The Awkward Adventures of Meghan Whimblesby

by FebruarySong

Summary

What happens when a girl who is afraid of blood, thinks Legolas is a complete fruitcake, and knows next to nothing about LoTR gets dumped into Middle-earth with the Fellowship? Crazy spin on a Mary Sue fic.

Notes

This story was imported mainly for archival purposes; it can also be found on ff.net under the same title and author.
Meghan was an ordinary girl of the sweet age of nineteen. She was not strikingly pretty; however, she managed to get by with her short, messy black curls and thick-rimmed glasses. She was one inch shorter than five feet, but she didn't mind being "vertically inept." Her philosophy was that it wasn't a hardship, but rather a challenge.

She was one of those people who looked eminently more comfortable behind a laptop or a sewing machine than in front of crowds, but in reality, Meghan was a feisty if somewhat weird individual. Her hobbies were a bit on the artsy side, including painting, sewing, cooking, crafting, and anything related to the theatre. She had indulged the tiny trace of rebel in her by dying a single streak of her shoulder-length hair to a bright, neon blue just behind her left ear.

Her two best friends were Andrea and Stefanie. The threesome always sat together during lunch at their local high school. One fine noon-meal, the topic of conversation was the varying degrees of "hottness" that the male roles of Lord of the Rings had. Actually, this was a frequent discussion.

"Legolas," Andrea announced firmly. "Legolas, Legolas, Legolas. He's definitely the hottest one."

"He's too girly," Stefanie countered with a glint in her eye. "I want my man to be, well, manly. Speaking of men…"

"Legolas is not your man!" Andrea exclaimed.

"Ew! I never want him to be!" Stefanie said. "As I was saying, men are totally the way to go. Scruffy, unwashed warriors. Mmm. Like nothing could stop them from protecting you."

"You can't pick between what's-his-face and who's-it," Meghan interjected.

"Boromir and Aragorn!" Stefanie squeaked, affronted by Meghan's lack of knowledge.

Yes, readers, truth be told, Meghan did not like Lord of the Rings. She had never so much as cracked the cover open on the books, and she fell asleep during the first movie. She didn't even try to see the second or third.

"But Legolas surfed down the stairs on that shield," Andrea said. She ignored Meghan and her 'pitiiful ignorance regarding the finer points of any hott Elf in Middle earth.'

"That's not even possible," Stefanie snorted. "It was so fake."

"Not possible for a human," Andrea clarified. "Possible for an Elf."

"That's ridiculous. That shield would have shot out from under his feet and he would have fallen on his bum." Stefanie looked smug.

"Whatev, Stef," Andrea said, losing interest. "Meghan, guess what!" This last word was squealed in
Meghan had read some of Andrea's fanfiction, and it was almost as boring as the movies themselves. Except Andrea's fiction tended to include angsty she-Elves running around with swords and typically falling in love with a certain son of Thranduil.

"Who is it this time, Andy?" Stefanie sighed. "Legolas, Legolas, or Legolas?"

"No," Andrea said, shooting a glare at her friend. "It's about a tortured Elf-maiden who can't remember her past. She wakes up near Rivendell and she has these strangemarkings on her back. Anyway, Elrohir finds her and they…” (dramatic sigh) "fall in love! Then he helps her discover her hidden past with the help of Galadriel and Lúthien."

"Lúthien is dead," Stefanie said in her "duh" voice.

"I know," Andrea said, not to be deterred. "But I brought her back to life. I'm considering having Elladan fall in love with Lúthien, but she remains faithful to Beren and that breaks Elladan's heart. He'll have to sail to the Undying Lands."

"Sounds very tragic," Meghan said with a straight face.

"Oh, but Meg, I want to put you in this one." Andrea made a puppy-dog face.

"Oh no, not again," Meghan protested, putting her hands up in defense. "Last time I said you could put me in one of your stories, I ended up as Legolas' little sister. Thranduil abused me! And you married me off so some weirdo named Gloryfiddle or something."

"Glorfindel," Andrea corrected without missing a beat. "But I promise it'll be different this time. You get to be the Elf-maiden's best friend and help her out of all sorts of troubles. Please? Pretty please? I'll give you lovely dresses!"

That was one thing that Meghan liked about Lord of the Rings: the costumes.

"Well…" Meghan considered. "I guess so. But who are you going to force me into marriage with?"

"That was an awkwardly phrased sentence," Stefanie piped in.

Andrea gave Meghan a very innocent look. "Figwit."

"Who is Figwit?" Meghan demanded as Stefanie dissolved into gales of laughter.

"He's a very respectable Elf!" Andrea jumped to Figwit's defense. "Did you get to the Council of Elrond, Meg?"

"No, that's just where I nodded off," Meghan said.

"Well, Figwit's at the Council. That proves that's he's smart and important! And he's really good looking. Sort of a boy-next-door type guy."

"Show me a picture and I'll think about it," Meghan said.

Andrea pouted. "Fine. I'll bring one tomorrow. But he really is a nice looking guy."

"I'll believe it when I see it."

"Oh look, lunchtime is over," Stefanie declared, bored by a conversation that didn't concern her.
She had long since forbidden Andrea from putting her into any sort of fanfiction. The first and only time that Stefanie had been featured, Andrea had paired her up with one of Haldir's brothers and declined to allow Boromir to live. The horror was unspeakable, and Stefanie refused to be included again.

"And of course they send us to lunch right before lab class," Andrea whined. "What are we dissecting today? Pigs?"

"Oh, don't remind me," Meghan moaned. "You do the cutting; I'll do the note-taking."

"No way," Andrea protested.

"Aw come on," Meghan wheedled. "Please?"

Andrea shot her a calculating look. "Only if you let me put you in this new fanfic."

"Oh, low blow," Stefanie said. "You know that Meghan is afraid of blood."

"There's never blood in dissections like this," Andrea defended.

"It's a deal," Meghan said, sticking out a hand. She and Andrea shook.

A couple of minutes later found them in lab, trays with small, hairy piglets in them on the tables in front of them. Meghan was looking a little bit green.

The teacher briefed them quickly regarding their instructions and then the class gingerly dug in. Andrea brandished her scalpel and smote the piglet a long slice along its belly.

"Oh this is so gross," Meghan grimaced. She shielded herself behind her notebook.

Andrea didn't mind the process so much. She seized a pair of pliers and prepared to... well, you know, do whatever they do when they dissect pigs.

"Uh, Ms. Taylorson!" Andrea suddenly exclaimed in a bit of a panic.

"What? What is it?" Meghan asked, peeking over the top of her notebook.

"What seems to be the trouble, Andrea?" Ms. Taylorson also asked as she made her way over.

"Oh, oh, oh," was all Meghan managed to gasp out before she collapsed the floor, unconscious.

You see, apparently the pig was a special pig, and its intestines were arranged in an unusual manner, and there was blood pooling in the tray.

Meghan groaned and opened her eyes. The sun glared into them. That pig was nasty. Just the mental image resurfacing brought a strong bout of queasiness to Meghan's stomach. She closed her eyes again and fought to think about something other than blood and guts.

The nausea passed, and Meghan sat up, pressing a hand to her head. The ground underneath her was rocky and uncomfortable. She heard a noise very similar to a cough from behind her and she whipped around and to her feet all in one weirdly graceful movement.

Nine men stood there, all holding some sort of weapon in their hands. Well at least, some of them were men. Five of them were only waist-tall to the others around them.

The two parties stared at each other for a few seconds, the men looking fierce with their swords,
bows, axes, and staffs, and Meghan looking somewhat unfortunate with her…well, her nothing.

"I'm dreaming," Meghan suddenly announced, snapping her fingers and pointing at the men. "You guys aren't real. You know how I know that? Because you're from a movie. I'm gonna wake up in about ten seconds. Please excuse me while I pinch myself awake."

She seized a patch of skin on her upper arm and squeezed really hard, squinting her eyes shut, too. When she blinked them open, the nine men were still standing there, except this time, they looked even more confused.

"A witch, perhaps?" one of the tallies asked. He had a scruffy beard and a big shield strapped to his back. He was one of Stefanie's favorites.

"I have been called many things in my day, Fuzz-face, but witch ain't one of 'em," Meghan said. She was trying to put up a brave face, but the situation was starting to freak her out. This whole *Lord of the Rings* thing was for her friends, not her.

"Where are you from?" the wizard asked. Meghan struggled to remember everyone's names. The blondie she knew well. Andrea's maxim came to mind: "Legolas. He's definitely the hottest one." Goodness knew that Andrea talked about him enough.

"Uh…" Meghan droned, stalling for time. *Gandalf! Got it! Wait I can't just tell them I'm from an alternate reality. That would be too weird. Remember! Remember! Remember!! What are the names of all the cities Andrea and Stefanie talked about?"

"Ravendill," she said confidently.

"Rivendell?" one of the shorties said.

"Yes! Yes, Rivendell. Good ole Rivendell! I just love the…uh. Architecture." Meghan put on an encouraging grin.

"What brings you so far from your home?" The other scruffy man questioned.

*What's with the Spanish Inquisition, here? Just keep stalling until you wake up. This will all be over once I wake up.* "I went hunting, and I got lost… and my horse died, and… I… I'm still lost."

She didn't really want to tell them that they were dissecting a pig and she had passed out at the sight of blood.

"You went hunting in a fine dress?" Scruffy-Number-One said in a menacing voice. He looked like he could clobber her with that shield.

For the first time, Meghan looked down. Then she screamed.

Her hair had gone from just brushing her shoulders to falling well passed her waist. The curls had loosened and become more like waves. Her clothing was also different - way different. Instead of a t-shirt and bermuda shorts, she wore an ankle-length, cream colored gown with belled sleeves that swept all the way to the ground. The neckline was in a V and it had embroidery along it and the hems of the sleeves. A belt of deep golden cloth hung around her hips.

"Oh my gosh!" she exclaimed before quickly glancing up at the Fellowship and smiling awkwardly. "You have no idea how bad I am at packing! I just…throw everything into a knapsack without looking! I must have been really tired this morning when I put this on, kinda caught me off-guard just now. Heh."
"If you were just going out for a simple hunting expedition, why did you pack extra clothing?" This time, it was Blondie that spoke up. He had a lightly flavored accent… of course they all had accents, but his seemed the most exotic out of the four that she'd heard speak.

"Ew," Meghan said like it was the most obvious thing in the world. "You men might be able to handle riding around for days on end wearing the same smelly clothing, but women actually have a sense of hygiene. Newsflash! I don't want to gut a deer and then wear the same outfit all the way back home. Gross." Images of the pig reincarnated themselves in her mind. She shuddered them back down.

"She does have a point," Scruffy-Number-Two conceded. She crawled deep into the bowels of her memory and pulled out his name: Aragorn.

"There you go," Meghan said with a smile. "Listen to the man."

"Very well, we will trust you," the wizard sighed.

"Great," Meghan chirped. "Now, uh…what do we do from here?"

"You must return to Rivendell, my lady," Blondie declared.

"I told you, I'm lost. I have no idea how to get back. Even if you pointed me in the right direction, I would still ramble alone in the wilderness and I'd probably get eaten by… whatever I would get eaten by here."

"Are they seriously considering just leaving me here?"

"We are many weeks out of Rivendell," Gandalf said, again with the sighing. "And the only ones who could guide you back are Aragorn, Legolas, or I. None of us can be spared from our company."

Meghan bit her lip and stared at the ground for inspiration. "I…could go with you."

"Impossible," Scruffy-Number-One growled. "A woman, journey with us? It is madness, Gandalf."

"And yet we cannot very well leave her here," one of the shorties countered. He had dark curls and bright blue eyes…what was his name… Frodo!

"The Halfling is right, Mithrandir. Perhaps she can travel in our company until we reach another city?" Legolas suggested.

The wizard seemed burdened down by many responsibilities as he stood and pondered. Meghan shifted my weight from either foot, and it was then that she realized she was wearing soft, knee-high leather boots. She kept this miraculous and somewhat thrilling discovery to herself, figuring another outburst would probably earn her a few weapons in her body.

"So be it," Gandalf said. "My lady, you must accompany us to our next destination, whatever it may be. From thence, you may return to your home. Now, tell us your name."

"Meghan," she said.

"Meghan?" Legolas repeated, stumbling over the unfamiliar sound. "That is unlike any Elvish name I have ever heard."

"Elvish?" she said. "I'm not-" she reached up for her ears, and found that they were pointed. Once again, she wisely bottled up her surprise. "Uh… I'm not a normal elf. My real name is…uh…" She strained to think up a convincing name. Arwen, Éowyn, Thranduil…no wait, Thranduil was
a man! Lúthien, Galadriel, oh, they were all taken! Andrea and Stefanie had given her an Elvish name once, what was it again?

"...Melethriel," she squawked the funny-sounding word. "But I don't like it, so everybody calls me Meghan."

"I see. Gather your things, Melethriel, so that we may continue," Gandalf said.

"Oh, well, I kinda lost my things awhile back. This morning, actually. You know, my bow and stuff. This is all I've got."

Boromir looked suspicious. "You lost your things." It was a statement, not a question.

"Yeah." Meghan nodded. "But look at the bright side, Boromir. It could be you that's in the dress."

Two of the shorties giggled at that and Boromir's face darkened a few shades of red. "I beg your-"

"Not now, Boromir," Gandalf said, holding up a hand for peace. "Very well then, Melethriel, you must travel without your gear, unless you wish to remain alone in this wilderness."

"No no, I'll stick with y'all." Meghan smiled. Gandalf nodded and wearily began to walk away. The rest of the Fellowship fell into line behind him.

Meghan trotted to catch up to them. The blondie was in the far back of the group, and she fell into step beside him.

It was distinctly quiet as they all marched along. Meghan alternately stared at the ground, stared at her dress, and tried not to stare at some of the members of the Fellowship. Now that she thought about it, Andrea did have a point when it came to the… attractiveness of a certain blonde Elf. Except he totally was too pretty. Quite like a pansy, really. But Stefanie wasn't kidding either.

*If only Stef would choose between Aragorn and Boromir, Meghan sighed internally. Such unfaithfulness. Tsk. Oh well…* 

She refocused herself on the task at hand - ignoring everybody's hottness. And speaking of hot - the weather wasn't. In fact, it was kinda cool. As if her mind was being read like an open book, someone draped a cloak around her shoulders.

Meghan looked up in surprise to see Legolas smiling kindly at her.

"Th-thanks," she stammered. This was not her field of expertise at all. Andrea was the one who always ended up with Legolas. In the fanfiction, at least. Although Meghan distinctly remembered Andrea announcing on several occasions that she'd had a dream that involved Legolas.

"It is my pleasure, Lady Melethriel," he replied.

"Oh gosh, don't call me that. It's the stupidest name ever," Meghan said with a dismissive flutter of her hand. "It means 'crowned with love' or something preposterous like that."

"It's 'daughter of love,' actually," Legolas corrected her.

"...Oh."

"Do you not speak Elvish?" he asked her.

This was getting ridiculous. An Elvish name, an Elvish dress, Elvish ears, and now she had to
actually speak the language? The blond hottie was asking too much.

"I do," Meghan smiled. "But I learned how to speak…" *Not English, but rather…* "This language recently. I promised myself that I would only speak in it for a year so that it would get really solid in my memory. I like to do the whole immersion thing in languages."

"That is very devoted for you to only speak Westron."

*Westron. Gotta remember that.*

"I gotta fess up so something else," Meghan said tentatively.

"What is it?" Legolas said as she paused in an awkward silence.

"I don't actually know how to use a bow."

It had occurred to her that should the need arise for her to wield such a weapon, she would have a hard time explaining her incompetence. So she invented a new string of lies to cover it.

"When I said I was hunting, I was really learning how to hunt. I went out with my… brother. He lent me one his old bow, but I was really just learning how to track and everything. I have no idea how to even string a bow. And I don't know how to use a sword either."

Legolas looked like he was processing this information. "It does not matter, at any rate," he finally said. "You have no bow, so therefore you could not use it even if you knew how."

"Thanks," Meghan said. "You have no idea how much better I feel now."

"'Tis no trouble, Lady Meghan."

*Lady Meghan. I could get used to that.*
Yeah, About That Silly Ring of Ultimate Doom

Chapter Notes

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Meghan's feet, miraculously, did not hurt. Her soft, pale leather boots were contoured comfortably to the shape of her foot, supporting her arches and fitting so well that she didn't get any blisters. Whoever made those boots was Meghan's friend for life.

And it was good that her feet didn't hurt, because they seemed to walk for hours. Meghan guessed it had been early to mid-morning when she had "woken up" or "fallen asleep" (whichever way you wanted to look at it) and they didn't stop for lunch. As the sun rose higher and higher, Meghan got hungrier and hungrier.

"So," she said, attempting to make small talk so that she would be distracted from her growling stomach, "how long have you guys been… you know… wandering around in the wilderness?"

"Three weeks," one of the shorties said before receiving two very withering glowers from Greybeard and Shieldguy. "Oh, sorry," he wilted. His Scottish brogue was adorable in his utter crushedness. "I thought we were trusting her."

"Oh gosh you guys, I know all about it," Meghan said, then she realized that she didn't really know all about it. She at least knew the basic plot. "About the Ring and everything-"

She suddenly discovered something sharp and shiny pointing at her throat, and her eyes traveled the length of the blade to see that Aragorn was attached to the hilt. Legolas had also pulled his nocked bowstring back to his ear, while both Boromir and Gandalf had drawn their swords. The Hobbits looked confused. Gimli looked really angry.

"Do not speak of such things so openly," Aragorn cautioned. Meghan was perfectly frozen, but when she saw Aragorn's eyes, she felt her fear draining away. His gaze was hard, but not unkind.

Probably shouldn't be so cavalier about announcing that I know all about their most carefully kept secret, Meghan thought to herself.

"What do you know of this burden?" the wizard asked.

"Um…” Meghan tried hard not to stare at Aragorn's sword. Besides the fact that its sharpness was distracting, she was certain that it made her go cross-eyed to see it in focus. "Well, I know about…" She cast about, struggling to remember. It was all very disconcerting, having nine people sticking sharp objects in her face. "Oh gosh. This is really weird. Wake up! WAKE UP!" The last part came in a shout as she squinted her eyes shut, trying very hard to snap out of the pig-intestine-induced-nightmare. If only she hadn't fainted at the intestinal disorder of the pig, none of this would be happening!

"Mithrandir," Aragorn said. "Perhaps it is best if we set up camp here. The sunlight is already waning, and we must solve this mystery set upon us."

"You are right," Gandalf sighed. "We will prepare a campsite here and rest until morning light."
"Should we not tie her up?" Boromir said. "Until we know more about her. We cannot trust her yet."

"Has anyone any rope?" Gandalf asked. Meghan noticed that one of the shorties stirred at that, like he was berating himself internally for something.

"I have a short length of rope," Legolas said. He had lowered his bow and was already rifling through his pack. "Here it is."

"Bind her hands, then," Gandalf said.

Aragorn removed the tip of his sword from her throat, and Meghan relaxed. The Fellowship busied themselves with an apparently routine task of gathering wood, preparing a fire, and opening their bedrolls.

Legolas came up to her with an apologetic look on his face. "I am sorry to have to bind a woman, and one of my own kindred," he said. "But in these dark times, suspicion and fear drive us to new limits. Forgive me, if you are what you say."

She extended her hands to him willingly, but she felt her heart sinking. She wasn't what she said.

But this nonsense that she was a spy was ridiculous. Sauron or Saruman or whichever one was which would have to be a raving lunatic to send a completely outlandish person such as the figure she cut to spy on the Fellowship.

She'd just have to convince them to believe her string of lies.

Meghan felt the cool fibers of the rope coiling around her wrists, then tighten as Legolas tied the knot. It was a soft rope, but very strong. Legolas gave her another rueful look before joining the others in their simple preparations for the evening.

Already she could see signs of their camaraderie. All the little ones (with the exception of the stoic, bearded Dwarf) laughed and talked together like chattering birds. Not having anything better to do, Meghan sat down on the cold, rocky ground and hunched into Legolas' cloak.

She felt something slip down her throat: something warm and wet. She cautiously lifted her bound hands up to her neck and felt at the slick liquid. A familiar sensation of bile in her throat threatened to overwhelm her, but she choked it down. Her hands shook a little as she drew them back to look at them.

Sure enough, a crimson sparkle stood out on her fingertips, and she realized that the sword had pierced the skin enough to make it bleed.

Another drop of blood raced down her throat and again she swallowed the urge to vomit. "L-" The syllables refused to come out of her mouth. "L-Legolas?"

The blond Elf looked up, as did all of them. Apparently Legolas saw the thin line of red on her throat, but he didn't understand her anxiety.

"What is it?" he asked, coming over.

"I-I'm afraid of blood," Meghan confessed. "I think I might throw up… Oh, gosh!" The last two words were in a groan as a wave of pain and nausea swept over her. Blood absolutely froze her up - gave her a headache, chills, and queasiness.

"I'm sorry," Legolas replied, but he made no move to do anything. Meghan bit her lip and squinted
her eyes, another droplet of blood rolling down her skin and pooling with the other two at the base of her neck.

"Well are we all just going to stand around like fools?" the little Hobbit that had told her how long they were journeying burst out. He bustled forward and used the corner of his cloak to wipe Meghan's throat. "There. Easy as a peach."

He smiled down her, probably glad that for once he was the taller half of the conversation.

"Thank you, ah…" Meghan grimaced at not knowing his name.

"Peregrin Took, at your service," the Hobbit bowed. "But you can call me Pippin."

"Meghan Whimblesby, at yours," Meghan smiled. "I'd shake your hand, but…"

"Don't worry about that," Pippin said, making a face. "I think it's all nonsense, anyway. I like you. You're a bit strange, but I don't think you're one of… them."

"That's enough, Pippin," Gandalf said, but not unkindly. "Come, let us all talk. We have finished setting our campsite up. We can move closer to the fire for warmth."

Pippin let Meghan steady herself on his shoulder as she stood up (it's hard to get off the ground when your hands are tied) and together they went over to the fire and sat in a circle around it. Sam, the chubbiest Hobbit, set about cooking the evening meal, although the sun was only just kissing the horizon.

Meghan felt vastly better now that the blood was gone from her throat. Sure, she'd probably have a scab, but that was different and at least she wouldn't have to look at it.

Wait a minute. She froze. How can you bleed in a dream? She reached back up to her neck and sure enough, the blood was knotting together and forming a scab.

"I'm not dreaming," Meghan breathed softly, staring wide-eyed at the fire.

"No, you're not," Pippin agreed in his adorable brogue.

Meghan bit her lip, hard, and experienced the pain. "Oh my gosh, this is real! I'm really here! But how-why-what about-?"

The others were giving her confused looks, some laced with suspicion. She fought for mastery over herself.


Boromir turned to Gimli and gave him a funny look. "Are all she-Elves this strange?"

"Don't ask me, laddie," the Dwarf rumbled. "I know nothing of the Elves and their peculiarities."

Legolas shot the Dwarf and the Gondorian a dark look.

"Now, Melethriel, tell us your story." Gandalf leveled two grey, stormy eyes at her. "From whence do you come from, and how did you get here?"

Meghan stared at them all for a few seconds. They would think she was crazy if she told them the truth.
"My name is Meghan," she plunged in. "I'm from South Carolina. No no," she shook her head to forestall their obvious question, "it's not in this world. I'm not from this world. This morning I was in a biology lab, watching my best friend cut open a pig. Its intestines were a little out of place—(shudder)—and I passed out. The next thing I know, I'm here and all of you guys are staring at me."

"How then do you know of our troubles? And our names?" Legolas asked, ignoring all the other questions like, What's a biology lab? Why were you slicing pigs open? What do you mean by "intestines out of place"?

"It's all been recorded in history books," Meghan said. She remembered: that was Andrea's excuse when one of her fictional characters got dumped into Middle earth. Hmm. Maybe Andrea's example would be useful. Meghan opened that file in her memory and sifted through its contents. "I suppose you could say I'm from the future. Maybe the, uh… Gods brought me here. To help you on your quest."

That was practically word for word from Andrea's fanfic. No joke.

Now the little matter of the Fellowship's reaction came up. In the fanfic, of course they all accepted the newcomer with gracious words of welcome. Except Gimli, needless to say; but he eventually came around and even gifted the lucky lady with a lovely throwing axe at the wedding.

The wedding with Legolas, of course.

"She is mad," Boromir announced calmly after a moment or two of silence.

"I believe her," Pippin said.

The redhead Hobbit, Pippin's good friend, voiced his agreement. "Me too. She seems fair enough."

Gandalf ignored all three of them and kept his attention on Meghan. "Why then did you tell us that you were hunting?"

"Well," Meghan scrambled, "I wasn't even sure where I was. To tell you the truth, I never read much of the history books where your story was documented. I'm not familiar with the particulars of this story at all. I know that—" She glanced at Boromir and bit her lip. "That Boromir is a renowned swordsman. And that Legolas is the Prince of Mirkwood. And that the Hobbits like to eat. And that Aragorn has a special sword. And that, well, I don't know much about you, Gimli."

The Dwarf only grunted.

"Have you any skill with a weapon?" Aragorn asked.

"No," Meghan said, shaking her head. As she did so, her hair fell over her shoulders and she noticed that the blue streak was still there. She hid a smile. So these weird gods forgot to remove her weird side.

"And you have only a cursory knowledge of this tale?" Aragorn continued.

"Well I know how it ends," Meghan said. She had at least learned that much from Andrea and Stefanie.

"What of the healing arts? Do you have any knowledge of those?"

"Not really," Meghan grimaced. "Blood makes me, well, sick."
"Then how can you be of any use to us?" Boromir burst out. "Why would the Valar send us a woman who is worthless?"

Meghan bristled, but her tirade-ish reply was cut off by Gandalf.

"The Valar may have their own ends by sending the girl to us. But you have yet to earn our trust, Melethriel. You may accompany us, and we will release you from your bonds, but we will not yet have faith in you. You must win that."

"Okay," Meghan nodded. Legolas hastened over and hurriedly untied the knots from her wrists.

"Again, I beg you to forgive me," he said.

"Legolas, chillax." Meghan flexed her hands. "I am seriously going to go medieval on your face if you don't quit freaking, alright?"

Legolas looked very taken aback by her strange language.

"Supper's ready," Sam declared. Everyone practically pounced on the food, except Meghan, who hung back. Gandalf's whole, "we will accept you but not trust you" speech had thrown her a little off. Did that mean they didn't trust her with the food, too?

Pippin appeared and shoved a plate of food into her hands, then plopped down next to her, holding his own dish. "Sam makes the best sausage and tomatoes," he said, stabbing a piece of sausage with his fork. He paused and looked up at her with huge eyes when he noticed her hesitation. "Do Elves eat?"

"Well, you've seen Legolas eat, haven't you?" Meghan laughed. She speared a tomato and popped it into her mouth. "Mmm, this is good."

"Oh, sure I've seen Legolas eat," Pippin said between mouthfuls. "But he never eats sausage or anything but fresh meat. Lots of waybread, too."

Considering the fact that she was afraid of blood, it was strange that Meghan still ate meat. But, as long as she didn't see the meat being prepared, she didn't have a problem with it. "There you have it then. Of course Elves eat." It felt strange, calling herself an Elf.

"I just wondered. I've never seen a lady Elf eat before. I thought maybe you didn't need to eat. That would be sad."

"Trust me, Pippin, I love food. Especially chocolate." A sudden cold, bottomless feeling appeared in the pit of Meghan's gut. "Wait. You guys have chocolate here, right?"

"Chocolate?" Pippin repeated. He was so concerned that he forgot to eat. "What's that?"

"You…don't have chocolate here? How do you live!" Meghan started to breathe heavily. "No chocolate? Not any? No chocolate cake or brownies or cookies or hot chocolate or Snickers bars or fudge or anything? You poor, poor people!"

The Fellowship traded glances, clearly wondering what all these words meant.

"No, none of those things," Pippin said. He instinctively knew that Meghan was talking about food.

"Oh you poor dears!" Meghan crooned. "That's terrible!"

By this point, everyone was staring at her in confusion - except Pippin, who seemed to empathize
with her somehow. She noticed their gaping.

"Um… sorry about that," she said, forcing a smile. "Chocolate is only the best food ever, but I guess it hasn't been invented yet."

"Still," Pippin said cheerfully, "there are lots of delicious foods here. You should try some of the Prancing Pony's stew! And their ale. The best ale in the Shire, I'll say!"

"I don't really drink," Meghan grimaced. "Although I've never tried ale."

"You should try it," Pippin said.

"That's enough, Peregrin," Gandalf said.

All that Meghan was sure of was that this was going to be an interesting ride.
"Well this sucks," Meghan announced under her breath, looking at the dismal patch of dirt that she'd selected as her bed.

But as she looked around, she realized that everyone had the exact same problem. They wrapped themselves into their cloaks and lay down on the ground. It looked spectacularly uncomfortable.

"I'll take the first watch," Legolas said to Gandalf, who nodded wearily.

Meghan looked over at the devastatingly gorgeous Elf. "Uh, Legolas?" she said. The whole situation reeked of awkwardness.

"Yes, Lady Meghan?" he replied, casting his blue gaze on her.

"Um… You-your cloak," Meghan stammered as she fiddled with the fabric in her hands. "I mean, I don't desperately need it, and I'll totally give it back to you if you want it, but you know, it's kinda cold-although I thought Elves weren't affected by the climate as much as humans? This whole Elf thing is new to me, you know, and I'm not really sure how to adjust-"

"You can keep it," Legolas said.

"Oh, thanks!" Meghan said, brightening. "You can have a brownie point for that."

"Brownie…point?"

She burst out laughing at the humorous look on Legolas' face. "You know, like, extra credit? A good word?"

"I see," Legolas replied, although it was obvious that he didn't.

"Well, I'm going to conk out now," Meghan said. "G'night, all."

She didn't get any sort of reply, but that was alright. She returned to her square of dirt and lay down, wrapped in Legolas' cloak. Well, her cloak now that he'd given it to her. It was forest green and pretty enormous on her. Convenient when you're stuck in the wilderness without a bed.

Though it seemed completely legitimate to assert that every single rock, lump, and kernel dug into her back, Meghan managed to fall asleep.

BREAK

A bright, glaringly annoying light crept past her eyelids, waking her. She squinched her eyes shut and rolled over with a groan of protest.

Soon sounds added to the reception of her five sense. A sizzling sound, firstly. Then muffled conversation. And immediately after she recognized those two things, the heavenly smell of
sausage hit her nose.

"Alrighty then!" she exclaimed, bolting upright. "I am totally ready for the day." She stretched and glanced around. Sam was busy preparing breakfast, and all the others sat around in various locations around the small campfire. Well, with the exception of Merry and Pippin, who were still asleep.

"Good morning," Sam called cheerfully.

"Mornin'," Meghan replied. Before she could get up, Legolas came over and sat next to her.

"Lady Meghan," he began, looking very earnest. She fought down the impulse to laugh hysterically at this pretty-boy conversing so solemnly with her. Seriously, he ought to be off modeling Swedish clothing or something, not trying to be masculine. Ew.

"Yes, Lord Legolas?" she asked in the exact same grave tone.

"I have noticed something strange about you."

Way to impress a chick, Legolas. Idiot.

"Oh? And what's that?" Meghan opened her eyes wide and blinked violently, acting like a blonde fashion zombie.

"You sleep."

A slow, slightly surprised smile spread across Meghan's face. "Really. I sleep. Well that just classifies me as the village idiot, now doesn't it? Let me guess, next you're going to announce that it's a little bit weird for me to breathe."

"Please do not misunderstand me," Legolas practically gasped. "I did not intend any offense."

Meghan softened, seeing that he really did not mean to insult her. "It's okay. What did you mean?"

"Elves do not sleep, and seeing that you are of the Elven kind I wondered how it was possible for you to enter that state."

"Oh I see." Meghan pondered this for a moment. "And I guess Elves don't fart, either. I probably still do that. You know, I read somewhere that people fart fourteen times a day." She shook her head at this fact. "Maybe my Elvish body will bring that average down to five or six."

Legolas' face seemed positively aghast. "What are you talking of, Lady Meghan?"

"Never mind," she sighed. "If you don't know, you don't need to know."

"I see," Legolas said, but just like the first time he had said that, it was quite clear that he really didn't see at all. Well not to say he was blind. You know what I mean.

"So." Meghan cheerily clapped her hands onto her knees. "What do you guys do for fun?"

With that, Pippin snorted awake. "Is that sausage I smell?" he inquired immediately, rubbing his eyes.

"Yes, 'tis, but 'tisn't finished yet, so don't get any ideas into your head," Sam said. Meghan felt instant solidarity with him in regards to protectiveness over food.

Merry also awakened. "Sausage?" he asked.
Sam merely shook his head in obvious despair.

"Come, little Hobbits," said Boromir. "You should practice your swordplay. Do you know how?"

"A little," Merry admitted, yawning.

"Then I will teach you. Come on, get up!" Boromir ruffled Pippin's hair and pulled him to his feet.

Pippin and Merry grabbed their swords, which were really nothing more than long daggers, and followed Boromir to a relatively flat spot on the hilly, rocky incline.

As they began bashing away on each other, Meghan turned to the others for a source of amusement. Unfortunately, Gandalf began to sermonize.

"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 their our road turns east to Mordor."

Off behind her, Meghan heard Boromir encouraging the Hobbits. "Two, one, five. Good, very good."

Gimli decided to announce his point of view. "If any was to ask for my opinion, which I note they have not, I'd say we were taking the long way round. Gandalf, we could pass through the Mines of Moria. My cousin Balin would give us a royal wel come."

Despite herself, Meghan found that she was increasingly interested in the conversation. After all, she had fallen asleep before this point. She did remember that Moria was bad. Stefanie and Andrea primarily thought that Moria was bad because the lighting was poor and hence made it harder to see their favorites. Twerps.

Gandalf agreed. "No Gimli, I would not take the roads through Moria unless I had no other choice."

A fluttering in the breeze distracted Meghan from Gandalf and Gimli's discussion. She looked over and realized that it was Legolas' hair. Fighting down a giggle, she crept over and stood next to him.

"Are you cloud-gazing?" she asked with a straight face. "I think that one is shaped like a polar bear."

"No," Legolas said, never taking his eyes off the distance.

"No? Yeah I guess you're right, it does look more like a cow."

"I don't think that's a cloud."

Meghan squinted her lids harder.

"What is that?" Sam asked.

"Nothing, it's just a wisp of cloud," Gimli grunted.

Boromir left the Hobbits, staring at the dark mass that was quickly coming toward them. "It's moving fast…against the wind."

"Crebain from Dunland!" Legolas randomly shouted.
Immediately the entire group exploded into activity. Dunking the fire out, hiding the packs and gear, running around like crazy.

"What is so important?" Meghan demanded.

"Hide!" Aragorn snapped.

"Ooookay," Meghan said, hopping off the big rock she was standing on. Apparently this wasn't fast enough for everyone else, because Legolas grabbed her wrist and dragged her underneath an outcropping of scrubby bushes.

Precisely one second later, a huge number of black, cawing birds wheeled over them twice. Their wings churned the air and sent up a whooshing sound. Then they were gone.

Meghan spluttered her hair out of her mouth and glared at Legolas. "You of all people should understand that it is a pain in the bum to have long hair," she glowered. "I mean seriously! It's everywhere! This is why I prefer to keep my hair short!" She sighed dramatically for the days of shoulder-length hair.

"Your hair is the least of your worries," Legolas replied, offering her a hand to help her up.

"What do you mean?" She accepted it. "It was just a flock of birds."

"Spies of Saruman!" Gandalf growled. "The passage south of being watched. We must take the Pass of Caradhras."

As if on cue, everyone dared a glance at the doleful, snowy mountain. It offered a dismal prospect, and a long trek.

Meghan seemed born to break awkward silences. "I still don't get it. What's so special about the birds?"

"Saruman is using them as a tool. They will relay our location and number to him," Aragorn explained.

"Oh. Right. Saruman's one of the baddies. He moded Gandalf back at that tower thing. Gotcha."

"I fear we will never be able to understand her strange dialect," Boromir sighed.
"Oh my gosh it's bloody cold!" Meghan screamed into the shrill wind. She was able to walk on top of the snow, like Legolas did, but it did nothing to block out the frigid cold. Her skirt swirled around her ankles, and she swore with much impetus that she would find some way to modify them into a more practical style.

The others largely ignored her; they were all struggling through the thick drifts of snow, except Legolas of course, who kept busy by staring off into the distance.

Meghan reflected on the creepy moment as they had been climbing up the hill. Something about Frodo dropping the Ring and Boromir picking it up. Meghan watched as the Ring squirmed on its chain like a live thing, and shuddered. But then the whole scene had blown over, and Boromir gave the Ring back to Frodo with a dismissive laugh.

*Now that was bona fide eerie. I wonder what woulda happened if Boromir hadn't given it back. Probably Aragorn would have fought him over it. That would probably have settled Stefanie's indecision. Whoever wins the swordfight wins Stefanie's affection.*

A deep, distant voice whispered through her ears. It felt strange and foreign, but beautiful at the same time. It spoke in a language she couldn't understand.

"Cuiva nwalca Carnirasse; nai yarvaxea rasselya!" it shouted.

"Where's that coming from?" she asked Legolas, who seemed to have heard it, too.

"There is a fell voice on the air!" he exclaimed in reply.

"Oh no duh, Captain Obvious!" she snapped. "Couldn't you say something smart? Like who's talking or why this is happening?"

"It's Saruman!" Gandalf shouted angrily.

A huge shuffling sound creaked over their heads. Everyone looked up to see an avalanche of white fluff racing toward them from the overhang above. Scarcely knowing what she was doing, Meghan threw herself against the mountainside and felt the snow sweep over her body. As the last of it tumbled further down the cliff, she heard Aragorn shout,

"He's trying to bring down the mountain! Gandalf, we must turn back!"

"No!" the wizard argued. He twisted himself out of the snow. "Losto Caradhras, sedho, hodo, nuitho i ruith!"

"OH WOULD YOU GUYS KNOCK IT OFF!" Meghan screamed. "I don't know if the 'fell voice on the air' can hear me, but shut up and leave us alone! Your little scheme doesn't work! We go through the Mines! WE GET IT!"
The Fellowship stared at her. But a lightning crack forestalled any of their comments. This time the flood of snow was bigger, heavier, thicker. It buried them all above their heads and they had to dig themselves out.

"Meghan!" Gandalf growled the moment they were clear of the fluff. "What did you just say?"

"We can just cut the crap and get straight to the point," Meghan said, dusting snow from her annoyingly long hair. "The fact of that matter is that this icky mountain thing doesn't work out and we have to go through whatever that underground route was called."

"But we can make for the Gap of Rohan and take the west road to my city!" Boromir said.

"The Gap of Rohan takes us too close to Isengard!" Aragorn disagreed.

Gimli piped in. "You heard the woman! She says to go under the mountain, through Moria!"

"It's really quite pointless to argue," Meghan added.

Gandalf looked worried. "Let the Ringbearer decide," he said at last.

"We cannot stay here!" Boromir shouted. "This will be the death of the Hobbits!"

"Frodo?" Gandalf urged.

"We will go through the mines," said the little dark-haired Hobbit.

"So be it," acquiesced the wizard.

"Well now that that's all settled, can we go?" Meghan insisted. "It's bloody freezing up here!"

They made the unpleasant trek back down the mountain. It is not the purpose of this work to describe all the nastiness of that voyage, so I will cut to the chase. As they shook the last of the snow from their shoes, Gandalf turned to Meghan with a seriously displeased look on his face.

"Meghan," he said, his tone imperious. "You must never do that again. If you truly do know what will happen, than it is imperative that you do not tell us anything. It could change the future."

"Okay, I'm sorry. Chillax. It's just a book, you know?"

"It's not just a book!" Gandalf said. He gave her a 'Fool of a Took' look, except she wasn't a Took so it was more of a 'Fool of a Meghan' look. "I cannot choose for you whether or not you believe, but this is real and you are a part of it now. Should Middle earth fall to ruins under the reign of a Dark Lord, you will share our fate. So you must not change what occurs in your history books."

Meghan was silent. "I guess you're right," she said at last. "I never thought of it that way. Alright, you win. I won't give anything else away."

Gandalf seemed to accept that, but he didn't say anything. He seemed very weary and old at that moment. Without another word, the entire group of Ten Walkers continued down the rocky trail that led to Moria.

Several hours later, they arrived at the huge rocks walls of Moria's exterior. The mountain swept up severely, leaving a little strip of gravelly dirt between the stone and the dark, dirty lake. Meghan took one look at the water and shivered. She turned to Legolas.

"Doesn't that pond just give you the heeby-jeebies? Ick," she grimaced.
"Does 'heeby-jeebies' mean--" Legolas seemed at a loss for words.

"You know, like," Meghan made a nauseated sound and shuddered melodramatically. "Like that."

Legolas nodded. "For the first time, I think I understand you."

The entire group randomly came to a stop before Meghan could come up with an answer.

"Dwarf doors are invisible when closed," Gimli announced very cheerfully.

"Yes, Gimli, their own master cannot find them if their secrets are forgotten," Gandalf sighed. Meghan decided he was one of 'those' people, who sighed at every chance they could get.

"Why does that not surprise me?" Legolas muttered under his breath in a sarcastic tone.

Gandalf reached up and brushed his hands across the outline of a door. "Well, let's see," he muttered. "Ithildin. It mirrors only starlight and moonlight."

"This is so artsy-fartsy," Meghan declared. "I mean seriously. Starlight and moonlight? Shall we just sit down and make daisy-chains while we're in the process?"

Nine pairs of eyes stared at her in either anger or disbelief. Even Bill the Pony gave her a 'you idiot' glare.

"Sorry." She slunk off to the side.

At that point, the moon decided to spare her a bit of discomfiture by casting off her cloudy robes and shining gently upon the door. The lines that Gandalf had traced began to glow.

"It reads, 'The doors of Durin, Lord of Moria. Speak, friend, and enter.'" Gandalf's voice rang across the stagnant lake.

"What do you suppose that means?" Merry asked.

"Oh it's quite simple. If you are a friend, you speak the password and the doors will open." He extended his hands toward the stone. "Annon Edhellon edro hi ammen! Fennas Nogothrim lasto beth lammen!"

Silence hung heavily.

"Nothing's happening," Pippin said.

Gandalf grunted a bit and began to push against the stubborn and highly unreasonable doors. Of course, they remained shut. Meghan could feel everyone's impatience breeding in the air.

"I once knew every spell in all the tongues of the Elves, Men, and Orcs."

"Ewww, aren't Orcs like, really grody?" Meghan squealed.

"What are you going to do, then?" Pippin asked.

Gandalf growled, "Knock your head against these doors, Peregrin Took! And if that does not shatter them and I am allowed a little peace from foolish questions, I will try to find the opening words."

Cowed, Pippin backed down. Slowly the entire Fellowship, with the obvious exception of Gandalf,
fanned out from the doors and pursued their own amusements.

Meghan chose to approach Legolas again. "Legolas, can I borrow one of your knives? And do you have any thread and a needle?"

"You may borrow one of my blades," he replied, immediately reaching behind him and handing her one of his long-knives. "And I do have needle and thread."

"Woah, seriously?" Meghan choked back a laugh. So the Fruitcake was a seamster, too? Too funny. "Why?"

"Each warrior is responsible for the upkeep of his clothing. We have little time to return home and let the women mend our things. So should something tear or wear out, we repair it."

_Okay, that's not too fruity._ "Coolies. I don't really care what color the thread is, I just need some. Okay a lot."

Legolas rifled through his pack and produced the required articles. Meghan thanked him with a cheery smile and sat down next to him on the rock outcropping.

"What are you doing?" he asked, seeing her gathering her skirt into her hands.

Meghan took a calculating look at the fabric. "I'm shortening this stupid dress." She saw his eyes go wide. "Don't worry, it won't be scandalous. I'm just taking it up maybe eight inches or so. I don't want to be tripping over the hem every ten seconds."

She carefully began slicing the skirt with Legolas' knife. True to her word, she only brought it up about a hand-span, but it still allowed her to move more freely. It was a little awkward to reach the back of the dress. She managed.

Then she whip-stitched a new hem into the skirt. The thread was black and looked a little strange against the creamy fabric.

"Your fingers are very fast," Legolas said as he observed her rapidly basting the hem.

"Lots of experience," she replied. "I do oodles of sewing. It's kind of a hobby."

"A hobby? Why not an occupation?" Legolas said.

"Well, in the future, making clothing isn't really a big deal. It's made in mass, and it's not by hand anymore. There are machines that make it. So the only real need for hand-sewing is for costumes and the like. I make period costumes from the Renaissance and colonial times, and the Victorian era."

"I'm guessing that all those ages have not yet come in my lifetime," Legolas said.

"No," Meghan looked up and smiled. "But hey, you're immortal, right? Maybe you'll still be around for all of them."

She glanced back down at her work to tie off a knot. "Well, that's done. I feel much more mobile now. But about these sleeves…"

She flapped her arms in despair and gazed dolefully up at him. "Can I have the knife back?"

Wordlessly, he returned the blade to her. Using clean slices, she chopped off her huge, long sleeves at the elbow. "I have half a mind to whack my hair off while I'm at it," she growled at her raven locks.
"No don't," Legolas said quickly. "You have beautiful hair."

"Thanks," Meghan said, inwardly giggling. *But not half so pretty as yours. Snort!*
Meghan was dancing.

This was highly inappropriate, considering the fact that Gandalf was practically swearing at the doors, Aragorn and Boromir were casting doleful glances around the area, and everyone else was brooding.

"But I don't feel like dancin'
When the old Joanna plays
My heart could take a chance
But my two feet can't find a way…"

Meghan was also singing under her breath. The reason that she was dancing was because she was testing out her newly reduced dress, and enjoying the freedom of movement. It was quite liberating.

"You think that I could muster up a little soft, shoe gentle sway
But I don't feel like dancin'
No sir, no dancin' today.
Don't feel like dancin', dancin'
Even if I find nothin' better to do
Don't feel like dancin', dancin'
Why'd you break it down when I'm not in the mood?"

"If you do not feel like dancing," Gimli growled in a display of complete and utter frustration, "Then why do you persist in doing so?"

"It's just a song, Gimli," Meghan replied, but she quit dancing anyway. "Y'all are a bunch of fuddy-duddies. Jeez, it couldn't have taken this long in the movie for you guys to figure out the stupid password. Oh wait, I got this. It's a fruit or something."

She struck an authoritative pose in front of the doors. "Okay. Mmm hmm." She cleared her throat. "Apples!"

Nothing happened.

"Oranges! Pears! Bananas! Coconuts! Wait is that even a fruit?" Meghan noticed that everyone was
giving her weird looks. "Cantaloupe? Dang and that even sounds the most fairy-ish out of all of them."

"It's not about fruit," Frodo said, standing up and walking toward the doorway with a quizzical expression on his face. "It's a riddle. Speak friend and enter. Gandalf, what's the Elvish word for friend?"

Gandalf enunciated the word clearly. "Mellon."

Painstakingly slowly, the doors creaked open. A smile lit up the dark-haired Hobbit's face.

"Oh I so totally got you started down the right path. I mean, melon is a fruit," Meghan said.

The others rose excitedly from the hard stone ground, and carefully they all entered the dark mines. Gimli, at least, got hyped up about it.

"Soon, Master Elf, you will enjoy the fabled hospitality of the Dwarves!" he roared gaily.

*Wow, spiteful much? How cliché is it that Elves and Dwarves hate each other's guts?* Meghan puffed mentally.

"Roaring fires, malt beer, ripe meat off the bone!" Gimli was still chattering about Moria. "This, my friend, is the home of my cousin Balin. And they call it a mine. A mine!"

"This is no mine," Boromir said with sick dread in his voice. "It's a tomb!"

Meghan looked down.

Then Meghan screamed.

Everything dissolved into complete chaos as a slithery thing grabbed Frodo, Meghan went into a panic attack at the grody skeletons lying around, and everyone else set about rescuing the poor Hobbit from the evil clutches of a large, slick tentacle.

"EW!" Meghan hyperventilated. "Bones and little hands and DUSTY COBWEBS! OH! The cobwebs kill me!" She backed away from a particularly gruesome skeleton only to bump into another one. "GERMS!" she screamed.

Meanwhile, the Fellowship was busy with hacking, whacking, and attacking the Lake Monster. And they were doing a fine job of it, too. Considering the fact that my readership has probably seen the movie, I will not bore you with a repetitive description of the scuffle. Suffice it to say, Frodo dropped into Boromir's arms and the entire Fellowship, including Meghan, was trapped inside Moria's dismal darkness by the Watcher in the Water.

"Oh my gosh, we're stuck in here, we're all gonna die, this is terrible, I'm sick of this place, I wanna go home, we're all gonna die, I can't see anything!" Meghan babbled incessantly, almost on the point of hysteria. She completely froze up when she felt something warm grab her hand.

"AH!!" she screamed a second later. "IT'S GOT MY ARM!"

"Lady Meghan," a soothing voice came from the darkness, "It is I."

"An EYEBALL?!?" Meghan whispered loudly.

"No, it is Legolas," the voice replied. His grip on her hand tightened.
"Don't DO that do me! I'm prone to panic-attacks!"

"I will remember that."

A light flickered up from Gandalf's staff. "We now have but one choice," he said glumly. "We must face the long dark of Moria. Be on your guard. There are older and fouler things than Orcs in the deep places of the world."

Meghan felt Legolas tugging on her hand, insisting that she follow him as Gandalf began to walk cautiously down a flight of stone stairs.

"Quietly now," the wizard snapped. Everyone knew the comment was directed at Meghan, and she glared daggers into the gloom. "It's a four-day journey to the other side. Let us hope that our presence may go unnoticed."

Slowly, they all made their way through the cavernous depths of the ancient Dwarvish city. As they walked, Gandalf ran his hand along the walls. "The wealth of Moria was not in gold, or jewels," he said, "but mithril."

He directed the brightness on his staff down a huge shaft into the mine below. Meghan couldn't resist to take a peek, although she grabbed Legolas' arm before she did. If she was going to fall down that awful distance, she was going to take someone with her.

"Bilbo had a shirt of mithril rings that Thorin gave him," Gandalf continued.

Meghan had absolutely no idea who those people were. She made a mental note to ask Pippin later.

"Ah, that was a kingly gift!" Gimli exclaimed.

"Yes. I never told him, but its worth was greater than the value of the Shire," Gandalf agreed.

Right, so this Bilbo guy is like Paris Hilton, walking around with enormously expensive clothing that's worth a fortune. Got it.

It soon became quite monotonous, the cycles of sleeping, then eating, then walking, then eating, then sleeping. The floor was hard as, well, stone, and Meghan didn't have any padding. By the second evening she was so tired that she slept like a rock despite the discomfort.

Every morning, she noticed that Legolas watched her curiously as she woke up. She figured it was just weirdness about her being an Elf and still managing to sleep.

I am so totally going to talk to him if he keeps this up. I mean, yeesh, he's like a stalker or something. Ha. I get the pretty-boy stalker.

There was never a lot of conversation. After Meghan's initial freak-out moment, she felt too embarrassed to say much, and everyone else seemed to be unremittingly taciturn. It was all quite maddening, really.

But Meghan got a welcome holiday from the Fellowship's silence. It was on the third night, and she volunteered to take the first watch. She figured it would work better that way because then she wouldn't be groggy while she was supposed to be alert and vigilant.

So she hunched into Legolas' cloak (she still couldn't think of it as her own) and hunkered down for a boring two hours of watchfulness. The minutes ticked by slowly, and kept track of time by counting up to a thousand seven times. She was just on seven thousand sixty-nine when she heard
rustling behind her and Pippin scrunched down next to her.

"Hello," he whispered in the darkness.

"Hi," Meghan replied. Pippin was next on the watch. At least she wouldn't have to deal with the immense guilties of waking the poor little soul up.

"I couldn't sleep," Pippin sighed.

"I'm sorry." Meghan didn't really know of anything else to say.

"You could go to sleep, if you wanted," Pippin offered helpfully.

"Thanks, but I could use the company. Mind if I stay and chat a bit?"

"No, not at all."

Quiet fell for the briefest moment.

"Hey, this is really random, but who're those guys that Gandalf was talking about a couple days ago? You know, the guys with the mithril shirt?" Meghan asked.

Pippin pondered for a moment. "Oh, Bilbo you mean? He's Frodo's cousin, but he's older than Frodo and he raised him. I think the other one was one of Gimli's relatives."

"Oh. Cool."

Another pause.

"Do you ever feel like Gandalf is totally watching you?" Meghan asked. "You know, like right now, he's pretending to be asleep but is really awake and is listening, and tomorrow morning he's going to chew us out for talking?"

She could hear the smile in Pippin's voice. "All the time. But he never has, I don't think. It just feels like it."

As if it was a harbinger of doom, Gandalf rolled over. Meghan and Pippin traded a look of pure horror and then stared at the wizard for a good two minutes, trying to figure out whether he was awake or not.

Meghan giggled under her breath, "Woah, psych!" she whispered.

"Psych?"

"Um, it's kinda like, you get all prepared for something and it doesn't really happen. Like a let-down."

"Oh, I get it."

"Well, I'm going to go conk out now. G'night." Meghan crawled a few feet away from the group of smelly men and flopped onto the hard floor. Another night, another… night. Hey, wait a sec, if I'm an Elf and Legolas is all freaked out about me sleeping, what does he do? If he doesn't sleep why doesn't he keep watch all night?

She crept back to Pippin.
"Psst!" she said. "Pippin!"

"What?" the Hobbit asked.

"What's up with Legolas? Is he asleep or what?"

"Oh, he said he doesn't sleep. But he does somethin' strange… it's like he meditates all night. It'll off-put you, at first."

"Weird," Meghan mused. "Oh well. G'night again."

She returned to her original spot and curled up. *Ick. There is so much bacteria on this floor. Whenever we reach some civilization, I am going to take the bath of the century. And possibly cut my hair.*
The next morning, Meghan awoke with the most enormous crick in her neck. She jerked her head every which way, trying to crack her neck. Eventually she heard and felt the satisfying pop.

"So, what's for breakfast this morning?" she asked in a hushed tone.

"Same as the day before," Pippin answered a bit dolefully. "Journey-bread and dried meats."

"You know, in my time, we call this stuff jerky." Meghan gnawed on a piece of the hard meat.

"Really? Why that?" Merry said.

"I dunno. And then there's this really highly processed stuff that's called Slim Jims. Those things are frightening. I think I might have been scarred by the commercial with the guys that had Slim Jims for hair… I couldn't ever really look at beef jerky the same after that."

"What is a commercial?" Pippin asked innocently.

"Um… it's like a really advanced street seller person. You know at markets and stuff how people try to hawk their wares? It's kinda like that."

The two Hobbits nodded.

"Come come," Gandalf barked with authority. "We must press on. If we move quickly enough, we may see the sky by this evening."

"Whoo hoo!" Meghan partied under her breath.

They all finished wolfing down the simple breakfast and then set out again through the dark and gloomy mines. Even Gimli's fascination with the architecture had eventually worn off.

The hours passed slowly, just as they always did in that clockless hole. Meghan slipped into an easy, brainless routine: left foot, right foot, breathe in, breath out, left foot, right foot. It worked rather well, actually.

'Cept when the Fellowship stopped. She bumped into Legolas. "Sorry…" she whispered. Apparently something bad was happening, because nobody said anything.

"I have no memory of this place," Gandalf mused, staring at three gigantic archways.

They all stood around in awkward silence for a moment.

"If this was really the movie, it would be at this point that a time lapse would occur and it would cut to when Gandalf figures out the right direction. Or maybe it would allow a brief interlude for a dramatic conversation that furthers the plot of the story. Gosh, now I wish I hadn't fallen asleep. I am such an idiot."
"You fell asleep?" Boromir demanded. "I still fail to see what purpose this girl has to serve."

"You're just smarting over the dress comment!" Meghan shot back.

"That is ridiculous!"

"You smell funny!"

"Please refrain from that noise," Gandalf said tranquilly.

Boromir and Meghan settled for shooting dark glares at each other.

As time slowly wore on, the Fellowship once again spread out, waiting for Gandalf to come to a decision. Meghan slumped down (having won the stare-down with Boromir) and started counting the pebbles on the floor.

She didn't even hear Legolas coming to sit next to her until he spoke in a soft undertone. "Hello, Lady Meghan."

"You really don't have to call me that," Meghan said.

"I prefer to. I try to make it a rule that I express proper respect to women by calling them 'lady'."

"Hmm. Wait, does that mean you call, like, your sisters and your friends 'Lady Whatever'?"

Legolas laughed: a gentle but joyful sound. "No, I do not call her by a ceremonious title. I have only met you a week or so ago, and I want to treat you respectfully."

Meghan nodded, understanding that he wasn't comfortable enough around her to drop the formal name. "Well, Legolas, someday I hope you'll just call me Meghan."

He smiled warmly.

"So, will you tell me more of your childhood?" he asked. "I only know that the Valar took you from the future. But what of you? How did you grow up?"

"Well, I'm the youngest of four. But my three brothers are all much older than I. Evan is married with three kids, Thomas is off living in Iceland with a research team, and Chris is in his last year of grad-school. They're all, like, super-protective of me. I could never get a date in high school because all the guys were afraid of my brothers. We're sorta the traditional Southern family, you know, where if a guy comes to pick up the girl, he finds the girl's dad and brothers cleaning their guns on the front porch. But I guess I didn't really mind. They're really cool. You don't understand a word I'm saying, do you?"

"No, I am afraid I do not. But I am enjoying the picture you are painting. Please, continue."

Meghan shrugged. "There's not much to tell. I had an extremely normal childhood. In school I comfortably fit in with the outcasts, but I was cool with that. And through it all, I've been best friends with two girls who are almost as crazy as I am: Stefanie and Andrea. They are absolutely obsessed with you guys." Meghan laughed a little, thinking of her two nutty friends. "So yeah, nothing particularly exciting about me. I've maintained a GPA of 3.6 throughout school. I've never been mugged. I've never had a show-down with the local drama queen. I'm pretty ordinary."

Legolas chuckled again. "Pardon me for saying this, Lady Meghan, but you are by far the strangest elleth I have ever met!"
They were interrupted by Gandalf's optimistic announcement: "Ah! It's that way!"

"He's remembered!" Merry exclaimed.

"No, but the air doesn't smell so foul down here. If in doubt, Meriadoc, always follow your nose."

"Wait, we're trusting in your superior olfactory senses?" Meghan asked.

Gandalf shot her a look that was both exasperated and weary. "Yes, Melethriel, we are."

_Dang. He calls me by that stupid Elvish name just to tick me off._

They all clamored carefully through the portal that Gandalf indicated, the wizard himself leading the way with his shining staff. The hallway they walked down was just as grey and grody as the previous thousands of hallways.

Until they entered a vast, immeasurable space, that is. Meghan perceived a huge immensity, and the air tasted less stale. _Wow. Gandalf's nose was right. Coolies._

"Let me risk a little more light," Gandalf himself said. He did something magicky with his staff and suddenly the whole, enormous chamber was illuminated. "Behold! The great realm and Dwarf-city of Dwarrowdelf."

"Now there's an eye-opener, and no mistake," Sam breathed.

"Whew, you can say that again!" Meghan agreed, staring with a slack jaw at the arched ceiling far above her head. "Dude, this was made by Dwarves? But you guys are super short! How the heck did you get that high?"

It is perhaps fortunate for Meghan that Gimli was too distracted to explode into a fine fit of rage at her for that reckless comment. But, the fact of the matter remains that instead of threatening to lop off Meghan's head for belittling his kin, he let out a cry and ran off toward a side room.

"Gimli!" Gandalf snapped, obviously quite put out that the Dwarf had dashed away from the group. Meghan was vaguely reminded of how in preschool, you got the lecture of your _life_ if you wandered away from your fellow toddlers.

Of course they all had no other option other than to jog after him and enter the dusty chamber. There was a high concentration of decayed Dwarvish corpses in this room, and Meghan shuddered away from each and every one, only to get closer to another. It was a hopeless situation.

Gimli, meanwhile, was moaning in anguish in front of a brightly lit crypt. Gandalf walked passed his shoulder and ran a hand over the runes on the slab.

_Here lies Balin, son of Fundin, Lord of Moria_," he translated. "He is dead, then. It's as I feared."

"Were we ever expecting anybody to be alive down here?" Meghan whispered to Legolas. He shook his head sadly.

The wizard handed his staff and hat to Pippin and lifted an old, crumbling book from the clutches of a particularly pained-looking body.

"They have taken the bridge, and the second hall," he began to read.

Meghan could hear Legolas mutter to Aragorn, "We must move on: we cannot linger!"
"What do you mean?" she demanded in an undertone.

"Can you not feel it?" Legolas asked.

Gandalf was still reading the book, which suddenly felt much less important to Meghan now that she knew that Legolas was having some sort of Spidy-sense moment.

"...We cannot get out. A shadow moves in the dark. We cannot get out. They are coming."

"That alone is very disturbing!" Meghan burst out. "But Legolas totally wants to jet, and if he's all whacked out about it, I'm all for dumping this place, too."

Pippin chose that exact moment knock the corpse down the well. It made a huge rackety sound that echoed and rebounded through what felt like the entirety of Moria.

As the reverberations died away, Gandalf snapped the book closed. "Fool of a Took!" he barked. "Throw yourself in next time and rid us of your stupidity! And you!" He wheeled on Meghan. "You speak nonsense that none of us can comprehend! If you cannot learn to communicate, than say nothing at all!"

"Okay, first of all-" Meghan's hackles never had the chance to fully raise. They all heard the deep, booming drums from the mine's bowels.

"Frodo!" Sam said urgently. The dark-haired Hobbit drew his sword a few inches from the sheath, and the blade was glowing a soft, electric blue.

"Wait, is that bad?" Meghan asked, all her confrontational attitude gone.

"Orcs!" Legolas snarled.
Immediately, Boromir went to close the rotted wooden doors through which they had originally entered. Meanwhile, Aragorn got busy with directing all the "battle-challenged" individuals in the room.

"Get back!" he shouted. "And stay close to Gandalf!"

Meghan had half a mind to just start screaming, right then and there. The other half of her mind was performing lightning-fast calculations. She glanced around the room, looking for an escape route. None to be had. They were trapped.

More importantly, she was trapped.

"Umm..." she squeaked. "I don't know how to fight at all!"

She felt a reassuring hand on her arm. "Stay by me. I will protect you."

Great. The clothing model to save the day. But at that point, Meghan would take anybody. If she remembered anything from her friends' frequent conversations, the battles typically didn't go well.

"Legolas," she said shakily, "the first thing we're doing once we get out of here is some major weapons training stuff."

"Agreed," he replied before turning away from her to toss various weaponry to Aragorn and Boromir, who were blockading the door. An enormous roar echoed through the room.

"They have a cave-troll," Boromir said in sarcastic joy.

Meghan gasped. "Like in Harry Potter?!"

But everyone was far too busy to answer her. Especially Gimli, who was being very Dwarvish and heroic by standing menacingly atop Balin's tomb. He growled. "Let them come! There is one dwarf yet in Moria that still draws breath!"

The next few minutes of Meghan's life hardly bear description. It is a miracle that she even survived that encounter with Orcs and a pesky troll. Or perhaps Legolas had a little more to do with it than anything else. Meghan mostly huddled away in one corner of the room with Legolas darting around to kill all the Orcs that came at her, and also help other members of the Fellowship.

Meghan herself was fighting the most massive attack of sickness that had ever overcome her. She had her eyes tightly squinched shut, but just the sounds were enough to make bile rise in her throat.

Finally, she heard a huge thud and she looked up to see the cave-troll lying in a heap on the floor and all the Orcs had fled. The Fellowship was gathering around the apparently dead body of Frodo.
Dismissing the concern that the Hobbit really was dead, Meghan shook her head and tried to gather her wits. She took a good look around the room.

Bad idea.

The twisted and fresh corpses of the Orcs sent her stomach into a roller-coaster of nausea. She tasted the vile tang of queasiness and before she knew what had hit her, she was doubled over her knees, vomiting.

Feeling the acute misery that only completely emptying your stomach can bring, she wiped her lips and tried to think of other things. Such as getting furiously angry at the Fellowship for no good reason. What the heck were they talking about over there, anyway? Why weren't they leaving?

She peeked over to the group, but one little glance was enough to undo her. She threw up again, and almost kicked the ground in frustration. Actually, the only thing that stopped her was the fact that she was on her knees. So she resorted to pounding the stone floor with her fist.

That drew the attention of Pippin, who hurried over and laid a hand on her back. "Meghan?" he asked tentatively.

"I'm fine," Meghan said, but she didn't open her eyes. "Just a little sick. Once we leave I'll be fine."

The Orcs obliged her. They screamed and made a ruckus outside, thus prompting Gandalf into action.

"To the bridge of Khazad-Dûm!" he shouted.

Meghan dragged herself to her feet and willed her eyes to open. Still, she was convinced that she'd just puke again.

Pippin knew just what to do. He grasped Meghan's hand and put it on his tiny shoulder. "Just until we're out of this room," he said quickly as he hurried after the Fellowship with Meghan (her eyes still shut) tagging closely behind.

They quickly left the chamber and once again entered the marble hall. Meghan let her hand drop from Pippin's shoulder and popped her eyes open. Now she that she was away from the grisly scene from the fighting, she felt better.

Then she noticed that they were being following by a rather large collection of extremely unattractive people.

The Orcs were jeering and screeching like banshees as they rushed, en masse, toward the Fellowship. Hundreds of other goblins swept in from the other sides, blocking them into a perfect circle.

"You guys are so UGLY!" Meghan shouted irately.

The next thing she knew, they were all scattering with shrieks of terror as a red glow appeared farther down the hall.

"What is this new devilry?" Boromir asked in a breathy tone.

"A Balrog. A demon of the ancient world."

_Sooooo cliché._
"This foe is beyond any of you. Run!" Gandalf took off at a sprint and the rest of the Company followed suit. Within about ten seconds, Meghan was huffing and puffing.

"DANG!" she screamed randomly, drawing the word out in delicious fury. "Why didn't I decide to do cross-country? Noooo, I had to pick Accounting!"

"Save your breath!" Gandalf shouted.

Meghan was thisclose to yelling at him. But she decided, hey, he's a smart guy. He's probably right. They ran through many rooms. They ran down many stairs. They also ran up many stairs. Meghan's muscles burned in a way she had never thought possible. Her clothes were sticky with sweat and she whipped her hair away from her face. Stupid hair.

It finally got exciting when they were running down a particularly disconcerting stairway – no railings, and no visible floor. But what really made it exciting was the fact that it had a gap in it.

Meghan stomped her foot and shook with rage. "Peter Jackson should DIE!" she bellowed.

Legolas neatly leapt across the gap. He turned and beckoned to the wizard. "Gandalf!" he urged. *Oh my gosh. That was so pansy.*

"No," the wizard objected. "Melethriel first."

Meghan rolled her eyes, but smiled at the same time. Sure, Gandalf had his obnoxious idiosyncrasies, but he was still pretty cool. She steeled herself and jumped down to the lower section of the stairs. Legolas caught her by the shoulders, steadying her landing.

Meghan suddenly remembered the whole drama with the stairs crumbling. "Hurry up everybody!" she said. She hated drama. It was just simply unnecessary when they were fleeing for their lives.

Miraculously, the stairway did not begin to collapse. Meghan felt a disproportionate amount of satisfaction as they all again ran through the vastness of Moria. Surely they were getting closer to the stupid bridge!

Well, duh, there it was. Meghan stumbled onto it before she even realized that it *was* the bridge.

"AH!" she exclaimed. "That's really skinny!"

"Over the bridge! Fly!" Gandalf shouted.

Meghan whirled around to glare at him. "Do you see how tiny that thing is? And what's up with Dwarves and no hand-rails! This is all to produce pointless tension and suspense!"

"Meghan, run!" Practically everyone shouted, perhaps with the exception of Gimli, who was too busy mourning the loss of Moria's charms.

"Oh, fine!" Meghan snapped. She turned back to the bridge and, gulping in a huge breath, darted across the slender stone pass.

The other side felt remarkably comforting and solid. Meghan stumbled a bit in pure relief as the bridge ended and the regular floor began. She was totally prepared to keep on running from those perfectly odious Orcs, but it seemed as though everyone else had stopped as soon as they got to the other side.
She turned out and saw Gandalf standing in the middle of the bridge. This sight was far less stimulating than the spectacle of a very large, very flame-y monster roaring and hollering on the other side.

"AH!" Meghan screeched in surprise as she grabbed somebody's arm – she didn't really care who it was… it was probably Boromir. "What the heck is that thing?!"

"A Balrog of Morgoth," Legolas said, almost reverent in fear.

Meghan could not think of anything to say. The whole situation could strike anyone dumb.

"You cannot pass!" the wizard snapped, and at that moment, he looked quite wizard-esque. A brilliant light emanated from the tip of his staff, creating an orb of radiance. "I am a servant of the secret fire, wielder of the flame of Anor. The dark fire will not avail you, Flame of Udûn!"

The Balrog heaved a mighty blow down on Gandalf, but he blocked it with his own sword, splintering the Balrog's red weapon.

"Go back to the Shadow!" Gandalf ordered firmly.

But the Balrog would have none of it. It now flaunted a whip, lashing and cracking it threateningly.

"YOU…SHALL NOT…PASS!" the wizard boomed, and, joining his sword and staff together, brought them both down on the bridge with a dull thump. Sniffing in contempt, the Balrog took one step onto the bridge.

That was enough. The bridge shattered under the weight of the ancient demon, and both stone and Balrog fell into the abyss. Gandalf heaved a weary sigh and turned back to the Fellowship.

Meghan burst into spontaneous applause. "Whoo! I was totally rootin' for y—" Her cheering was abruptly cut short. The Balrog's whip snatched around Gandalf's ankle and dragged him down. He caught the edge of the stone just in time.

"Fly, you fools!" he gasped before simply letting go.

Frodo was screaming something over to Meghan's left, but she didn't pay much attention. She was too confused. What on earth just happened? I thought Gandalf was alive in the next movie…I could have sworn he was!

She couldn't think. It was too difficult to think and run at the same time. And since running was more beneficial to her survival, she chose to run then and think later.

Moments later, the Fellowship burst out of the East Gate of Moria. The sunlight was blinding and Meghan immediately tripped over an unseen stone. She caught herself with her hands and lowered herself to the ground, heaving huge breaths in and out.

I have never run so much in my entire life. And I never want to do it again.

Meghan rolled onto her back and stared up into the blue sky. So back to this whole deal with Gandalf. I remember he's in the last movie. So how the heck can he die? A cold feeling swept over her gut. What if I did something that threw off the timing or whatever? No no, that can't right. Or at least, I won't think about that right now. She focused hard on the conversations between Stefanie and Andrea. Didn't they say something about meeting Gandalf in the second one… in a forest. I can't remember! This is so frustrating!

"Legolas, get them up," Aragorn said.
"Give them a moment, for pity's sake!" Boromir exclaimed.

"By nightfall, these hills will be swarming with Orcs!" Aragorn said. "We must reach the Woods of Lothlórien. Come Boromir, Legolas. Gimli, get them up."

Meghan didn't want to be one of the people's that needed "getting up." She popped to her feet and glanced around. The terrain was similar to the landscape a few miles before Caradhras, except colder. She tightened her cloak around her body.

A moment later, they were all assembled, though looking a little teary – especially the Hobbits. Meghan stuffed her confusion about Gandalf's death down into the deepest depths of her consciousness.

"So, where exactly is this Loth-whatever place?" she asked.

"Southeast from here, and several hours' travel. We must start now to arrive before nightfall," Aragorn replied.

"This means more running, doesn't it," Meghan sighed.

"I am afraid so," Aragorn nodded. "Let us go!"

And with that, they were off.
They ran for what seemed like forever. Meghan had long gotten passed the knot-in-stomach stage, the calf-muscles-burning-like-Hades stage, and the want-to-fall-down-and-die stage. She was at the in-so-much-pain-that-you-can't-feel-anything-anymore stage.

But she pushed doggedly onward. If those tiny little Hobbits could handle running for hours at a time, than by golly, she could, too. She was certain, however, that she wasn't fairing nearly as badly as the huffing and puffing Dwarf, who cursed every several minutes. Or at least, Meghan assumed it was cursing; he used a very gruff-sounding language that was most likely some Dwarvish dialect.

At last (and Meghan was quite certain that she heard a hallelujah chorus), they reached the eaves of Lothlórien. Meghan staggered to a walk, heaving a gigantic sigh of relief. It felt so good to walk instead of run.

"Stay close, young Hobbits!" Gimli said in an extremely loud whisper, gesturing the other short people closer to him. "They say a great sorceress lives in these wood. An Elf-witch of terrible power. All who look upon her, fall under her spell… And are never seen again."

Meghan rolled her eyes. "Right, and she probably lives with Darth Vader. I can totally see that going down."

Pippin and Merry gave her quizzical looks, but Gimli entirely ignored her. He tended to do that a lot. "Well, here is one Dwarf she won't ensnare so easily. I have the eyes of a hawk and the ears of a fox!"

Very conveniently, a whole bunch of sharp, pointy objects appeared and aimed at the Fellowship. Meghan squeaked in surprise and hid behind her hands.

"The Dwarf breathes so loud we could have shot him in the dark," a very arrogant voice announced.

Meghan peeked through her fingers and saw an Elf that was almost as gorgeous as Legolas. "Actually, it would be 'loudly.' Proper grammar, and all."

The Elf turned his attention onto Meghan. "Pardon me," he said with a distinct air of sarcasm.

"Okay, look, you want to be rattin' on me that's fine, but can you wait until I'm not exhausted from running since, like, five o'clock this morning?!" Meghan snapped.

He leveled a glare at Aragorn. "Who is this elleth?"

"Our story is long, and she is but a part of it. May we not retire to someplace more protected?" Aragorn said, giving the Elf an apologetic look.
Meghan took the cue to shut-up, but she couldn't resist another eye-roll.

"Very well. Follow me."

The Fellowship and their coterie of Elven guards went deeper into Lothlórien, and soon reached a guard-flet, where they all climbed the dizzying height. Once they got to the top, Meghan tumbled to the floor and stretched out.

She was vaguely aware that everyone else was basically being presented to the Elves, but she didn't care. She wanted to lie down and puzzle over the day's happenings.

More importantly, to puzzle over whether Gandalf's death was her fault or not. He's an important guy. If I accidentally killed him off, we could be in a heap of trouble. But I remember! In Andrea's story, the one where I was Legolas' little sis... her character went with the Fellowship, and...oh, why did I have to skip some of the parts? But it was in a forest. They all tried to hurt him or something... and then... Oh yeah! He comes back to life! Thank goodness.

She heard a sound next to her, and she looked over to see Pippin and Merry both settling down beside her with a miserable looks on their faces.

"How're y'all doin'?" Meghan asked gently. She wished she could tell them that Gandalf wasn't really dead, but that might mess something up.

"Alright, I guess," Pippin said glumly, but it was hard to be sad for him when he had that adorable accent.

"It was just so unexpected," Merry added.

"Yeah," Meghan sighed. She wasn't very good at comforting people. Heck, when Stefanie's pet hamster died, Meghan had told her that it was probably going to hamster-heck because it ran away every chance it could get. Stefanie had fled, crying, and refused to speak to Meghan for three weeks. (They were seven years old, at the time.)

Pippin seemed to pull himself together. "What do you make of this place?" he asked.

"I dunno yet. I haven't seen much of it. It kinda reminds of a church, for some reason."

"A church?" Merry asked.

"Um... like a temple? Do you guys have that stuff here?"

"I think I know what you mean."

"Hey... how do you think Aragorn is going to explain me to those snobby Elves?"

Pippin cracked a smile. "Careful, or they'll hear you."

"Do you seriously think I care? They're probably all thinking I'm some smelly freak. I haven't gotten so sweaty in years."

They were interrupted by Haldir. "You will follow me," he said rather superciliously.

Meghan cast a wry look at the two Hobbits. "And I was just getting comfortable," she said before crawling to her feet.

Once again, they trekked through Lothlórien. It was beautiful to be sure, but a bit too quiet and
eerie for Meghan's tastes. At last they reached a hill-ish part of the forest that opened into a pasture of sorts, and then thickened back into the forest a ways in.

"Caras Galadhon," Haldir said, pride and love for his homeland thick in his voice. "The heart of Elvendom on earth. Realm of the Lord Celeborn and of Galadriel, Lady of Light."

Meghan thought that was great and all, she was so exhausted that she had a headache. Every muscle in her body burned violently. It was rather pathetic, really.

"How much longer?" she panted between gasps for breath.

Haldir cast her an irritated look. "It is not far. Perhaps a mile more."

"A mile," she groaned. "I am so out of shape."

"You say that she is from Rivendell?" Haldir asked Aragorn.

The Ranger nodded.

"Rivendell?" Meghan said with a questioning look on her face. Legolas jabbed her in the ribs with his elbow, obviously warning her to go along with the story. "Of course! Rivendell! I am just so used to calling it by, um… the Elvish name, that… you know, it's weird to call it by the…human name. Yeah." She smiled cheesily.

Haldir nodded slowly, but he didn't look entirely convinced. "Very well." His eyes clearly said, Rivendell has been going downhill lately, if this elleth is to be the illustration.

They started walking again. Meghan moaned internally and kept going by sheer force of will. A stubborn spirit came in handy, sometimes. Ugh. This would totally be a time-lapse moment in the movie.

And thus, we will take Meghan's advice and use a time lapse, although we do not claim to be a movie. After much more walking, and then a bit of climbing, they finally assembled in another very lofty flet, which was quite shiny.

What was even more shiny was the presence of Celeborn and Galadriel, who glided down the stairs, hand in hand. They looked very solemn. And very shiny.

"The Enemy knows you have entered here," Celeborn began.

Now, let it first be said that Meghan had been running for her life for a dreadfully extended period of time. Before that, she had been sleeping in a dark and scary mine. Before even that, she had been trekking through a snowy mountain. And before even that, she had been dumped in a world that was infinitely different than her own.

So perhaps it is excusable that, in that moment, she got a giggle-fit.

"What hope you had in secrecy is now gone…" Celeborn trailed off in confusion as Meghan struggled to suppress a fearsome attack of giggles.

"I'm sorry," she gasped from behind her hands, which were clamped over her mouth.

Celeborn turned away from her, his eyes still perplexed, and continued his monologue. "Tell me where is Gandalf? For I much desire to speak with him. I can no longer see him from afar."

"Gandalf the Grey did not pass the borders of this land," Galadriel said quietly. "He has fallen into
Shadow…"

Meghan realized that they were talking about something serious, and, in a Herculean effort, put on a straight face.

"He was taken by both Shadow and flame. A Balrog of Morgoth. For we went needlessly into the net of Moria," Legolas said, sorrowfully.

"Needless were none of the deeds of Gandalf in life," Galadriel said.

*I can think of some. Calling me Melethriel, for one.*

"We do not yet know his full purpose." Galadriel looked over at Gimli. "Do no let the great emptiness of Khazad-Dûm fill your heart, Gimli, son of Gloin. For the world has grown full of peril. And in all lands, love is now mingled with grief."

She couldn't help it. Meghan put both her hands back over her lips to keep from laughing out loud. It was just too funny.

"What now becomes of this Fellowship? Without Gandalf, hope is lost," Celeborn said. The seriousness in his tone and expression only made Meghan's giggle-fit worse. In fact, she was getting to the point where it was hard to ignore her. She caught Haldir glaring at her and her obvious disrespect for the Lord and Lady of Light.

_Yikes, what a jerk. Serves him right that he dies in the next movie._ That thought immediately sobered her. _How did I know that? Andrea's story... but does it really happen? It does! I remember Stefanie being so angry, because it wasn't in the book but it was in the movie... Holy crap, I'm really mean. I take it back, O powers that be! I don't want Haldir to die! I mean, he remains a jerk, but..."

"...Do not let your hearts be troubled," Galadriel was saying. "Go now, and rest, for you are weary with sorrow, and much toil. Tonight, you will sleep in peace."

The Fellowship took this as their cue, and turned to leave. Meghan felt someone's gaze on her back as they began to file down the long flight of stairs.

"Meghan," Galadriel stopped her with one word. "I would have you stay for a moment."

_Oh, come on. I'm totally wiped out. I just want to fall asleep._

"Okay," she said, and turned back to face Galadriel. Celeborn wasn't there anymore.

_Not fair. He gets to leave and go to sleep. Oh wait, the Elves don't sleep. Fine. He gets to leave and go 'meditate' or whatever._

Galadriel gazed at her for a moment. After another moment, Meghan started get a little creeped out. For all she knew, Galadriel could be in that whole 'meditative' state.

"So..." she began tentatively.

"You are not from Rivendell." It was a statement, not a question.

Meghan eyeballed her. "Alright, you probably know my whole story, so you don't have to be mysterious."

To her surprise, Galadriel smiled faintly. "You are right. I do know much of your story. You are
from the future, and yet you know little of this tale."

"Yep. Wait. Do you know my social security number?"

"No." Galadriel did not ask what a social security number was.

"Than…is that…all you need? Like…can I go now?"

"You, perhaps you most of all your companions are wearied by your journeys. Yes, you may go."

"Great!" Meghan brightened at the prospect of a bed. "Um…where exactly do I go?"

"Lalaith," Galadriel called, and a moment later a blonde handmaiden came into the room. "Lalaith, will you conduct Meghan to her lodgings?"

"Yes, my Lady." The handmaiden curtsied and went to top of the stairs, pausing to wait for Meghan.

"Well, um, bye," Meghan said to Galadriel, and waved awkwardly.

"Sleep well," Galadriel said.

"You… too. Wait, how did you know I sleep?"

"You said so yourself. I know your story."

"Right. That whole thing. Gotchya. 'Kay, well, I'm gonna go sleep for like, a long time." Meghan gave Galadriel a thumbs up sign and then followed Lalaith down the stairs.

The elleth was remarkably pretty, what with her flaxen hair and perfectly clear complexion. She had startling eyes that were a very pale grey, almost white, that gave her an exotic look.

"So, your name is Lalaith," Meghan ventured.

"Yes, my Lady," she replied shyly.

"I'm Meghan." There was a hesitation on both sides. Meghan was determined not to let the conversation drop, though. This was only the second female she'd seen in quite a few days, and probably only the fourth person who didn't smell rank as a horse. Well, okay, tenth or eleventh, if you want to count all the Elven guards.

"So can you believe that sentinel guy? You know, Haldir?" she continued, fully prepared to launch into a rant.

But a dreamy look immediately swept onto Lalaith's delicate features. "He's my husband," she said with an almost silly smile on her face.

"Say what?" Meghan demanded, a sick sensation plummeting inside her gut.
"You're trying to tell me that that pigheaded, callous barbarian managed to snag a wife?" Meghan said.

Lalaith stopped dead in her tracks and stared at her. "Excuse me?" she managed to gasp.

"Sorry," Meghan cringed. "My mouth runs while my brain stands still. I'm sure Haldir is a pleasant sort of fellow."

"You cannot imagine how wonderful he is," Lalaith sighed with that dreamy glow in her eyes as they began walking again. "He rescued me, in a way."

"Really?" Meghan said. She may not like the guy, but this sounded interesting. "How so?"

"My father died in battle, and my mother joined him in the Halls of Mandos. Soon after, my twin brother was taken by Orcs, and two days later the scouts found his body."

"Oh man, I'm sorry," Meghan said. It seemed like a lot of people died over here. She'd probably better start honing her consolation skills.

Lalaith smiled her thanks. "Haldir was the one who brought me the news of my brother. I was cast into despair for many months, and began to fade. I thought that the heartache would be too much, and that I would die and pass into the Halls of Mandos as my family as done."

"Woah wait, you guys die of grief? That's really depressing!"

"Do the Elves of your realm not do this?" Lalaith asked.

"Oh, um, yes, of course we do, I was just, uh, reiterating some of the more sad aspect of being an Elf!" Meghan laughed uncomfortably. "Uh, proceed with your story."

"Haldir was away for most of this time, but when he returned, he saw my grief and helped me to come away from it. He reignited my soul with light, and joy, and beauty." A flush spread across Lalaith's cheeks and she smiled softly, thinking about her husband.

"Wow, that's really romantic," Meghan said sincerely. I bet they're a cute couple.

"What of you? I saw another Elf in your company. Is he your husband?" Lalaith asked, her face completely innocent.

Meghan burst out laughing. "Good grief, no. I don't think I could marry someone who's prettier than I am."

Lalaith looked like she was holding back a grin. "I do not know if I would put it that way…"

"Let's face it," Meghan chuckled, "Legolas is gorgeous."
Both girls dissolved into giggles. But Meghan was trying not to do a million calculations a minute. If this elleth, or whatever the Elves called the women, had been grabbed back from the brink of death by Haldir, what would happen when he died? It didn't bear thinking about at the moment. Meghan was too tired.

"I understand that separate housing has been prepared for you," Lalaith said, still smiling.

"Thank goodness!" Meghan exclaimed. "Whew! Traveling with a bunch of incredibly ripe men is an ordeal! Although I guess I'm none too sweet-smelling myself."

"I will bring you some soap," Lalaith replied.

"What about clothing? I'd really rather not wear dresses whenever we start traveling again."

Lalaith gave her a curious look. "Will you accompany the Fellowship past the borders of this land?"

"Um, yeah, I guess," Meghan said, confused. She hadn't really thought about it.

"You are very brave," Lalaith said. "I would not have the courage to leave my homeland."

"You should have seen me in Moria," Meghan chortled.

The blonde elleth didn't reply, but rather gestured to a tiny little tent set up in a clearing amongst the trees. Peering down the path, Meghan could see another open space, and could just make out that the rest of the Fellowship was there.

"That is your tent," Lalaith said.

"Sweet!" Meghan squealed, and ran forward to inspect it despite her fatigue. It was a darling little place, with a comfortable interior furnished with a small chair and a low pallet to sleep on.

"Lady Galadriel saw that you did not have many things, so she provided bedding. Tomorrow, one of the seamstresses will bring over a few dresses for your stay here. For tonight, you may borrow one of my nightgowns. I think we are nearly the same size."

Meghan guffawed. "Honey, I could never hope to be that skinny. But, you know, it's a nightgown. Not that complicated."

"I will leave you here, then, and return in a moment with the gown and soap."

Meghan nodded as Lalaith tripped daintily away through the forest. About ten minutes later, Lalaith came back, bearing an array of things.

"This is your nightgown," she said and handed Meghan a frilly white thing. "And this is a drying-cloth and a bar of soap. The stream is not far - I will lead you to it."

Meghan stood rooted to the spot. "You bathe in streams?"

"I know that in Rivendell it is the custom to draw water for a bath, but here we have no tubs for it. I regret the inconvenience."

"But-but-but how do you make sure no one just waltzes up while you're… you know, in the buff?"

Lalaith laughed delightedly. "Your speech is so charming!" she said. "The pools are fairly secluded, and at this time of day, no one will be out washing. Come, before the light is entirely
Meghan reluctantly followed Lalaith down a path that twisted and turned between the trees until at last they reached a quiet stream that was both deep and crystal-clear. It was thickly surrounded by dense underbrush, but that still didn't quite allay Meghan's concerns.

"Um, okay, so, this is a little weird, but, you know, I guess I really want to get clean, so, I'll just, um, bathe here," Meghan rambled.

Lalaith smiled. "Do you require anything more?"

"Oh, doi," Meghan said, smacking her forehead. "Of course your hubby is home. You probably want to go chillax with him, not take care of me. I think I got it. I just follow that nice path thing back to my tent once I finish...bathing...in the river... eheh... Yes! I'm fine. It'll be great. Just me and the river. Go ahead."

"Thank you," Lalaith said. "I hope you have a restful evening."

"You...too," Meghan replied.

Lalaith dropped into a curtsey and then went back down the path, leaving Meghan alone in the twilight, holding a bar of soap, a towel, and a nightgown.

"Heh. Nothing for it. Oh this is so weird." Once her mind was made up, Meghan stripped quickly out of her clothes and jumped into the water. It was surprisingly warm and pleasant - considering the fact that it was winter, she had expected it to be chilly. But, that was probably the power of Lothlórien for you.

Warm water notwithstanding, it was possibly one of the most awkward adventures that Meghan had experienced up to that point. The nagging fear that someone would walk up made her work incredibly quickly, and she had scrubbed her body and hair in no time flat. She climbed out of the brook, towelled off, and dressed in under two minutes.

She swept her cloak around her shoulders, not entirely comfortable with the nightgown even though it fit reasonably well, and gathered up her boots and old dress. It was in a sad state, that dress. She thought about washing it, but she just wanted to sleep.

Looking up, she could see the dark sky peeking in between the leaves. Even so, the entire forest was illuminated with a soft, silvery glow. More Elvish fairy-tale stuff.

Meghan shrugged. As long as she could curl up on that comfy looking bed in the tent, she was happy. So she traipsed down the path, toting her bundle in her arms.

Not forty-five seconds had passed when she saw the slim figure of a person walking toward her on the very same path. Meghan ducked her head, hoping that whoever it was would magically vanish.

"Lady Meghan," a pleasant voice hailed a moment later. "I was looking for you."

It's that stalker Elf. Meghan thanked god, or the stars, or the Valet or whatever the divine being was here that Legolas hadn't come looking for her three minutes earlier. That could have been interesting. He drew closer and they stood opposite one another.

"I just came from a... bath," she replied with an nervous smile.

Legolas immediately turned a very uncharacteristic and strange shade of pink. "I-I am sorry," he
stammered. "I did not know-

Meghan burst out laughing. "It's okay, really it is. You didn't get a free show or anything, so we're good. But seriously, I am so wiped out right now that I could fall asleep on the spot. So don't be all embarrassed on me because that's going to slow me down."

"If-if you are certain," Legolas said, still a bit apprehensive.

"Dude, calm down," Meghan giggled. "I'm completely not mad at you."

"Than may I escort you back?" Legolas said. He actually grinned.

"Sure," Meghan replied.

"May I carry your parcel?"

Meghan looked down at the wad of stuff in her arms, and contemplated the fact that there were, shall we say, "underpinnings" that she had cleverly hidden in the folds of the dress. She put on a cheery smile and thrust her boots into Legolas' hands. "You can carry those!"

It was a quick walk back to Meghan's tent. They didn't speak at all: partially because Meghan's eyelids were drooping even as she walked, and partially because Legolas was still awkward over the whole bathing incident.

When they got to the tent, Meghan turned back to Legolas and smiled. "Thanks for walking me back," she said.

He stooped to place her boots on the ground just outside the tent flap. "It was my pleasure," he said, and he kissed her knuckles.

"G'night," Meghan said.

"Goodnight."

She ducked into the tent and sighed with relief. Creepy pansy Elf following her was a little strange. He was sweet, yes, but too graceful and pretty. I guess I side with Stefanie on this, Meghan sighed internally. I never thought I'd actually have an opinion on the subject, but Elves are so fairy-ish. I want a guy who can sweep me off my feet and grab me in the middle of something epic and just simply kiss me senseless.

With this pleasant thought, Meghan threw off her cloak and crawled into bed. It was soft and cozy, but Meghan never had a chance to notice. She fell asleep even before her head hit the pillow.
"I crave a marshmallow," Meghan sighed.

"What is a marshmallow?" Legolas asked.

"It's a delectable piece of cloud that melts in your mouth and makes your heart smile," Meghan replied.

They were both sitting up in a tree. Legolas had coaxed her out of her tent (she originally had wanted to sleep in for a week) and convinced her to climb up into one of the immeasurably tall mallyrn trees with him. Even though there had been stairs winding around the trunk, about a third of the way up, Meghan declared that she was wretchedly sore and couldn't mount another step. So, naturally, they had carefully gone out onto one of the branches to rest.

Let me rephrase that. Legolas had daintily and quickly sauntered onto the limb, while Meghan had followed, flapping her arms in a desperate attempt to retain her equilibrium.

The enormous sleeves hadn't helped, either. That morning, she had woken to find a bundle of several dresses just inside the door, and they all had huge bell-shaped sleeves.

"That sounds wonderful," Legolas said, referring to the marshmallows of course.

"They are, let me tell you. Whew. Heaven in a bite. Dang I love food."

Meghan struggled to her feet and was pleasantly surprised that without all the flailing, she could actually balance fairly well.

Legolas stood up, too, and they faced each other on the tree branch. If Meghan had actually stopped to think about it, she would have considered it one of the stranger things that had happened to her. Standing up in a tree having an earnest conversation about food just didn't rate on her normal list.

"That is not something that most elleths would say."

"Legolas," Meghan said seriously, clapping a hand onto his shoulder. "Understand that when I was transported here by the gods, I was placed in the wrong body. It would have been much more appropriate had I appeared as a Hobbit."

He laughed. "You are more like the Halflings than my own kin in some ways."

"Like my…crazy wicked awesome kung-fu skills?" She laughed at his blank stare. "Dude, it's like I'm speaking a foreign language to y'all people."

"I confess, it is difficult to understand you, sometimes," Legolas said.
"Oh gosh, and you guys are so adorable with your quaint old-fashioned words. You know, I don't think I've ever heard you use a contraction."

"I learned the Common Tongue without contractions."

"Gotchya."

They stood in silence for a moment, with Meghan studying the finer points of her fingernails and Legolas studying her.

"So," Meghan began calculatingly, looking up. "In Moria we agreed that I should learn how to use some chillin' weaponry stuff so that I stand a better chance of not dying next time."

"Yes, we did," Legolas said. "What would you like to learn?"

"Um, you're the expert, not me."

"I think it would be wise to begin with the bow. It does not take much to learn, and is less physically demanding than a sword or knives."

"Cool. Now all I need is a bow. Oh and those little arrow things."

Legolas nodded slowly, probably pained by her ignorance of his beloved sport. "I will go to the armory and try to obtain the required items."

"Great!" Meghan chirped. "Shall we get started?"

"Are you certain you are not too sore from yesterday's exercise?"

Meghan paused to think about it. It did sound awfully inviting to go back to her tent and collapse onto the bed for another ten or twelve hours. But who knew how long they would stay in the safety of Lothlórien? She might not have many opportunities like this one.

"Nah, I'll be fine. Let's get this over with."

They descended from the tree and Legolas left her, promising to return shortly with a bow and arrows, if he could find them. Meghan stood at the base of the tree and twiddled her thumbs.

Not many minutes later, Legolas came back with two bows - one his, and the other for Meghan. "I checked with one of the armorers," he said. "He said that you may keep this bow and equipment." He handed her the bow, a quiver of arrows, and a strange strappy thing.

"What's this?" Meghan asked, investigating the latter item.

"A vambrace. It protects the forearm from the slap of the string."

"Coolies. Shall we?"

They found an archery range that was utterly uninhabited, for which Meghan was grateful, considering the fact that she wasn't the among more coordinated individuals of the Elvish race.

"Alright, the primary muscles that you will use are your shoulders and back. You place your feet the width of your shoulders..." And Legolas launched into a detailed tutorial on archery, which would most likely bore my readers. And even if it didn't bore my readers, it would detract from the story. So we will jump to Meghan's first attempt at a shot.
She clasped the shaft of the bow with one hand and drew the string back to her cheek with the other, sighting down her arm carefully. Breathing in, she released.

If it is possible for a bow to explode, this one did. The arrow embedded into the ground about four feet in front of them, and the string snapped off the bow and fell impotently into the grass. The bow itself sprang from Meghan's grasp and rebounded away from her, bruising her foot in the process.

"WHAT THE HECK?!" Meghan exclaimed.

Legolas swallowed a smile. "An accident," he said. "Try again." He restrung the bow for her and handed it to her. "Relax your bow-hand, and focus on releasing smoothly with your string-hand."

Meghan repeated the process, concentrating on her hands. This time, when she released, the arrow struck the target… but the string smacked the inside of her elbow.

"Ow!" she screeched. "I thought that the vambrace thing was supposed to protect me!"

"Not that far up your arm," Legolas said. "Try again."

That's how it went all morning. Meghan repeatedly messing it up and Legolas patiently correcting her. As the afternoon crept in, Meghan had painstakingly managed not to injure herself with the bow, but her accuracy was terrible. Plus she was fighting mad.

"I don't get it," she snapped. "This is ridiculous. I can't even hit the same place twice."

"It is only your first day," Legolas said soothingly. "It is reasonable that you are not as precise as someone who has been practicing for many years."

Meghan sighed. "Maybe I'm not cut out for this archery thing. Maybe I should do swords or something."

"That is not my area of expertise," Legolas said. "You might ask Aragorn or perhaps Boromir to teach you to wield a sword."

She contemplated both of them. Boromir was a bit…eh… sensitive and brooding. And Aragorn was depressed and grim. But Boromir had a touch of creepiness about him - and not the same kind of creepiness as Legolas, who was overly friendly and slightly girly. Boromir was dark creepy. Aragorn was just…sad.

"I'll talk to Aragorn," she decided. "But meanwhile, it's almost nighttime and I'm wiped out. My legs feel like limp noodles and my arms feel like… really limp noodles."

"That is a very descriptive figure of speech."

"Thanks, but it's not mine. It's really cliché."

"Cliché?"

"Um… overused."

Legolas regarded her in the goldeny light of Lórien. "Whenever I am certain that I understand your entirety, you surprise me."

"Trust me…not even I know myself in my entirety."
He laughed. "Are you hungry?"

"Yeah, let's go rustle up some chow. All this hard work makes me ravenous."

She hurried away, her hair swinging behind her. Legolas shook his head at her disregard for the bow that she held in her hand, but he followed nonetheless.

About an hour later, Meghan had satisfied her gullet and was sitting contentedly amongst the rest of the Fellowship. They were all silent. It was quite boring.

"So…" she said slowly. "…Aragorn."

The Ranger looked up, his grey eyes piercing. "How can I help you, Lady Meghan?"

"First of all, you can knock it off with the Lady crap. It's annoying. I don't call you Lord Aragorn, do I?" He didn't answer. Meghan cleared her throat and continued. "Anyway, I was kind of hoping, if you had time, that you could teach me how to use a sword or something. Legolas is coaching me in archery and I pretty much stink at it, so I'm widening my horizons."

"If you wish," Aragorn said. "Though I thought that you were affected by the sight of blood?"

"Um… I am. But just for practicing, I think it'll be fine. Just don't randomly slit your throat, 'kay?"

He cracked a faint smile. "I will try not to. Shall we start tomorrow morning?"

"I guess so. Legolas, do you want to do archery stuff in the afternoon?"

The Elf nodded. "That will do."

"Great. It's settled. I am so going to become the most awesomest warrior-chick ever." She caught Boromir rolling his eyes, and she huffed. "What? You don't think I could be Xena reincarnate?"

"Even if I knew who this Xena character is, I do not agree with you."

"Fine. Be that way," Meghan crossed her arms and looked away from Boromir. He was a spoilsport, anyway.
And thus, the next while of Meghan's life was spent largely in keeping company with a sweaty Ranger and a delicately clean Elf. Aragorn had found her a moderately light sword to use, and of course she still had the bow that Legolas had procured for her. Nevertheless, she was terrible in both departments.

Her accuracy in archery still didn't improve, and she was so depressingly bad with a sword that it took all of Aragorn's vast patience not to shout at her.

About two weeks in, Meghan was just finishing a long day of sword-training in the morning and archery in the afternoon. She stood, the string drawn back to her ear. She could feel the soft fletchings on the arrow teasing her cheek.

It was like a moment of clairvoyance. She could sense everything around her with perfect clarity. The rustle of the leaves, her breathing, the way the bow creaked, even Legolas' heartbeat.

She drew in a careful breath, and let her string-fingers relax. The bow snapped straight as the arrow flew neatly into the small red circle of the bullseye.

"YES!" Meghan shouted, pumping her fist in the air. Before she knew quite what was going on, she found herself being twirled around in the strong arms of a certain blond Elf.

"Excellent," he said with a broad grin as he gently set her back to her feet. "Do you remember what you did?"

"It was weird," Meghan said gaily. "I think I finally just focused completely on the whole thing, instead of letting myself get distracted."

"Then let us end on a high note." Legolas offered her an arm, but unfortunately, she was so busy gathering up her gear that she didn't notice. When she looked up with a smile, he had turned away to collect his own equipment.

"I hope they give me some pants someday soon," Meghan sighed. "I think these dresses are lovely, but it sure is a pain to wave a sword around in a skirt."

"You should speak to one of the seamstresses," Legolas suggested. "I'm sure they could arrange something for you."

They began to stroll back in the direction of the general meeting ground of the Fellowship. It was a quiet evening, just as all the evenings in Lothlórien were.

"How much longer do you suppose we'll stay here?" Meghan asked.

"I do not know. But it seems that we will depart soon. There is still the Quest to think of."
"Yep."

They continued on in silence for a few more moments. It was broken by a sweet soprano voice from behind them.

"Meghan!"

Both Meghan and Legolas turned around and saw a blonde elleth trotting prettily toward them.

"Lalaith!" Meghan exclaimed. "I haven't seen you since we first got here."

Lalaith came up to them and dropped into a curtsey to Legolas, who returned it with a gracious bow. "I delivered the dresses to your tent the next morning, but you were still asleep so I left them without waking you."

"Thanks for that," Meghan said.

"I was actually seeking you to ask you to walk with me. I am on my way to obtain a few bolts of fabric, and I hoped you might keep me company if you are not too tired."

"Sounds like fun," Meghan grinned. Fabric was always fun.

"I will take my leave then," Legolas said. "I fear I would only intrude upon two ladies fluttering over yards of cloth. Good evening, Lady Lalaith." He bowed to her again.

"Good evening, Prince Legolas," Lalaith said.

"Lady Meghan, may I take your things back to your tent?"

"Thanks," Meghan said, handing him her bow and quiver.

Despite all the gear, he somehow managed to lift one of her hands to his lips and press a kiss on her knuckles. "Good evening, Lady Meghan."

"G'night."

He smiled faintly and walked away.

Meghan found that Lalaith was giving her one of those I-know-something-you-don't looks.

"What?" she demanded.

"I remember that you said that you would never consider Prince Legolas."

"Yeah, and this is going where…?"

"He seemed very intent upon you when he kissed your hand."

"That puff-muffin? Are you kidding me?" Meghan looped her arm through Lalaith's and they started off down the path. "Legolas is more of a freaky cousin that you eventually get used to sort of person. I'm sure that what you're seeing in Legolas is courtesy. He's just a nice guy."

Lalaith smiled knowingly and let the subject drop. "What think you of my homeland?" she asked.

"It's very beautiful. I haven't seen much of it, though, since I've been so busy with Aragorn and Legolas. How long have you lived here?"
"My entire life."

"Coolies. Hey, do you think I could eventually get some pants or something? I don't want to keep traveling in a dress."

"I am certain that one of the seamstresses could sew something suitable. I will pick up a few materials for you when we reach the loom-flets."

"Thanks."

They walked in companionable silence for a few moments until something scared the willies out of Meghan.

"AAHH!" she screeched as a person appeared behind Lalaith.

Lalaith gave her a strange look, and Meghan calmed down enough to recognize Haldir, who was cringing for his poor Elvish ears and the violence they had undergone from Meghan's scream.

"I see that you have met the elleth who came with the Fellowship," Haldir muttered to Lalaith.

"Yes," Lalaith said sweetly. She pecked a quick kiss onto his cheek. "I have."

"You should not come sneaking up on people like that," Meghan huffed. "It's totally rude."

"Forgive me for walking in my own homeland," Haldir retorted.

"My love," Lalaith said with a warning tone in her voice. "We were just on our way to the loom-flets to retrieve some cloth."

Haldir gave Meghan the evil eye and then turned his attention to his wife. "I followed you to help you carry the fabric back."

"Thank you," Lalaith replied, biting her lower lip like a bashful little girl. "You may still accompany us, if you wish."

Meghan saw a look of adoration in his eyes and suddenly felt as though she was intruding. "You know what, y'all go ahead. I'm actually pretty tired and I ought to get back to my tent. Busy day tomorrow and all."

"Than I hope you have a restful evening," Lalaith smiled.

"Thanks. G'night."

Meghan returned to her tent, but she didn't go inside. She flopped onto the grass and looked up at the sky that peeked between the leaves. It was so quiet and peaceful that she fell asleep just so, spread-eagle on the ground outside her tent.

"Meghan?" a manly voice asked, rousing her from her sleep.

"Huh?" she snorted awake. "Oh, hi Aragorn. What's up?"

The Ranger refrained from questioning her about why she was sleeping outside as she propped herself up by one elbow. "I came to inform you that we have decided to depart on the morning of the day after tomorrow."

"Okay," Meghan said. She fell back on the soft turf. Aragorn turned to go, but she stopped him
with a question. "Hey Aragorn? What happens to an Elf when her husband dies?"

"The Elves die of grief when their spouse perishes," he replied. "Why do you ask?"

"Oh, no reason," Meghan sighed, still staring at the sky. "Just wondering, is all. Lalaith said something that made me wonder. How often does it happen, do you think?"

"In times of war, it occurs frequently. But otherwise, it is rare for an Elf to die."

"That's sad, but romantic in a way, I guess. Where I come from, it's so common for men and women to leave each other. It's cool that Elves stay bonded that way."

Aragorn seemed sad, as though he was pondering something.

"What about you? You got a girl?" Meghan asked as she propped herself up again.

"Her name is Arwen," Aragorn said quietly.

"Oh yeah, Stefanie totally hated her," Meghan said, grinning at the thought. She noticed Aragorn's faraway look. "Oh. Sorry. I never said that. Ehem. Arwen, you say?"

"Arwen Undómiel," Aragorn added. He paused for a moment, then smiled. "Good night, Meghan."

"G'night," Meghan said.

He retreated into the forest, and Meghan got up and went into her tent. She still had Lalaith's nightgown from the first night, and she grabbed it, a towel, and a bar soap and headed down toward the stream.

She had almost gotten used to bathing so openly, so she took a more leisurely soak and spent the time to scrub out her long hair. As she floated in the comfortably warm water, she pondered what she'd learned that day.

*Lalaith's so sweet, and I don't want her to die of grief because that egotistical moron gets himself killed in the second movie. But I can't fight worth a flat tire. Could I tell Legolas and have him keep an eye on Haldir? But that might mess something up and make Legolas die. I don't want that either. He's creepy, but nice. Dang. I'll figure it out tomorrow.*
The next morning, Meghan slipped out of her tent to see a beautiful dawn sweeping over Lothlórien. She sniffed the fresh air and smiled.

A moment later, Lalaith came strolling down the path with a large basket hooked on her arm. "Good morning!" she called cheerily. "I heard that you and your friends are leaving tomorrow morning, so I went through some of the cast-off pieces from seamstresses. I also took a few items from my own wardrobe – I can easily replace them, and your need is greater than mine."

She handed the basket over to Meghan, who took it and looked inside. "Pants!" she squealed. "And shirts and stuff. This is great, Lalaith! Thanks so much!"

"I also brought a few things for your journey. Lady Galadriel wished for me to ensure that you had the proper supplies. So here is a pack with all the things she thought that you might need."

Meghan peeked into the knapsack and saw some journey-cakes, a bar of soap wrapped in leaves, and various other items that would be useful on a trip.

"You should try the garments on, to confirm that they fit. I must go now and hurry to Lady Galadriel's flet, for she is busy with some plans that require the help of her handmaidens. I shall see you tomorrow, then, when you depart?"

"Sure, sounds good," Meghan agreed. "I'll see you then."

Lalaith smiled in farewell and went back up the path. Meghan took the basket of clothing into the tent and went through everything. She set aside the clothing that didn't fit and stuffed the rest into the pack that Lalaith had given her, with the exception of one set of garments, which she wore. Then she hurried off to sword practice.

The morning passed as most of her mornings did: bashing away at Aragorn. He never talked much during those sessions except to correct her stance and so forth… and considering how pathetic Meghan was, that provided plenty of dialogue. It usually went like this:

"Bend your knees more. It is almost like dancing."

"Like this?"

"No, you resemble a chicken."

"I thought that was the point!"

"Than that was not the dancing I had in mind. Try again, but remember to bend your knees."

"Like that?"
"No. Now you are lumbering your sword about as though it is a block of stone."

"Do you realize how heavy this thing is?"

"Yes, and it is one of the lighter swords made by the Elves. You are fortunate to have one so small."

"Gah, this is annoying. If I were in a battle against Orcs, how long would I survive?"

"Ten, maybe twenty seconds."

"...Seconds?"

Or at least something like that. But today, he was unusually quiet. Meghan attributed it to whatever he had been thinking about last night and didn't question him. At the end of their practice, he bowed and walked away.


She slung her quiver onto her back and picked up her bow. The sword she left buckled to her waist – she'll take it off once she got to the archery field.

Legolas was already there when she got to the range, practicing his own archery. Meghan sighed as she unclasped the sword belt and let the weapon rest against a nearby tree.

"You do that just to intimidate me," she growled when Legolas hit a perfect bullseye – again.

"I would never seek to intimidate you," he replied mildly. "But if it troubles you, I will cease."

"No, it's fine, really. I was just being whiny. You can keep going. I'll practice on the target next to yours."

He silently resumed his archery, while Meghan took up the other target. A few minutes later, Legolas shot her an amused look.

"Lady Meghan, I must congratulate you. You have succeeded in hitting my target."

Meghan glanced at his target and cringed, seeing a distinctly not-Legolas arrow sticking out of it. "Sorry," she mumbled. "But hey, on the positive side, I got it into the inner circle!"

He chuckled. "True."

There was another moment of silence, except the twang-thunk of Legolas' bow.

"Hey Legolas?"

"Yes?"

"How long do you think I would last in a battle?"

Pause.

"You are still a beginner, Lady Meghan."

"I can deal with it. Tell me."

"Perhaps a minute."
"You're just being nice!"

"You have already asked Aragorn, I take it."

"Yeah, a couple of days ago."

"He is a very honest man."

"Yep. He gave me twenty seconds, tops."

Legolas tried to swallow his smile.

"Yeah, yeah, you go ahead and laugh at me." Meghan rolled her eyes.

"I apologize. I should not discourage you."

"One of these days, I'm going to make a point to talk exactly like y'all."

"I somehow have a hard time envisioning that."

"All I have to do is talk like this." Meghan stuck her nose into the air and cleared her throat. "Hark! Yonder there, amidst the dazzling stars of evening, doth lie the pale new moon! I shall sing sweet songs of praise to thee, O great and beautiful moon!"

"That is not like it at all!" Legolas was outright laughing now.

Meghan's jaw dropped open and then she burst into a resplendent grin. "I've never heard you laugh before!"

He could see her hiding a smile behind her hand. "What is it?" he asked.

"You have a really dorky laugh!" she giggled.

"What does that mean?"

"Um… very nice."

He smiled. "Thank you, I suppose. You have a dorky laugh, too."

"Thanks," Meghan said, fighting back a grin.

A moment of stillness passed, both of them absorbed in their practice.

Legolas broke the silence. "Tell me, do you miss your friends and family?"

Meghan pondered this. "Yeah, I do. I kinda wonder what's going on back there. I mean, I don't think this is a dream because of the whole pain thing, so I'm just curious. Is time frozen where I'm from originally? Or is there a manic, hysterical search going on for me? I dunno."

"I suppose your friends will wonder where you went."

"I'm sure they will." Meghan wondered if Legolas said obvious things like that a lot. "But they're crazy. Really crazy. Especially Andrea. She's written fifteen stories for this time period. She got married to you eight times. Then she wrote one where the girl got married to Aragorn in an attempt to please Stefanie, but Stef just laughed and refused to read it. And she's written three for Haldir." Meghan chuckled a bit. "The last Haldir one was my favorite. Their heartbeats harmonized as she
lay dying in his arms after they both fought bravely on the borders of Lothlórien. 'Oh Haldir!' She mimicked the story, putting a hand to her forehead dramatically. "I have two deep wounds! Both of which are poisoned! It was really funny."

Legolas gave her an odd look. "That does not sound amusing at all."

"Oh silly, it's how they're written that's funny. One of the main characters literally said 'Hark! What Legolas through yonder window breaks?' That was the one where I was your little sister. Your dad was abusive and violent in that one. And she married me off to some Elf guy named Gloryfiddle… I never can remember his name…"

"Glorfindel?"

"Yeah! That's it!"

"I am sorry—I simply—that is—" And Legolas burst out laughing (dorkily) all over again.

"What are you man-giggling about?" Meghan demanded.

"I am sorry… I simply cannot imagine you being bound to Lord Glorfindel." He was manfully biting back more laughter.

"Haha, very funny, Mr. I-Laugh-At-Helpless-Bystanders. I couldn't avoid it! And in the one she's writing now, I have to get married to Figwit. I always get the dorks."

"I thought dork meant something nice?" Legolas said, actually quirking his head to one side.

"It does!" Meghan gave him a double thumbs-up sign. "I always get the…dorky nice guys!"

"I have said it before, Lady Meghan, but you entirely confound me." He shook his head and began to gather his equipment. "I think you should curtail your practice today. We are, after all, leaving tomorrow and you must be weary from your swordplay this morning."

"I kinda am, but I'm kinda not," she replied, but she picked up her sword and buckled it around her waist again.

"I shall retrieve the arrows," Legolas said and walked toward the targets.

Meghan started skipping around in circles, waiting for him to finish gathering up the arrows for both of them. She liked to do that when she was bored.

"What are you doing?" he asked curiously as he returned and handed her a few arrows.

"It's called skipping," Meghan said, settling back to two feet on the ground. "Are you telling me you've never seen anyone skip before?"

"The action resembles…running like a toad," Legolas said.

"Very descriptive." Meghan seemed to ponder this for a moment. "Well, I'm going to go run like a toad back to my tent. Bye!"

And she skipped away.

Legolas smiled after her; she truly did remind him of the Hobbits, with her light-heartedness and zeal for life. She would be a pleasant companion on the journey.
Realization hit him like several large and disagreeably heavy bags of concrete. She had assumed, and indeed even he had assumed, that she would accompany the Fellowship. But Legolas knew Aragorn would scarcely even consider that option. After all, Meghan had barely any useful skills, and she was a liability.

But as Legolas thought about it, he didn't want Meghan to stay in Lothlórien. He very much wanted her to stay with the Fellowship.

"Lady Meghan!" he called urgently, hurrying after her.
A Rather Grim Period in Meghan's Life

Meghan stared at Legolas. Legolas stared back. It could have been called a staring match if Meghan didn't start to splutter violently.

"What the—you're saying—how come—that's not—WHY?"

"I am merely suggesting that Aragorn does not intend for you to accompany us beyond the borders of Lothlórien."

"But—but—WHY?"

"In all honesty, Lady Meghan, it would seem to be a reasonable perspective."

A very resolute look swept across Meghan's face and she began to march determinedly toward the Fellowship's little clearing.

"What are you doing?" Legolas asked, matching her pace.

"I'm going to convince Aragorn that I can go with y'all! Lothlórien is nice and all, but I refuse to be left here while you guys have all the fun."

They reached the clearing in record time and Meghan stood very tall and imposing despite her height of five foot one. "Aragorn," she announced in a firm voice, "I insist that I go with y'all tomorrow morning."

Aragorn glanced up mildly from his hunting knife, which he was cleaning. "I am sorry, Lady Meghan, but that is impossible."

"And just exactly why is that?" Meghan demanded. "I may only last between ten seconds and one minute in a fight, but I can be helpful! I know how to cook!"

By this point, the entire Fellowship was interested.

"But you have no experience in battle," Gimli grunted. "If an enemy were to attack, we would have to protect you."

"It's the same for the Hobbits," Meghan said. "They are probably just as proficient with a weapon as I am."

"You become ill at the sight of blood," Boromir said.

Meghan huffed. "Look guys, you said so yourself, the gods brought me here. There's got to be a good reason for that! Don't you think they intended me to keep going with y'all?"

It went back and forth like that for quite a while. Meghan found several advocates in Pippin, Legolas, Sam, and Merry, who all supported her desire to remain in their company. Frodo seemed
to have very little opinion in the matter, while Boromir and Gimli opposed it.

At last, Aragorn held a hand up for quiet. "Lady Meghan," he said with a serious face. "You have not yet proven your worth in battle, but I have seen a little progress in your practice these past few days. And your words are true, the Valar must have some purpose in mind for you. Therefore, you may accompany us. But you must understand the gravity of this mission. You are risking your own life."

"I know," Meghan said, too vastly relieved to be much worried for her life. "I'm cool with that."

"With that settled," Aragorn said with a glance around at the group. "I think it would be wise to sleep now. I would like to start early next morning."

The Fellowship mutually agreed through nodding, grunting, and other manly actions.

"Well, it's off to bed for us all!" Meghan chirped. She was suddenly very lively now that her membership in the company was official. "G'night, everybody!"

A round of goodnight's came up and Meghan cheerily waved to them all.

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Meghan wanted to scream.

In fact, she wanted to scream a lot. She also wanted to tear her hair out, then kick something until her feet fell off, then eat copious amounts of chocolate. Unfortunately, Middle earth had no chocolate, so she was stuck.

She was on the verge of throwing a full-out tantrum when Lalaith arrived. The blonde elleth entered the tent with a look of trepidation on her pretty face.

"What is wrong, Meghan?" she asked curiously.

Meghan looked up with frustrated tears in her eyes. "I am so mad!"

"Why?"

"...I started today."

"Started?"

"Oh come on! Are you trying to tell me that you don't get periods?"

"I am afraid I do not understand—"

"You know, my cycle? Menstrual stuff?"

Lalaith's confused look immediately melted into a motherly expression. "Oh, I am sorry, Meghan. Your terminology is bewildering at times." She patted Meghan's shoulder. "I will gather supplies for you on your journey. You finish preparing to depart. When do you leave?"

"In, like, a half an hour," Meghan sniffed. She wasn't sure what "supplies" meant but Lalaith seemed to know what she was talking about. The elleth went back out of the tent, leaving Meghan to wipe away the tears from her eyes. She sniffed again, just for good measure, and sat down on the edge of her bed. While she was waiting for Lalaith's return, she quickly braided her hair into two long plaits down her back.
Lalaith soon reappeared, bearing a basket hooked over her elbow. "Here. I brought several days' worth of supplies for you." She thrust the basket into Meghan's hands, explaining briefly what was inside. Meghan shrugged and stuffed the basket's contents into her leather backpack.

"I guess I have to hurry and go," she sighed. "The guys are probably waiting for me."

Lalaith drew her into a quick embrace. "It has been good to know you," she said with a sincere smile.

"You too," Meghan replied.

"I will pray for you," Lalaith said. "That the Valar will protect you."

Meghan nodded. It all felt weird. Then again, as she thought about it, it was weird. This was the first time she'd ever been leaving a nice, big forest to go on a dangerous mission.

"Thanks. Hey, I'm gonna miss you," Meghan grinned. "You were such a help. And it was super nice to talk to a girl."

Lalaith smiled beatifically. "Farewell, Meghan."

"Bye," Meghan said. Lalaith exited the tent with a pretty little wave of her hand – but then again, everything that Lalaith did was pretty. *She could probably make a burp all cute and charming,* Meghan thought wryly.

Shouldering her pack and taking one final look around the tent, Meghan pushed the door flap aside and stepped out into the freshness of Lothlórien's morning. The air tasted like lemondrops – or at least it could have, according to poetic license.

A wave of cramps swept over Meghan and she growled deep in her throat. It was one of those days where all she wanted to do was lie in a bed and cry a lot. But then she remembered how tentative the Fellowship had been to let her join.

"No way am I wimping out!" she thought with a defiant shrug.

"Meghan!" She heard an unmistakably accented voice from the path down to her left. She glanced over to see Pippin gesturing her over.

The sight of the Hobbit cheered her immediately. "Pippin!" she exclaimed.

"We're leaving," he said.

"Okay. I'm coming." Meghan trotted over to join the little furry-toed person. "I haven't seen much of you. I guess I've been so busy with all that weaponry stuff."

"It's alright," he replied, quirking a half-grin up at her as they walked down the path. "I should have been practicing more. But it's so quiet here."

"Yeah, it sometimes felt a little unholy to make such a ridiculous clamor. Where exactly are we going, Pippin?" She had noticed that they weren't headed toward the Fellowship's normal gathering spot.

"I don't know, actually. Aragorn told me to find you and then come back down this path. I hope we haven't strayed off."

"Very reassuring," Meghan groaned lightheartedly. "Just the impression we need to make. Late."
Pippin laughed, and said nothing.

It turned out that her fears were ungrounded; the path soon brought them to the bank of a very large, cold-looking river. The rest of the Fellowship had already gathered there, along with a great number of Elves. Meghan saw Haldir, but not Lalaith.

That morning felt very surreal. First, the Elves pinned lovely grey-green cloaks around their shoulders as Celeborn droned ominously, "Never before have we clad strangers in the garb of our own people. May these cloaks help shield you from unfriendly eyes."

If that wasn't enough to quell a sarcastic comment from Meghan, it is unclear what possibly could.

Then they loaded up the boats. Gimli and Meghan glared at each other ferociously when they found out they had to share a boat. Of course Boromir announced in a placating tone that there really wasn't a better solution, so they might as well act like mature adults and stop sulking over it.

Legolas chose that moment to broadcast the many virtues of some of their supplies. "Lembas," he heralded. "Elvish waybread. One small bite is enough to fill the stomach of a grown man." He demonstrated by nibbling the tiniest corner of a piece.

Meghan clapped him on the shoulder. "Good commercial, buddy. You could tour with that."

"Thank you," Legolas said oddly, not entirely certain how to respond.

"Sorry," Meghan said with a repentant sigh. "I'm just so—" She fought the urge to break into a homicidal, she-woman war cry. "Um, frustrated right now. I'll be fine in a… couple of days."

It was obvious that Legolas was entirely ignorant of Meghan's predicament, and she wanted to keep it that way for as long as possible. It was all just too awkward.

"Come, the Lady wishes to speak to us," Aragorn said, gesturing them all over.

It turned out that Galadriel not only wanted to speak with them, but she also wanted to parcel out gifts. The excellent and admirable readers of this story likely know what the majority of the Fellowship received with the exception of Boromir, who it seemed was snubbed from any form of offering, and Meghan, who was unfortunately not a germ in Tolkien's mind when he wrote the story and as a result received nothing in the original text. Therefore it is the author's duty to inform her readers of the latter's gift.

Meghan stood between Pippin and Sam. Galadriel smiled one of her Mona Lisa smiles and handed Meghan a smallish parcel wrapped up in brown paper. As Meghan accepted it, she could smell a wonderful, teasing aroma.

"Tea," Galadriel explained. "You may not have many opportunities to drink it during your travels, but it is a calming blend that will help to soothe bodily aches." There was something in her eyes that told Meghan that she knew that Meghan had a few bodily aches at that point in time.

"Thanks," Meghan said. "It smells really good."

Galadriel smiled again, and then moved on.

Meghan stuffed the sweet-smelling packet into her bag and headed down the river, where the others were getting into the boats. Gimli grumpily settled into the middle section of the boat as Meghan gingerly tiptoed onto the front. The boat rocked menacingly and she groaned.
"I hope I don't get sick," she muttered.

"You will not," Legolas said quietly.

"How do you know?" Meghan growled.

"Because I will guide the vessel gently, and the river is not very violent."

Meghan felt her hackles lowering as his gentle, tenor voice wiped away her irritation. "Okay. I trust you, I guess."

He rewarded her with a smile.

The Fellowship steered their smooth, Elvish boats into the river's pull, and Galadriel raised a hand in farewell. It was at that moment that Meghan saw a slim, girlish figure hurry to edge of the river, and wave. It was Lalaith.

Meghan waved in return, but her spirits sank to her toes. *How am I going to save her?*
"Um, Legolas," Meghan said in a very small voice. "Can we pull over?"

They had been paddling down the Anduin for the better part of the day, and now the sun was hanging lazily in the lower part of the sky. Meghan's bum and shoulders hurt like crazy from the uncomfortable seating arrangements. However, that was not her most pressing dilemma.

"I am sorry," he replied with a look of concerned confusion. "I do not understand what 'pull over' means in this context."

"Make a pit stop, um, halt... sojourn!"

He hesitated, as if pondering. Meghan's anxiety was increasing by the second and she didn't have time for his meditations.

"Seriously, dude, if you don't stop, I'm going to jump out of this boat and then scream my brains out, probably attracting every single darned evil thing in the country." There was such a maniacal gleam of promise in Meghan's eyes that Legolas couldn't help but agree. He wasn't quite certain of what was troubling her, but he meant to get to the root of the problem as soon as possible.

"Certainly," he said, smiling for her benefit.

Gimli snorted grumpily. "Surely you can wait, Meghan."

"Look here, Happy, you have no idea of what I'm going through, so you can just grab a pick-ax and go hang out with the rest of the seven dwarves!" After this explosion, Meghan felt like bursting into tears.

Legolas steered the boat toward Aragorn. "My friend," he hailed. "Do you not think we might stop for a brief moment on dry land?"

Glancing at the sky, Aragorn nodded. "Yes, that would be pleasant. A short rest will do."

They all guided the boats to the shore and piled out, pulling the craft up the dirty banks so that the current wouldn't drag them away. Meghan immediately darted off into the density of the forest.

"Do not go far," Aragorn cautioned after her.

Several minutes elapsed and Meghan still did not return to the bank, where the rest of the Fellowship had either stretched out on the ground or walked to work out cramps. After another few minutes, Pippin timidly piped up,

"Should someone, you know, check on her?"

"I shall certainly not go," Gimli growled. "Her behavior today has been very irrational."
"She is a woman," Boromir agreed. "They are unreasonably erratic."

"But she could have been, I don't know, eaten!" Pippin insisted.

"We would have heard her screaming," Merry said.

"Maybe not," Pippin said. "The fact remains that someone ought to make sure she's alright."

"Why do you not go?" Gimli said in a sour voice.

"Because I wouldn't be of any help if something was attacking her," Pippin replied as though it was the most obvious thing in the world.

"I will go," Legolas said. He was beginning to have his suspicions regarding Meghan's "irrational" and "erratic" conduct.

"Be quick," Aragorn said. "We have far still to go before dark."

Legolas nodded and then followed Meghan's very hastily made track. While there was still quite a good distance left, he called her name softly a few times. There was no need to make an awkward situation more so.

He called her name again, and this time he heard a rather thick, upset "Hold on a minute," followed by a few leaves crackling. Meghan emerged from the underbrush, looking quite as pathetic and gloomy as can be. Her eyes were puffy and rimmed in red, and her nose was pinkish. She was obviously not one of the fortunate few who could weep prettily.

"I was not crying," she sniffled before he even had a chance to ask her what was wrong.

"Yes, you are," Legolas replied. If anything, the crying had confirmed his hunch, and though he could not empathize with her, he felt sorry for her.

"Okay so I was," she crumbled. "I just can't help it—I should have expected it—it was about time anyway— Why am I even telling you this?" Fresh tears welled up in her eyes as she spoke.

Legolas was momentarily confused. It certainly looked like Meghan could use a hug at that moment, but it was not his general practice to embrace woman that he had only recently become acquainted with.

"And the worst part is, you know I get sick at the sight of blood, and—" She shook her head and wiped her nose. "I don't want to talk about it. That's just gonna make me cry more. I'm set for another couple of hours." Taking a huge sniff, she tried to look normal, and failed miserably.

"Do I look really ugly?" she asked as she scrubbed a few tears from her eyes.

"Well," Legolas stalled. "It is only natural after crying that you would be a little—"

"I know, I get it. I look like a nightmare." She sighed. "We really need to get back before they send another person to look for us."

They went back through the leafy forest to the bank of the river. Meghan somehow managed not to trip and fall daintily into Legolas' arms, despite all the Laws of Mary-Suedom that decreed this course of action.

If any of the rest of the Fellowship noticed Meghan's slightly teary face, they said nothing. However, it should be said that they were all considerably kinder to her as they piled back into the
boats and once again drifted down the river.

And apparently Gimli felt comfortable enough with her to sigh dreamily, "I have taken my worst
wound at this parting from Lothlórien, having looked my last upon that which is fairest.
Henceforth I will call nothing fair unless it be her gift to me."

"What was her gift?" Legolas asked.

"I asked her for one hair from her golden head. She gave me three."

Meghan perked up. "She does have really pretty hair."

But Gimli was off in a paradise of memory and had no words left for Meghan.

-----------------------------------------

They floated down the river for several days. No one ever spoke much, but somehow it wasn't
boring. Repetitive, yes, but they were all so tired that they didn't have the energy to be bored.

Meghan had managed to survive without either killing herself, or killing someone else. Four more
days of rowing along on a river, and her "monthly monster" beat a hasty retreat. Once again,
Meghan thought that all was well with the world.

Except now that she wasn't so weighed down with angst, the oppressive silence suddenly became
very, very boring.

On the sixth day of their journey, Meghan decided that enough silence was enough. They had all
spoken no more than ten words together for quite a while, and it was getting very aggravating.
After all, we must remember that Meghan was a woman, and women love to talk.

"So..." she began that morning, a few minutes after they had packed back into the boats and
shoved off. "What's everybody's favorite color?" Her voice was loud enough to carry to the other
two boats.

The silence had a strong grip on the company. But Pippin had the courage to break it. "Um, well,
blue's mine."

"I like green," Merry added.

"Mine's brown," Sam said.

The two younger Hobbits gave him an incredulous look.

"It's the color of th'earth!" Sam defended. "Of soil and roots!"

Merry and Pippin shrugged.

"Green is my favorite, as well," Aragorn murmured.

"White," Legolas said.

"White?" Meghan asked. "White's not a color, it's a neutral."

"If Sam may prefer brown, than I certainly may show a partiality toward the color white."

"But Sam's makes sense. What does white signify?" Meghan paused. "Fluffy clouds and prancing
bunny rabbits?"

Legolas' face and tone were very serious. "I happen to be quite fond of fluffy clouds and prancing rabbits."

The entire Fellowship chuckled – even Gimli, who grunted a few guffaws and then rumbled, "Gold."

"Gold is a metal," Pippin said.

"Than the color of gold." Gimli sounded brusque.

_Probably 'cause of Galadriel's hair. Kinda cute, in a weird way._

"My favorite color is green," Frodo piped up. It was, in fact, one of the few sentences that Meghan ever heard him speak.

"Orange," Boromir said gruffly. "When the sun sinks behind the horizon."

"That's my favorite color, too!" Meghan announced gaily. "See! I knew we all just needed the proper opportunity to further bond like a nice little unit. Once we get on shore we should practice trust-falls."

Boromir looked as though he had just taken a bite out of a cow-patty. "For the first time in my life, I am frightened of a woman."

"Kidding!" Meghan laughed.

"What does kidding have to do with the situation?" Gimli asked.

"It means, I'm kidding," Meghan replied with a 'duh' tone in her voice.

Not for the first time (and certainly not the last), Meghan found nine pairs of eyes looking at her dubiously.

"Surely she doesn't mean—" Pippin began, but trailed off hesitantly.

"What?" she demanded. "I'm joking. Haha, funny."

Relieved smiles broke out amongst the male members of the Fellowship.

"I believe that your speech can sometimes be confusing to us," Legolas said. "We understand kidding as the act of a goat giving birth."

Meghan practically doubled over with laughter. "Oh my gosh!" she giggled. "That sounds so wrong!"

The banter went back and forth like that the entire day. The author fears that she would bore the readers if she went into details of their discussions on basic warrior techniques, various types of flowers, disgusting medicinal remedies, and, of course, that all important subject of _food_. They spent the largest amount of time conversing about food. Suffice it to say that Meghan had not talked so much in one sitting for several years.

The sky had already tinted dark by the time they guided the boats to the shore and disembarked. They were all sore and achy, but at least they were in a better frame of mind. The air didn't seem so charged with tension as it had on previous nights.
Despite their intense conversation throughout the day, they ate dinner in silence. Legolas volunteered for first watch duty, so the rest of the Company quietly stole off to sleep. Within minutes, the traditional Fellowship snoring contest began.

Gimli almost always won, but tonight, Legolas was pulling for Aragorn. The man sounded like he had a monster in his sinus cavities.

A new sound entered the general cacophony. Legolas paid closer attention and realized that it was Meghan – and she was giggling.

"Senator Monkeybrain should be exiled immediately," she snorted.

"M-Meghan?" Legolas asked tentatively. He had so little experience with a sleeping person, aside from the obvious: snoring humans. He wasn't quite sure what Meghan was doing.

"He has clearly displayed a lack of pants and should be rebuked for this brazen…" Here Meghan's words dissolved into incoherent mutters.

"Me-" Legolas stopped himself. Why wake her? This dialogue promised to be entertaining, anyway.

"Oh yes, I agree. Professor Furrynose has been remarkably nifty in this investigation. Did you present him with his Enamel Award? Excellent. What is your opinion on Chancellor Pete?"

At that point a particularly poignant snore from Aragorn cut above the rest of the sleepers' din.

"Silence, you fool!" Meghan snapped.

"I find him reprehensible," Legolas interjected. He had once heard that sometimes the sleeper would converse with the conscious.

"Good grief, man! Have you been sliced open by a fish? Chancellor Pete is the best we've got!"

"But surely you have heard of his…tendency to… lick doorposts!"

Meghan gasped. "No! Not Chancellor Pete!"

"Yes, I am afraid it was he."

"I never would have suspected him of it. I trust that he doesn't… you know… chew cardboard?"

"No, no indeed. I do not think that he would not take it so far."

"Good," Meghan sighed. "Perhaps his blunder can be overlooked, then. Will you arrange everything?"

"Certainly," Legolas agreed. "Do not become anxious about anything."

"Watch how you talk to me, peon. I strongly disapprove of underlings speaking in so familiar a manner."

Legolas smiled faintly. "Forgive me."

"Well…" She sniffed contemptuously. "I suppose I'll let it slide just this once. Now be off with you."
Then Meghan promptly rolled over, and started to snore gently.
The next morning, Meghan woke up with a massive crick in her neck. The sizzling sound of fish cooking hissed in her ears, and she sat up and rubbed the sleep from her eyes.

"Good mornin', Miss Meghan," Sam said. He was busily tending breakfast.

"G'morning, Sam," Meghan said groggily. "That smells good." Truth be told, she was dead-tired of eating fish every morning and evening.

"Thank you," Sam replied gratefully. He probably knew that everyone was sick of fish. *He* was probably sick of fish.

"Where is everybody?" Meghan asked. "Well, just Legolas and Aragorn, I guess. Everybody else's asleep."

"They are scoutin' around a bit," Sam said.

"Oh," Meghan stretched.

"I've got a drop of water boilin' here, if you would like to brew some of that tea that the Lady Galadriel gave to you."

Meghan contemplated her sore neck and the Lady's promise that the tea would *soothe bodily aches*. She actually hadn't tried it yet, either. "I'd love some, thanks. But I don't really know how to brew it." She produced the package from her back, which had served as a pillow the night before. "It's so different than what I'm used to."

Sam took the tea with experienced hands. "In civilized places, I would strain it after it finished brewing. Here you will just have to let the herbs sink to the bottom, an' be careful how you sip."

"Do you want some?"

Sam appeared to be pondering this question. "I wouldn't mind a cup o' tea," he admitted at last. "If you wouldn't mind."

"Go ahead."

He deftly sprinkled a few pinchfuls of the crushed tealeaves into two tin mugs that he had procured from his own supplies. At that moment, Legolas and Aragorn reappeared and several other members of the Fellowship snorted awake.

"Fish?" Merry and Pippin asked at the exact same time.

"Yes," Sam grumbled. "But it's fresh meat and that's better than some can boast. Miss Meghan, this tea must brew for a few minutes."
"Okay," Meghan said. The fresh morning air was slowly waking her up.

Legolas sat down next to her. She noticed that he was wearing a very faint smile – but then again, that was normal for him. He very rarely grinned. And she hadn't heard him laugh since that one afternoon in Lothlórien.

"What are you smirking about?" she said.

"Do you remember a dream of any kind last night?" he asked.

Meghan pondered this. "I remember pink jelly."

"Nothing more?"

"Why are you so curious to know?" Meghan demanded. Then her face paled. "I wasn't... I wasn't, um, you know, sleep...talking, was I?"

"You have a history of this practice?" Legolas said. There was more "wry" in his smile, now.

"Just tell me what I said, okay?"

"Some sort of discourse on a certain..." Legolas seemed to think for a moment. "Ah yes, a Chancellor Pete."

"Oh, so it was that dream again." Meghan sighed. "I have two recurring dreams, at least according to Stef and Andrea. The other one involves me and Zac Efron getting married. I HATE ZAC EFRON!"

Her impassioned outburst woke the remaining members of the Fellowship and drew the attention of those that were already awake.

"Who's Zackefron?" Pippin asked innocently.

"Just some guy," Meghan said with a defeated sigh. "I've never even met him."

"If you've never met him, how can you hate him?" Merry, ever the logical one, said.

"Wait until he starts dancing on a golf course and singing a 90's throw-back pop song. Then you'd hate him too." Meghan knew she wasn't making any sense to her companions, and it irritated her. "Look, just never mind, okay?"

"Tea's ready!" Sam declared, trying to defuse the situation. He handed the mug to Meghan and smiled.

"Thanks, dude," she said. The tea smelled luscious and her neck really did hurt. She lifted the brim to her lips, tasting the brew experimentally. It tasted even better than it smelled. She downed the whole cup – except she forgot about the crushed leaves at the bottom and she had to spit some of those back out.

"Man, that was good," she said.

"We must not loiter here too long," Aragorn said. "The woods are free from orc-tracks, but I do not trust this silence. And our journey cannot wait."

"Breakfast is done," Sam said.
Meghan thought about getting up. In fact, she wanted very much to get up and get a plate of food. But the ground was so comfortable. Funny, the ground had never seemed comfortable before. She looked down and realized that her mug was now sitting on the ground, too.

*How did that get there?* She thought. She was dimly aware that the others were all beginning to eat, but it was so hard to keep her eyes open…

"Meghan?"

"What happened to her?"

"She just toppled over!"

"Why is she…" 

The voices of the Fellowship were loud and quite annoying. Meghan slipped – no, she *dove* headlong into the comfortable, silent darkness.

--------------------------------------------------------------

The first thing that Meghan was aware of was that she had to pee very, very badly.

And it really didn't help that there was the distinct sound of rushing water somewhere in the close vicinity of her head.

"Unnggh?" she half-snorted, half-moaned.

"At last," came the familiar and rumbly voice of Gimli. He sounded irritated.

Meghan groaned and tried to roll over. Her hand dipped into cold water, this action solicited a startled yelp from a certain blond Elf. She squinted her eyeballs open and saw Legolas leaning haphazardly over the side of the boat in the opposite direction that *she* was leaning – and it was then that Meghan realized that she was practically falling out of the boat.

With an equally surprised squeak, she rolled back into the safety of the gunwale.

"What *happened?*" Meghan demanded as she tried to grasp the situation. She was in a boat, floating on a river, in the company of quite a few men, just like usual. Except, how did she *get* here? The last thing she remembered was badmouthing Zac Efron.

"You have been unconscious for two days," Legolas explained, obviously more at ease now that the equilibrium of the boat was restored. "The tea that Sam prepared for you was far too strong."

"Huh?"

"The brew is meant to relax the body, but Sam did not know that it is a very potent blend and only a little is needed. Furthermore, it seems that you ate some of the leaves. The result was so strong that it rendered you unconscious."

"For two days?" Meghan sniffed.

"Yes." Legolas nodded gravely.

"And they have been carrying you around like a sack of dirt," Gimli grunted.

Meghan was about to make a very catty retort when two intensely large and imposing statues swept into view and struck her quite dumbstruck.
"The Argonath!" Aragorn said softly, but the water carried his voice. "Long have I desired to look upon the kings of old. My kin."

"Who the heck says 'my kin'?" Meghan asked.

But no one answered her. They were all looking at Aragorn's kin.

In fact, this gazing went on for quite a while, and meanwhile, the waterfall was sounding louder and louder in Meghan's ears. She looked around at everyone. Sure, this was all very fascinating, but Meghan had more important things on her mind.

"I GOTTA PEE!" she finally burst out when it seemed like they were just going to ogle the statues forever.

This rousing reminder of the here-and-now jolted the other members of the Fellowship back into… well, the here-and-now. They paddled over to the riverbank, where Meghan disembarked and immediately loped off into the forest. Being asleep for two days will do some mean stuff to a person's bladder.

She returned just in time to hear Gimli snort, "Recover my strength? Pay no heed to that, young Hobbit."

"Where's Frodo?" Merry asked a second later.

"I didn't see him when I was…out," Meghan said as she sat down next the her pile of stuff, which evidently someone had tossed onto the ground.

It happened rather instantaneously. In fact, it happened so fast that Meghan never quite knew how it started.

The Fellowship burst into pandemonium.

Merry and Pippin dashed off in one direction and Sam, in another. Aragorn ran after Sam, and then Gimli started growling several unpleasant sounds under his breath as he, too, lumbered away into the forest. Within seconds, the only two remaining people on the riverbank were Meghan and Legolas.

"Lady Meghan," Legolas said urgently, turning to her as she stood. "You must remain here."

"What?" Meghan demanded. "What's going on?"

"I scarcely know myself," Legolas said. His words tumbled out and he seemed jumpy. "But swear to me that you will stay here."

"I don't—"

"Lady Meghan!" Now his eyes were harsh.

"Fine, fine!" she growled. At that, he sprinted into the underbrush and Meghan was left quite alone.

Alone, and somewhat frightened.

"Psh," she snorted a minute later. "Who says I can't go? I was out there just a minute ago!" She stepped very imposingly toward the forest with every intention of stomping through the trees and giving Legolas a very large piece of her mind. Maybe even two pieces.
Then she paused, remembering the many objections that Boromir and Gimli had to her coming along. *She's a liability. She's useless with a sword. She's a woman. She's too headstrong. We'll have to protect her.*

With a defeated sigh, she flopped back onto the ground next to her stuff. Legolas *did* tell her to stay here. And she promised. Gah, the nerve of that Elf! And he still called her *Lady Meghan.* Even when he was stressed. Did he crack under anything?

She sat there for what seemed like ages. After a while, she heard a loud blast of a horn, but she didn't know what it meant. *Boromir carried a trumpet or something, didn't he?* She shook her head. No use trying to figure it out.

Then she heard feet crashing through the leaves, and she stood up again, nervous now. Why only one? Where were the rest? Frodo burst into view, looking harried.

"Frodo, thank goodness!" Meghan said. "Where's everyone else?"

He ignored her. Actually, he just stood there with a shiny ring in his hand, staring at the water.

"Frodo?" Meghan tried again.

This whole staring match between Frodo and river went on for several minutes. Then, he randomly shoved the bling into his pocket and grabbed one of the boats.

"Are you stealing a boat?" Meghan gasped in complete horror.

Frodo's spell was finally broken. "Meghan?" he exclaimed. "I didn't see you there. Please don't discourage me."

"Discourage you from what?" Meghan said. "All I see is that you're trying to steal a boat!"

He doggedly shoved the huge boat into the water and hopped into it before Meghan could catch him. She stood on the bank, her face wrinkled up in confusion.

"Tell Sam and the others that—"

"Frodo, no!" This was Sam's voice, now. He exploded from the forest and sprinted as fast as his short legs could carry him toward the river.

Meghan suddenly felt very out of place. Like she really shouldn't be there. But, she was, so… might as well contribute to the situation!

"What's going on?" she asked no one in particular.

Sam started to splash into the water, and Frodo turned around. "Go back, Sam! I'm going to Mordor alone!"

*Oh. That's what's going on.*

"Of course you are!" Sam agreed. "And I'm coming with you!"

"You can't swim! Sam!"

"WHAT? He can't swim?! Frodo, go and get him!"

Meghan was practically dancing with fear as Sam sank below the water and Frodo paddled
frantically to reach the bubbles.

But Frodo reached down in time and pulled Sam up, who fell, spluttering, into the boat. Meghan couldn't hear the conversation between the two Hobbits after that, but it evidently resolved that Sam would accompany Frodo.

Sam turned around in the boat and waved to Meghan. "Sorry about the tea, miss!" he called across the water.

"Don't worry about it!" Meghan called back. "I probably needed the sleep!"

They started paddling toward the far shore, leaving Meghan behind. "Don't talk to strangers!" she shouted just as they touched on the bank.

The twosome acknowledged her with a wave of their hands and then disappeared into the dense underbrush. Meghan sighed. It all seemed very dismal now that the Fellowship was splitting up. Speaking of the Fellowship, where was everyone else?

Three people now appeared – one short, one smelly, and one blond. Aragorn and Gimli surveyed the bank while Legolas hurried to one of the boats.

"Y'all are okay!" Meghan said. "But, where's everyone else…?"

Aragorn looked grim. "Boromir fell."

"Did anyone help him get up? I mean falling can be embarrassing but—"

"No, Lady Meghan. The Uruks slew him," Legolas said, looking her in the eye.

Meghan felt her stomach drop to her toes. "And Merry and Pippin?"

"Taken," Gimli rumbled.

"Than…what are doing here? Let's go! We have to help them!" Meghan cried out. "They're so little and—"

"What of Frodo and Sam? If we hurry, we could reach them," Legolas interrupted her.

Aragorn glanced calculatingly across the river. "Frodo's fate is no longer in our hands."

"Can't we go?" Meghan pleaded. Why were they just waiting around while those nasty Uruks were taking Pippin and Merry farther away?

"It has all been in vain. The Fellowship has failed," Gimli droned ominously.

Meghan threw her hands up in the air with a huff and ran back to her pack. She grabbed her sword, bow, and quiver of arrows and went back to the Fellowship, or what was left of them, anyway. "Let's go," she growled.

Aragorn nodded. "We will not abandon Merry and Pippin to torment and death. Not while we have strength left. Leave all that can be spared behind. We travel light. Let's hunt some Orc." Then he turned and ran into the forest.

This time, Meghan followed him.
Meghan felt like throwing up.

She also felt like dying.

Preferably both. Well, a little sleep would have solved either problem, but really, it's quite hard to sleep when you're running.

The sun was starting to set, and still they didn't stop running. Meghan had forgotten about the Hobbits, or Boromir, or even her name. The only thing she could think about was her feet feeling like lead, and her lungs feeling like fire.

At least Gimli was huffing and puffing just as badly; but the comparison to a mere human seemed to push the Dwarf into further stamina. Meghan often lagged behind the group.

As brilliant pinks and oranges and lavenders began to carpet the sky and the sun finally dipped below the horizon, Aragorn held up a hand for halt. Meghan tumbled to the dry earth and lay there, gasping for air. Yes, Moria had been difficult, but she had been somewhat conditioned for it after trekking up and down Caradhras. But their stay in Lorien and subsequent time spent sitting in boats had softened her again.

She dragged herself upright to eat. There was no conversation; everyone was still processing the events of that morning. Legolas quietly volunteered for first watch, and the other two men soon drifted off to sleep.

No rest for the weary. Meghan tossed and turned, then groaned several times to vent her frustration, and finally she crawled over to where Legolas sat and harrumphed down next to him.

"Surely you are able to sleep after such a grueling day as this," he muttered softly in the darkness.

"Can't. Not enough noise."

"I beg your pardon? Does not the absence of noise lend itself to a better night's rest?"

"Usually," Meghan agreed. "But I've gotten so used to everyone snoring that without the everybody here, it's different."

"What about in Lothlórien?"

"You will not be surprised to know that I could still hear the whole lot of them even from a hundred feet away."

Neither laughed or even smiled, but there was an implicit undercurrent of amusement between them. Staring into the huge canopy of stars above her head, Meghan grew serious.
"Legolas… Will you tell me what happened today? While I was at the riverbank?" She could feel his body tensing from where she was, curled into her cloak. "If it's alright, I mean," she added hastily.

"I will tell you," he said, his voice heavy. There was a brief pause, and then he began to speak in that clear, quiet tenor of his. Meghan listened silently.

"Wow," she said at the end of his narrative. "I never was very nice to Boromir. He was such a great man. I—" she trailed off, and then glanced up quickly at Legolas and rushed on, "I'm sorry, Legolas, for all the terrible things I've said. I've been rather immature."

There was a softness, a kindness in Legolas' eyes, like he was smiling, but not with his mouth. "Lady Meghan, you do not need to seek forgiveness. You are very young, and this world is unfamiliar to you."

Meghan recoiled a little bit. Young? "How old are you?"

Now he really did smile. "Old enough."

"Fine. Be that way. Just so you know, the charmingly mysterious man almost always ends up being a special agent or something, so I've got my eye on you. No need for the Elvish Secret Service to snipe me down." She could tell by the way he was looking at her that he had no idea what she was talking about. "Never mind."

"You should sleep," he said. "Aragorn will want to continue at dawn."

Meghan suddenly remembered her aching bones and she yawned. "You're right. Think you could fake some snoring? You know, to add to the general cacophony."

"I do not think that it would produce the effect you desire," Legolas said, quite serious. "I have little practice in snoring."

"You're a dork, you know that?"

"Thank you."

Meghan just rolled her eyes and flopped onto the ground. "Let's see if I can fall asleep."

"Perhaps I can help," Legolas said. "Just close your eyes."

Softly, he said a few brief sentences in a language that Meghan did not understand, but sleep rolled over her body like a tidal wave of warm fuzziness, and she dropped off as easily as a child after a day at the theme park.

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The next couple of days were quite blurry to Meghan. They ran a lot. On the second day, they ran so hard that she threw up four times from overexertion. The third day was almost as bad, except they didn't run all day. Something very exciting happened about an hour after midday.

There was a loud clumping noise, like lots of horse hooves on the ground. Meghan, however, didn't really care about any sounds. She was just happy that they were taking a breather so that Aragorn could listen. Then Legolas grabbed her and they all hid behind a large boulder.

Several dozen horsemen swept by, wearing dull armor and helmets. They almost all carried spears
"Riders of Rohan!" Aragorn bellowed, stepping out from their hiding place. "What news from the Mark?"

In a very impressive display of horsemanship that Meghan entirely missed because she was too busy trying not to fall asleep, the Rohirrim wheeled around and neatly surrounded Aragorn, Legolas, and Gimli. Please note that the esteemed author did not mention Meghan in the group of those surrounded.

It is reasonable, therefore, for the author to clarify her clumsily worded paragraph by saying that Meghan did not step out from behind the little hilly thing like the others did. Instead, she stayed right where she was and watched the horses' and the backs of the riders' heads.

She watched with very little concern as the horses shifted nervously around, and half-wondered about what was happening in the middle of the circle. She couldn't see her companions for the solid mass of horses and men.

Then she heard the familiar sound of a bowstring being drawn back and what sounded like Legolas' voice raised in anger. That was quite unusual for the Elf. Meghan decided it was time for a woman's touch.

She marched resolutely toward the large backside of a chestnut, and wedged between it and another pathetically non-descript brown horse. A tall, blond man wearing a big, shiny helmet glanced down at her and yelped in a manner strangely reminiscent of a schoolgirl.

"My Lord Éomer!" he squeaked.

Meghan ignored him and pushed beyond his horse and on to the next row – more brown horses. By now, almost all the men were looking at her in a mixture of distrust and surprise. The quarters were too close to wave their spears in her general direction, but several of them had produced smallish riding bows and had the strings nocked back to their cheeks, arrowtips aimed on her forehead.

At last she shoved past the last bulk of horseflesh and could see her three companions, all staring at her with a look of truly she is mad. Legolas' bow still was nocked and drawn, but he didn't quite seem to know where to point it.

"You really are a dork, Legolas," Meghan announced grandly, throwing her left arm up into the air for emphasis. She took a step forward to really give him a piece of her mind—

And promptly fell flat on her face. A rock had specially selected her as the recipient of its wrath.

She gingerly picked herself off the dusty ground and grabbed a horse's mane to drag herself up. The rider eyeballed her with a suspicious sniff, but the horse didn't seem to mind. Wavering slightly, Meghan pointed reproachfully at the bearded blond man facing her friends.

"And you…um… Big Man With a Mole on Your Eyebrow… You're a dork, too!"

The Author begs her venerable readers that Meghan has been running for several days in the heat. It would be enough to destroy anyone's vocabulary.

Legolas' bow was slowly lowering down, the string becoming less and less taut.

Meghan plunged on. "I do not know what y'all were chatting about, but geez! is not the answer!"

She paused and glanced around to see that everyone was still giving her that open-mouthed,
disbelieving look. "Can't we all just get along? Heck-oo! Everybody's fighting this big, evil monster dude with psychopathic obsessions for power, and you're squabbling over... whatever you were squabbling over?"

The blond man turned his eyes back to Aragorn. "Whoever you are, the presence of a woman dressed in men's garb and traveling with you is one of your many mysteries. Now, your name."

"I am Aragorn, son of Arathorn. This is Gimli, son of Gloin, and Legolas of the Woodland Realm. The woman is Melethriel of Imladris. We are friends of Rohan, and of Théoden your King."

With another skeptical glance at Meghan, Éomer took off his helmet. "Théoden no longer recognizes friend from foe. Not even his own kin."

There we go with "kin" again.

"Saruman has poisoned the mind of the King and claimed lordship over his lands," Éomer continued. "My company are those loyal to Rohan, and for that we are banished. The white wizard is cunning. He walks here and there they say, as an old man, hooded and cloaked, and everywhere his spies slip past our nets."

Meghan was just about to light into him when Aragorn cut her off. "We are no spies. We track a part of Uruk-hai, westward across the plain. They have taken two of our friends captive."

With a sudden pang, Meghan realized she had barely even thought about the two Hobbits in the past few days. Stef and Andrea would have said something if they died, right? I would have known somehow. But somehow it felt different. It wasn't just a story anymore.

Gimli's voice cut through her thoughts. "But there were two Hobbits. Did you see two Hobbits with them?"

"They would be small, only children to your eyes," Aragorn added.

Éomer looked grave. "We left none alive. We piled the carcasses and burned them."

"You killed them?!" Meghan screamed. A sudden rage took over her and she threw herself toward Éomer. Well, she would have, if Aragorn and Legolas hadn't grabbed her arms and dragged her back. Which really wasn't very hard to do, since they were big strong men and she was a small, tired woman.

"I am sorry," Éomer said, not at all ruffled by having a five-foot-nothing try to kill him with her bare hands.

"Get off me!" Meghan snapped at Legolas and Aragorn. The latter gave her a very sharp look, and she sagged. Good grief, do I have to keep acting like a complete idiot? Get a grip, Meghan!

"Hasufel, Arod!" Éomer whistled. "May these horses bear you to better fortune than their former masters."

Two horses – one brown, one white – had trotted obediently forward; they were riderless, but Meghan couldn't remember seeing any empty saddles earlier. By that point Éomer had remounted his own stallion. "Look for your friends, but do not trust to hope. It is forsaken in these lands." He raised his voice to address the other men. "We ride north!"

They all thundered away, leaving the four travelers standing beside the patient horses. Meghan groaned and shook her head. "That was surreal and fairly anticlimactic," she muttered.
"Come, we must retrace their path," Aragorn said. He swung up on the sorrel horse and glanced at the other three. "We will have to double on the mounts."

"Um, I don't really ride so well," Meghan said. "I always fall off."

But Aragorn and Legolas were obviously having an in-depth conversation with their eyes. Gimli and Meghan glanced back and forth between them until after a moment, Legolas looked away.

"Come Gimli, you will ride with me," Aragorn said.

It took a little bit of strategic planning, but at last Gimli sat grumpily behind Aragorn, looking for all the world like an ox perched on a wooden fence.

Okay, so maybe that simile was a little exaggerated, but the basic idea is comparable.

Now that all the excitement was over, Meghan found herself ready to drop onto the ground and fall asleep right there. However, Legolas neatly planted her on the white horse's back and then somehow maneuvered up so that he was sitting in front of her. How he did it, Meghan never knew, but the deed was done and they began to canter in the opposite direction that the Rohirrim had gone.

Meghan held on tight to Legolas shoulders. Bumping along on a horse's behind was not her idea of fun. But the rolling pace of the horse's hooves was almost soothing, despite the jarring motion. She soon drifted off into an uncomfortable sleep, leaning forward onto Legolas' back.
Meghan awoke to the bouncy, jerking motion of the horse slowing down to a trot. She groaned and peeled herself off of Legolas’ back, then released one of his shoulders from her fearsome grip to clasp a hand over her mouth in complete, abject horror.

She had *drooled* on him.

Sure enough, where her mouth had been, a darkish wet stain spread in a nice oval shape about the size of her hand. She was so riveted by this sight that she didn't even notice that they had stopped.

Legolas somehow torqued around to halfway face her. His expression was quite grim. She met his eyes with a shrinking feeling, knowing that he was about to kill her for drooling all over his back.

"Lady Meghan," he said in a tone just as serious as his face, "I believe that it would be wise if you remained here for the moment."

Meghan didn't have the brainpower to remove her hand from her mouth, and just sat, staring futilely at him. She dragged her gaze back to the wet patch on his back, and then up to his eyes again.

"Do you understand, Lady Meghan?" Legolas asked, carefully enunciating each syllable.

The rest of Meghan's mind started to wake up. "Oh, huh? Yeah, stay here, got it. Wait, where are you going?"

Legolas nodded toward a little hilly thing, beyond which Meghan couldn't really see. There was a rather dismal stench in the air, however, and she suddenly realized just exactly what the smell was. Éomer had said that they burned the Orc bodies.

"Oh," she said slowly. "*Now* I understand. I'll stay here."

He dismounted first, then turned and gently helped her down from the grey horse's back. They both paused for a moment, he looking down at her and she looking up at him. A very curious flip-flopping sensation appeared in Meghan's stomach, and things were just about to get dangerous when—

The horse sneezed. Very violently, in fact.

Meghan jumped, and then laughed awkwardly. "You should follow Aragorn and Gimli. I'll just stay here with... the horses."

He nodded and sprang lightly away, disappearing quickly over the crest of the hill. Meghan turned back to the sneezy horse and frowned. "What was *that*?" she asked it.

The horse, more or less, ignored her.
"You're no help," she grumbled.

Glancing around, all Meghan could see was lots of grass. And a few random hills, but not many. The other brown horse strolled serenely over the hill and snuffed noses with the grey horse.

Meghan sighed and grabbed both horses' reins. They stared at her disinterestedly. In fact, the whole situation was all very bland. That is, until a rather explosive and manly yell from yonder side of the hill brought all of Meghan's senses into sharp focus, and she hauled forth on the reins, heaving her way up the hill despite the reluctant gait of the horses.

The sight that greeted her was really rather gross. It looked worse than it smelled. The Orc head speared on top of the lance was probably the grodiest thing there.

So Meghan promptly dropped the reins, doubled over, and threw up.

She felt a hand on her back, and she growled, knowing exactly who it was. "Legolas, can't you just let me puke in peace?"

"I told you to stay on the other side of the hill," he said.

Wiping her lips, she glared up at him. "And what exactly makes you the boss of me? Besides, Aragorn just screamed like a banshee and you expect me to stay put like a pretty little angel? One of you could have been dying!"

"I was attempting to help you," Legolas said. He looked the faintest bit miffed, which was the equivalent of saying any other person was yelling in an epileptic rage.

"Just because I vomit every time something nastified shows up doesn't mean you have to pamper me!"

"Lady Meghan!" His tone was so very harsh that Meghan actually shut up and glowered at him. He gave her a steely look and continued speaking. "You certainly have been pampered during your time here. Your performance in front of Éomer clearly displayed how spoiled you have become. You are a grown woman, yet you have been behaving very childishy. This juvenile behavior must cease if you intend to survive in this world. Éomer easily could have slain you for your rash actions."

Meghan worked her mouth, attempting to think of an extremely cutting reply. Nothing really seemed intelligent enough, though, so she resorted to sniffing disdainfully and turning away in a huff.

"Legolas! Meghan!" Aragorn's voice cut through the tension like a knife. "Come, friends. The tracks lead into Fangorn Forest. Legolas, please hobble the horses."

Meghan pointedly avoided looking anywhere in the vague direction of either Legolas or the horses, and instead skirted around the smelly pile of scorched carcasses to join Aragorn and Gimli at the fringe of the trees.

"What's Fangorn Forest?" she asked.

"An ancient forest," Gimli rumbled. "It has an unsavory reputation."

"What do you mean, unsavory reputation?" Meghan said.

Aragorn shook his head a little. "Nothing definite. Rumors tend to grow and distort with each
telling. Come along, we must hurry if we are to catch up with them before nightfall."

Meghan felt rather than saw Legolas rejoining them. She could sense his tension, the way the muscles on his back and shoulders were taut. And something in her was glad: glad that she had the power to make him angry. But a little niggle of doubt lingered obnoxiously in the back of her mind. What was all that about?

Without a word, Aragorn stepped into the forest. Gimli heaved a melodramatic sigh of long-suffering, and followed the scruffy Ranger.

"After you, Lady Meghan," Legolas said. His voice and facial expression were as unruffled as a dove, but she could still perceive the stiffness in his muscles.

She twitched up a critical eyebrow at him. Well, if he can still be a gentleman despite that little spat back there, then I can be a lady. "Thank you, Legolas," she said in the most gracious tone that she could muster.

Regrettably, the dense underbrush made it difficult to enter the forest with any sort of grace or dignity. Going any farther than two or three feet required hopping over a root or ducking under a branch. Nevertheless, Meghan swept grandly into the canopy of trees as regally as a queen.

Perhaps anger lent her elegance, or perhaps the trees were feeling kindhearted that day, but Meghan did not trip, as she had almost expected to. Her previous record of serious situations and tripping was an unhappy one.

They tramped through the woods for what felt like hours. The initial adrenaline of Meghan's clash with Legolas soon wore off, and she found herself almost as tired as before. The short nap on the horses had helped to recharge her a little bit.

After quite a while, Gimli suddenly stopped and poked a leaf. He then licked his finger, pulled a sour face, and spat.

"Orc blood," he growled.

"Tell me that you did not just put that into your mouth!" Meghan squeaked. The taste of bile was still on her tongue from when she had puked at the pile of burning orcs, and the burning sensation rose in her throat again.

"Please do not vomit again," Legolas intervened.

Meghan fixed him with a testy glare. "What if I want to vomit?"

His lips crinkled briefly in irritation and he returned her frown with equal potency. "Then you would be foolish."

"Cease," Aragorn commanded sharply. He gestured to the leafy ground. "We must concentrate on the task at hand. These are strange tracks."

Gimli seemed eager to help change the subject and decided to comment on the atmosphere. "The air is so close in here."

Meghan shot another scowl in Legolas' direction, but he tranquilly ignored her.

"This forest is old. Very old. Full of memory…and anger." he said. He suddenly seemed alive with sensations, and Meghan forgot her annoyance as an awareness not unlike whispering came over
The trees groaned, almost like they were being blown by a strong wind. More whispers wound around Meghan, addling her. She could almost make out what they were saying, but not quite.

"The trees are speaking to each other," Legolas commented.

Meghan concentrated on the trees, trying to block out what her companions were saying. The voices were so tantalizing, and she strained to understand.

But all that came were images of tall trees being chopped down by leering orcs. There was a quiet sound in the background that seemed to be the almost-words.

A raspy noise brought her back to the present. She glanced at Aragorn and saw that he was carefully unsheathing his sword and Legolas was knocking an arrow to his bowstring.

"What's—" A furious gesture from Gimli cut her question short.

And then all the men in the little group went into crazy attack mode. Gimli flung his axe, Legolas released his arrow, and Aragorn whirled like a ninja toward a very bright white light emanating from a figure that had all of a sudden appeared behind them.

Of course, their weapons did no good. A deep, resonant voice spoke from behind the white light. "You are tracking the footsteps of two young Hobbits."

Meghan had been struck dumbfounded very few times in her life. In fact, most of those times had occurred in Middle earth. This was definitely one of those moments.

"Where are they?" Aragorn demanded.

"They passed this way, day before yesterday. They met someone they did not expect. Does that comfort you?"

"Who are you? Show yourself!"

The light faded slowly to reveal an old man, dressed in white.

"It cannot be," Aragorn breathed.

Meghan took a different approach.

"OH NO YOU DIDN'T!" she shrieked. Gandalf winced, but that didn't phase Meghan in the least. "Why the heck did you die? This was all for pointless drama and suspense? Why couldn't you just have stayed alive? Then maybe Boromir wouldn't have died! Or is he coming back, too?"

Shut up, Meghan! the convenient little voice in the back of her head screamed. Let's just prove Legolas right while we're at it!

"I see that you have not changed," Gandalf muttered with an apologetic look at Aragorn.

"I haven't changed? You're back from the dead and all you can talk about is that I haven't changed? How the heck did you do that, anyway—"

Gandalf held up a hand to silence her, then glanced around the little group with kind eyes.

"Forgive me," Legolas said, taking the opportunity to speak. "I mistook you for Saruman."
The wizard brightened. "I am Saruman. Or rather, Saruman as he should have been."

"You fell." Aragorn clearly wasn't latching on to this new idea without some hesitation.

"Through fire, and water. On the lowest dungeon, on the highest peak I fought him, the Balrog of Morgoth."

Meghan tried to pay attention while Gandalf droned on and on in a speech that very well could have been stolen from The Canterbury Tales. She didn't understand the half of what it meant, but she tried to pay attention, anyway.

"Gandalf," Aragorn said at last. Meghan perked up. Aragorn usually said relevant things.

"Gandalf? Yes, that was what they used to call me. Gandalf the Grey. That was my name. I am Gandalf the White, and I come back to you now at the turn of the tide."

"But," Meghan spluttered. "I don't understand. You're all raised from the dead, and that's it? No big ceremony? No weird initiation rites?"

"No. Not today. But come, we must hurry. I will speak as we walk." Gandalf waited long enough to give them each a smile. "It is good to be back."

They all started back to the direction that they had come, Gandalf talking the whole way. "One stage of your journey is over, another begins. War has come to Rohan, we must ride to Edoras with all speed."

"Edoras! That is no short distance!" Gimli exclaimed.

"Where's Edoras?" Meghan interjected.

"We hear of trouble in Rohan. It goes ill with the king," Aragorn said.

"Yes, and it will not be easily cured," Gandalf agreed.

"Did anybody hear me? Where's Edoras?"

"Than we have run all this way for nothing? Are we to leave those poor Hobbits here in this horrid, dark, dank, tree-infested—" A rumbling through the forest stopped him short. "I mean, charming, quite charming forest!"

"It was more than mere chance that brought Merry and Pippin to Fangorn. A great power has been sleeping here for many long years. The coming of Merry and Pippin will be like the falling of small stones that starts an avalanche in the mountains."

"Why is it always 'Merry and Pippin'?" Meghan piped in again. "Why can't it be 'Pippin and Merry'? Did someone have a secret council and agree that it sounds better when Merry is mentioned first?"

"You think too much, Meghan," Gimli said.

The important people ignored the pawns' short discussion.

"A thing is about to happen that has not happened since the Eldar Days. The ents are going to wake up – and find that they are strong. So stop your fretting, Master Dwarf. Merry and Pippin—" (Meghan rolled her eyes) "—are quite safe. In fact, they are far safer than you are about to be."
"But where *are* they?" Meghan said. "Why aren't we going to find them? And where is Edoras? What *is* Edoras? Am I even pronouncing it right?"

"Yes, Melethriel, your pronunciation is excellent," Gandalf said. Meghan thought she detected the faintest hint of exasperation in his voice, but with the new and improved Gandalf, it was hard to tell. "And as to the location of the two younger Hobbits, it would be pointless for me to explain. You see, it is impossible for you to understand what I would tell you. Content yourself with the knowledge that they are safe, and in very good hands."

Somehow the trip out had taken much less time than in. They burst out into the fresh sunshiny air and Meghan breathed in deeply of the comparative freshness.

"What about you, though?" she continued her interrogation of the recently reborn wizard. "We all watched you die. Do you have new super cool superpowers now that you're alive again?"

"Did you hear nothing I said?" Gandalf said. This time, Meghan was certain of the exasperation in his tone. "I have not the time to tell you again. You are nearly as unquenchable as the Hobbits in your thirst for information."

"Later, Meghan," Aragorn said. "For the present, we must make all haste to Edoras."

She blinked. "How are we going to do that? We've only got two horses and there's five of us. Are we going to have to triple up on one of them? I claim a spot on the double-up horse."

"Wait," Gandalf shushed, just before whistling a very peculiar whistle. For a minute, nothing happened. Then a beautiful white stallion cantered up. Meghan glanced between Aragorn and Legolas, because they both looked very impressed with this new addition to their little herd of horses.

"That is one of the mearas, unless my eyes are cheated by some spell," Legolas said.

"Shadowfax," Gandalf nodded, reaching up to stroke the tall horse's arched neck. "He's the lord of all horses and has been my friend through many dangers." He swung up easily onto the horse's back.

"Shadowfax?" Meghan mumbled to herself. "That's so weird. It's like, Shady Email. Ooooh, scary."

"Come, Gimli," Aragorn said lightly. "I fear we must ride again."

The Dwarf made a bit less of a fuss as he maneuvered himself onto the brown horse's saddle, but once he was atop the horse again, he grew silent. "Let us be off," he growled after a moment.

Meghan felt herself being hefted like a sack of grain onto the grey horse. Furious, she opened her mouth to protest in the strongest terms to the manner of her transfer, but the enormity of her tirade was cut short by a colossal sneeze that the dusty air had necessitated. Legolas was already settled in front of her by the time she regained any amount of equanimity.

She chose to maintain a stately silence as they once again began to ride. This time they rode at a canter instead of a trot, and the motion was a little smoother. Meghan only slid one hand on Legolas' shoulder – just enough to keep her balance. No need for any more drooling, anyway.

Anxiety swept over her like a summer storm. Gandalf had said that they were about to be in danger. What did that mean? And what about the Hobbits? The future seemed very bleak.
Chapter Notes

This isn't really a proper chapter, just a random little idea that came to me a while ago. It's definitely not necessary to read, and you won't miss anything important to the plot if you skip it.

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"Okay, everybody take five!" FebSong yelled above the general cacophony of noise.

"Oh God, no!" Meghan moaned. "Not writer's block!"

"SHUT UP!!" FebSong shrieked before bursting into tears. "IT'S NOT MY FAULT! YOU DON'T KNOW WHAT IT'S LIKE!"

"It's alright," Aragorn said in a pacifying tone. "I'm sure you'll get your thread back."

"SHUT UP!!" FebSong screamed again. "My Muse is having an affair with a slash-ficcer and you're telling me that it'll be fine? AND WHY ARE YOU TALKING IN CONTRACTIONS??! I distinctly remember telling you to talk ONLY IN UNCONTRACTIONS!"

"Is that even a word?" Pippin whispered to Merry.

FebSong threw up her hands in a huff. "I'm going shopping."

The little group watched the author stalk off with her fists clenched.

"Well, I sure could use the break," Legolas said, taking the opportunity to stretch. He cast a wry look around. "Being this hott takes a lot of concentration."

Everyone groaned and rolled their eyes, with the exception of an adoring scream from Andrea, who was safely quarantined in chapter one.

Meghan joined the Hobbits at the snack table and selected a powdered doughnut. Pippin looked up at her, smiling despite a mouthful of brownie. "Good job on that argument with Legolas in chapter seventeen. That was pretty intense."

"Thanks." She smiled, then turned it into a glower. "Didn't help that Febby kept rewriting it."

They both paused for a moment to mutter dark words about the author under their breath.

"So," piped in Boromir, who had joined them at the refreshments, "what do you think about the upcoming plot twist in chapter?"

"SHH!" everyone shushed him and glanced around warily.

"Sorry," he grinned. "Not used to high security rigs."

"It's okay," Meghan answered with a laugh. "This is my first fic ever. I can't imagine what it's like
for you guys, full time and all."

The rest of the group had gathered around the snack table by that point, and the spread of munchies was starting to look a little bare.

Legolas winced as he took a nibble from a celery stick. "Just this morning I was on the set of another Mary Sue. This time, I'm abusive to her due to my tortured past, during which I was possessed by Morgoth's disembodied spirit. I have to go back for another chapter this Tuesday and I am not looking forward to it."

"Um…" Meghan paused. "I think Andrea's writing that one."

"Great," Legolas replied sarcastically.

"I just did a steamy little romance oneshot yesterday." The group turned in shock to stare at Gimli, who shrugged. "What? Some people have a Dwarf fetish."

"I'm scheduled for a self-insert next week," Aragorn sighed. "The summary said that Arwen dies and I fall into the depths of despair, until a 'feisty warrior maiden from Lothlórien' travels to Rivendell. Please keep me in your prayers."

Legolas clasped his friend's shoulder sympathetically. There was a moment of silence as everyone contemplated the strange world of fanfiction.

"I like this set," Frodo said. "Even though I only had about six lines total, FebSong does give us nice food. All the other sets try to feed me angst cookies. Have you ever tasted an angst cookie?"

"Oh I've had those," Boromir grimaced. "One bite and you want to commit suicide."

"The Mary Sues eat those things like air," Legolas said.

"But here," Frodo continued, "we get to eat all kinds of stuff. Plus, FebSong gives us breaks even when she doesn't have writer's block."

Legolas batted his eyelashes at Meghan. "Besides, you're my favorite Sue."

"Aw," Meghan crooned, clasping her hands and swiveling from side to side like a little girl. "You're too sweet, Legolas."

"And you both are too disgusting," Pippin wrinkled up his nose. "Puh-leez, the romance doesn't come in until chapter-"

"SHHH!" Everybody looked around again.

Haldir and Lalaith chose this moment to make their appearance. They came walking over, looking every inch the happy couple. You see, after being introduced in chapter eleven, they had fallen properly in love and had gotten married not long after chapter fifteen appeared.

The snacking group greeted the newcomers with good cheer and several offers of the various munchies that remained. Haldir waved the food away, but Lalaith accepted a divine little slice of chocolate cake.

Haldir was just about to say something when a harried-looking FebSong burst into the room, hair awry and eyes blazing with mad inspiration.

"I HAVE IT!!" she bellowed, causing everybody to jump. "PLACES!"
They dropped their snackage and dashed to their places on set.

FebSong had a maniacal grin on her face as she flexed her fingers, preparing. "OKAY! This is gonna be great!"

*Legolas glared at Meghan, wondering how she could possibly be so stubborn. But he also noticed the way the firelight illuminated her raven hair, and outlined the pretty cut of her jaw. Suddenly, he found himself taking her into his arms, kissing her…*

"STOP!"

This was an entirely new voice. Legolas and Meghan backed away from each other instinctively as a darkly cloaked figure stepped into the room.

"FebSong… A word, if you please."

The author looked a little bit extinguished as she meekly followed the new person to the little set of chairs in one corner.

"I heard that's the new beta," Legolas whispered to Meghan. "ElvishKiwi. She's really canon."

"Thank heavens," Meghan sighed. "You're a good kisser, Legolas, but we're only in Rohan. Too much, too soon."

"Agreed."

A moment later a much more sane-looking FebSong returned with ElvishKiwi keeping a watchful eye on the goings-on.

"Okay, different approach!" FebSong said. "Back to the original plot!"

*The rhythmic motion of the horses' hooves beat out a tattoo-*

FebSong frowned. "No no no, I don't like that, it sounds like crap. Backspace, backspace, BACKSPACE!!"

*The hours dragged like lead bricks through mud-*

"What on earth is that? Lead bricks! BACKSPACE!"

*After many hours, the group finally reached Edoras-*

"I CAN'T DO THIS!" FebSong wailed. "CURSE YOU, MALICIOUS MUSE!! I hope you're having your smutty fun with that slash-ficcer!" She shook her fist at the ceiling, then burst into tears. "Please excuse me while I go and watch Doctor Who. Maybe I'll gain some artistic motivation from that."

And she marched resolutely from the room.

ElvishKiwi threw back her hood and gave everyone a benevolent smile. "Don't worry. She'll be back in a little while." Then ElvishKiwi vanished.

The group peered around at each other before bursting into hearty peals of laughter, Meghan and Legolas no less than the others.

"I suppose that ElvishKiwi is the protector of the plot-time continuum," Boromir commented,
recovering from the hilarity first.

"She's my hero," Legolas said.

"And just in time, too," Lalaith added. "It looked like FebSong was to going to raise the rating to M. Maybe she's having an affair with a PWP Muse."

The silence dragged out awkwardly, and Meghan was just about to break it when-

"I'VE GOT IT!" FebSong screamed, entering. "PLACES!"

Legolas glared at her. "You cannot fight, Meghan. How will you be of any help if you are incapacitated?"

"But you don't understand!" Meghan growled.

Just then, they were interrupted by a very strange sound and the gradual materialization of a large blue box. Out stepped a rather dashing figure, who was followed by a pretty blonde.

"BRILLIANT!" the first newcomer exclaimed in a lovely English accent. "The TARDIS can transport to fictional worlds!"

"And what world might this be, Doctor?" Rose asked.

"Middle earth!" the Doctor said enthusiastically. He noticed Meghan and Legolas gawking. "Ah look! Locals!"

"STOP!" ElvishKiwi looked a little exasperated. "FebSong, you can't afford to do a crossover this late in the story!"

FebSong wilted. "You're right. Okay, um… EVERYBODY TAKE FIVE!!" She stomped out.

Before anybody could blink, Meghan was hugging the life out of the Doctor and smiling enormously.

"Hello, then," the Doctor said. "Never been to this fandom before. Are they all this welcoming?"

Rose was eying Meghan with more than a martial gleam. "Nope, just this one it seems."

"Sorry," Meghan blushed, and released the Doctor. "I just got so excited to see you, is all."

"Lovely to meet you, too," he beamed, clapping her on the shoulder. "But there's nothing wrong here. It's not Doctor Who if I don't save the day!" He whisked back into his blue box, and Rose was on his heels. A moment later, the TARDIS had quite vanished.

"That was… interesting," Aragorn said.

"To say the least," Haldir agreed.

Everyone began to migrate back toward the snack table, where they once again resumed their nibbling of assorted treats.

"You know, it really was quite rude of Febby's Muse to go off and commit plot adultery like that," Lalaith commented.

"Yes, it was," Meghan nodded. "And I heard that the slash ficcer isn't even in this fandom!"
"Don't sound so unhappy about it," Legolas frowned. "I'm quite content to leave slash fics to other fandoms."

Suddenly, FebSong skipped in. "I have it at last!" she crooned cheerily. "I just know this will be a wonderful twist to the story. So unexpected! So fresh! So original!"

"Well, let's get started then," Meghan urged.

"Alright! PLACES!!"

Meghan sat brushing her hair, noticing how it fell past her waist. She decided to take a midnight stroll out in the fresh, moonshiny air of Rohan. Her small feet quickly traversed the floor until she burst into the starlight. There, she discovered Legolas standing and admiring the night sky.

"Good evening, Legolas," she murmured demurely.

He swiveled around, a resplendent smile lighting up his face. "Meghan!" he exclaimed as he dropped onto one knee and burst into a glorious song. "I've been dreaming of true love's kiss—"

A rather unexpected sound interrupted his ballad. ElvishKiwi was sitting in a corner, weeping as she rocked back and forth with her hands clasped around her knees.

"Um, Kiwi," FebSong growled. "You're ruining themoment!"

"You can't make this a MUSICAL!!" ElvishKiwi shouted, standing up. "Are you crazy? Besides, that's plagiarism! You didn't even write that song!"

"But..." FebSong's lower lip quivered. "James Marsden was so dashing when he sang it!"

"I don't care," ElvishKiwi hissed.

"Fine! I'll be in my dressing room!" FebSong shrieked.

After the writer had stomped away, ElvishKiwi turned once again to the cast. "I'm going to go and find her Muse if it kills me," she said calmly.

"Try the Lost fandom," Meghan offered. "There's lots of hott guys in that one. Slash ficcer's dream."

"Thanks," ElvishKiwi nodded. "Wish me luck."

"Good luck!" everyone chorused as ElvishKiwi disappeared with a flourish.

There was a silent pause.

"I kinda liked the musical idea," Pippin said.

"You were very dashing when you sang," Meghan informed Legolas, who smiled gallantly.

"Thank you," he said.

Just then, the most amazingly, devastatingly, overwhelmingly, crushingly, tremendously, extraordinarily gorgeous man stepped into the room. He had eyes so blue that it almost hurt to look at them, a lush crop of dark brown curls that fell in perfectly shaggy ringlets around his face, and a body that anyone would kill for. Despite his immeasurable gorgeousness, he was still the most masculine man that any one of them had ever seen.
"Who…" Meghan just barely managed to puff out. She tried again. "Who… who… who… who are you?" The last word came out in a very unflattering squeak.

The man quirked an eyebrow disdainfully at her. "I am FebSong's Muse. Can you direct me to her?"

Lalaith and Meghan - who happened to be the only resident females of the group - pointed mutely toward FebSong's dressing room.

The Muse bowed elaborately and sauntered off in that general direction.

"I don't like that man," Legolas announced suspiciously once the Muse was out of sight. "I have a difficult time believing that he is really FebSong's Muse."

"I concur," Haldir said.

Meghan rolled her eyes. "You guys just aren't used to somebody being more handsome than you are."

Amidst the general protests of that assertion, FebSong reappeared, looking very calm and rational.

"Silence!" she boomed, and immediately everyone quieted. "I have, at last, come up with a decent opening to the next chapter. Places, please."

_Meghan drifted into a half-awake state with a sensation of well being. She left her eyes closed, savoring the mood. She could feel by the rhythmic motion of the horse that they were still cantering across the plains of Rohan. But that didn't matter. It was lovely to finally feel safe and secure for the first time in awhile..._
Meghan drifted into a half-awake state with a sensation of well being. She left her eyes closed, savoring the mood. She could feel by the rhythmic motion of the horse that they were still cantering across the plains of Rohan. But that didn't matter. It was lovely to finally feel safe and secure for the first time in awhile.

*Wait a minute. Secure?*

Meghan realized that her arms were tied-- very tightly -- around Legolas' shoulders.

Fully awake, she tested the strength of her bonds and glared all sorts of hatred into the back of Legolas' head. "Why the heck am I tied up?!" she snapped.

His voice was painfully calm, and he did not turn around. "You fell asleep and nearly fell off thrice. I took the only rational course of action left to me."

"You tied me up." Meghan somehow managed to combine sarcasm, disbelief, and exasperation all in one scathing tone.

"If you do not remember, I woke you up and requested that you find a better position to slumber in rather than as far back on the horse's rump that you could manage. If my memory serves me correctly, you spat on me and told me to eat a stick of -- what was the word? Dynamite?"

Meghan winced. She'd thought that had been a dream. Still, being trussed up the back of a very polite but maddening Elf was certainly plenty of retribution for that.

"Dynamite notwithstanding, do you think that you could *untie* me now that I'm awake?"

"It would be my pleasure." And with that, he neatly unworked the knots without even looking at them.

Meghan immediately scooched a little farther back on the horse and rubbed her sore wrists. "That's the second time you've tied me up."

"Both occasions were necessary."

She rolled her eyes again and then peered around Legolas' flaxen tresses. A large, rustic-looking city had sprung up out of the plains. It was mostly brown and dusty, with the exception of some scrubby green bushes dotted here and there.

"Edoras," Gandalf announced as they all drew rein and looked into the sun toward the capitol of Rohan. "And the Golden Hall of Meduseld. There dwells Théoden, King of Rohan, whose mind is overthrown. Saruman's hold over King Théoden is now very strong."

"Who's Saruman again? His name is *really* familiar," Meghan said.
"One of the Istari, who was corrupted by the promise of power. His reach has grown long, and the King of Rohan is under Saruman's sway," Gandalf explained.

"Oh. Gotcha. Bad guy."

They spurred their three horses on, toward the city on a hill. This time Meghan held on to Legolas' shoulders of her own free will – better than being forced.

As they drew closer to the gates, Meghan saw a woman dressed in white who was standing out on a bit of a porch-like thing. Thank goodness! she thought. Another girl! This world is a chick's dream. All those men running around and it looks like I've only just now met the third woman total.

Their ride through the dirty streets was marked only by the barrage of strange looks they received. It did not take long, though, to reach the summit of the hill, where they dismounted and went up to the platform that Meghan had noticed earlier. The woman in white was gone, though.

A gruff but kindly man stopped them from going through the magnificently huge wooden doors. "I cannot allow you before Théoden King so armed, Gandalf Grayhame, by order of Grima Wormtongue."

Gandalf nodded curtly to them, and the three men started to unstrap, unsheath, and otherwise unfasten all manner of weapons from their persons.

"Lady Meghan, your bow and sword," Legolas hissed.

With a start, Meghan followed suite and handed over her weaponry, suddenly feeling very naked despite the fact that she had very little expertise with either.

There was a pause.

"Your staff," the man coughed.

"Oh, no," Gandalf said in a pleasant tone of disbelief. "You would not part an old man from his walking stick."

The guard seemed caught with indecision for a moment, but soon grimaced in acquiescence and turned toward the big doors. Gandalf took the opportunity to wink slyly at Aragorn and Meghan as he leaned more convincingly on Legolas' arm.

The doors creaked ominously closed behind them after the group entered a large hall, lined with pillars and finished by a somewhat raised throne, upon which sat an ancient looking man flanked by a different, rather slimy individual.

"Why should I welcome you, Gandalf Stormcrow?" the old man rasped in a voice thin from disuse.

"Legolas?" Meghan whispered.

"Yes, Lady Meghan?" Legolas returned in a clipped, quiet tone.

"Legolas, you were right. I have been acting like an idiot. I don't want to be angry with you anymore. Forgive me?"

His reply was forestalled by a burly man coming toward them with nothing less than a snarl of rage on his face. Legolas took a moment to dispatch of him, but another took the first's place.
Meghan decided she would only get in the way, so she stood back and admired the fluid, economical movements that Legolas used to beat the crap out of each of his attackers.

Then she felt a grubby hand slam across her mouth and an arm around her waist, lifting her completely off the ground and carrying her backwards toward a smallish side-door that was partially shadowed.

Meghan had been angry before in her life – but it didn't compare to the fury she felt at that moment. With one hand she ripped his grasp away from her mouth, and the other hand she balled into a fist and slammed her elbow back as hard as she could into his gut. He grunted and his hold on her waist loosened enough to allow her to twist away from him.

Her counterattack didn't end there. She held his eyes with a glare for half a moment, and then kneed him in the groin. His face twisted into a grimace of pain and anger as he dropped to his knees. Meghan thought that might be all, but, snarling, he began to lunge to his feet. She scowled and kicked his head.

The man crumpled to the floor just as Legolas arrived – a bit breathless – at Meghan's side.

"Are you alright?" he demanded, running his hands down her arms and closely examining her hands for any broken bones or bruises.

"I'm fine," Meghan replied. The realization of how close she had come to being dragged off dawned on her. "That guy almost—Well, you know!" Her breath came out shuddery.

"I was not watching carefully enough. It never occurred to me that they might assail you." His eyes were very, very big and he sounded genuinely shaken.

Meghan quirked him a half smile. "I think I did a pretty good job of knocking that jerk out, though."

"Quite." Legolas ventured a smile back at her. "Now I know that you fight well when you are provoked."

Suddenly she caught sight of the throne. "Woah, what just happened?" she exclaimed. A slightly raised brow from Legolas reminded her to keep her voice down. "Who's that new guy?"

"Théoden as he is meant to be," Legolas replied. "It would seem that Gandalf has healed him."

Gandalf agreed. "Your fingers would remember their old strength better if they grasped your sword."

The original guard who had met them at the gates knelt in front of Théoden and offered the king a sword. Théoden unsheathed it, looking up and down the length of the blade.

Legolas and Meghan watched in impartial silence as the guardsmen dragged the slimy man out into the crisp spring air. The entire company followed the King outside as well as he followed the wretched creature.

"Who's that?" Meghan asked Legolas.

"I believe it is Gríma Wormtongue. Saruman's hand, if you will."

The rushing of the wind prevented them from hearing any of the conversation. Still, they observed Gríma argue with Théoden and Aragorn until he made a hasty retreat.
"Hail Théoden King!" Aragorn cried to the surrounding crowd.

Even the wind stilled as the entire throng knelt reverently to Théoden, who blinked around like he was waking up all over again.

"Where is Theodred? Where is my son?"

Meghan realized that the woman in white from earlier was standing there. She looked so remarkably troubled that Meghan promised herself that she would talk to her later, once the hubbub of the moment had passed.

The funeral for Theodred passed quickly. Meghan stood a little off to the side while his body was carried solemnly and Éowyn – Meghan had picked up her name from hearing the passing folk say it – sang a mournful dirge. The workers moved surely but swiftly, as if they wanted to be done with the terrible task.

Now, Meghan was sitting in the hall of Meduseld, which was considerably warmer and brighter than that morning. She felt a tugging of sadness as she watched the blonde woman moving about the room. Her posture revealed a deep weariness. After a moment, she brought a bowl of steaming stew over to the table.

"I'm Meghan," our leading lady said, venturing to smile.

"Éowyn." The blonde sank onto the bench across from Meghan. Despite how worn out she seemed to be, her body was tensed a bit. Meghan wondered if the Rohirrim didn't much like Elves. The blonde took in a deep breath. "Where are your friends?"

"Gandalf is outside somewhere. And Legolas and Gimli went to get all our weapons and stuff back."

Éowyn nodded and said nothing.

"I'm sorry about your cousin," Meghan said, reaching out to clasp Éowyn's hand for a moment. She had learned about the family connection earlier from Gandalf, who seemed to be a wealth of information on any topic.

Éowyn regarded her for a moment, her blue eyes searching Meghan's green ones. "He was too young to die." She smoothly withdrew her hand, and passed it across her forehead as if to clear her thoughts. "What of you? Have you been traveling long?"

"Yes," Meghan said. "We were trying to find some friends, but another friend found them first. So Gandalf decided to come here."

"I marvel that Stormcrow has companions. He has ever journeyed alone."

"He was kinda stuck with us," Meghan muttered.

The blonde tilted her head. "You speak strangely for one of Elf-kind. Is this a common dialect among your people?"

"Yeah," Meghan dragged the word out dubiously. "I'm from… Rivendell, but I was raised by…" A sudden and entirely irrational urge to say wolves flooded her thoughts. "…My… Elvish parents." She smiled widely, hoping to save the thread of conversation. "We had some… weird sayings."
"Are the tales of your people true?"

"Some of them," Meghan fudged. "Um... the good stories are true."

Éowyn digested this. "I am sorry," she said at last. "I should not interrogate you. I have never met an Elf before."

"It's okay," Meghan answered quickly, but cringed at the look of apprehension on Éowyn's face. "It's alright, I mean."

"Is that an Elvish word? 'Okay'?"

"Yeah!" Meghan gave her a thumbs-up. Good grief, how many more unsuspecting people am I going to con into thinking that slang means something else?

Éowyn stood and moved toward one of the fire-basins that were set in a square pattern on the floor. She tipped one of the logs into the flames.

"Hey, um, Éowyn?" Meghan began.

"Yes?" She turned around to face Meghan.

"Are you any good with a sword?"

The upward tilt of Éowyn's jaw told Meghan enough even before the blonde woman spoke. "I have some knowledge of a blade."

"Great! Do you think you could spar with me a little? Aragorn's been so busy and we haven't really had any time. I really need the practice."

"If you wish," Éowyn said. "But I do not understand. Why would an Elf need practice with a weapon?"

"Because I kinda suck." Meghan smiled ruefully. "I only just recently started learning. The sad thing is, I'm better with a bow – and I only can hit the outer rings with that." She was rewarded with the faintest glimmer of a smile from Éowyn.

The quiet of the hall was crushed as the heavy doors swung open to admit Gandalf, Théoden, Aragorn, and Legolas. The latter two were carrying small persons, one of which – the boy in Legolas' arms – seemed unconscious.

"Hammerhand," Éowyn breathed. "What devilry can this be?"
"Are they alright? What happened to them? Where's their mom?" Meghan asked as Legolas gently lay the boy on the table. Aragorn set the little girl onto her feet and she rushed over to her brother, grasping his hand.

"They are survivors of an attack in the Westfold," Théoden explained grimly.

Gandalf bent over the boy and peered into his face with one hand on the side of the child's head. "He is not injured, but very weary. And…” he paused, "he is waking up."

Sure enough, the boy jerked awake. "Freyda?" he asked, rising into a sitting position.

"She is here, son," Aragorn said. "You are both safe in Meduseld."

"You have had a long journey, and you are safe now." Gandalf allowed an encouraging sparkle into his eyes, even though his voice was grave. He turned to Éowyn. "Will you see that they have something to eat?"

"Yes, of course," Éowyn replied, and hurried to bring them two bowls of stew.

Meghan plopped onto the bench next to the little girl, and the boy climbed off the tabletop to sit beside his sister. "So your name is Freyda?" Meghan asked.

The little girl nodded, her brown eyes very round.

"That's a pretty name. What's yours?" Meghan leaned forward a bit to see the boy.

"Éothain," was the reply.

"Wow, you guys all have amazing names here. Mine's Meghan."

"Why are your ears pointed?" Freyda said.

Meghan glanced around like she was about to tell them something very important she didn't want anyone to overhear. "Can I tell you a really big secret?"

The two children nodded solemnly and leaned closer in.

Meghan dragged out the silence for dramatic effect. "I'm a Vulcan," she finally whispered. Freyda's and Éothain's mouths turned into little O's.

"What is a Vulcan?" Éothain asked, stumbling a little over the unfamiliar word.

"A very, very important person. Vulcans mostly nod and say sage things."

"I don't remember you saying anything sage." Éothain was not impressed, but at least his mind was
off of the more unpleasant subject of his missing parents.

_Dang, these kids have good vocabularies_, Meghan grumbled. She had hoped that the old-timey-sounding word would throw them off. Not that an old-timey word would help much in this time period. "Well, um, that's because you haven't been around me very long."

The boy looked at her dubiously. "Say something sage, then."

Éowyn's reappearance with the stew saved Meghan from digging herself deeper into that hole.

"Where is Mama?" Freyda said in a distressed tone. It was obvious that she regarded Éowyn as the more knowledgeable of the two women.

"Shhh," Éowyn replied, settling a blanket around Freyda's shoulders. She turned to Théoden, who had taken a seat on the throne. "They had no warning. They were unarmed. Now the wildmen are moving through the Westfold, burning as they go. Rick, cot, and tree." Meghan made a mental note to ask Legolas what a _rick_ was.

The children dug eagerly into their stew, and Meghan patted Freyda on the back. "I'm going to go and sit with my friends over there, 'kay? I'll see y'all later."

Freyda nodded, but didn't venture to speak with her mouth employed in much tastier uses. Meghan gave them both a cheerful smile as she rose and crossed the room to join Legolas, Gimli, and Aragorn.

"…riding north as we speak. Êomer is loyal to you. His men will return and fight for their King," Aragorn was saying.

Meghan leaned next to Legolas against the pillar. "We need to talk," she said in an undertone.

"And you need to practice more with your bow," Legolas returned just as softly. "There is a small archery range behind the stable. Will you meet me there in a few moments? I must retrieve our bows and quivers."

"Sure," Meghan said. "Something tells me we aren't really needed here."

Legolas glanced around and nodded. "The stable is to the right as you leave the main doorway. Though perhaps a less prominent removal would be in better taste at the moment." He scanned the room. "That doorway there leads to a side access."

"Such subterfuge," Meghan sighed. "It's not like we're leaving to take a roll in the hay."

Apparently _that_ figure of speech existed in Middle earth, because Legolas let his head fall into his hands. Then he started shaking.

"Legolas…?" Meghan said quizzically. He held up a hand to forestall her questions, and she realized that he was _laughing_.

After a moment, he regained his typical composure, although his lips couldn't quite stop twitching every few words. "I will meet you behind the stable in a moment, then."

This time it was Meghan's turn to cover her mouth to prevent her laughter from bursting out. "That sounds worse!"

"Away with you," Legolas grimaced. "Before we disrupt the entire room."
"Alright, behind the stable it is." Meghan winked at him as they both turned away from each other, Legolas for the sleeping quarters to fetch their equipment and Meghan for the side exit that he had pointed out a moment before.

Dusk had firmly settled across the plains by the time Meghan walked out into the fresh air. There was a bit of a chilly breeze, and she readjusted her cloak to fall more closely around her shoulders.

It didn't take her long to find the stables – in fact, it would have been extremely difficult to miss them. She wound her way to the back, where, sure enough, a little archery range showed up in the moonlight.

She drew in a deep breath, contemplating that even though horses were an erratic, intimidating lot, they smelled nice. Which is fairly bizarre when you realize that they mostly smell like sweat and poo.

Legolas appeared around the corner, two quivers slung on his back and both of their bows in his hands. He smiled.

"It is, perhaps, a shorter range than to what I am used. Nevertheless, without practice, you will not improve." He handed her bow and quiver to her and gestured to the farthest target. "That one."

Meghan made a face. "Somehow, I knew you were going to pick that one."

"I am predictable, I suppose."

They both fell silent as the twangthud of the arrows hitting the target filled the night air.

"Lady Meghan, you did not merely ask me out here for target practice."

Meghan lowered her bow, glad for a chance to rest her aching muscles. "Well, for starters, you never accepted my apology earlier before those guards went all medieval."

He half-grinned, and Meghan decided that he had the nicest smile she had ever seen. "I accept your apology, and also offer one. I should not have rebuked you. It was not my place."

"You are most heartily forgiven," Meghan said with a very formal curtsey, despite the fact that she was still wearing pants.

In mutual contentment, they resumed their practice. This continued for awhile more – the silence broken only by the sound of their arrows.

After a bit, though, Meghan got restless. Taking a tentative breath, she said, "Legolas, back there, yesterday I guess, before we argued…" She trailed off, uncertain of how to continue.

He paused for the slightest moment, then resumed his practice. "I helped you off my horse."

"Yeah," Meghan said, hoping he would continue. She didn't know what had happened back there, but she wanted to find out.

"You were very weary, and unsteady on your feet. I supported you briefly until you regained your balance. That was all."

"Yeah," she repeated. So it was really nothing after all.

The silence became a little bit oppressive. They didn't have to deal with it long, because Legolas bowed and said, "You must excuse me, Lady Meghan. I think that I will return to the hall."
"Okay." Meghan nodded absently. "I'll stay here to practice some more."

"Goodnight, then."

"G'night."

Meghan watched him leave. *That was not nothing*, she thought. *Back there, he almost kissed me.*

This realization brought a certain level of uncertainty. It had never occurred to her that one of Andrea's lovey-dovey, fall-in-love-with-the-hott-elf-and-have-problems-admitting-the-relationship-to-each-other fanfics might *actually* happen to her. Then another realization hit her in the gut like a sack of potatoes.

*I don't mind. At all.*

"Oh, this is pathetic," she groaned, rubbing her eyes. "I am *not* the girl for you."

"Meghan?" That was definitely a woman's voice. Meghan suddenly saw Éowyn standing by the corner of the stables.

"Oh, hi," Meghan said. She walked toward the target to retrieve her arrows.

"One of your companions, the Elvish man, asked me to find lodgings for you. He said you were here."

As Meghan slid her arrows back into her quiver, she noticed that Legolas had neglected to reclaim his own arrows. He must have been either very distracted or very tired to forget something as important as that.

*Aha, caught you!* A distinctly triumphant thrill pin-prickled across her body. *That was not nothing, after all!*

She forced her voice to be moderate when she replied, "Thanks. Actually, sleep sounds really great right now." Legolas' arrows were much harder to pull out of the target on account that he had a much heavier draw-weight than she did. Éowyn joined Meghan at the target and helped her yank the shafts out.

"Are the kids cool?" Meghan grimaced at Éowyn's confused look. "I mean, um, are the children faring well?"

"Yes," Éowyn replied, pacified by Meghan's clarification. "I had a room prepared for them. I believe that they are sleeping now."

"Yes," Éowyn replied, pacified by Meghan's clarification. "I had a room prepared for them. I believe that they are sleeping now."

They quickly returned to the main building, and went down a side passage, where evidently the quarters were. Éowyn had already prepared a small lamp and handed it to Meghan so that she could light her room. "Your chamber is here," Éowyn said, gesturing toward one of the heavy, dark wood doors. "Mine is the second on the left. Do you require anything more before you retire for the evening?"

"No thanks," Meghan said, even though she *did* wish she had some sort of pajamas. But Éowyn looked so tired and dismal that Meghan wanted her to go and get some rest of her own.

The blonde nodded wearily. "Rest well, then."

"You, too. G'night."
Éowyn turned to go as Meghan laid a hand on the knob of her door. "Oh, hey, Éowyn?" Meghan
asked, a sudden thought hitting her.
Éowyn turned back, her thick, golden hair spilling over her shoulders.
Meghan smiled. "If you ever want to talk, or just to sit, or whatever, well, you can talk with me. I'm
a good listener when I remember to keep my mouth shut."
A sliver of a smile lightened Éowyn's careworn face. "Thank you, Meghan of the Elvish
Realms. G'night." Her mouth formed awkwardly around the unfamiliar word.
"G'night," Meghan grinned, then stepped into her temporary room. It was a tiny little thing, with
only a few articles of furniture – a small bed, which was really nothing more than an elevated
pallet; a rough but practical table about three hand-spans wide; and a rickety looking chair. Meghan
set the lamp on the table and took a good look at the bed. It was lumpy and it looked as though the
mattress was filled with straw, but she didn't care. It was very possibly the most glorious bed she
had ever seen, after sleeping on the ground for several weeks.
Her bundle of belongings sat in the corner by the bed, evidently where Legolas had delivered them
earlier. Earlier, before the two children had been discovered, Legolas had offered to take Meghan's
possessions to her room so that she could stay with Éowyn and get something to eat.
It all comes back to Legolas again. Meghan half-smiled at the irony. Still, she was tired and letting
herself think about that angsty topic of roiling emotion and sentiment was far too weighty an issue
to deal with at such a time. She pulled her cloak out of the pile in the corner, stretched out on the
pallet, and settled the cloak around her like a blanket.
She didn't exactly remember falling asleep, but her surroundings changed in such a dramatic way
that she was certain that she was dreaming. Which was odd to begin with, because normally she
wasn't aware of her dreams as she was dreaming them.
Glancing down, Meghan realized that she was wearing a poofy, white, princessy wedding dress,
complete with long gloves and Austrian crystals on the frothy skirt. She blinked at this sudden
revelation, then looked around to see that she was in a very beautiful old church with several
hundred people sitting in the rows, all either smiling or looking quite bored. In fact, most of the
women were smiling, and most of the men were looking bored.
I'm getting married, she decided with a curiously fluttery sensation in her stomach. No, no, this is
ridiculous. All those thoughts about Legolas and romance and unrequited love and all that mushy
gooshy junk is messing with my brain.
Even so, she had the irresistible urge to peek around to her right side, where ostensibly her groom
ought to be standing. She very much expected to see a green-clad blond standing there. But
someone quite different grinned back at her.
"CRAP!!!" she screamed.
She was having the Zac Efron dream again.


Meghan woke up the next morning feeling preposterously nauseated. She very rarely remembered her dreams, but this time seemed to be an exception. She half-wondered if this was some sort of punishment from the love-gods.

With a groan, she heaved herself out of bed and stretched, hearing several pops and cracks from various joints in her body. The thin mattress had made her half wish for a bed on the ground, but a mattress was a mattress, however lumpy it might be. And at least she hadn't needed to worry about a random bird pooping on her while she slept.

She ran a hand through her hair – and promptly got it stuck. She groaned again. Her hair must be the most impressive rat's nest that ever existed. If I keep this up, I'll have dreadlocks.

The best thing that she had for a hair tie was leather strip that Lalaith had given her all the way back in Lothlórien. She separated it as best she could, patted out the lumps, and pulled it into a half-back pollyanna. That was the extent of her hairstyling expertise. She was used to short hair, and here she had hair down her waist. Fingering the ends, she contemplated whether or not she really ought to cut it or not.

A rumble in her stomach reminded her that she hadn't eaten anything in quite a while, so she settled her cloak on her shoulders and went out the door. No one was out in the hallways, but she remembered the turns Éowyn had taken her down the night before. She soon found herself in the main hall again.

It was entirely transformed since the previous evening. Everybody seemed to be going through chests, selecting the most important things to pack into saddlebags and leather satchels. Meghan stared, perplexed, at all the hustle and bustle.

Éowyn spared her a tired smile as Meghan came up. "I thought that you had been told last night, or else I would have mentioned it." She hefted a heavy-looking bundle, handling it easily.

"Told what?" Meghan asked.

"We leave for Helms Deep this morning," Éowyn replied with an unreadable face. "My uncle has commanded that the city be forsaken to whatever evil wishes to defile it."

"I would rather see a city burn than watch people get eaten," Meghan said. "Orcs are nasty."

"I know what they are like!" Éowyn snapped, and Meghan remembered that her cousin had been killed by Orcs.

"I'm sorry," Meghan said. "I keep thinking I'm the expert on this stuff and I forget that you've lived it your entire life."

She could feel the tension easing out of Éowyn's body as the blonde's hands unclenched from the
"And I am sorry," she said in a softer voice. "I should not have raised my voice."

"Oh don't worry. You can raise your voice all you want at me. Trust me, I grew up with four brothers. I can handle yelling."

A small flicker of kinship sparkled in Éowyn's big brown eyes. "Brothers are loud," she offered.

"Way loud," Meghan agreed, cracking a smile.

Éowyn seemed to be about to return the smile, but she suddenly withdrew into her shell, as though she realized that she was getting rather chummy with one of those mysterious Elves. Her face went carefully blank and she returned to her work.

Meghan sighed. Well, I guess it's not fair to expect her to be my best friend on the second day. Curse these pointy ears! She reached up and touched them. It still felt strange to have such alien ears. Then she made a mental note to ask Aragorn why the Rohirrim didn't like Elves.

"I advise you to go and gather your belongings," Éowyn said in a voice that wasn't quite aloof or congenial. It was sort of a mixture of both.

"Right," Meghan said. "Excellent idea. I'll be off then."

She couldn't help but feel dismissed as she turned toward the door that led back to her room. On a sudden whim, she spun on her heel and headed in the direction of the little side entrance that opened to the front portico. Once outside, she saw what seemed like the entire population of the city scurrying about on various errands. She soon spotted Aragorn walking from the stables toward her, and she waved at him.

"Good morning, Meghan," he said, coming up the last few stairs to stand by her.

"G'morning," Meghan replied. "So exactly what is going on? Éowyn said something about Helms Deep. What is that?"

His shoulders had a determined set. "It is a fortress to the northwest of Edoras. King Théoden does not wish to leave his people unprotected in the city."

There was a bit of a troubled look on his face, and it prompted Meghan to ask, "And we'll be safe in Helms Deep?"

"The king is certain that nothing can breach the walls," Aragorn said.

Meghan smiled cynically. "They said the same thing about the Titanic."

"You will be safe if you stay with Legolas and me."

"Thanks," Meghan grinned, suddenly heartened by his promise.

"And, as for Legolas, did he seem unwell yesternight? He was very…" Aragorn searched for the right word. "…Distracted this morning."

"You don't say," Meghan laughed awkwardly. "He's probably just nervous or something." Yeah, but nervous about what?"

Aragorn frowned. "He does not appear to be one who is anxious before a battle."

"Aha! So you admit that there probably will be a battle!" she crowed triumphantly.
"Lower your voice." He stepped closer and continued in an undertone. "It is Gandalf's belief that Saruman means to destroy Rohan. Stone walls and untrained soldiers will be hard put to keep Orcs out of the Keep."

Meghan sobered. "But I have faith in you."

It looked like Aragorn would have liked to have said something, but instead he rubbed his eyes with one hand and sighed. "I must go. Have you yet readied for our departure?"

"No, but I don't have much to do. Are we walking or riding?" Half of her wanted him to say walking because the horse had given her some very interesting soreness, but on the other hand, walking was just plain exhausting.

"I believe that Legolas meant for you to ride Arod, but if the horse has already been claimed, you may ride Brego."

"Wait a minute, Prego?" Meghan interrupted. Sudden images of a tomato sauce horse entered her head.

"Brego," Aragorn said mildly, emphasizing the B. "We will leave soon. The Rohirrim are nearly ready."

Meghan wasn't quite sure what to say, but Aragorn was already walking into the grand main entrance, wherein no doubt he would discover a slightly testy Éowyn and lots of barrels and chests. Making a new mental note to thank Aragorn for offering his horse, Meghan trotted down the stairs and headed for the stable.

Even in the stable, activity hummed. Men were busily saddling the horses and then filling their saddlebags. A few horses were being hitched to rickety looking wagons and led outside, where Meghan assumed the families would fill the wagon with foodstuff and valuables.

She was still looking around for Arod when Legolas came up beside her. In fact, he was so quiet that she wouldn't have noticed him at all for a moment if Gimli hadn't been with him. Haldir was right. Gimli does breathe very loudly. Oh god, Haldir. Her groan at the recollection earned her a raised eyebrow from Legolas and a grunt from Gimli.

"Are you well, lassie?" the latter rumbled.

Despite her objections to being called a name that was reminiscent of a large dog that often saved the day, Meghan kept her voice even. "I'm fine. I just remembered something that I need to think about. How are you?"

"Ready to leave this place," Gimli said. "I like the sound of a stone fortress."

Legolas' tone was the same blend of reserve and friendliness as Éowyn's. "The journey will take a better part of the day. I have already saddled Arod for you."

"Thank you. Speaking of which, do you know when we are leaving?" Meghan limited herself to asking. In fact, she would have liked to ask several more questions, including, Are you really in love with me? When will you admit it? How does your hair stay so perfect all the time?

"Soon," Legolas answered.

"Thanks for being specific," Meghan said.
Legolas seemed determined not to get into another argument, and he replied in a carefully smooth tone of voice. "I am not in the inner circles of the King's council. He will leave whenever he wishes."

"Come, elfling," Gimli grunted. "We must get the saddlebags." The Dwarf seemed quite oblivious to all this romantic tension.

Legolas inclined his head briefly to Meghan, but he did not say anything as the pair left. Meghan heaved a sigh, then belatedly remembered that she still had Legolas' arrows in her room.

*I'll make a mental note,* she thought sourly, then sighed. *This is getting ridiculous. Mental notes don't even work.*

She decided to take up Éowyn's advice and collect her belongings. The main hall of Meduseld was considerably less crowded as she wended her way through the clutter and back to her room. There was no sign of Éowyn or Aragorn, either.

Her little bedroom was much more cheerful now that some sunlight streamed through a slightly grubby window above the bed. But there wasn't very much to do, either. All of her things were still in the little bag by the door.

Still, she strapped it all onto her back, including her bow and quiver. His arrows were longer by seven or eight inches, and Meghan vaguely wondered if they made her look like she had antennae from a front view. She sniffed. *Fine time to become self-conscious.*

Pausing to straighten the dusty blanket atop the bed, she retraced her steps back to the windy sunshine. It seemed as though the activity was calming out in the courtyard, too. More people were standing passively beside handcarts and horses than there were running around still preparing. Meghan even caught a glimpse of the king, whose name she could not remember despite the fact that Aragorn had just said it earlier.

Meghan sat down on the bottom step, feeling useless. She let her head fall into her hands. The only person that she normally would have talked to at that moment would have been Legolas, but that didn't seem like an option. *Of course he had to go and fall in love with me. Moron. And why the crap won't he say anything?* She closed her eyes to block out the sight of the unforgiving stone underneath her.

*Maybe he's keeping quiet for my own good. Maybe there's something disgustingly wrong with me and something terrible would happen if Legolas and I ever got together. Maybe I'm going crazy. Maybe he's not in love with me at all. Maybe he knows something that I don't. Maybe it's because I'm not from this world.*

She sighed. This internal dialogue was doing nothing for her. For all she knew, Legolas could be right. All he had done was help her off the horse, and then he had been very tired last night and had forgotten his arrows.

"This is absurd," she groaned. "I'm acting like Andrea, but a thousand times worse."

A carefully cleared throat made her look up, only to see the very object of her contemplation standing with Arod's reins in his hands.

"The Rohirrim are leaving," he said smoothly.

Meghan narrowed her eyes at him. If he really *was* in love with her, he could win an Oscar for his performance to the contrary. "Okay," was all that she said.
"I see that you retained my arrows for me," Legolas said, nodding at her quiver as she stood and testily peered into Arod's dewy black eyes.

"Oh yes," Meghan said a little too quickly. She reached behind her, feeling for the longest arrows, and started to pull them out. "I guess you forgot them or something last—OW!" A sharp pain on the back of her left hand cut her sentence short. She yanked her hand into her vision, and immediately covered it with her other.

As she had been drawing the last of Legolas' arrows from her quiver, she had pulled the sharp arrowhead over the knuckles of her other hand, which she had been using to hold her own arrows in the quiver. Now it was quickly soaking crimson over both of her hands.

"I— I think—" Her stomach did a peculiar little cartwheel just before heaving. In a sudden moment of decision, Meghan resolved not to throw up in front of Legolas again.

So she clenched her teeth and darted away.

Her mad dash at relative freedom found her behind the stables, throwing up every last morsel of food she had ever eaten in her entire existence. And after that came dry heaves, especially after she reached up to put a hand to her forehead and found a coating of blood on her palm.

After not too long a time, she heard the featherlight footfalls that only a cat or an Elf can manage, and she groaned. That was the whole point of running away, so that he doesn't see!

"May I see the laceration?" His voice still had a touch of that careful neutrality in it, but despite the conservative words, he sounded concerned.

"I guess so," Meghan said, squinching her eyes tightly shut and extending both hands in his general direction.

He lightly took them both, and she could feel him turning her left hand this way and that as he looked at it. "It will not need sutures," he said after a minute. "It is a gash across the skin, but nothing was severely damaged. The incision will bind itself up on its own."

Now he was wiping away the drying blood and wrapping something long and soft around her left hand. Meghan sucked in a breath, about to open her eyes.

"No, do not yet. There is still blood on your other hand. And your forehead."

Great, now he's a mind reader.

He quickly rubbed the blood from her hand and forehead, and she blinked her eyes open to see him smiling bemusedly at her. She fought down a grimace. Some impression she was making.

"We should hurry to rejoin the others," Legolas said, abruptly becoming distant again. "We should not keep them waiting." And just like that, his back was to her and he was striding away.

Meghan thumped the stable wall with her fist. "This is too complicated!" she muttered angrily at the dirt.

"Meghan?" The sound of Aragorn's call drifted around the corner.

"Coming!" Meghan trotted back into the courtyard.

"Come, it is time to leave," Aragorn said. "Did Legolas secure a mount for you?"
"Yes," Meghan said.

Right on cue, Legolas came over with Arod. He wordlessly lifted Meghan (who squawked in protest) into the saddle, and just as wordlessly walked away again.

Aragorn eyed Meghan dubiously.

"It's a long story," Meghan sighed in reply to his look.
Meghan's stomach was complaining very noisily. She wrapped one arm around her waist and wound the fingers of the other hand more deeply into Arod's shaggy mane. Riding the horse still felt like straddling a barrel in deep water. Despite how exasperating Legolas was being, he did provide a pleasant pair of shoulders to hang on to.

Her stomach gurgled again.

She wondered if she had any lembas left in her pack. Actually, she had barely looked into her pack since the riverbank. An extremely horrifying revelation slowly began to dawn on her. She hadn't bathed or even changed her clothes since Lothlórien. It was difficult to tick up the days in her head – most of them were a little blurry at best – but it must be at least two weeks. If not fifteen or sixteen days.

Fighting down the mad urge to leap into the nearest body of water and scrub until her skin turned lobster red, Meghan slid her hand into her bag, which had been tied to the saddle instead of her back. She tried to ignore the deliciously clean-feeling clothing and rifled around for some lembas. Funny, she had forgotten all about that package of instant-sleep tea, but there it was, soft against her hand. She pushed it away and continued rummaging.

Well, no luck with the lembas. Gimli had probably pilfered the rest of it sometime when she wasn't looking. That dwarf can eat more lembas than Merry and Pippin put together.

Ignoring the disturbingly ambiguous grammar of her last thought, she slumped in her saddle and sighed. Her stomach felt like it was going to shrink in on itself.

Randomly, a floating hand appeared to the right side of her vision, holding a wrinkly apple. Actually, the hand wasn't floating at all: it was connected to an arm wearing familiar green sleeves, that was in turn connected to a pair of shoulders that Meghan would have been clinging to had the owner not been so prickly about their current relationship status. Now he was walking beside Arod and shoving an antique apple in her face.

"I could not help but notice that you were hungry," Legolas commented casually, as if he was talking about the weather.

More with the mind-reading. What if he knows when I need to burp? Or when I have to go to the bathroom? Is he psychic or something? More like I'm psycho.

Meghan gingerly took the apple. It felt like an old person's face, except not as soft.

"Very appetizing, I know," Legolas said.

She glanced from the apple to his face and saw that he wore a pleasant smile, though he did not look at her. "Did you just make a joke?" she asked, trying to peel the crinkled skin away.
"Perhaps I did."

Fine. If he wanted to play the "let's-pretend-we're-not-in-love-with-each-other" game, Meghan would, too.

"It was a pretty lame joke." She ripped a stamp-sized sheet of paper thin peel off.

"Eat your desiccated fruit and be grateful." Legolas still didn't make eye contact, but he had a bantering tone that told Meghan he was joking – maybe even flirting.

"Did you give me this apple just so that you could laugh triumphantly at my disgust?" Meghan tried to keep her own voice light. This was getting ridiculous. First he was Colonel Oblivious, then he was Bashful, and now he was Casanova. It simply was not fair to play with her like that. Still, she would rather have Legolas behaving erratically than no Legolas at all.

He took no notice of her question. "How is your hand?"

"Fine," Meghan said, wincing despite herself. It still stung, but at least she couldn't see it. Well, she could see it, except it was swathed in a brownish strip of cloth. "Where exactly did you get this fabric?"

"When one is faced with difficult times, it is wise to be prepared." Legolas paused briefly, then scanned the horizon. "I believe that King Théoden means to allow his subjects a rest for the midday meal."

Meghan froze, half of the apple already peeled. "You mean I don't have to eat this shrunken African head?"

For the first time since he walked over, Legolas leveled his clear blue eyes at her. "I suggest that you eat it despite its unsavory appearance. Food is somewhat scarce when so many are traveling together."

She fought down the urge to stick her tongue out at him. After all, he would probably laugh at her and walk away. Or stare disapprovingly, at that would be worse. "Fine," she huffed. "But I expect you to eat something just as ghastly whenever we stop."

And he actually had the nerve to laugh at her and walk away.

Ooo! Meghan seethed, boring a hole into his back as he lightly picked through the crowd to walk beside Aragorn. The audacity! She peeked around, then stuck her tongue out at him even though he wouldn't be able to see it and receive the full benefit of her wrath.

A little child's giggling interrupted her fuming. She swiveled around in her saddle, only to see little Freda riding in front of her brother, trying unsuccessfully to hide her laughter behind little chubby hands.

Meghan snapped back forward and clenched her teeth. Two in the space of as many minutes!

Despite herself, she noticed Legolas jogging away from Aragorn, who mounted and dropped back a few paces to ride beside Théoden. A split moment later, Gimli lost control of his horse and fell with a distinctly unpleasant thump. Meghan winced sympathetically, but Éowyn seemed to think it all a grand joke and laughed.

Meghan could use a laugh. She just needed to figure out how to steer this darned horse.
"Um," she said, trying to sound authoritative, "onward to the right, Pegasus."

She might as well been talking to a brick wall. Arod plodded just like always, and in a straight line.

"Use the reins," a youthful voice suggested from behind.

Oh yeah. Reins.

So much for her Vulcan mystique. "Thanks," she called over her shoulder before using the reins to turn Arod's head toward Éowyn and Gimli. By then, Gimli was back onto his feet, but staunchly refusing to remount the horse.

"You alright, Gimli?" Meghan asked, drawing level with the other two and sliding gawkily off of Arod's back.

"I am quite alright," Gimli said gruffly. "As I was just telling Éowyn, it was entirely intentional. I can keep my seat on a horse if I want to."

"Of course," Meghan nodded. "I never doubted otherwise." Éowyn gave her a wry look over the top of Gimli's head.

Meghan would have liked to start a conversation with Éowyn, but just then, Théoden proclaimed (and really, she couldn't think of it as anything but a proclamation) that they would halt for a brief luncheon. Éowyn dashed off as Théoden's words were fading in the air, and Meghan glanced at the shrively apple still in her hand. Shrugging, she fed it to Arod.

It was rather fun to watch everyone settle down for a meal, the way that even though they were facing a terrible, terrible battle (if Aragorn was right), they still helped each other and tried to keep a cheerful countenance. She had found herself a seat on a very handy rock, and Arod seemed content to stand beside her, although he occasionally put his head down to lip at the dry, brown grass.

After not too long, Legolas appeared again and handed her a bowl of a watery something that smelled exceedingly strange. Meghan wrinkled up her nose despite the fact that she was ravenous.

"Lady Éowyn prepared it," he said, settling down beside her with his own bowl of doom. "I claim no responsibility for the taste."

Meghan scrunched up her face again as she stared into the soupy stew. "Either that means it's insanely delicious and you are making sure you don't incorrectly get the credit, or this stuff is a complete waste of the ingredients."

"Ah…" Legolas searched for the appropriate words. "I will allow you to make that distinction." His face never changed in the slightest as he took a bite.

Meghan shifted the pale hunks of mystery around in the watery broth. It looked strange, but then again, chocolate looked like poo if you thought about it. She shrugged, and spooned some into her mouth.

"SALT!" she wheezed half a second later, frantically scraping her tongue with the spoon. "Haven't these people heard of salt?"

Legolas' tone was so meticulously calm that Meghan had half a mind to punch him just find out if he even knew how to shout. "Seasonings are even scarcer than food."
"This is…" Meghan wanted to say disgusting, revolting, sickening, nauseating, any other negative adjective, really, when she remembered that Éowyn had made it. Saying that the stew was gross seemed mean, especially when these people had so little. "This is…all right. Just think, no sodium. Perfect diet." A weak smile was all she managed before steeling herself for another bite, but there was an approving look in Legolas’ eyes.

The rest of their meal was eaten in silence, and not long after they finished, the Rohirrim packed up their meager things and resumed their trek. This time Meghan was determined to talk with Éowyn, if only because she was still the only woman that Meghan had so much as had one word from in two full weeks.

"Hi," Meghan greeted her.

"Good afternoon," Éowyn said. There was the faintest hint of curiosity about her, but none of the aloofness that she displayed earlier that morning.

"How are you?" Meghan asked.

"I am well. And you?" Éowyn replied.

This conversation was following every boring guideline in the history of small talk.

"I'm doing just great, thanks."

There was a brief lull in their dialogue before Éowyn broke it. "Meghan, this morning I was—" She paused, as if uncertain how to continue. "What I mean to say is that I should not have…" She could not quite meet Meghan's eyes.

"What's done is done," Meghan said, laying a hand on Éowyn's arm. "But I think you and I are going to be good friends." Éowyn's smile was warm, even if a little tentative.

"Your companion…" she began, trailing off with eyes that seemed thoughtful.

Meghan rushed to fill the gap. She didn't know what had changed Éowyn's mind in regards to an inter-species friendship, but she didn't care. Maybe just talking with Gimli had been enough. And Meghan wasn't about to let a potential friend slip away. "Which one? The pretty one, the hairy one, or the smelly one?"

Éowyn completely surprised Meghan by bursting into a few clear notes of laughter that lasted no longer than two or three little chuckles. "The man," she clarified.

"Oh yes, aside from being SCARRED FOR LIFE, I'm quite alright."
"Perhaps someday you shall tell me this story," Éowyn said. "Until then."

Meghan sighed and peered sideways at Arod, who seemed content to plod along without Éowyn's horse for company. "It's just you and me again, Pegasus," she said.

She thought that she could hear snarling, which seemed odd since she couldn't remember seeing very many dogs. She pushed the thought from her mind. It was probably just a wheel grinding on its axel. It seemed that these people not only had a striking lack of salt, but no oil, either.

But when she heard Legolas shout something angrily, and she knew something was wrong. Arod pricked his ears up and started dancing nervously on his little grey hooves.

Then everything fell into chaos.
Meghan would very much have liked to run around screaming with her hands thrown up in the air, but somehow she held herself together. She had already surrendered Arod to Gimli, while it seemed like every single male in the entire company ran in the general direction of Legolas' shout, waving a sword or a spear or a bow or something violent. Meanwhile, all the children were shrieking in terror and the women were not much better. Even the horses' eyes were rolling in fear.

Deciding that the situation was rapidly spiraling out of control, Meghan glanced around for Aragorn. He was not very far away, grabbing his horse and looking very prepared to dash off into that frenzy of carnage.

"Aragorn!" Meghan shouted as she tore over to him. He had already mounted by the time she reached him.

"Meghan, go with Lady Éowyn," he said quickly.

"But you said that I would be safe if I stayed with you and Legolas!" Meghan shouted. Fool man, changing his story on her at a time like this.

"Not this time," he replied. "Go with the Rohirrim to Helms Deep."

And with that, he wheeled his tomato sauce horse and galloped away.

It took an enormous effort of will for Meghan not to stamp her foot and rage at being left behind. That, and a flood of humanity rushing the opposite direction that Aragorn had ridden off in. Instead, she looked around and spotted Éowyn herding the masses together. Almost all the horses that had not been hitched to something were carrying men toward who knew what, and even Éowyn's mare was nowhere to be seen. Nevertheless, Éowyn seemed to be plenty in possession of herself and the situation.

The current of people carried Meghan along. Soon, as they all got farther and farther away from immediate danger, the panic gave way to subdued worry. People stopped running and instead gathered together in little groups, murmuring unhappily with one another. Meghan felt a little out of place, even though she was just as worried as any one else. It was just that she didn't have anyone to murmur with.

A gusty burst of wind swirled her hair into even more of a tangled mess, plus it tickled her nose and got stuck to her lip. She scrubbed it out of her face and, with a pitiful sigh, set to braiding her long mass of hair. Trying to comb it with her fingers only yanked the tangles. Once she finished the braid, she remembered that she didn't have anything to tie it off with. All her possessions were strapped to Arod's back.

It felt like hours, but Meghan knew by the position of the sun that it couldn't have taken very long for a large stone fortress to come into view over the crest of a hill. Many of the refugees began to
cry out in relief, thanking Éowyn even though it was likely that she couldn't hear most of them.

Meghan studied Helms Deep as they all walked a little faster toward it, some even running despite their bundles of possessions bouncing on their backs. The fortress was all a washed out grey, and it looked as though it had been there since the beginning of time.

*It probably has,* Meghan thought. The stone bridge that ran up to the gates felt especially hard under her sore feet, but she didn't mind a little hardness if it meant keeping Orcs and other nasties out.

Thoughts of Orcs inevitably brought back worries, and she felt her guts twisting the same way they did when she felt sick. Except this time she didn't feel like throwing up — she felt like crying.

*Stop it,* she told herself angrily. *He's alive, and that's that. You're going to be of no use to anyone if you keep expecting the worst. He's a million years old, he can take care of himself.* Still, she wanted him back just to be sure he was alright.

She'd been so absorbed in her thoughts that she started a little when she saw that there were many more fugitives in Helms Deep than had arrived with her. *They must have come from the countryside,* she decided. *Not all of the people in this kingdom would have lived in one city.*

Éowyn had disappeared, but she did see two familiar little children clinging fiercely to an older looking woman. It seemed that Freyda and Éothain had found their mother at last. Meghan pushed down her thoughts of Legolas, and picked her way through the crowd to reach them.

Freyda caught a glimpse of her and whispered something in her mother's ear, and by the time Meghan got to them, the woman had risen to her feet with a smile on her face.

"I understand you helped look after my two children, my Lady Elf," she said, reaching out to clasp Meghan's hand. "Thank you." There were tears standing out in her eyes, happy tears.

Meghan returned the smile, if a little sheepishly. "I really didn't do much. I think they helped me more than I helped them."

"All the same, I am grateful. My name is Idrys," the woman continued. "And you already know Freyda and Éothain."

"I'm Meghan. Not Lady, just plain Meghan." She simply did *not* need someone else calling her Lady.

"Just as you say, Lady Meghan," Idrys smiled.

Swallowing her irritation, Meghan tried to focus on the positive. "Is there anything I can do to help?"

"Oh, that would be wonderful," Idrys said, squeezing her fingers, which she still hadn't let go of. "There are so many children here, children who lost their families. I have tried to gather them together, and keep them safe."

Meghan perked up a bit. She liked kids, except when they laughed at her Vulcan persona. Maybe she wouldn't try that one with this group of kids. "I could watch them, if you like."

Idrys smiled again.

Not very long after that she was inside the Caves, sitting on an upended barrel. She was surrounded
by a ring of children ranging from three years old to twelve, and all of them dirty. Meghan didn't mind; she was probably every bit as grubby as they were. She had attention from most, mingled with a little bit of uncertainty about this strange new Elvish person who had suddenly joined them. A few were already fast asleep on the grimy stone floor, their heads pillowed by others' legs or arms.

"Once upon a time," Meghan began, trying to remember the classic opening to a fairy tale, "in a land far, far away, there lived a girl. Her name was Cinderella, and she lived with—" Normally she would have started back before Cinderella's father died, but she decided to skip that part. "She lived with her evil stepmother and two terrible stepsisters."

"What were their names?" a tiny little girl asked, her brown eyes far too huge for her face.

"Well, um," Meghan hedged. She never did remember the two stepsisters' names, let alone the mother's. "The stepsisters were named…uh… Ducky and Blottie!" A ripple of giggles rewarded her ad-libbing. "One day, as Cinderella was doing a bunch of chores for her evil stepmother, a royal messenger came to the house…"

As she spun the story out, the children grew more and more involved. Once she even had to stop and retell a part of the story so that a few of them could act it out. The crowd drew the attention of other children, sometimes mothers, and all of them smiled. Meghan felt her own tension melting away.

Only after Prince Charming and Cinderella rode away in their pumpkin-esque carriage – into the sunset of course – did Meghan notice Legolas watching them. She swallowed around her heart, which had suddenly gotten lodged in her throat. When had he gotten back?

Sparing a quick grin for the children, who were still regaling each other with reenactments of Cinderella's life, Meghan hurried over to him. "You're alright," she said.

He didn't smile. In fact, he looked angry enough to tear an Orc's head off with his bare hands, although it was all contained in that calm, composed exterior he had. "Aragorn fell," he said.

Meghan stared at him, and this time her heart started kicked at her ribs. "I—I don't understand."

"He was dragged over a cliff by a Warg."

"Warg?"

"The Orcs use them as mounts. They are very like wolves, only larger." His voice was patient, and he didn't look so angry anymore. Just tired and disheartened. She had spent so much time worrying for him, and here he was, uninjured.

"God, Aragorn's dead," she moaned internally. The thought didn't feel quite real. Aragorn was one of the strongest people she had ever met, and it felt so… anticlimactic. Meghan thought of Arwen, who Aragorn had talked of with such a quiet yet fierce devotion, and she wanted to cry again. But tears wouldn't come.

Legolas gently touched her arm. "You have worked hard to make these children happy again," he said, empathy burning in his eyes. "Do not spoil it."
Meghan sucked in a deep breath and nodded. They wanted normal, she could give them normal. "Can I borrow one of your knives?" she asked in a voice that managed to be steady.

Legolas eyed her hesitantly. "Lady Meghan, you would not…?"

"Oh, no!" Meghan almost wanted to laugh at him, except her she thought it might turn into tears before she could help it. "I'm not gonna commit suicide or become a cutter or something. I just need a blade for a minute, that's all."

With no little reluctance, he unsheathed one of his lovely, white-hilted long-knives and passed it to her. "I brought your things for you," he said, crouching for a brief moment to retrieve her pack and weaponry from the floor. It made a clumsy bundle, but she welcomed it all gratefully.

"Thanks," she said.

"It is my pleasure." He inclined his head in a small sort of bow, and headed back toward the outside.

Meghan made her own way toward Idrys. The woman had a smile for everyone, and Meghan wondered how Idrys managed it in the midst of so much loss. "Could you watch my things for me?" Meghan asked. "I have an errand to run, and then I think I'll find Éowyn and see if she needs me."

"Of course," Idrys said, accepting the bag.

Meghan buckled her sword around her waist and tucked the dagger into the belt. "Thanks," she replied.

"Thank you, Lady Meghan," Idrys said. "For your fable. You have a good voice for story-telling."

This time, Meghan was able to quirk a grin back at her before she left, heading for the outdoors so she could have better light. Even outside, she looked for a relatively secluded place. She found one soon, and she hefted Legolas' dagger, eying the blade. She'd cut her hair a few times before, but that had always been with scissors and stylists' razors. Still, it couldn't be too hard to use a knife.

Twenty minutes later found her sixteen inches lighter. Now her hair just brushed down to her collarbone in loose waves. It was still tangled, so she ran her fingers through it again.

Just then, she heard a commotion from the gates, which were not too far away from her. It sounded like a happy commotion, including a woman's voice crying, "He's alive!" above the general buzz of conversation.

Stuffing Legolas' dagger back into her belt, Meghan dashed toward the noise. The crowd was not so thick this time, and she burst through them just in time to see Gimli squeezing the life out of a very tattered Aragorn. Without a pause, Meghan launched herself onto Aragorn as well, hugging his shoulders above Gimli's arms.

"You're alive!" she screeched with joy.

"Bless you, laddie," Gimli agreed, grinning cheerfully.

Aragorn gently disengaged his body from both of them. "Gimli, where is the king?" he asked. The Dwarf nodded in a general leftward direction, and with a thump for Gimli's shoulder, Aragorn moved off that way.
Meghan trotted to keep up with his long legs. "How?" she asked, not quite able to stop grinning for some reason. It was like Christmas, except a gift wrapped like Aragorn would be rather gross.

There was an air about Aragorn: determined, but content at the same time. Content that he was alive, content to be among friends perhaps, but why determined? He spared her a slight smile without slowing his pace an inch. "I do not know myself, Meghan." Abruptly, he stopped walking, and lo and behold, there was Legolas.

"Le abdomen," he seemed to say, although Meghan suspected it was probably some of that strange language Legolas sometimes spoke in. He continued in regular speech. "You look terrible."

Meghan was about to interject about just exactly how rude that was until Aragorn actually chuckled a bit. She swallowed her words, surprised to see him laugh. She could probably count on two fingers how many times she had heard it.

Legolas gravely pressed a silvery necklace onto Aragorn's hands, and there seemed to be something very serious that passed in their eyes because Aragorn said something unfamiliar in a very somber tone. He fingered the necklace a moment, then clasped his fingers around it. "I must see the King," he said.

"He is further in the Keep," Legolas replied. Aragorn thumped him on the shoulder in a similar way to Gimli, bowed to Meghan, and strode away.

Legolas' eyes widened a bit when they fell on Meghan, as if it was the first time he had noticed her there. "Lady Meghan," he said after a moment. "That is not quite what I pictured you using my dagger for."

Meghan reached up to her newly shorn tresses, abruptly very self-conscious of them. She had forgotten until now, that moment in front of Moria as they waited for Gandalf to open the doors, how Legolas had said that she had beautiful hair. He must have seen hundreds or even thousands of heads of hair in his lifetime and he had said hers was beautiful. And now she had chopped it all off? What was she thinking?

"It's easier now," she managed to squeak. "Less fuss. It was getting tangled all the time."

Legolas nodded thoughtfully, still looking at her hair. "I am glad that you will not be troubled by it any longer," he said at last, before inclining his head and walking away.

Suddenly, Meghan wished that she had every last strand of long hair back on her head.
"Are you alright, Meghan?"

Meghan jerked at the sound of Éowyn's voice, and realized that she'd been staring into space ever since Legolas had walked away. *Great way to look like a lovelorn fangirl, Meghan. Good job.*

"I'm fine," she said, pulling up a smile for Éowyn, who was giving her a quizzical look. "Just thinking. Do you need help with anything?"

"No, but thank you. I believe that all the necessary preparations have been tended to. I trust that you saw Lord Aragorn was well…?"

"Yeah, I did," Meghan said, not quite able to keep a smile off her face. She noticed the faintest hint of pink on Éowyn's cheeks. "He was going to see—"

Just then, King Théoden himself appeared, followed by a gruff looking man that Meghan dimly remembered seeing earlier at Edoras.

"Ah, Éowyn," Théoden said. He looked distracted. "I wish for you to remain in the caves."

Éowyn's face froze for a moment, except for her mouth, which opened and shut once. "The caves?" she then asked coolly.

"Yes, the caves," Théoden repeated. "There is much to be done. I can trust you to keep order down there."

There was a brief stare-down between uncle and niece, and Meghan felt very forgotten. Which was quite alright with her, since the looks passing between Théoden and Éowyn were less than complimentary.

"I must go," Théoden said after a minute, obviously intent on mastering the situation before it ran out of control. "You will remain in the caves, Éowyn." With a quick look of apology, he and his second-in-command strode away.

Éowyn's fists clenched, then unclenched a few times before she whirled around and stalked off in the direction of the upper defenses. Meghan had no idea what she was planning on doing, but it seemed like the right thing to do was to follow. Plus, she had nothing better to do.

She found out soon enough. "My Lord! Aragorn!" Éowyn called as Aragorn, Legolas, and Gimli came into view through the throng of people. A foot soldier was herding the commonfolk ever downward, deeper into the fortress, but even over his shouts of direction and the general murmur, Meghan could hear Éowyn's soft dialogue with Aragorn.

"I am to be sent with the women into the caves," she began, sounding a little desperate. What exactly Éowyn hoped to accomplish by informing Aragorn of this fact, Meghan had no idea.
"That is an honorable charge," Aragorn replied. His eyes were patient, the same way that Legolas' were sometimes. Meghan pushed through the crowd to stand somewhere between Legolas and Gimli. Legolas glanced at her quickly, enough to say hello.

Meanwhile, Éowyn's voice was breaking a little. "To mind the children? To find food and bedding when the men return? What renown is there in that?"

"My lady, a time may come for valor without renown. Who then will your people look to in the last defense?"

"Let me stand at your side," Éowyn whispered.

The lightning bolt of realization struck Meghan. Éowyn is in love with Aragorn. The thought left her feeling forlorn. Aragorn was already in love with someone else. Somebody in this triangle was going to get hurt. And if she knew anything about Aragorn, he was faithful. It looked like Éowyn was in for some heartbreak.

"It is not in my power to command," Aragorn was saying.

"You do not command the others to stay!" Éowyn exclaimed. "They fight beside you because they would not parted from you. Because they love you." Éowyn blanched at her own words, and suddenly seemed abashed. "I'm sorry," she gasped, already hurrying away.

Meghan moved forward, about to follow, when she decided that Éowyn would probably want a little bit of privacy after that outburst. She sighed. This was one of those moments when Meghan missed the Hobbits the most.

"I believe that King Théoden is wise to send the women to the caves," Aragorn said. There was a bit of an apology in his eyes, but also a look that said he wouldn't put up with arguments. "Meghan, you should remain there, as well."

"That's cool with me," Meghan said, holding her hands up in surrender. "You guys know better than I do about how crappy I am in battles."

Gimli grunted approvingly. "I have not heard that expression before. It sounds appropriate."

"Perhaps it would be better if you went now," Legolas suggested. Meghan appreciated that it was a suggestion, not a command. "You have already established a relationship with the children, and your stories buoyed their spirits earlier."

"Fine, fine," Meghan sighed. "I get it. You guys want me to leave so that you can worry about more important things. Off I go."

She turned away with every intention of pushing gently through the crowds, back to Idrys and the kids, when Legolas caught her wrist.

"No, Lady Meghan," he said in a rich undertone for her ears alone, his intense eyes tripling the meaning in his voice, "Your safety is of the highest priority."

Meghan ruined the moment by hiccupping. It was the tiniest of hiccups, but it shattered the deliciously taut atmosphere between them nonetheless. Legolas cracked a faint smile and just said, "Go."

She went. In fact, if ever a girl floated on rosebud clouds, it was Meghan. Her safety, his highest priority. That tasted very, very good. Granted, her raptures were frequently interrupted by little
hiccups, but that did nothing to diminish the warm, fuzzy sensation that she hugged close to herself like a teddy bear.

Truth be told – Meghan's feet did not come back to earth that entire afternoon. She went through the motions while her heart sang various love songs, some from the 21st century and some of her own creation. It is fearful and wonderful what love does to otherwise rational women.

It was already well-past nightfall when she finally did drift down from her heavenly clouds of smitten glory. Actually, it was much more of a jolt back to reality than a drifting down. It was the sound of a horn being blown, a sweet, bold note that echoed through the Caves. The women and children began to whisper to each other, confusion and hope shining in their eyes.

"That does not sound like trumpet of a foe," one grey-haired woman near Meghan said. "If ever I heard magic, I just did."

Trying to look as though she knew what she was doing, Meghan got to her feet and hurried toward the gates, where she suspected everybody who was anybody important would be gathering.

Sure enough, when she got to the same gates that she had entered through that morning, she found a pretty large crowd of people, mostly dressed in armor. Legolas just had to be the exception though, with only some sort of shoulder guards that vaguely resembled football gear. Even Haldir had more armor than that–

"Haldir!" Meghan's voice came out in a ghosty little shriek. Instantly, all eyes were on her. She took the opportunity to hiccup. "Um… what are you doing here?"

He gave her the most mild-mannered look she had ever seen upon any face, and suddenly she realized that he had very little time for prying losers such as herself. "Elrond Peredhel sent us," Haldir said evenly, then turned his attention back to Aragorn and the rest. Everybody else went back to ignoring her, too, which was fine with Meghan.

Meanwhile, her mind was sprinting a million miles a minute. Why, oh why couldn't she have said something that would have cleverly tricked Haldir into going back home so that she wouldn't have to bother with saving him? He was a pest, and that was a fact.

Another hiccup only added to her frustration. Goodness only knew why she had been stricken with hiccups for almost four hours. Calculating another look at Haldir, she slipped back the way she had come. Oh, this is horrible, she thought to herself, curling into a ball against the rough stone walls of the Caves. There's a terrible battle about to take place and if I don't help Haldir, my friend is going to die of a broken heart. Stupid Elves and their sentimentality. He's not even all that nice to begin with. Lalaith should go find somebody better and move on with her life. If only I could just sleep until this is all over with…

Wait a minute. Sleep.

And just like that, Meghan's whiny bellyaching dissipated in a lightbulbish burst of joy. Of course. Why didn't I think of that before? Sometimes, Meghan Whimblesby, you are a genius. A belated genius. And she began to lay her plans.

Not forty minutes later and she was trotting about the hallways, searching for Haldir. She had heard from some of the guards that he and the other leaders had just gotten out of a brief war council, and he was heading toward the ramparts to stand with his warriors.

If only, oh if only the local deities favored her, Meghan would find him alone.
She was beginning to get worried when all of a sudden, he appeared around the corner. "Haldir!" she called in as an authoritative voice as she could muster. He paused, deigning to level a cool look at her. Deities be praised, no one was with him.

"This is not the appropriate time to make conversation, Meghan," he said in a voice that very thinly masked his irritation.

"Oh no, I'm not here to chit chat," Meghan said, waving her hand dismissively. "I came to tell you that Théoden needs you. Um. Back there, I mean. He thought of something new for the battle plan and wanted to consult with you." That part of the plan had been a bit hazy, and so she'd had to wing it. She didn't even know if there was a battle plan.

But he seemed to be buying into it, although with a healthy dose of skepticism. "The King went to the parapet," he said with a quirked brow.

Meghan nodded, trying to look convincing. "He started going there until he had an idea, so he headed back. On his way here he came across me and asked me to find you. Will you come?"

She could see him weighing it in his mind, deciding whether she was telling the truth or not. She had to restrain a sigh of relief when he finally nodded in assent. "Where is he?"

"This way," Meghan said. He followed her through the winding corridors, until soon they reached a largish chamber, one that Meghan hoped might serve as a supposed war room. Of course, it was empty, but Haldir didn't need to know that she was setting him up.

"Where is the King?" he demanded as soon as he set foot in the room.

"On his way, I'm sure," Meghan said. "He had to check something further in the Keep before he came here. Busy man, that."

"Perhaps I should go to find him," Haldir said, turning back toward the door.

"No!" Meghan gasped, then schooled her face to calmness when he gave her a strange look. "That would be very confusing. What if he came back here and you were still out looking for him?"

"I see your point." Haldir looked ready to vomit at the notion of agreeing with her. "I will remain here for a time. If he does not arrive shortly, however, I will return to the walls."

"Meanwhile," Meghan said, going over to a smallish stand, whereupon sat her hard-earned teapot. She had been forced to trade one of the two dresses she had kept from Lothlórien in order to get that teapot and set of cups. Doing everything in her power to act natural, she poured a stream of steaming, delicious liquid into one of the cups.

"Would you care for a cup of tea, Haldir?"
Meghan stifled a groan by changing it into something more like a grunt. Who would have guessed that a willowy Elf would weigh this much? *Pah. Willowy. More like brawny man.* She dropped Haldir's shoulders and rested her palms on her knees, leaning on them. This was *killing* her back. If she had actually thought about it, she would have baited Haldir closer to her destination. While he was still awake, that is. Dragging him was just too much work.

Oh well, she was almost there anyway. She bent down and hooked her elbows underneath his arms, heaving away. She only got about three feet before she had to rest again. This time, she squatted down and puffed a few times in an attempt to coax more oxygen in her lungs.

"Meghan?"

Had that voice belonged to a man, Meghan would have started running and never looked back. As it was, she stood and turned around with a cringe.

"Oh hey there Éowyn," she said as she offered an awkward smile.

The blonde looked rather shaken at the sight of one Elf dragging another through a deserted hallway. "Is Lord Haldir well?" she managed to say.

"Oh, he's great," Meghan nodded, glancing back at the stationary Marchwarden. "He just, um, fainted."

"Fainted," Éowyn echoed weakly.

"Yeah." Meghan paused, then her resolve crumpled. "Oh Éowyn, it's all my fault, but it's not really my fault because I'm trying to help, you see, and oh, it's just so ridiculous..." She poured out the whole story, leaving out that she was from the future and fudging most of the foresight stuff by saying that she had had a "vision" – courtesy of another one of Andrea's many fanfics. It all came out in a rambling, apologetic style that probably left Éowyn more confused than enlightened.

"So you rendered him unconscious...with tea?" she said.

"Yes," Meghan nodded.

Éowyn's face went through several transformations, from displeasure to worry to resignation, all in the space of a few seconds. "The Elves," she said, "they will not leave?"

"I don't think so," Meghan said. "Aragorn's as good a leader as Haldir. They probably won't even notice he's gone."

"Why him?" Éowyn's voice had gone a bit hoarse. "Why must you save only *him*?"

"He's the only one I can save," Meghan replied. "And I need to hide him now. Can you imagine..."
what would happen if someone found me like this?"

The blonde nodded, and gestured with her hand. "There is a storeroom a little way on," she said. "Let me help you."

Together, they hefted Haldir the rest of the way, his bulk much more manageable between two women instead of one. Once they got him relatively concealed behind several barrels and sacks of grain, Éowyn straightened her skirts and gave Meghan a questioning look.

"What do you wish to do with him now?" she asked.

"I have to stay here, I think," Meghan said. "What if he wakes up? Or somebody finds him?"

"Very well. I would remain with you if I could. I fear that I would be missed, so I will return to the Caves." Éowyn offered her a companionable, if somewhat weak, smile. "Perhaps they will assume you are fighting outside."

"I am sorry, Éowyn," Meghan said quickly. She didn't really know where this was coming from, but it felt like it needed to be said. "About you being left behind. I think you're one of the bravest people I've ever met."

This time, Éowyn favored her with a grin. "I will send someone for you when the battle is won." Her steps were a little lighter than they had been earlier as she slipped out the door.

Alone again, Meghan directed a sour glare at Haldir. He had not gone down easily. First, he had rejected the tea to begin with. A couple of minutes later, after she had annoyed him relentlessly about it, he had drunk the entire cup in a single gulp just to shut her up. Then he had managed to walk almost the entire way back to the outside before finally crumbling into a heap of unconsciousness.

Which had, of course, forced Meghan to drag him the rest of the way.

Stupid Elf.

To pass the time, she meticulously inspected every square inch of her light sword. Truth be told, she had no idea what she might be looking for or what to do if she found anything amiss, but it did help the minutes slide away.

Just as she was contemplating the braided leather cording that covered the handgrip, Meghan heard several distinctly metallic clangs followed by a thump. The sounds were distant enough to be eerily distorted by the caves' acoustics, but close enough to make Meghan stiffen. Whatever was out there, that had been a martial clatter.

Gripping her sword with white knuckles, Meghan crept over to the door and put her ear to the heavy wood. All she could hear was the normal woody sounds a thick door makes.

She didn't know how long it took for her to twist up the courage, but she finally lifted the latch on the door and poked her head out, fully prepared the slam it closed again in the event of a slavering monster roaming loose in the halls.

But all she saw was the slim form of Éowyn, holding a sword limply in her fist and staring at the crumpled body of an Orc.

"Éowyn!" Meghan choked hoarsely as she crept over to the blonde Rohirrim maiden and shoved her sword back into the scabbard. "You scared the willies out of me."
Éowyn snapped out of whatever reverie she had been in and faced Meghan with determined, if slightly feverish, eyes. "I was coming to check on you. It seemed foolish to leave you alone, so isolated from anyone. I found this skulking beast. It was well that I had a blade."

For the first time since coming out of the storeroom, Meghan got a good look at the Orc. Éowyn had used that sword – took the demon-spawn's head right off. The familiar taste of bile rose in Meghan's throat and she squinched her face up to block out the sight.

"What is with this place?!” she whined. "Every third day and somebody gets hacked up!"

She couldn't see anything, but she could tell that Éowyn's eyes were hurt. "It is the nature of warfare," the blonde said softly, dangerously. "I would gladly slay as many of these filth as necessary to defend my people."

"I'm sorry," Meghan said, sticking out a hand blindly. "You already know I talk faster than I think. It's just that, well, I get sick when I see blood."

Éowyn's cold hand filled Meghan's for a moment. "Then I am sorry, too," she said. "I hope you will see Rohan restored someday. My people do not love war."

"Where do you suppose it got in?"

"Pardon?"

"That Orc." Meghan waved in the general direction of the felled ogrish thing, because she still had her eyes closed and she wasn't about to open them just to pinpoint its exact location. "It didn't just walk through walls. It must have crept in somewhere." Strangely, the notion didn't scare her as much as it normally would. Maybe I'm getting braver, she thought.

Nah. It's probably not that.

"You are right. We should search for an entry it might have forced through." Éowyn sounded determined.

"Couldn't we just… call someone?" Meghan suggested.

"Who would come? Who could come?"

"True. Where should we start?"

"You cannot look if your eyes are closed."

"Seriously Éowyn, I'll just vomit right on the spot. I know from experience."

"May I ask something that is, to some extent… personal?"

"Fire away."

Éowyn didn't say anything.

"Um… I mean, yes, of course you may ask," Meghan amended.

"What do you do during your cycle?"

"Cycle?"
"Your cycle."

"Oh! You mean Uncle Tom! Aunt Flo! Monthly Monster! The Monthly Bane of Womanhood!" Meghan gesticulated wildly, still with her eyes closed. "Eh… it's complicated. We should be looking for other Orcs, yeah?"

"Yes. Come, I will guide you until the one I slew is out of sight." Éowyn grabbed Meghan's wrist and pulled her for what seemed like a very long while, but couldn't have been more than twenty feet. "You may open your eyes, now."

Meghan squinted open and found herself just around the bend in the hall. "Thanks. Where could something have gotten in?"

"You may wish to unsheathe your sword," Éowyn said in a firm tone.

The gravity of their situation suddenly hit Meghan as she drew the sword that she had been so meticulously staring at not twenty minutes before. So much for being braver, she sighed to herself, noticing that her hands were shaking.

They spent some time crept through the corridors, peeking around corners, startling at bumps in the night, but all to no avail. They found no crawly holes wherein an Orc could have slipped through, and they never stumbled on any foes.

"There are no other entries through which it could have come," Éowyn said at last. "I have heard that the smaller of the Orcish folk are more intelligent than their larger kin. Perhaps it forced through a door and bolted it behind, to seek out some cowardly victory in the bowels of our refuge?"

"Sure, that sounds about right," Meghan said, not completely sure about some of what Éowyn had just said but hoping to look Elvish and wise by agreeing with her.

"I have tarried long from my duties in the Caves," the blonde said. "And it would be best for you to return to the invalid Elf in your care."

Meghan appreciated that Éowyn didn't say, the Elf that you intentionally knocked out, which is – incidentally – really weird of you.

"You're right," she said. "However, I have no idea how to get back to where we were. Plus, I'd really appreciate it if you'd help me get back inside that door without seeing your casualty."

They threaded their way back, and Éowyn navigated Meghan around the Orc from earlier. Once Meghan was behind that oaken door again, she asked loudly so that Éowyn could hear her, "What should I do now?"

"Barricade it," Éowyn ordered at the same vocal level. "We cannot be certain that no more timorous beasts will not slither into the Keep."

Did she just say "timorous beasts"? For real?

She did as she was told, shoving barrels and big pallets of some sort of oaty thing in front of the door.

What followed was, perhaps, the worst unspecified amount of time in Meghan's life thus far. She was alone with a comatose Elf with the distinct possibility of untold nasties roaming about the halls outside. She began to imagine the likelihood that the Orc that Éowyn had so efficiently
beheaded was not dead after all, but was merely bluffing until they were lulled into complacency, at which time it would spring to life (head and all) and kill them.

And they never had found where it had gotten through. Suppose another found its way in through that same elusive door? Suppose a whole regiment? Did Orcs even have regiments? Well, suppose a whole group? They could break down her barricade in a matter of minutes. They probably would kill her slowly, using lots of sharp objects and hot metallic devices.

With these reflections to soothe her soul, it is understandable that Meghan leapt some three feet into the air when Haldir sighed softly and turned his head.

Heart pounding, she took a moment to regulate her breathing and peer at Haldir. He exhibited no further signs of life for a moment, until he turned his head again.

He’s waking up. The thought had never come to her. It had taken her two days to come around – but then again, she had eaten some of the leaves. Should she just let him wake up? He would be more than able to dispatch of any predators that might be prowling about. On the other hand, she would never be able to contain him in that room unless she tied him up, which would defeat the purpose of him being awake. Plus, she would have to listen to his angry ranting at the injustice of her saving his life.

She was just settling on keeping him asleep when it occurred to her that she couldn't exactly brew more tea and force it down his throat.

"I am very sorry for this, Haldir," she said seriously. "Honestly, though, I'm not doing any of this for you. I will not have that sweet woman die because you're too stupid to stay home when there's a war. So… Oh, here goes nothing!" And she clouted him across the head with the hilt of her sword.

Suddenly a very horrible thought entered her head. What if I KILLED him? she thought in a wretched moment of panic. Or gave him a concussion? Or damaged his brain and he'll be mentally retarded for the rest of his life? I don't even know how to check for that kind of thing!

She gingerly reached out a hand and placed her fingers on his neck, just under his jaw. Relief washed over her in huge, rolling waves when she felt a pulse beating underneath her fingertips. He's alive!

Just then, there came a great hammering upon the door, and Meghan gave herself up for dead.
"Unbar this door!" came an urgent voice from the other side. Meghan looked up in stricken terror from Haldir, who was once again safely comatose. The voice didn't sound Orcish at all, but then again, the door muffled everything enough that it could be a well-spoken monster.

"H—Hello?" she called out tentatively.

"Lady Meghan?" replied the voice.

"Yeah," she squeaked, realizing that it was Legolas. Of course, she thought wryly at the exact same time as her heart melted. Legolas would be the one to come and find me.

"There is something obstructing the door," he said.

"I know!" she trilled. "I'll move it. Éowyn told me to block the door in case anything happened." Moving quickly, she shoved all the barrels, crates, and sacks out of the way and lifted the latch on the door. It swung open to frame the most wonderful sight she had ever seen.

"Lady Éowyn said you were down here," her blonde savior said a little breathlessly.

He was dirty and sweaty and smelly and magnificent. His hair, though – well, suffice it to say that his hair never managed to look mussed. Ever. But the rest of him was smeared in grime and there was even a smudge on his forehead. Meghan had the absurd impulse to wipe it off.

"I saw the body outside the door," he continued, and this time his voice was steadier. "Is all well?"

"Yeah," she said faintly again. "Éowyn killed it. We didn't find any others."

"Have you been waiting down here the entire night?"

"You… you could say that," Meghan stalled. "Is everybody okay? I mean, did we win?"

"Yes, all are well, and the Uruk-hai been destroyed. Gandalf has returned, with Éomer."

Meghan couldn't help but make a face. "I don't think Éomer likes me very much."

"Perhaps you will have an opportunity to retrieve his good opinion," Legolas suggested with the faintest hint of a smile. Suddenly, his expression changed. "What is that?" he asked, staring passed her.

Meghan followed his line of vision over to Haldir's boot, which was unfortunately sticking out from behind the barrels she had tried to hide him behind.

It struck Meghan just exactly how bizarre her situation appeared.

"I drugged him," she burst out, because she really didn't want Legolas jumping to conclusions.
about her being linked to Haldir in any more than a vague acquaintance sort of way. Granted, being locked up in a room with him while he was unconscious probably didn't help that particular train of thought.

There was an unpredictable glint in Legolas' eyes. "I beg your pardon?"

"I drugged him?" Meghan whispered. "With the tea that Galadriel gave to me?"

She was saved from any further confessions by the sound of several hurrying pairs of feet, and soon Éowyn, Aragorn, and Gimli burst onto the scene. Well, Éowyn and Aragorn burst in. Gimli huffed along a few moments after them.

"You look ill, Meghan," Éowyn said in a voice that said she had expected Meghan to be dancing jigs of delight. "Is all well?"

"No," Legolas said in a velvety calm tone. "All is not well. Lady Meghan has impaired Lothlórien's Marchwarden."

"Oh," Éowyn said with much more understanding.

"What do you mean, Legolas?" Aragorn asked.

At that very moment, Gandalf appeared. "Ah, Aragorn. We are preparing to—Melethriel?"

"Hi Gandalf," Meghan waved weakly.

"What are all of you doing down here?" the wizard demanded. "Is something wrong? What has happened?"

Meghan had that sinking sort of feeling, similar to when you have stomach bug and decide that a rollercoaster might be fun, anyway.

"She wanted to help," Éowyn piped in, much to Meghan's surprise. "There was no harm intended."

"What does this mean?" Gandalf asked with a confused and slightly irritated look on his bearded face.

"Is all well?" Aragorn asked again.

Someday, someone is going to say something ungrammatical, Meghan thought in despair. She tried to speak, but the words expanded in her throat and wouldn't come out.

"Has something happened?" Gandalf continued.

Meghan shot Legolas a pleading look, but he didn't make eye-contact with her, and instead calmly said,

"Lady Meghan has used the tea given to her by the Lady Galadriel to cause the Marchwarden to be incapacitated."

"Is this true, Melethriel?" the wizard said, his expression a mixture of incredulous disbelief and thunderous disapproval. Meghan could practically hear him thinking, I didn’t know she had the guts to do something like that. What an idiotic way to go. Except, he would have said it much better than that.

"Yes," Meghan only just managed to squeak.
"And why have you done this?" Gandalf pressed.

"Because…" Meghan started.

"Because he would have died if she had not taken action," Éowyn said. "She preserved his life."

"At what cost?" Aragorn said, a look of deliberation on his face. "All of the Elves were slain but one – Haldir."

"They would have all died anyway," Meghan said, then bit her lip. "Actually, I'm not sure about that. Maybe some of them would have lived."

Gimli's gruff voice drew her eyes downward. "How did you know the Marchwarden would die?" he asked.

"A vision," Meghan said, once again mentally thanking Andrea for all those silly fanfics. "I had a vision."

"Even so," Aragorn said after a pause, "your actions have rippled outward. There are consequences, of which Haldir will bear the heavier load than you."

There was another pause – longer this time. Everyone seemed to be waiting for a lightning bolt to strike Meghan, while Meghan herself was waiting for all of them to start yelling at once. And then she heard a very surprising sound; a sound that she had briefly wondered if she would ever hear again.

Laughter.

"Oh Melethriel," Gandalf chuckled amidst startled looks from those present, "in the absence of the Hobbits, you still manage to create the most marvelous state of affairs."

"Um...thank you?" Meghan said.

"I think, Melethriel, that you have done no harm," Gandalf said. "However, you have wronged Haldir. Perhaps you should be the one to explain what has occurred to him when he... recovers."

Meghan carefully swallowed around the huge lump of horror that rose in her throat. "Yeah."

"Come, Aragorn," Gandalf said, turned his attention away from Meghan. "The King awaits us. There is much to discuss."

They all began to file away. The look that Legolas shot Meghan was so packed that she would have very much liked to grab him and demand answers, but she wasn't about to tackle him in front of so many people. Was he angry? Disapproving? Disappointed? Disgusted? Amused? She couldn’t decide which was worse. And she certainly hadn't realized that this would was going to be such a big deal. She had simply acted, trying to help Lalaith. Perhaps it was a foolish, impulsive thing to do, but didn't saving two lives count for something? Why was Legolas so upset? Was he upset?

Éowyn's hand on her arm brought Meghan back to the situation at hand.

"I have partaken in this," the blonde said seriously. "I will help you explain to the Marchwarden for Lothlorien. Perhaps he will not be so angry if we can convince him that it was meant for his good."

"Thanks, Éowyn," Meghan murmured. "You're a good friend. I'm not gonna lie, I appreciate the
They waited in silence for what seemed like hours, but couldn't have been more than three-quarters of one, before Haldir showed any definite signs of life. First he snorted (or as close as and Elf can get to a snort), then he sighed, then he rolled half over.

"Éowyn," Meghan began, "before we die of furious Elf homicide, I just want to say that I'm very glad that I met you."

"Meghan," Éowyn said with a look of consternation, "surely it is not so bad as that."

"You haven't met Haldir. He's... he's... oh, you'll find out."

Éowyn didn't have a chance to reply, because at that very moment, Haldir groggily blinked his eyes open.

"Meghan?" he asked, scrambling to his feet. "What has happened? Has the battle begun?"

"It's over," Meghan said as calmly as she could manage. "I drugged you with Galadriel's tea. You missed the whole thing."

"What?" Haldir managed to roll horrified, disgusted, furious, and disappointed all into one syllable.

"I..." Meghan waved her hands as if wiping that thought away, and started afresh. "You love Lalaith, yeah?"

"Of course," Haldir said. While he didn't visibly soften, his voice lightened a little. "How does that relate to this?"

"I know for sure that she loves you, too. She gets that lovey-dovey look in her eyes that I probably get when—" she trailed off. "Um, never mind. The point is, Lalaith's lost a lot of people who are dear to her. She told me that you're pretty much the only one that she has left."

"I fail to understand how a discussion of my wife's troubles is relevant," Haldir said. Obviously he was getting tired of what seemed like a distraction.

"You would have died," Meghan said simply.

Haldir glared at her, saying nothing for a moment. "And so you circumvented the will of the Valar?" he said at last.

Meghan blinked. She hadn't quite expected him to ask that. *How do you know that?* maybe, or perhaps *My god, you're good*, but not that. *Had* she irrevocably twisted some sort of fate? Would it be like on *Lost*? No matter how many times Desmond saved Charlie, he still had to die?

*No,* she thought, shaking the idea away. *That's ridiculous. Besides, I'm not about to start saying "Bruthah."*

"I... guess so?" she fudged.

"How did you gain this knowledge?" Haldir continued, getting more agitated by the moment.

"I was blessed with a vision," Meghan said, much more confidently this time. "So I guess I wasn't really circumventing the... uh... Valar's will!"

"A vision," Haldir repeated skeptically. "From the Valar?"
"Yes."

"And they told you to drug me, and drag me into a storeroom?" Haldir's voice rose in pitch as the sentence progressed.

"Erm... no."

"Could you not simply have warned me?"

"My Lord Elf," Éowyn interceded. "Would you have listened? Would Meghan have been able to persuade you to stand out of a battle? I, myself, would have been unconvinced, had I been in your place."

"Good maiden, you will pardon me if I exclude you from this discussion, for I am certain you were not involved," Haldir said, tight politeness barely masking his anger.

Meghan could have sworn Éowyn's face flushed briefly. "That is untrue," the blonde blurted out in a slightly strangled voice. "I came upon Meghan shortly after you fell, and I assisted her from that point on."

Haldir's demeanor changed entirely. It shifted to the attitude of someone whose entire world has been upturned, such as when you first discover what hot dogs are really made of, or that your favorite love song was written about a pickle. "This is madness," he said.

"So maybe I went about it the wrong way, but it was meant in the best possible way," Meghan said.

"If I hadn't given you the tea you would have been killed and Lalaith would have died shortly after she found out."

"What of my troops?" Haldir asked, his voice low.

"They were all slain," Éowyn murmured. "Many men died upon the battlements last night."

"What of their families?" Haldir said. "Why should my life be more valuable than theirs? Three hundred Elves!"

"I couldn't save all of them!" Meghan said, her tone rising to match his. "Do you really think I could have inconspicuously pulled off a tea party for your whole army? Yeah, I can see that going over really well."

"Do not disrespect with sarcasm those who have given their lives in your defense!" Haldir practically snarled.

"I just saved your life, and you haven't even acknowledged it!" Meghan screeched in return.

"And you clearly do not understand that by saving my life, you condemned the lives of others!" Haldir fired back.

Meghan suddenly felt as though a bucket of ice water had been dumped on her. She opened and closed her mouth, trying to push the words off her tongue, but nothing would come.

"What has been done is done," Éowyn said before Meghan could recover. "Arguing the point will accomplish nothing. Perhaps it would be for the best if we returned to the Keep."

Haldir glared at both of them, and swept imperiously out of the room. Éowyn and Meghan waited a few beats until they were sure he was gone, then they traded glances.
"I understand now what you spoke of earlier," Éowyn said. "The Marchwarden is... is... is..." She left the sentence dangling. "Come. You should rejoin your companions."

"Yeah," Meghan said a little hoarsely. Truth be told, she didn't exactly want to face them again. Still, she followed Éowyn through the winding corridors, out into the morning sunshine. Fortunately they emerged at a place where there had been little fighting, so there were no mangled corpses for Meghan to contend with.

"I've got to find Idrys and the kids," Meghan said hurriedly, mostly just wanting to get away for a few minutes.

Éowyn studied her for a brief moment. "I believe that the women and children are still in the Caves. Do you know the way back?"

"I can find it. Thank you, Éowyn. I really appreciate... well, everything."

The blonde smiled faintly. "It is good that you came here, I think."

_Sometimes, I'm not so sure_, Meghan sighed internally as she gave her a half-hearted grin and began to walk back into the shadowy recesses of the Keep. _Was Haldir right? Did I just passively kill people just to make myself feel better? Because I didn't want to be hurt, knowing Lalaith would die?_

The gloominess of the Caves' interior only served to darken her mood more. _Haldir was right. There are other wives out there who are going to die because Haldir didn't. Is that a fair trade? Since when do I get to decide who lives and who dies? Oh, badly done, Meghan!_

Still buried in this dismal load of guilt and self-reproach, Meghan came round a corner and bumped smack into Legolas. He opened his mouth to say something.

Meghan burst into tears.
Meghan didn't know why she was crying.

She didn't regret saving Haldir and Lalaith. And really, no one's reaction had been too harsh. (Éomer hadn't heard yet, though. She suspected he would either frown contemptuously or laugh contemptuously.) The only person who had really yelled at her was Haldir, and he'd had the right. Plus, he'd let up pretty quickly and settled for death glares.

*Maybe I'm crying because of stress?* her analytical, logical half reasoned while her other half clung to Legolas' tunic and sobbed. *Maybe I finally cracked. I mean, I think I've handled all this pretty well so far, but a person can only take so much. Maybe I'm going crazy.*

As her tears subsided, Meghan began to realize that Legolas had absolutely no experience with crying females. He was still as a stone with his hands cupped under her elbows, as if he was ready to catch her in case she tried to collapse into a puddle of tears on the floor. The mental image made Meghan giggle just a little, but it came out as more of a strangled hiccup.

"Meghan?" Legolas asked very, very tentatively.

"I'm sorry," she replied in a thick voice. "I didn't mean to bawl all over you like that."

She unexpectedly decided that it felt very natural, being in Legolas' arms like this. But as soon as she realized it, the comfortable feeling vanished and she felt like an intruder. Backing away, she hiccupped again and avoided his eyes.

"No, Meghan, I am sorry," Legolas said. "I should not have judged you so severely before. You made a bold decision, and while I am not certain that I agree with you, it was a brave thing that you did. Your compassion for Lady Lalaith is… heartwarming."

Meghan considering crying again. *Bold? Heartwarming? That could be describing a dog! Was that all he had to say? Where was the part where he dramatically swept her into his embrace and professed his undying love?*

*Okay, maybe that's a little too far, she thought sourly. It's more like profess his undying toleration.*

"I have to go," she said, mainly because screaming was beginning to look like a very attractive option. "Right now."

Legolas looked confused.

"I have to pee," Meghan growled, "so don't you dare follow me. My cousin had a stalker once, and she taught me self-defense. If I catch you creeping after me, I'll—I'll—" she couldn't think of anything suitably horrid, so she settled for the classic, "I'll scream!"

With that, she stalked away.
She briefly hoped he would follow, just so she could light into him more thoroughly this time. Heartwarming? She'd show him heartwarming. She'd turn him into ashes if he so much as took the slightest step to come after her.

But he didn't. She didn't get the satisfaction of seeing his face as she stormed off, either. So she stomped in the direction of the Caves, hoping to find Idrys.

The Caves were in a flurry of activity. There was a palpable change in the atmosphere this time; the tense misery had given over to quiet relief. Nearly everyone had lost someone in the battle, so there was an air of mourning, as well.

Meghan spotted Idrys busily tying up several bundles amidst the hustle and bustle, and she made a straight beeline toward her.

"Good morrow, Lady Meghan," Idrys greeted her brightly before noticing Meghan's glower. "Are you well?"

"I'm fine," Meghan hissed. She caught her own tone in her ears and winced. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't take out my frustration on you."

Idrys was a woman. She immediately picked up the thread that Meghan had dangled in front of her. "Oh? What has a pretty girl like you so frustrated?"

Meghan screwed up her face in disgust. "I'm heartwarming."

"That does not sound so bad."

"Oh Idrys," Meghan whined, sitting down and folding her legs up under her. "You don't understand."

"Help me understand," Idrys suggested companionably.

Meghan chewed on her thoughts for a moment. It had seemed like such a big deal, two minutes ago. But putting the situation into words made her offenses shrink to a more reasonable proportion. After all, she already knew that Legolas didn't always say the right thing at the right time.

The older woman sagely interpreted Meghan's silence. "I would lay a wager your troubles are related to that Elf warrior," she said.

"Yes," Meghan sighed. It felt like a twenty pound sack had lifted off of her – actually confessing that she had boy problems. Elvish boy problems. "I don't know where exactly we stand. Are we friends? Are we flirting in a weird, roundabout way? Does he even have any inkling that I'm interested? Is it wrong for me to be interested? I'm so much younger than he is. It's like cradle-robbing on an epic scale. But then, sometimes he gives me this look, and it's like he wants to bottle me up and keep me forever, but he never says anything, or does anything, and I have to wonder if he's actually just giving me a weird look because I have a booger hanging out of my nose or something. And there's that whole Lady Meghan thing——"

Like a peaceful blanket of clairvoyance, Meghan's thoughts finally registered Legolas' words from five minutes before.

Meghan. He called me Meghan.

She went very still, the realization still dawning across her brain. She racked her memory for what he had said about the policy for prefixing a name with "Lady." Express proper respect. Only close
friends. – I hope someday you'll just call me Meghan. She surprised herself, how perfect her recall was. Their conversation had been so long ago, in the bowels of Moria.

"...Lady Meghan?" Idrys prompted.

"Idrys," Meghan said in a steady voice, "I have been rather hasty."

"Oh?" the older woman looked interested.

"...And I definitely need to go," Meghan decided. "Definitely. Right now."

Idrys' face was approving. "That is the first piece of sense you have spoken since you came."

"Thanks," Meghan said. She wasn't patient enough to decipher whether that was a compliment or not. Close friends. I can handle that, for now. At least it means we're on good terms. Unless my little "stalker" outburst killed that. A sense of urgency spread across her and she darted an apologetic look at Idrys. "Thanks for listening," she said right before taking off at a run toward the entrance. Apparently her reputation for knocking people out and dragging them into secluded storerooms was spreading ahead of her, because the crowd parted to make a passageway for her.

She burst out into the open air, and instead of being surrounded by blonde women, she was surrounded by blond men. They were sparser out here, and most of them were warriors striding determinedly in one direction or another. And they were all blond. Still, only one head in that crowd could have golden tresses that glorious. He was walking away from her, toward the gate.

The men did not respond the same way to a running woman. They did not make room for her. They just gave her weird glances as she wove and pushed past them. She didn't care. She just wanted them to move so she could get to Legolas faster.

Finally, after mazing her way to him, she stumbled up behind Legolas. He turned with a rather unreadable expression on his face, except for the quirk of his eyebrow that betrayed his uncertainty.

"Don't say anything," Meghan gasped between huffs and puffs. "Lemme talk first." She drew in several deep gulps of air, trying to regain her breath. "I'm sorry, Legolas, for yelling back there. You were being so nice and I kinda blew up in your face. I think you're right – I'm immature and reckless and I don't think things through well enough. My mouth runs faster than my brain. So... um... yeah. Sorry, again."

"Meghan..."

She didn't even bother suppressing the euphoric butterflies that exploded in her stomach when he didn't include the "Lady."

"...You are forgiven." There was something of a smile around Legolas' mouth; a soft smile that Meghan very possibly could have stared at for hours on end.

"So... friends?" she asked, sticking out her hand.

He turned her hand over and calmly pressed a kiss onto the inside of her wrist, his breath thrilling along her skin. Meghan struggled to keep her jaw connected to her face. She had certainly been kissed before, but this was very possibly the kinkiest thing a man had ever done to her, despite the simplicity of his actions. Goosebumps skittered up her arms. She was suddenly very aware that Legolas was a man and she was a woman.
And then he just walked away.

It could have been just five minutes that Meghan stood there. It could have been five hours. She wasn't really sure. She could have continued to stand there for five hours more if Éowyn hadn't appeared, looking concerned.

"Meghan? Is something amiss?"

"I think Legolas just tried to seduce me," Meghan said in a faint, dreamy voice.

Éowyn's eyes bugged out in a most unbecoming manner. "I– I beg your pardon?" she choked.

"Forget I said that," Meghan replied as a hot flush spread across her face.

Éowyn looked slightly scarred, but she plowed away with the conversation, nonetheless. "My uncle and your companions are preparing to depart. I thought that perhaps you would wish to bid them farewell."

"Where are they going?" Meghan demanded, a chill creeping into her bones.

"Isengard," Éowyn said somberly.

"Are we talking farewell forever or just farewell for a day or two?"

"Gandalf is optimistic. The arrival of the… Huorns--" the way Éowyn tripped over the word told Meghan that she wasn't exactly sure if it was right, "-buoyed his spirits considerably."

"What are Huorns?" The name tasted strange in Meghan's mouth, too.

"I am not certain, but I believe that they are the ancient tree-shepherds from our lore."

"Tree… shepherds?" Meghan repeated. "Like hippies?"

"Is that the Elvish name for them?" Éowyn asked.

"N-no," Meghan stuttered. "I'm not sure we're even talking about the same thing. But why do I have to say goodbye? Why can't I just go with them?"

"In light of your recent activities," Éowyn began carefully, "perhaps it would be best if you volunteered to remain behind."

"You wanted to go, too," Meghan said with sudden understanding. Éowyn didn't say anything, but her eyes did all the talking. "I'm sorry, Éowyn. I've been very selfish. We'll stay behind together."

She offered the blonde a smile.

"There is much yet to be done," Éowyn said, a glimmer of camaraderie in her eyes. "The citizens of Edoras make for the city soon. We must help prepare to leave."

Meghan couldn't help but grimace. "Ugh. Edoras is pretty fly, but the whole walking thing has got to go."

"I often wonder if we are speaking the same language," Éowyn sighed. "Perhaps when you learned the Common Tongue, your teachers were playing tricks on you."

"You're probably right," Meghan laughed, thinking of her English teachers in high school. "Come on. What exactly do we need to be doing?"
"Do you not wish to say farewell to your companions?" Éowyn asked.

Meghan hesitated. After her last encounter with Legolas, she was pretty sure that their relationship was progressing in a new direction. And, I mean, rules of flirting seem to imply I ought to back off or whatever, she thought. Why didn't I date more in high school! I should have all this figured out by now. But noo, Meghan wanted to focus on her academics... Idiot.

"No," she said after a second. "They'll be fine. I'll see them soon. They're probably sick of me right now, anyway." I hope not.

Éowyn nodded. "Come, then. We can begin in the storerooms."

The next two or three hours were spent companionably. Éowyn did most of the work, with Meghan tagging along and pitching in wherever she knew enough to be of any use. They supervised the food distribution between those returning to Edoras and those traveling back to their homes in the countryside; they organized those remaining at Helms Deep who would repair some of the damages; they inspected the few packhorses that would draw carts of supplies and people back to Edoras – and many more mundane tasks.

"Whew," Meghan said once they had finally collected everyone and everything and were beginning the arduous walk to Edoras. "This is crazy. I never knew how much went into taking care of a city. You're a beast."

"A… beast?" Éowyn's face squinched up in disgust.

"Oh, no no! It's a good thing. Er… like, you're so good, you pwn whatever you do like a beast…" Meghan trailed away. "I'm not explaining this well."

"No," Éowyn agreed.

"Um… what I meant was that you're really good at what you do," Meghan said. "Ugh. You were right. My teachers were laughing up their sleeves."

The blonde cracked a faint smile. "I must speak with Fastred about making provisions for the refugees once we reach Edoras. Will you excuse me?"

"Of course," Meghan said. Éowyn smiled faintly and veered off to the left, heading toward one of the few armed men in the crowd.

Meghan sighed and wondered just exactly what Legolas was doing at that moment. Probably riding. Although, she had no idea how long it would take to reach Isengard. Maybe he and the rest of them were already there. She tried to imagine what he would do, only to realize that no one had told her why they were going to Isengard. She grimaced.

Good job, Meghan. You were so focused on the fact that he kissed your hand that you forgot to ask for details about a possibly deadly situation that he's walking into. Although, that was one heck of a kiss—

Oh good grief. He just kissed your hand and you're daydreaming about it? This is pathetic. What are you going to do when he actually kisses you for real—

With a physical effort, Meghan dragged her thoughts away from that very appealing rabbit trail. She could not afford to get distracted by something that hadn't evenhappened yet.

Hurry back to me, Legolas.
In Which Meghan Displays Poor Judgment

Chapter Notes

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"And then Westley said to Buttercup that they must, absolutely, without a doubt enter the dreaded Swamp of Nastiness. Although Buttercup was very frightened of the Swamp of Nastiness, she trusted Westley with her entire heart and believed that he would get them through safely."

Meghan glanced around at her audience, gauging how involved they were. They were walking again, heading for Edoras this time. Idrys had suggested she tell another story, to ease the monotony. Now, most of the little ones were staring at her with rapt attention, and anyone else close by at least tilted their ears toward her. In fact, she had a bit of a crowd around her, listening to her story.

"And so, with great bravery from Westley, and no little fear from Buttercup, they ventured into the unforgiving, treacherous depths of the Swamp of Nastiness. There, as they made their way through the twisted trees, Westley told her the story of how he became the Dread Pirate Roberts. It turns out, that there were no less than four Dead Pirate Robertses before Westley himself."

She spun out the story as best she knew how, adding flourishes and sparkles wherever she could. Westley's "death" was received with somber gazes, so she hurried through that part and soon had them giggling over Mad Max and his wife. At the end, when Westley and Buttercup rode off into the sunset, the gathered listeners clapped. A few of the children capered about, battling ROUS's and staging dramatic rescues. One little girl, whose name Meghan remembered was Ana, threw her arms around Meghan's waist and squeezed tight, before running off to join the others in their imaginings.

Meghan smiled. She had never thought that she could be of any use with children – she only saw her three nieces and nephews once a year at Christmas, and even then it had always been a little bit of a 'you stay over there, I'll stay over here' sort of thing. But here, with these people, who had lost so much and still reached out to her, she could actually reciprocate by making their sons and daughters laugh.

They reached Edoras by midafternoon. It seemed like the crowd quietly melted away as soon as they entered the city wall; everyone was probably intent upon returning to their homes and shops. Granted, a fairly large group of people stayed with Éowyn, because they worked at Meduseld itself.

"Can I help with anything?" Meghan asked Éowyn as they climbed the stone steps to the front veranda. "I could put stuff away, or sweep something, or…"

"No, no," Éowyn said. "There is not much more to be done that cannot be handled by the servants. Please, settle into your room again. There is to be a celebration later, so you may want to rest."

"A party? I could decorate!" Meghan exclaimed.

Éowyn laughed. She actually laughed. "I appreciate your eagerness, but truly, the stewardess
would be offended if I or anyone else robbed her of her duties. If it helps you be easy, know that I will soon repair to my room, as well."

Meghan suspected that Éowyn was lying, and she would probably spend the next several hours up to her elbows in work while Meghan herself took a nap. So she frowned doubtfully at the other woman, trying to telegraph her skepticism. But then, if Éowyn really didn't want her underfoot, it would be a help to just to stay out of their way.

"Alright," she sighed. "But I don't remember where my room is. And is there any chance of some water to sponge off with?"

"I will show you your room and send a basin of water for you," Éowyn said with a smile. Meghan had the distinct feeling that she was being babysat, which was not a pleasant sensation at all. Still, she obediently followed Éowyn through the halls to a familiar looking door (even though all the doors looked the same) and waited patiently for her basin of water to be brought.

She was just about to pull off her filthy tunic when there was a rapping on the door. It was a serving woman, about forty or fifty years old, bearing a dark green dress in the Rohirric style.

"M'lady Éowyn sent this for you," she said, dipping into a faint curtsey. "She also said you may not know how to wear it. Will you need any assistance?"

"No, thank you," Meghan said. For one thing, she had worn similar costumes before. For another, she had never really gotten used to changing in front of someone else. "I'll manage. But thanks, really."

The woman gently transferred the dress over to Meghan, who suddenly felt as though she was holding a baby. "Thank you, again," she said. "The dress is lovely. Will you convey my thanks to Éowyn?"

"Yes, milady." And, dropping into another short curtsey, the maid went out and shut the door.

Meghan stripped down to her skin and then scrubbed off so thoroughly that she turned pink all over. Then she dunked her head in the remaining water and washed her hair as best she could. The dress did prove to be a bit complicated, but soon enough she had laced herself into it, and even found a comb to run through her hair.

Now that she was clean and warm, a massive wave of drowsiness swept intoxicatingly over her. She gazed at the bed, contemplating the pros and cons of drifting off right then and there. It didn't take long for her to curl onto the bed and drag her cloak around her like a makeshift blanket. The next thing she knew, there was a gentle rapping on the door. Meghan blinked, momentarily disoriented. She had the feeling that she'd just been interrupted from a dream, but she couldn't remember what it was about. She wadded up her cloak at the foot of the bed and went to the door.

The next thing she knew, there was a gentle rapping on the door. Meghan blinked, momentarily disoriented. She had the feeling that she's just been interrupted from a dream, but she couldn't remember what it was about. She wadded up her cloak at the foot of the bed and went to the door.

"Aragorn!" she said, surprised by her visitor. "You're back!"

He didn't actually look her in the eyes. Instead, he seemed transfixed by her hair. She reached up to touch it and felt an explosion of frizz.

"Heh," she said, frantically running her fingers through it in an attempt to tame the beast. "So, how was the fieldtrip to Saruman's? Is everybody back?" Alright, so I'm technically asking about
"It was productive," Aragorn said. Now that she thought about it, he looked tired. Then again, he always looked tired. "Everyone returned safely, and the two Hobbits joined our company."

Meghan finally gave up on her hair. "Are they safe? I mean, healthy and stuff? Can I go see them?"

"They are resting. But I hoped I might speak with you on a rather personal matter. May I come in?"

Oh my god. He's going to tell me that Legolas died on the trip to Saruman's. He fell off his horse and broke his neck. He was hit by a stray arrow. He developed a tangle and died of shame.

"Yes, yes of course," Meghan replied, opening the door wider and willing herself not to cry. Aragorn took the chair at her desk, and she folded her legs under her on the bed, Indian-style. He looked like he was choosing the right words to say.

"I have noticed that there is an increasing relationship between you and Legolas," he began.

Meghan almost choked on her own saliva. On the one hand, this was validation that she hadn't interpreted Legolas' actions through wishful thinking on her part. On the other hand, this was completely mortifying. It felt like the dean had caught her making out with a boy.

"Yeah… kinda…" was all she could muster as a reply.

Aragorn didn't exactly look comfortable with the situation, either. "And you have no family in this world. You are effectively alone."

"Yes." It came out as a squeak.

"I believe that it would be wise for you to have some sort of protector."

Meghan was simultaneously touched and horrified. She liked and respected Aragorn, but he was so somber all the time that she usually felt like an annoying cousin that had to be put up with, but not necessarily liked. Was he just offering because he thought she was too out of control to hold her own in a relationship? He had so many responsibilities already. He didn't need this.

"Um." She fudged for time to think. How could she gracefully say no, just so he would feel like he'd done his best but escaped any commitment? "Do you mean like you'd be sort of… my brother? Or… uncle?" He was old enough to be her father, but that was just too weird even to consider.

"In a way. It is customary for a woman to have some watching over her, even in the most benign courtship."

"OH MY GOD," Meghan practically gagged on her words. "No one said anything about courtship!"

He gave her a puzzled look. "Than there is no understanding between you and Legolas?"

She shook her head, her heart rate picking up. "No. He kissed my wrist and it was dreamy…" She grimaced. "Sorry. TMI. But no, he hasn't asked or anything."

Aragorn thought about it for a minute. "Though you are strange at times, Meghan, it is easy to forget that you are not familiar with Elvish customs despite having the body of an Elf."

Meghan scrambled to understand what he meant. Oh yeah. Way back when I first landed here, I told them I was from the future and the gods sent me to help out on the mission. Yeah. Fat lot of
"The Elves are immortal, and therefore do not hurry in many aspects of their lives. Legolas has not taken me into his confidences regarding this matter, but you should understand that some Elvish courtships have taken decades."

Decades.

"Oh," Meghan said, sinking on the inside. "Yes, Aragorn, I think I would like a friend watching out for me."

He inclined his head in acceptance of this new burden to shoulder.

Meghan glanced out the window, partially because the silence was awkward and partially to decide how many more minutes of sunlight she had. "Aragorn… when are we? It was early spring back home when I left, and it feels kinda springy here. What day is it?"

"The sixth day of Súlimë," he replied.

"In… common speak?"

"The sixth day of the third month."

"Holy crap."

"Is something wrong?"

"It's my birthday today."

"Congratulations," Aragorn offered.

Meghan realized that Aragorn wasn't very good at saying happy birthday. She didn't mind. "Thanks. Oh! I just remembered! When is the party tonight? Um, I mean, celebration. Éowyn mentioned it earlier."

"I believe that it will begin soon," Aragorn said.

"I'm going to find Éowyn and see if she needs any help yet," Meghan said, standing up. "How's my hair? Still fuzzy?"

A pained expression crossed Aragorn's face as he rose and surveyed her head.

"Sorry, I won't ask you for opinions on hair." She tried to feel it with her hands, and she could tell that it was much less huge than before. "Okay. Well, see you there." She hurried out the door, sensing that he followed but peeled off in a different direction down the hall.

She couldn't find Éowyn, so after a few minutes she headed toward the main hall. Théoden was already making a serious speech, but she spotted the two Hobbits sitting near the back, so she tiptoed over to them and sat down.

Meghan knew the minute the beer and ale started flowing that she was going to have a problem. For one thing, she didn't drink alcohol. For another, everyone else was drinking alcohol.

"You've never had a pint?" Pippin asked, not bothering to conceal his astonishment.
"Nope," Meghan shook her head.

"But you said it's your birthday today," Merry said.

"You should try a pint," Pippin insisted. "Just one. If you hate it, give the rest to me."

Meghan laughed. "Alright. Just one! I promise I won't like it. Beer is gross."

They brought her a flagon just the same, and then watched her expectantly as she took her first sip. The taste immediately surprised her; she had been expecting an oaty, pungent flavor, but this was rangy and exotic. It was disgusting in a delicious sort of way.

"This is actually… good," she had to concede, taking another swig. It burned down her throat in a lovely way.

"Of course it is!" Pippin crowed. "Have another?"

"What?" Meghan glanced down at her mug and realized to her boundless disbelief that it was already empty and her mouth tingled. "Yes! Gimme nuther round."
Meghan was drunk.

He could tell by the way she was brandishing her flagon and demanding a free refill. The fact that she couldn't stand up straight was another indication. He pushed his way through the raucous crowd, cursing his inattentiveness. He should have known that she wouldn't last long – it just didn't occur to him that she would be ragingly intoxicated after a few pints. He himself was practically immune to the weak Rohirric ale, but apparently she was not.

Legolas caught her elbow before she toppled over. She fell against him and clung woozily to his shoulder.

"Hah-loo, Leg'las," Meghan slurred, poking him in the chest. She stared at her finger for a moment, then poked again. "You're very musc'lar."

"And you are intoxicated," Legolas replied. He turned her toward the door and gently compelled her to walk. They made it as far as the hallway before Meghan batted him away and stumbled against the wall, holding herself up by a candle votive.

"Tha's because I find you… intoxicating," she cooed.

"Meghan, please. You are—"

"I know, 'm drunk." She staggered a few steps away from him. "I jes'wanna go sleep now. Leg'las, where's m'room?"

"This way," he said, gesturing down the hall and feeling enormously relieved that he wouldn't have to argue with her.

She nodded with a very serious expression, and promptly crumpled to the floor.

With a pitying sigh, Legolas knelt beside her. Pushing herself up into a sitting position, Meghan blinked around as if assessing the damage. "I fell…" she said tragically, then her eyes narrowed and she glared at him. "You tripped me!"

"I was nowhere near you."

"Hmm." Meghan's face crinkled into a look of intense contemplation. "Okay. Oh no! I forgot to say g'night to Gimli!"

"I am certain that he will not be offended," Legolas said soothingly.

"Really?" Meghan pushed a lock of hair out of her face with a shaky hand. "I wanna sleep now; can't you hurry up an' take me home?"
"I am trying," he muttered. He helped her to her feet, Meghan giggling all the way. "Can you walk?" he asked her.

"'Course I can walk," Meghan announced, fluttering her hand dismissively. "That is very fresh of you, young man, to suggest otherwise." Pushing away from him again, she took a very wobbly step. She would have fallen again if he had not caught her.

"Meghan, I do not believe that it is wise for you to continue—"

"You talk like Shakespeare," she commented, clinging to his shirt. "That's kinda smexy."

Legolas felt a laugh in his throat at her ridiculousness. "You are not yourself, Meghan."

She considered this for a moment, then yielded. "You're right. I feel warm and buzzy. Like a bee, or sumfin. Sumfin." She tasted the last word, rolling it on her tongue. "I can't say it right. *Sumfin* Tha's weird."

"Perhaps you are ready to return to your room?"

"Yes, please. I'm so sleepy."

"May I carry you?" He knew she couldn't walk a straight line to save her life.

"Are you asking me to dance?"

Without waiting for any kind of resistance, Legolas hefted her into his arms and strode down the hall. She sagged, resting her head on his shoulder. It only took him a few moments to get to her door, where her set her back onto her feet. She sank to the floor as he fumbled with the door latch.

When he looked back down, he saw tears running down her cheeks. "Meghan, what is wrong?" he asked, sitting on his heels.

She shook her head at first. "You'll think it's silly."

"Please tell me," he pleaded. "Why are you crying?"

"I'm so young!" she wailed. "I'm twenty today. You're so old, and you think I'm young and stupid. And I am stupid. You could never, never love me because I'm too young. You'll just despise me because I'm…" Her words trailed into garbled tears.

"Meghan, look at me." Her glassy gaze flittered everywhere but him.

"Meghan, look at me." He put his hands on either side of her face and she finally met his eyes. "You are very young." Fresh tears welled over her red rims. "But you are not stupid. You have grown so much. You have become… dear to me. Please do not cry."

She sniffed and used her sleeve to wipe away her tears. "Are you going to kiss me now?"

"I do not believe that would be appropriate," Legolas replied. "You are drunk and I will not take advantage of you."

"Okay," she resigned. "I'm going to sleep now."

"Goodnight, Meghan."
"G'night, Legolas."

She didn't move.

"Are you going to sleep in your bed?" Legolas asked after a moment.

"I don't wanna get up," she sighed.

Once again he maneuvered her into his arms. By the time he was in the door, she had fallen asleep. Her hair pooled in a tousled mess on her pillow when he lay on the bed and arranged her cloak around her to pass as a blanket. He smiled, brushing a strand of hair from her face.

"Sleep well," he murmured before he slipped out of the room.

Meghan snapped awake to the stomach-curling sensation of being watched. It felt like she was just out of the direct gaze of a very, very inquisitive glare. Her heart clawing at her ribcage, she quickly glanced around the room and saw no one. But the sickening sensation remained.

As soon as her feet touched the floor, she realized that her boots were still on and that she had a slight headache. It also occurred to her that she didn't remember going to bed that night. But her skin was crawling and all she wanted to do was find human company. The very moment she opened her door and peered into the dark hallway, two man-sized figures came tearing past her room. The silver-blond hair gave away at least one of them as Legolas, and sudden panic joined the first feeling of surveillance.

She didn't even bother to grab her cloak as she bolted after them. She found that she couldn't quite keep her balance, and she almost tripped before she skidded through the door of the men's chamber. The whole room was awake, tense, and staring at Gandalf, who hunched over something. Meghan leaned against the doorframe, panting partially from lightheadedness and partially from relief that the crushing weight of scrutiny had somehow lifted.

"The city was burning—" Meghan could hear Pippin's frantic voice, and realized that he was talking to Gandalf.

"Minas Tirith? Is that what you saw?" Gandalf sounded sharp.

Meghan saw Aragorn's shoulders tense, and she tried to remember what Minas Tirith might mean to him. She didn't even know where Minas Tirith was.

Pippin was still speaking. "I saw… I saw him! I can hear his voice in my head!"

"And what did you tell him? Speak!" Gandalf growled.

"He asked me my name… I didn't answer. He hurt me."

Who are we talking about? Who's "he"? Pippin doesn't look hurt…

"What did you tell him about Frodo and the Ring?"

A pause, and finally Pippin blurted, "Nothing. Aragorn took it away before I told him anything."

Meghan was practically bursting with questions, like, What are we talking about? Is everything going to be okay? How much did I drink last night? but it didn't seem like the appropriate time to ask them.
Gandalf glared at Pippin for a moment longer, then sighed. "To bed, everyone. There is much to be done at first light."

All the men hastily moved back to their blankets. Gandalf himself moved a few feet away to a roughly spherical shape buried under a blanket, and wrapped it even more securely, grumbling the whole way. Meghan took the opportunity to lay a hand on Aragorn's arm.

"Are you okay?" she asked in an undertone.

"Yes," he replied, although he looked very sleep-deprived. "And you?"

"Just a little spooked. What happened? I don't understand."

He hesitated, then gestured for them to go outside the chamber. Once they had begun walking down the hallway, he continued. "While we were treating with Saruman, Pippin discovered a palantír."

"What's a palantír?"

"It is a seeing stone. There were eight forged before this age began, but most are ruined or lost. It seems that Saruman was using this particular palantír to communicate with the Dark Lord. When Pippin touched it the first time, it planted an itch to gaze into it. Though Pippin did not understand the danger, he did just that. The Dark Lord saw Pippin, and questioned him."

*Like a crystal ball. Oh man, those stories always turned out badly. "And that's bad."

"Yes."

"Oh, Aragorn? What's Minas Tirith?"

Again, that tension. "It is the capitol city of Gondor. My homeland."

"You have a homeland? That's great, Aragorn! For some reason I thought you were kinda, you know, a gypsy nomad or something. What's Gondor like?"

"That is a topic for daylight," Aragorn said. "You need to rest. Your eyes are bloodshot." They had reached her room. Meghan could only tell it was hers because the door was ajar. She remembered the horror of waking up alone with that terrible feeling that she now knew was the most evil creature in the entire world staring at someone close to her. "Would it be weird if I slept in the boys' room?"

"I believe it would cause a minor sensation if an Elf maiden shared quarters with half of the King's guard," Aragorn replied with the faintest smile. "Perhaps you could sleep in Lady Êowyn's quarters?"

"That's alright," Meghan sighed. "I guess I'd have to sleep on the floor either way. I'll stick to my room."

"We are just a little ways down the hall," Aragorn said. Meghan nodded with a grateful smile. "Thanks, Aragorn. You make a great older brother type person."

"Sleep," Aragorn said. "As Gandalf said, the morning will be busy."
Meghan did not sleep well that night. At first, she left the door open in case she had to make another hasty exit. But then it seemed like shadows were creeping around in the hall, so she scurried over and shut it, then leapt back into her bed from several feet away on the off chance that any cold, clammy hands would grab her feet.

After that, she sat at the head of the bed with her knees drawn up to her chest, trying to shake the uneasiness that had settled over her. At long last, she drifted off to a fitful sleep.

The quiet movements of a maid woke her. Meghan jerked up and immediately regretted it. Not only was her headache worse, but she also had a crick in her neck from the odd angle she had been sleeping in. The maid smiled and set down a basin of water on the table.

"Lady Éowyn says good morning, miss," she said with a curtsey. "Will you need any help to dress?"

"Oh, no thanks," Meghan said, putting a hand on her throbbing forehead. "I do have a headache."

"You might try feverfew leaves, miss," the maid suggested helpfully. "I brought a dress and laid it out on the chair. Will that be all?"

"Yes, thanks," Meghan said although she had no intentions of wearing a dress that day and no idea was feverfew looked like. The maid dropped another curtsey and left.

By the time Meghan had wiggled out of her dress, found enough clean clothes to put together a decent outfit, and braided back her hair, the sun was peeping through her window. Her stomach grumbled, so she headed toward the Golden Hall, where she hoped a breakfast buffet might be waiting.

Sure enough, breakfast and almost all the principle people were gathered in the main hall. Gandalf apparently was recapping the events in the middle of the night for Théoden, and everyone else was listening grimly. A smallish table of light food stood off to the side, and Meghan quietly put two biscuits and a slice of cheese into the shallow bowls provided.

Pippin and Merry were both seated a few paces away from everyone else, so Meghan skirted around the company to join them. She sat down next to Pippin and held out a biscuit. "Hungry?" she asked quietly.

"No," he replied in a disconsolate tone. "I already ate, thanks."

_Wow, he really must be unhappy if he's not eating,_ Meghan thought. Her memories of the party were very blotchy after the first pint of ale, and the midnight scare seemed a little hazy, too. "Did you sleep much?"

"A bit," he said, then gave her a sidelong glance that had a bit of mischief in it. "You were pretty soused last night."

"Was it really bad?" Meghan wrinkled up her nose and thought about eating her breakfast. Even though her stomach felt empty, the mental picture of putting food into her mouth seemed unappealing. She was ragingly thirsty, though.

He shrugged. "At least you didn't bring it all back up. Legolas had to take you back to your room,
"WHAT?" Meghan screeched loudly enough for everyone to turn and look at her. "Oh hey guys," she grinned uncomfortably. "Sorry."

Once everyone had focused their attention back on the more serious subject at hand, Meghan turned to Pippin and hissed, "What do you mean, he took me to my room?"

"Well, I wasn't really paying it much mind," Pippin said. "He had been having a bit of a drinking game with Gimli, I think. Once that finished, he came over and guided you out of the room. He looked a bit grim. I do remember that."

Meghan felt all the blood draining from her face. She snuck a furtive glimpse at Legolas, but he didn't look at her. He seemed to be engrossed in the discussion taking place, which Meghan tuned into.

"I will go," Aragorn was saying, his voice quiet and determined.

"No!" Gandalf interjected.

"They must be warned!" Aragorn insisted.

"They will be," the wizard said, then lowered his voice. Although he was speaking very softly, Meghan could still hear him. "You must come to Minas Tirith by another road. Follow the river. Look to the black ships." He addressed the entire room again. "Understand this: Things are now in motion that cannot be undone. I ride for Minas Tirith. And I won't be going alone."

His eyes fell on the Hobbits.
"What do you mean, you're leaving?" Meghan asked, trotting along beside Gandalf and trying to block the intense sunlight from stabbing her eyeballs. Gandalf's stride was so long, it took two or three of her own steps to keep up. The Hobbits were a few paces behind them.

"We must," he replied grimly.

"But why? Pippin and Merry just got here. Ah, it's bright out here."

"The Dark Lord believes that Peregrin is the Ringbearer. It is for his own protection that he must away to Minas Tirith."

Meghan felt a chill in her bones. "Does that mean Pippin is Public Enemy Number One? At least… Orcish Enemy Number One?"

"It would seem so," Gandalf said, entering the stable and heading straight for Shadowfax's stall.

"Are you guys going to be alright?" Meghan asked, relieved at the shade inside, although the noises from the horses seemed unnaturally loud.

"I can promise nothing, Melethriel. I will do everything in my power to protect Peregrin."

"How far is Minas Tirith?" Pippin said.

"Three days' ride, as the Nazgûl flies, and you better hope we don't have one of those on our tail," Gandalf grumbled as he mounted the white horse and helped Pippin up in front of him.

"Here, something for the road," Merry said, handing up a package to his friend.

"The last of the Longbottom Leaf?" Pippin looked appalled and immensely grateful at the same time.

"I know you've run out. You smoke too much, Pip."

"But—but we'll see each other soon… won't we?"

"I don't know," Merry whimpered. "I don't know what's going to happen."

Neither do I, Meghan thought in despair. Gandalf urged Shadowfax into a canter, and the stallion shot out of the stable like a rocket. Merry stared after them for a moment, then took off running out the door.

Meghan sighed and trudged in the same direction. It felt like the weight of the world was closing around her.

"Are you alright?" She knew that voice. Glancing up, she saw Legolas and Gimli watching her.
Everything that Pippin has said about the previous night came flooding back. *You were drunk. He took you to your room.* She gazed into Legolas' blue eyes for a split second, then bolted for the door.

She didn't run very far. Once she was back out in the fresh air and sunshine, the brightness forced her to shade her eyes and slow to a walk. She saw Aragorn seated several yards away, facing the mountains. She marched over to join him.

He said nothing when she sat next to him and pulled her knees up to her chest. She was thankful that he had chosen a shady spot, even though the surrounding scene practically reflected the sunlight. They sat together in silence for some time, as Meghan tried to build up the courage to speak and Aragorn stared pensively at the mountain ridges.

Finally, he asked, "Is there something on your mind, Meghan? You are not often this quiet."

She opened her mouth, then shut it. *I am kind of a chatterbox.* But she really felt like she ought to tell Aragorn what she was worried about. So she lowered her voice to murmur and just blurted it out. "I think I slept with Legolas last night."

Aragorn froze, his pipe no longer puffing. Meghan cautiously peered over at him, trying to gauge his reaction. For the moment, it seemed that he was in a state of shock. Until she saw his lips twitching.

"Are you laughing at me?" she demanded.

Aragorn shook his head and turned his face away, but by now his shoulders were shaking, too. There was no hiding the fact that he was desperately trying not to laugh.

"Why are you laughing?" Meghan was genuinely upset. Aragorn offered to be her protector, and then laughed at the first sign of trouble?

"Forgive me, Meghan," he said, still chuckling. "I am afraid that I have offended you."

"Well, I'm being very serious."

"I apologize." He still had a smile playing with the corners of his mouth, but he put his pipe back to his lips and tried to look serious. "What are you concerns?"

"Well…” She searched for the best way to explain it. "I kind of got drunk last night. And I've never gotten drunk before, because I don't really like the taste of beer and stuff. But whatever they were serving actually tasted good... and I guess I'm kind of a lightweight. So I got drunk really fast. And apparently... Legolas took me back to my room. I don't remember any of it, though."

Aragorn nodded, now completely composed. "And you infer by the second-hand knowledge that Legolas escorted you to your chamber, that he somehow took advantage of you?"

It sounded a little silly, put that way.

"Well. Maybe he didn't take advantage of me, per se. I have no idea what kind of drunk I am. Maybe I convinced him because I was out of my right mind."

"Are you…” Aragorn trailed off, obviously rephrasing what he was going to say. "Did you see any evidence this morning to support your suspicions?"

Now that it occurred to her, it was fairly impossible for anything untoward to have happened the
night before. She was a virgin – there would have been changes. A deep, crimson flush spread over
her cheeks. "Please don't tell Legolas about this discussion. I think I've been a little hasty in my
assumptions."

"I will forget about it altogether."

"You can laugh at me again, if you like."

He chuckled. "Perhaps now you understand why I laughed in the beginning."

"Yes."

There was a pause, and then Meghan burst out laughing. She almost immediately stopped, because
it upset her headache. "Gosh, that was really dumb," she still giggled. "I mean, Legolas isn't that
type of guy, anyway. Do you think I'm still a little drunk?"

"I am not aware of how much you imbibed last night," Aragorn replied. "I cannot guess if you are
still under its effects."

"I don't think I'll ever drink again," Meghan sighed. "I don't like that I can't remember half a night."

"That can be an unpleasant result," Aragorn agreed. Now that the serious discussion had fizzled
into nothing, he seemed preoccupied with those mountains again.

"So what are we looking at?" Meghan asked, following his gaze. She couldn't see anything
particularly important about the mountaintops.

"There is a string of beacons across the mountains that border both Gondor and Rohan. The first of
these beacons is in Minas Tirith. If they call for aid, we will see the beacon lit on that ridgeline."

"Would it be good or bad if that happens?"

He paused. "I do not know. But Théoden will not ride to Gondor's aid unless he is prompted."

"So it would be a good thing if the beacons light up," Meghan said. "Except it would mean that
Gondor is in trouble."

"Yes."

Meghan remembered what she had overheard Gandalf muttering to Aragorn earlier. "Aragorn?
What did Gandalf mean, about black ships and another road and stuff?"

He didn't look at her. "Gandalf often speaks in riddles."

"True," Meghan said. Aragorn obviously didn't want to talk about it, but she got the sense that he
was keeping a terrible secret. She just didn't know how to pry it out of him, mostly because
Aragorn wasn't exactly easy to pry.

They sat that way for some time more, quietly watching the mountains. Meghan found that she
actually liked the smell of Aragorn's pipe smoke, and the feel of the sunlight through her clothes
was warm and comfortable. If I didn't have this headache, she thought, this would be kinda nice.

"Aragorn," she said in a whispery voice, because she felt guilty about pestering him for a third
time. "Do you have any water to drink? I'm really thirsty."

He silently reached to his left side and handed her a water skin. She drank the whole thing in a
couple long draughts. As she wiped her lips with the back of her hand, Aragorn leaned toward the mountains with a stare even more intent than before. All of a sudden, he took off like a shot.

It took Meghan a few moments to realize that a small, reddish glow had cropped up on one of the mountain peaks. A beacon! And she leapt to her feet, prepared to race after Aragorn.

Until a wave of nausea swept over her.

She stumbled against the lean-to that they had been sitting under, clutching her head. After a moment, the dizziness passed, so she took a few cautious steps and found that her feet were still attached to her ankles. Never. Drinking. Again. This is miserable, she groaned mentally as she trudged toward Meduseld.

She arrived just in time to get out of the way of a torrent of burly men that poured out of the front double doors like bees from a hive. Meghan pushed past them until she reached the blessed dimness of the inner hall. She caught Éowyn's sleeve before the blonde rushed away.

"Éowyn? I saw that the beacon lit up. What's happening?"

"My uncle will muster the Rohirrim to ride to Gondor's aid," Éowyn replied. Her voice practically glowed.

"So that means we're leaving?" Meghan asked.

"The éored will assemble at Dunharrow, and it is tradition for the women of the court to farewell the men. But if you wish to stay, no one will fault you."

"Éowyn." Meghan shot her a look. "Do you really think I'm going to stay here and play house while you go off and have all the fun? Um, no. If I actually have a plausible excuse to go with the boys, I'm taking advantage of it."

"It is tradition," Éowyn said with a grin that shone with camaraderie.

Meghan grinned right back. "I'll go pack."

"I will make certain that a horse is secured for you."

The two parted ways, both in considerably high spirits. Meghan felt almost giddy, knowing that the Rohirrim would help Minas Tirith. She didn't know much about Gondor, but it seemed important to Aragorn.

As soon as she got to her room she hastily threw her belongings into her rucksack. For a moment, she fingered the beautiful green dress that Éowyn had lent to her, but it was much too heavy to pack. She would have to bum another one off Éowyn the next time there was a party.

Slinging her cloak over her shoulders, she swept out of the room for the last time. The harsh sunlight stung her eyes as she walked out the front doors and toward the stable, but she soon reached the shadows cast by the stable.

The stable itself was a hotbed of activity. Every stall buzzed with horsemen preparing their mounts. Even so, Meghan easily spotted the smooth, sure movements of Legolas as he saddled Arod. She reached his stall just as he was tightening the horse's girth.

"Hey," she said with a lame wave.
"Are you feeling well?" He glanced up with the faintest twinkle in his eyes.

"Yeah," Meghan lied, nodding for emphasis. "So... how did tacking up go?"

"It went well," Legolas replied evenly. "I prefer to ride bareback, but it is more convenient to have a saddle."

"Doesn't your butt get sweaty?"

"...Excuse me?"

"I mean, you know, it's kinda hot, and the horse is hot, and you're hot, and hot kind of makes sweat..." Is there a way to resolve this statement without sounding perverted? No, not really. "...And you know, you're in contact with the horse for hours... I would get sweaty."

They looked at each other for several seconds.

"You know, let's just pretend I never said that."

"As you wish, Lady Meghan."

He said it. The L word. The wrong L word. To mask her despair, Meghan changed the subject. "So... Gimli. I guess he's riding with you?"

"Yes. Although I will confess that I almost expected him to ask Lady Éowyn for the use of her horse again."

"He's one smooth talker. I think he prefers the blondes." A horrifying implication occurred to Meghan. "Oh no no no, but not you. I'm not saying he prefers you or anything." She grimaced. "You know, let's just pretend I didn't say that, either. I think there might still be a little alcohol in my system because I normally don't say stupid things like this. Actually, I do, but not in such quick succession—"

"Your horse is over there," Legolas interrupted, nodding at a stall diagonally across from them. "Perhaps you would like to become acquainted with it before we begin the ride to Dunharrow."

"O-okay." Meghan nodded. Please just kill me now.

Legolas led the way to the stall that he had nodded toward, and reached over the partition to lay a hand on the horse's withers. "Lady Éowyn did not have the time to tell me the name of your mount," he said. "If I understood correctly, he was, at one time, a training horse for her."

"Is it a he or a she?" Meghan was not about to bend down and check this horse out.

"A gelding."

Meghan looked the horse in the eye, trying to project her helpless pleading for mercy into its horsey mind. Please don't hurt me. I haven't ridden very much, and usually when I ride I have shoulders to hold onto. It's just you and me, Seabiscuit.

The sorrel huffed a lazy sigh.

"Mmkay, thanks," Meghan said to Legolas. She still found it hard to meet his eyes, because she was certain that hers burned with questions. What happened last night? "I think we're good from here."
"If you experience any difficulty, do not hesitate to ask," he said. He took her hand and kissed it, just the knuckles this time. Still, her breath snagged on her windpipes as he dropped her hand and strode away.

"Oh Seabiscuit," she breathed, hardly able to tear her eyes off Legolas' back. "I may never wash my hand again."

Seabiscuit snorted.
Meghan was the last one in the stable.

She had delayed the inevitable until everyone else had gone out, and now she was in a panic that they had all ridden off without her. But the fact of the matter remained; she didn't know how to mount a horse. Legolas had always helped her up, and now she stared at the insurmountably tall hulk of horseflesh standing placidly in the stall.

"How did Éowyn ever get onto you?" Meghan whispered. "You're enormous."

"Meghan?"

She turned to see Merry standing in the doorway of the stable, wearing a quizzical expression.

"Are you coming? I think the King will leave in a few moments," he said.

"Oh no," Meghan groaned. "Are they all waiting for me? Maybe I should just stay here."

Merry frowned. "You want to stay behind?" The way he said it made it sound like the worst idea Meghan ever had.

"No," Meghan huffed, crossing her arms. "I just don't want to mount this foothill."

"Is that all?" Merry's whole demeanor changed. Now, he stepped forward with an eager spring and surveyed the situation. "It can't be that bad. I will tell you a bit of secret," he leaned forward conspiratorially, "but there was a time when I wasn't too keen on riding, myself. Do you trust me?"

"Um. Yes?"

"Here, use the rail like a mounting post. Just climb up, and I'll keep your horse close enough to mount. Like this, come on."

Grudgingly, Meghan saw that his plan would work, provided that he kept the horse still. Which seemed impossible, considering the fact that he was about a tithe of Seabiscuit's size. But he nodded confidently at her, and there was nothing for it but to clamber up on the railing.

She took one breath to steady her nerves, and then blindly flung herself onto Seabiscuit's broad back. Immediately, she was surprised that he did not buck her off. Secondly, she realized that she was draped over the saddle instead of actually sitting in it.

"That's a start," Merry said. He looked impossibly small from this angle.

With a grunt or two, Meghan wriggled around to a sitting position. "This is practically hopeless," she sighed, looking down at the reins. "I have no skills with a horse. I mean, I can't even get it to go the way I want it to."
"Don't worry," Merry dismissively waved at her fears. "Once a horse gets with other horses, it will just follow the herd. You don't even need to guide it."

"Oh. Well, that's a relief. Do you think you could pretend to be a horse so that Seabiscuit will follow you outside?"

He laughed. "I'll just lead him."

It was ridiculous, really. Merry was small enough to walk under Seabiscuit's belly if he ducked, and here he was leading the massive horse out of the stable. And once they got outside, he went to a small pony that could only have been a third of Seabiscuit's size, and calmly mounted it.

Meghan felt a pang of loneliness as she watched Merry walk away. She already missed Pippin's steadfast cheerfulness, and while Merry was much more serious, he was still quietly comforting just by being a Hobbit. Now she was alone in a crowd of men. Even Éowyn was out of sight.

She expected Théoden to give a rousing war speech and then majestically gallop off into battle with his soldiers thundering after him, but instead there seemed to be an unspoken "let's go" and they all nudged their horses into a sedate walk.

Except Seabiscuit didn't move.

"Um," Meghan said as streams of Rohirrim flowed by her. "Go. Onward. Away. Yip yip!" She noticed Aragorn guiding his horse toward her, and she desperately lowered her voice to an urgent whisper. "Come on, Seabiscuit. Let's go. I'm trying not to look helpless here."

"That is a training horse," Aragorn said. "They are taught not to move without the proper cues from the rider. Most horses will simply follow the herd."

"Oh," Meghan said. "What are the proper cues?"

"Squeeze with your knees."

Meghan tried it, and Seabiscuit heaved a sigh and began a lazy walk in the same general direction as everyone else. Aragorn brought his mount alongside Meghan.

"That's a stupid cue," she griped. "What if my horse is going too fast, and I'm trying to hold on, but my knees are just telling the horse to go faster!"

"Horsemanship is a complex study," Aragorn replied evenly. "Perhaps there will be time for you to learn more."

"Just like swordsmanship and archery, right? Because I was sooo good at those," Meghan said.

"As I understand it, Legolas implied that you were improving with a bow."

"He was being nice," Meghan groaned. "He's always nice about me. I wasn't improving, Aragorn – I was probably getting worse."

Meghan suddenly remembered her original misgivings about burdening Aragorn, and a wave of regret washed over her. She was just about to apologize for ranting, when he spoke.

"Do you feel inferior to Legolas?" he asked.

"Have you seen the guy? He's gorgeous. He looks like a model, except not so weird… even though I practically said he was interested in horses of all things. He's prettier and more graceful and nicer
and smarter and just plain more awesome at everything. He even has longer hair than I do!" She mournfully reached up and touched her short hair, once again cursing herself for cutting it. "I never say the right thing. I'm klutzy and immature and loud. It sometime feels like I'm Legolas' charity case. OH NO!"

Aragorn tensed. "What is it?"

"I wasn't going to unburden on you," Meghan said. "I'm sorry, Aragorn. You are so busy and preoccupied, and it's selfish of me to ramble about my pathetic insecurities."

His face softened. "Meghan, I assure you that I am willing to listen to your concerns. I knew when I offered my involvement that you may wish to talk, and now that Pippin is gone your number of confidantes has lessened. As to what you said regarding Legolas, do not be overly troubled. Granted, you are not very skilled in weaponry, but you have had very little time to learn. It takes years to become proficient. Truthfully, I did not immediately take to the sword. I nearly took off Elrohir's arm at the elbow when I was first learning."

Meghan chuckled. "Who's Elrohir?"

"Lord Elrond's younger son," Aragorn replied. "He has a twin, Elladan, who is not ten minutes his senior. And he will not let Elrohir forget it." He had a faraway look, but the kind that is quiet and happy.

"Did you grow up with them?"

"I grew up in their company, yes, but they were full-grown long before my birth. They were my mentors when I was a child; now they are my brothers."

"I guess you miss them a lot," Meghan said.

He gave her a wry look. "You were distressed about sharing your troubles, and now you have led me into talking about my youth. Do not think your crafty conversation escaped my notice."

"You're not the only one who can listen," Meghan smirked. "Almost everybody likes to talk about when they were kiddies."

"That was kind of you," Aragorn said, inclining his head. "I will return the favor and revisit the subject of Legolas. I do not claim to be particularly perceptive about relationships, but I will venture to say that you should speak with him honestly."

Meghan nodded. "You're probably right. Thanks, Aragorn. You're kind of like the Doctor Phil of this place."

"Who is Doctor Phil?"

"Lord Aragorn!" A horseman rode up, looking very official. "Théoden King bid me find you. He wishes to speak with you."

"Excuse me, Meghan," Aragorn said. "Perhaps you can tell me about this Doctor Phil some other time."

"Sure," Meghan nodded with absolutely no intention of explaining Dr. Phil. Aragorn nodded once and then guided his horse toward the front of the column. Even though he had suggested that she talk to Legolas, Meghan did not feel like talking to anyone,
let alone a gorgeous blond. So she settled in for a long, uncomfortable, boring ride.

By the time they arrived at the encampment, the sky had grayed over in chalky, sullen clouds. Meghan felt like it reflected her mood – dreary and ready to cry. She slid off Seabiscuit's back and rubbed her shoulders, sore after hours hunched in the saddle.

"My lady? I was told to bring your horse to the picket lines," a voice said. Meghan turned to see a scruffy, haggard-looking man standing several feet away from her, staring at the ground.

*Seriously, picket signs?* "What? Is there a protest or something?" she asked, baffled.

"N-no, my lady, but we are at war—" He was obviously getting more and more tense, the longer he had to talk with her. "Lady Éowyn instructed me to fetch your horse and bring it to the picket lines."

"Okay," Meghan nodded slowly, still not sure what was going on and why the man was so edgy. She obediently handed over her reins and watched the man hastily beat a retreat, almost dragging Seabiscuit behind him. He veered a wide path around Gimli, who was heading in Meghan's direction.

"Speaking to an Elf makes these Rohirrim uneasy," came the Dwarf's gruff greeting. "And rightly, too. A bewitching folk, Elves."

Meghan didn't know if he meant it as a compliment or an insult, but he didn't give her the time to decide.

"Come," he grunted. "The Halfling asked after you, and since your Princeling is fussing and coddling the horse, I came to find you. I'm hungry."

"Me too," Meghan realized.

Gimli didn't say anything more, just turned around and trudged back the way he came. Meghan followed, having nowhere else to go. She had no idea where she would sleep that night, or where Gimli expected to find any food, but he was a familiar face in a sea of strangers, and he was the closest thing to a friend she could see.

*If it really came down to it, she wondered, would I get out of bed at three in the morning to help him change a flat tire? Well, no, because all the wheels here are wooden. But would I?*

The Dwarf gave her a sideways glance. "I noticed that you and the Elf are not speaking." He rumbled under his breath. "Ridiculous, the way you tiptoe around each other."

"Excuse me?" Meghan froze stock-still, too horrified to continue walking. First Aragorn and now *Gimli?* Would the ignominy never end?

"If you want my advice," Gimli turned around and leaned on his ax, as if he had been taking wayward Elvish couples under his wing for decades, "you should be more assertive. Dwarf women chose their own mates."

Meghan grasped at the straws of her sanity. "But I'm not a Dwarf…!" was all she could manage.

"True," Gimli grunted. "But that Elf has preposterous ideals about honor and virtue and twaddle like that. If you stand back and wait for him to initiate, he will kill you with kindness."

*Killing me softly with his song,* Meghan thought, and batted the lyric away. "Aragorn said almost
the same thing, just phrased way differently… did he put you up to this?"

"No," Gimli snorted. "I find your courtship dance with the Princeling to be tedious and exasperating. I am trying to speed things along for my own peace of mind." Here he leaned forward with a very foreboding look in his eyes. "Furthermore, I know that Aragorn has taken you under his protection. You should know that Legolas is under mine." And with that, he turned and continued to trudge toward the center of camp.

Meghan gaped after him. Did he just tell her to make the first move and then threaten her? This was all too surreal. He did have a point, though. Legolas was such a gentleman. The big first step in their relationship had been a dropping the formal "lady" from her name, which he promptly reinstated after a night that Meghan couldn't even remember.

So the first move is up to me?
The sight of Éomer was enough to stop Meghan in her tracks. Gimli didn't seem phased in the least; he solidly thumped Éomer's arm and grunted a question about food. Éomer nodded toward a column of wispy, white smoke and wallop ed Gimli on the back, which was apparently man-code for extreme approval instead of hostility, because the dwarf didn't fight back.

Meghan was more than happy to give Éomer a wide berth, just in case he decided to approve of her, too. As they passed each other, he glowered and rumbled, "My sister inquired after you." He didn't even stop walking, just strode away without waiting for any reply.

*He is so scary,* Meghan thought, rather awed. *I'm glad we're on the same side. Sort of.*

Gimli had already disappeared, presumably homing in on a hot meal. Meghan decided to head toward the smoke that Éomer had pointed at. *Maybe Éowyn is there. Maybe... he's there.*

Thinking about Legolas just made her stomach flip. *This is so dumb. Be a man, Legolas. If you want to talk to me, then talk to me!* She scowled and kicked at a rock that was in her path.

"Are you well, Lady Meghan?"

She almost had a heart-attack, right then and there. He had appeared out of nowhere and fallen neatly into step beside her. "How long have you been walking with me?" she gasped, wishing she could regulate her heart rate.

"Just a few paces," He gave her a long look, but his face was so composed that she couldn't tell what he was thinking. "When Gimli returned alone, I decided to look for you myself. I thought you might be hungry. Has anyone prepared a tent for you?"

"I don't think so. I guess I'm rooming with Éowyn."

He nodded and said no more. Meghan desperately wanted to fill the silence, but couldn't find the words. They kept walking, his long steps setting the tempo. "Legolas," she finally blurted out. "Last night. After I drank so much." It seemed like eons ago after that dreadfully long ride, but it was all she could think about.

"You were disoriented," he said, looking straight ahead, something playing on the corners of his eyes.

Is that a smile?

"Yes. Um. I've never gotten drunk before."

He stopped and put a hand on her arm, asking with gentle pressure for her to stop. "Meghan. I can see that something is upsetting you. What is it?"
"Nothing," she lied. "You are a woman, and therefore there is always something wrong."

Meghan practically felt her blood pressure double. "Excuse me?"

For the barest second, she thought she could see panic in his eyes. "I simply meant—" He looked confused, then resigned. "You are right. That was unkind of me. Of course there is nothing wrong." He started walking again.

"Legolas, wait," Meghan said, hurrying after him. He slowed down but did not stop. "Actually, you were right," she said. "There is something wrong, sort of. It's just that I'm confused. You're kind of sending mixed messages. I can't tell if you—"

She wasn't sure how it happened, but one second she was walking and the next she was flat on the ground, face squashed against a grimy shock of grass. She was so stunned that she helplessly gaped for words.

She felt a hand on her back. "Are you alright?" Legolas asked.

"How did that happen?" she said, still dazed.

"You tripped over that stone," he replied.

_Darn him, he's trying not to laugh!_ Meghan pushed herself up to sit on her knees. Legolas was kneeling next to her. "Stupid rock," she growled, and dusted herself off. He stood, offering her hand.

"Sorry," she said once she was on her feet again. "I can't believe I just face-planted."

"That is alright," he said in an even tone. "Many women have fallen at my feet." Again, there was that something of a smile around his eyes.

Meghan didn't have the faintest idea of how to react. She felt like her entire reality was crumbling down around her. First Gimli told her to make the first move, and now Legolas was making bad jokes. He was normally so composed and collected, not a bad joke teller. He hardly even _told_ jokes. It was like he had gone crazy.

Or he's nervous?

The thought was reassuring, in a way, and she cracked a smile. That seemed to break the sudden tension that had risen in the pause while she was thinking, and they continued to walk in silence.

"Meghan!"

She turned at the sound and saw Éowyn walking toward her. "Hey Éowyn."

"I have been looking for you." Éowyn always had an air of busyness about her, but it seemed like she was even more occupied than normal. "The messenger I sent was to show you the way to your tent, but he misunderstood his instructions. If you are not otherwise engaged…" She trailed off, suddenly noticing Legolas. "Westu hal, Legolas."

Meghan turned back to him and he inclined his head to both women. "Westu hal, Lady Éowyn," he
"I'm not otherwise engaged," Meghan said, torn. Êowyn looked like she could use a friend, but things were just getting comfortable with Legolas again! *Sisters before misters.* Meghan consoled herself.

"I will take my leave," Legolas said. He took her hand in his and kissed her knuckles, then gently squeezed her fingers and walked away. Meghan stared after him. *How does he do that?* She schooled her mind back to the task at hand: cheering up Êowyn.

"So how was the ride here?" she asked, forcing her voice to be upbeat.

Êowyn gestured for Meghan to walk with her. "Your tent is this way, beside mine. The ride seemed brief, but I have much on my mind." It sounded like Êowyn was pushing herself to be positive, too.

"Want to talk about any of it?" Meghan asked.

"I fear that I would bore you," Êowyn said with a weak laugh. She seemed relieved to change the subject by pointing to a smallish, unmarked tent. "Here is your tent. Mine is directly to the left. If you will excuse me, I have many matters to address." With that, she hurried away.

*It must be about Aragorn. She's probably just as confused as I am. But it's not fair because I know she doesn't end up with him. Whoever this Arwen is, she better be awesome because Aragorn is kind of dumb for turning Êowyn down.*

Now that it occurred to her, she wondered if Aragorn even knew that Êowyn was interested. He was so concentrated on the war, on protecting and serving those around him, that he might be completely blind in that one place. Meghan wished she had dropped a few hints. Who said she couldn't be his protector, too?

Dusk was starting to fall. Even though Meghan was hungry, she decided to just nibble on some dried food from her pack and then try to sleep.

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"Is it true that pompous Elf Lord is in the camp?"

"Keep your voice low, Gimli, unless you mean to wake half the company."

The voices of Gimli and Legolas floated into Meghan's dreamscape. Judging by the tramp of Gimli's boots, they were walking by her tent. It was harder to hear Legolas because he spoke much more quietly. "I believe Lord Elrond means for Aragorn to take the Paths of the Dead. He must not go alone."

"Are you not going to tell the girl?"

Legolas' voice was starting to fade into the distance. "The Paths are no place for her. She will be safe if she stays with Lady Êowyn…"

Meghan drifted awake. Paths of the Dead? That sounded awful, and gross. The sleep fog began to lift. Paths of the Dead. They were leaving. Even worse, they were leaving her behind.

She bolted out of the tent. The silvery moonlight lit up the camp, but she couldn't see Legolas and
Gimli anywhere. In a panic, she swatted open the flap of Éowyn's tent.

"Éowyn!" Meghan hissed, and a pale shape sat up from the blanket roll.

"What is it?" she sounded tired, but alert.

"What are the Paths of the Dead? Where are they?"

Éowyn instantly became hyper-focused. She moved closer to Meghan. "Speak those words softly. Why do you ask of the Dimholt road?"

"Because Legolas and Gimli were talking about them, about Aragorn going there. What are they?"

"A place of great evil." She looked shaken and grave. "This is foolishness. I must go." She darted away, and Meghan thought she could see tears beginning in Éowyn's eyes as she went.

Meghan felt like crying, too, except it was out of anger. They can't just ditch me here, she thought. I want to help!

She heard a soft sound like hooves on dirt, and a horse's questioning whicker. Then Legolas himself appeared around the side of a tent, leading Arod.

"Legolas!" Meghan shouted in a whisper, trying to convey her exasperation without waking up everyone around. He actually looked startled, which for him was a raised eyebrow and slight downward turn of his mouth.

"Meghan," was all he got out before she interrupted him.

"You were going to leave me behind again," she growled. "After everything! I don't know what the Paths of the Dead are, but you do not get to decide what I can and can't handle. You are acting like a complete pig! I am a woman, not a piece of glass. At least Gimli had the decency to suggest that you tell me!" Meghan huffed. "Where is Gimli, anyway?"

Legolas' face was impossible to read. "He went to apprehend Aragorn."

"Well, you can march straight back the way you came and apprehend my horse, because I'm coming with you." Meghan pointed demonstratively in the general direction of the picket lines and pulled the most authoritative face she could manage.

"The Paths of the Dead are a place of unspeakable horror," Legolas said, his tone very, very even. "I do not think you should join us because you cannot understand what you would be riding into."

"I was in Moria," Meghan snapped. "I think I can handle myself. You can't treat me like a kid, Legolas. I'm coming with you, and you might as well get on my side because I'll just follow you guys if I have to. Will you please go get my horse now?"

She could see him weighing his options, his ingrained mindset to protect and serve women battling against her assertion of her own rights as a woman.

"Your horse will be too slow," he said at last. "We will have to double up, as we did when we rode across the plains of Rohan." It was his way of saying I'm on your side, albeit reluctantly.

"Fine," Meghan said. "Let's go apprehend Aragorn."

They walked with Arod between them, his steady bulk a welcome buffer. Now that the confrontation was over, Meghan felt like her intestines were in knots. Did I just ruin any chance I
ever had with Legolas? Stop it, Meghan. So not productive.

"What took you so long, Princeling? –Oh." Gimli huffed out a surprised sound. Aragorn looked up from Brego's saddle tack.

"Meghan will be accompanying us," Legolas announced calmly. Meghan almost missed the significant look that passed between him and Gimli.

"Then let us go," Aragorn said. "Gimli, shall you ride with me?"

"No, I will," Meghan piped in. There was a pause, the three men obviously taken aback. "I've never ridden on Prego before," she said defensively.

"Very well." It seemed like Aragorn would not be deterred by social awkwardness. He mounted and held out a hand to Meghan.

It took some wriggling, but she finagled herself into the saddle behind Aragorn. By the time she was ready, Legolas and Gimli had also mounted, so Legolas and Aragorn turned their horses toward the mountain.

Men began to poke their heads out of tents, a whispered ripple of uncertainty running through the camp. Meghan could hear them murmuring questions to each other as they watched Aragorn, their greatest hope, riding away. Aragorn himself did not acknowledge them even when one called out to him.

The dark walls of the mountain entrance rose up around them, muffling the sounds of the camp behind. It immediately got even darker than before.

"So… the Paths of the Dead," Meghan mused. "Does that mean the Paths of the Actually Dead, or the Paths of the You Are Going to Be Dead, or the Paths of the Technically Undead?"
When Meghan woke up, it was day again, although it was a greyish, washed-out daylight. The last thing she remembered was wedging her arms between Aragorn's pack and Aragorn himself, then curling her upper body around his pack as best she could. Her back ached from hunching over, but she was surprised she hadn't fallen off.

She rubbed her eyes. "Are we there yet?"

"No, lassie, and I wager we have many hours to go," Gimli looked around as if he expected ghouls and goblins to leap out from behind the rocks. "What kind of army would linger in such a place?"

"One that is cursed. Long ago, the Men of the Mountain swore an oath to the last King of Gondor, to come to his aid, to fight. But when the time came, when Gondor's need was dire, they fled, vanishing into the darkness of the mountain. And so Isildur cursed them, never to rest until they had fulfilled their pledge. Who shall call them from the great twilight? The forgotten people. The heir of him to whom the oath they swore. From the north shall he come. Need shall drive him. He shall pass the door to the Paths of the Dead."

"Wait a second," Meghan whispered. "Are we talking about ghosts?"

"No one who has entered the Paths of the Dead has returned," Legolas said grimly.

Meghan felt a deep knot of hysteria forming in her stomach. "No no no. If there are R.O.U.S.'s, I quit. I can handle creepy dead guys and creepy monsters and creepy legends, but I DRAW THE LINE at giant rats."

She caught Legolas' pointed look, a look that came pretty close to saying I told you so.

Meghan had the inexorable urge to stick her tongue out at him.

"There will be no giant rats," Aragorn said with an air of mingled patience and defeat.

That was the end of conversation for a while. Meghan wished they would talk, if only to interrupt the heavy stillness, but she didn't know what to say. She later remembered that long, silent ride as the loneliest time of the journey, because the deep, pallid air seemed to divide them. After what felt like days, they came into a narrower pass that soon funneled down to end in a grim archway.

"Those are... skulls," Meghan whispered. For the first time, she began to wonder if she should have stayed with Éowyn.

"The very warmth of my blood seems stolen away," Gimli agreed.

"The way is shut. It was made by those who are dead, and the Dead keep it. The way is shut," Legolas read the crudely drawn symbols.

Meghan could feel the tenseness in Aragorn's shoulders, the dogged resolve brewing in him, and
she realized that this was a matter of life and death for him. *If he walks through that empty arch, he could die. If he doesn't, everyone else will definitely die.*

She slid off Brego's back. "So, um, let's get started," she said. In an instant, the other three were on the ground as well. The horses' hooves tattooed a skittery beat in the chalky soil.

A huge rush of wind that sounded more like a moan swept out of the doorway. Meghan shrieked and covered her face with her arms. An ice cold chill soaked into her bones. When she peeked out again, the horses were gone.

"I do not fear death," Aragorn growled and, squaring his shoulders, strode into the darkness. Legolas followed without looking back. Meghan and Gimli just stared at the grey archway.

"Gimli," Meghan said breathlessly, shaking her head. "I do not know if I can do this."

He harrumphed, then gave her a sidelong look. "Put your hand on my shoulder as you did with the Halfling."

"Thank you," she whispered, unclenching her fists long enough to clench one around Gimli's shoulder in a vise-like grip. She probably would have just stayed rooted to the ground had he not charged forward, practically dragging her inside.

It took a few minutes for her eyes to adjust to the darkness. Aragorn had lit a torch, but that did nothing to warm up the greenish-grey illumination that seemed to seep out of the rocks.

"It's not... so bad in here," Meghan ventured, trying not to look too hard. *This looks almost the same as Moria, just... smaller.* She felt a little reassured, and dropped her hand from Gimli's shoulder.

Then she saw something, just out of the corner of her eye. It was wispy and grey-green and altogether wrong. She stiffened, sucking a breath in through her nose and clenching her fists in an automatic fight-or-flight instinct.

"What is it?" Gimli whispered breathlessly. "What do you see?"

"I see shapes of men, and of horses," Legolas replied, peering into the darkness as if he was trying to see more clearly.

Meghan did *not* want to see more clearly. She forced herself to take another step forward and kept her eyes on the back of Legolas' head. She began to get that creepy-crawly feeling that something was about to grab her ankles. She walked a little faster.

"Where?" Gimli was saying, obviously trying not to step into a ghost.

"Pale banners like shreds of cloud." Legolas ignored Gimli's question. "Spears rise like winter-thickets through a shroud of mist. The Dead are following. They have been summoned."

"What does that even mean?" Meghan hissed. "Why are they following us? Why can't we just get this over with?"

They passed through another archway and Meghan sensed a change under her feet, the solid stone floors giving way to an uneven, rutted surface that somehow felt hollow. She didn't think much of it until Aragorn said, "Do not look down."

Meghan froze again. Absolute horror battled with morbid curiosity. She heard Gimli groan, then
creak forward. Every step he took produced an echoing crackle. She screwed her eyes shut and took a wavering step. Her foot molded around something slightly rounded. Curiosity won, and she peeked down.

"SKULLS," she shrieked in a whisper. Every nerve in her body screamed for her to get away and she fought a wild urge to climb the walls. She blindly reached for Legolas, unable to drag her stare away from the ground.

She finally caught Legolas' hand into a death grip, but he gently pulled away. "We must move on," he said, coaxing her forward with a light pressure at her elbow.

Meghan just wanted to cry. *I am walking on skeletons and you won't even hold my hand?* she sniffled mentally as she followed him and Aragorn. *I know I insisted on coming, but… it's just a little hand hold.* She actually felt tears prickling her eyes when she realized that Legolas needed his hands free in case he had to handle a weapon. *Oh. Well that's okay I guess. SKULLS.*

Thankfully, they soon passed into a huge hall, this time with stone floors. The sheer enormity of the space again reminded Meghan of Moria. As she looked around, she saw that they were actually standing on a wide ledge that fell away into darkness. Across the chasm, the ruins of a city clung to the enclosed mountainside.

She turned away from the abyss just in time to see a wispy green specter drift into semi-solid form. A scream clotted in her throat and she swallowed fiercely.

"Who enters my domain?" the ghostly figure asked.

"One who will have your allegiance," Aragorn practically snarled.

"The Dead do not suffer the living to pass."

"You *will* suffer me."

A horrible laugh echoed through the cold air. Suddenly, they were surrounded by gruesome copies of the first ghost, each one more leering and decomposed than the last. For the first time, Meghan was certain that she was about to die.

What followed was an agonizingly long battle of wits, to which Meghan hardly paid any attention. She was making rapid-fire calculations. *I am not going to be killed by a ghost,* she thought. *We could probably just run right through them, right? They're ghosts. Wait. Sam and Dean almost got killed by ghosts lots of times. If I just edge this way and set a torch to those skulls…*

A frigid wind snapped her back into the present. The misty green host was dissipating into nothing. At the same time, the ground began to rumble under their feet.

"You guys…" Meghan barely managed to keep her voice from rising to a wail.

"Out!" Aragorn shouted at the same moment the stone wall closest to them exploded into an avalanche of skulls.

"MORE SKULLS!" Meghan screeched.

This time Legolas grabbed her hand and yanked her forward, his grasp a welcome guide as the world crumbled past her. Meghan half-swam, half-slogged through the chaotic tidal wave. The skulls did not decrease; if anything, more poured over them.
The sunlight stung her eyes as they all burst into the open air. A faint, briny tang announced the ocean somewhere nearby, but even more nautical were the three dark ships crawling down the river.

"What are those?" Meghan said, turning just in time to see Aragorn sink to his knees.

"We are too late," Legolas murmured. "The Corsairs will pass unchallenged."

Meghan knelt beside Aragorn and grasped his arm. "Aragorn," she began, and then wondered what she could possibly say to comfort him. *Sorry the zombie apocalypse didn't work out for you today. Better luck next time.*

A soft airy sound, and suddenly they were surrounded by green wisps. Meghan leapt to her feet and moved closer to Legolas. The Undead looked a little more real and a lot more ugly in the sunlight.

Aragorn stood and faced them.

"We fight," the King leered.

There was a silent pause.

"HURRAY!" Meghan whooped, throwing her hands up.

"Come," Aragorn gestured, "we must stop the ships. We will challenge them there, where the bank is flat." He turned to the Undead King. "Follow behind us when they have stilled their sails. We will ambush them and claim the ships."

"I do not take orders from a stinking fleshbag," the King snarled, but he jerked his head as a command to the army. Within a moment, they had melted back into the mountainside.

"Meghan, perhaps it would be wise for you to remain here," Legolas said. The way he wouldn't meet her eyes told her that he didn't exactly know how she would respond.

She drew herself up to her full height in an attempt to be imposing. "If I can handle Skull Mountain, then I can handle Pirates of the Caribbean."

"Stop badgering the lass, Princeling," Gimli grunted. "She's not yours."

"We have not the time," Aragorn called over his shoulder, already making his way down the hillside. "Meghan comes with us."

"Dwarves were not made for scaling mountains…" Gimli huffed as he began to arduously descend.

Legolas gave her a searching look. "Will you at least agree to stay behind me?"

"Deal." Meghan stuck out a hand to shake on it.

Instead, Legolas took her hand in his and kissed her knuckles in that particularly heart-melting way of his, then lightly followed the other two down.

*How does he do that?*

By the time she painstakingly crept down the mountainside without tumbling headfirst, the other three had planted themselves in a line facing the river. The ships were no more than a stone's throw away.
"You may go no further," Aragorn said in a quiet yet carrying voice. "You will not enter Gondor."

The men on the ships laughed raucously.

Meghan shifted a bit, staying behind Legolas as promised but not liking it very much. She wondered how the three men could be so calm. These pirate guys could probably shoot all of us in like, five seconds.

"Who are you to deny us passage?" scoffed one of the pirates.

"Legolas, fire a warning shot past the bosun's ear." Still, Aragorn was cool as a cucumber.

"Mind your aim," Gimli grunted as Legolas drew the bowstring back to his ear.

"Gimli, I feel like Legolas can probably—" Meghan began to say. Nevertheless, Gimli nudged the bottom curve of Legolas' bow just as he released his arrow, and the ugliest, hairiest man that she had ever seen toppled over with a strangled cry. Meghan couldn't see Legolas' face, but she guessed that he was rolling his eyes ever so slightly.

"That's it. Right. We warned you. Prepare to be boarded!" Gimli said.

"Boarded! By you and whose army?" the pirate captain guffawed.

Just at that moment things got a bit chaotic. There was a shrill, metallic sound that Meghan was beginning to associate with the Undead in motion, and then the ships turned into broccoli. Well, not actually broccoli, but the way the greenish shapes of the Undead swarmed the decks and the rigging really looked like shrubbery. There was much screaming and yelling and general commotion but luckily, much of the actual fighting was obscured by the green-grey haze.

Meghan hardly had time to get nauseous before the whole thing was over. The Undead slowed down, dissolving into the ships, and somehow the pirates were gone, either thrown overboard or… Meghan didn't dare think about any other means of disposal.

The King of the Undead wafted up to Aragorn and made a grand gesture toward the ships. "My liege," he said in a mockingly deferential tone.

Aragorn ignored the farce. "Much time has been lost. We must make haste to aid Gondor before all hope is lost."

The Undead had already found a boat to ferry them onto the ships. Meghan grimaced as she practically crawled in. The thing was filthy, covered in river-slime and crusted sea spray. The last time she had been in a boat, the Fellowship was still together. For the first time, she wondered about Frodo and Sam. All she remembered was a long, dark journey for them.

Stay safe, guys.
It was a mystery to Meghan how *all* the Undead fit onto the ships. It was like many of them melted into their surroundings, be it each other or the ship's timbers, but they could still physically interact at will with everything. They were, in fact, sailing all the ships. She could see their flickering shapes in the rigging.

Legolas, Aragorn, and Gimli were below decks, planning and talking with the Undead King – or arguing with him. The King was so sour and ornery that Meghan had given up and come to the upper decks for fresh air. She had hoped that Legolas would follow her. *But he's too professional for that. There's a job to be done.*

She glanced around the deck. It was empty except for a lone, greeny-grey figure standing at the starboard bow, gazing at the riverbank as it slid by. Meghan screwed up her courage and walked over, not entirely sure why she wanted to talk to a ghost.

"Hello," she squeaked, and steadied her voice. "I'm Meghan."

The Undead turned one eye to her. (His other eye socket was empty.) He said nothing.

"Do you have a name?" Meghan asked.

Silence.

"I guess you can't talk."

He stared at her, stony.

"I guess I'll call you Bob, then."

He turned back to the riverside.

"You're daydreaming, aren't you?" she said, suddenly struck by his air of melancholy. "You've been this way for a very long time and now you're remembering what it's like to be awake."

Nothing for a moment, then one slow nod.

"I'm sorry to have interrupted. I'll leave you to it." She began to go, but he reached out to stop her. He shook his head. "Oh, okay. Um, I'll stay."

She stood by him, just quietly watching the landscape pass by. After a while, she found herself talking, telling him her story. At first she thought he wasn't listening, until she noticed that he had tilted his head to her.

She was just beginning to detail her concerns about Éowyn when Bob unexpectedly turned around and bowed. She turned to see Legolas bowing in reply.
"Honor to Numenor," he said, saluting Bob in the Elvish fashion by folding one arm across his chest. Bob solemnly returned the gesture, then faced Meghan and repeated the same motion. Baffled, Meghan was just reaching up to do the same when he vanished.

"Bye, Bob," she said in case he could somehow still hear her.

"Bob?" Legolas said in a quizzical tone as he stepped forward to stand beside her.

"I just wanted to call him something," she said. "None of them seem to be able to talk. I don't know his real name."

"I believe that their muteness is part of the curse."

"Hmm." There was a pause, both of them looking at the shore slipping past. "Oh. How did discussions with Captain Undead go?"

Legolas seemed to be choosing his words thoughtfully. "I think the King of the Undead has gone mad. It made conversation… challenging."

"I suppose I would have gone crazy, too. Did you guys decide on anything?"

"To tell the truth, I grew weary of his ravings. Perhaps it was cowardly of me, but I abandoned Aragorn and Gimli to him so that I might come here and stand with you."

"Oh," Meghan said, not sure how to respond aloud, because inside she was jumping up and down. *He came to see me! He came to see ME!* Trying to hide her elation, she looked squarely over the railings and studied the riverbank.

"Meghan," he said, and there was something in his voice that made her heart feel twice its natural size. He put his fingertips under her chin and drew her gaze back to him. "I know you lose patience with me when I ask this question, but I must ask. When the ships dock in Osgiliath, will you remain aboard?"

Looking up at him, she realized that she'd been fighting him. She had been so determined to prove that she could handle anything, that she became blind to him. He knew her limits and had only been keeping her inside them while making it look like he was overprotective. Instead of calling out her weaknesses, he quietly and doggedly tried to protect her.

*How terribly unfair I've been to him,* she thought with a sinking heart. *Yes, he says the wrong thing sometimes. But he is quite simply too good for you.* She noticed that she was staring at him, openmouthed. He seemed to be braced for a firestorm, for arguing her out of her own foolishness.

"Yes, of course, I'll stay, you're right," the words tumbled out in a rush, she was in such a hurry to agree. His face relaxed into something of a smile, although it was more relief than happiness.

"Thank you," he said, then quirked an eyebrow. "Perhaps, when this is past, we can resume your archery lessons."

Meghan had to laugh. "No matter how many lessons I take, I don't think you will ever let me near a battlefield."

"That is true."

And suddenly he was very serious, and his eyes got that certain look that made Meghan feel like jelly inside. She could feel her breath slowing down and her heart speeding up.
Kiss me, she thought simply.

"Meghan..." he murmured as he moved toward her.

"Confounded ladders! A plague upon all shipbuilders!" Gimli's roar burst from the hatch.

Legolas took a step away from her, looking uncomfortable. Meghan's heart rate unceremoniously dropped back to its normal pace. The top of Gimli's head (or rather, his helmet) appeared and then slowly the rest of him crawled onto the deck.

"Blast that wretched unnatural ghoul. I am sick of this waiting." Gimli glowered at Legolas, who still looked a little uneasy. "I thought that I surely gave you enough time, Laddie."

"Time for what?" Meghan asked.

"No matter." Gimli waved a gloved hand and walked over to stand in between them. "Ah! I can see the smoke from the city. We are getting close."

Meghan looked overtop the Dwarf's head at Legolas. Was she imagining things, or were the tips of his pointy ears slightly pink?

"I should go below decks and inform Aragorn that we are nearing Minas Tirith," he said quickly, not meeting her eyes. And with an awkward bow to her, he disappeared down the hatch.

Gimli immediately turned a stern look on Meghan. "You will be relieved to know that I have spoken to the Princeling on your behalf."

"WHAT?" Meghan choked.

"It seems to me that I recall encouraging you to initiate more with the lad." Gimli sagely gazed into the middle distance. "I simply suggested the same thing to him."

Meghan helplessly opened and closed her mouth, unable to form a coherent sentence. "Gimli," she finally blurted out, "what—how—is that what you meant with 'enough time'?"

"You are most welcome." He bowed.

"I'm going to walk over there now," she said, pointing across the deck.

She didn't get far before Aragorn came up, followed by Legolas. The latter shot her an apologetic look and went to join Gimli, but Aragorn strode over to her.

"Legolas told me that you agreed to stay aboard," he said.

"Yes," she replied, not sure what else to say. *Oh yes. I had a major revelation that I've been kind of a jerk to him. No big deal.*

"Good." He nodded and started to walk away.

"Aragorn," Meghan said. He turned back to her, but she couldn't find the words. "I-- I know this is dangerous. But... but... Everyone's going to be alright... right?" She tried to keep her eyes on him instead of sliding over to Legolas.

She could see the compassion in his eyes and a part of her decided that he would be a wonderful father someday. He took a breath, weighing how to respond.
"Meghan, I do not have to gift of foresight. I can promise nothing. But it may bring you comfort to know that Legolas, Gimli, and I are brothers in arms. We are not often divided on the battlefield."

She liked that idea, that the three of them guarded and protected each other. "Thank you," she whispered.

Something like a smile creased the corners of Aragorn's eyes. He leaned toward her and dropped his voice lower. "Legolas has fought many battles. In all the long years I have known him, I have seen him injured thrice, and the worst of those no more than a graze."

"Really?" Meghan snuck a glance at him, then dropped into a whisper, too. "In all the long years you've known him, have you ever seen his hair mussed?"

It always surprised her when Aragorn laughed, but it also made her feel like laughing with him. "I have," he chuckled. "But that is a tale for another time."

She could see out of the corner of her eye that Legolas and Gimli were coming over, and she smiled at Aragorn. "I hope you'll tell me someday, then."

"Well, laddie, did that stinking unnatural creature agree to your plan?" Gimli growled.

"Yes," Aragorn replied, slipping back into the role of somber leader. "The Undead King and his men will do my bidding."

Looking around, Meghan noticed that all the greenish figures on the rigging above had melted away, presumably into the woodwork of the ships. "How far away from the port are we?"

"If the wind holds, no more than a quarter of an hour, I wager," Aragorn said, looking down the river.

The next fifteen minutes were fairly quiet. Now that the long journey down the river was almost over, the gravity of the next few hours struck them. Meghan felt useless and uneasy. Despite Aragorn's reassuring words, she knew that they were heading into a horrific battlefield.

As they drew closer to the stone ruins that must have once been a beautiful port, Aragorn told them to crouch low so that the mob of Orcs couldn't see them. Meghan just caught a glimpse of what seemed like endless rows of the disgusting creatures before she ducked behind a barrel.

She wondered how the ship would stop with no one to man the sails, but somehow the Undead managed to stay unseen and still maneuver the ship. As it slowed alongside the port, a harsh voice called out,

"Late as usual, pirate scum! There's knife-work here that needs doing. Come on, ya sea rats! Get off your ships!"

Legolas caught her gaze and held it for a split second. Come back to me! she tried to say with her eyes. And then he was gone.

She could hear the rush of the Undead sweeping out of the ships and the screams of Orcs as they were massacred by an enemy they were absolutely terrified of. Meghan warred with panic for a moment, then stood up to see what was going on. Sure enough, a solid wall of Undead rushed away, taking down every goblin in its path. Somewhere amidst the greenish wisps, she could see
the solid forms of her friends. There was little for them to do, until they cleared the solid knot of Undead and broke onto the real battlefield.

A black arrow thunked into the barrel she had been hiding behind, and she ducked down. But there were no more. Within a moment, even the screams of the Orcs faded into the distance. Meghan had to take one more look, but she only saw dark, filthy armor and twisted goblin faces in the piles of carcasses strewn across the dock. Even at a distance, the sight of so much gore brought on a wave of dizziness. She sat back down, hard.

*Great. Now to wait,* she thought. At Helms Deep, she had been distracted by drugging and hiding Haldir, not to mention Éowyn's occasional check-ins. Meghan miserably twisted the corner of her cloak and choked back tears.

A guttural sound made her freeze.

*Did I imagine that?*

No, there it was again, a throaty grumble, now accompanied by ragged breathing. "Reeking ghouls," it hissed. Meghan could tell by the way the sounds carried that the speaker was moving.

Toward the ship.

A scream bubbled into her throat at the same moment that she realized there was no one to hear her. She clenched her teeth to keep it in. The Orc was probably just moving about to steal from his dead fellows. He probably didn't know she was still aboard. He would probably leave soon.

She tried to quiet her breathing so that she could listen better. The Orc didn't seem to be slowing down to pocket spoils. He was ten yards away from the ship. Five yards. Five feet.

*He's going to board the ship,* Meghan quailed. She blinked the tears out of her eyes and looked around, assessing her resources. She was surprised when she remembered the sword buckled around her waist. She had gotten so used to carrying it that she forgot she had it.

The Orc was painstakingly crawling up the rope netting that draped over the side of the ship. She used the creaking of the ropes to slowly draw her sword and edge a little further around the barrel. It was big enough to completely conceal her, and she hoped to stay that way.

With a clatter, the Orc tumbled onto the deck, cursing in a strange, harsh language. "Where's that filthy she-elf, I wonder?" it snarled. "I'm gonna stick her with her own arrows."

Meghan felt like every muscle in her body had swollen to twice its size and frozen into place. Slow, heavy footsteps crept forward. *This is a terrible hiding place,* she thought with a certain dreamlike clarity. *I really should have gone below decks and hidden in the captain's quarters."

And then the Orc was right in front of her, but peering hard in the other direction. She could see the shaft of one of Legolas' arrows protruding from its collarbone. For one fraction of second, she gripped her sword and prepared to sink it into the creature's back. She was one fraction of a second too late. The Orc whirled around and struck the sword out of her hands with a snarl.

"There you are, she-witch," it growled, a leer distorting its already grotesque face. "Your mate tried to kill me with this." It snapped off the arrow shaft and howled. Meghan wondered if it was physically possible for her eyes to pop out of her head. She was definitely going to have a heart attack soon.

"St-stop it," she quivered, holding her hands up a bit. "I surrender."
The Orc backhanded her powerfully across the jaw, sending her sprawling against the railing. Fireworks danced across her vision. *This isn't how it's supposed to be. I'm supposed to be safe on the ship.*

"We're gonna have fun, you and me," the Orc taunted. "I reckon no one is coming this way for at least an hour. That's plenty of time." He grabbed a fistful of her hair and dragged her upright.

The full impact of what he meant struck Meghan worse than his actual blow. "LEGOLAS!" she screamed, clawing at the Orc's hand in her hair as the sobs started.

The Orc started to cackle. Meghan kicked at him, trying to twist out of his grasp. "You're not going anywh—" His sneer was cut short by a blade sticking out from his chest. He coughed up black blood, and a splatter of it went across Meghan's face as his grip relaxed and they both toppled to the ground. The warm, sticky blood on her face made Meghan's insides heave, and a crushing blackness swept over her.

The last thing she remembered was a familiar green blur rushing toward her.
"Meghan!"

She couldn't understand why he was shouting.

"MEGHAN!"

Or why his hands seemed to be fluttering at her neck, then her wrist.

The only things that felt quite solid were the pounding in her head and the blackness that was starting to dissolve as the real world rushed back in. It took a great force of will to open her eyes, and an absolutely Herculean effort to focus her blurring vision.

"Meghan…" She was rewarded with a perfectly wonderful grin from Legolas, who looked like he might cry. He cupped her face between his hands and she could actually feel him trembling.

"Legolas?" she asked blearily, trying to shift her body into a more comfortable position and finding that her head throbbed more when she moved.

"I thought you were dead," he said, the grin on his face completely incongruous with his words. "Your friend – Bob – he came to me as the last of the Easterlings fell. He could not speak – he only pointed this way – when I saw the Orc – I thought you were dead."

All of a sudden, Meghan found herself crushed in his embrace. Her arms were pinned between her body and Legolas, so she couldn't even hug him back. Instead, she contented herself with being as still as possible in the hopes that he would simply never let go.

"What happened?" he asked. She started to look around, but he caught her chin before she could turn very far. "Not there," he said. "Not yet."

"Oh." She remembered the Orc's shocked face when a sword bloomed out of its chest, then the blood spattering across her face as it fell. She winced. "Is it… still on my face?"

There was a second where Meghan could see the debate in his eyes, whether to tell the truth and risk her getting sick, or to lie and hope for the best. Just knowing that the Orc's blood was on her made the bile rise into her throat. She reached up to scrub her face.

"No, you will just smear it," he said, catching her hands.

"I need it off," she choked, determined not to throw up on him.
"Close your eyes." It was an order, and for the first time, it occurred to Meghan that Legolas was a prince. He came across as quiet and sometimes awkward, but she realized that he was very comfortable with commanding an army – and a whole kingdom.

She closed her eyes.

After a moment he somehow managed to conjure up a damp cloth, and the cool fabric felt good against her skin. She struggled to master the shudders racking across her body, forcing herself to acknowledge that the blood wasn't on her anymore. As she could feel her muscles loosening, she noticed that Legolas wasn't really going near her left eye.

"The skin is torn above your eye," he said calmly, as if he read her thoughts. "And it is bruised. I think it is too late to stitch it."

Meghan knew that when Legolas got that calm, he was overcompensating to cover up his own emotions. She peeked her good eye open. "So you're saying I have a battle scar?"

He looked like he was holding himself in. The grin was gone. Instead, he wore an expression that may as well have been war paint. It startled her.

"What happened with the Orc?" he asked again.

"It's done." She laid a hand on his shoulder. "Please help me up."

He did, steadying her as she climbed to her feet. He hovered, not quite letting go of her elbow. "Meghan," he began. His expression faltered, then melted into guilt. "Please forgive me. I should not have left you unprotected—"

She cut him off. "It wasn't your fault. And the worst that happened was that I got a black eye. Wait, what happened to Bob?"

"Aragorn released the Undead. I do not know where the souls of men go when they pass from this world."

"So he's gone."

"Yes, he is gone."

"Oh." She looked up at the rigging above their heads, diligently keeping her eyes away from the dead Orc at their feet. She didn't know what to say, except that she wanted to go home. But what is home? Her life before Middle earth felt like a dream. She didn't want to go back there. The best she could come up with was, "I'm very tired, Legolas."

"Of course," he said, beginning to move then pausing. "Meghan, it is a long walk to the city gates, and the battlefield is strewn with gore. Will you be alright?"

She shuddered in a breath. "I'll have to be, won't I."

They got about twenty yards onto the battlefield before Meghan doubled over and vomited. The pounding in her head felt like a hammer on an anvil. As she wiped her mouth with the back of her hand, she decided not to cry.

Legolas looked completely lost. What can I do? his eyes asked.

"I'm alright," Meghan rasped, her throat already a little raw.
"Give me your hand," he said, so she latticed her fingers between his. With gentle insistence, he began to guide her. She kept her eyes on the back of his head, trusting him. Still, the fetid smells cloyed around her. Soon the nausea rose up again, and she emptied what was left in her stomach.

"Meghan," Legolas said, the word balanced between a question and a decision. A decision to do what? Meghan wondered from the haze of sickness.

"I can do this," she said. She realized that she was clenching his hand, clinging to something solid and real and warm as her world swam.

It took them three hours. By the time they got to the ruined city gates, the sky had darkened to a deep grey-blue. Meghan barely paid attention to her surroundings as he guided her through the streets. She was somewhat aware of many people hurrying around, and that she was slowly going uphill.

As the nausea began to pass, her head cleared a little. "Where are we going?"

"A city as large as this must have a place of healing," he replied. "The cut over your eye should be cleaned. And I need—" he cut himself off with an irritated expression.

Meghan's senses came into sharp focus as suspicion instantly blossomed in her mind. "You need what?"

"It is nothing." He didn't make eye contact, scanning upwards to the next city level instead.

"What is it? You said it."

He didn't stop moving, just tightened his grip on her hand and pulled her in a somewhat diagonal path toward another gate up ahead. "I said it was nothing."

"Legolas, hold on," she said. When he ignored her, she simply stopped walking and put her other hand on his forearm. He froze, still facing away from her. She slid around him so that she could see his eyes. "Legolas, please tell me what's going on."

"You need a healer," he said firmly, finally looking at her. "You have taken a severe blow to the head, and you are beginning to experience dehydration."

She wondered how to get him to open up, to trust her. "I know why I need a healer. I don't know why do you need one. Please let me be your equal. Please let me in."

There was a pause.

"I do not think you should see it," he said at last, and she could hear the exhaustion in his voice.

"See. What."

He eyed her for a moment, and she eyed him right back. After a moment, he pushed his cloak behind his shoulder and lifted his arm to reveal a dark stain that spread down the side of his ribcage. His shirt was raggedly torn, gaping open enough for her to see a long, bloody gash beneath.

"Legolas," she choked, as if the air had been sucked from her lungs.

He quickly drew the cloak around himself again. "It is not as bad as it looks. Now will you come?"

Meghan had her hands clamped over her mouth, but she moved them long enough to say, "Does it
hurt?"  Stupid! Of course it hurts!

"No," he sighed as he stuck out his hand. "We should keep going."

Now that she knew Legolas had a fairly severe injury, she noticed that he was a little pale – even for him. And he looked bone-weary. You've been hiding this from me for hours, she thought achingly. And I was too lost in my own misery to notice.

She took his hand and they started walking again. "Where are we going?"

"The healing house."

"I mean where are we going."

"It is likely on the upper levels, closer to where the nobility live."

"So you don't know exactly where it is."

"No."

It felt like a nightmare as they wove through the crowded streets. Her head still ached, and Legolas was unraveling little by little. A stumble here, a confused look there. She wondered how much blood he'd lost. After a while the lines blurred and then she was the leader, except all she knew to do was go up.

"Legolas!"

Never in her life had Meghan been happier to hear Gimli's gruff voice. He appeared around a cluster of hurrying women, his face a mixture of relief and fury. Legolas roused a bit at the sight of him.

"Confound it all, you snot-nosed Princeling," the dwarf fumed as he stalked toward them. "Running off like that after that reeking goblin stuck you. I thought you were dead! I just went to the Houses of Healing to find your body!"

"My friend," Legolas said with a ghost of a grin. "I will live to trouble you still."

Gimli peered hard at them. "The pair of you look like those Undead fellows, perhaps even greener. You'd better come along."

"Are we close to the healing thing?" Meghan said.

"The entrance is around that corner there," Gimli grunted, gesturing down the street. "Come along. Aragorn is there."

It was mercifully calm in the Houses of Healing. Gimli bustled off to collect Aragorn, leaving Meghan and Legolas just inside the entrance. They both leaned side by side against the cool stone wall.

"Are you alright?" Meghan asked. She tried to examine him out of the corner of her eye, because she knew he would fake it if he knew she was looking.

He managed a faint smile for her. "I am better here where it is quiet."

"How did it happen?" she whispered. She could feel tears starting in her eyes and she didn't want him to hear it in her voice.
"What?"

She nodded at his stomach. "That."

"I was distracted. For an instant I questioned if my arrow felled that Orc back at the harbor." He tilted his head to look at her, appraising her bruised eye. "It seems I was right to worry."

The laugh turned into a sob in her throat, which she tried to cover with a cough. She was saved from attempting any more bad acting by Gimli and Aragorn, who were flanked by an older, round woman with silver hair. Aragorn wasted no time in waving Legolas down an adjacent hallway, but he spared a wan smile for Meghan.

"Are you well?" he asked as they entered a large hall that was lined with rows upon rows of white cots. Many were occupied by sleeping soldiers in various degrees of bandages. Some men were still being tended by women in grey smocks.

"Yes, just a black eye," Meghan said. "But Legolas-- he's--"

"Gimli told me," Aragorn said. "Legolas, sit down there. Meghan, this is Ioreth. She is a healer."

He gestured to the woman, who had followed them in.

"Um, hello," Meghan said, barely able to acknowledge her.

"Lassie, perhaps you should have your eye looked at," Gimli grunted. "Aragorn has the Princeling well in hand."

Cold tendrils of panic laced up her spine. Leave Legolas? She stared at him numbly. He was slowly easing his quiver off his shoulder, and Aragorn was crushing some leaves in a shallow bowl.

"Gimli is right," Legolas said. "Let Ioreth tend to you."

They're giving me an out, she thought. So that I don't get sick when I see Legolas' injury. She nodded stupidly, turning towards the woman.

"Poor lamb," Ioreth tutted, putting a gentle arm around Meghan's shoulders and steering her out of the hall. "Come along. You look like you haven't slept or eaten in days."

Ioreth showed her into a small room, where she cleaned Meghan's cut and smoothed a cooling salve on the skin around it. "Now," she said, "I'm going to fetch you a crust to eat. While I'm about it, there's a washtub there and a comb beside it. Once you've washed and eaten, you'll need to have a good long sleep." And with that she bustled out of the room.

Meghan stripped out of her clothes and scrubbed all the filth of the day from her skin. She dug a somewhat fresh pair of trousers and a blouse from her pack and slid into them. Just as she was beginning to comb her hair, Ioreth reappeared.

"Here's your supper, dear," she said, and set down a tray with a slice of brown bread and a mug on it. "Drink that water slowly, now, else you'll bring it all back up."

She did as she was told, and carefully sipped a little in between each bite of the dry bread. She had had enough vomiting for a lifetime.

"Can I go back now?" she asked, swallowing the last drops of water.
"Well, I suppose so." Ioreth wore a perplexed look. "I am not entirely sure if it would be proper for you to pass the night in the—"

"I don't care," Meghan said, standing up. "Please show me back."

A smile stole over Ioreth's face. "I was going to say that even if it's not proper, I cannot blame you. If I had one with such a sweet face as his, I would not be parted from him, either. This way."

Meghan was too tired to blush. She followed Ioreth through the passageways, back the way they came. At the doorway to the hall, they met Aragorn. Ioreth inclined her head to him and left.

"Is he alright?" Meghan asked, the *what ifs* rising up in her mind.

"He has two broken ribs, and the wound is deep. I have bound it, but the rest he must do on his own."

"But he'll be alright," Meghan insisted.

"Yes," Aragorn nodded. "Elves heal very quickly. He is sleeping now."

"Can I see him anyway?"

"The cot next to his is empty. You must rest, as well."

"Thank you, Aragorn." She took a shuddering breath. "I'm so glad you're alright. I'm just– I'm very tired."

"Rest," Aragorn said. "I will come to check Legolas in the morning."

"Thank you. Goodnight, Aragorn."

"Goodnight."

When she got to Legolas, she made herself lie down on the adjacent cot and take a deep breath. Once she got herself under control, she curled onto her side and looked at him.

He was asleep, stretched out on his side with a white linen bandage wrapped around his ribs. He looked vulnerable, and younger than she could have imagined him. She saw a few silvery ridges on his bare arms and realized they were scars.

For the first time that day, she allowed herself to cry.
She dreamed about falling.

Then her dreams melted into nightmares of leering Orcs and blood and she was fighting and falling and losing and *losing him* and she wanted to scream but couldn't so she cried instead—

She woke up.

"You talk in your sleep," Legolas said. He was sitting on the floor next to her cot, one hand clasped around her own. He wore a loose grey-blue shirt, but she could see the white bandages peeking from his unlaced collar.

"You okay?" Meghan asked groggily. She was a little below eye-level with him, so she didn't bother to sit up.

"I am better," he said. His thumb traced circles onto her palm. "Bad dreams?"

"Ugh," Meghan mumbled, curling up a little more. She rubbed her free hand over her eyes. "Are you really alright? You looked so... You were sleeping. I thought Elves didn't sleep?"

"Sometimes, to recover from great trauma or exhaustion, we will enter a state very much like sleep. Elves often heal much more quickly than other races." He smiled a little. "Your eye is nearly mended."

She reached up in surprise, but couldn't even remember which eye had been hurt. The ache of the bruises had melted away, and she finally remembered it was the left when she discovered a slight tenderness in her brow. "Oh," she said. "I don't even have a headache anymore."

"SSHH!"

The shush was much louder than their voices had been. Both turned to see Ioreth marching toward them, wearing an imperious face.

"This is a place of rest, not a social hall," she said in something that managed to be both a whisper and a shout. "There are wounded soldiers trying to *sleep* in here, just as you two should be."

Meghan sat up, but didn't withdraw her hand from Legolas'. "What time is it?"

"Time for *rest,*" Ioreth retorted, smoothing her skirts.

"Perhaps it would be beneficial to the patient if we took a turn in the open air?" Legolas suggested.

Ioreth folded her arms across her chest and fixed him with a look. "Do not venture to believe that you can fool me with your youthful face and pleasing manners, young man. I know you are a patient even more than your lady is."
He opened his mouth and then shut it.

"To sleep, both of you," Ioreth commanded, obviously satisfied that she was fully in control of the situation. "It is still hours before dawn. And do not let me catch you chattering away like children at a festival again."

Legolas meekly unfolded himself from the floor and stretched out on his cot while Meghan tried to disappear into hers. Ioreth swept a stern look across them and nodded, then strode away.

"I don't remember her being so scary last night," Meghan whispered.

"I have not felt this chastised since I was a schoolboy and my tutor caught me cheating," Legolas whispered back.

"You cheated?" Meghan choked in a loud voice.

"Hush!" Legolas hissed.

Footsteps echoed toward them. Meghan panicked and went completely limp, pretending to be asleep. Ioreth's footsteps slowed near them, paused for a moment, then receded away again. Meghan peeked one eye open, only to discover that Legolas was playing dead, too.

"Did you really cheat in school when you were little?" she murmured.

He smiled, but didn't open his eyes. Or say anything.

"Oh my god, you were a cheater."

"Shhh, I am sleeping," he said.

Meghan couldn't do anything but grin into the darkness.

When Meghan drifted awake again, it was to the quiet bustle of busyness in the room. She blinked her eyes to clear away the sticky feeling. About half of the cots were empty now, and almost all of the wounded men were awake in some measure or another. Grey-garbed woman flitted about the room, administering medicines and changing bandages and delivering meals. Pale sunlight seeped through the windows.

"Good morning."

She rolled over to see Legolas sitting cross-legged on his cot, examining the grip of one of his daggers. She could tell by the way he held his torso stiffly that he was still in pain, but despite that he had an air of… health? No, not quite healthy, she thought. He just looks ready to leave. I wonder if he feels uneasy in a sick house.

"G'morning," she slurred sleepily.

"Ioreth is not on duty this morning," he said without looking up from the dagger. There was something cryptic and mischievous about the way he said it.

What is it about getting injured that turned him into a ten year old boy?

"Are you suggesting that we make a run for it before she gets back?" she asked, sitting up.

He shot her a scandalized look. "I am suggesting that we repair to the courtyard for some fresh air."
Is he flirting? Oh my god I can't tell anymore. The one thing Meghan was sure of was that she felt… relaxed. Comfortable. Natural. I don't know if Elves drink coffee but this somehow reminds me of a coffee date. Thinking about coffee made her realize how hungry she was.

"I am achin' for some bacon," she admitted with a casual shrug. "Do you think we could find food somewhere?"

"I cannot promise that there will be bacon," Legolas said.

She grabbed her sword and buckled the belt around her waist. "I could settle for toast and jam. And some fresh air."

He eased off his cot, not actually wincing but keeping such a straight face that she knew he was hiding it. But he smiled at her as he tucked the dagger into its sheath and then maneuvered his quiver over his shoulder. "Shall we?"

"Let's go." Am I supposed to take his arm or...? Before she could decide, his hand was in hers and they were walking and it almost felt like everything was coming up roses.

As it turned out, there was a small commissary in the Houses of Healing, where Meghan had to make good on her promise to be satisfied with jam and toasted bread. They ate the simple meal in relative silence.

"Now what?" Meghan said when they finished up.

"Perhaps it is time to find the others," Legolas said.

She wasn't sure if she was quite ready to let him back into the swing of things, judging by how voraciously he had eaten their meager breakfast and the way he kept one arm casually folded over his torso. She wondered if he even realized that he was doing it. Still, she didn't know how to change his mind without directly challenging him, and she was enjoying their newfound easiness too much to risk it with an argument.

Besides, Aragorn won't ask much from him, she consoled herself. And my eyebrow did heal so quickly. He may still be feeling rough, but he'll probably be back to normal in a few days.

"That sounds good," she said. "Where do you think they are?"

"Aragorn visited this morning while you were still sleeping," Legolas said. "He mentioned that they would gather for a war council at midday. I believe they will be in the throne room."

"I've never been to a war council before." Meghan grinned, trying to look demure. "What should I wear?"

Legolas flashed a wry smile. "You will do very well as you are."

It took them a little while to navigate through the ruined streets to the uppermost level of the city, but the guards outside the throne room seemed to be expecting them and let them in without question. It was a long hall, echoing with Gimli's voice as he boomed,

"Let him stay there, let him rot! Why should we care?"

Aragorn, Gandalf, Gimli, and Éomer were scattered at the steps up to the throne. Aragorn acknowledged Legolas and Meghan's approach with a nod, but Gimli glowered at them as if to say, What have the pair of you been up to all morning?
"Because ten thousand Orcs now stand between Frodo and Mount Doom," Gandalf was saying. "I've sent him to his death."

"No," Aragorn said firmly. "There is still hope for Frodo. He needs time and safe passage across the Plains of Gorgoroth. We can give him that."

"How?" Gimli sounded dubious.

"Draw out Sauron's armies. Empty his lands. Then we gather our full strength and march on the Black Gate."

What? "That sounds like a suicide mission," Meghan said. She knew that her fingers were curling around Legolas' hand more tightly than before but she couldn't bear to loosen them.

"We cannot achieve victory through strength of arms," Éomer agreed, giving her a sideways glance. She couldn't tell if it was disdain or respect.

Aragorn looked tired, but determined. "Not for ourselves. But we can give Frodo his chance if we keep Sauron's Eye fixed upon us. Keep him blind to all else that moves."

A suicide mission, she thought with a sinking heart.

"A diversion," Legolas said.


"It will take some time to gather the men and horses," Éomer said.

"We do not have the luxury of time. We will leave in the morning." Aragorn nodded curtly, and that seemed to dismiss the meeting.

Why are we all agreeing to this so quickly? Aren't there other options here? Her heartbeat was scrabbling wildly in her chest. It was too soon. They couldn't throw their lives away like this. She knew Legolas would go, injured or not.

"I'm coming with you," she announced.

Éomer rounded on her, suddenly angry. "The battlefield is no place for a woman," he snarled.

Her eyes started to sting as she searched for an advocate. Gandalf looked completely noncommittal, while Aragorn seemed to be struggling with what to say. Gimli, for once, was at a loss for words.

"Meghan, it is noble of you to offer," Aragorn said. Now he just looked sad. "But I cannot with clear conscience allow you to join our company."

"I'm coming," she said, dashing away the tears.

"She should be allowed to go," Legolas said. Meghan thought her eyes were going to pop out of her head.

"Really?" she asked.

Aragorn opened his mouth to say something, but Legolas shot him a look that changed his mind. "Very well," he said, inclining his head. "Be ready at first light."
Thank you, Meghan thought. Thank you for finally letting me make my own decisions about this.

"Legolas, perhaps you would accompany me to the Houses of Healing so that I may change your bandages," Aragorn continued.

"I'll come too," Meghan volunteered quickly. "I left my pack and cloak where we slept, I need to get them."

Legolas put a hand on her shoulder and looked very earnestly into her eyes. "The wound is still ugly. I will gather your things and bring them to you. Meanwhile, I think the Halflings would enjoy a visit."

"Merry and Pippin," Meghan said, remembering them for the first time since she stepped foot in the city.

"I will show you the way, lassie," Gimli grumbled. "Master Meriadoc is still in the western wing of the Houses, if I am not mistaken."

"I will meet you there," Legolas said.

"Okay," she relented. It felt wrong to let Legolas out of her sight, but she didn't have a much choice. He had stood up for her, insisting that she could join them in the morning. She couldn't very well repay him with a hissy fit.

She followed Gimli through the halls of the city. The dwarf didn't say anything, and she didn't either. Her mind was churning with thoughts about the next day. How can they even consider such a desperate plan? Even I know that nobody will survive a battle like this. But, if it's the only chance they have... if it means that everyone else lives... Meghan felt sick.

After a short while, Gimli led her into a large chamber much like the one she and Legolas had been in the night before. This one seemed to have several levels, with arches and tall plants to divide them. It was in one of these antechambers that they found Merry and Pippin, who seemed none the worse for the wear despite the bandages around Merry's forearm.

Even though the Hobbits chattered gaily about their turn as soldiers of Gondor and Rohan, Meghan couldn't shake the feeling of unease. She wanted to walk, to run, to do something other than sit still.

"Are you alright, Meghan?" Pippin sounded concerned.

She realized she'd been staring into space, and hastily refocused her attention. "I just need a little fresh air, is all. I think I'll go for a walk...?"

"Of course," Merry said. "Maybe we will see you at supper later. Have a pleasant walk."

"Thanks," she said, rising from her seat on the floor.

She barely got a few steps into the larger hall when she saw Legolas wending through the rows of cots. The sight of him sent fresh surges of dread over her. It's not fair, she cried to herself. He was almost mine, and tomorrow we're going to march to our own graveyard.

He did not seem to share her fears as he came up. "This is for you," he said, holding out a tin cup. "Ioreth sent it. She claims it is an elixir to cure the last of your dehydration from yesterday."

Meghan took it and peered into it dubiously. The liquid inside was a muddy grey color, and she could tell by the temperature of the cup that it was cold. "Do you think it will taste gross?"
"She made me take a draught before I left. It was only a little oversweet."

"Oh. Okay." Meghan took a deep breath and knocked back the entire cup in one go. "That wasn't so bad."

A huge, crushing, inexorable wave of sleepiness flooded over her, followed immediately by realization. "You… bastard!" she hissed around a yawn that almost split her head open. She was dimly aware of Legolas catching her before she hit the floor.

Darkness rolled in.
Meghan's stomach growled.

Then she opened her eyes.

At first, all she could comprehend through the haze of grogginess was that she was so, so hungry. She struggled upright, blearily pushing away the heavy blanket that somehow seemed to be more like a straitjacket. The chilly air soaked through her soft linen tunic and she could feel goosebumps rising on her skin.

Where am I? she wondered, glancing around. A wan shaft of sunlight peeked through the windowslit to illuminate a small grey room with two cots and precious little else.

She scrambled off the cot, hissing when her bare feet touched the cold stone floor. Her things were at the foot of the bed, so she stuffed her feet into her boots and grabbed her sword. The wooden door opened easily when she shoved against it. Beyond was a wide corridor, dancing with firelight. A grey-garbed girl with folded blankets in her arms was walking by.

"Wait," Meghan choked around the sudden ache in her throat. It felt like she had forgotten how to speak. "Are they gone– Did they–"

The girl just looked confused. "Who, m'lady?"

Insensible rage swept over Meghan. "Who do you think?" she shrieked. "Who could I possibly be referring to? Oh I don't know, maybe an army of men going to their death!"

Another figure rounded a corner of the hallway and hurried over. "Go and fetch Lady Éowyn," she said to the girl as Meghan realized that it was Ioreth.

"YOU!" she screeched. "Did you help him brew that tea? Did you help him drug me?"

"Now!" Ioreth hissed, and the girl scampered away. "Lady Meghan, you must be famished. Perhaps you would like—"

"I would not 'perhaps like' to do anything! He drugged me with my own tea and I know somebody helped him boil water. I trusted him! I—"

Ioreth put a hand up to interrupt her. "My lady, I understand that you are upset, but you mustn't shout. This is a house for the sick and wounded, and I expect quiet in this place."


"I must insist that you return to your chamber until you regain your composure." Ioreth reached for her arm to pull her back into the bedchamber.
"I AM GOING TO KILL HIM!" Meghan screamed, twisting away from the older woman.

By this point she heard footsteps echoing down the hall. A moment later Éowyn appeared, flanked by two guards and the girl from before.

"Meghan," Éowyn said in a firm voice. "This is no way to comport yourself."

"Éowyn? What are you doing here?" Meghan reeled, anger momentarily forgotten amidst her confusion.

"I rode as a man in my uncle's army," Éowyn replied brusquely. "I wish I could have done the same when the company rode for the Black Gate."

The ache and the fury flooded back in. "Are they too far gone? Couldn't we ride after them?"

"You have been asleep for nearly three days," Éowyn said.

"But I was going to stay with him!" Meghan could feel the hysteria creeping up her throat. "I was—I was going to—" *I was going to die with him…*

"I know," Éowyn murmured. She waved the guards and the healers away. "Come. Legolas left something for you."

Every fiber of Meghan's body felt raw. She helplessly followed Éowyn back into the small room and watched her rifle through a short chest of drawers.

"These are our quarters," the blonde explained. "There is a common hall down the corridor to the left where you may take your meals. Ah, here it is." She handed Meghan a folded square of heavy parchment. "Would you like to be alone?"

Meghan took the square and turned it over in her hands. *Is this a break up letter? It's going to be something about setting me free. Oh my god. He's going to set me free because he's going to die and he doesn't want me to stay faithful to his memory. Oh my god.*

"Please don't go," she said, realizing that Éowyn had already started to slip out the door. "I don't know what this says, but I could use a friend."

Éowyn nodded and closed the door again. "Very well."

Willing herself to breathe, Meghan sat down on one of the cots and unfolded the paper. The most beautiful handwriting she had ever seen made just a few lines on the page.

*Meghan,*

*I love you. Please forgive me for giving you the tea.*

*Legolas*

Meghan started to cry.

*I lost him! The thought twisted in her throat. And he loves me! Oh Legolas, how could you?* She felt the pallet shift as Éowyn settled next to her, then one of Éowyn's calloused hands slid over her own. It occurred to her that Éowyn was a rare friend, the kind that knew when not to speak but offer comfort in silence.

After a time, Meghan spent all her tears. She sucked in a shuddery breath and scrubbed the salt
from her eyes. At that moment her stomach grumbled and she tried to laugh a watery laugh.

Éowyn smiled. "I am hungry as well. Perhaps a bite to eat would put us both in better spirits."

The commissary was different than the one Legolas and Meghan had been to, but it still reminded her of their simple meal there. Éowyn did not seem to want to talk, so they ate in silence. Meghan spent the time regathering her frayed nerves. She felt like she had shattered. All she wanted to do was stitch herself back together, but she couldn't hang on to all the pieces at the same time.

"Éowyn," she burst out, "couldn't we follow them? Surely two people can travel faster than a whole army, even with a three day lead."

"There are no horses fit to ride," Éowyn replied. "Only unbroken yearlings and old carthorses."

*We could go on foot,* Meghan thought, but she didn't say it.

Éowyn reached across the rough wooden table to put a hand over Meghan's again. "There is nothing to be done. We can only wait."

"Oh," Meghan said. They both went back to their food.

"Meghan," Éowyn said after a moment. "I hope you know that you will always have a home at Edoras."

*She means if they all die.*

"Thank you," Meghan said, tears welling into her eyes. *No, I'm not going to cry anymore.*

They spent the rest of the afternoon wandering the halls of the Houses of Healing. Neither particularly wanted to talk, and nobody spoke to them. Meghan decided to never become a ghost.

The next three days were much the same, except most of the time Meghan was alone. Even though she shared a chamber with Êowyn, the blonde always rose much earlier than she did. Meghan soon discovered that she was allowed to leave the Houses, so she sometimes roamed as far as the third level of the city. Hardly anyone even looked at her, let alone tried to talk. Everyone seemed too wrapped in their own grief to see anything else.

On the fourth day, Meghan drifted into the main hall of the Houses of Healing. It was something of a common room, courtyard, and family den all on one. Those that were not confined to their beds came there to read or dice or talk. Meghan had avoided it so far because she didn't like the crowd, but by then she wanted company.

When she got there she saw Êowyn talking with a tall, ginger-haired man. His back was to Meghan, so she could only just see the side of his face. She hung back to watch them. *Éowyn seems so... at ease.* A moment later, the blonde laughed quietly at something the man said.

Just then Ioreth bustled over and said something to him that made him nod and take his leave of Êowyn. As he turned away, Meghan got a glimpse of him. *He has kind eyes,* she decided as she hurried over to Êowyn.

"Who was that?" Meghan asked, trying to be casual so as not to spook Êowyn.

"His name is Faramir," Éowyn replied. "He is the Steward of the city."

"Why is he here?"
"He did not say." She stared in the direction that he had walked, a far away look on her face – and perhaps just the faintest suggestion of a smile.

"Oh Éowyn," Meghan said with an involuntary little hop. "He's really cute. Did you get his number? Wait, how does that… do you have like carrier pigeons or something?"

"I hardly think he is cute," Éowyn said, looking startled.

"Handsome, I meant handsome." Meghan giggled. She probably thinks "cute" is just meant for babies and kittens.

The next morning, Meghan found Faramir and Éowyn talking again. This time she just smiled and turned around, hoping they wouldn't be interrupted like the day before. Instead she hunted down Ioreth.

The older woman looked wary when Meghan cornered her. "Do you intend to throw another tantrum?" Ioreth asked with a sniff.

"No," Meghan said, the heat rising to her face. "I know you thought you were being kind when you helped him make the tea. I just… I can't…"

Ioreth took pity on her. "Come come, child. You have had plenty of rest, perhaps some hard work will turn your thoughts away from those things."

"Thank you," Meghan sighed in relief. "That's what I wanted to talk to you about. I'm no good with blood but there's got to be something I can do to help."

"Oh, there is always work to be done in the Houses of Healing, so long as you do not mind roughening those dainty Elvish hands of yours."

Meghan decided that Gimli and Ioreth would get along like a house on fire, until she remembered that Gimli and the rest were not coming back. "No, I don't mind," she said.

From that point on, she became charwoman, dishwasher, sous chef, busboy, and handyman. There seemed to be no end to the jobs Ioreth could find for her. She scrubbed pots and ran errands and diced potatoes until her shoulders tightened into knots that would make a sailor proud. It felt so much better than aimlessly wandering.

On the eighth day, she was jarred awake by the blasting of trumpets. The sound was dimmed by the thick walls of her room, but even so, Meghan could hear at least a dozen individual horns.

They're coming back! she thought with a thrill racing up her back the same time as her stomach dropped.

Éowyn had already bolted halfway to the door. "So soon!" she said in a concerned voice.

Together, they hurried through the halls toward the main entrance. Meghan's heart was in her throat, in her toes, in the clouds – but her mind seemed to be stuck in a loop. Is he alive is he alive is he alive? She couldn't get outside fast enough. The walls of the Houses of Healing were crushing her.

They finally made it out into the courtyard. It was chaos. Three impossibly huge eagles were screaming at over a dozen archers that circled warily around them, while Gandalf – Gandalf? – shouted overtop the din.
"Stay, stay!" he bellowed. "Do not loose your arrows! These are Gwaihir's kin. Make way for the Ringbearers!"

The archers lowered their bows uncertainly. The eagles stopped screaming uncertainly. Meghan looked at Éowyn uncertainly. Then one of the eagles spread its wings, revealing two tiny, huddled shapes on the ground.

*Hobbits!* Meghan surged forward, irrationally certain that one was Pippin and he was dead. She was cut off by an army of healers that suddenly gushed into the courtyard as soon as the eagles ceased to be an immediate threat. At least ten grey-garbed women swarmed around the Halflings, quickly moving them to roughspun stretchers. The charge was led by none other than Ioreth, shouting orders like a true soldier.

"Steady with them, now! Bring them to the northern wing. You, Calima! Fetch hot water and more of that athelas. What ails them?" This last was directed at Gandalf, who looked like he was a thousand years old.

"They walked from the Shire to Mount Doom, woman!" Gandalf exploded.

Ioreth was entirely unperturbed as she followed her two tiny patients. "Be that as it may, I shall require more specifics if I am to treat…" Her voice faded away as the entire procession disappeared into the Houses of Healing. After a moment, all the remained in the courtyard were the eagles, the archers, and Meghan and Éowyn.

"So the army isn't back," Meghan said.

"No, my lady," one of the archers said helpfully.

At that, the biggest eagle gave one great, echoing *caw* and the three of them swept into the sky. Their wings churned the air into a windstorm, swirling Meghan's hair into her face. She didn't care. The army wasn't back.

It was two days until she could talk to Gandalf. Everyone seemed to need him, and she couldn't be selfish. Frodo was still unconscious, and Sam weak and malnourished. Everyone in the Houses tread softly and willed them to health. Meanwhile, the city rejoiced. Sauron had fallen! The darkness over! A new age for Middle earth!

Finally, Meghan saw an opportunity. It was late, past moonrise. She had been prowling the hallways, unable to sleep, when she tiptoed to Frodo's door. Hunched beside the Hobbit's bed was the old wizard, perhaps asleep, but likely not. She slipped in the door.

"Melethriel," he said in his deep growly voice. *I forgot all about that terrible Elvish name,* she thought.

"Gandalf, I—" Now that it came down to it, she didn't know how to ask. *In all the pandemonium of the battle, did you happen to notice if Legolas was alright?* It tasted silly.

"My dear," he said, turning toward her. His face was kind, and tired. "I am sorry. A wizard I may be, but I cannot tell you what befell any of our companions after the eagles arrived."

She could feel the tears forming in her eyes. "But he was alright," she whispered. "Before the eagles came."

"Who?" Gandalf's eyebrows drew together.
"Legolas." She snuffled.

"Ah," he said in a pleased, sing-song sigh. "So that tree did take root. Yes, Melethriel, Legolas was quite well the last I saw him."

Meghan tried to grab her soaring spirits before they raced away from her. After all, Gandalf made no promises about the battle after the eagles had flown him away to rescue the Hobbits. But quite well! The words were a balm. She sucked in a deep breath.

Gandalf had turned back to Frodo, who looked like a small shadow against the white sheets. He still hadn't woken.

"Will Frodo be alright?" she asked.

"He is drawing back from the darkness," Gandalf said thoughtfully. "Though I do not know that he will ever be alright again."

Meghan saw that the wizard was sinking into his contemplations again, so she crept back to her own room. Éowyn was asleep, something of a small smile on her face. Meghan wondered if a certain Steward of the Citadel had anything to do with that. The thought made her smile, too.

Six days later, the horns blew again.
Meghan had the good sense not to simply drop the crock of butter in her hands. Instead, she threw it in the general direction of the countertop and then bolted out of the kitchens. She could just hear the crock shattering but what was butter when there were returning heroes at the gates?

She took the steps two at a time. It sounded like every horn in the city was blaring, from the great warhorns to the smallest child's toy. The immensity of the noise level grew as she emerged into the open air. The courtyard was filled with children, laughing and screaming and whooping at each other. Meghan hurried through the crowd of them. She realized that she didn't know where to go. The gates? Those were all the way on the bottommost level, and she was at the top.

"Melethriel!" There was Gandalf, his robes swishing imperiously about him. "Come this way. You will be amongst Faramir's party."

"I don't want to go to a party, Gandalf!" Meghan shouted over the noise.

"It is not a party," Gandalf replied, the eye-roll evident in his voice. "It is a place of honour in the delegation that will receive the King."

"WHAT KING?" If this is another false alarm and it's not Legolas and the rest, I am going to scream.

"Do you care to discuss Gondor's line of succession here in the courtyard, or would it please you to follow me so that we might make our way to the gates?"

A part of Meghan wanted to give Gandalf a piece of her mind regarding his unnecessary sass, but a much much bigger part needed to find Legolas as quickly as possible. So she huffed disdainfully and marched after him.

She followed him to the same great throne room that the Last Council had met in. There Meghan saw Éowyn and Faramir standing close together, talking in low, happy voices. Several other official-looking people were milling about, but Meghan didn't know who they were. She was so impatient to go that she felt like stamping her foot and screaming.

"Samwise did not wish to come," Gandalf said. "He will stay near Frodo until he wakes."

"Then we shall go," Faramir announced, and headed for the door. The group fell in behind him, and Meghan found herself next to Éowyn. They hadn't really seen much of each other the past few weeks, except for a few brief conversations before they went to sleep. Meghan had it on good authority (the healers gossiped most shockingly) that Éowyn and Faramir spent most of their time together, and she was quite content to let that progress without her interference.

Still, she was grateful that Êowyn chose to walk with her, even though neither said anything. Just having a friend nearby while her heart was leaping and bounding and sinking helped Meghan keep breathing as the procession wended through the city streets and finally down to the main gates at
ground-level.

At first Meghan thought that only their party would go out, but she soon realized that anyone who could walk was pouring out behind them. The entire city was emptying to welcome their heroes home.

It wasn't long before she could make out the army returning across the field. At the front was a tall, dark-haired man in black and silver attire. *Wait, is that... Aragorn?* He looked so different, even at that distance.

And there, beside him, was golden Legolas, still beautiful and perfect and very uninjured. She wanted to fly to him, to scream at him, to kiss him. He had already found her with his eyes, and there was something in them that sent a delicious shiver up her spine.

But there was a solemnity in the moment that she knew she couldn't break. Even now the two parties had gotten close enough that they stopped, facing each other. She realized that if she didn't distract herself with something, she would probably end up tearing Legolas off his horse and dissolving into tears. The twenty or so feet between them was simultaneously too far and too near. To be so close but unable to interact was torment.

She dragged her eyes away, forcing her attention to the scene at hand. Aragorn had dismounted, and Faramir stepped a little farther forward and knelt.

"The last Steward of Gondor begs leave to surrender his office," Faramir said.

Aragorn drew him to his feet. "That office is not ended, and it shall be yours and your heirs' as long as my line shall last."

Faramir turned to address the people of the city behind him. "Men of Gondor, hear now the Steward of this realm! Behold, one has come to claim the kingship again at last. Here is Aragorn, son of Arathorn. Shall he be king and enter into the city and dwell there?"

The crowd erupted in a roar of approval, and just like that the invisible barrier was lifted. The two sides melted into each other, husbands and wives and siblings and mothers and children finding each other to meet for the first time in a world free from the oppression of Sauron. It was chaos, and it was glorious.

Legolas had dismounted and was pushing through the masses toward her. Meghan felt her stomach drop away, then rush into her throat. *Why am I so nervous?* she wondered, wishing that she had changed out of her grubby cleaning clothes. *Don't be ridiculous! You're supposed to be angry with him for leaving you!*

Now he was in front of her, and he grasped her shoulders, pulling her to him. Suddenly Meghan found herself being kissed so thoroughly that her rational thoughts skittered round and around in her head until she brushed them away and let the warm, melty thoughts take their place.

And then she sneezed.

It was the explosive sort of sneeze, too – the kind that comes out almost like a scream and makes your ribcage burn.

"I'm so sorry," she gasped, clamping both hands over her mouth just in case she sneezed again.

Legolas looked shaken. "Are you feeling quite well?"
"I think I might be allergic to you," Meghan replied.

"Impossible," was all he said before leaning in for another kiss.

It took her a long moment to come back to her senses, but presently she pushed him away. "Hang on a second, I am not just going to melt into your arms like a Disney princess," she said. "You drugged me and then ran off to a battle and left me back here to worry myself sick. I think you should apologize."

He looked sheepish and puzzled at the same time. "That was my apology."

"Oh." Meghan thought about it and crossed her arms over her chest. "I don't forgive you."

"In that case..." He put his arms around her waist, drawing her flush to his body. "Will," he dropped a kiss on her forehead, "you..." Another on the tip of her nose. "Forgive," on her cheek, just at the corner of her mouth, "me?" and one last kiss on the other cheek.

Meghan wasn't sure if she was still breathing. *He is the cheesiest thing since Velveeta and it is all working on me! Oh my god he knows it, too... he's practically laughing at me!* And she had no other choice but to kiss the smirk right off his face.

"Have you two children had quite enough?" came Gimli's gruff voice.

Meghan was so startled that she instinctively jerked away. Gimli burst into hearty laughter.

"Pardon me," he chortled, stroking his beard. "It has taken the pair of you so long to get this far, I should not have interrupted."

Legolas muttered something under his breath that Meghan didn't understand, but she took it for some colourful Elvish because it just made Gimli laugh harder.

"Away with you, Dwarf," Legolas said, his good humor laced with real irritation. Gimli shook his head and, still chuckling, strode away. Legolas sighed. "He would not like to hear it, but Gimli reminds me of my brother from time to time."

Meghan laughed, then stared. "You have a brother?"

"And a sister—"

"Meghan!"

She turned to see Pippin pushing through the crowd toward her, beaming. He had a thin gash along his jaw, but otherwise seemed unhurt. He still wore his sable livery and mail.

"Pippin!" Meghan exclaimed, throwing her arms out to hug the Hobbit.

"I'm sorry about leaving you behind," Pippin said. "Merry and I were quite shocked to hear what Legolas had done."

She could hear Legolas huff a little bit behind her, and she laughed. "I was pretty shocked myself. I still haven't forgiven him."

"Oh?" Pippin said with a tilt of his head and a half smile. "So it's not all domestic bliss between you two, then?"

Legolas lightly laid his hands on her shoulders and dropped a kiss on her temple. "Perhaps if we
got away from this crowd," he said in a low voice that only she could hear, his breath warm on her neck.

"Where are Frodo and Sam?" Pippin said, either totally unaware or deliberately ignoring the sudden flush in Meghan's cheeks.

She cleared her throat to get her thoughts back on track. "They're in the Houses of Healing. Frodo still hasn't woken, but Gandalf said he's nearly recovered."

"That's good," Pippin said. He quirked an eyebrow, giving them both a knowing grin. "I think I'll go find Captain Faramir. Or I should say the Steward now!"

"See you later," Meghan said. Pippin sketched a bow and began to push his way back through the crowd.

The Hobbit had hardly taken a few steps away before Legolas wrapped his arms around Meghan's waist from behind and kissed the nape of her neck just behind her ear. "Am I forgiven yet?" he murmured.

She twisted around so that she faced him. "Do you solemnly swear to never drug me with sleeping potion ever again?"

"I swear it," he nodded.

"And you're genuinely sorry for drugging me in the first place?"

"I am."

"Well, in that case, I suppose—"

"Meghan!" That sharp voice could only belong to one person.

Legolas sighed, resting his forehead against Meghan's with another whispered profanity in Elvish as Ioreth bustled up.

"There you are, child," the healer said with her usual business-like air. "I see you have reunited with your young man. Well, there will be leisure for that later. Meanwhile we have much work to do."

"But Ioreth—" Meghan started.

Ioreth waved her hand impatiently. "No time for excuses. For every healthy man you see, there are two wounded in the rearguard. We have until nightfall at the latest before they begin to arrive."

Meghan was having a hard time letting go of Legolas. "Could I have five more minutes?" she faltered. "I've only just gotten him back."

"Do you suppose that you are the only woman that has only just seen her beloved again? You have already had five more minutes than some. It is time for good work."

"Go," Legolas said. "I will come find you after."

"You look in need of a good wash," Ioreth interjected with a sniff. "Come along, Meghan."

One more kiss, and Meghan dragged herself away. By then some of the crowd was beginning to trickle back into the city. Most of those returning were workers like Meghan, women hastening to
ready the city for the influx of survivors and wounded.

Despite a renewed workaday spirit, the overwhelming sense of festivity carried Meghan up the city streets and back into the Houses of Healing. As she set to making up fresh beds for the wounded, she heard some of the women singing while they worked.

She spent the rest of the morning flying from one job to the next. Each time she thought it was her last task, Ioreth seemed to find something new. "Roll these bandages," she would say, and then "Sweep up that mess in the kitchens, it seems that someone has broken a butter crock."

"If I had gone with the army, I wouldn't have to work under this dictatorship," Meghan muttered to herself after yet another assignment.

"If you had gone with the army, you would be dead," Ioreth called after her calmly.

Finally, as the sun started to melt into the horizon and Meghan started to melt into despair, Ioreth released her. "Go now, child. That is quite enough work for one day. I shall expect to see you at the usual time tomorrow morning."

"Morning?" Meghan quailed.

Ioreth gave her an appraising look. "You are a worker in the Houses of Healing now. If ever we are needed, it is in this hour."

"Of course," Meghan replied, resigning herself to the reality that she had accidentally become an indentured servant to a maniacal overlord.

"You'd best hurry to the common hall," Ioreth said. "I heard rumors of a young Elf prince asking after you there."

Meghan could literally feel the knots loosening in her shoulders as her troubles melted away. She crushed Ioreth in a sudden embrace, and then ran.
Their first order of business was, of course, a kiss. This kiss was short and sweet instead of the long and scorching one that she wanted, because they were in the common hall of the Houses of Healing. Then they just smiled at each other for a moment in the way that lovers do.

"How was your day?" Legolas asked, folding her hand into his own and leading her outside.

"Rather long," she replied with a thrill at his touch. "Ioreth runs a tight ship. What did you do today?"

"We spent much of the day in council. Aragorn, Mithrandir, Éomer, and Faramir had matters of state to address, and they requested that Gimli and I remain with them, perhaps as a courtesy to our own peoples. To be truthful, I do not believe that my presence was necessary. Gimli had many ideas for the restoration of the city, but I know little of masonry or stonework."

By then, they had walked outside the Houses and were now wandering the streets of Minas Tirith, hand in hand. Dusk had evaporated into a cool, clean evening. Meghan felt the crisp night air seep through her clothes and wondered if she could possibly be happier.

"I spoke with Faramir for a few moments," Legolas continued. "He had some remarkable thoughts about one of Gondor's provinces in the east, called Ithilien. It is close to the dark land but he tells me that it is very beautiful. He intends to take up residence there after the coronation."

"Coronation?" Meghan asked.

"Aragorn's. I believe he will wait until mid summer. There is much still to be done before he will deem the time ready."

"Legolas..." Meghan trailed off, unsure about how to phrase her question. "What are you going to do now? Are you going to stay here in Gondor, or are you going to back to your home?"

He stopped and drew her around to face him. "I will go where you go," he said, tangling a hand into her hair and pressing his forehead against hers. "Ever have I asked you to stay or to go or to wait for me. Now it is time that I follow you."

Meghan breathed in the scent of him, and decided that he smelled like autumn and spring at the same time. "Let's stay for Aragorn's coronation, then. I've never been to a coronation before. After that we can decide what's next."

"Anywhere you want to go," he said.

They were very close now, close enough for her to feel his warm breath ghosting across her face – close enough to feel the heat of his body radiating against her own. She tilted her head up just so, and that was enough. At first the kiss was a question – may I? – but then, as she opened her lips to answer him, it turned into a sentence, a paragraph, a story.
His hands felt like butterfly wings against her cheek and in her hair, and through the gentleness of his touch Meghan was struck by the profundity of his love for her. There was a tension across his body that she knew was because of how much he wanted her, but at the same time she sensed his restraint and willingness to wait. Even though their kiss tasted of hunger, it was much more like a promise.

Legolas suddenly pulled away. "I should teach you Sindarin."

"What?" Meghan said, breathless.

"My family will wonder why you only speak the Common Tongue," he said.

She noticed that he was breathing a little heavily too, and she had to bite back a smile. The fact that he was nervous and not entirely comfortable in the role of leading man made her want to grab his face and kiss him until her heart burst.

But he was still talking. "And since you are an Elf…" He reached up to trace the tipped point of her ear with his thumb. "You should know your own language."

"Legolas," she said, wrinkling up her nose in an attempt to offset the anxiety that crept into her voice, "that's actually been bothering me the last few weeks. I've had a lot of time for thinking. I guess you could say I was sort of zapped here by a higher power but how can we be sure that I'm here to stay? What if I get zapped back?"

"Do you want to go home?" Legolas asked, and she saw a flicker of uneasiness in his eyes.

"I can't imagine going back," she said. "It's not really home anymore. I'm not a big believer in fate and destiny and stuff like that, but as crazy as it sounds this feels like the natural progression that my life was supposed to take. Anything else would have been wrong."

He tucked her hand into the crook of his arm and began walking again. "Then the Valar may try to take you away, but I will not let them."

Meghan wasn't exactly sure if she was convinced. It doesn't make sense. What if I'm only here for how long the movie lasted? What if I get sent back once the story is over? She couldn't shake the nagging fear. Still, there wasn't anything she could do about it, so she filed it away and resolved not to worry.

"Tell me about your family," she said to take her mind off it. "You said you have a brother and a sister."

"Gwaethir is my elder brother," Legolas said in the thoughtful way that storytellers sometimes begin with. "He is a very capable healer, much more than I ever learned. It takes great patience and diligence to study healing, and he has those qualities in abundance."

"He sounds…" Meghan tried to find an appropriately polite word for boring but realized there wasn't one. "He sounds like fun."

"Forgive me," Legolas said, as if he had read her mind. "My description already makes him seem a tiresome bore, when in truth he is the reverse. He has plagued me with such pranks and mischief that you would hardly believe him to be an adult, let alone the heir of my father's kingdom. His humor is, at times, not unlike that of the Halflings."

"Oh," she said with much more interest. "He does sound fun."
"My sister Alassëa is like quicksilver," he continued. "She is very young, hardly more than two hundred years old."

Meghan swallowed. *I'm hardly more than two decades old, you cradle robber.*

"She is what is perhaps called high-tempered, but there is also a gentleness and tranquility in her that runs very deep. Even so, more than anything else she loves to laugh."

"Why didn't you ever mention them?" Meghan asked, slipping her free hand onto Legolas' arm so that she walk a little closer to him.

"I missed them too much," he replied quietly. "Even now it is difficult to speak of them. We were very rarely parted, even into our adulthood."

"What about your parents? What are they like?"

"My father is..." He trailed off, then quirked a half-smile at her. "Perhaps you should simply meet my father to form your own opinion."

"That's not fair! You can't just tease about your dad like that and then leave me in suspense!" Meghan said, poking Legolas in the side under his ribs and making the magnificent discovery that he was ticklish there.

He chuckled, partially because of the poking and partially at her tone. "I cannot do him justice," he said.

"Wait, are you ticklish?" Even though Meghan knew it was immature, a childlike curiosity swept over her and she poked him again.

"No," he laughed – but he twisted away a little, and the game was up. Meghan crowed with delight and attacked him in full force until they were both laughing breathlessly. Then the laughing dissolved into kissing and neither one said anything for a few minutes. But a moment later they were laughing again, because the night was beautiful and they were in love and the future couldn't be anything but golden.

They walked together for several hours, sometimes speaking in quiet voices and sometimes just enjoying each other's company in silence. Finally, as the moon rose in the sky and Meghan couldn't stifle her yawns anymore, she said, "I should go to bed. Ioreth has informed me that I am expected at the usual crack of dawn starting time."

"I am certain that you could be excused from these duties," Legolas said. "You are, after all, a boon companion to the king of this realm, and even more, you are a heroine in your own right."

Meghan flushed a little. "A heroine I certainly am not. I don't think I've done anything useful since I go here, except maybe make people laugh sometimes. And that's why I don't want to stop working in the Houses. It's not much, but I'm helping. Because I'm folding sheets or washing dishes, that frees someone up to do the real work of healing people."

Legolas lifted one of her hands to his lips and kissed her inner wrist in that bone-meltingly seductive way of his. "I cannot argue against your passion for this work, although I am jealous for your time."

"You could come," she said breathlessly. "I mean, when you're not helping Aragorn with reestablishing the government and stuff."
A slow smile spread across his face. "I meant to surprise you in the morning. I do not believe that my presence is of much help to Aragorn at this time, so perhaps I could slip away for a few hours to help you scrub chamber pots."

"I haven't scrubbed chamber pots yet," Meghan said with a grimace. "Mostly stew pots. I think Ioreth plans to slowly turn me into a cook, but apparently you have to pay your dues to work up the ladder."

He laughed and pressed a kiss to the crown of her head. "I will help you scrub any pots that Ioreth puts before you. Consider it my recompense for giving you the tea."

"You have a lot of pots to scrub to make up for that," Meghan said.

"All the better than I start in the morning, then," he replied.

Meghan saw that they had wended their way back to the Houses of Healing. It was very late, and she knew that she needed sleep to even have a prayer of waking up in time for the morning bell. Still, she didn't want the evening to end. "Let's make one more circuit around this level of the city," she said.

"One more circuit will turn into two," Legolas replied. "And then just one more, and then dawn. You may be able to stay up the entire night, but I need to rest. You forget that we have returned only this morning from a long journey and a hard battle."

"Wait, wait, I don't understand how this works. You said Elves only sleep if they are very sick."

"Elves do not often sleep in the sense that mortals understand it," he said. "We do, however, enter a sort of waking trance to rest the mind and body. It is difficult to explain. Perhaps it is most similar to a very deep daydream."

"Hmm," Meghan said. "I wonder if the reason why I still sleep like a human is because it's just a mental block. I don't know how to enter this 'trance' thing so my body forces me to rest in the only way I know how."

"Speaking of sleep..." he said with a grin.

She realized that all his talk of needing to rest himself was really just a way to make sure she got enough sleep. "Fine, fine," she said. "Away I go. I will see you in the morning."

"Good night," he said, and cupped her face with his hands. This kiss was her favorite yet, because it somehow managed to say good night and good morning and I will say these things to you every day for a thousand years all at once. She wondered if every kiss would be like this.

A few minutes later, she was padding through the hallways. Almost everyone was asleep, but there were still a few healers quietly making the rounds. One or two smiled at Meghan in passing; a gentle smile that meant, Oh, to be young. Oh, to be in love.

Éowyn was already sleeping when Meghan crept in the door to their shared room, so she changed into her nightgown and hurried under the covers on her thin mattress. Now that she was actually in bed, though, she couldn't fall asleep. First, she went over the evening in her mind – replaying certain moments, of course. But inevitably her thoughts shifted back to her place in Middle-earth.

If I stay here, I will never see my family again, she realized with a sudden pang.

Before, she had been too busy to get homesick. The constant danger and stress of war had kept her
in survival mode, reacting to events. Now that things had settled into peaceful happiness, the reality of her situation struck her in full force.

*I have no family here. I can't imagine going back now, but... mom and dad.*

She curled into herself as the first tears started to fall.
Meghan woke up in a pool of blood.

The first thing she did was roll over and vomit over the side of the bed. Then she started crying. Choking back tears and nausea, she peeled away the blankets to assess the carnage a little better. Her nightgown was ruined and the sheets had stained such a deep red that she felt flutters of panic in her stomach.

At the sound of her stifled sobs, Êowyn woke up with a start. "Meghan! Are you quite well?" she said, her eyes widening at the bloodbath that Meghan sat in.

"I started my period," she replied in a voice thick with misery.

"Oh my," Êowyn said evenly. She had already stood up and was now drawing a cloak around her shoulders. "I will fetch Ioreth. Meanwhile, take off that nightdress and wrap this around yourself." She stripped off the top sheet from her own bed and passed it to Meghan. "Ioreth will know best what to do. Are you going to be alright?"

"Yes," Meghan nodded, trying to keep the clean sheet off the sullied ones.

"Just a moment, then." With that, Êowyn swept out the door, just as imperious when dealing with feminine hygiene as when she defeated witch kings.

Meghan scrubbed the sleep and salt from her eyes and sucked in a deep breath. She really should have expected her period soon, but the volume and ferocity of this particular cycle shocked her. As she started to ease off the sticky bed, her lower back clenched in the most agonizing cramps that she had ever experienced. Fresh tears rose to her eyes and she had the sudden, profound urge to destroy something.

Slowly, painstakingly, and shuddering in disgust, she stripped off her nightgown and cleaned herself up the best she could. It felt like her uterus was attempting to crawl out of her body. She wanted to lay down and die, but instead she wrapped herself in the sheet and knotted it under her arms like a sarong to keep her hands free.

There was a rapping at the door, so she scooped up the long train of the sheet and trundled over to let Ioreth and Êowyn back in. This is kind of humiliating, she thought as she turned the knob and swung the door open. I feel like this is the first time I've – Legolas.

For one slow-motion moment, they stared at each other. It was just long enough for him to take in the bloodied bed, the room's general disorder, and the fact that Meghan was naked except for a sheet. In the next moment, she wordlessly screamed and slammed the door in his face.

There was a long silence on both sides.
Then, tentatively, "...Meghan?"

It took a lot of will-power, but she slowly managed to crack the door open and peek through the opening. She tried to fill the space with her body so that he couldn't see into the room again, forgetting that he was tall enough to look over her head.

"Good morning," she whispered, clutching the knot on the sheet tighter against her chest.

He looked completely unnerved, which for him meant a quirked brow and a downward turn on the corners of his lips. He kept his eyes very deliberately focused on her face. "Good morning."

"I'm afraid that I will be a little late to work today," Meghan said.

He opened his mouth and shut it a couple of times, like he was at a loss for words but scrambling to find them. Finally, with a slight clench of his jaw that told her he had formed a desperate resolution, he choked, "Do you need any assistance?"

Meghan gaped at him. "Did you just offer to help me clean up my menstrual blood?"

"Yes," he said, looking physically pained. "I know that you get sick. And, ah, blood in the general sense does not, well, for the most part it does not bother me so I thought that perhaps I could save you the trouble..." He trailed off, miserable.

She blinked a few times, then quietly shut the door in his face again. This time, she sank to the floor and leaned against the doorframe, torn between hysterical laughter and uncontrollable sobbing. He offered to clean up my period blood. In a horrifying way, that is the most romantic thing anyone has ever done for me. Oh my god. Oh my GOD.

She heard footsteps approaching down the hall, and then Ioreth's authoritative voice through the door. "Land preserve me, young man, if you cannot keep away from that girl for one blessed minute!"

"No wait," Meghan said, twisting around to stand up and throw the door back open as quickly as possible. "Ioreth, you don't understand—"

"Young lady!" Ioreth looked so scandalized that Meghan immediately wanted to sink into the ground for shame, although she wasn't sure why. "You cannot be gallivanting about in the presence of a man in such a state of undress. And you!" Ioreth poked an accusing finger into Legolas' chest. "You should be ashamed! Sneaking about the Houses at this hour, when the sun is hardly up! Young people these days!" She threw her hands up in a gesture of despair and outrage.

Éowyn, who had been watching the scene with a carefully passive face, took this opportunity to pipe in. "My Lord Elf," she said, taking Legolas' arm. "Perhaps I might acquaint you with the Houses of Healing. I understand that you had very little time to find your bearings during your brief respite here before."

A spasm of relief washed over Legolas' face, followed immediately by guilt. Meghan wondered if his emotions were obvious to the other two women, or if she had just learned to read him after so much time together. Either way, she shot him a reassuring nod, trying to telegraph with her eyes that she didn't mind him leaving. Given Ioreth's present state of indignation, it was probably for the best if he did remove himself from the situation.

"Thank you, Lady Éowyn," he said as she gently guided him down the corridor.

Ioreth, meanwhile, had bustled past Meghan into the bedroom and was surveying the damage.
"Well, young lady, this is certainly quite a mess," she said matter-of-factly.

"Yes," Meghan cringed. "It seems a bit… excessive."

"Do you mean this is uncommon for you?" Ioreth had completely switched over to the crisp, businesslike mode that she reserved for patients. Meghan felt panicky again and avoided looking at the ruined bed.

"Well, this is a couple weeks late," she said, "and I never bleed so much. And my back is killing me."

"Last night," Ioreth began, and paused for a moment. "Were you intimate with your lover?"

"No," Meghan spluttered. "We haven't even talked about that yet! I mean come on, I don't even know if we're formally courting or whatever you people call it here. I'm not ready to start sleeping with him!"

Ioreth held up a hand for peace. "Do not think me indelicate when in truth I am only ignorant to the customs of Elves. Had you lain with him, perhaps this much bleeding would be cause for concern."

"Wait, concern? Is there something wrong with me?" Meghan put a hand on her stomach. "No, child. You have been under such a weight of fear that your body slowed down to preserve your own strength. Now that the greatest of your worries is assuaged, your cycle is catching up. Do not fret yourself about it. Now, we must get this room cleaned up."

A half an hour later, the room was back to normal and Meghan was properly outfitted in the menstrual necessities of the time. Due to the bulky nature of the undergarments, Ioreth had brought a long grey dress for Meghan to wear. It fit a little too loose and the sleeves kept slipping down over her hands, but it reminded her of a baggy sweater so she didn't mind.

"Well then," Ioreth said. "I do not often allow this, but perhaps in your case an exception may be made. I suppose you may be absent from your duties today."

"I think I would rather be busy—" Meghan froze, a wave of cramps sweeping up her back and down through her abdomen. "Ehem, I would rather keep moving and stay busy. Just… just don't make me do anything with blood, please." She eyed the bundle of ruined sheets.

Ioreth gave her a slow, thoughtful smile. "Well done. You may turn out something more than a pampered Elvish princess, after all."

"Thank you, Ioreth, really." Meghan impulsively swept the older woman into a hug. "For this, and for letting me work here, and for not holding a grudge after I exploded in your face about the tea. You're only the third woman I've really met here and I'm so grateful that you've got my back."

"Well, to be truthful with you," Ioreth said, dusting off her skirt. "You put me in mind of my niece. I had no children, but I love her like my own. She has the same air about her that you do."

"Where is she now?" Meghan asked.

"She married a soldier of Dol Amroth two summers ago. It is difficult to travel that distance – or it was. I expect she will be here with her family for the coronation. But enough of this chatter; there is good work to be done. Let us go to the kitchens, I am certain there is plenty to begin with there."

"Actually, do you mind if I meet you in a little bit?" Meghan cleared her throat. "I may have,
ah… *traumatized* someone earlier and I should probably reassure him that everything is alright."

Ioreth sniffed disdainfully. "You tell that boy that it is a natural part of life and womanhood, not something to be ashamed of."

"Right," Meghan said, who had zero intention of spending any more time than necessary to discuss the finer points of menstrual acceptance with Legolas. "He's just a little more sheltered than you and I, that's all."

"I will give you a half an hour," Ioreth said. "Then I expect you to present yourself to the head cook. You have said that you wish to work, so you will not be coddled."

"I understand," Meghan said with a smile. "I'll see you later today. Thanks again."

Ioreth nodded and headed out the door. There was something immensely comforting about her, even though she could be intimidating when the mood struck. Meghan pushed her sleeves up to her elbows and followed her out the door.

She hadn't gotten more than a few paces into the hallway when Legolas appeared from a side passage. He looked like a kicked puppy and Meghan had the simultaneous urge to hug him and laugh at him – so she did both.

"Are you alright?" he asked, holding her like he thought she might break.

"Legolas," she laughed as she drew back a pace to look him in the eyes. "Bless your heart. I'm sorry you had to see that this morning."

The anxiety was starting to fade from his expression. "You look nice," he offered. "I have not seen you in a dress since Edoras."

"Thank you," Meghan replied, heart in her throat. *This must be love,* she thought, *if he can make me this happy when I'm bleeding out of my vagina."

"So what sort of pots shall we be scrubbing today?" He took her hand and put it into the crook of his elbow.

"Stew pots, most likely," she sighed. "I saw a whole fleet of them last night after they served dinner."

When they got to the kitchens, it turned out that the chore of the morning was actually prepping more stew for later that day. Legolas fell to helping Meghan with a good will, even though nobody quite had the nerve to give him directions about what to do. The head cook was a seasoned veteran, not easily surprised by even the most outrageous spectacles, but the sight of a princely Elvish war hero peeling and dicing potatoes was enough to send her muttering into a corner.

The days spun out into weeks, and they fell into a comfortable, happy rhythm. Meghan spent most of her daylight hours working in the Houses and whenever Legolas could get away from "affairs of state" he joined her. And always at night they shared dinner with some or all of the Fellowship, and laughed and talked together well into the evening.

Afterward, Meghan remembered it as a time of deep contentment, despite the thread of uneasiness that she couldn't seem to shake. But as the weeks turned into a month, and then two months, and she still didn't wake up back in her old world, the disquiet faded into a dull ache that she knew was simple homesickness.
Late one morning, Meghan was steadily working through a colossal pile of sheets to be folded. She half-wondered where Legolas was, since he usually came by that time, but shrugged it away. He's probably just busy with the coronation stuff, she thought. The spring was fading into a rich summer, and it felt like the entire city was buzzing to crown their new king. Still, Aragorn waited, and Meghan was beginning to suspect why.

He's waiting for her. She smiled, catching the corner of a sheet and tucking it neatly into the folds. She must be wonderful, if they would wait so long for each other.

Thoughts of love and romance inevitably led to Legolas, and her smile shifted to a thoughtful half-frown. The past two months had been hardly short of magical, but she couldn't help but remember what Aragorn had said about Elvish courtships sometimes taking years. Legolas was simply too much of a gentleman. There had been no discussion about their future together – or if they even had a future.

I suppose with all the kissing and such, we're practically engaged by these old-fashioned standards, she thought. But I wish he would say where we're at. And he always stopped it at just kissing. Once when she had reached up to unlace his jerkin, he smoothly caught her hands and continued to kiss her like nothing happened. He even put a limit on heavy petting. It was confusing and frustrating and it made Meghan feel a bit silly.

I shall chalk this up to bad communication, she thought with a nod. All couples have to learn how to communicate. Next time I see him, I'll just sit him down and discuss things frankly and openly.

This decision made, she retuned into her surroundings. A group of several teenaged healer acolytes were clustered at the end of the room, just within earshot. It seemed like they hadn't noticed Meghan, who was half-buried in the pile of sheets.

"They arrived last night?" one asked, grey eyes shining.

"No, early this morning," returned another, who was clearly the leader of their clique. "I heard the sound of their horns as I dressed."

"It is so marvelous that there are more Elves in the city," sighed the third. "I wonder if they are all as beautiful as the Elvish prince."

Meghan was a little stung. So only the Elvish prince is beautiful? What about the Elvish tagalong girl?

"They should be," said the ringleader in the familiar, high school tones of superiority because she knew something the others didn't. "It is the delegation from Mirkwood, and the one of the company is Prince Legolas' older brother."

It suddenly felt like the air had been sucked out of Meghan's body in a devastating wave of anxiety. Her first, panicky thought was, I'm going to meet part of his family already? She haphazardly tried to straighten her hair, then froze as the second thought bloomed.

His brother has been here for hours and he didn't come to tell me?

Chapter End Notes
If anybody caught the silly pun in the title, you get a cookie. :)

Meghan waited until the three girls giggled their way out of the room, because the last thing she wanted to deal with was their awkward courtesies. It perplexed most of the people in the Houses that she chose to work there, and she suspected that her pointed ears made them a little uncomfortable. The younger women especially treated her with a mixture of disdain and fascination that she didn't know how to handle. Just her association with the Fellowship gave her a reputation, and her relationship to Legolas was the subject of much whispering and looks.

"There you are!" Ioreth's voice interrupted Meghan's thoughts. "I have searched these Houses all morning, and here I find you hiding amidst the bedclothes. Come along, child. I believe your time here is at an end."

"What?" Meghan said stupidly. Back to my old world? How can she know about that? Legolas said he wouldn't let them take me…

Ioreth gestured impatiently. "The citadel sent for you just after dawn, but you had already started your duties and I could not find you until just now. Little did I know that you were buried down here with the laundering. Come along."

"I still don't understand," Meghan said, standing to follow Ioreth as she marched toward the main part of the Houses. "What do you mean my time here is ending?"

"I mean that you will no longer have time for your duties," Ioreth said. "Delegations are arriving for the coronation. You have spent long enough working as a scullery maid. It is time to act like the proper lady that you are."

Meghan glanced down at her grey dress, not feeling particularly ladylike. "Proper lady? Oh Ioreth, I'm just not getting this at all. Please tell me plainly what's going on?"

"Lands alive!" Ioreth sighed. "You are obtuse at times. Listen to me well, child, for I am not your mother and have no interest in explaining to you twice. You should have been up at the citadel hours ago, bathed and in a lovely dress, to meet your young man's delegation that arrived this morning."

"Oh," Meghan said as the tension started fading from her body. So he did want me to meet his brother, he's just been tied up with official business and couldn't come himself.

"Well, come along then," Ioreth gestured impatiently. "I do not know how I became your lady's maid, but the least I can do is lace you into your gown. It is one of Lady Éowyn's, that dress, so mind that you do not spoil it."

Half an hour later, Meghan wore a pale green dress that was just a little too long for her. Despite her protestations to the contrary, Ioreth fussied and primped enough for any lady's maid, and even took the time to braid Meghan's hair up into the Gondorian style.

"I know it is the custom for Elves to wear their hair loose," she said as she pinned the last coil. "But your hair is not so long that it lays well without coaxing, and we have not time to wash and comb it afresh. There, child. You will not bring shame to the Houses of Healing now that you are presentable."
"Ioreth, I'm nervous," Meghan confessed. "It's easy to forget that Legolas is royalty, but that's his brother up there. Two princes – I just—"

"What have you to fear?" Ioreth sniffed. "They will not bite. You are a charming girl when you keep your wits about you, and I am quite certain that your young man's brother will be glad to know you. Now away with you!"

She shooed Meghan out of the room and all the way to the uppermost level of the city, where she parted ways with a stern but reassuring nod. Meghan smoothed out the front of her dress even though there weren't any wrinkles in it, and swept into the council chamber.

The scene that greeted her was almost domestic in its simplicity, except for the otherworldly beauty of some of the players. Aragorn, Gandalf, Faramir, Éomer, Gimli, Legolas, and several unfamiliar Elves sat at a long, dark table, apparently deep in discussion. One of the Elves was talking, but Legolas turned at the sound of the door opening. As soon as he saw her, he left the table to join her.

"I'm sorry I'm late," she whispered.

"I wondered where you were," he replied in the same low tone. "My brother and his company have been telling us the news from the north. It seems that the war has gone ill with the Dwarves of Erebor."

"Where is that?"

"Northeast of my home. I believe it is where Gimli spent much of his adult life."

Meghan put a hand on Legolas' arm. "And how did the war go with your people?"

"It went well." A relieved grin broke over his face. "A great shadow has been lifted from my homeland. Perhaps it will one day return to its former splendor."

"That's wonderful," Meghan smiled, going up on tiptoes to hug him.

Meanwhile, the gathering around the table had concluded and was starting to break up. A slightly taller, somehow older, and significantly darker-haired version of Legolas approached with a smile just as Meghan pulled away.

"Meghan," Legolas said. "This is my brother, Gwaethir."

"Lady Meghan," Gwaethir said, inclining his head in greeting.

"Hello," Meghan choked, suddenly nervous again. "I hope I didn't interrupt your, ah, your seminar. Nooooo it's not called a seminar!

"Not at all," Gwaethir replied easily. Either he was used to oddball girls, or Legolas had prepared him for Meghan's awkwardness. "To be honest, your entrance prompted us to conclude our discussion, but it was a welcome intrusion. We have talked long."

"I guess there was a lot of new information to exchange," Meghan said.

"Quite so." He quirked a mischievous smile at them. "Speaking of new information… this is a surprise, little brother. We heard distant rumors that an elleth traveled with the Fellowship, but little suspected that Mirkwood could claim two heroes henceforth."
"Gwaethir—" Legolas began in a voice that sounded like an eye roll.

"I mean you no disrespect, Lady Meghan," Gwaethir said as he disengaged her from Legolas and looped her hand through his arm. He began to lead her out the door, talking easily all the while. "You are truly an amiable and beautiful woman, which only adds to my disbelief. You must understand that our family genuinely doubted that my little brother would ever find a spouse."

"Oh?" Meghan said, every minute feeling less anxious and more delighted.

"Oh, quite." Gwaethir nodded. "He has, since his adolescence, been rather… clumsy around those of the fairer persuasion."

Legolas had fallen into step just behind them, and at these words she could hear him growl under his breath. Laughingly alarmed, she peeked over her shoulder only to see him rubbing his temples like his worst nightmare had come true.

"No doubt you have gotten a taste of his particular brand of charm during your courtship," Gwaethir continued, "but should you ever become curious about his irresistible social dexterity before he somehow managed to win your favor, I can relate several truly humbling stories."

"Some other time, perhaps," Legolas cut in as he pushed between his brother and Meghan to reclaim her hand.

"I see that we must meet in secret council to discuss this further," Gwaethir said gravely. He sketched a courtly bow to Meghan. "Until this evening, then. I trust that you will be present at the banquet tonight? I rely upon making your better acquaintance there."

_Do I curtsey, or…?_ "I would be delighted," Meghan said, opting to bob into something that vaguely resembled an informal curtsey.

"Away with you," Legolas said, "before you trouble my lady any longer."

Gwaethir chuckled. "I must pay my respects to Mithrandir, and then I believe my room will be ready. It has been a fortnight at least since I had a proper wash. Lady Meghan, I look forward to speaking with you further." And with a quick kiss to the back of her hand, he whisked away.

Meghan and Legolas shared a look, hers more laughing and his exasperated. She lifted his arm to snuggle into him. "I think I'm going to like your family very much," she said with a smile.

"This is going to be much worse than I imagined," he groaned, but he was smiling, too. Then he started a bit. "You are wearing a new dress."

"Yes, I am officially off the books in the Houses. Ioreth said it's time I act like a proper lady. This is one of Éowyn's dresses."

"It becomes you. Any color looks well on you, but I will always prefer green."

"I don't care what your brother says…" Meghan stretched up to kiss his cheek. "I think you're very debonair." That finally got a laugh out of him.

She remembered her earlier resolution to work on their communication issues with him at the next opportunity. "Hey, are you free for awhile?" she asked. "I'd like to talk, if you're not engaged in official business."
"I am not busy. Shall we go somewhere more private?" He eyed his brother as if he half-suspected to be interrupted with more teasing.

"If you like. I just scored a new room up in the citadel, maybe you can help me find it."

She wasn't sure how it had gotten this far.

It was probably because she had her own room now. Before, she had shared a room with Éowyn in the Houses, but Meghan's possessions had been moved to a small suite in the uppermost circle of the city as a reflection of her official status as the king's friend. It was bright and tidy and just the right size for one person – or two, if they didn't mind sharing a bed.

However, at that particular moment, she wasn't thinking about the dimensions of her room. Somehow, "Let's go somewhere private to talk" so that she could pin down exactly where their relationship was headed had turned into her literally pinning Legolas down on her bed and kissing his surprised exclamation away. It hadn't taken him long to turn the tables.

Now the laces of her dress were perilously loose and she had managed to peel off his outer jerkin. His lips traced a hot line of kisses down her cheek, her neck, her collarbone.

*Are we really ready for this?* the tiny, rational part of her brain whispered.

*We are really doing this!* the other, much less coherent side of her brain exulted.

By then, his mouth had made it back up to hers, and she wasn't even sure if she was still breathing. His lips tasted like heat and hunger. This was a new side of him that he hadn't quite shown her yet – he had always been so restrained before, and seeing this raw passion from him was exhilarating. She interrupted their kiss for a moment to pull his silver tunic off over his head.

"We should stop," he panted, but he didn't stop shrugging his arms out of the sleeves, and went right back to plying her lips like he would die without her.

"What?" was all she managed to gasp between kisses. She finally got him shirtless and he wanted to stop? The cords of muscle on his stomach almost made her forget her own name.

He groaned and rested his forehead against hers. "Yes, we should stop," he sighed.

"What?" Meghan repeated, except this time it was even more incredulous. They were still painfully close, their breath mingling, but he rolled off and reached for his tunic. "No, hold on, wait a minute!" She sat up in a panic, because she knew he was going to cover up his glorious torso again and she didn't know if she could handle that.

"I would not wed you in this way," he said simply as he shrugged into his shirt.

Meghan froze in the middle of pulling up the neckline of her dress from where it had slipped off one shoulder. "Wed?" she choked. "Are you trying to tell me that we just almost got married?"

"Does it not mean the same in your world's culture?" he asked, his face curious.

"Not, ah, not quite," she said. She felt like she was swimming in her dress because it was so loose, so she reached behind her to tighten the laces. "Um, actually, the act of intimacy can mean many things..." she trailed off, her concentration taken up with untangling the laces.

"Let me," Legolas said quietly.
Slowly, she stood and faced away from him. His hands were precise and gentle as he traveled down her spine, tightening the cords until he tied them off at the small of her back. Meghan had to wonder if he knew quite what he was doing – setting her body on fire, and then insisting they wait to put out the blaze.

He brushed her hair off one shoulder and pressed the lightest of kisses to her skin, the heat of his breath leaving more of an impression than his lips. *Oh, he knows exactly what he's doing,* she thought with an inward, delicious groan. She twisted around and draped her arms across his shoulders.

"What if you take your shirt off again, and I'll just look," she said with a winsome smile.

He laughed and gave her a quick peck on the cheek. "I do not believe that would be helpful."

"I think it would help me a lot," Meghan coaxed. "You can talk about Elvish marriage customs… and I can have a better visual of what you mean."

"It would be profitable for us to have a discussion about our expectations," he replied earnestly, disentangling himself from her arms so that he could pull on his dark green jerkin. "But considering the subject matter, perhaps it would be best to remove as many temptations as possible."

Meghan plopped onto the bed with a sigh. "You are flawlessly logical, as ever," she said, trying not to pout. "So, Spock, what do Elves do about doing it?"

"In times of peace, it is the custom to exchange silver rings as a symbol of betrothal," he said as he sat down next to her. "The betrothal often lasts a year, at which time there is a public ceremony followed by a… private ceremony." He smiled.

"What happens during war? I don't know if this could strictly be classified as a time of peace."

Meghan did her best to look academic instead of just incredibly aroused.

"Elves are not married by the ceremony, but instead by bodily union," Legolas said. "So it naturally follows that when there is no opportunity for a traditional celebration, two lovers may wed by consummation."

"So…" She paused. "I just attempted to surprise-marry you, then."

"In a manner of speaking," he laughed, and stood. "I should leave your chambers soon, lest anyone believe that we truly are bound to each other now."

She caught the hem of his shirt between two fingers. "Don't go yet."

"I must," he said, leaning down to drop a kiss on the crown of her head. "You have probably observed that our Fellowship has gained no little notoriety. We cannot go unnoticed anywhere within the city walls, and people will talk. I would not have your virtue be the subject of idle gossip." He paused, the faintest glimmer of a smile on his lips. "To that end, perhaps it would be best if you wore your hair down for the next few days."

Meghan reached up to touch the soft spot on her neck just below her left ear, then gaped up at Legolas. "Are we twelve years old? Did you seriously give me a *hickey*?"

"I believe the term is love mark," he replied with a grin that somehow managed to be innocent and wicked at the same time.
"You troll!" She rushed to the looking glass in the corner to assess the damage. "Oh m– I'm going to need a scarf! I can't believe you!" She spun around with every intention of payback, but he was already halfway into the hallway.

"I will see you this evening at the banquet!" he laughed as he shut the door.

Chapter End Notes

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As it happened, there were no scarves to be had, and without the modern conveniences of foundation and concealer, Meghan was at a loss to cover the quickly blossoming mark on her neck. Eventually she gathered all of her curls to one side and braided them loosely over her left shoulder. It made her look like a schoolgirl, but at least it hid the redness.

"I'm going to get him back," she muttered grimly to herself, tugging a little at the braid in an attempt to look effortlessly tousled instead of stuck a finger in an electrical current. It didn't work.

She felt odd not to be working in the Houses, and for a little while, Meghan hardly knew what to do with her time. That didn't last long, though, because soon what seemed like an army of seamstresses streamed in her door and began attacking her with measuring tapes and fabric swatches.

"What's going on?" she asked as one musingly held up a purple square under her chin.

"We have received acres of fine fabrics from the east," replied the seamstress who was measuring Meghan's waist. "One of the first orders was several gowns for you. I think the blue suits her well, yes?" This last sentence was addressed to the other women.

"No, wait," Meghan blurted out. "Do you have any green?"

"Perhaps dark green for the coronation, then," the woman nodded, "though it is the colour of Rohan."

_The colour of Mirkwood, too,_ Meghan wanted to say, but they were already chattering animatedly amongst themselves about styles and seaming and satin.

It turned out that the dress-fitting took up much of the afternoon, and by the time the seamstresses packed up their samples and left, Meghan's stomach was growling. It seemed a little early to go to the banquet, but she reasoned that perhaps some of her friends would have the same idea and she could catch up with them.

The banquet hall was actually more occupied that she expected, and she glanced around the huge room in search of a familiar face. She didn't have to look for long, because after a moment Gwaethir appeared at her elbow.

"My Lady Meghan," he said with a courtly bow.

"Lord Gwaethir," Meghan replied, fumbling with the title. "What should I call you? Do I call you prince or lord or—"

"For my part, I would have you dispense with formalities and simply call me by my name," he said, smiling. "We are to be brother and sister one day..." Here his voice dropped to a mischievous whisper. "Unless, perhaps, we already are such."

Meghan's hand instinctively flew up to her neck, and she tried to make it seem natural by tugging her braid with a cough. "One day, yes. But not yet."
"Then please, call me only Gwaethir. Will you sit with me? There is much I would discuss with you."

"Of course." Meghan hardly knew what to expect from his conversation. He looked so like and yet so very unlike Legolas that it perplexed her, and his whole manner was different than what she had expected. I wonder what they were like as children, she thought.

They sat at one of the tables. There was no food yet, only empty place settings, and Meghan suspected that they would actually be seated at a different table closer to Aragorn's. But for the moment, no one seemed to care.

Gwaethir fixed an inscrutable look on her. "My brother has spent much of the afternoon explaining your complex and extraordinary history to me. I must confess that I am still confused by the particulars."

"What can I clear up?" Meghan asked, tensing. She had left the decision up to Legolas regarding what they would tell his family about her. At first they had talked about her trying to assimilate as quietly as possible, perhaps giving a vague backstory of living in seclusion prior to joining the quest. But that had hardly seemed plausible, and she still couldn't even converse in Sindarin fluently. Still, she wondered if Legolas had actually gone for it and told Gwaethir the real story.

"Simply reassure me that my little brother spoke the truth," Gwaethir said with an arched brow. "I hardly believe him capable of enough imagination to concoct such a tale, but you must agree that it sounds too fantastical to be true. I would be gravely displeased to find that Legolas pulled an elaborate joke on me."

"He wasn't pranking you," Meghan said, although the image of Legolas as a prankster did not compute in her mind. "He told you the truth. I am from the future, but I don't know why I was sent here. I hope that I did well."

A slow smile spread across Gwaethir's face. "Perhaps both of you are laughing at my expense. The burden of being a trickster is that it is difficult to trust others when circumstances seem unbelievable. However, there is an earnestness in your countenance that I can hardly deny. I will believe you, and let a better judge of the Valar's whims decide the likeliness of your story."

"Thank you," Meghan said, uncertain of the proper response. Why do I feel as if I've been weighed and measured?

"Enough of this inquisition," Gwaethir said. "Legolas would have my head if he knew how keenly I interrogated you. Come; let us speak of other things. Surely you must have questions about your fair prince's past."

"There is one thing I've been wondering about," Meghan said slowly. "Legolas has told me a lot about you and your sister, and he mentioned your father a few times… but he never talks about your mother. I didn't want to pry, because I kept thinking he would tell me on his own. Maybe it's wrong of me to ask you."

Gwaethir's face was grave. "I do not wonder why he was loath to speak of it. Our mother passed over the Sea more than half a century ago."

Meghan had learned enough about the Elves to understand what that meant. "Oh, I'm so sorry. Was she… was she alright?"

"My mother loved our homeland very deeply," Gwaethir said, choosing his words thoughtfully. "I
believe that her heart was given as much to the trees as to my father. When the Greenwood began
to sicken, it affected her very much. By the time the spiders swarmed the northern borders, she had
become so unwell that my father insisted she remove to Rivendell for her own health. Lord Elrond
did all he could, but it did not take long for my mother to answer the call of the Sea."

"I'm sure you miss her very much," Meghan said with an ache as she thought of her own family.

"Every day," Gwaethir replied softly. "She was the best of mothers. Yet I do not despair, for I
know that I will join her one day."

Meghan was just about to ask about the mysterious Thranduil when they were interrupted by
Legolas' arrival in the banquet hall. His expression was serene when he entered the room, but when
he saw Meghan and Gwaethir talking, an alarmed look flickered across his face and he hurried
over.

"Ah, brother," Gwaethir said in a cheerful greeting. "I was just telling Meghan about the incident in
Dorwinion two summers ago."

"Ahh," Legolas breathed out slowly, his face going completely neutral.

Gwaethir burst into laughter. "How quickly you are fooled, little brother! Be at ease. I have told
none of your secrets about that journey to your lady fair, although I suspect that now you will have
to."

For a moment Meghan was going to take pity on him – until she remembered the hickey on her
neck. "I think that would be wonderful," she said, smiling innocently. "I would love to hear more
about your past."

"You must understand that Dorwinion wine is very potent," Legolas began with a strained
expression.

He was interrupted by the entrance of Aragorn and Gandalf, which signaled the beginning of the
feast. Legolas sat down, and even though he wasn't breathing heavily, it looked like he had just
woken up from his worst nightmare.

The banquet was wonderful. It began with toasts and speeches, but before long it segued into music
and dancing. The younger hobbits spent half the evening teaching the Gondorians around them
traditional folk songs – an endeavour more or less successful, considering how abundantly the ale
flowed in the hall.

Meghan found herself carried from one group to the next; at first she stayed to talk and eat with
Legolas and Gwaethir, until she laughed at Merry and Pippin for a little while, then whispered with
Éowyn like schoolgirls at their first party, and later wound up consulting seriously with Faramir
about the particular differences between wedding ceremonies in Edoras and Minas Tirith. At one
point, Aragorn even taught her an old Gondorian dance.

By the time Legolas reclaimed her, she was sleepy and happy and ready to be quiet. He smiled at
her in the midst of the party that still whirled joyfully on, and Meghan decided she would like to be
smiled at like that every day of her life.

"Let's go somewhere a little quieter," she said over the general noise in the room.

Without a word, he clasped her hand and showed her to one of the beautiful outdoor recesses that
was just outside the main banqueting hall. They could still hear the music and laughter, but it was
muted now, distant against the sounds of nighttime.
For a few moments, they simply stood together, enjoying the cool midnight air and each other's company. The moon was full and low and cast a bright luminosity over the city.

"Legolas," she said after a while, "why didn't you ever tell me about your mother?"

He paused, his body going tense in that way that Meghan sensed rather than saw. "It seemed selfish," he finally said, although he couldn't quite meet her eyes. "I saw how deeply you miss your own family. I could not burden you with my own troubles."

"Legolas," Meghan chided, reaching up to turn his face toward her. "You can't shut me out like that. Part of being in a relationship is bearing each other's burdens. I want to support you and protect you, too."

"I knew that you would chasten me thus," he said with a rueful smile. "Forgive me, Meghan. Too often have I underestimated your strength and spirit."

"I hardly think that apology will suffice," she said seriously, because Legolas doing penance was one of her favourite things, and he grinned because he knew it.

"Wicked woman," he murmured against her lips just before he kissed her. As he did, Meghan noticed him loosening her braid and pushing the curls off her shoulder. She started to protest, but he insistently kept her mouth busy, so she let it alone. "I can re-braid it in a minute, she thought in a haze. It was he who pulled away first, and he seemed to be studying her neck. At first Meghan didn't understand.

"What is it?" she asked. "Wait – are you inspecting your handiwork?" Her hand flew up to the mark below her ear. "Is this the first time you've given someone a hickey or something?"

He laughed, looking every inch the teenage boy. "Well, I have never wanted to do so before," he said, playfully defensive.

"You..." She looped a hand into his belt and pulled him closer, so that their bodies were flush against each other. "You are a total dork."

"You said once that meant a nice thing," he said as he brushed her hair back again, except this time it was so that he could twine his hands into her curls. "But I begin to believe that you are laughing at me when you say it."

"Oh my, how observant you are." Meghan reveled in his closeness, the wonderful and mysterious scent of him, the way his fingers sketched lazy circles at the nape of her neck.

He leaned down and gave her the lightest of kisses, just enough to make her go up on tiptoes to follow him as he pulled away. "I have been told that I am a little imperceptive from time to time," he said with a very serious expression.

"I think you're a little imperceptive about how much I would like to kiss you right now," Meghan muttered at the ground, indignant that she was too short to reach him.

His eyes were dancing and his hands felt cool as he tilted her chin up. "My lady gives me no credit," he grinned. "I am quite aware of how much you would like to kiss me." And he did just that, his lips gentle and unassuming. This time he let her take the lead, and she reached up to trace the outline of his jaw with her thumb.

"Come to bed with me," she blurted out, and quickly kept going to forestall his protestations. "Not like that. It's just... I haven't slept alone in a room for a long time. I don't know if I can fall sleep
without the sound of someone breathing near me."

"Do you think it would be wise?" His eyes were uncertain.

Meghan laughed and pushed him back a half-step. "Contrary to popular belief, I can actually keep my pants on."

"We will have to be discreet," Legolas said doubtfully. "If my brother heard even the vaguest rumour, we would never hear the end of it."

"Sounds like fun," Meghan said. "I never did any sneaking around when I was a teenager, so it's about time."

"We need rules," Legolas said. "I must insist that we do not kiss. If you attack me as you did this morning, I do not believe that my self-control will last."

"Don't tempt me," Meghan groaned, then quirked an earnest expression up at him. "Why do we have to wait? I understand that it's not very normal to be married this way, but it can't be unprecedented."

"Were I but a common Elf with no expectations of honour upon me, I would ravish you this very night," Legolas said, sending a delicious shiver up Meghan's back. "But as a prince, I have certain responsibilities. If I brought you home as my wife, the people would be wary and question how quickly we acted. I want them to trust and love you as I do. I cannot bring doubt into their minds at your first meeting."

"Alright. That's fair enough, I guess, and I can live with it… for now. Are there any more rules tonight?" Meghan wasn't entirely sure how to take this declaration from him, so she decided to think it over later.

He grinned suddenly, a boyish delight for mischief clearly sparkling in his blue eyes. "There are no other rules. Go now, prepare for bed as you always do, and I will come to you when I can."

Stifling a yawn, Meghan hurried up to her room. It only took a few minutes to change into the soft linen shift she slept in, but by the time she crept into bed, she was yawning in earnest. *This mattress is so much softer than my old one,* she thought drowsily. *I have to stay awake until Legolas comes.*

It felt like hours passed as she fought sleep. *Should I go and find him?* she wondered. But the bed was so comfortable, and it was so late… *We'll sort it out in the morning. Maybe Gwaethir caught him before he could get away. But I wish he could come…*

She was startled out of her half-slumber by a noise at the window, and she lifted her head from the pillow just in time to see Legolas slide into her room. He grinned at her as he shut the latch behind him.

"Did you just crawl up the wall outside to get into my room?" Meghan asked.

"I told you that we needed to be discreet," he said, blowing out the candle by the bedside.

"Hark, what Legolas through yonder window breaks, indeed," she murmured around another yawn.

He stretched out beside her on the bed, although she was on top of the sheets and she was under them. She rolled over to face him and burrowed against his chest, mindful not to press too close. She didn't want to torture him – much.
"Goodnight," she whispered.

"Goodnight, my Meghan," he replied, his chin brushing the top of her head.

And with that she fell asleep, possibly the happiest girl that ever lived.

Chapter End Notes

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The weight of sleep clung to Meghan's bones as she slowly drifted back to consciousness. Somehow in the night she had kicked off her blankets, probably because of the balmy midsummer air – or perhaps it was the warm heaviness of Legolas' body stretched out next to her own. She had curled into his shadow, one hand splayed across his chest, and the other hand brushed against…

A puddle of her own drool?

Her eyes snapped open precisely the same millisecond that her mouth snapped shut. She stared up at him, frozen. He was watching her with a dreamy half-smile on his face, the kind of smile that a man wears when he is so profoundly captivated by a woman that he even thinks her saliva is endearing.

Meghan was unconvinced.

“How much did you see?” she whispered suspiciously.

“You are a very deep sleeper,” he replied.

She wiped her mouth with the back of her hand and lifted her head long enough the flip the pillow to its clean side. She couldn’t resist that smile any longer, so she snuggled closer and hid her face against his chest. His fingers lightly found the curve of where her jaw met her throat.

“The mark on your neck has healed,” he said.

Meghan reached up for confirmation. “Thank goodness,” she said, peeking up to narrow her eyes at him. “It was a nightmare to keep hidden.”

“I could give you another,” he replied with that wicked grin she found so delicious.

“Maybe I’ll give you one,” she muttered, toying with the laces at his collar and wondering if she could casually get him shirtless again.

He smirked. “You could try.”

“You forget that I have one distinct advantage over you,” Meghan said seriously.

“Oh?”

“I know where you’re ticklish!”

Without giving him an opportunity to react, she attacked him under the ribs where he was most sensitive. He laughed and shuddered away, ineffectually trying to fend her off with his hands. Undeterred, Meghan rolled her body on top of his to straddle him, her knees on either side of his hips to better pin him down. He was laughing harder now, his breath coming in gasps, and she laughed, too.

Then she squealed and twisted away, because it turned out that he knew where she was ticklish too, and he ran his hands feather-light up the small of her back. “No, no stop!” she shrieked through laughter as she flopped back onto the bed, trying to get away. “Truce!”
They lay there for a moment in a tangle of limbs and giggles. As they fell silent, Meghan felt a swell of contented drowsiness wash over her. She was safe, and loved, and happy, and the sun coming through the window felt warm on her skin. But she wasn’t ready to surrender the moment back to sleep, so she quirked a look up at Legolas.

“Why were you so late last night? Did you run into Gwaethir?” she asked.

He stilled, radiating an alertness that made her think that he’d almost been waiting for her to ask that question. She shifted position a little to see his face better. *Is something wrong?*

“I had to track down a metalsmith,” he replied.

“Oh?” she said, feeling thrown.

“A silversmith, in fact. I placed an order with him some weeks ago, but his shop was somewhat derelict due to the war, and it took him time to complete my request.”

A flutter had taken up residence in Meghan's stomach. “And what did he make for you?”

“Perhaps you recall what I told you of exchanging silver rings,” he said, producing two simple bands from an inner pocket of his tunic.

“I do,” she whispered, then caught herself. “I mean, I remember.”

His eyes were deep blue as he cradled the nape of her neck with his free hand, and there was a searching look on his face, like he wasn’t sure what she would say. “Meghan… would you bind yourself to me?”

She tried not to make a silly face in her confusion. “What does that actually mean?”

“To be bound to another means…” He trailed off, looking a little lost himself. “It means – ai, that you spoke Sindarin more, for the meaning is clearer in that tongue… It is to be promised, to be betrothed.”

“Oh! Yes, yes, of course!” she exclaimed, and then she laughed, because she had thought she’d been happy before but now she knew that *surely* this was the happiest anyone could ever be.

His face broke into a grin. “It is customary for my people to exchange many words and vows along with the rings, but I fear that you would not understand the old tongues.” He took her right hand to press his lips against the inside of her wrist, then slipped one of the silver rings onto her finger. “What is the custom from whence you came?”

“Well, *my* people call it being engaged,” she replied as she took the second ring from him and did the same on his index finger. “And it’s traditional that the man got down on one knee for the proposal.”

“Such strange expressions,” he said. “A proposal for an engagement. I have been engaged for a dance, or for an evening of entertainment. The word is not enough – I would be bound to you, to have *gwidh uin melith.*”

It still took time for her to mentally translate anything from Sindarin, but those words were familiar. “The bond of lovers?” she asked, a thrill of triumph sweeping over her even before he answered, because she knew it was right.

“You have learned more than I thought!” Legolas said in surprise.
Meghan shrugged, trying to act nonchalant. “I’ve been studying a little.”

“I will not misjudge your abilities again,” he said, then linked their hands together so that the rings were side by side. “And what comes after this proposal? Forgive me for not going to one knee.”

“Well, what happens next…” She gave him a very serious look. “Lots and lots of kissing.”

He didn’t answer in words, but instead slid one arm under her head to prop himself up. The morning sunlight spilled over his shoulders as she looked up at him, and not for the last time Meghan wondered how exactly his hair always looked so perfect. But a moment later, she was hardly conscious of his hair or the sunlight at all, because his mouth claimed all her attention.

**Knock, knock!**

They both completely froze, lips against lips, his hand tangled in her hair and her just starting to peel off his shirt. Meghan swallowed a knot of real irritation, and considered simply ripping his shirt off and pretending she hadn’t heard the knock. But he was already pulling away with a worried look.

“My brother—” he began in a voice that might have been genuinely alarmed.

**Knock, knock, knock.**

“It’s not your brother,” Meghan whispered. “He doesn’t know where my room is. And listen, we’re all adults. Nothing happened last night, and we’re engaged now. Or… gwidh uin melith.”

“Sindarin sounds beautiful in your mouth.” Legolas grinned at her.

Meghan tried to remember the words for *let’s open the door*, but she couldn’t. “Come on, it’s probably just one of the Hobbits, or maybe Ioreth because she misses bossing me around.”

“Very well, we shall answer the door,” he groaned, then swooped in for a sudden kiss. “One last kiss before our doom.”

“You’re such a drama queen,” she laughed as she pushed him off her and stood.

“I think, perhaps, you will understand better when you are more familiar with Gwaethir’s uncanny ability to tease in the most discomfiting way possible.” Legolas had also risen, although he was taking pains to smooth the sheets.

**Knock, knock, knock.** “Meghan, are you awake?” The voice on the other side of the door was familiar, and Meghan pointed a triumphant finger at Legolas.

“See? Not your brother.” She opened the door and smiled. “Good morning, Aragorn!”

“Good morning, Meghan,” Aragorn replied with a slight bow of his head. His eyes looked beyond her and his brows rose the slightest bit. “Good morning, Legolas.”

There was a pause.

“Good morning,” Legolas finally replied, and he had a look in his eyes that Meghan could literally only interpret as that glance that guys exchange just before going up for a high five.

Meanwhile, Aragorn looked like he was struggling to suppress a smile. “Gwaethir is asking after you. It would seem that he could not find you in your room this morning and is now exploring the city in search of you.”
The confidence faltered on Legolas’ face. “Perhaps I should go to meet him,” he said.

“Perhaps you should,” Aragorn replied gravely.

“Pardon me for this indecorum, mellon nin,” Legolas said just before sweeping Meghan into his arms and searing her lips with a quick but fervent kiss. “Until later, my love. I go to my ruin!” And with that, he disappeared out the window just as he had come in the night before.

“Is it me, or is he overreacting?” Meghan asked.

Aragorn looked out the window with a half smile quirked on his lips. “Indeed, I have watched Legolas face many foul things without flinching, yet he is reduced to a nervous child at the threat of mischief from his brother.” He chuckled, turning back to her. “Tread watchfully in all your dealings with that family, Meghan. Perhaps your novelty will protect you for a time, but the day will come when you are drawn into the web of pranks and treason and tricks.”

“Surely it’s not so bad as that,” she insisted.

“Do not underestimate their penchant for mischief,” Aragorn said. “The Elvenking has been hard put at times to subdue the… shall we say, exuberant pranks of his children, Legolas no less than the other two. I have known them since I reached my majority and I could tell you stories that you would scarce believe.”

“You don’t think anything will happen here, do you?” she asked, quailing a little at this warning.

“No, you are safe within my walls. Gwaethir has already given me assurances that he will do nothing while he is on Gondorian ground, although I suspect he does so purely for the pleasure of watching Legolas jump at shadows. Look, he forgot his boots.”

“Oh,” Meghan said. She grabbed them from the foot of her bed and went to the window, hoping that Legolas might still be below so she could give them back. But no, he was nowhere to be seen, and she turned back to Aragorn. “He’s wandering around Minas Tirith… barefoot.”

“Something must have distracted him even more than his brother to cause him such an oversight,” Aragorn said with a crinkle at the corners of his eyes. “May I see your hand?” Suddenly shy, Meghan offered him her right hand. He smiled fully this time, examining the silver ring on her first finger. “It would seem that I have been remiss as your guardian,” he said, “for you have been betrothed under my very nose!”

"Well, you have been very busy," Meghan said, trying to act mature until her giddiness won out and she squealed. "Oh, Aragorn, I'm so excited!"

He regarded her with old, kind eyes. "As you should be, my friend. You have earned the love of a good man, and he is most deserving of you. I believe that you both will be very happy."

"Thank you, Aragorn," she said as her eyes suddenly misted up.

A concerned look crossed his face. "Why these tears? Did you not say that you are well pleased?"

"Yes, I am," she laughed around the lump in her throat. "But I'm a little sad, too. I always imagined celebrating with my mom and dad when I got engaged. Now I don't know if I'll ever see them again."

"I am sorry," he replied gently, taking her hand and looping it through his arm. "Will you walk with me?"
She nodded and sucked in a gurgling sniffle. They left her room, shutting the door behind them, and walked through the hallways until they came to the open air of the courtyard at the pinnacle of the city. The four guards of the White Tree stood silently, and Aragorn nodded to them as he and Meghan passed. Despite her previous tears, Meghan was feeling peaceful again in Aragorn’s reassuring presence. They stood at the lip of the stone overhang and looked across the fields of Pelennor.

“What will you do?” he asked after a while. “You are more than welcome in my household, but I sense that you are not of a mind to always remain in Minas Tirith.”

“Legolas left it up to me,” Meghan replied. “He would stay here, if I asked him. Part of me wants to stay, but I know that the Hobbits will leave soon, and Gimli will go once he’s done helping with the city’s reconstruction. I want to know Legolas’ family, so I think we’ll go to Mirkwood after your coronation.”

“I have heard that much is changed in that realm with the defeat of Sauron,” Aragorn said. “You will find it a wonderful place, if the stories are true.”

“I hope so,” Meghan said. “When Legolas talks about it, he lights up. I know that he can’t wait to get back and see the difference in his home. I’m a little nervous, though… I guess it’s just a lot of pressure, to basically go live with his family in a whole new place, all at once.”

“You will do well,” Aragorn said. “You have a great capacity to be adaptable. Think on how readily you found a place here, though it may have been simple employment in the Houses of Healing. Do not worry about how Legolas’ family will receive you. And perhaps it would be wise to cultivate your own independence while in King Thranduil’s house.”

“Aragorn,” Meghan said, the tears welling up again, “I’ve thought this before, but I want to tell you. You’re going to make the best father someday.”

“I hope so,” he said. She was surprised that he looked sad. “The wait may be long, indeed.”

Until that moment, it hadn’t even occurred to her that Aragorn might not believe his love would come to him. “She will,” Meghan whispered as a fierce, protective ache throbbed in her chest. “She has to.”

“I cannot delay the coronation any longer,” Aragorn replied with a heavy voice. “If she comes, she must come soon.”

“When is the coronation?” Meghan asked.

“Two days hence. All the delegations have arrived but one, and I do not know if that party will come at all. The summer is already waning. It is time to receive my birthright.”

“You’ve earned it,” Meghan said. “I can’t think of a better person to be king of these people.”

They were interrupted just then by forceful footfalls made by heavy boots, accompanied by angry huffing. Both turned to see Gimli stomping towards them, his expression dour.

“My friend,” Aragorn said, all mildness. “What has caused this prospect of calamity in your countenance?”

“A blight upon Elvish princelings,” Gimli growled. “Making me his errand boy, of all things! It’s preposterous! A plague take him and his tomfool forgetfulness…” Here he dissolved into Khuzdul, presumably of an unsavoury nature.
“What has Legolas sent you to do?” Aragorn prompted.

“Did he have a message for me?” Meghan asked, wondering if Legolas needed back-up because Gwaethir really was flaying him alive.

“Hardly!” Gimli rumbled. “He all but begged me to come to you, Meghan, and retrieve his confounded boots!”

Chapter End Notes

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Oh, I Just Can't Wait to be King

Meghan smoothed out the front of her dress, even though it was already neatly pressed. It made been made in the style of Gondor’s court with a softly curved collar and deep pleats in the long skirt, all in green tones. She traced the embroidery across the high neckline and wondered if the silvery leaf pattern had been accidental, or a wink and a nudge prompted by Ioreth.

“You look very fair, my friend,” Éowyn said from the other side of the small room, where she was braiding back the crown of her hair.

“Thank you,” Meghan replied with a smile. She plopped down on her bed and touched the deep blue cloak that Éowyn had draped across the foot of it. “This is beautiful. Is it new?”

“A gift from Faramir.” Éowyn made eye contact with her through the mirror and grinned.

“Oooo!” Meghan crowed. “Éowyn, I’m—” She choked a bit as tears welled into her eyes. “You deserve so much happiness, and I’m just really glad for you. I’m so grateful that you’re my friend.”

Éowyn came to sit next to her on the bed and put a hand on her shoulder. “And I you, Meghan. How strange that I could call an Elf a friend! Yet I have learned to consider all the races of Middle earth with greater understanding. I hope that we will remain friends all the years of my life.”

“I am quite sure we will,” Meghan smiled even as the realization struck her that she would long outlive Éowyn. She swallowed the sudden thickness in her throat, determined not to let sad thoughts darken the day. “Is Faramir coming here before the ceremony?”

“No, I will go to him in the upper levels. He takes his duties as Steward very seriously, and did not want to be absent should there be need of him.”

“He is so not who I would have pictured you with, and yet he suits you so well.”

“The world has changed, and I have changed with it,” Éowyn said with a soft smile. “A king at last on Gondor’s throne, my own good brother the Lord of the Mark, and I to wed a man who esteems learning above war. Who could have guessed that such darkness would give way to this?”

“It almost seems to good to be true.”

“But it is true,” Éowyn firmly said. “And you and I shall reap the rewards of it. Would you like to walk with me up to the first level? Faramir and I would welcome your company.” She stood and picked up the blue mantle, considering its weight.

“Thanks, but Legolas is meeting me here.”

Éowyn cast the cloak around her shoulders, and it fell in dark folds around her, the silver embroidery catching the light. “Then I will see you at the coronation.”

“Alright. You look so great, Éowyn!” Meghan called after her as she swept out the door. The blonde cast a grin over her shoulder on her way out, and Meghan smiled to see her friend so happy.

She puttered around the room for a few minutes, fussing with her hair and straightening the trinkets on her bedside table. She would have just gone out to find Legolas if she hadn’t been so rubbish at finding her way in the city – every level looked nearly identical, and she knew it would just make her late to the coronation. She didn’t have to wait long, though, because after a moment there came
a knock at the door.

“Coming!” she called, and threw open the door.

She went absolutely stock-still.

“What is it?” Legolas asked, immediately looking concerned.

A horrible, horrible urge to giggle was taking hold in Meghan’s stomach, and she clenched her jaw to restrain it. “Nothing,” she choked out, afraid to say more lest she start laughing.

His brows furrowed, which somehow only made the situation funnier to her. A tiny giggle escaped—except it came out more like a strangled grunt, and of course that was even funnier. Realizing that she was at a critical point in a downward spiral, Meghan sucked in a deep breath and fanned her face in an attempt to compose herself.

“I’m so sorry,” she said. “I’m fine. It’s nothing. I’m fine. I am fine.” Talking seemed to help, and if she didn’t quite look at him directly, she could keep it under control.

“Are you sure?” He didn’t seem convinced.

“I am so sure that I’m alright,” she replied, masterfully swallowing the last of her giggles.

Legolas still shot her a skeptical look, but it melted into a smile. “You look very pretty.”

“So do you,” she whispered, and any pretense of keeping a straight face ended as she dissolved into the kind of belly-laughter that is almost silent and makes your eyes water. She had to clutch the doorframe for support. “I’m so sorry,” she gasped even as the traitorous laughter overwhelmed her. “This is so mean—I’m sorry—” Breathless, she couldn’t get the words out.

He had crossed his arms across his chest, quirking one eyebrow at her as the giggles subsided. “Are you quite finished?” he asked dryly, which was enough to send her back into hysterics.

“I’m so sorry,” she repeated as she finally got herself under control and wiped the tears from her lashes. “I shouldn’t have laughed. I just did not expect you to be wearing something like that.”

He glanced down at the long silver robe he wore. “Truth be told, I do not care for these formal clothes, either. I prefer my hunting greens.”

“You look very… stately,” Meghan said, now absolutely determined to maintain whatever shred of restraint she had left. “Is that, ah – is that a tiara?”

“I believe the proper term is circlet,” Legolas replied with a pained expression, “and I like it least of all.”

“It makes your hair look very shiny,” she offered.

“My brother was thoughtful enough to bring my formal attire from home. I am certain that my father would not appreciate his sons attending an official coronation in anything less.”

Meghan didn’t say anything in the moment, but she took note of his comment about Thranduil. She had begun to suspect that there was a long and complicated history between them, and wondered how she might go about unraveling it. And without knowing Legolas’ father yet, it almost seemed pointless to try.

“Where is Gwaethir?” She changed the subject in the hope that she wouldn’t get another giggle-fit
“With a friend,” he said, brightening. “Will you join me? There is someone I would have you to meet.”

Intrigued, Meghan took his arm. “This is very mysterious. Do we have far to go?”

“Well down the hall. Did you not hear us last night?”

“No,” Meghan replied.

“I thought to wake you, but it seemed unkind given the lateness of the hour.”

“What on earth were you doing?”

They had made their way past several doors by now, and Meghan expected each one to be their destination. Legolas quirked a mischievous smile at her as he gently slowed them down at the last one. “My brother and I smuggled a vagabond and her father into the city long after moonrise. Would you care to meet her?”

“You don’t mean...?” Meghan asked in the same moment that he opened the door.

“I am hardly a vagabond, mellon,” a musical voice spoke from inside the room.

“Are you—?” Meghan gasped, rushing inside to see a tall Elf lady in a pale dress the colour of spring. “You’re her! I’m so glad you’re here! I didn’t think you were coming!”

“You must be Lady Meghan,” the brunette laughed, although it was so lovely and deep that it almost seemed more wonderful than laughter. “I am Arwen Undómiel.”

“What happened? What do you mean you smuggled her in? Why is it a secret?” Now that the initial surprise was over, Meghan couldn’t get the words out fast enough. She realized that Gwaethir was there too, lounging easily in the open window frame with one leg swinging outside. Apparently Legolas isn’t the only Elf comfortable with sheer drops, she thought.

“Aragorn does not know she is here,” Gwaethir explained, “so you must play innocent if you speak to him this morning.”

“We mean to surprise him at the coronation,” Legolas said.

“That’s so exciting! This is the most wonderful thing that could have happened today. He’s missed you so much, Arwen, even though he didn’t like to talk about it often. I think that maybe he has started to lose hope that you would come.”

“There is always hope,” Arwen replied quietly. “He bid me sail West and remain with my kin, but I shall not go now to the Havens. Mine is the choice of Lúthien, as she chose so have I, both the sweet and the bitter.”

“I think you’re very brave,” Meghan said, swallowing around the lump in her throat.

Arwen laughed again, the sudden sound dispelling any melancholy in the air. “I am too impatient to wait for the coronation. Perhaps I will slip away from you and go to my beloved now!”

“It would not do for the King of Gondor and the reunited realms to miss his own coronation,” Gwaethir said with an impish grin, swinging down from the windowsill to give Arwen a kiss on the cheek. “Let the poor man get through the rites undistracted. There will be ample time for a
reunion after.”

“This is how I know you are not in love,” Arwen teased. “If you were, then you would understand the length of an hour!”

Gwaethir glanced around the room as a look of stricken horror dawned across his face. “I did not realize until this moment that I am solely in the company of lovers,” he exclaimed. “I hope this sickness is not catching, for I have no wish to pine after a lady. Save me from the madness of love!”

“It is a sweet madness, brother,” Legolas said.

“Still, I would have no part in it,” Gwaethir smiled in return. “But look! The sun is already well in the sky. Our father could hardly countenance his sons being late to a royal coronation, though it is a mortal’s. Away with you two, and I will deliver our Lady Evenstar to her noble swain at the proper time.”

“I look forward to making your better acquaintance, Lady Meghan,” Arwen said.

“Oh, just Meghan, please. I’ve had enough of Lady Meghan to last me a lifetime.” She twinkled innocently at Legolas.

“I meant it as a courtesy,” he said, equally – if not more – innocent.

“It sounded like you were intentionally reminding me that you wanted to just be friends,” Meghan smiled back.

“See how they already quarrel,” Gwaethir stage-whispered to Arwen. “This fate awaits you also, mellon. Now do you see why I hesitate to be bound by any troth?”

“There must be no bickering on this happiest of days,” Arwen said. “I will see both of you later. Gwaethir, I thank you for your kind offer to escort me, but I think I will go up with my father, for I would speak with him as we walk.”

“As you wish, my lady.” Gwaethir inclined his head graciously.

“Would you like to go with us?” Meghan asked.

He put a hand over his heart with an offended look. “And be seen trailing in the footsteps of my little brother and his beautiful betrothed? I think not. No, I will find my woodland kin and join the party with them.” He perched easily up onto the windowsill and shot a deliberate wink at Meghan before disappearing out into the morning air. She knew then, without a shadow of a doubt, that he knew about Legolas coming to her two nights ago.

Arwen was watching the two of them with a twinkle in her eyes. “Can you both be trusted to walk together without quarreling?”

“This is hardly our first disagreement, mellon,” Legolas said as he pressed a quick kiss to Arwen’s cheek. “Had you only seen us when first we came to Rohan…”

“Or when I drugged Haldir!” Meghan piped in, then wilted a bit. “Um… Rohan was a difficult time for us in general.”

“I see there is much to tell in your story,” Arwen said, smiling. “But for the present, your brother was right. It is time for the coronation!”
“Of course,” Legolas said. “We will see you at the feast.”

They left Arwen and made their way from the guest wing out to the open air. The sun felt warm on Meghan’s face after the coolness of being inside, and the air had that indefinable smell of summertime. She breathed in deeply as they walked and thought of what Éowyn had said earlier – that the world had changed, and they would live in peace and happiness.

“Did I really offend you when I persisted in calling you lady for so long?” Legolas asked after a moment.

The question surprised her, because she had already forgotten about their exchange earlier. She thought about it for a moment. “No. It just confused me.”

“If it is of any solace to you, I was confused too.”

“Maybe Gwaethir was right, and this whole love business is just too much work.” She used her elbow to nudge him in the ribs where he was most ticklish.

He shuddered away with a barely suppressed laugh – always her favourite response. “Had I known how often you would tickle me like an Elfling, I would have called you lady for another age!”

“It’s my only advantage over you,” she said, flexing her index finger at him threateningly.

“That is hardly your only advantage,” he said. “Why, you could undo me more easily than you may guess.”

“Really? How?”

“If you sent me away from you, and bid me not return.”

She poked him in the stomach again, earning another ridiculous giggle. “I’ll stick to tickling you. I like you too much to send you away. Although… that robe might mysteriously disappear from your wardrobe at some point.”

“And three more would appear in its place. The seamstresses of Nídhrond are very vigilant.”

“Nídhrond?” She hadn’t heard that word before.

“It is the name of my father’s city. The forest is called Mirkwood by most, though we still use the name Eryn Lasgalen in memory of its green boughs before its corruption. But the city in which my people dwell is called Nídhrond, after the river that runs beneath our halls.”

“Oh,” Meghan said. She loved hearing about his home, but he seemed reluctant to talk about it very much. She had learned enough to know that Mirkwood had fallen into darkness and it grieved him to speak of it. But she also knew that Galadriel and Celeborn had joined King Thranduil to effect some kind of change in the forest, and she suspected that Legolas wanted to see what that meant before he told her more. I will just have to be patient, she reminded herself. I’ll be there before I know it, anyway.

By then, they had walked up to the uppermost level, and entered the throngs of people in the open courtyard. They were ushered to a place of honour close to the steps leading to the Great Hall, and after a moment Gwaethir and the rest of the Mirkwood Elves joined them.

“This is so exciting!” Meghan whispered to Legolas, but quickly quieted because Aragorn and Gandalf stepped out of the huge double doors and onto the dais at the top of the steps.
Most of what Meghan remembered from the coronation was the atmosphere of solemn, irresistible joy. She didn’t know most of the history of Gondor’s rulers, but she could sense the deep relief and wonder in the people around her when Gandalf placed the winged crown on Aragorn’s head. Once he finished the old song of Númenor, he stepped down from the dais and began to walk down the aisle in the courtyard, bowing to those he knew as he went.

As he drew closer to them, Meghan leaned close to Legolas and whispered, “When can we tell him? Can it be soon?”

“Very soon,” he murmured back, then smiled to his friend.

Aragorn put his hand to Legolas’ shoulder in a friendly greeting, which he returned. “Hannon le,” Aragorn said.

Meanwhile, Meghan was practically vibrating with excitement. She bounced up on her toes and grinned so hard that she probably looked unwell. Aragorn turned to her with a quizzical smile. “What is it?” he asked.

“I can’t tell you,” she squeaked.

“See with your own eyes, my friend,” Legolas said, tugging Meghan out of Aragorn’s line of vision. She hadn’t meant to cry, but the look of wonderstruck disbelief on Aragorn’s face as he saw Arwen made Meghan’s eyes sting with emotion. She gripped Legolas’ hand tight and struggled not to let out a whoop of pure elation as the King and Queen of Gondor swept into each other’s arms.

A few moments later, once Aragorn and Arwen had subsided into whispers, they made their way over to where the Hobbits had been waiting. Meghan was too far away to understand the words they were saying, but she was more than happy to drop to one knee in what could only be in honour of Frodo and Sam.

When Aragorn rose to his feet again, some unspoken weight was lifted and the crowd erupted into cheers. The wonderful chaos reminded Meghan of when the army returned from the Black Gates. She turned to see if Legolas remembered too, only to discover that he was already speaking with Faramir. They had been talking more lately, discussing Faramir’s plans to relocate to Ithilien in a year or two. Meghan smiled at their earnest conversation in the midst of the noise and bustle of the packed courtyard, and decided to look for Éowyn.

She hadn’t gotten far when she started in surprise at Gwaethir’s sudden appearance at her elbow. By then she had realized that Elves moved much more quietly than humans, but someday she hoped that she could hear them coming first.

“May I speak with you for a moment?” he asked, all courtly politeness in contrast to his teasing earlier.

“Sure,” she replied. “What’s up?”

He quirked an odd look at her. “I fail to see how that is relevant.”

“No, it’s just– it means what’s happening or what do you need.” She had nearly forgotten what it was like to explain her modern slang, since everyone had grown accustomed to it.

“Hmm. A strange phrase. Well, I will tell you what is up.” Gwaethir smiled a little at the words. “I hope this is not an indelicate question to ask of you, but I like to believe that we have become friends already.”
“Friends don’t let friends wonder about indelicate questions,” Meghan prompted.

“A fair point. My brother is loath to ask this of you, for he fears to hurry you before you are ready. But he and I are both needed at home and our company must depart this city soon. Are you willing to join us on our journey in a week’s time?”

A week! That was much sooner than Meghan had thought. “But you’ve only just arrived! I assumed you would rest for longer before starting the return trip.”

“Elves are a hardy folk,” Gwaethir replied wryly. “A little more than a week’s respite is ample for us, especially since we are all eager for home.”

“Then of course I am willing. How long does it take to get from here to Mirkwood?” I should call it Eryn Lasgalen, she thought with an internal wince, hoping that she hadn’t given offense.

“Six weeks to the borders of the forest, and another four days from there to Níðhrond if all goes well. We will travel light, so do not pack overmuch.”

“I don’t have much to pack,” Meghan said.

Gwaethir smiled kindly in understanding. “All will be provided for you in Níðhrond. You will want for nothing.”

“Thank you,” she replied, returning the smile. “Honestly, I’m excited to meet your family. Your sister sounds wonderful.”

“Alassëa will be so pleased to meet you, as well,” Gwaethir said. “She has quite despaired of having a sister. What a surprise you will be to her!”

“You and Legolas must be the most eligible bachelors in the entire kingdom. How could she possibly think you both wouldn’t marry?”

“Legolas has ever been wed to his duty as Lord Commander of the Guard, and he is rubbish with ladies anyway. So stilted and formal, and hardly able to speak of what he feels. I pity you, Meghan, for you have promised yourself to a very boring ellon.”

“So boring,” Meghan nodded. “In fact, I better go to make sure that he hasn’t bored someone to death.”

Gwaethir waved her away with a look of feigned exasperation. “Away with you, lovebird. Your happiness disgusts me.”

“You better get used to it. We’re about to travel together for six whole weeks.” She grinned at him. His face crumpled into a very un-Elflike grimace. “It will be a long six weeks, then.”

“I’ll see you at the feast,” Meghan laughed before turning away to find Legolas. The crowd was so thick that it was difficult to see through it, but after a moment she spotted his blond hair not far away. As she got closer she saw that he was facing away from her, speaking to Gimli.

Once she was just beside him, she slipped a hand into his and was delighted when he startled a bit at the touch. “Did I sneak up on you?” she asked.

“There is so much noise in this courtyard that I can hardly hear my own thoughts,” he replied.

“Ho, Laddie, she most certainly gave you a fright,” Gimli rumbled with laughter.
Legolas cleared his throat. “Gimli was just explaining to me that his kin from Erebor are only a few days from the city.”

“Oh?” Meghan said, going along with his obvious attempt to change the topic. “How do you know?”

“They sent word by ravens this morning,” Gimli replied. “Two score of good stonemasons and miners. Minas Tirith will be fit for a king soon enough.”

“I’m sure that Aragorn is enormously grateful,” she said.

“And I will be grateful for some food. Will you join me inside?”

“We’ll catch up in a minute,” Meghan said. “I would rather wait until the crowd thins out a little bit before trying to get anywhere.”

“As you like, lassie,” Gimli said, then bowed and moved away.

Meghan swiveled around to face Legolas. It really was quite loud in the courtyard, with hundreds of people slowly milling around and talking all the while. Still, the air was bright and tasted of summer, and Meghan smiled up at him despite his ridiculous silver circlet.

“So I hear we’re leaving in a week,” she said.

His brows drew together in surprise. “I intended to ask you about that later. How did you know?”

“Gwaethir beat you to it.”

“Did he?”

“He was concerned that you didn’t want to ask me,” Meghan said. “He wanted to be the bad guy making me decide, instead of you.”

“Ever the elder brother.” Legolas’ voice was tinged with dry humour. “I cannot fault him for acting in kindness, but I did not fear to ask this of you. Mithrandir and the hobbits will also be leaving when we do.”

“Then it sounds like perfect timing.” She used the density of the crowd as an excuse to sidle closer to him and wrap her arms around his midsection. He softly cupped her face between his hands, his eyes dark and warm.

“Thank you, my Meghan,” he said before pressing the lightest of kisses on her lips.

“So indecent for a proper Elf Prince,” she grinned up at him. “Kissing in public! I blush to think of what might be next.”

He laughed, and this time kissed her more fully. She tried to follow him up onto her tiptoes as he pulled away, but he was too tall. “We should join the feast before we are missed,” he said.

“Okay,” she said, breathless. “But just one more thing before we do.”

“What is that?”

She reached up and carefully pulled the circlet off his head. “No more tiara for tonight.”

“It is strange how easily such a thing can be lost,” he said, taking it from her hands to let it fall to
the ground between them.

“I mean, you must have just forgotten to put it in your saddlebags when you were packing for home—” He interrupted her with another kiss, and this one was the kind that felt like laughter and made her stomach flutter with anticipation. His breath felt warm on her lips as he lingered close to her for a moment.

“I’m going to marry you someday,” she said, half a threat and half a promise.

“I depend on it.” He smiled and took her hand, and together they went into the Great Hall to join their friends.
Legolas woke her with a kiss on the cheek, his hair tickling the side of her neck as he leaned across her shoulders to reach. She growled a bit and hunched deeper under the blankets. The Fellowship, plus several additions, had stayed up late the night before, talking and laughing and enjoying one another’s company, and Meghan felt like she had just fallen asleep a few moments ago.

“Noooo,” she whispered. “I’ll just sleep for ten more minutes…”

“And ten more after that, then twenty more,” he laughed.

She cracked one eye open enough to glare at him over her shoulder. “How did you get in here, anyway?” He hadn’t shared her room again since the first time a week and a half ago, explaining that it really wasn’t possible to spend an entire night lying beside her with nothing to do about it. Yet here he was, stretched out very appealingly on her bed – although he was fully dressed in his green traveling garb, and on top of the sheets instead of under them.

“You should consider locking your window.”

“It doesn’t have a lock,” she said, closing her eyes and curling against him so that her back curved into his chest. “It overlooks a twenty foot drop. The city wasn’t built with ninjas in mind.”

He rolled away from her and stood, jostling her enough to know that it was a deliberate ploy to wake her up more. “Are ninjas those who would rouse you in time for important leave-takings?” he asked, and he sounded so excited that she couldn’t even be irritated anymore.

“Not exactly,” she replied, sitting up and rubbing the sleep from her eyelashes. “They’re people who climb up walls and through unlocked windows to wake up their girlfriend.”

Legolas looked a little offended, and for a moment Meghan regretted being such a wet blanket when he was clearly ready to begin the journey back to his homeland. But then he said, “Girlfriend?” like it left a bad taste in his mouth. “That hardly seems like a sufficient word for what you mean to me.”

“Alright – lover,” she laughed and stood so that she could pull him into a kiss. “I’ll be ready to go in a few minutes. I know that you’re eager to finally go home.”

His hands were gentle against the small of her back as he drew her closer and pressed a more lingering kiss to her lips. “It is not only that, my Meghan,” he said. She wasn’t sure if it was just her imagination that his eyes actually darkened in hue sometimes, but they certainly seemed a deeper blue now. “I am eager to give my home to you.”

Oh, she thought, because it honestly hadn’t occurred to her before. Suddenly, the prospect of going to an unfamiliar place didn’t seem so daunting. “That sounds really nice.”

He smiled, his whole face lighting up with happiness. “I will take your bags to the stable while you dress. Can you find your way to meet us there?”

“I think so,” she replied. “But first, I want to stop in at the Houses of Healing. I promise I won’t be too long.”

“I will see you in a little while, then,” he said. “I am—I am glad that you are—” He abruptly paused to clear his throat, and she briefly saw the glimmer of a few unshed tears on his lashes.
before he blinked them away.

“Hey,” she said, reaching to frame his face in her hands. “If you start crying over how much you love me, I’m going to rip all your clothes off and marry you right here, right now.”

He choked out a surprised, watery laugh. “Then I should go. I have no intention of weeping my way into our marriage bed.”

“When you put it that way, it is a little bit unattractive,” she said, wrinkling up her nose and dropping her hands to rest on his chest.

“What I meant to say is that I am very glad you chose to come to Greenwood. I did not imagine, when first I departed from there, that I could ever return so happy.”

“Yes, you should definitely take my bags and go,” Meghan whispered, “because otherwise we’ll both be weeping our way to the marriage bed.”

He bent down for one more kiss. “I will see you at the stables in a little while,” he said, and released her so that he could heft her saddle bags over his shoulder. “Do not be overlong, if you can help it. The sun will rise soon.”

“Don’t remind me that you woke me up before dawn,” she groaned, rubbing a hand across her eyes. “Now get out of here so that I can get changed. You are altogether too distracting.”

“Just as I endeavor to be,” he said with a sunny smile, and with that, he disappeared out the door.

Once she was dressed in a sensible riding outfit, Meghan neatened the room one last time. It looked small and grey in the pre-sunrise dimness, but even so, she smiled fondly as she left and closed the door behind her.

The Houses were always quiet this early in the morning, though a few healers stayed on duty throughout the night. Meghan meant to ask one of them if Ioreth could be found, but when she arrived at the main entrance she was met by the grey-haired woman herself.

“So you’re off to strange lands with that beautiful boy of yours,” Ioreth sniffed by way of greeting.

“Yes, I am,” Meghan smiled. “That beautiful boy and I are going to get married someday, so I thought it best to know where he came from.”

“Well, perhaps that is wisdom,” Ioreth replied gruffly. “I know little of Elvish princes. If ever he makes you unhappy, remember that there is a place for you here, scrubbing pots.”

Meghan laughed. “Thank you, Ioreth. Thank you for all your kindness. I am going to miss you very much.” She drew her into a hug, her eyes suddenly feeling very full.

“Oh, hush now,” Ioreth harrumphed, though she did not push her away. “I hope that you will be so busy with useful things that you have no time to mope after an old woman.”

“I do plan to stay busy,” Meghan said as she drew back. “Maybe I’ll even try to find work with their healers, if there’s a need. I don’t really know what Elvish ladies do.”

“Do you not?” Ioreth asked, giving her a strange look.

“I’ve never been to Mirkwood before,” Meghan said quickly. Of course she doesn’t know that I’ve only been an Elf for a few months! “I imagine things are done differently there.”
“Well, do not become so enamored with their fine ways that you forget to be helpful. Regardless of your wealth and standing, you can find ways to serve and aid those around you. Enough of my lectures, though; I am certain that you are eager to be off.”

“Yes…” Meghan said slowly, “in a way.”

Ioreth nodded, reaching into the little pouch on her belt to draw out a thick envelope. “I thought perhaps you would feel a little displaced in a new realm,” she said, “so I wrote a letter to you, to remind you of your time here. This way you need not wait for a courier.”

“Thank you,” Meghan whispered as she took the envelope and felt the weight of several pages folded within. “Let’s write to each other often. You can keep me updated on everything that happens here!”

“Perhaps I’ll scratch a line or two as I have time. And now away with you. I will not have those Princes of Mirkwood saying it was my farewells that made them late.”

“Goodbye, Ioreth,” Meghan said, reaching for her hands. “You’ve been such a rockstar.”

“Stars are not rocks, dear,” Ioreth said patiently. “Goodbye Meghan.”

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She only lost got lost once on the way to the stables, and even so, it seemed that she had beaten most of the company there. Meghan paused at the front gates to take in the scene. Away to one side of the open stableyard, Legolas was currying Arod’s neck and speaking quietly with Aragorn and Gwaethir. Beyond, through the stable doors, she could see a couple of the Mirkwood Elves – Urúvien and Imrathon, if she remembered their names correctly – saddling up their horses. And tucked in a corner of the courtyard, Arwen and her father sat in discussion together on two crates, as ethereal amidst hay and dust as they had been in the royal hall after the coronation.

“Meghan!” Pippin’s voice hailed her, and she turned her head to see all four Hobbits leading their ponies from the stable, followed by Gandalf and Shadowfax.

“Good morning!” she said to Pippin. “You look very fine in your official uniform.”

“Oh, it’s certainly morning,” he groaned as he reached her. “The sun is hardly up! I thought we were quite finished with difficult journeys!”

“This will be the easiest journey you have yet undertaken, Peregrin Took,” Gandalf growled. “Unless you wish to forfeit your pony and walk the whole way home, that is.”

“He is just grumpy because it’s so early,” Pippin whispered, and she laughed.

Just then she felt the cool touch of Legolas’ hand slipping into hers. “Good morning, erth periannath,” he said, bowing to the four Hobbits, who each did the same in return. “I do not know if there will be time enough for farewells once we depart the city,” he continued. “I thought it best to speak now.”

The finality of their separation suddenly rolled over Meghan like a tide, and she bit the inside of her cheek in an attempt to stop the tears from springing into her eyes again. How could she say goodbye to these kind people, especially Merry and Pippin who had made her laugh and were her dear friends? She knew, in that moment, that she would never see all of them together again.

All the words stuck inside her throat, but she forced herself to speak anyway. “Thank you,” she
choked out, turning to Sam and Frodo. “Thank you for doing such a terrible, painful thing to save us all. I hope you find peace and rest back in the Shire.”

“Thank you, Miss Meghan,” Sam replied. “Mr. Frodo did most of it, anyway.”

“That is hardly true, Sam,” Frodo protested, then addressed Meghan and Legolas. “I think it will be my life’s work to get Sam to accept the credit he deserves.”

“Allow me to thank you both, as well,” Legolas said. “Your sacrifice has truly changed Middle earth.”

As the two Hobbits bowed and exchanged farewells with him, Meghan focused on Merry and Pippin. “I’m going to miss you so much,” she said, and that wasn’t nearly enough but she didn’t know how to say everything that she felt. “Mirkwood is going to feel awfully big without you.”

“You should visit the Shire,” Merry suggested, his easy smile lighting up his face.

“I have always thought you were more Hobbitish than Elflike,” Pippin said. “You could come and give it a try anytime. Perhaps you’ll discover a taste for mushrooms!”

“I would like that very much,” Meghan laughed. “I’m almost Hobbit sized, anyway.”

“You forget that we are uncommonly tall for Hobbits,” Pippin said, standing up straighter and throwing his shoulders back. Even so, Meghan stood only a little more than head and shoulders taller than him.

“You’ll be giants back home. Oh, please write to me sometimes! I want to know everything about what life is like in the Shire.”

“It will be good to be back,” Merry said with a smile. “And you really would be welcome there, Meghan.”

“Thank you,” she sniffled, bending forward to draw them both into a hug. “You have been such good friends.”

As she drew away, the grey figure of the wizard caught her attention over Pippin’s shoulder. She looked up to see Gandalf a few yards away, leaning on his staff and watching her. There was something about his expression that invited her to join him.

She grimaced down at the Hobbits. “I think Gandalf wants to talk to me,” she whispered. “I hope I didn’t do anything wrong.”

“Just be glad you aren’t traveling with him still,” Pippin groaned. “I think he means to remain with us all the way to the borders of the Shire!”

“Good luck with that,” Meghan smiled. “And good luck in all your travels. Goodbye, my friends.”

“Goodbye,” Merry and Pippin both said at the same time, and then traded irritated looks.

Meghan laughed, giving them one last hug before walking to Gandalf. He quirked a smile at her as she approached.

“Lady Melethriel,” he said, inclining his head.

“Lord… Mithrandir?” she returned the greeting hesitantly. “I wish you would just call me Meghan. Formality confuses me so much here. We didn’t really have titles or anything where I come from.”
“You are about to join the royal court of the last king of the Elves,” Gandalf said wryly. “The Silvan Elves do not stand overmuch on rigid formality, but you will find that King Thranduil is a formidable politician.”

“I’m going to suck at politics,” Meghan sighed. “Is Thranduil really so… so…?”

“He is very unlike his children,” Gandalf said. “They are more akin to their mother, who sailed West long ago. Her departure was a grievous blow to the Elvenking, and he has dwelt in sorrow since. Yet he is not unkind.”

“That doesn’t really help much, Gandalf – I guess I’m going to have to just meet him and figure it out for myself. But was there something you wanted to talk to me about?”

“Yes. I have given some thought to your history and from whence you came. To whom have you told the full tale?”

“Well all the Fellowship knows of course, and Lady Galadriel,” Meghan replied. “But beyond that, just Gwaethir. I haven’t even told Éowyn or Ioreth. It seemed wrong to tell them, somehow.”

“You were wise to be discreet. I have spoken with the others in our Company and encouraged them to do the same. I think you must tell Thranduil and his daughter the truth, but otherwise keep it to yourself. It had not occurred to me until after the greatest danger had passed, but the Dark Lord could have used your foreknowledge to great evil had he known of your existence.”

“I hadn’t thought of that either,” Meghan said, a cold feeling in her stomach. “But you said the danger has passed?”

“There are still those in Middle-earth that would do it harm,” Gandalf replied gently. “I fear that Sauron’s influence reaches far yet. Let people believe that you are from Imladris. Lord Elrond has already agreed to vouch for you.”

“Okay,” Meghan said, although she was thinking about how little she knew of Rivendell.

“You will do well, my dear,” he said, as if sensing her thoughts. “Remember that you have friends across all of Arda. You already have one very close to Mirkwood, in the Dwarven realm of Erebor.”

“Yes, once Gimli is finished with overseeing all the reconstruction here, I suppose he will go back home. Thank you, Gandalf, for all your help. I know you must have done so much more than I realized or understood. And thank you for giving me a chance all the way back when I first showed up here in Middle earth. I don’t know what would have happened if you hadn’t vouched for me.”

The wizard’s eyes twinkled. “I had my own reasons, Melethriel. Ah, look, it’s the Shieldmaiden of the Mark. Westu hal, Lady Éowyn.”

Meghan turned to see Éowyn approaching from the stables, flushed and smiling. “Westu hal, WhiteRider,” she replied. “Good morning, Meghan. I have been impatient for you to come down. There is something I want to show you.”

“Go,” Gandalf said with a smile. “Namárië, and be well.”

“Goodbye,” Meghan said as Éowyn dipped her head in farewell to him. Then together the two women went toward the stable doors. The stable smelled like earth and oats and manure, which somehow all combined to smell comforting. Most of the Elves had made their way outside, but the
few that remained saluted Meghan with a hand over their hearts and soft incline of their heads. Unused to the honour, she clumsily mimicked the motion in return.

“It feels weird to be treated like this,” she whispered to her companion.

Éowyn smiled at her. “You will grow accustomed to it in time. When first I came to my uncle’s household as a girl, I thought the formality of court would stifle me unto madness. But I learned to abide it, and you will as well.”

“I hope so,” Meghan replied, nodding politely at the Elves as they led their horses outside to the stableyard. “Was there a purpose for coming in here?”

“Yes,” Éowyn grinned. “Did you never consider how you would travel from this city all the way to distant Mirkwood?”

“Well…” Meghan crinkled up her nose. “Not really. I just figured Legolas would find a horse for me, or I would ride Seabiscuit again.”

“You forget that I am of a house of horselords,” Éowyn said, disappearing into a stall for a moment only to reappear with a small sorrel mare behind her, already tacked and laden with saddlebags.

“Oh!” Meghan gasped, delighted.

“Her name is Windlwyn, and her sire is the same as my own Windfola’s,” Éowyn said. “I asked Éomer to bring her when he returned for King Elessar’s coronation. She will bear you well, wherever your road may take you.”

“Éowyn, she’s so beautiful. Can I… can I touch her?”

“Of course,” Éowyn laughed. “She is yours now. Normally I would want more time for you to become acquainted with a new horse before undertaking such a long ride, but Prince Legolas reminded me that Elves are friends to all good creatures. I think you will bond quickly enough.”

I’m not so sure about that, Meghan thought, remembering her dubious success just getting Seabiscuit to walk forward. But this horse regarded her with bright, dark eyes, and swiveled her ears forward to better hear the tones in her voice. Meghan extended a hand and wished she had a treat to offer. “Thank you, Éowyn,” she said as Windlwyn snuffed her palm. “I don’t know how to repay this kindness.”

“Come to visit me,” Éowyn said, “in Ithilien. Faramir talks of settling there once Minas Tirith is strong again. I would welcome you there, if it is not too far a journey from Mirkwood.”

“I literally have no idea how far it is. But I would love to come.”

“Be gentle with the reins. Windlwyn has a soft mouth,” Éowyn replied, and Meghan thought perhaps her friend changed the subject to cover the tremor in her voice. Knowing that Éowyn wasn’t one for big emotional displays, she reached out to squeeze her hand.

“We should probably go back outside,” she said. “I’ve been delaying this departure for long enough.”

“Yes, of course,” Éowyn replied, quickly passing a thumb under her eyes.

The sun was fully risen by the time they walked out into the courtyard, with Windlwyn obediently shadowing Meghan. Faramir had arrived and was talking with Pippin and Merry. Meghan saw that
all the Elves from Mirkwood and Rivendell were quietly mingling together, obviously ready to go but passing the time pleasantly among friends. Éowyn turned to her with a smile.

“Goodbye, my friend,” she said. “May the wind ever be at your back.”

“Bye, Éowyn.” Meghan wished there was a similar blessing from her own world, until she realized that there was. “Oh! Live long and prosper.”

As Éowyn went over to join Faramir with the Hobbits, Aragorn and Arwen approached Meghan, arm in arm. She almost felt like she was in the midst of a long dance, twirling from one partner to the next to say goodbye. The thought of saying yet another farewell made her heart clench, but she couldn’t help but grin at how they were obviously still in their honeymoon stage.

“You guys are sickening,” she said by way of greeting. “Newlyweds should never be allowed in public, it’s indecent.”

Aragorn chuckled. “I will give you leave to censure us once you have been wed.”

“That might be awhile,” Meghan sighed. “Legolas says we have to be betrothed for the full year. I know it’s only twelve months and that the time will fly by, but…”

“He may yet be persuaded,” Arwen said with a mischievous twinkle in her eye. “There is little urgency among the Elves, but I have learned that to wait is to squander precious time. Though I have known you only a little while, I believe it is within your power to change his mind.”

“Legolas is very conscious of his duty,” Aragorn added. “For many years, that has been to his father and his people. He will soon learn that he now also answers to you.”

Arwen slipped her other hand into the crook of Aragorn’s arm, an artless move to be closer to him that made Meghan smile. “He loves you very deeply, Meghan. I have been friends with all of Thranduil’s children for many years, and never before have I seen Legolas this way. His heart is full of you.”

“I love him, too,” Meghan said, sucking in a breath around the sudden thickness in her throat. She fanned her face and managed to laugh, although she wished that Legolas would stop talking with Elrond and come to her. “I can’t stop crying this morning! I feel like I’m happier than I deserve, but I’m so sad that everyone is leaving.”

“It is bittersweet to see our Fellowship sundered, but its need has ended,” Aragorn said.

“You’re right,” Meghan said. “Thank you, Aragorn, for everything you’ve done. I don’t know what I would have done without your steadiness and kindness. Arwen, you are so lucky. You both are so lucky! I hope you guys are happy and have lots of babies and just flourish here.”

By then Legolas and Gimli joined them, and the Dwarf guffawed. “I cannot imagine Aragorn swaddling a babe,” he said. “Noisy, messy little creatures.”

“Do you have children, Gimli?” Meghan asked, suddenly wondering how well she knew him after all.

“No, no, thank Mahal. But I am cousin to the King under the Mountain, and he has four dwarrowlings. They are called the Terrors of Erebor all the way in Dale.”

Meghan was absolutely enchanted by the idea of Dwarf children. “What are they like? Do they have—do they—”
“Yes, they are born with beards,” Legolas answered her unspoken question with a cheeky half-smile.

“That’s so cute,” she breathed as she tried to imagine it.

“I am sorry to cut short this enthralling conversation about Dwarflings,” Legolas said, “but I fear that Lord Elrond and Mithrandir wish to depart. My brother has been dropping hints to me this quarter of an hour.”

“Of course,” Aragorn said graciously.

Legolas turned to help Meghan onto her horse, and that somehow prompted the rest of the travelers to mount up. As Legolas went to Arod, Meghan felt a hand touch her stirrup and she looked down to see Gimli standing beside Windwyn with a serious look on his face.

“That Princeling can be stubborn as a Dwarf when his mind is set to a task, Meghan. Do not let him neglect you in his single-mindedness. If he does, send word to Erebor and I will knock some sense into him.”

“Thanks Gimli,” Meghan laughed. “I might take you up on that. But you should come visit us anyway.”

He harrumphed at the idea. “If I trusted the Woodelves to tell you the whole tale, I would suggest you ask them why Erebor Dwarves would not like to enter Thranduil’s halls again. Perhaps one day, when there is more time, I will tell it to you as my father told me.”

“I look forward to it,” she said. Some of the Elves had started to make their way out the stableyard gates, and Meghan looked over to see Legolas waiting for her on Arod.

“Take care of him,” Gimli said quietly.

She didn’t need to ask who. “Of course I will. We’ll see you very soon, I hope.”

He bowed. “It would be my honour.”

Meghan guided Windwyn toward the gate, and Arod fell into step beside her as they brought up the rear of the company. Legolas’ steady presence next to her was a welcome anchor, because she felt worn out after so many goodbyes.

It was only a short walk from the stableyard to the main gates that opened onto the Fields of Pelennor, and the city walls slipped past them as they broke into the open air. Beams of sunlight, too low to reach over the high walls, now warmed her skin. It was going to be a beautiful day.

Both groups had already gone a good distance from the city – the Hobbits on their ponies with Gandalf and the Rivendell Elves forming a casual guard around them, and the Mirkwood Elves in loose formation a little behind. Without quite knowing what she was doing, Meghan tugged Windwyn to a stop. On her left, Legolas did the same. He reached across the distance between them to thread his fingers through hers.

“It is time to go,” he said, squeezing her hand.

She looked back one more time at the beautiful white city that had been her home for so many months, and had housed some of the darkest and brightest times of her life. Still framed in the gateway, her friends already seemed far away. Éowyn raised a hand, and tears sprang to Meghan’s eyes as she returned the gesture. I wish I could stay just a little while longer, she thought. But she
knew that delaying their departure wouldn’t make it any less painful.

*I am going on a new adventure,* she told herself firmly. *I will make new friends, and visit often with my old ones. And Legolas will be with me.*

She turned to him. The look in his eyes told her that he would return to Minas Tirith if she asked him, even though his heart was calling him home. Her heart soared up with love for him and she wanted to kiss him, but didn’t think she could without falling off her horse’s back.

“What do you want to do?” he asked quietly.

“It’s time to go,” she smiled as she brushed away the tears running down her cheeks.

He grinned back at her, gathering Arod’s reins into his hands. “I love you very much, my Meghan.”

“I love you, too,” she replied, and together they rode after the Elves of Mirkwood and toward their new adventure.
Epilogue

Meghan dropped Windlwyn’s reins and brought her arms above her head in a long stretch. None of the other Elves seemed to be bothered by riding almost every day for just over five weeks, but she felt sore and tense in the saddle. And this had been an especially long day – they were so close to Mirkwood that they had kept riding past dusk so they could set up camp right outside the forest. But now that they had finally stopped, Meghan was so tired that she wasn’t sure if she remembered how to dismount.

“Are you alright?” Legolas asked. He had already dismounted and was standing at her stirrup, Arod’s reins in one hand and the other on Windlwyn’s neck.

She smiled down at him and wondered how to articulate that she was more than alright, because the longest leg of their journey was done and he was simply the most wonderful person she had ever known and she still couldn’t believe that he was hers. But all she said was, “I’m fine, thanks.”

“Let me help you down,” he said, offering her an arm.

She didn’t actually need the support, but she took it anyway. Despite having an easy rapport with the warriors traveling with them, he maintained a reserved propriety with Meghan in front of them that she interpreted as his proper Prince of Greenwood the Great mode. And that meant limited physical contact – and even less kissing. She had only managed to steal a few quick pecks since they’d left Minas Tirith.

Even worse, he hadn’t noticed how frustrated she was, but Gwaethir had. Once, about halfway into the journey, he had caught her eye over Legolas’ shoulder after a particularly failed attempt on her part, and mouthed so boring with an exaggerated point at his brother.

So she put a hand on Legolas’ upper arm and intentionally slid off Windlwyn so that she alighted quite close to him, congratulating herself on her cleverness. They were shielded between the two horses, which was surely enough privacy even for a very conscientious prince. Without giving him any warning (lest he flee in a fit of respectability), she went up on tiptoes and slipped a hand behind his head to pull his mouth down to hers.

He let out a surprised noise in the back of his throat, but she shushed him with her lips. Luckily he recovered soon enough and brought up his hand to her neck, his fingers tangling deliciously in the curls at her nape. It was still a restrained kiss, but oh, so much better than the brief pecks that had come before!

When he pulled away, she growled a little and considered dragging him back down. He seemed to guess her intentions because before she could, he pressed a line of kisses from her forehead to her ear and whispered in a husky voice, “Do you want horse duty tonight?”

The incongruous question and the way his breath tickled the little hairs at her temple made her burst out laughing. “No, you take it,” she said, handing him Windlwyn’s reins. They had a system of switching off who took care of the horses and who set up their corner of camp – an arrangement which Gwaethir called ‘repulsively domestic’ with a wrinkle above his nose.

As she watched Legolas lead their two horses away, she wondered, how am I ever going to wait a whole year to marry him?

The other elves had already nearly finished setting up camp – it was always fairly simple anyway,
with a small fire to heat their supper and a scattering of bedrolls in a loose circle around it. Now they were tucked right up just a few yards from the eaves of the forest, and Meghan spread out her bedroll and Legolas’ near the edge of camp. Whenever he took the setup duty, he placed them right in the middle by the fire.

*Why do you always do that?* she had argued once.

*B因为我想保持温暖,* he had smiled, although it was summer.

Of course she knew it was because he was protecting her as usual, which made her love him a little more each time. And sometimes she conceded and setup in the middle, too. But tonight it was clear and warm and she wanted some seclusion that she couldn’t get next to the fire, although the forest looked very dark in the moonlight.

She loved to watch Legolas interacting with his kinsmen. She could see him across camp, talking with a few of them as they curried down their horses. He laughed more now, and she saw glimpses of what he must have been like when he was younger. It made her wonder what Elf-children were like – and then it made her wonder what *their* children would be like.

A bout of sleepiness hit her, and she stretched her shoulders again. Riding alone, she had quickly learned, was a full-body workout. At least it meant that she slept well every night, and she was certainly tired now. They had already eaten a light meal in the saddle as the sun went down, so she lay down in her bedroll and waited for Legolas to finish with the horses.

She must have drifted off, because the next thing she knew the camp was totally quiet and Legolas was stepping over her to walk away again. “What time is it?” she whispered groggily, trying and not really succeeding to push hair out of her face.

Legolas turned back and crouched beside her. “A little past midnight.” He smoothed the hair behind her ear. “Go back to sleep. I am going to check on Arod; he sounds restless. I will return in a moment.”

Meghan made an agreeing sound and curled deeper under the light blanket. “Stay warm,” she mumbled. One more caress of his thumb across her cheek, and the gentle weight of his hand disappeared.

Realizing that a root was digging into her back, she wriggled around to her other side so that she faced into the camp. The first night, seeing all those Elves stretched out and staring sightlessly up at the sky had unnerved her. She still didn’t entirely understand their *waking sleep*, though after five weeks she had grown accustomed to it.

She had woken herself up more by shifting positions. It really was absolutely silent, except for the occasional sound from the horses on the other side of camp. Meghan wondered why Arod had been restless, wishing Legolas was beside her again. A half-formed uneasiness had curled up her spine and she propped herself onto her elbow so that she could see if anyone else felt the same. But Urúvien, who was on watch, hadn’t missed a beat in whatever he was mending.

*You’re overreacting,* she soothed herself as she settled into a more comfortable spot. *If there was anything to notice, he would have noticed it.* Trying to ignore her uncertainty, she closed her eyes and let her breathing even out.

That is, until an inhuman scream splintered into the silence and froze her bones.

Most of the other Elves had roused, reaching for weapons. As a hundred more harsh cries filled the
air, Meghan bolted completely upright.

“The trees, they’re in the trees!” she shouted at the exact same moment that two bands of Orcs poured out of the forest, rushing to surround the woodelves. Someone grabbed Meghan’s arm and yanked her back from the outermost perimeter, and it was just in time. One of the Elves – Imrathon, she thought – swept up his sword to catch a jagged blade that had been meant for her. It was chaos, and so, so loud. The Orcs shrieked as they fought and Meghan wanted to cover her ears.

“Meghan, fall back! Get to the center!” That was Gwaethir, shouting at her from her left before he whirled away to cut down a trio of Orcs that had converged on someone else.

She could hardly even tell where the center of camp was anymore except for the smoking remains of the fire. A horrible smell was starting to fill the air, and she tried to convince herself that it wasn’t blood as she scrambled deeper into camp.

Where is Legolas? she thought miserably. He must still have been close to the horses when the Orcs first appeared. Yes, there was his golden head, luminous in the moonlight. He was nearly the full length of the camp away, easily felling two Orcs at once. Just the sight of their blood spilling from his knives made her double over, retching.

Something whistled past her ear, and she instinctively flinched away. They have archers! She had never felt more useless in her entire life. No wonder Legolas always insisted that she stay away from battles! She hadn’t even grabbed her sword. She searched for Legolas again, only to see that the tide of battle had drawn him even farther away.

With a sick horror in her gut, she knew that he couldn’t protect her this time.

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