The Road to Erebor

by AnnEllspethRaven

Summary

This is Book Four of the Adonnenniel series, and commences early in T.A. 3016, a few weeks after the end of Emissary of the Valar. Nenni's continued story will detail her experience of pregnancy, navigating diplomatic issues both inside and outside of the Palace walls, and of course their first visit to Erebor under the rule of King Dáin. And yet not all is well, in Esgaroth and Dale...

As always, kudos are nice and comments are nicer!

Notes

Note to Readers: Welcome to book four! I wanted to release this chapter without too much delay but...a great deal of time is being poured into the other fic I'm cowriting, At the Edge of Lasg'len. While I do still work on this one, I've had some fairly horrendous episodes of writer's block, as I try to work out how some things in this storyline will occur and...with that being said, there will more than likely not be more content released here until I can work past those problems...it means too much to me, to have the quality of these stories stay intact. The good news is, sooner or later the Mother Ship will send the idea I'm looking for. Thank you for your patience.

Echuir 26-54, Imladris, March 2-27, Gregorian, year 3015 of the Third Age of Arda.
Time Flies

Chapter Notes

[Echuir 26-54, Imladris, March 2-27, Gregorian]

For the fifth time in as many days Glorfindel made the same demand. "Please name the seven sons of Fëanor."

The answer began as it always did: "Maedhros, Maglin, Curufin, Celegorm..." and now she reached the place where it traditionally fell apart. Two weeks ago, her Ada's lessons had forced the unpleasant epiphany that perfect memory was most assuredly not the provenance of all elves, as Thranduil had led her to believe. Apparently he had been oblivious to the rarity of his own gifts of intelligence, and had made some incorrect assumptions. These ongoing sessions felt humiliating; she had always been an excellent student on Earth, able to succeed academically. Memorization, especially for the short term, had never been difficult. But with this method of oral instruction in which she was not permitted to write or make use of notes, she was struggling. All attempts to enlighten Glorfindel concerning the cognitive benefits of note-taking and writing fell on deaf ears, as did her pleas to let her learn in the manner to which she was accustomed.

Think, Nenni. It is three more names. Two begin with an "A", the third is another "C" name. "Caranthir," she said, now frowning. One down, now the other two. They are short names, very similar...she did not want to meet Glorfindel's eyes; her level of discomfiture was mounting. You had a mnemonic, what was it...fishing rod, ne pas..."Amrod and Amras" she said, now raising her eyes to his. However brokenly, she had recalled. Finally.

With a warm smile he praised her. "Well done, Adonnenniel."

She managed an unhappy nod. While she appreciated the words, she still felt incredibly stupid.

He saw and knew, and took her hand, offering counsel. "I want you to understand, I am not requiring this of you to humiliate you; I know that you had other means of learning which made it easier. Trust that I have a reason, and do not give way to judging yourself with the recrimination I can see inside of you."

Returning the pressure of his hand more firmly, and nodding again, she sought to govern her thoughts.

"I want to acknowledge that in all of the last many weeks, only today have you begun to falter in this way, ellig. Your heart and spirit have remained positive, when I know that this has not always been the case. I have been very pleased with your progress. I am proud of you."

"Thank you, Ada," she said softly, struggling to accept the compliment without an internal argument occurring.

He rose from his seat opposite her to hug her to him; his gesture was quickly reciprocated. She knew that the affection was a reward, and did not care. And given that it was still very much a part of her circumstances that his attention and reassurance mattered a great deal, it was a very effective incentive. He rubbed her back, which he knew she enjoyed greatly, and felt her melt against him.
The response elicited a smile, but also saddened him. Memories of being an elfling, of receiving this same affection from his mother and father, were very clear; while at the time he had craved their love, he eventually grew out of this intense need. Her hunger for this experience, that she had never known prior to a few short weeks ago was palpable, and not likely to diminish anytime soon. There were times he wanted to weep over what she had been denied through no fault of her own; she was being forced to redress these losses in adulthood...for a human. In mental years, she was not yet fifty; the age of completing elven physical growth. And with the Eldar reaching full maturity at one hundred years, the morass of her circumstances was indecipherable; what was one supposed to make of a fae thousands of years old, housed in a body and mind so young? There had simply never been anything like her, just as there had never been anything like him. The irony scintillated.

These last weeks had seen myriad activities. Nenni had steered Thranduil to focus on what gifts they would bring for their upcoming visit to King Dain. The chess set she suggested long ago had actually been commissioned at that time, and was nearly ready. Rather than try to 'out-dwarf the dwarves', his artisans had suggested a hand-carved set all in the assorted woods of the forest, but with themes that would appeal to their race. To her delight, all of the pawns were mighty hammers with heavy steel handles to grasp. The rooks called to mind the ramparts of Erebor. The knights were dwarves mounted on war boars, and the 'bishops' were attired as warriors bearing axes. The king and queen were bearded figures differentiated by size; the king held a staff of authority. It was ingenious, visually attractive, and paid homage to both their races.

Nenni put great thought into whether there was a vegetative gift she could offer, but could not puzzle out how any growing thing could survive in their underground fortress. After much discussion, including prayer, and a sincere consultation with Glorfindel (her heart needed to hear that it would not be an affront to the Valar, to share these flowers outside of their people), a decision had been arrived at. They commissioned a planter; a glorified flowerpot, from their finest clay artisans. It was made with motifs that were suitably dwarven. Thranduil and Nenni agreed that they would plant the flowers of Vána in it, and that Thranduil would in turn lay his gift of blessing and preservation upon it. While there was no absolute guarantee of the plants' ultimate survival, in theory with the sole requirement of regular watering, they would do very well. The spiritual significance of the blossoms of a Vala combined with the extraordinary gifts of both the Woodland King and Queen constituted an exquisite offering that was essentially priceless. And of course there would be generous amounts of her citrus fruits, nuts, and apples. She had collaborated with the kitchens on almond roca, having known from Earth that honey could be used in place of cane sugar for some candies.

Of course there had been studying under the tutelage of Glorfindel, and some days ago they had finalized her decision to accept his gift of Quenya, the tongue of the Noldorin elves. Thranduil had elected to defer this offer, stating that he was still considering; they did not press him further and both reaffirmed to him their willingness to abide by his command to keep it a carefully guarded secret.

Work and life had gone on around her ordinary duties in the Realm, and after a few rough beginnings Nenni had largely given herself over to Glorfindel's supervision. She hoarded one block of time to herself for being alone; she was rising early once again, and shutting everyone out of her thoughts so she could work in the garden from sunrise until breakfast. It was just as well, as Thranduil had adopted a habit of leaving at the same hour to meet with Legolas. The King and Queen almost always sought each other on waking; her hunger for her husband was fully intact. By mutual agreement their couplings at this hour were brief; a reassurance of their love and a pleasant start to the day.

Later they would breakfast as a family of four with Legolas and Glorfindel. When duties to the
Realm did not demand otherwise, she almost always spent the remainder of the day in the company of the latter. The only thing more annoying than having agreed to their new arrangement was the fact that she had almost immediately begun to feel much better physically, experiencing no further significant fluctuations in her energy level. All she could do is try to admit her flaws with a sense of humor and be gracious about her level of surrender. He cared for her better than she cared for herself, and that meant better care for the unborn elfling; she could indulge in her tendencies to abuse her health some other time.

The one thing she did not mind was that every day, she had the better part of two hours to play the piano. After much deliberation, it had been installed in an unpurposed chamber halfway between her home and Glorfindel's private quarters. She finally asked how it was that so many rooms so close to the royal chambers had lain empty. With chagrin, Thranduil had confessed that it was one of the ways by which he could isolate himself; he had not wanted neighbors, is what he meant in so many words. Some furniture was brought in; a sofa and chairs. There was a fireplace, and the instrument was placed as far from it as possible. The degree to which she appreciated having the piano was hard to express. When she played she could tune out all the rest of her life and lose herself in this music that she had loved for so long, and now with her elven skills. It also grounded her on a level to the life she had left behind, but in a happy way. Heartfelt joy gushed forth at beginning to study new music: pieces that were inaccessible to her previous level of ability, and often Glorfindel would catch her smiling. Not a little smile, but one that lit her entire face when she thought she was being ignored.

Almost always he stayed with her, with a book in hand that he pretended to read. Knowing she could not spare the focus, he rarely interacted with her when she practiced, but these hours had come to be priceless in his estimation. The only thing more beautiful to him than the music she played was the admission to the walled off places of her mind kept closed at all other times. There was a passion and an intensity there like no other, and he wished very much to somehow connect her to this part of herself far more of the time. He knew that he was looking at a task he would measure in years or even decades, but first he required a complete understanding. That this part of her was for music alone he could see, but the rest was somewhat shrouded in mystery to him.

And so today, after her victory over the Sons of Fëanor, he decided that moving along to music time would be wise; he wanted the lesson to end on a positive note. He would not tell her, but the reason for his peculiar insistence on her method of learning was to retrain her mind to function better in their world. He saw her intelligence and how organized her mind was for learning...in one particular manner. Her observational skills and her ability to recall spoken details accurately were lacking, and this was one of his solutions. They went to the room and entered their customary routine of not speaking; he sat where it pleased him and she sat down to play. At one point in her long battle against a Chopin prelude she stopped to look up and regard Glorfindel, not speaking for some time. Lost in his thoughts, he had not noticed that the music had ceased and then abruptly looked up to see her eyes locked on his. Her head was against her hand, while her bent elbow rested on the fallboard of the piano.

"Iellig, is something the matter?"

She smiled with a look that made him unaccountably nervous, and he could not easily read her thoughts. "No, nothing is the matter, dear Ada. But I am sitting here wondering if you would like to learn to play the piano." In perfect honesty, she was being half-generous, half mildly vindictive. *When was the last time he had ever had to learn something difficult, completely dependent on the whims of a demanding teacher, while struggling? Clearly he is very intelligent, with artistic inclinations. He seems to like music. Why not?*

His features spoke of genuine surprise, among other emotions, and she was enjoying very much
that she had at least confounded him for once, in a nice way. Reading his face, she made a different offer. "Or perhaps if the idea seems intimidating, would you like to understand something about how it is learned?" While Nenni watched him ponder she realized that in addition to her mischief, she really would like to share this with someone, and that her husband would never have interest in learning a musical instrument. And this was the thought that Glorfindel heard. His eyes raised to hers and his face changed into a kind smile as he rose and approached her.

"Before I agree to months of torment, you may show me something about it."

"It is not that bad," she chided. "I would never ask you to keep on with something you disliked. You have many abilities; I do not think you will find it insurmountable by any means. Who knows, given that you often do not sleep much, practicing would give you another pastime. Sit next to me," she invited, patting the bench and moving over a little for him. "The only problem is, I am not a real musician by the standards of this world, and can only teach you as I was taught. But as all the music that exists for this instrument is from Earth, I suppose it is no bad thing if you learn to make use of it." As best as her scattered understanding of music theory would allow, she explained the scales and the keys, while showing him names of the notes on the keyboard. How to play a C scale was demonstrated, and using one of the simpler pieces she explained how to read the sheet music; the value of the notes, and how they indicated time.

"This is ingenious," he said, perceiving at least the method.

"Try to play a scale," she said. "One two three, thumb under, one two three four five. It matters that you train your fingers to move in this pattern. Just as footwork is to sword fighting, fingering is to playing piano." It was heartwarming to her, always, to watch a beginner play that first tentative scale, and this time was no exception. All these years later, she vividly remembered the day of her first lesson and the patient elderly lady that taught her...and that first scale. It brought her more pleasure than he could ever realize, to watch him do the same. When he completed this successfully, she encouraged him. "That was good! To go in the reverse direction is like this." "And this is how it is done for the left hand." "And this is how it is done with both hands moving in the same direction, and then both hands moving in the opposite direction; if you wish to try, work on those until you feel pleased with your ability." Banishing the smirk that threatened to surface, she watched him develop a look of vague panic as the variations increased in complexity. Baby steps, she thought, but then she wondered. "Ada, you spend much time seeing my mind, I would guess. If there is a means by which you can transfer my knowledge to yourself, in the same way you granted me the gift of your native language, I would gladly give it."

He looked ahead, his lips parting. Yes, he could do this, but...his closeness to her grew and grew, and every instance of this kind of sharing grew it more. He still struggled, some part of him, with the growing strength of their bond. All of this, for him, had amounted to plunging blindly forward. He questioned his wisdom, even as he became drawn further in.

"Ada?" she asked, seeing that some kind of hesitation was afoot.

Smiling weakly, he looked at her. "I am going to ask a question, and I want you to honestly reflect before answering. We have been father and daughter now for perhaps six weeks. That is as nothing in the lifetime of our people, but is tempered by the reality of your outlook being still more human than elven. Are you unhappy, in any way, with our relationship?"

Nenni immediately had to look down and suppress a smile, but did as he instructed. Nothing could have been less necessary, though; the answer was well-known to her. "Unhappy is not the right word, Ada. Glorfindel," she said as she took his hand. "I cannot deceive you even if I wished to. There are times your sternness feels unfair to me. There are times I find your protectiveness
suffocating. And there are times when your insistence on my obedience when you refuse to explain yourself is frustrating to the point of being maddening. But I have never doubted that you love me. I have always realized that on some level you are guiding me, teaching me. I am learning humility on a new level," she said, snorting softly. "I guess those would be the harder things. And yet none of that discusses the priceless gift of your love, your healing of my spirit, and your generous heart. I would not change my mind about this relationship for the world, my Lord. There are no meaningful regrets, for my part. And I pray that I have not given you cause to have any of your own."

A kiss was placed on her forehead. "Thank you, for your answer." He sighed. "I have asked because our relationship continues to deepen. I wished to hear from you that this is not a cause for remorse, because what you offer me will deepen it further."

Tilting her head, she idly began to play a chromatic scale, which used different fingering yet. "Does that mean you accept?"

"Yes."

She stopped playing to meet his eyes. "You do?" I think I am having a bad influence on him, she thought. He is becoming positively hasty. Excellent.

"You are still an imp, Adonnenniel."

"I know. What do I do?"

"I want you to find a piece to play, it matters not what it is, but something longer might be good. You will feel my hand on your face, and just as when I shared the knowledge of Quenya you will feel the weight of my mind joined to yours. When you play, do your best to actively think of the concepts you demonstrated to me. And we will see what transpires."

For another half hour she played like this, before confessing her growing fatigue.

"Then that is enough for now. There is no hurry, for this. And now, let us return. You will rest for awhile."

"Must I lie down, or will a quiet pursuit suffice?"

""Why do I gain the impression that you are trying to trick me?" he said with mirth.

"No tricks, Ada. I have spent a great deal of time thinking on what gift I might give Thranduil on his aur en onnad. I did not wish to ignore it, and he is at best a difficult one when it comes to presents. We had a saying on Earth, 'What do you get someone who has everything?' So rather than jewels or clothes or things he already has in abundance, I decided to try and recreate a game from Earth. He liked chess very much, and so I worked to make another one. I wondered if you would help me test out my creation. It is not so intellectually demanding as chess, but is amusing enough."

"Can I suggest then, that we retrieve your items, and go to my quarters? It would save you the risk of having Thranduil enter at an unfortunate time, and he can reach me should he wish for you."

"This is true. Would you allow for Beren to come, if he wants to? I will not be offended if you do not."

"Of course he may. And before you go on about it, yes I realize that he will likely take over my furniture."
Few things made her feel more accepted than the acceptance of Beren. In moments, she had a bundle in her arms and a hound in tow. "I am a little hungry, could you bring an apple for me?"

The sideboard was filled with them, and another few moments later they were seated at his table. Beren interestedly sniffed everything in this new room, including the apple he did not actually want, before colonizing Glorfindel's sofa. He looked so incredibly cute that she had to spend a minute kissing his nose, until his huffs of distaste grew too loud in volume and he squirmed away to go belly up on her, much preferring that his tummy have the attention. She obliged, besotted with him, until she realized that she was not there to pet her dog all day.

"I am sorry Ada," she said, returning to the table. "My mind seems to run off with increasing ease. Forgive my rudeness, and thank you for inviting us here." She unwrapped her bundle while he sliced the apple for her. He had a small sideboard as well, and placed the fruit on a plate. What met his eyes was a strikingly attractive piece of forest wood, curved, polished very smooth, with eight of groupings of double sets of five bored holes; there were two tracks of these, parallel to each other. Plus a few extra holes. She placed tapered wooden pegs in these extra spaces. And then brought out a stack of marked papers. "I will eat the apple first so that I can clean my hands before touching these, I do not wish to make them sticky." She pushed the deck of handmade cards across to him, reaching for the plate of apple slices. "This game is called Cribbage. I know that elves like to count in units of six and twelve, but on Earth we used units of ten much of the time. Cribbage involves a scoring system that hinges on two numbers; fifteen and thirty-one. And what you have is a deck of playing cards. There are fifty-two cards divided into four suits; hearts, diamonds, clubs, and spades. The cards are numbered two through ten, and then there are a jack, queen, king and ace. Aces are given a numerical value of one, the others are assigned a value of ten."

"And the wooden...object?"

"That is basically just a scoring board, but was the most fun to make. Cribbage boards, on Earth, were an art form; I used to collect them." Moving peg over peg, she explained how the simple system acted as a glorified adding machine, before munching the apple slices and using the opportunity to gain a long-desired tidbit of information. "Thank you, for cutting the apple. When is your own aur en onnad?"

His attention was diverted from looking through the individual cards, all the numerical ones marked with elven Tengwar numbers, while the others used a strange hybrid of Tengwar letters and symbols to represent the jack, queen and king. Her cheeks were stuffed with apple as she chewed, and she looked remarkably like a squirrel as she waited him to answer her completely random question.

"If I tell you, will you promise not to turn it into an official function of the Realm?" he queried.

Her hand swiftly came up to her face as she laughed, swallowing what was in her mouth before speaking again. "That will teach me to hear a funny answer with my mouth stuffed," she noted ruefully. "I promise. I will not turn it into any function, save perhaps a family dinner and trying to do something nice for you of a modest nature."

"I can live with that. It is the twentieth of Iavas."

"Thank you," she said quietly. Too quietly. *What were the odds?* She took more slices of apple, and vaguely wondered if he knew his own age. Though, she did not know what one did with being sent to the Halls of Mandos for part of the time...that was likely better left alone.

Heartly laughter interrupted her musings. "Do you know I have never thought about that? " He sighed. "4635, Iellig. In the Years of the Trees. Do you know the year Thranduil was born?"
"200, in the Years of the Sun. The same as me, I am told."

"Then I am yet some centuries older. I did not spend enough time in the Halls of Mandos to cancel out much of the difference. And besides, since elven fae do not truly die, I am not certain it matters."

She nodded, smiling, and rose to wash her hands at his pool; while she was thusly occupied he had removed the plate. Now she sat, and began shuffling the paper cards. Each one had been cut out by hand carefully from the paper she had worked on making in secret, with reasonable success after a few initial failures.

He stared at her, and his face spoke of amusement. "Did you think I would let you change the subject without telling me the date of your own aur onnad? The same that I see you are trying to block from me?"

"I could hope, couldn't I?"

That Look was on his face now, which meant all possibility of evasion was lost; his eyes bored into hers as she shuffled the cards. There was nothing remaining but capitulation.

"It is the same day as yours," she said in a very small voice.

Baffled, his first instinct was to ask her why in the world she would wish to keep this from him, but the obvious rising discomfort mirrored in her bearing changed his mind. He was learning, and this would be better discussed later on. "Thank you for telling me, and I am honored to share the day with you." That was all he said; simple, and short, and then he moved along. "Please, explain more about this game."

Her tension dissolved and with discernible relief, none of which escaped his attention, and she launched into describing the mode of game play. With increasing enthusiasm, she told about playing cards, and that this was only one of dozens of games for which they were used. Showing him the face cards, she gleefully explained that she had used a carved potato to ink the designs onto them, and that she had figured out how to make the red ink out of one kind of her mulberries.

"How did you know to do these things?" The cleverness of how she had made something out of nothing astonished him.

Shrugging, she began to deal out cards. "I liked to know how things were done, on Earth. I would often see some random object or some...anything, really, wonder how it was made, and so I would learn about it. The one thing I miss very much about my former world was nearly unlimited access to every kind of knowledge. We had devices no bigger than this deck of cards that allowed us to instantly summon the collective information of our entire species. Want to know how to cook a chicken? Smelt iron? Make paper? Build a crossbow? No problem. The answer to nearly anything was right there for the taking. So, when I am alone I often daydream about how I can do things, and what things I can do. Eventually the mother ship sends the answers," she joked. And then she sat bolt upright, her eyes unfocusing. "THAT'S how he did it. How could I be so blind? Oh, Thranduil..."

Glorfindel looked on to see that she had just discerned how her husband had engineered the creation of the piano. Having been told, he knew that she was correct.

With a shake of her head, she dismissed the thought. "Anyway. We will play cribbage, until it settles in. Rather than blather rules at you, I think it is easier to demonstrate as we go."
Over an hour later, the golden elf had largely mastered the concept, and another monster had been created. Nenni grinned. "Is it safe to say from your reluctance to stop playing, that the game pleases you? Do you think he will like it?" she asked him, now propping her head up with her hands as she stifled a yawn.

"He will like it very much, and while I walk with you to your chambers so that you can sleep before dinner, perhaps you would tell me what this paper is?" He waved a card at her. "I have not seen the like."

Laughing, she rose and went to scratch Beren. Let's go, Buddy. "Paper is...paper. It is what we had on Earth for writing. Parchment was considered to be a material of bygone times, in my era. Paper is made from plant fibers. Mine is very primitive, but even this took some doing. And without my gift, I am not certain I could have managed it at all. The paper on Earth was white as snow, smooth and perfect. If you want, you can make more with me, and then I can make more decks of cards," she offered. "Can I leave all of this here?" she asked. "We could play more, later on."

"Yes, but I wish to cover everything and place it in my sleeping room. Thranduil has never once come here, but let us not tempt ill fortune."

She took his arm, as they walked down the passage. "Ada, if we are to work on making paper, you should wear your worst work clothes or we should procure an apron for you. There are parts of the whole process that involve ashes, and it can be a mess to rival the cob. I am experimenting with other ideas but there are many obstacles."

What he saw in her mind alarmed him. "Iellig, what am I seeing? What are you making?"

"Better living through chemistry; I am making lye. It is a big subject, and if I could ask your indulgence, I am feeling too weary to try and talk about it just now."

"Will you at least tell me what chemistry is?" he asked softly.

"It is everything, Ada. It is the study of matter. You and I are made of chemicals. Water is a chemical. The air we breathe, the walls of stone; all of it is chemicals. Chemistry is the understanding of matter, the organization of molecules; what happens physically on the level smaller than what we can see with our eyes or even a microscope. It is the knowledge Eru has by which he made all things, if you will."

He opened the chamber door for her. "Lie down, Adonnenniel, I will build a fire."

She did as he asked after she stopped to drink some water, and Beren flopped down next to her. "That is chemistry too, Ada. Fire is a combustion reaction that releases heat, light, and other products from the matter in the wood."

Glorfindel did not answer, as he arranged the kindling and larger pieces of wood before igniting them. He was recalling the night his daughter explained something of the heavens to him; the stars and planets, ithil and anor and beyond. She had said, he thought, that she had other knowledge but only now was he seeing glimmers of what her mind held, and he was in awe. Rising, he could not help staring at her.

"Why are you looking at me like that?" she asked with a smile, holding out her hand to him.

For a moment, he ignored her, shaking out a blanket to place over her before seating himself next to her.

"Because I am only now gaining some understanding of the contents of your mind, and that it is so
far beyond anything I possess that there are hardly words."

A noise erupted from her that sounded remarkably like "Pffft. It isn't like it is good for much, here." She halted her words, seeing his demeanor change. "Aaaand that was the wrong thing to say, wasn't it?"

He stared at her, expressionless, in what felt to her like a rather stony silence.

Taking a deep breath and looking away, she tried again. "Forgive me. I need to learn to think before I speak, and my response was chosen badly. What I should have said is this: Yes, the knowledge you see in my mind is wondrous. It is an understanding of the world in a profound and beautiful way, at the very level of creation. But...I do not know how to say this, exactly, so I have to show you." Lifting his hand to her face, she continued. "Ada, because we on Earth had this information, we put it to use. And almost every one of those uses damaged our planet, one small bit at a time. What you are seeing in my mind now are the results. Air not fit to breathe, water not fit to drink, animals and plants destroyed because it was all poisoned. We poisoned it. We were all Sauron, though many of us did not mean to be, but it did not change that the sum of our actions as a species placed dominion and the acquisition of power over the well-being of all. What is in my head could transform this world...into a ruinous copy of Earth. Even my tinkerings to make this paper...I have to be careful. I know how to make better paper, but to do it I would have to in turn make chemicals that would pollute the garden. I promised myself that if I introduce something here, I must find a way that does not have destructive side effects. You see, on Earth we were curious. We wanted to understand...things. Anything, everything. And in our hurry to know, we did not often stop to consider the uses to which that knowledge might be put. What you are seeing now? That is an atomic bomb, a weapon of our world, and that is chemistry too." Her voice faded to a whisper as she spoke, and a tear rolled down her cheek at the memory of such things. "I meant no disrespect to you."

His eyes widened as he now beheld a larger picture, the flickering firelight glancing off of them. The sky blue irises seemed to dance and move in the silence between them. Finally his mouth curled in a gentle smile, as he reached to brush away the tear. "I see that now, and am sorry for my look of reproach. I have much to learn, from you. I only want you to know that nothing you have explained to me changes that you are extraordinary. May I give you sleep?"

"If you promise I will be awakened for dinner, yes. I love you, Ada."

"And I you. Rest well." He slowly withdrew his hand after her head fell against it in slumber, rose, and poured himself wine. Returning to a seat near the fire, sipping his wine, he was soon deep in reflection concerning all that he had just been told, and what he had seen in glimpses. She shows great discernment, and the intention of her heart is pure. Again and again she demonstrates that she makes sound and reasoned decisions in matters demanding discretion and wisdom. As before, she seeks to protect all of us from what she carries within her; more determined to not use her knowledge than otherwise. And yet... Am I seeing another facet of why I was sent to her? Am I meant to guide her in this, somehow? Closing his eyes, he bowed his head in prayer, beseeching the Valar for a heart open to the understanding of their will.

*****

Perhaps two hours after, Thranduil returned home, entering noiselessly as was his custom. He saw Glorfindel seated but unmoving, while his wife seemed to be sleeping. It was unlike his mentor to be unaware of him. Frowning, he moved across the room and gently laid a hand on his shoulder. "Are you well, my Lord?"

The golden head lifted suddenly, his reverie broken. "Pardon me, Aran Thranduil. I have been in
prayer, and in thought."

"Of course," he said, removing his hand after an affectionate squeeze. "Then, forgive me for disturbing you."

Glorfindel's face tilted up in amusement. "Forgive you for my being disturbed by you in your own home?" he chuckled.

The Elvenking's eyebrows arched sharply as his mouth formed into a brilliant smile. "I was merely showing polite regard, my Lord," he returned with equal humor. "Adonnenniel...?"

"Is sleeping under my influence, and will be woken for dinner. She had become tired."

He nodded. "I have said it already, but will say it again. Thank you, Glorfindel, for the care you take of her. I have deeply appreciated that your presence here has allowed me to have the time to spend with my son." His eyes were shining as he spoke.

"It is no burden, Thranduil. It is my heart's pleasure to be with my daughter, just as it is for you to be with Legolas. I do not need to tell you that she is extraordinary." He paused, still seeming lost in his thoughts. "Thranduil, I would like to know something. You were taken to her world. What were your impressions of it? What was it like?"

"I hope you will allow me a moment to pour wine before I answer. Do you still have enough in your goblet?"

Glorfindel nodded, remaining seated, waiting for the King to return.

Having drunk deeply and refilled his cup, Thranduil came and seated himself on the couch as well. New furnishings had been brought into their chambers, and the two chairs and small table had been replaced by a couch and two other smaller but comfortable chairs. Swallowing another deep draught, he gazed into the flames. "Earth," he said. "I was there for two and a half days; sixty hours. That time was divided evenly between the edain world and the natural world; Adonnenniel's farm in a rural area, and a great city of men; and then one of their most beautiful forests and the shore at the edge of a mighty ocean. It tore my heart to leave that forest, Glorfindel. Trees old and proud, of a height to reach the heavens. Beautiful, so very alive, and unstained by the devices of Morgoth or Sauron.

And the ocean! A steel blue surf of immense power, crashing against the blackest pebbles in sprays of white foam. There was so much beauty, and she assured me that I was seeing only a drop in the lake of the loveliness of their world. But those places were also islands under siege. They told me of forests razed to the ground, mountains mined into ugly scars, some of which I saw for myself. Their great city had mighty constructs and places that were lovely as well, but were also filled with filth and squalor. People lived debased lives alongside those possessing great wealth; fouled air, refuse, and a reek of uncleanliness were not in short supply. She told me that as great cities went, that this was one of the nicer ones; there were others that she called...'unspeakable', I believe was the word she used.

I learned something too of their wars; their military, their weapons. They were great, Glorfindel, great and terrible beyond all imagining. I took offense once with her, because she called our manner of fighting 'primitive.' She had meant no disrespect and asked my forgiveness for her choice of words, but later on I found that 'primitive' was an entirely correct description." He shook his head. "They created marvels, at the expense of the earth beneath their feet. We drove by great buildings, spewing stench...she called them 'chemicals.' Though there were many marvels to behold, I would beg the Valar on my hands and knees not to be abandoned there."
"They?"

Thranduil frowned. "They who?"

Glorfindel smiled. At one point you said "They told you of forests razed to the ground. This implies another was with you and your Queen?"

"Yes. I understand now. Brian. We were also with Brian, her closest friend on Earth."

"What was she like?"

Thranduil laughed. "He, not she. Adonnenniel's friend was male."

Glorfindel's eyebrows shot up.

"No, my Lord. The relationship was chaste," Thranduil grinned, before his face grew earnest. "He was a wonderful man, much like Adonnenniel, and yet not. In a short time I grew very fond of him. He was filled with kindness and humor, and embraced me wholly. In our time there, she gave him all her worldly assets for his care. Do you wish to see my memories?" he offered.

The golden-haired elf nodded, and moved close to Thranduil, who for some time disgorged his sharp and clear visual recollections; Glorfindel learned what he wished to know. "Thank you Thranduil, it was generous of you to allow me to see this." For some moments they sat in silence. "How have you been feeling, since returning home, if I may ask? We have not had occasion to talk in some weeks," he said gently.

The King smiled, sipping his wine. "I have not stopped reflecting on your counsel to me. I have practiced the exercises you assigned me by which to calm myself each day, though the need has not arisen. I have found that they place me in an ideal frame of mind for my duties, and intend to keep on. My heart has felt at ease. Really, better than at ease, though I have not allowed myself to forget my mistakes. All his life, Glorfindel, Legolas has been a guarded presence at my side. Always there, always trustworthy, and always keeping his true feelings hidden away from me. This was my own doing, but that has begun to change. Today we spent much time in his quarters, simply talking. We have been sharing far more affection." He looked away, as a tear splashed from his eye. "I feel as though a place in my heart I did not realize had frozen has thawed under your care. There is joy, such as I do not recall having in a very long time. The complete joy of all my family around me, with more blessings yet to come." As he said the words, his gaze came to rest on Nenni, who slept on peacefully.

The older elf's heart rejoiced. "It does me good to hear this, mellonenin. If I am not mistaken, the meal is soon?"

At the word 'meal' Beren raised his head, looking suddenly alert. Thranduil chuckled at Beren's interest. "Yes, soon. Galion will bring Beren's food, and I thought we would dine in the Great Hall. Legolas wished to speak to his Naneth. I have shamelessly capitalized most of his time, and I had promised her that she too would have more occasion to be with him. I think he hopes to take her on another outing; one that might actually go as planned."

"She would like that. I have one more question, and then I must wake her. Today she asked me when my aur en onnad was, and I told her. Iavas 20."

Thranduil's head came up sharply in surprise and enjoyment.

"Yes. And my question is, why did I have to pry out of her the date of her own aur en onnad? She deliberately made no comment, and was planning on dropping the subject entirely until I pressed
I wondered if you had any insight?"

Thranduil reflected. "I think you will have to ask her if you truly wish to know; nothing obvious comes to mind except, her comfort level can plummet any time she believes she is being made the center of attention. She has improved a great deal, about this, but now and again there are little flare-ups. Though, I cannot say for certain this is the issue." He shrugged. "Adonnenniel is very complicated."

Glorfindel rose to wake her. "Agreed." Seating himself, he laid his hand on her forehead to slowly and carefully bring her back from sleep. "As promised, iellig, I am waking you in time for the meal," he said softly.

"Thank you, Ada," she murmured, still groggy.

"Come, sit up," he said, lifting her as though she were a doll.

"You are coddling me, Ada," she murmured in mild protest before yawning into his robe.

Unable to resist, Thranduil sat on the other side of her, noiselessly, and began rubbing her back as her eyes closed again.

"That is not helping, Ada," she protested. "I am trying to wake up." Nenni was oblivious to the fact that three hands were now touching her.

Thranduil tenderly cupped her face and kissed her on the lips. "Does that help, meleth?"

Her eyes flew open wide, as she tried to register the goings-on. "You two," she said smiling. Turning more, she embraced her husband. "Thranduil, it is good to see you."

He did not respond, but allowed his actions to speak, kissing her soundly. When he broke away from her, he smiled. "Come meleth, sit by the fire, and I will comb your hair. Would you like wine?"

"No thank you. But I would like water." She stood up quickly and regretted it, feeling dizzy. Glorfindel swiftly steadied her, and guided her around to sit on the couch. The end seat was her favorite; it was warmest, near a table and she liked to lean up against the arm of the couch. Thanking him, she stared into the flames while trying to forego becoming frustrated with her capricious body, if only because it would accomplish nothing. While Thranduil poured the water, she swept all of her hair out behind her so that he could access it, and turned her thoughts to her lye problem. I need to make stronger lye, and that requires heating or evaporation. And that requires in turn a heat-safe container that is impervious to a strong chemical base. And nothing comes to mind except glass. Glass...her eyebrows raised. But glass requires two materials that were not anywhere near here, plus heat exceeding that of a forge...no. To think I could manage the production of glass vessels, especially ones suitable for chemistry applications, is absurd. So forget that. I am thinking about this all wrong, chasing a manufacturing process with more variables and obstacles than a hydra has tentacles. Idiot. What are you surrounded by? Focus on what you have in front of you, not what you don't. An involuntary groan escaped her lips, though it was barely audible.

"Is everything well, meleth?" Thranduil asked, as he expertly combed through her tresses. His touch was very soothing.

"Yes, thank you. Just being, um, never mind. That feels very nice." She closed down her mind for just a moment so that she could indulge in thinking, Being a stupidhead who would rather do
twenty steps when she can do one instead. Insulting herself was a lifelong habit she doubted she would ever shake, but doing so in the hearing of Glorfindel was asking for censure. And she felt like she deserved a gratuitous moment, as she had just solved, entirely, her problem with making more playing cards; for playing cards could be made from hardwood. And so they will be, she thought smugly. Now that I've mastered that pressing global situation, what else can I do? A smile spread across her face as she gained entertainment from how ridiculous her inner world was, sometimes.

She was so absorbed that she did not notice the older elf watching every bit of this, and he knew perfectly well why she had shut him out. Not to be outdone, he sidled closer to her. "Give me your feet, iellig."

With a look of surprise, she turned her body and complied. As soon as he had both of her feet, he delved his thumbs expertly into the arches, causing her to stifle a moan of enjoyment. For about fifteen seconds, he gave the perfect foot rub. And from then on out, it was only the lightest touches, creating all the anticipation of a decent foot rub but with no actual delivery. And there was not a thing she could say about it; she firmly believed that one should never look a gift horse in the mouth. This went on, as Thranduil styled her hair for dinner. At the least, the warmth of his hands was pleasant to feel; her feet had begun to grow cold. Finally she summoned the wherewithal to meet Glorfindel's eyes, and immediately saw his expression. Her lips parted as she became aware that he was doing this deliberately. Did you think you could fool me, iellig?

Nenni grinned. There is always hope, Ada.

How well has hoping worked for you today? His eyes shone with mirth.

It has not, she admitted. But mischief requires that the attempt be made, Ada. I am nothing if not dedicated. The corners of her mouth curled in a smile; she was not ready to concede defeat.

Looking away, Glorfindel shook his head. He had to admit it was a very good retort. With a sigh, his shoulders sagged.

Seeing, she smiled. Dear Ada. I know your discipline, and that you do not wish me to run myself down. But there are times...well, it is sometimes part of my inner voice to myself. I know that I am neither stupid, nor an idiot, nor any of the other names I call myself. And oddly enough, I say those things most often when I have just thought of something reasonably clever. Know that I do accept the spirit of your teaching. But every now and then...I cannot explain, it just has to come out. I am not able to be as perfectly good as you. I try, but it is like closing all the valves against steam. Pressure builds, and something has to erupt.

The innocent words cut into him. She knew the truth, though she seemed willing to ignore it. He was not perfectly good, and he had no right to ask perfection of her. Glorfindel's eyes lowered, though he forced a smile. He resumed rubbing her feet...the right way.

Though she did not perceive all of what had happened within him, her sharp senses analyzed that he was granting her a concession. Her eyes did not leave his face, and when he looked up again, it was with a far milder expression, one bearing almost...apology? Frowning, she reviewed exactly what she had said to him, and then it dawned on her. She took a risk, an educated guess. You need not think along those lines. I accept you, Ada. All of you. You have my love. And the foot rub is very nice.

Thranduil smiled, wondering if Glorfindel knew his danger on starting in with foot rubs. He was more than content to see someone else take up the duty, reasoning that in about six more months, this would be something she would wish for a great deal as the elfling grew. His wife would be
heavy with child through the cold months of the year, too. Just managing her feet might take more effort than ruling his Kingdom, he thought with amusement. Her hair was finally completed in a particularly elaborate creation, and he asked Glorfindel if he would mind retrieving her jeweled hair clasp from the other chamber; it was fixed into place. "You may wish to change, meleth."

Rising, she thanked both of them for their attentions, pausing by the mirror. "Thranduil, is it a special occasion tonight?" Her hair was astonishingly lovely.

"Yes. The occasion is, I have not seen my wife all day, and I wanted to enjoy her beauty."

Nenni simply stared at him. "Flattery will get you everywhere," she teased, hurrying off to choose another dress. Her eyes lighted on a fitted velvet gown in differing shades of blue. *I may as well make a point of enjoying these close-fitting ones while I still can. Soon these will have to be stored away, for a time.* Minutes later she was ready, having laced the back as best she could.

Reappearing in the next room, she asked Thranduil to care for the rest of the closures. It was only then that she realized they were alone. "Ada left?" she asked.

"He went to change, meleth. Something about 'being fit to be seen with us.' "

Her face fell. "Oh dear. I forget, he is not used to our indulgence in pretty fabrics."

Thranduil chuckled. "Imladris made me aware of my...excesses. I had been alone here so long that it never occurred to me that they were excesses."

"Or maybe you rule so well that your people are able to be generously provided for as a mark of your skill."

He looked at her in surprise and pleasure at the compliment.

She reached for him, taking both his hands in hers. "Which reminds me. A series of random thoughts today led me to understand just how you must have managed to allow the instrument makers to build that piano. You had to have gone on the Internet, on Earth, and looked at I don't know how many websites to understand the construction of it. While I do not know much, I know they are complicated. You planned to do this, you made the effort, and with the blessing of your extraordinary mind and memory you must have begun scheming on this soon after our return. And I still cannot fathom fully how all of you did it."

Meeting his eyes and seeing the surprise there, she could tell he was about to speak and placed a finger over his lips to silence him. "I am not done yet. I want you to know that I am truly humbled at the depth of love you have shown for me. The joy your gift has brought...even though you see my thoughts, I still cannot fully impart to you what it has meant to me. Thank you for what you did, Hîr vuin. Thank you, so much."

Thranduil's eyes closed tightly as he held her. It was not expected, that she would guess...and that she did not know all of it, confirmed for him that Glorfindel would not have told her; plus it was not his nature to reveal confidences, ever. "You are welcome, meleth. Though my actions have not always measured up, I have so badly wanted your happiness. I saw that day on Earth, what a bitter loss it was for you."

"Loss?" she said, puzzled.

"You wept because you could not bring the piano home with you...did you not?" he asked softly.

"No. Or perhaps Yes in a way, but it was something a little different. Thranduil, you have to realize that I struggled for many years to play it, and was never good enough to truly excel. I tried so hard, but lacked the necessary talent, which really very few ever have. My fingers and my brain, they did
not talk to each other in the way they needed to. Piano for me was great love and great frustration. It is why I turned to singing, actually; singing was something at which I could succeed in a way not given to me with the piano. But when we returned, I was an elf, with elven abilities of mind and body. I now had the skill I yearned to possess, and I only discovered this as I played for you. I cried out of grief because something I had wanted all my life and been denied was given to me precisely when it was no longer of use at all; the piano was not coming to Ennor with me and I knew it. Had you not been there with me, I would have used all fifty-eight of my remaining hours sitting there playing, but that was not possible either. Now, thanks to you, I have the joy of it I always had wished for. And it is a different piano; your gift to me. I am free of the other one at last."

"You did not like your piano?" The King felt vaguely astonished to learn these nuances he had not at all understood.

Nenni broke away from him to look out the balcony window as she answered, and silently, Glorfindel had returned. "It was weirder than that. When I was a little girl, my father bought that piano for me. You know", she said with a soft laugh, "the same father that destroyed my mental well-being and thereby gave Glorfindel a full-time occupation. He spent I don't know how long repairing it; the outside of it was ugly and damaged. You saw how polished and radiant the wood was; he made it that way. He also insisted on and paid for the lessons by which I was taught. Do you know, he never told me why he wanted me to learn? I still have no idea; I would honestly rather have learned the flute. But learn I did, and by the time my life in that house had deteriorated to a waking nightmare, that piano saved me. During what I fondly recall as my "every day I hoped I would die" era, I poured out my pain into those keys. The act of playing is joined to the deepest places in my spirit, because it was my anchor when I had nothing else. Nowhere to go, no help, nothing else to cling to. I loved and hated that piano. It was a reminder of both my inescapable misery and my salvation. I am not sorry that it did not follow me here, though I would have rather had it than nothing, I suppose. Regardless, it is now far away." She turned her head to look at her husband. "Me and my cheerful stories," she said, smiling, as she returned to him and slid her arm around his waist.

Glorfindel listened silently, and connected a great many dots.

Thranduil kissed her, not replying. It was hard to know what to say, except to stand here in silent gratitude for his own decision. His gift had been far greater, far more valuable, than he could have known. "We should go now, meleth. Your Ada is here."

Turning, she saw Glorfindel wearing silver robes with a pale blue sash. Her lips parted to see him; he was truly beautiful. More than usual. *I never would have guessed that silver would look so good on him*, she pondered. Though, Thranduil wore it often. Somehow, she usually thought of them as having different coloring from each other...but really that was not the case.

"I am glad you approve, Adonnenniel," he said, chuckling at her unguarded thoughts.

*****

Legolas insisted on sitting next to her at the meal, and for the first time, she found herself with someone seated to her right in their private dining area here. Thrilled that he would do this, she took his hand, only releasing him when the arrival of food required it. It endeared her when he insisted on serving her the pieces of poached fish and vegetables they were eating that night.

They spoke quietly. "How have you been, Ionneg? Your father has been shamelessly keeping you to himself, though I cannot begrudge him. Mostly. Sort of. Which is all to say, I have tried to be patient but I have missed you," she told him as he began to laugh.
"Naneth, you are funny," he said. "I have missed you as well. I wondered if I might do two things. The promised and long-deferred tea at my quarters, tomorrow afternoon...perhaps at four? And the day after that, a ride in the forest? I decided that we shall not have a destination, thus reducing the likelihood of random edain releasing hordes of angry bees at us."

"Yes to the former, and probably yes to the latter, though we must ensure that my diligent guardian approves." She lowered her voice to a whisper. "We must all come back in one piece, Ionneg, your Adar's aur-en-onnad will be the day after the ride. Galion will have all our skins if we ruin his plans for the day. Which is of course a complete exaggeration, but ai! I still would not wish to face him."

"True," said Legolas thoughtfully. "Perhaps we can do something low risk, like running in the treetops," he joked.

"You laugh. That sounds like a lot of fun, actually. Or, it would be until your sister sucks away all my energy. But I am willing if you are," she said, grinning. "Surely there is some bit of woodcraft you can impart to me? I will not be able to do many things for another year, and I would like to think I am gaining a skill or two instead of losing all of them in forced idleness."

He tilted his head. "Let me think on that, for there are many things that would be useful to you and enjoyable for me to teach."

"Deal," she said, eating her food. "Not to mention, your best combat skill is my weakest, Ionneg. I have used a bow only once out in the real world. It is abysmal."

His eyebrows arched. "How are you with knives?"

"Good, I think, but I would happily let you be the judge of that. Ada and I have kept up with some drills and sparring for practice, but it has all been sword work."

Legolas smirked. "Then I have yet more to consider. But let us change the subject for a time. Do you see those seated at your two o'clock, below?"

The group of fair-haired Sindar were difficult to miss, as were the opulently dressed ellith in their midst. "Yes, I do."

"Now, keeping our previous discussion in mind, discreetly observe."

Nenni had a hunch that this might be an excellent time to keep everyone out of her thoughts. As she steadily worked her way through her dinner, she kept her eyes on the group below without appearing to do so. She recognized a few of the Lords, and obviously they were a close knit group of nobles that enjoyed each other's company. The ellith seemed much occupied with each other as were the ellyn; it was easy to see that though they were wed, they did not dine as couples. As always, there was much laughter and the steady hum of many elves conversing. Which is when she heard it. It was not outrageously loud, and if she had not been looking directly at them, she would have missed it. One of the ellith laughed, but something happened...was it when she inhaled? the oddest sound came out and it reminded her of...what was it? Something she recalled from her farm on Earth, that sound...Her eyes flared when she realized that the sound was an owl's screech. "By the Valar..." Nenni whispered, remembering that one of the ellith was nicknamed 'Screech Owl,' only to see in her peripheral vision that her son was chuckling softly into his napkin, barely able to contain himself.

"I do not know her name, and you cannot tell me just now; it will be too hard for me to keep it out of my thoughts. Though it has brought me many benefits, there are times I wish my head was not
an open book. But...I so badly had wanted to believe you were making that up, on some level. And, I cannot un-hear that, you know."

"Ah, Naneth. We are going to be great friends, because you cannot hide from me that you enjoy mischief just as much as I do. Not blatant mischief, but rather mischief with subtle overtones and an air of refinement."

"That is a dangerous quality in one who might one day rule," she said to him, her eyes sparkling with...mischief.

"Ai! Naneth, do not say such things. I have no wish to assume my father's throne. And besides, that is what you are here to save me from," he teased.

Nenni took his hand even as her demeanor shifted to one that was impossible to read. "Enjoy your mirth while you yet may, dear son. If I have learned nothing else, it is that life can sweep you off to faraway places, and ask you to take up burdens impossible to imagine in the present. Look what happened to me!" Her voice still held humor, but her eyes spoke in earnest. She would not reveal his future to him, but would still do her best to prepare his spirit. You will rule in a manner of speaking, Ionneg, but not here, she thought.

"I suppose anything can happen", he said reflectively.

"It can. And with the gift of your irrepressible mirth, you will doubtless meet the challenge of all those 'anythings.' We had a saying on Earth. 'Hope for the best, prepare for the worst.' It was sound advice," she told him.

"I will see you tomorrow at four, then...with Glorfindel?"

"Yes. Be hungry; this is intended to ruin your evening meal."

Laughing, she nodded. "I will, my Prince." The meal concluded, and she released his hand so they could depart.

Taking Thranduil's arm, they made their way home. Glorfindel excused himself, citing a wish for the library, so she kissed his cheek in parting. Not expecting to see him until tomorrow, he was privately informed of their invitation for tomorrow. As they continued on, the King spoke.

"Meleth, I have barely heard you play the piano. Would you play for me, even if only for a short while?"

"I would be honored, Thranduil. I would like to ask something from you, as well."

"What is it?"

_I have hungered for your touch, and time alone with you. I do not only mean the joy of your body. I would greatly appreciate simply being close to you this evening._

Whatever he had expected to hear, that was not it. In the middle of the passageway, he stopped to kiss her passionately and lift her into his arms. Very happy, she wrapped her arms around his neck, kissing him on the cheek. He soon delivered her to her piano bench.

"Would you sit with me?" she asked.

For an answer he slid next to her. "I do not wish to cause you sorrow but...would you play something that you used to play, from the times of your troubles?"
"Yes. If you want, you can keep your arm around my waist. At worst I will push against you on occasion if I need to reach for some high note." Shuffling through her music, she found Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata, making a mental note to study the other movements that were previously impossible. "This was written by a genius. While it was not the case with this particular piece, he wrote some of his most compelling works after he became completely deaf." She closed her eyes for a moment, before reaching for the keys.

Thranduil listened; this was very different from what she had played before. While he did not understand how something with no words could accomplish it, within a few measures he was lost to a sense of intense yearning. For what, he did not know, so he closed his eyes and lightly held her. When the music concluded, he had no words. Their eyes met, and their lips soon followed. Though she had genuinely meant to play for him longer, desire was surging through both of them and by unspoken agreement they returned to their chambers.

Nenni felt differently than she had in weeks; since before their troubles had begun. Though she ached for him, she wanted something else even more; to pleasure him. Maybe it was gratitude for what he had done for her, maybe it was their difficulties having been healed over by another layer of positive experiences with him. These last weeks had been good, without a whisper of conflict between them. Though their habitual morning lovemaking had been enjoyed, it was not the same as the long hours they’d given to each other before. Did it matter, what the reason was? Gathering up her skirts, she walked around to the stone table near the balcony, and removed her slippers. With a spring up onto the table, she turned gracefully, her fingers beckoning him. With a grin that told of anticipation mingled with curiosity, he approached her, gently holding her waist. Taking full advantage of now standing some inches taller, she cupped his cheek and caressed it, her hands slowly tracing her fingers over his sensitive ears. His flaxen hair cascaded through her fingers, glinting copper in the firelight. The sharp intake of air as he returned her gaze hinted at the success of her ideas.

Leaning toward him, her lips brushed against his, the edge of her tongue barely tracing his lips. Teasing, tasting, her touches played around every inch of his fair skin. Without warning her arms wrapped around his shoulders, drawing him forward to crush her mouth against his in lust and aggression. Her tongue swept his mouth as he quickly responded to her; her body was now molded against his without an inch between them. Take me to our bed. The request came only because she could not easily pick him up and carry him herself. Robes and gown swiftly fell away under the uncoordinated efforts of grasping fingers and tugging hands. Laying her down, Thranduil had begun to take the initiative, when she met his eyes and imprisoned his hands in her own, twisting from underneath him. No. I want to. Kneel. He complied, silently, the excitement he felt betrayed only by his swifter breathing and the visible pulsing of his swollen member. He shuddered as she took him into her mouth, guessing what pleasure he was about to receive. Her mouth, her hands, were seemingly everywhere, as her passion for him poured out of her. From the lightest nibbles at the ridges of his sensitive manhood to the roughness with which his length was drawn toward her throat, he was being ravished; no other description sufficed.

When his moans came in a steady stream, her fingers sought his slicked entrance, and soon a second delight was added to his first. As her slender digit found the gland inside of him, a jolt of ecstasy shot through his body. Desperate for relief, he began to rock involuntarily between her finger and the moist heat of her mouth. Intoxicated by the obvious bliss she was giving him, Nenni’s heart soared. Joining to his mind, she controlled his ascent, drawing him out far more than when she had done this for him in Imladris. His vocalizations came in torrents of increasing volume, which spiked her own desire. The hunger she felt for him was unabated, and all her energy went into these final moments during which she increased the tempo of her pleasuring until he could stand no more and exploded in release, all but shouting her name. Still she kept a gentle suction on his length, devouring what he poured into her. Slipping her finger out of him and
catching him as he slumped onto the bed, her arms held him tightly; her mind reeling with the shared aftermath of the pleasure that was still jarring his mind. Covering his face in soft kisses, her love blazed. Thranduil opened his eyes to see her aglow with light.

"Adonnenniel," he gasped, knowing his wife was unfulfilled. In the face of one of the most desirable sights he had ever beheld, his lust remained ungratified. Unhesitatingly, he turned her to claim her body, hearing a cry of satisfaction escape her throat as he penetrated her. He did not provide the same sweet torment that she had given him, but joined with her in raw desire, fueling her mounting cries until her passion burst around the part of him buried inside of her. His wild thrusts did not abate, and moments later he filled her a second time. Her limbs were locked around him much like a sea creature, as she pulled him down on top of her. This was not terribly difficult, as he was spent for the moment. But he did not wish to stay there, much to her annoyance. "It is better for the child," he whispered, rolling off of her, but gathering her against him as he lay at her side.

How can you know that? she asked, not out of spite but in genuine curiosity.

Because I can see, meleth. Suddenly his images flared into her mind. His hand traveled to just above her mound, over her womb. With a sharp gasp he showed her the elfling, as only he could see it. There are times I wake while you yet sleep. I indulge myself in watching this beauty, growing inside of you. Very soon, your womb will begin to swell with her, though you will not feel it for perhaps some weeks yet. Watch. He pressed his hand down firmly over the region of her womb, in imitation of bearing his weight on top of her body and she could actually see the compression, however slight, that occurred.

Thank you, for showing me. Her hand reached down to cover his. I do not suppose you can tell me why all of a sudden, my desire for your body is nearly insatiable?

He laughed. Your hormones are changing and while this craving is not usual, neither is it completely unheard of. It is likely one of many phases you will experience. I took the initiative to speak with Lord Elrond further, on another occasion, asking him some blunt questions that I believe he would have found difficult to answer to an elleth to whom he is not wed, however grounded and forthright he is in matters of the body. Do not feel concern. You have ever generously given of yourself for my needs; I will do no less. I will satisfy you to the best of my ability at the times when we are free to have this. And if you feel you need still more, you are to tell me. I will not leave you wanting, meleth.

Gin melin, Thranduil. Leaning forward, she claimed his mouth in another gentle kiss, as Beren looked on with a bored sigh and rolled onto his back, returning to slumber.
Unbelievable, she thought. This is really simply unbelievable. They had shared love well into the evening and by all rights she should have been worn out enough to sleep until noon. But noooo, it's who knows what o'clock and this, again. It's useless. With a huff she considered what to do. The past weeks she had been sleeping well, and thought that perhaps "Imladris insomnia" was behind her. And odder yet, she felt edgy. Simmering, even. Screw this. Rising carefully, she padded into her chambers and found clothes. Eager fingers donned the tight-fitting black garments that she would ordinarily wear for fighting, her boots and the precious knives from the twins. Over that went a cloak and hood to hide her tell-tale copper hair from the rest of the Palace. Her swords she carried under her cloak rather than on her harness, since those were equally unique to her. Good enough, she felt, and left for the practice rooms.

An hour later saw her giving vent to whatever was bubbling within her, as she threw and spun the blades in blurs of motion. When she tired of that, she switched to her swords. Unbridled from restrictions and monitoring, she let loose in a blaze of activity. The sharpened tips of her weapons unquestionably were taking a beating as she worked intensively on a maneuver that involved running up the wall as far as she could, using her sword points and legs to leverage herself back and away, before tumbling to the ground. She never worked on this sort of thing with Glorfindel around, because it would probably be vetoed from the outset. That and she needed all her focus; he was an inherent distraction and his presence dampened her introverted creativity. Her exhilaration grew, somewhat displacing the mood that had brought her here. Pushing the limits of her strength, she finally stuck a particularly good landing. Breathing heavily but feeling immense satisfaction, she decided that this session with swords was concluded.

Placing the blades on the table with her cloak and allowing for a moment to rest, she eyed the bow that laid there. With a twisted smile, she recalled her days and weeks of being tasked in such a difficult manner by Thranduil, and the particularly awful one-time session with the bow. With a hardened look she picked up the elegant weapon and fingered it, taking her stance and drawing the string. Her shoulders pulled it without strain, and she reflected on how different and how painful this used to be. There was a quiver of arrows near, but this was not a room for such things. To continue, she would need to go outside and practice in the dark...which might potentially attract notice. Waffling about this idea, she drew the string once again, enjoying the feel of it buried against the skin of her nose and lips. And then, arms were around hers, gently pressuring her hands to reverse her draw. Pure ire coursed through her, as she forced herself to allow the hands to guide her motions. With a deep sigh of exasperation that she tried to keep silent, she dropped her head. You will not be churlish to him, she told herself.
"Good morning, Ada," she said in a carefully neutral tone of voice. "I take it you wish me to return the bow to the table?"

"Yes. Or rather, could I prevail on your good will to do so? And good morning to you as well, Adonnenniel" he said, turning her to face him. The stern look of reproach she more than half expected to see was not there, but instead his eyes held excitement. "I am sorry to interrupt you, but I wondered if you would come with me?"

This was so different than what she had anticipated that it took her a moment to process. "Of course" she said, returning her knives to her boots, and reassembling her cloak and other items. He looked at her quizzically.

"I do not always wish to be observed coming and going, and therefore I must cover my hair if I am to accomplish that. Not to mention, I am hardly dressed appropriately to be seen around the Palace. I am obligated, at least on some level, to maintain appearances," she informed him. "I cannot reflect poorly on Thranduil. And to that end, may I ask you if our destination requires me to change clothing?"

He rolled his eyes; that she was in his company alone jeopardized her anonymity. "If I were to meet you outside your chamber door in five minutes, to allow you to wear something else, would that be adequate? We will be alone yet I recognize there is a chance you can be passed in the hallways." This bothersome emphasis on appearance was not a factor in his life in Imladris. Or at least, it was a greatly reduced factor.

"Five minutes, then," she said, stuffing her swords under her cloak and vanishing. It was all the time she needed to look longingly at the heated pool as she walked past it, divest herself of her current items and climb back into her gown of earlier. She did not attempt to deal with her hair, that she had not exactly placed in confinement before her drilling with the weapons, but instead found a hooded robe and artfully arranged it to hide the tangled mess. Silently padding over the stone floor in soft-soled slippers, the latch was lifted noiselessly and she emerged. He was already waiting for her, and took her hand to walk the few doors down to the music room and then to the piano bench. He had the book open to the same Bach piece she played first for Hannasiel; lovely, yet relatively simple.

A deep excitement was barely being held in check, and she had never seen this in him. "Would you tell me if I am doing this right?" he asked.

"Of course," she said, now intrigued to see what had come of their...sharing. Moving away enough to give him room, she watched how he held his hands before he began to play. It was lovely, perfect, and she followed his flawlessly moving fingers, mesmerized. The pleasure of just listening without being the one playing was restored to her. All she could think was Valar, thank you. Thank you for your gifts, and such beauty. She let him finish, and praised him. He was overjoyed to have this newly acquired ability, and was beginning to glow. "Ada, there is something else you might enjoy," she said softly. Because it dawned on her, she had an accompanist now. Or the beginnings of one. Shuffling through her music, she brought out the Bach/Gounod "Ave Maria" and placed that in front of him. "This is the same piece, arranged for piano and a singer. I am not warmed up but I think I can manage to not make a disaster of it, if you would like to try."

He nodded eagerly. "Yes."

"Then we shall. Try. Focus as best you can on the music, and let me match myself to what you are doing; it will be easier as this is all new to you." She took her place at the curve of the instrument, facing him. For this one, she had no need to look on at the written music.
Ave Maria, gratia plena....Maria, gratia plena.... Nenni reflected that this would be so much lovelier if the words could be altered to sing of blessed Varda, the true Queen of the Stars...but there was only so much thought she could spare, and tweaking Latin on the spot exceeded that quota. Her eyes shone, as his playing turned out to be perfection. She had only ever experienced this powerful draw one other time since coming here, with the lovely but emotionally aloof Arwen. And now, as she stood facing this elf who she loved and trusted fully, there were no restraints; no reservations in her connection to her song. She sang for him in a way that she had never sung for anyone except herself, because she was not singing actually to him but rather to his music. Her song to his, twining in perfection. As Glorfindel played, his connection to her mind drew him in to the depths of those hidden places he had already witnessed. Except this time he understood them, because they were now within him as well. The music reached down into him and ensnared him with strength he could not have imagined, and could not resist. It was one of the most compelling experiences of his very long life. She studied his face as she sang, and saw.

This possession, this musical colonization of her heart had come to her slowly; the transcendent frisson to which she'd had all her life to acclimate was striking him all at once. As her song concluded, she perceived the emotion that had taken him, so intense that he could hardly manage it. For it was in her as well, but she had prepared for its arrival. Nenni walked behind him and wrapped her arms around him, kissing the side of his golden head. "It will pass," she whispered. "But stay with it while you can."

His hands came up to hold onto her arms, as a tear rolled down his cheek. He did not know that anything could be so exquisite. That anything at all could overpower him in this way almost felt frightening.

Nenni tried to say something to acknowledge his state of mind. "Ada, I did not think about this, beforehand. But I am not sorry. No one here could ever experience what I have kept inside of me, and now you can. You have."

"I do not understand," he said with a barely audible voice. "Although I did not play an instrument, I can sing. I have known the music of our people for all my years."

"I know", she whispered in sympathy. The feelings that had consumed them still felt too raw for words spoken at normal volume. "And the music of our people is beautiful, but it is not the same. I cannot explain this exactly, but this is the essence of being human. Mortal music contains love and yearning and an expression of life's miracle that can only come from those for whom it is ephemeral. Elves do not burn with that same bright fire, Ada, which is why the music of elves cannot tear at your fae as does this. Only the composers of Earth capture the Gift of Men in a manner so transcendent that a kind of pain comes with it."

He turned himself so that he could bring her onto his lap and hold her tightly. I did not foresee this, Adonnenniel, and I cannot undo it. I came into your life with very specific goals in mind; a clear purpose. And yet since my return here, I am having one experience after another that is confounding me.

For the umpteenth time his strange absence of an ordinary bodily scent intruded on her awareness. To be held by him was to be embraced by the sensation of breathing in the air after a spring rain, and it was apparently never going to be something her mind could ignore. Inhaling deeply more than once, she considered his words. To her it was breathing in calm and a deep sense of spiritual safety. And in a blinding flash that bathed her entire psyche in clarity, her insight revealed the circumstance of the one who held her.

When she spoke, her voice was very soft but held a strange edge of authority that he had only heard
a few times. "I do not pretend to understand the entire scope of your life, for you have not allowed me to see it. Yet. I do not ask it. But you will show me, just as you told me of Eöl, and just as you agreed to accept my knowledge of music. You have been like a net to me, Ada. You came into my life and cast yourself widely around me. You have held me together, protected and strengthened me, and you continue those blessings even as you guide me. But to you, I am like a needle. I slipped deep inside of you before you were fully aware, triggering vulnerabilities you did not know you had. You are not accustomed to being other than calm and ordered, and yet you are being drawn further toward the disarray I create in you, even as you hesitate." She pushed herself gently out of his hold, meeting his bewildered eyes, reaching up to caress his cheek before she continued.

"It is already too late for you. I have sworn my body and my spirit to Thranduil, who I love deeply. Yet he is not my match in all respects. There is also the vast landscape of thought and emotion; something he and I do not share in the same manner at all, and it is here that you have found me. It is a tie just as strong as the other; it does not need vows or promises to maintain its hold, and goes far beyond our bond as father and daughter. It is within you to perceive as I perceive, feel as I feel. I would even argue that it is the other way around, for I believe your intuition exceeds my own. What happened just now has shaken you, because you are still resisting being pulled to me even though you cannot hope to succeed. Have you considered that maybe you are being asked by the Valar to be open to growth of your own? I have understood for weeks that I was being joined to you in this way, though I am only now articulating it. Obviously, I did not resist." After some seconds of silence, she added one last thing. "You are my Ada and blessed; whatever your path, you will always have my love and reverence."

Except for an intermittent blink, Glorfindel did not move. And realizing that he needed some time to digest her words, neither did she. *Me and my messages from space*, she thought. That sort of thing had always happened, all her life. There were times she just knew things, with a certainty and accuracy she could have taken to the bank. But prior to right now, she could not ever recall having actually disgorged those kinds of epiphanies to another. Because what always followed in her head was exactly what was occurring right now; her logical mind was showing up to the party and causing her to second-guess and doubt the laser beam of her intuition. *But my logical mind is not going to win on this one, because the words cannot be un-spoken.* It was easier not to care, this time, because on some level the conviction of being right about this was not departing. Still, her boldness surprised her. What would she manage next, lecturing a Vala? An involuntary sigh escaped her at the idea that she had presumed to speak to him in such a manner. Truthfully, she did not know where this rolling stone would come to rest, except for an assurance that he belonged in her heart, exactly where he was. *That was something she could avow; to do otherwise would be another blatant attempt at self-deception.* Her reflections wandered back to the first day she laid eyes on him, and the words Thranduil had spoken. *Think of him like....Brian was for you, on Earth. It will be like a visit with Brian.* He could not possibly have known how correct he was going to be. *Life is weird,* she concluded.

Following her mental meanderings that she had forgotten to hide from him, his complete shock gave way to discomfort, which in turn ended up at a place of admission. He had not seen it, perhaps owing to his desire to cling to his concepts of ordered self-management. Did the Ainur have more of a sense of humor than he realized, sending him to aid one of the most damaged individuals he had ever seen, only to expose him to insight so honed that all his defenses counted for nothing? A smile tugged at the edges of his mouth. He had just had all his feelings elaborated for him, in full detail. "I am taken into another of your unexpected and pointed lessons, I see," he said in a voice laced with humor.

Picking up one of his hands that rested on her lap, she idly flexed and straightened his long fingers, wondering how many piano keys he could span. "I did not mean to. It just sort of arrived in my mind and wanted to be spoken. Though part of me very badly wants to ask your pardon for my
brazen words, my heart will not allow it."

"Good. For though I would prefer not to have to admit it, you are correct in all that you have said."

"I hope you know that I will not allow it to go to my head. And...I am glad. Glad to be right, glad to call you not only 'Ada' but 'meldir' as well. Please know how happy I am, to find this relationship with you. And that we now share music is beyond all my hopes. This time has been joyous for me, but..."

"But?"

A cavernous yawn could not be successfully stifled.

"But it is time for you to return to sleep," he said, smiling.

Nodding, she rose, and kissed him on the forehead. Before she left, she turned and said one last thing, gazing at him kindly. "You play beautifully." With a full heart, she pulled her hood back over her disastrously disheveled hair and scurried to her own door. In minutes, she was back under the covers, where she fell asleep at once.

*****

"Meleth."

*Just five more minutes, please.*

"Meleth."

*Pleeeeeease.*

"Meleth!"

With sheer force of will, she opened her eyes to see a perturbed King leaning over her. "What time is it? I feel so sleepy."

"Legolas and your Ada are to meet us in ten minutes, and I needed twenty to do anything with your hair, Adonnenniel. I have been trying to wake you for the last half hour."

"You have?" She genuinely did not remember anything like this. "I am sorry," she whispered, forcing herself to rise. "I will dress and care for my hair."

Thranduil's eyes narrowed. "Did you sleep through the night?"

She sat at the side of the bed, rubbing at her eyes. "No, I did not. I woke and exercised, and then Glorfindel wanted some of my time. I would say I was up for maybe two hours."

He sighed, mildly exasperated. She had moved past him to dress, and on the way dipped a clean cloth into the pool, to rub at her face with the warm water; it would have been sincerely nice to have had time for a proper bath.

His words caused her to feel as though she had managed to offend him. A sigh escaped her. If it was the case, it had not been her intention. He had been very loving last night, and she was not going to react to this. Perhaps not as carefully or gently as he would have done it, she combed through her hair with blazing speed and then used the wet cloth to dampen down the part of her hair nearest her head while she kept combing. Her diadem was placed over it, her hands swiftly sectioned it into thirds, and about five plaits were braided into it loosely. And then she returned to
him, because it wasn't going to get any better than present. He still stood there with his arms crossed, until he noted that she actually was done. "We need to go now?" she asked softly. He nodded, and offered her his arm, looking down on her.

"I did not know you could ready yourself so quickly," he said, trying to work it into an apology.

"There were many years of almost being late for school in which to practice," she said mildly, stifling a yawn. "I could have shaved two minutes off with shorter hair. Please forgive me, Thranduil, I did not mean to be rude or cause you trouble."

"There is nothing to forgive," he said softly. "I too am sorry, I should have shown more kindness."

Nenni hesitated. "Would I offend you, if I asked to stay here?"

His eyes flared in irritation, and it was all the answer she needed. "I should not have asked. Please, lead on."

He did not respond, though he did cover her hand that held her arm with his other one. Her thoughts faded to stillness, for truly she was so tired that there was nothing to think. Legolas and Glorfindel greeted them warmly at their private entrance, and the latter noticed immediately that she did not meet his eyes. Though, she embraced him tightly. When they walked in and those below rose, it was the closest she'd yet come to completely forgetting to curtsy to the King, but she managed to have some stray force of habit come to her aid, and bowed deeply before him. Perhaps she was more grateful than usual for his hand that raised her up. This morning she was seated between Thranduil and Glorfindel, who took her hand underneath the table as she stared at her plate. Iellig?

Nenni raised her eyes to look at him and managed a weak smile. Only then did he see the fatigue written there, and her confusion that she felt this way. He did not chastise her or criticize her exercise earlier this morning, because it should not have been enough to do this to her. "You do not feel otherwise ill?" he asked. A gentle shake of her head No was the only reply. He released her hand to move it discreetly around to her lower back, out of sight of all except Galion, who was busy bearing serving trays. Not for the last time, her heart poured out gratitude for what she was being given. Because right now, it was the only way that her entire morning wasn't going to be spent face down in the grass, sleeping. She was genuinely expecting that when Amaranthine was born, that she would find out the little elleth had a scolex for a mouth, after all. "Only ten and a half months to go," she thought, trying not to give way to despair. With a sigh, she took his hand again as she tried to decide what if anything looked as though she might want to eat it. Besides tea, which she requested in reply to Thranduil's silent inquiry as to what she wanted. When nothing beyond the request for tea was forthcoming, he raised an eyebrow at her.

"Meleth you cannot only have tea," he said, though his voice was kind. "You must eat something."

Reluctantly, she chose a small pear and a slice of cheese, knowing that she could probably spend so much time slicing the piece of fruit that he might not notice how she could make some of it go away. Glorfindel next to her was piling his plate with eggs, toast, fruit and some kind of game meat that had been roasted, and the smell of all of it made her feel vaguely queasy. Picking up her knife, she began to cut the fruit into slices in geometric patterns. Nibbling a piece, she decided it was at least one of her better efforts; the pear was quite sweet and they'd made a proper job of ripening them in the dark of the storerooms. Matching it with a small flake of cheese, she nibbled on it. Mostly, though, she wanted tea. All the area around the core of the pear simply began to turn brown and vanish away, though it was undetectable unless someone was actually focusing on the fruit. And because she only wanted half of the pear, for every slice she ate, another slice disintegrated into a brown smear on the plate. Unfortunately for her, Glorfindel was watching, and
stared in wide-eyed fascination as parts of her food began to dissolve, even as she repeatedly reached for the teapot.

With a frown, suddenly the memory of Frosted Flakes came to her. Coffee and Frosted Flakes. Well, that isn’t going to happen. With another sigh, she lifted the cup to her lips and wondered what was the matter with her. Though, granola would have been nice. Milk was a food group, in her mind. Where did the milk come from, that was here occasionally? she wondered with a frown. And the butter? I've never seen a milk cow, and there is no way these are goat products. More accurately, she wondered who she had to thank. She recalled milking Butterscotch, back home; her friends had kept a Jersey. All those fond moments of getting knocked off the stool by a 900lb animal in a bad mood, and a hoof going in the damn bucket...no, don't miss that one bit. Though, it brought a smile to her lips; it was never not going to be amusing, and she'd never been really hurt. In short order she had eaten next to nothing while creating the impression to Thranduil that she had consumed a small amount of something, as the pit of her stomach lingered in the sensation of food seeming repulsive.

Iellig, she heard, I will keep your secret concerning your breakfast if you will agree to let me help you later this morning. I can aid you to feel better, and you can have fruit and nuts.

Her pupils flared, not knowing whether to be amused at his strategy or chagrined that she had not been nearly as sly as she'd thought. It was a little of both, really. It would seem that I have little choice but to agree, given that I have no wish to irritate the King further this morning. I will speak to him later. I saw. Unless I am much mistaken, it was only that he so very much desires to have this time together as a family. You must understand what he is experiencing, with this. To have this closeness to his son, to have you and I, and the joy of awaiting Amaranthine...he wants this, more than he has ever wanted anything. I believe in time he will settle down, but at the moment he is consumed by the experience of family, his family, for the first time in all his long life. That being said, he must not forget that you welcomed this pregnancy to please him, and that you have had a hard experience of it thus far, with much more to come.

Ada, you do not need to run interference for me. As she raised her eyes to his, she saw The Look. Turning her gaze back to her plate, she took his hand. Forgive my words, please, she asked. It occurred to her too late that he had not intended to be doing anything for her, but rather was speaking from the place of his ongoing oversight of her husband's circumstances.

I do. He squeezed her hand gently in reassurance, and reached to pour her more tea. Can you take the tea with some milk? he asked, trying to coax anything else possible down her throat. When he saw her nod, he reached for the small pitcher of that Galion had left, and added it to her drink. The motions in his peripheral vision attracted the notice of Thranduil, who smiled kindly, seeing that the pear and cheese were gone. He placed his arm around her shoulders, and kissed the side of her head in affection. Feeling only slightly guilty she leaned into his touch, while looking around his chest to exchange subtle smirks with Legolas, in a briefly shared moment of mischief and scheming. She was very much looking forward to their date later on. Straightening back up, she smiled at her husband before finishing her tea. And then the meal was concluded, and before dispersing Legolas came to her and hugged her warmly once again.

"Please do not become overly enthusiastic on volumes of food this afternoon, Ionneg," she said quietly. "I am struggling to eat very much. Your sister leaves me never knowing what any given day will be like."

"Fear not, Naneth. Nothing will go to waste; whatever survives has a destination." It was a slightly mysterious comment, but set her at ease. With a kiss to his cheek, her eyes told of how much she
was anticipating this, when a last thing occurred to her, flushing her cheeks pink.

"Ionneg, I am ashamed to say I do not know where you live. Where do we go?"

Legolas grinned. "Glorfindel knows."

With a soft laugh, she nodded her head, hiding her frustration. "Very well," she said aloud. *That does it, she thought. That absolutely does it. The next time I wake up before dawn, I start learning this Palace.*

Thranduil overheard all of this, and frowned. Glorfindel came behind him, placing a hand on his shoulder. "It is some quiet merriment he has planned for her, today. Do not forget that she enjoys the time with him to herself as much as you do," he counseled gently.

"I know," the King said. "It is only that I have meetings all afternoon...meetings my son scheduled with my generals and commanders, while excusing himself." The frown of suspicion returned.

"He told me of his reports concerning your difficulties with the spiders," the golden elf said. "And I believe his exact words were that he had spoken his opinions at length and felt it would be best for you and them to meet without his influence. Do not imagine ill motive for no reason, Aran Thranduil," he said soothingly.

The King looked down and nodded.

"May I ask my daughter's schedule for today?" Glorfindel inquired politely.

Thranduil smiled. "She will be free to spend the day with you in an hour. That is the time I will ask to make it up to her, for being less than kind when she was so tired this morning. I hope you do not begrudge me this."

"Of course not," said Glorfindel, smiling. It was just the right amount of time to see to a few other matters, not to mention this was exactly what he wished to hear.

Thranduil offered his arm to Nenni, who snaked her hand around it. The strength and reassurance she felt from touching him still struck her after all this time. She felt fortunate, to be so cared for as she was, in a very blessed family. Once back at their chambers, she asked him deferentially what would be required of her today. As he returned her gaze before replying, he looked into her and saw the same steady determination to do her duty to him, and to their people. Though he guessed that Glorfindel had strengthened her, slightly dark circles of tiredness still lingered under her eyes. Without warning, he swept her into his arms and seated her there, walking with her toward their bed.

"You may listen to me while I apologize for how I spoke to you this morning, meleth. It was wrong of me to criticize you for your tiredness, as though you had somehow asked to feel that way. I can see for myself what our daughter is doing to your body, and what you are giving up in order to give me this gift. It was shameful for me to have said what I did. I am sorry."

Leaning forward, she wrapped her arms around his neck, burying her face against his throat. "Thank you, for caring enough to tell me that. This has not been easy, and I have always tried to give you my best, Thranduil. It is hard on me, to think I have disappointed you."

He removed her diadem, before kissing her copper hair. "You have not disappointed me, Adonnenniel. You have never disappointed me. What can I do for you? We have an hour, before I must care for my duties. Your only obligation today is whatever work you need to do in the garden with your Ada; otherwise you may have the day with or without him as it suits you both."
Tilting her head, she considered. As much as she usually would ask for his carnal attentions, she did not feel that kind of hunger for him now. Or at least, not to an extent on which she felt compelled to act. Leaning up, she whispered in his ear, what it was that she wished.

An hour later, when Glorfindel arrived, the chamber was silent and still, which he thought strange. It was easy for him to be aware of when they were intimately involved; he knew that whatever was occurring was not that, or he would not have entered. When he came around the screen to look about, he saw a heartwarming sight. There they both were, fully clothed on their bed, with Thranduil leaning against the many pillows. A blanket covered both of them, but especially her; she was held against her husband's chest. She appeared to be sound asleep, her lips gently parted. The King's eyes opened as his finely attuned senses realized they were not alone. With a grin he spoke silently to the older ellon. She is all yours, i Hîr nîn. Should I wake her?

Glorfindel shook his head No. Let her rest awhile longer. Is this...normal, Thranduil? You have more understanding of the body than I. I do not recall this rampant and random fatigue in Celebrían's two pregnancies. But for obvious reason, my experience with ellith and bearing children is very limited.

Thranduil frowned as he carefully wormed his way out from his hold on Nenni, laying her gently against the pillows without waking her. Then you are one pregnancy more knowledgeable than I, because I could only observe how her former self carried Legolas. There was none of this. It could not be more different. If you will forgive me for saying this, my intimate attentions were rarely if ever wanted, so long ago. They are wanted a great deal, now. Her moods last time were volatile from the start but her energy steady; now it is the opposite. Elrond assured me that this is all still normal, though less usual. I cannot help but think on the vision you shared with me, Glorfindel. I have a feeling, a guess, that Amaranthine will prove a force with which to be reckoned, with a strength of spirit far beyond that of Legolas. He laid his hand over her womb. Come here, my Lord. Feel.

The King guided Glorfindel's hand to exactly the correct place over her lower abdomen. In another four weeks, this will not be remotely the same. Amaranthine will begin to grow in earnest, and the womb will begin to expand beyond its current location deep in her pelvis. Look into my thoughts, if you wish, and see the child. I did not have this gift anywhere near as developed when she carried Legolas, and I confess I often look on in this manner. It is beautiful, a miracle.

As Glorfindel saw, his eyes widened in amazement. So very tiny, but even the little fingers were visible. His lashes moistened as he looked at Thranduil, and removed his hand. You are right, and I do not have words for this, he said in return.

Thranduil smiled as he rose and began to depart. Alas, I must attend to my obligations now. I take my leave of you, my Lord.

Thranduil, wait.

The King stopped and turned, obediently staying in place while Glorfindel approached him. It would be remiss of me not to offer you both praise, and encouragement. You have made a great deal of progress, and your present happiness has not gone unobserved by me. I will confess that I had some moments of concern, this morning, but you were quick to make amends.

Thranduil looked down sheepishly. It would be remiss of
*me* not to confess that I am not out of the proverbial woods yet, my Lord. Because the first realization of my error came not from considering my words to my wife, but from considering how you would view them. And...that is not how it should be.

Glorfindel embraced him. No, it is not. But you show courage to admit this, and a pure heart. Adonnneniel gave you little information by which to see your mistake; she was determined not to offer criticism out of her gratitude for your attentions. Yet if I may offer, it is still your tendency to expect that others act out of some kind of desire to oppose or thwart you. We can explore this together, but not now. I am proud of you, Thranduil. You are sincerely trying. I have noticed. And more importantly, so has your wife.

The King allowed himself another moment to linger in the comfort of that embrace, accepting the affirmation it provided before he withdrew with a smile. Off to the wars, he quipped, but with a sparkle in his eye. Turning, he departed with a sweep of his robes.

Glorfindel reflected on what he’d seen, and decided to have wine. Pouring a goblet and then seating himself, he enjoyed the view through the balcony doors. It was yet too early in the season for opening them at this hour, but spring would come very soon to the Greenwood. With a joyful heart, he thought on Amaranthine, and felt his heart surge at the blessings of his life. There had been so much sorrow, and strife, in all his long years. And even though more was to come, the hope and beauty of greeting a new elfling and the wonder of it filled him. When he fell to his death so long ago, could he ever have imagined a fraction of this? He blinked, staring down into his goblet, as his thought shifted uneasily to the conversation of early this morning. What am I to make of her?

From the faraway time of his life in Beleriand, he had always commanded authority; and it was such that none attempted to undermine him. From having been gifted with unusual physical, emotional and mental strength and great beauty, there was never a question of his ascendancy or his Lordship. He was Glorfindel, whole and sound and complete. But there were the little cracks. The tiny spaces; hollows that had formed slowly over thousands of years as he turned away from thoughts of family or forming close bonds with another. It was into these vulnerabilities she had unerringly drilled with astonishing accuracy, and yet she held this power lightly. As she holds all power, he noted ruefully. Someday, there would be a conversation with Lord Elrond. A snort escaped him, as he wondered just how much his friend had foreseen of his current circumstance. There was only a small doubt in his mind that far away, an Elflord was chuckling softly.

Nenni began to stir, feeling the strong and unwelcome combination of hunger and nausea. Thranduil was gone, which she knew would occur as he had obligations. Milk, she thought, even as she knew there was none. She tried to sit up, and felt the nausea increase markedly. I thought Elrond said this didn't happen. No baking soda, no drugs. It's official, I'm screwed. She tried to think of something, maybe a garden plant. There is mint, that might help. And in theory there is nothing on which to be sick, in my stomach. Little lamprey, you and I are going to have to have a discussion about this state of affairs. Your Naneth is becoming fed up.

"Iellig, you feel unwell?"

Her irritability was replaced by an uncharacteristic twinge of self-pity once she realized she was not alone; these surprise and unwelcome symptoms had become extremely tiring. I am afraid I will throw up.

He could feel her sensations in addition to her words, and moved swiftly toward her. Without asking, he returned her to sleep, looking on as she slumped back down to the mattress. With her distress eliminated for the moment, he frowned. This was not serious enough to warrant recalling her husband from his obligations, but was also beyond his ability to aid, aside from what he had
just done. Standing and walking to the sideboard, he rang for Galion, who appeared within seconds.

"My friend, the Queen is feeling unwell. Can I ask you to discreetly return with a Healer? She is sleeping now, but the problem is a significant nausea she has not had previously. It likely has to do with her pregnancy."

With a deep bow, the Steward left immediately. With a sigh, Glorfindel considered what to do. He did not wish to leave her alone, but if she did...vomit, there was nothing here. But...he glanced at the resting hound on the bed. "Beren." The animal raised his head at once. "She may need something from the garden, Beren. Can you bring me one of these?" The massive head tilted as the hound gained the image of what was wanted, and jumped off the bed to trot away. It had been ingenious, to modify the door latches so that the dog could open and close them at need. Soon enough, Beren returned, carefully bearing a very large bowl gourd in his mouth that had been hollowed out; the elf accepted it gratefully with much praise. Beren sniffed at his sleeping mistress and whined, before resuming his place. "I should arrange her a little better, perhaps. She will likely not be thrilled to wake and see a stranger here, but I cannot leave her unassisted for the hours it may take Thranduil to return."

There was not long to wait before Galion appeared, admitting Thaliel, and informing them that he was nearby if further services were needed. The elleth bowed her head quickly to Glorfindel, while moving to the bedside and raising an eyebrow to see the sleeping Queen. "She is nauseous?"

Thaliel asked with an amused smile, knowing that sleep largely eliminated that sensation.

"That is my doing", Glorfindel smiled. "The sleep, that is. It is a father's prerogative to not watch his daughter tormented with misery, if he can prevent it." The words were kind, but left no misunderstanding as to his intent.

"Of course, my Lord. I meant no offense. My sense of humor is not always as it should be. But I must speak with her, if I am to help." Her words were softer, more contrite now.

"I am sorry, Thaliel. I did not mean to speak so forcefully. I am guilty of being overprotective, where she is concerned."

"I do not fault you, my Lord" the elleth whispered, gently brushing a strand of copper hair from Nenni's face, before taking her hand to feel her pulse at the wrist.

Glorfindel's eyebrows arched briefly in surprise; he did not miss the emotion behind the gesture. These two had not seen each other for many days; the Queen's routines and the advent of the piano had diverted much of her time. He had diverted much of her time. "You would like her awakened?"

he asked for confirmation.

"Yes, please."

Moving to lay his hand on her, he slowly brought her out of her sleep, withdrawing once he saw the grimace of discomfort spread again over her face.

"My Queen, it is Thaliel, the healer. I am here to help you. Can you tell me what is wrong?"

Glorfindel admired the even and soothing quality of her musical voice.

Ada, you have to tell her for me that I feel like if I so much as move or speak I will begin retching. I feel much worse, now. A tear fell from one eye, at the effort being expended to breathe steadily and not allow that first reflex of gagging to begin; if that started, she would not be able to stop.
He could do better than that, and spoke. "Thaliel, I ask once again for your discretion. I can communicate by thought. If you will allow it, I can enable you to perceive what she feels; she says she feels so ill that she cannot speak to you without risking vomiting."

Surprised but phlegmatic, the elleth agreed. "Very well, my Lord." At the touch of Glorfindel's hand on her arm, images and sensations flared into her mind, for only a few seconds, but it was enough. "I see," she said, fascinated, immediately moving to the contents of her satchel. She had seen this many times...indeed, she knew it well herself. Her own two children were centuries past the age of majority, but nothing exactly erased the memory of some of the more difficult aspects of carrying an elfling. Her fingers raced to unstopper two bottles of oils. With great gentleness, a drop from each was applied to Nenni's upper lip and rubbed in. "Hiril vuin, these are some plant oils. The strong smell should help reduce the intensity of your nausea enough for me to administer other remedies. I promise you this will get better, but it will take us a little time." Turning back to Glorfindel she asked, "Has she eaten?"

"At the morning meal; tea, half a small pear, and the thinnest slices of cheese."

"In other words, next to nothing?" she asked with humor, as she reached to open yet another vial.

"Yes," Glorfindel smiled in response.

"My Lord, if I can ask it, I am going to give you a small amount of ground herbs. I believe there is a means here to heat water? I wish for a tea to be made of this, one cup's worth. It can be sweetened but only a little. I am going to apply ointments that will further reduce her nausea; the goal is to enable her to consume that tea along with a cordial that will control the symptoms completely." She handed him a small pouch with an expectant expression, and he took it from her with a nod. The candle warmer yet kept a vessel of water hot, over at the sideboard, and he moved to do as he was asked.

The smell of what seemed to simply be spearmint and peppermint made all the difference in the world. She still felt sick, but not at the ragged edge of tossing her proverbial cookies. After inhaling several times, very deeply, she whispered between still clenched teeth "Thank you." But she did not yet dare move her head, or her body. This was worse than sea-sickness, and she knew the value of being absolutely still. She felt Thaliel's hands moving her long and unbound hair back.

"I am going to apply another medicine to your chest and throat, Hiril vuin. Both for the aroma of it and its properties to further reduce your symptoms. If you reach a point at which you feel you can sit up more, or speak, tell me and I will assist you."

Nenni felt the laces at the front of her dress being tugged loose, allowing the garment underneath to be tucked down and out of the way further. Wondering what in Ennor, she soon felt the soothing fingers applying (was that ginger, of all things?) some kind of ointment. As the minutes wore on, she felt the horrible sensation begin to abate. First only a little, and then substantially. Finally, she felt she could speak with confidence.

"I think I can move now without the worst happening," she said softly. Glorfindel had returned, having prepared and lightly sweetened the concoction that he left under a saucer to keep hot. Tinivel indicated that she was to be moved higher up onto pillows that would allow her to be far more upright while still facing sideways; Glorfindel managed this easily.

As Thaliel kept working, Nenni did not try to refrain from gratefully staring at her. The elleth did not flinch from her gaze, but instead returned it with warm compassion, even reaching out to caress her cheek.
"What is wrong with me?" Nenni murmured. "I was told that ellith do not have this happen in pregnancy."

Thaliel's eyebrows arched. "May I ask who told you that, Hiril vuin?"

"Lord Elrond, of Imladris."

_Ah, Thaliel thought. Every elven healer in Ennor knew of the great Lord, and his blessed power and skills. But, he is an ellon, and the population of Imladris had ever been comparatively tiny against the other realms of their people._

"If I were to guess, Hiril vuin, there is a misunderstanding. All healers know of and honor the skills of the great Lord, and his gifts. But he is an ellon, and perhaps has only seen a handful of pregnancies under his care. We in the Healing Halls of Aran Thranduil here have seen hundreds, if not over a thousand. I have given birth to elflings myself, and I can assure you that your nausea is very much something that ellith can experience; I recall it well. Though, a great many do never suffer from this sickness. Do your best, to breathe as deeply as you can, Hiril vuin."

Seeing that Adonnenniel was being expertly cared for, Glorfindel withdrew to a chair.

As Thaliel continued to rub in more ointment, Nenni eventually felt the great majority of the nausea leave and gratefully stretched out on her back, sighing in relief. Seeing this, the Healer smiled. "May I touch your belly, Hiril vuin?" she asked.

"Of course," Nenni said, ruefully guessing that before this pregnancy was over, Thaliel would touch a great many things. The elleth's hand traveled down, feeling over her womb.

"When was the aur-en-onnad?" she asked.

"Echuir the seventh," Nenni answered.

"I can just barely feel her, but only because I have much practice. Soon enough, there will be no mistaking the swelling of your womb. Do you think you are ready to try drinking a tea?"

"I think so. And if I am wrong, I see that my Ada has thoughtfully procured insurance." Her eyes fell on the bowl gourd, which was an excellent precaution.

Glorfindel chuckled. "I will bring the tea. And you can thank Beren; he retrieved the gourd."

At the sound of his name, his head lifted up, and Thaliel inhaled sharply. In the forest colors of the bed coverings and the tangle of blankets, she had not noticed the hound, who blended in with...well, almost everything, honestly. Nenni quickly laid her hand on Thaliel's arm. "He is family to me, and will not harm you. Beren, this is my friend Thaliel. Say hello."

Perhaps only the Queen's surprisingly powerful lock on her arm kept her still. Everyone had caught sight of the Queen's hound at one time or another, but few had encountered him at anything but a significant distance. Thaliel's eyes widened as the dog basically crawled up onto the legs of his mistress and politely sniffed the hand that Nenni held out to him, then gave a very tender little lick and several wags. But then much to her surprise, the crawl continued until Beren was nose to nose with the startled Healer. After a few more sniffs, a second tender lick was left on Thaliel's cheek before he backed away and curled up again.

Nenni cleared her throat. "I hope I did not just terrify you. He likes you, very much. Very few have ever merited that kind of display."
Beren's tail thumped audibly.

Thaliel forced herself to relax. "I have never seen a dog that big and...you speak to him as though he can understand?"

"He is not ordinary. Beren does understand, every word. He has been changed and blessed, by a Vala. I guess you could say it is one of many things in my life that is a 'long story'." Nenni took the cup that was handed to her.

"Drink this very slowly," instructed Thaliel. "One sip, and then wait until I tell you to take another."

In between sips, there was plenty of time for Nenni to ask more questions. "From what you have said, this will happen again, won't it." It was a statement, not an inquiry.

"Unfortunately, it is very likely. Though, it usually disappears around the end of the second or third month; you may find that it is a brief experience. And when it occurs, more often than not it is earlier in the day, as you have seen. The tea, how is it to you? Neutral? Disagreeable?"

"Neutral. I wouldn't want to down a pot of it, but it isn't horrible, taken like this."

"You can make a choice. I can recommend that you take the tea on a regular schedule, to reduce the likelihood that you will find yourself in quite such bad straits a second time. Or, you can wait; watch to see if this is an isolated occurrence. That does happen, sometimes. There are as many experiences of pregnancy as their are ellith, unfortunately. There is no way to predict with absolute assurance what will happen next."

Nenni frowned. "I think I would like to ask the King his opinion, when he returns. But if this comes back, will you come to help me?" she asked. "There is actually a great deal I had wished to do with you, and have somehow been sidetracked."

Glorfindel had followed all of this. "Iellig, if how you feel and Thaliel's schedule allow for it, would you like to go into the forest today? You have already had much rest. I would be honored to escort both of you."

Nenni's hopeful expression did not go unnoticed by the Healer, who laughed. "My duties are officially concluded as of the mid day meal", Thaliel said. "I would be honored. I recall how this is; one goes from abject misery to just fine, and back again. It can truly be frustrating." She now placed a single drop of cordial into the remainder of the tea in the cup. "Drink the rest now, all at once unless you feel any twinges. Within the next quarter hour, you should have no further symptoms."

Nenni downed it successfully, not tasting...whatever it was. And she did feel better already, quarter of an hour or no. "I cannot thank you enough. Both of you. And...where do I meet you, and do we need horses?"

Thaliel considered. "Horses are not really needed, unless you very much wish to ride; I usually visit our plants on foot. To see all of them is perhaps three hours of easy walking?"

"Then it would suit you to meet at the rear gates, perhaps two bells after mealtime?"

"Yes," said Thaliel. "I am very glad, to see you feeling better, Hiril vuin. I will take my leave, and see you soon. My Lord," she said, with a final bow of her head to Glorfindel. She was swiftly gone.
"Do you know, Ada, this is the first time I have actually experienced a normal elven healer while still conscious? It was very interesting," she said, looking at him. "I am starving," she said plaintively.

"Then let us get you outside, where I will slice fruit for you and bring you nuts. Will that help, or would you like something from the kitchens?"

She bit her lip, indecisive. "Would you go to the kitchens with me? I feel like I very much want something hot, like soup. And then maybe after, an apple?" Looking down, she felt ridiculous. "I am sorry, for taking up your morning like this, but..." a sigh of exasperation escaped. "You know."

"Yes, I do know," he laughed. "And it is why I am here. I confess, if I had known a year ago that I would be learning in this manner about pregnancy, I would have laughed very hard at whoever did the telling. But it is a precious experience for me, iellig, and not a bother. Thranduil showed me Amaranthine this morning, while you slept." His voice became heavy with emotion. "I do not know if you can understand, what a miracle it is, for me as an unwed ellon to have this chance. That you would both welcome me as you have, and share this with me."

Nenni stood up, to embrace him. "You are our family, Ada, though we are still all adjusting to that reality. Of course we welcome you. She might not have come to be, without your guidance and gifts. I hope you realize that you have had your own contribution to this joy." Taking his arm, she checked her appearance. "Ugh I must at least run a comb through my hair, I cannot be seen like this."

"Havo dad, iellig, I will fetch it. You must be careful, that you are steady on your feet when you rise."

Amused, she sat again, and as he began to comb her hair tried to think if he had done this before.

"No," he chuckled. "I have not. But I suspect it is time I learned. Needless to say, I cannot do as your husband does."

"Who can?" said Nenni. Thranduil's ability with hair had officially reached legendary status in her mind. And all from an ellon who never braided his own flaxen mane. *Go figure.* "And you're right, any self-respecting *grandfather* must know how to braid hair."

Glorfindel frowned as the comb encountered a snag. "What is this word?"

"Our Sindarin tongue has no acceptable title for the parents of parents. Whereas my language from Earth does. It is a much easier to say. We say 'grandfather' to mean the father of one of the parents of a child. If it matters to say which parent, then we insert another word. And if I wanted to mention, for example, your father, I would say 'great-grandfather'. We keep adding the word 'great', *beleg*, as many times as necessary to indicate each generation."

"You are nothing if not creative, Adonnenniel. Though, what little experience I have with very young elflings has taught me that no matter what they are taught, they will come up with their own titles."

"True. Though I can only imagine what a young one will do with Adar Glorfindel. I probably don't want to know. Then again," she thought ruefully, "never mind what I did to it myself, prior to coming here and finding myself instantly with a brain full of Sindarin."

"What do you mean?" he asked, amused, as they left the chambers with her now orderly and shining hair.
She blushed, faintly. Not knowing the difference, and speaking English, she'd slaughtered almost all the names in the books. Pretty much only Galadriel had gotten anything resembling accuracy and even then, she hadn't known to roll the "r". Oh and Bilbo and Frodo; the Hobbits all pretty much escaped with their dignity intact as well. But the elves? Ai. "I didn't pronounce elven names properly, Ada. I didn't know how. Many of the sounds aren't used in English. Yours got mangled along with the rest."

He saw clearly enough what she meant, and chuckled. "There has been worse. Once, long ago in Gondolin, there was a wed couple of my house. They gave birth to a little ellon; a beautiful child even by elven standards. When he was first learning to speak, he called me G'o'd'hel, which in turn is a very old word for Elf that also means Gnome. More than a few then extrapolated that to something having to do with Dwarves, and I was teased rather relentlessly."

Nenni laughed. "I know it does not mean the same thing, but on Earth, the word 'gnome' was used to mean these little creatures that were believed to dwell in gardens. People made statues of them and...oh, never mind, it is all too silly. You have slain a balrog and I am telling you about garden decorations. Forgive me, Ada."

They had arrived finally at the relatively deserted kitchens, where their presence was unusual enough that they attracted bows and curtsies. They politely and graciously nodded and smiled in return, and hid at a corner table after Nenni filled a soup bowl. And that was when she recalled what today was, with a groan. Oh my...I was not going to allow myself to eat much, to not spoil my lunch. But today is our tea with Legolas. Good grief what is wrong with me, we'll just get done with Thaliel and have to race off to the next thing. My little episode has caused me to be completely forgetful. After the encounter with Lady Sadronniel, she was no longer willing to risk that she would not be overheard in a public place and refused to speak aloud.

We will manage. And it is my fault as well; I did not become ill, and I helped contribute to the poor planning. Though I cannot say I am sorry. You have waited long enough to have some time with her, for which I also am to blame.

She smiled into her soup. I love spending time with you, Ada. You know that.

Yes, but you should have friends who are female as well. And I confess, while I am not drawn to her as you are, I have just learned the value of having an elleth near you who is a healer and who has seen hundreds of experiences of pregnancy. I will be teasing Lord Elrond mercilessly about this sooner or later.

Ada, you cannot, she said, horrified. He was so kind, to answer all our questions.

Yes, but even he should be made aware that he does not know everything. No one does, iellig. And forgive me, but now I wonder what else he might not know about.

Now that he mentioned it, so did she, actually. Especially on the 'does labor and delivery hurt?' question...

You will not be allowed to suffer, Adonnenniel. Finishing her soup, she rose and cared for her utensils.

Are you sure it can be entirely helped? While I can guess it does not have to be the abject agony it is for humans, "some discomfort" seems hard to believe. Have you ever seen a child be born?

No, I have not.
She took his arm as they returned to her chambers.

Well, I have. And it is one of the most beautiful things anyone could possibly witness. But miracles aside, it is still squeezing something the size of a whoppingly huge eggplant out of a place in the body that ordinarily has far less width. And unless you are squeamish, you will see my point sooner or later.

What do you mean?

You do want to be there when she is born, do you not? She looked at him quizzically.

His eyes widened and he stopped walking. You would allow it?

Why wouldn’t I? She tilted her head, baffled.

Your privacy, the parts of your body in question...I am not your husband.

She rolled her eyes at him. Oh good grief, Ada, what exactly have you not already seen? I used to have a saying, ‘who hasn’t seen me naked?’ While I confess I would not appreciate you being present for the activity that created the child, this is birth. She is your grandchild. If Legolas wishes to be there, he will also be welcome. If for reasons of your own you prefer to decline, I respect that. But in my eyes you are as welcome as my husband and my son. Besides, what would you do if we were in some crazy circumstance and she began to arrive with only you to aid me? I think it is perhaps time you learn about reproductive physiology. There are wondrous details you cannot imagine, that all mammals share. And lucky you, I used to teach others how to assist in birth when other help is not available.

He was obviously stunned at this matter-of-fact barrage of pronouncements, so she nudged him onward. Truthfully, she wanted the apple now, too. Another bowl of soup would have been entirely possible but she cautioned herself to take it slowly; it would be truly unfortunate to see the nausea return. Chuckling just a little, she held his arm while he was lost in thought. On their return to the chambers, she sat him down on their couch. "Ada, are you like Thranduil? Do you have his kind of memory, his kind of ability to learn so easily and not forget?"

It was an interesting question, one he had never fully considered. "I would say, mostly? There is no question that Thranduil’s intelligence and skill at learning are astonishing. And yet I can do many of those things, just not to quite such an exceptional degree."

"Good enough. We were supposed to work in the garden today. Given that my taking ill eroded our original large block of time, will you indulge me? I find that I want to tell you about what we call the Life Sciences, the understanding of the function of living things. I thought that we could also ask now for a small meal to be served to us here; I would rather not have to waste the time on changes of clothing that eating in the Hall then going into the woods will require."

Shaking his head, it was clear to him that right now she was much like the wind; a force that was going to move along regardless. Today he would yield, though he wondered very much what he was in for. "As you wish it, iellig."

Nenni’s face lit up with happiness. "Would you go and change for this afternoon now, and I will do the same after I speak with Galion? Then we will not be interrupted."

Ten minutes later her black clothes were returned to her body, weapons tossed on the bed, as she began, leaning back against him so that he could keep his hand on her face to thereby gain the clearest images from her thoughts. "The basic unit of all living things is the cell, but you must first
understand that there are smaller structures yet, though they do not have life all on their own. There are molecules, and molecules are made of atoms. And this is where the study of the sciences diverge; chemistry, of which I spoke earlier, is technically considered to be a physical science. Though you will come to realize, the distinctions become very blurry because living things all rely on chemistry to function...."

As she spoke and showed him the foundations of this learning, his lips parted in wonder. This exquisite understanding to which he had never even given consideration flowed into his mind, and he had only the most profound gratitude for the treasure in his arms.
At the appointed time Nenni and Glorfindel came sweeping down the rear passages with Beren ambling along behind, arrayed as though an hour's sparring were on the docket far more than a walk in the woods. And yet such had been her life here that she wondered if the day would ever come when she passed these gates without her swords at her back; there was simply too much uncertainty in Eryn Galen. And yet, she guessed, Thaliel went out alone. What's that like? Nenni wondered ruefully, thinking of the sum of her encounters here. Nenni smiled broadly to see her pretty...friend? can I call her that yet? Looking ahead, she realized how determined she was to break down some of the pomposity that existed inside these walls. Though, she knew there was still such a thing as public and private decorum. You were the one that signed onto a monarchy, she reminded herself with a sigh.

"Hiril vuin, my Lord Glorfindel", Thaliel said while curtsying.

Nenni quickly offered her hand to the elleth. "Thaliel," she said softly as she raised her up. "We are looking forward to this very much". Glorfindel merely smiled and nodded, his head being still lost in mitochondria and endoplasmic reticulum. "You must forgive my Ada," she said very quietly once they were past the guards. "He is reflecting on some new learning that has greatly interested him."

Thaliel looked her up and down with a smile, not ever having seen the Queen in anything but gowns. "I had heard that you engage in combat; I see that this is true. And that I will not have to rely so much on stealth for this outing," she said with humor.

Nenni laughed. "Yes. Or at least, yes, before conceiving this child. The overall tenor of my circumstances are that I am to avoid fighting except as a last resort; that is in part why we are guarded by my Ada. But one never knows, so I carry my weapons. You, I would guess, go out alone into the woods?" Her words held more than a touch of envy.

"Yes. Though even I will admit, there have been times of late that have unnerved me. All of the Silvan elves are taught by their families at a very young age how to disappear, how to hide, how to escape detection. While I carry a knife, I lack your abilities; I rely on avoiding trouble in the first place."

"Would you tell me something of them? Your family, I mean. That sounds like an enviable skill set; I am hoping that while I cannot fight, I can impose on Legolas to teach me some of these things. At least, until I am hopelessly weighed down."

Thaliel laughed, like the tinkling of bells. Everything about her was so...dainty. "You have awhile, before it becomes that limiting. Though I will confess, that by the time you reach the halfway point, you will like as not be staying out of the treetops. My family, they are no longer on these shores. I am the only child of my parents; my father went to Mandos in the conflict that occurred near Erebor. As did my Mithdir. My mother sailed west seventy years ago, and my daughter and
son accompanied her."

"I am so sorry," Nenni said. "You remained?" It seemed baffling, that Thaliel was still here if everyone she loved had departed to Aman, especially after such a grievous loss.

Thaliel smiled. "There are not as many Healers as one would think. It is well enough, when matters are in a watchful peace. But in times of conflict...every Healer that leaves is a loss to our people. My heart tells me that a time will come, in which I can join my family with a clear conscience. But it is my belief that my service here is yet needed, and so I remain."

"I thank you. As would the King, were he here to listen. It is unselfish, what you are doing, and I am grateful to you." Glancing around, she saw that Glorfindel had chosen to linger back, perhaps to give them a sense of privacy. Beren, on the other hand, swept the woods ahead of them, criss-crossing. It would be difficult to have better protection, she noted. Though, she did not like the stillness of the woods. And yet they had been talking aloud, however softly.

They continued to converse, though a sense of unease grew within Nenni. She listened as Thaliel talked, but kept on ear out. From time to time she would look back, to see Glorfindel still following. Finally they arrived at the first patch of plants.

"This is Sweet Flag, one used to make a cordial for pain," Thaliel said. "It is yet early for all of these plants; the growing season comes later. But I make the rounds, to ensure their health and keep an eye on them."

Nenni frowned. "Would it not make it easier if the plants were moved to the Halls? I have coordinated somewhat with Galasríniel to establish a collection of the more important ones, but...how many locations like this do you visit?"

Thaliel tilted her head. "Perhaps a dozen. These specimens are valuable, for they are used to make cordials for both pain and the treatment of poisons. It would make it easier if there was a place to maintain them, but no such place exists. Galasríniel is very skilled but has..." she trailed off, suddenly reluctant to speak.

"Has what?" Nenni asked. When she yet hesitated to answer, Nenni spoke kindly. "Thaliel, I am not going to reveal anything you tell me to another. Nor would I try to cause you problems, so to speak. I would not betray your trust."

Thaliel looked at her carefully, but then lowered and shook her head. "I am being silly, given that you could simply command me to tell you and I would have no choice. Galasríniel has far less knowledge of or interest in medicinal plants; her skills lean more along a spiritual plane, for lack of better words. But I do not wish to sound disrespectful of her; she is a dedicated healer with great ability. We have different approaches, one might say."

"Ah." Nenni looked at Thaliel, then back down at the plants. Not understanding the nature of today's outing, she had not brought her collection pouch. And yet the Healer had some manner of satchel with her. She bit her lip. Thranduil had agreed with her, that the garden should be kept private. But Glorfindel had come, and now he knew and then some. And now she was finding out that someone she cared for was risking her safety to come here, alone, when this was all entirely avoidable. Would any elf sense the power under the garden, or was it hidden from most? She recalled too Lord Elrond's counsel, and did not know how much she could afford to reveal.

"Thaliel, there is a way to have these plants in the Halls. A way to maintain them. I cannot in good conscience know that you are coming out here, with the darkening of these woods, when an alternative exists that ensures your safety."
"I do not understand, Hiril vuin."

Nenni sighed. "Do you...know about me? And plants?"

"I have heard some interesting things that I assumed to be rumors. I try very hard, to avoid the hearsay and gossip that travels the Palace, my Queen. All the Healers do, for such talk is destructive to the spirit and therefore runs against our calling. But even so, stories reach my ears. And all of us witnessed the night Aran Thranduil made you Queen. You did...something; those flowers grew in your hands."

Gray eyes bored into green ones. "I think, I hope, I can be assured of your discretion?" she asked. Nenni's shoulders sagged. "I do not want to have to issue orders to you, Thaliel, but I am obligated to be careful."

To her surprise, the Healer took her hand. "I would not betray your confidence either. And not just because you are my Queen."

Smiling, Nenni nodded. "Then, like as not, the rumors were true." As she looked down at their entwined hands, the ever-present tendril of ivy grew to encircle Thaliel's wrist as well. The smaller elleth did not see it at first, but felt when it touched her skin. Her eyes widened as it snaked around her wrist. "I have an unusual gift", she said softly, "and it goes far beyond what has been seen and heard." Just as quickly, parts of the tendril fell away, leaving Thaliel with only a bracelet of ivy. Nenni released her hand. "We will take a small amount of each plant from the forest, today. From them, I can provide you with barrels' full, if that is your wish."

Thaliel looked up at her, being about two inches shorter. "Is anything having to do with you ordinary?" she asked with a twisted smile.

Nenni snorted. "I doubt it. But if you notice something, tell me, it would make me feel better." No sooner had the words escaped, when Nenni seemed to realize that she'd been terribly forward at the same time Thaliel recognized she had just said something wholly inappropriate to her ruler. Each looked at the other with wide eyes filled with longing, perceiving the futility of continuing to pretend. Hesitantly, Nenni opened her arms with a gesture of welcome, offering. A moment later, Thaliel's arms encircled her ribs and they were both giggling as they held each other, their foreheads touching before their grip on each other tightened. Waves of emotion rolled over her, as she felt like a part of her that had been missing was now in her arms. And this sentiment was so obviously being experienced by Thaliel as well, as their heads buried in each other's necks. Good grief, she thought, feeling both silly and possessive even as she did not wish to let go.

"Valar be praised, that's over with," murmured Thaliel, who nestled against her.

"Agreed," whispered Nenni, reluctantly releasing her before she managed to crush her with hugs. Her mirth returned. "Now snap off a suitable piece of this Sweet Flag, and show me the next plant," she teased.

"Right away, my Queen," Thaliel dished back with a smirk. Both of their eyes were shining with happiness. They walked on, arms linked at the elbows. "I do not entirely understand my feelings," the elleth said, as she leaned her head against Nenni's taller frame."

"Nor do I," said Nenni, "but both my husband and my Ada seem to act as though this...happens. This overwhelmed me the first moment I beheld you...I am only grateful to find that you share my experience."

After they'd reached the tenth location, Nenni raised her eyebrows. "Mushrooms? I'll be honest,
"I've never fiddled with those." She bit her lip. "I have only one place that they might work. Grow, I mean. But...they are not quite like other plants...I know that what is here is only the tip of a larger organism...without exactly the conditions they want, I'm not sure I can do this."

"They are not just any mushroom," Thaliel frowned. "They can help against spider venom, and are therefore very important."

"Bring one, then, and I will try. I just cannot make guarantees, with these." Thaliel bent down to look for a suitable sample, and that was when a tremendous sense of unease flooded over Nenni. Not two seconds later, she heard Beren's booming bark a short distance off. Not a bay, but a bark. Reflexively, she drew her swords and on account of the bark, looked up. With an icy chill to her voice, she spoke quickly. "Thaliel, draw your knife and stay behind me. On no account are you to run." Ada, spiders, was all she had time to send. There were only two, dropping swiftly from above, and before Thaliel had her knife in her hand one was already dead with a blade in its eyes. The other came chittering at them but it too was swiftly killed, having lost the element of surprise. Glorfindel was there in seconds, his blade drawn, but it was seconds that would have been too late. "There may be more, Ada. We must keep an eye to the trees."

"What we must is leave and return, now." He was becoming filled with wrath, and Thaliel quailed in fear at the sight of his anger.

As this was obviously going to have only one outcome, in her mind she hollered Beren, come. "Come," said Nenni aloud to Thaliel, raising her up. The elleth had her knife out, and had been in a crouch; it had all happened so fast and she was badly startled. Though, the sight of Nenni so easily and masterfully protecting both of them awed her. "Keep your knife out, Thaliel. You are safe, I promise you. Neither of us would let anything happen to you," she said soothingly. Ada, your emotion is frightening her. I do not believe there are many more, if any. We will do as you command. Please, it is the forest. Spiders happen.

The ancient elf looked at the Healer, and saw her growing intimidation as she looked at him. Lowering his gaze, his shoulders dropped a little, as he mastered himself. "Thaliel," he said in a much softer tone of voice, "I am sorry for the heat of my words, and my expression. I am upset at having failed to notice them, and that my daughter needed to draw her weapons. I would never offer you harm, and my emotions were not directed in any way at either of you."

Nodding, Thaliel breathed deeply. "Thank you, my Lord. But, no one could have noticed. It is why we are seeing more injuries from stings, of late. They have begun to behave differently; there always used to be nests, far more discernible groups of them. Now we hear more and more of exactly as just happened; one to three of them in a place no one could have anticipated, and our patrols are being stung." She added ruefully, "it would seem that my venturing here alone has become unwise indeed."

Nenni decided to press the advantage. "Thaliel, how many more locations are left?"

"Only one, Hiril vuin."

With pleading in her eyes, she looked at her Ada. "We will do as you wish, but could we not complete our purpose for today? Then there would be no need to make a second excursion."

He sighed. Even he could see the logic and yet... Turning to the Healer, he inquired bluntly, "Is this last location further into the forest, or on the way back to the Halls?"

"More the latter than the former, my Lord. My path takes me in a wide circle; our destination would be somewhat outside of a direct line of return, but only by a little."
"Very well, then," Glorfindel said reluctantly. "But I would ask that we move as silently and as swiftly as possible; we will stay close together. He ordered Thaliel to lead with Nenni, while he and Beren vigilantly stayed on their heels. All of them paid far greater mind to the limbs above them.

They did not speak any longer, as they completed their errand and returned to the Halls. When they were near to but still out of sight of the Gates, Nenni stopped and turned to Thaliel. "I will care for all of the plants, and will see you as soon as I may." She had yearning, in her eyes, and then sighed. "Thaliel, do you agree it would be wiser for now to keep private our...I am not sure what to call this...attachment? I only need a little time to work out how we may interact without either of us becoming fodder for gossip. I am not ready yet to face that, nor to drag you into it as well. I would protect both of us, or at least make the attempt."

Thaliel took Nenni's hands, nodding shyly. "Though I have heard of this immediate and powerful connection between two companions; it has never happened to me before. But I felt it too, from the first moment you came to the Healer's Halls. And here we are, my Queen."

Nenni laughed, lacing her fingers into those of her friend. "That sums it up nicely, does it not? I hope you know, that when we are in private or with my family, which I suspect soon enough will become family to you as well, you need not use titles. You know my name, and some call me Nenni. You may choose to call me what you wish."

"Aran Thranduil...will not object to me?" she asked hesitantly. "I am no one, Hiril vuin; I am one of the commonest of Silvan elves."

That she said this, that she accepted this, stabbed Nenni to the heart. If she had felt like she was wavering in her determination to do something about the steaming pile of manure that was the social fabric of this Realm, those words hardened her resolve into diamonds. In spite of the feelings inside of her, she forced herself to answer carefully. Hugging Thaliel to her, she answered softly. "You are not common, and you most certainly are not common to me. My husband already knows, and accepts you. And you should know that neither of us in any way view any elf in this Realm as being of greater or lesser worth than another. We would give the last of ourselves to defend any of you. There is much you and I do not yet know about each other, but we will learn."

Nenni brushed a stray strand of hair away from Thaliel's cheek, who stood up on her toes to kiss her Queen's forehead, and released her. The trust in those emerald eyes, as the Healer nodded and smiled, almost stole her breath away. "Should you have any need of me, you are to send word through Galion that the work I requested for you to do is completed, and I will come to you. Otherwise, my scheming will be worked out very soon," she said with a grin.

An equal smirk of mischief looked back at her as they both said in unison, "Perfect." Thaliel handed over her satchel and they returned through the Gates and parted ways as the distant chiming of the clock told that there was one hour before they were to meet Legolas. Taking Glorfindel's arm, they walked without speaking aloud.

Well that seemed to go well, he gently teased.

Yes, in one very obvious respect. But Ada, I am not pleased that as Queen of this Realm, that I had to find out about the changes in spider behavior because first, one almost dropped on me and second, that my Healer friend knew more of this new development than I. In fact, were it not for the cloudlike haze of positive emotions lingering over my mind, it is safe to say that I would be halfway to livid just now. As in, do you recall the look on your face when it happened? About like that. I may be pregnant, and I may be struggling with physical difficulties, but I will not be disInformed like this, ever again.
Glorfindel's eyes widened in surprise. He opened his mouth to speak but then stopped. She was correct. It was her place and her right to know of these matters; she was not just any ordinary elleth of the Realm. And yet..."If I may offer a word of advice, iellig? It is the same counsel I gave your husband earlier today. Do not assume bad motive where none may exist. You have every right to demand to be better informed...but that demand might be easier heard, if it were spoken with your emotions mastered.

She did not respond until they arrived at her chambers, up the rear entrance. "You are wise, as always," Nenni replied. "I will wait, to say anything. Besides, I do not anticipate seeing my husband until after our engagement with Legolas."

"Will you tell him? Tell Legolas about Thaliel, I mean."

"Yes. If I am to attempt this grand scheme of mine, Legolas will be among my closest of allies. And if I cannot be open with my own family with the details of my heart, who can I trust? I meant what I said, Ada; I would see her protected from what will surely befall her if this were to be known by the wrong people here. She is a lovely person, sacrificing to care for others. I will not stand for that kind of a person to be abused, even were she not an object of my heart's affection."

"I heard, because you allowed me to. And I do not disagree. Iellig, I never answered you earlier, when you tried to talk to me about this some days ago. Though it will indeed be a difficult endeavor, it is a worthy one. I will help you where I can, though you must recognize that as an 'outsider' my influence is limited."

Nenni tilted her head, as she began to strip off her weapons and unbuckle what armor she wore. "It is and it isn't. You are an interesting case. While it is true that you are not...of this Realm in the usual sense of the word, I am not sure it matters. Your reputation is...you are revered by all. You are acknowledged as a Lord by all, even though here you technically rule nothing; I would be astonished to find anyone who would naysay you, from the lowliest guard to one of Thranduil's generals. I believe your opinion matters far more than you think," she concluded. "And yet that is precisely why I mean to leave you waiting in the background, as I explore all of this. And today is the first of many steps in that exploration, but we will speak enough of this later on. Would you like to help me with the plants, or would you like some time to yourself? You could come and get me when we should leave?"

"I think the latter option. I will return here about ten minutes before four, and leave you to your plants," he said with a twinkle in his eye as he kissed her on the forehead in parting.

Nenni, realizing that if she dealt with the plants quickly she could actually have that bath she'd been lusting after since the wee hours of this morning, raced off to the garden and soon managed to enter the perfectly warm water after pinning her hair up. "Sweet baby Jesus," she muttered, as she lowered her body into the exquisitely warm water after pinning her hair up. For whatever reason, she hadn't been in this pool nearly enough since returning home from Imladris, nor could she exactly say why. But she was in it now, luxuriating in the water, kicking her feet lazily as she leaned back against the edge. Leaning back, she thought about the afternoon with a happy sigh, keeping her thoughts for herself. And she laughed, speaking aloud to the empty room. "On Earth we would have called this a ‘bromance’,", she mused. "But what in hell is it when we’re both girls? Ellith? Whatever...female. Nothing else is exactly going to have the same ring but, same idea, I guess. It’s another kind of love and...to think that I might finally have a real friend here who is not male. I love my family, every one of them, but...it isn’t the same. I think you need to have the same equipment sometimes, to truly appreciate each other.” Each hand grabbed one of her breasts, in emphasis. “Girls.” She laughed, before sobering. “So beautiful, and delicate she is; and those eyes. Valar, I will care for her as best I can. And I am going to find a way, no matter what it takes, so
that no one in this Realm ever says, ever thinks, ‘I am utterly common, ordinary.’"

She was only getting started, on her soapbox monologue. "How dare these people? How dare one elf ever say or do something that makes another one feel like they are somehow second-rate? As if any of the Children of Eru do not matter? Ada, and Thranduil; they really are truly great, and would never in all eternity speak in such a way. I hope I never overhear something like this. I really do not know what will happen but it might make any of Thranduil’s old rages pale in comparison. These people only think they’ve seen an angry monarch.” At the mere thought of it, her ire rose until she forced herself to calm down. With a sigh, she reached for the cleansers, and found her favorites of lavender and peppermint. It was sensual to rub these all over and...later, she told herself. She would save this desire for her husband, though even the causal consideration of his body left her aching. Heaving one last sigh, she rinsed herself. “Now go pretend you are a responsible adult,” she chided herself.

Legolas was going to effort to prepare something nice for her, so she reasoned that the least she could do is primp a little. She chose one of her loveliest gowns, and combed out her hair carefully. While she could not do what Thranduil did, she still knew how to place elegant twists in either side of it. She looked at herself in the mirror, and then smirked. Why not go all out? she thought. It is a special occasion, the first invitation to my son’s quarters. Digging out the box, she lifted up the Necklace of Girion, and with only a full minute’s struggle was able to manage the clasp. Flushing with pleasure, she remembered the first time she’d worn it, and how Thranduil had made love to her while she had on this, and only this. Shaking her head lightly, she forced her thoughts back to the present. Adding her diadem, as it matched the green jewels better than her crown, she looked at herself. What impostors we all are, she thought. Sparkly stuff and beautiful clothes, and yet at the end of the day we still all eat, sleep and use the toilet. If more would just keep that in mind, how much simpler it would all be. With one last self-deprecating smirk, she exited her chamber and almost ran into Glorfindel.

“I am sorry, Ada,” she laughed. “What a klutz I am!”

It was only then that she caught the look on his face, at the sight of her. His eyes were wide and his lips parted. He moved his mouth as if to speak, but nothing came out. For a moment, anyway. “Iellig, you are beautiful,” he whispered.

Nenni giggled even as she tilted her head at him. “Ada, it is only pretty rocks. Just remember me as I was the day when we had the mud fight. That is the real me. However, how do you like my battle gear?” she asked with a flourish of her arm. “One of the many issues I go forth to conquer is a tendency to dwell on materialism and value the minerals in the earth, fabrics, and hairstyles above our own ellith and ellyn. As if any here have more of these things than our King, who has his priorities in order far more than some whose minds I wish to change.”

Glorfindel still could not believe his eyes. “I have seen wealth, and the beauty of ellith. But not like this.”

“Pffft,” she said. “This is nothing. Ask Thranduil to show you his vault sometime. I think half a dragon’s hoard is in there. Shall we? And, you look lovely, Ada. Had I your beauty, I would not bother with the necklace.”

Collecting his sentiments, and smiling in spite of himself at the flattery, he offered her his arm. As he led her down the passageway, a bit of a dream come true happened. An elleth she’d not seen before, but who was obviously one of them, came suddenly round a turn in the passage. Everything about her bearing and appearance screamed of vanity and ego, but at the moment she was distracted, and looking down.
"Ah-ah!", was what came out of Nenni, whose face held a kind smile, since the Sinda did not seem to notice that she was on a collision course with the two of them. The glare and sneer on the elleth's face would have taken her breath away had she not been in a frame of mind to anticipate just about anything. Not skipping a beat, she spoke again. "I am sorry to startle you, but felt it was better than us smacking into each other," she said with humor in her voice.

It was quite possibly the fastest she had ever seen a scowl transform in her life, as astonishment coupled with something like fear at the sight of the resplendent Queen and the most famed warrior yet in Ennor not two feet from her. Immediately she dropped into a curtsy. "Bereth Adonnenniel, i Hir nîn Glorfindel," came out in an odd, simpering tone of voice that almost had a croak to it. It could not be...

"Please forgive me, for not knowing your name, my Lady. You have me at a disadvantage," she hinted kindly.

"Lady Faelyn, Hiril vuin," she said in the same odd and hoarse voice.

Nenni beamed. "Then I have at least had the honor of meeting your husband, and now the good fortune of meeting you. It was our pleasure; I hope you will excuse us. I wish you a good afternoon and we take our leave of you," she said smoothly with a bob of her head. The elleth stared in wide-eyed envy at the jewels in front of her face, as they moved past her along the passage. When they had advanced far enough, she allowed herself the thought. I believe I have just completed my homework.

Homework? Glorfindel's merry eyes gazed down on her.

Legolas informed me that there are four ellith of unfavorable reputation who earned unfortunate nicknames. And that this piece of information was not to ever come up anywhere near my husband's brainwaves. They are apparently dubbed The Grackle, The Screech Owl, the Cuckoo and the Old Crow, respectively. Unless I am much mistaken, I have just identified the last of them.

Oh, dear.

Exactly, Ada.

Well, I imagine you are about to find out. We have arrived.

Glorfindel knocked on the door, that looked like any other door.

How did you know where he lives? She'd been incredibly curious about this but had managed to not ask.

Though he was tempted to tease her, he refrained. Mostly. "It was very simple. He and I encountered each other late one night as I walked and explored, and I was invited to share some wine. Not much of a conspiracy, was it?"

She was unable to successfully glare at him, so she elbowed him lightly instead. The door opened with a smiling Legolas whose face immediately transformed to one of open astonishment. "Naneth!" he gasped, overwhelmed at her appearance. "Come in, please, both of you. Glorfindel, welcome." Closing the door behind him, he swiftly moved in front of her once again with catlike grace to look at her, his eyes wide. "Naneth, you are always beautiful in my eyes, but this..." he whispered.

Nenni laughed merrily at him. "You did not think I would celebrate my first invitation to my son's home dressed in my work garb, did you Ionneg?" She hugged him close to her, relishing the feel of
his lithe strength. Is it normal, she wondered, to feel so proud of someone, each and every time I see them? Maternal feelings were still something shrouded in mystery, to her.

Yes, it is, iellig. Turning her head, she saw Glorfindel's warm eyes, full of love, gazing at her and could not entirely help the flush of pleasure that moved through her at his words. She reached for his hand and held it tightly, while she looked around. Legolas' chambers looked very different than their own; it made her realize how relatively unadorned their quarters were. For someone who enjoyed such elaborate dress, her husband had simple tastes in furnishing...which was fine with her. She'd never really had much of an opinion on such things, possibly from having lived in so many different places that were not really her own. The farm had not exactly left her in a position to engage in interior decorating, and what few attempts she'd made had been dismantled by the bevy of pets that had overrun the place.

The walls were hung with lovely fabrics, in assorted shades of green, and there were far more decorative objects like vases, bowls, small paintings and the like, and Nenni smiled to see it. Legolas beamed at her. "You look extra happy today, Naneth. I am afraid my humble tea will not match your expectations."

"That is not the reason, Legolas," Glorfindel said with mirth. "Your Naneth has had quite an experience today; she has confirmed her gwaedh with another."

"There is a word for it?" Nenni asked, taken aback. "I mean, I know what that means but..."

"You are all the worst!" exclaimed Legolas. "Of course there is a word for it, but who cares about that? Who is it, Naneth? Who is she? Do not be like my Adar, always tormenting me!"

"I am not..." Nenni stammered.

Glorfindel smoothly interceded. "She does not know of this as you or I do, Legolas. Your Naneth is not teasing you; this is very new to her. And very sensitive. You must promise to keep her confidence, until she is ready to have this be known outside of her family.

"I promise, and I promise I will go mad if you do not tell me without more delay," said the Prince, who had now moved to hold onto his mother's waist, as if afraid she would try to flee the room before he could learn what he wished.

"Thaliel," said Nenni, still trying to process what she'd just learned. "Thaliel, the Healer."

"The very dainty elleth, with the emerald green eyes?"

Nenni nodded, blushing.

"Naneth, I am so happy for you," he said, eyes full of sincerity, hugging her to him.

Nenni returned his embrace, feeling even happier, if that was possible. "Now it is my turn. Will you two please explain to me? Ada, you did not say all of this, when last we spoke about Thaliel and...what I felt."

Legolas kept his hands on her waist, guided her to the next room. "I for one would be glad to, but this is hungry work. Come, your tea awaits, my Queen," he said mirthfully. She cast a helpless look back at Glorfindel, who chuckled as he followed her. Expertly maneuvered into the next chamber, the sight greeting her eyes took her breath away. It was something out of a magazine photograph of what a very fancy restaurant would have offered for High Tea. His table was covered with a rich wine-colored cloth and trays were piled with dainty cakes, cutout sandwiches, tiny tarts, sliced
fruits and what she could swear resembled miniature quiches. Other bowls held fruit preserves (how were they doing that, without cane sugar?), clotted cream, and yet other vessels held sprigs of greenery and flowers...the display was simply overwhelming.

"Ionneg...." she whispered. "You did all this for me?"

"Technically, Galion and the kitchen staff did all this for you, and it is possible that I prevailed on Lord Glorfindel to acquire some greenery and blossoms," he smirked, as he leaned down to kiss her cheek. "Please, sit." He held out a chair for her and nudged her toward it; her eyes were still almost unseeing in disbelief at the obvious effort involved in what was in front of her.

Nenni spoke, though to whom was unclear. "Do you know, it is becoming one of my biggest mental fantasies, to sneak into the kitchens in the small hours of the morning, in order to cook a lovely treat for only the kitchen staff, and Galion and Tinivel, and order every one of them to sit at a table and enjoy it, while I serve them, in thanks for all that they have done for us? Every week, Legolas, I make some attempt to get Galion to have an ordinary conversation with me. Long ago I invited him to have a cup of tea with me," she said, shaking her head ruefully. "How naive I was, in the beginning."

Legolas looked on her with sympathy, as he poured tea for both her and Glorfindel, caring for his own cup last. He'd had no trouble convincing the golden elf by merely a gesture to begin filling his plate with the tempting treats. "So your ultimate plans include overturning the monarchy," he joked. "I, for one, would not complain in the least, but your work is more than cut out for you."

"No," she said, admiring the silken strands of his fair hair that cascaded forward as he leaned over. "I understand. I really do...else I would not lower myself before your Adar at every meal. It is far more than that he claims the title; he genuinely deserves the reverence and trappings of his office."

Most of the time, she heard pointedly intrude into her thoughts.

"We are none of us perfect, Ada," she fired back with equal emphasis, before continuing. "But I equally believe it is wrong that most of this Realm seems to think that anything on two legs with blonde hair is somehow so lofty that they have no right to set those formalities aside on occasion, and interact as equal children of Eru. Or copper hair," she added as an afterthought, frowning at her own locks. "You know exactly what I mean. I heard something today that almost broke my heart, from Thaliel. She was fully prepared to expect that Thranduil would reject her presence in my life on account of her being Silvan. 'Nobody. The commonest of Silvan elves,' was what she said about herself. And that she so obviously believed it, when to me no one could be more...perfect." She had to catch herself, as tears were pooling in her eyes.

"Naneth, do not be distressed," Legolas said, reaching to take her hand, unprepared for the strength of her feelings about this topic. "I have faith that we will find a way."

His words were closely followed by those of Glorfindel. "He speaks truly, iellig," he said, pouring all the calming he could into his speech. "Do not let these thoughts take away from this joyful day," he soothed.

Nenni huffed a sigh. "I know what you are doing, Ada," she said, the smile returning to her face. "As you equally know that I cannot withstand your gifts."

"Good," Glorfindel quipped, grinning as he bit into a tart. "These are wonderful!" he exclaimed. "Iellig, you must focus on the business of eating, or I will become cross with you," he teased.

She snorted, and turned her attention to the repast in front of her. "I guess it would not do, to waste
"Thaliel's efforts of this morning," she admitted, as she enthusiastically heaped a selection onto her plate.

Seeing that she had an appetite after all, Legolas' face broke into a smile, leaving Glorfindel to relate the assorted happenings of her morning while she proceeded to devour what was before her and return for more.

"I am happier than ever, that Thaliel is the one chosen for you, Naneth."

"Chosen for me?" echoed Nenni in confusion.

"It is how we have always thought of the gwaedh, iellig," Glorfindel explained. "As long as our race has existed, it has been known that there exists a chance of meeting another with whom there will be a special attachment, but not one who can be taken as a mate in marriage. It is one with whom there will be a bond of great strength, i 'waedh, and always of the same gender. When two such ones meet, the draw to each other is overpowering, and will almost always lead to a declaration of mutual feelings in short order. At the moment this happens, when both acknowledge their tie, the bond is complete. We have always imagined that this is another gift of Eru to his children, just as is the gift of marriage. For it certainly seems that our hearts are drawn to each other in ways that defy logic," he trailed off.

Legolas regarded the golden elf with awe, and wondered if he dared risk the query. "My Lord, you speak as though you have been blessed with this gift yourself, though I fear I am asking too personal of a question."

Glorfindel looked up, smiling. "As with many things about me, I would not wish this known to all. But you are my chosen family. Yes, I have my gwedeir. He is Ecthelion of Gondolin, Lord of the House of the Fountain. Strong, raven-haired, fair beyond imagining, and now dwelling in Aman. A day will come, when I will be with him again, but I am content to know that he lives now in safety, honored for his sacrifice."

Silence fell over the table. Her impulse was to ask him why he had not spoken of this to her, but she felt she already knew the answer. He did not wish to impose his experience over the joy of her own discovery. He had reassured her, set her mind at ease, and then left her path open to her, uninfluenced by this knowledge. The barest hint of a nod from him, as she met his eyes confirmed her guess. We will speak of this at another time, I promise you, she heard, and smiled at him to give her thanks.

"I am guessing from what is being said that this is not...common, that not everyone finds this connection? And that it happens only once?" She still felt determined to understand as fully as possible.

"It is not common" said Glorfindel, after he had swallowed enough food to render speech possible. "Some find it quickly, others never do. And while I do not know with full certainty, I have not ever heard of this happening twice to someone."

"What does it feel like, Naneth?" Legolas asked, sipping at his tea, cautiously hopeful of receiving an answer. There were so very many things he yearned to know about others, how they experienced life; and while his father was trying very hard to be more open, he could sense right away that the two seated with him might teach him far more.

That is a hard one, as I am still trying to find words for that myself, she thought, before speaking aloud. "I will try to answer, but the emotions are very complex. That it is a form of love, there is no doubt. There is a desire to share chaste affection. To protect her from harm of any kind, to care for
her, to learn of her and spend time with her; all those are quite strong. But...I do not think the feelings run to the same depths as what I feel for your Adar. And in some ways, the feelings I bear toward Ada are the same except...I love Ada because of what experiences we have shared, the trust we have built with each other, what I know of him. Yet I did not simply lay eyes on him at first sight and feel these things. The attachment formed over time, whereas with Thaliel this onslaught of strong attraction was fully present for no discernible reason. And the moment of finally being assured that my feelings were reciprocated...I have to confess that was wonderful."

Legolas nodded, smiling. "Thank you, both of you, for sharing with me so honestly. You speak so easily about emotions, compared to Adar. And I want you to know, I fully accept Thaliel. As I recall, she lost a great deal; all her loved ones left her in one manner or another. It does my heart good to know that she will have you when she has given up so much else to remain here."

"You knew?" Nenni asked, curious.

"I did," he said, his eyes suddenly filling with regret. "Both her father and Mithdîr were soldiers under my command. Archers of great skill, both of them were, but they were both taken by the siege engines of the enemy, crushed in an instant by a great boulder as they stood together defending the walls of Dale," he said softly and with obvious pain. "That they did not suffer, is the small consolation I was able to give her and her family, as it fell to me to tell them of their loss."

Perhaps nothing spoke more of her shifting perceptions in her time as one of the Eldar, that hearing this painful revelation did not grip her heart with despair. First and foremost was the understanding that they were not gone, but...elsewhere. Blinking, she realized from his words what eventualty would befall her, too. How many dozens, hundreds...thousands? of those duties would be hers? And yet for the promise that it would all be for the very last time...she sighed, her thoughts returning to the present. "I am so sorry, Ionneg. For all of it."

He shrugged. "I learned long ago not to dwell on these memories, these thoughts. It is necessary; an unfortunate reality. You cannot dwell on it either, Naneth. It will drive you mad, if you do."

Nenni nodded, gazing down at the little sandwiches on her plate. "I know," she said softly. "On Earth we had a saying, 'been there, done that.' I do not intend to make the mistake twice."

Legolas looked up sharply, only to hear Glorfindel in his head. No. Do not ask. Not today. I give you my word, I will explain later. Change the conversation to something different, please."

As it turned out, he did not need to. Nenni looked up, smiling. "I think I have met the Old Crow, Ionneg. We passed Lady Faelyn in the passageways. Before she realized who we were, she bore a visage that could curdle fresh milk. Am I correct?"

Breaking into laughter, he nodded. "Congratulations, Naneth. And since you did not wish me to tell you the identity of The Screech at our previous meal, that was Lady Penlor."

"So...all the names I am hearing are those of generals and counselors close to the King. Is this a universal trend?"

"Not all those who have risen to the top in my Adar's service are Sindar," he explained. "But all the ellith that are the force behind what we will kindly refer to as "The Problem" are the wives of Sindar who hold the highest stations possible short of being members of our family. My father has ever held merit over wealth; the ellyn who serve him are loyal and capable. To be honest, I would guess that even they turn a blind eye to the antics of their ellith; you have met all of them, and have seen for yourself that they are serious and dutiful."
"Well how deep does it run, then? Are there a large group of ellith that all behave thus?"

Legolas thought carefully before he answered. "The four ellith with nicknames are what I would call the ringleaders. They have wealth, and the position of their husbands gives them perceived influence and prestige. There are others of close to the same social station that are what I would call weaker-minded; not inherently so given to unkindness but easily influenced. And then there are those that envy and admire the group, and emulate their behavior."

Nenni frowned, munching another berry tart. "Let me guess. The currency of this entire social network is Information. Who knows what about whom, how juicy it is, and how much that information can be leveraged to cause discomfort or embarrassment, or spread around to create an impression of prestige or power. Am I close?"

Legolas smiled. "Your arrow is in the red, Naneth."

Glorfindel broke in. "Iellig, you have set yourself a very difficult task. One on which I cannot advise you how to begin. But you have my support. If it is what you wish, I will be at your side from beginning to...wherever this ends up." He extended his hand to her.

"As will I," said Legolas. "If contributing to the end of this poison is all I ever do in what role I have as Prince, it will be much." His hand came out as well.

Nenni slid her hand into the space between. "Then here is my proposal. We will try our best to find a solution that is both effective and honorable, one that would not reflect badly on the King, were he to know. And I would rather that he did not know, though I will not try to deceive him if I am confronted. I base my actions on the authority he has granted me, and am willing to accept any consequences of choosing to leave him out of this. I am not doing so to hide from him or to thwart him, but because I believe this is a problem beyond his ability to solve or it would not be a problem. Are we agreed?"

Their hands all clasped together on the wrists of each other, in a warrior's grasp of affirmation.

They returned to their eating, and Nenni's train of thought was well down the tracks already. "On Earth, when an enemy is difficult and well-entrenched, two strategies that often came into use were starvation and misinformation. I wish to open this endeavor under the full light of Anor. I propose hosting a meal in which all eight of the Lords and Ladies concerned are invited. As the evening winds on, our furnishings will be arranged to keep Thranduil conversing with the ellyn, but gather the ellith to us. We can begin as a group, but should each isolate one as the talk continues. We are to have meaningful projects of our own undertaking to discuss. I will bring forth my efforts concerning a medicinal herb garden and providing food. Ada, you should swiftly create some new reality by which you will contribute to the stores of knowledge in the Library of Imladris. You told me Lord Erestor wished to visit; perhaps laying a foundation for that occurrence is in order? I also think it would not go amiss if you would volunteer your services to the Prince, to take on a certain, albeit limited, instruction in swordsmanship for those of intermediate ability, by which to improve their skills further. Legolas, you as always will be busy improving the defenses of our home; apparently that our spider problem has taken on interesting dimensions. In this manner, they can in theory only carry positive comments away from their time with us to disseminate all over the place. And, it will give both Ada and I a chance to see these treasures up close and personally."

Both ellyn raised their eyebrows, having to admit that it was a sound strategy.

"But there is a part two," she said, smiling. "Within the week following this dinner, there must be a second meal. One to which those who work in what are considered the meanest occupations in this Palace are invited. They also are to dine with the King. Legolas, you have likely known Tinivel for
a very long time. Can she be trusted to help us? I know that Galion can be trusted with anything at all. I like Tinivel, very much but she will never be as Thaliel is to me."

Legolas looked at her in open admiration. "It is brilliant, Naneth. Tinivel can be trusted with anything; to have kept her station in such close proximity to my Adar speaks for itself. Were there ever any evidence of a lack of discretion, she would have been dismissed a very long time ago. To have any contact with our family is considered to be among one of the higher privileges in the Palace."

"Then that equally means, when she is asked to select the best candidates for this honor, invite them, and let it slip here and there that so and so will dine with the King, word should spread to our favorite four Ladies from the bottom up, no?"

"Exactly," said Legolas, while Glorfindel chuckled, somehow not believing that he was enjoying this as much as he was.

"Very well, then. I will lay the foundation with Thranduil tonight; I have made mention in the past of wanting to have a variety of people for dinner. Tomorrow, when he is away, I will summon Galion and Tinivel to our chambers and bring them into our confidence. We will not do anything in earnest until the King's aur-en-onnad is past. And Ionneg, when first you invited us here, you implied that there was something we needed to know about this teatime custom. Surely I have more to learn than how to stuff myself with your delectable treats?" Unbelievably, she still felt hungry, and filled her plate again.

Glorfindel made a mental note to inform Thranduil that she ought to use Thaliel's tea all the time; he had not seen her eat this much in one sitting in weeks. Then again, perhaps it was not the tea. His mind drifted back in a pleasant haze to the day he first saw Ecthelion. Proudly seated astride his stallion, glossy black hair streaming from under his helm, with the diamond at its point blazing in the sun. How the breath was stolen from his lungs at what he beheld, and how only a matter of days later, in a secluded garden under Ithil's rays, they embraced each other to begin a bonded friendship so close that even their deaths had proven but a minor disturbance. He sighed, truly happy for the joy his daughter would know.

"So I did," laughed Legolas merrily. "It is not so complex as I have made it out to be, but should you yourself receive an invitation to take tea with them, your seamless ability to follow their custom will aid you."

Glorfindel and Nenni both looked at him expectantly.

Chuckling, he continued. "The one who is hostess will choose one treat only, from among the choices; they do not fill their plates as we have done. The others present then take only one of that treat, and all consume what they have taken. And then the hostess does the same, and the guests do the same, on and on and on. They view it as some sort of major breach of protocol, were their hostess to choose a fruit tart while a guest opted for a cucumber sandwich."

Nenni's lips parted in thinly veiled disgust. "You have got to be kidding me. That is among the most idiotic things I have heard since coming to this world. Now I just want to have them to a tea, so I can fill my plate up and watch their heads explode."

"I have always been in this world, and I too feel that that is most strange", said Glorfindel, shaking his head.

"Strange or not, it is their silly little way, and knowing it may give you an edge of advantage that comes in handy sometime," he said, laughing. "I for my part, am going to follow my Naneth and
eat more, because this is all too delicious."

"Your Naneth is going to burst her stomach, but is willing to take the risk," she laughed. "I cannot remember the last time I had so much appetite. I hope the little lamprey is not about to change her ways once again. Are you preparing for your sister, Ionneg? I have a feeling she will be a force with which to be reckoned."

"Eru help me, I cannot wait," he said, laughing. "Fear not, Naneth. I yet have the first bow Adar ever gave me, and I know what I am going to do with it."

"Eru help all of us," she giggled, starting in on a tiny honeycake.

*****

'Thank you's' and kisses of affection were exchanged as a very happy and very stuffed father and daughter exited the Prince's quarters. Well he was right about one thing, Ada. Dinner is not to even be thought of, after that.

No, it most certainly is not, grimaced the mighty warrior. Though there had technically been some uneaten food, the table largely looked like an entire battalion had been invited rather than just the two of them. But Legolas was clearly thrilled with how much his treat had been enjoyed and appreciated, to the extent that he had even started daring them to finish every last bit. And the attempt was made, but ended in failure.

I suppose, she said ruefully, this is a small glimpse of the future I will have when the child is much larger. Why in the world did I eat so much? A soft moan escaped her at how completely and awfully stuffed she felt.

Because we were all daring each other to eat more? That might have had something to do with it, he grinned down at her.

She held onto his arm more tightly. I feel so happy right now, Ada. I feel so happy and I do not know what to do with it.

You will adjust, iellig. It is a form of sadness to me, that a day like this is so rare in your experience when I have been blessed with so many.

It has ever been my experience that...no, I will not say it. But I am glad to know that your life has been filled with many joys, especially the one you told of today. Please do not take this the wrong way but...I wondered, when first I met you, how you could possibly be unwed. It saddened me to think that you knew little of love. But if you have had this then you have had much, and with a worthy ellon who was your peer.

He smiled. Is it very different, than what you have with Thranduil?

In all the ways that truly matter, not at all. Obviously, the lack of desire for physical intimacy is a major difference. As well as the knowledge that Thranduil and I will always have the other; there is a depth of feeling that accompanies the complete absence of fear in that regard. But the sense of love, the rush of feeling at having the other in your arms, knowing that your love is returned? If there is a difference, I am not yet aware of it. I have found so much love, since coming here. I would feel guilty about my good fortune, were it not for how much I endured beforehand.

He nodded. We will perhaps have more time later, but I will leave you here at your door. Your husband is inside, and I have a feeling that your arrival will be enjoyed so much more if I am absent. He grinned at her, and with a pat to her arm, turned and departed.
Here goes, she thought, and here's hoping for quick digestion. Lifting the latch, she entered, not bothering to be quiet; there was no such thing as quiet enough to sneak up on Thranduil. He was seated at the stone bench, looking out the window; it was very close to sunset and the eastern sky was lit with brilliant colors. Walking to just behind him, she gazed appreciatively at the palette of roses and oranges. "Are you enjoying the view, Hîr vuin?" she asked softly, admiring the way the colors reflected off of his flaxen hair.

With a smile, he placed his goblet on the table and rose to greet his wife. And stopped in his tracks at the sight of her. "Meleth," he gasped, instantly feeling a strong twinge in his groin.

Giggling, she walked to him. "It was a special occasion, so I used what you gave me and celebrated. But I did not forget, while I dressed, the first time I wore your necklace. In fact, I am not sure it is possible to forget." She leaned up, to meet his kiss.

"Your Ada...?" Desire mixed with uncertainty, to form the question.

"Had the good sense to tell me that you would prefer to greet me without his presence, and departed."

His head tossed back in gentle laughter. "It would seem I am somewhat predictable," he smiled. "I would like very much to remind you of the first time you wore that, if you will allow it," he offered hopefully.

No answer came, but she took off her diadem, and handed it to him. Her light robe fell to the stone floor as she slid it off her shoulders. First one shoulder, then the other, she snaked her body gracefully to allow the gown to slip from her upper body, revealing her attractive breasts. A few tugs and movements later, the rest of her clothing fell away, and she stepped out of her slippers in a fluid motion. Only the hundreds of emeralds that comprised the stunning piece of jewelry remained. "I believe this is what you require?" she said provocatively, her chin tilted up toward him.

He'd enjoyed every moment of this erotic display, and now carefully placed her diadem on the bench. Looking him up and down as he approached her and embraced her, she commented tartly, "You are overdressed." And yet as she spoke, her hand travelled to caress his swollen member, eliciting a groan of want as he pushed himself into the pressure of her hand. And as always, the evidence of his desire inflamed her.

"Perhaps," he said, his breath coming much faster now, "I have overestimated my ability to restrain myself just now."

Her hand was already tugging furiously at the laces of his breeches, freeing him, her lust being in no better condition. "I was hoping you might say that," she whispered to him. "The necklace isn't going anywhere, and we have all night."

It was not easy to determine exactly how they made it to the bed without him tripping, but somehow in the space between he was divested of enough of his breeches, and she was fairly sure a robe had fallen away as well. He parted her legs to enjoy the taste of her, only to realize that the level of his arousal was too high. The first stroke of his tongue sent deferred want surging through her groin, and a cry escaped her when it was so swiftly followed by his length. Her hips rose up to meet him in eagerness as they writhed and pushed against each other. She remembered when it had felt awkward between them; these encounters in which one or the other of them desperately wanted the body of the other in a manner more purely physical. They had developed far more trust in their time together, and now neither had any reason to feel ashamed for the greed of their desires. "Please, more," she begged him between moans, trying to relax into his attentions and completely
failing. So close to her peak, so close...she felt and heard him as heated semen flooded into her, the
same seed that had filled her womb, and blessed them with a child. The thought was all it took, and
with a deep throated yell her passion burst around him. She strained and strained underneath him,
helpless against the intensity of her pleasure, unabashedly seeking the comfort of his mouth.
Though she noticed, that once again, he would not remain collapsed on her for long; something she
did not like. The weight of him as he rested from his climax was something she greatly
enjoyed...but she understood why, and it would not last forever.

He kissed her tenderly, leaving her body. Swiftly he removed the rest of his clothing, before
offering his hand to raise her to a sitting position. "I thought we might move to the pool", he said,
grinning. "Would you like wine?"

"No, thank you," she said, stretching luxuriously as she stood...while remembering to be careful
that she did not become dizzy. *Stupid orthostatic blood pressure,* she thought. But she was fine,
and moved to twist up her hair. "Our son stuffed me like a sausage casing, and I am honestly
surprised that my lust won out over how full I am," she laughed. "I think I ate more at his teatime
than I have at the last four meals combined."

Surprised and pleased, he entered the pool, taking another draught of wine before sitting down and
inviting her into his arms. Contentedly, she settled against him.

"I am told you had quite the day, and that Thaliel was involved," he said. "I was hoping to hear
more," he said kindly.

"Who told you that?" she asked sharply, anger building quickly in her eyes.

"Galion," he said, taken aback.

Suddenly it made sense, and was not at all what she had instantly assumed--and feared. Forcing
herself to take deep breaths, she leaned into him. "Please forgive me, I am very sorry for how I
spoke. I jumped to a wrong conclusion about something that is very important to me."

"Meleth, what has happened?" he said, gently turning her face back to look at him.

"It is..." a growl of frustration escaped her. "I had not wanted the conversation to start like this.
Please, Thranduil, can I have a moment? This has been one of the best days of my life, and I think
my heart will break if it is ruined with a needless argument."

If he could feel nothing else, he could see the tangle of her thoughts, how important this was to her,
and that far more had occurred than his Steward having called a Healer. "Take your time, meleth," he said soothingly. "I only wanted to know that you are well, though I can see that you are." That
he planted soft kisses against her cheek every few words did not hurt his cause in the least.

Finally a great sigh occurred, and she nestled against him. Everything that transpired in the
morning after he left her was told, though she felt it was understandable if she declined to mention
her ability to make plant-based food vanish. And then she paused. "Thranduil, do you know this
thing, i 'waedh ?"

"Yes, I have heard of this. The bond."

"That, I am told by my Ada, is what happened to me today." She stopped before saying more, still
fearful of how this would be received.

His face broke out in a smile as his arms closed around her. "Oh meleth, I am joyful for you! It is
Thaliel, is it not?"
She nodded, her eyes pooling with tears. On some level it was still very difficult to believe that everyone around her was actually supportive of something that she wanted badly. Her experience had always been quite the opposite.

"Do not cry, meleth, though I know why you do. This is meant to be an experience of great joy. I confess feeling a little envious, as this has not happened for me." Or at least... He remembered her friend Brian, on Earth, and how he had been drawn to the man... but...surely the Valar could not be that cruel? To give this connection to a mortal and an immortal alike? And either way, if they truly had been drawn toward each other, the bond had not been completed. Like as not he would never know.

"There is more," she said, blinking back the tears. "Though, what it means to me, to have your support, to have the support of my family...I thank you. But..." Still she struggled, to master herself.

"But?" he said tenderly, with more kisses, as he rubbed her back.

"I do not want any but our family to know. Not yet, anyway. I do not need to tell you what it might mean for her, in this Palace, to suddenly find herself connected to me in this way. She is a good person, and has sacrificed much to remain in your service."

"No, you do not need to tell me. And so you are seeking to find a way to be together, unobserved?"

"Yes, and there is a very obvious answer. And it raises a subject that I wonder if we need to revisit."

"The garden."

Nenni laughed. "You are not King for no reason, are you?"

"That is true," he said, still covering her cheeks and neck in kisses. "But tell me your thoughts."

"I told Lord Elrond about the garden, and what lies beneath. He counseled me to tell no one else. His implication was that in all of Ennor, five elves know about the power under the garden, and that it would be wisest to leave it thus. But all five of those elves are ones possessing strong gifts of their own, and able to perceive that kind of power. We were going to keep it to just ourselves, but then Glorfindel came to us. We have not ever even invited Legolas. And now the selfish part of me recognizes that with something as simple as permission to use the south passage entrance, Thaliel would have a way to come to us whenever she chose, unobserved, via the Storerooms. I could only call her here so many times under the ruse of her official duties, and truthfully, it would be wrong to summon her here when she has duties if I have no actual need of aid. And she cannot simply keep coming here before it is eventually observed how often she is in this part of the Halls."

She paused, sensing he was about to answer, and then held up her hand again. "And there is still more. When Thaliel and I completed our bond, we were in the forest visiting important medicinal plants for which she cares, with Ada and Beren. I was armed, as was Ada. We were attacked by spiders, Thranduil. Two came from above, and it was a combination of Beren's warning and some intuition on my part that caused my swords to be in my hands in time. Ada was near, but not near enough. I killed them easily but afterward, Thaliel told me that the spider attacks had changed in nature, and that our patrols are being stung. I am not angry now, i Aran nîn, but I was angry at the time, to find out that a simple Healer knew of this when I did not. I had hoped to plead with you to find a better way of keeping informed. I feel that I should have been one of the first to be made aware. But all this was foremost to say that walks in the forest with her as a way to enjoy each other's company now seem less advisable in my eyes. Even if we are guarded, there is risk. I have
made a bond with an elleth who has a deep interest in medicinal plants and yet I fear to bring her to my garden. I feel...frustrated."

Thranduil continued to rub her back, his eyes widening when he heard her tale, though he forced himself to not interrupt as he would have months ago. He followed her memories, and digested her words, slowly. "I see," he finally said. There were no words for a time, only his hands on her back and more kisses. And she was enjoying this relatively chaste contact, just as much as she had enjoyed gaining relief from her lust. Finally he spoke. "I take responsibility for your not having known. I thought I was sheltering you from matters that were less important, as your pregnancy has not been the easiest to date. This was clearly a serious mistake and will not be repeated. I propose the following: We spend much time apart, now, but we always do see each other toward the end of the day. When we meet, I will make it my duty to report to you even as Legolas reports to me. A simple summary of anything that is going on; very brief. If you have a desire to know more, then you can pursue it. I am sorry, meleth, and I am proud that your skills were more than adequate to manage the situation." He paused for a moment. "How angry was your Ada?" he asked, with some trepidation in his voice.

She giggled. "It was on its way to being ugly, but I managed to bring him around. Though sadly, it was because Thaliel took one look at him and was dissolving in fear of his wrath."

"I have not told you, meleth, how much I appreciate that you are enduring the restrictions he has laid upon you. Especially when we both know that they are almost worthless in a given number of circumstances."

Nenni pulled away long enough to look into his eyes. "You may never understand what it means to me, to hear you say this. I am doing it for the sake of his peace of mind and yours, and for no other reason. For all that you have both done for me, it is a small price to pay. I think what I mean is, thank you for acknowledging what is obvious to me. Though...now that I think of it, the month for which I agreed to abide by this is now past."

Another kiss was placed, this time full on her lips. "But I should finish answering your concerns, meleth. Specifically, the garden. I am willing to investigate having others close to us be there. Glorfindel's presence has caused no difficulties. Honestly, I do not see how two bonded ellith could possibly cause the Realm to collapse from harvesting herbs, and it does answer a pressing need. And, you are right in your observation. Elves with gifts perceive power; in all my experience, elves without them do not. I would be astonished if she could even detect what is there, much less understand. We will discuss this also with your Ada, since his input is worthy as well. However, a certain burden is laid on you if you desire to heed Lord Elrond's words; you must forego or be very cautious about joining your mind to hers, for by a stray thought she could learn of it very easily."

"I hadn't even considered doing that. She does not know, much about me. Us. All of it. And oddly enough, because I share really only with you and Ada, I forget that I even can, with another."

"That may not be the worst thing. In time, you will know her better, understand whether she could be suited to this. I would think, from what I have heard about the gwaedh, that your instinct to shield her from harm would more than curb a desire for an ill-advised risk."

Her head nodded against his neck. That much was a given, she would never wish to harm Thaliel. "There is one last thing concerning Thaliel, Thranduil. And even though I already know the answer, I must hear it from you." Lapsing into silence, she remembered for him what had been said earlier, and her answer: "Aran Thranduil...will not object to me? I am no one, Hiril vuin; I am one of the commonest of Silvan elves." "You are not common, and you most certainly are not common to me. My husband already knows, and accepts you. And you should know that neither of us in any
way view any elf in this Realm as being of greater or lesser worth than another. We would give the last of ourselves to defend any of you."

Thranduil heaved a sigh of anguish. "Meleth, that any one would think this of themselves, or of me, breaks my heart." He shook his head, and his words were laced with grief. "There is a rot in our midst, and for centuries I have been powerless to address it. But you most certainly answered correctly. I recognize that none of us know each other, but the gwathel of my wife is my family."

She hugged him fiercely. "I was not going to say this to you, but my trust in you has deepened: Leave the rot to me."

"What do you mean by that?" he asked, sharply.

Nenni regarded him carefully, and straddled him now, to face him. "I am going to be asking you for many strange things in the very near future. And I expect that you will grant them, as they will be well within your ability to do so. I am also going to ask both as your wife and your Queen, trust me, and accept that when I tell you I will not answer that question in order to protect you, to let it be."

Thranduil blinked at her, and tried to think about her words logically. Clearly, she understood the nature of the problem. Clearly, she had...an idea. And clearly, she wanted him out of it. He remembered Glorfindel's words: Thranduil, do you believe she will usurp your Realm, or murder you in your sleep? He sighed, and kissed her again. "I will let it be, meleth."

"Just like that?" she asked, half-astonished, and half-amused.

"Just like that," he replied, claiming her mouth with more fervor than before. She felt him swell beneath her, wanting him inside of her so badly, but sex underwater had never had good outcomes, in her experience. And yet in a moment, she felt herself lifted onto his erection, and slid down onto it with a moan of enjoyment. How...? And then she recalled, she had entered the water quickly after their last encounter, and made no effort to wash herself; her passage was yet filled with his seed. Well that is convenient, she realized as she drove herself down on him again. He moved somehow, to keep her knees off of the bench, or perhaps he moved into deeper water. She did not know or care what he had done, and was only registering that this was one of the most sensual encounters of their married life, as the warm water caressed her and allowed her breasts to bob within easy reach of his mouth. And when they both cried out at last in mutual bliss, there was no need for him to move or go anywhere; she wrapped both arms and legs around him and held him tightly, continuing to kiss him.

"I have never felt so happy as on this day. I love you, so much. And Legolas, and Ada. And even Thaliel, who I barely know," she laughed. "I never dreamed my life would ever be like this, Thranduil."

"Nor did I, Adonnenniel," he said in a voice filled with joyful emotion. "Nor did I."

Many minutes passed in which they held each other, relishing the contact and the warm water with contented sights.

"I have more to talk about but I don't want to; this is too perfect", she said. "I have become greedy for the time with you and hate to clutter it with affairs of the Realm."

"Perhaps I can make your discussion more pleasant," he said, thrusting up into her. It had been easy, so relaxed as she'd been, to forget that they were still joined.
"I see," she said, squeezing down on him as hard as she could. "I want *thrust* to issue some dinner invitations for the two weeks after your Aur-en-onnad," she said, "and since we agreed *squeeze* to discuss this privately first when possible, I am discussing it."

"That is courteous of you *thrust*."

Their discussion of dinner plans continued thus until they could no longer speak coherently, as each sought release. Most of the information had been communicated, except for the intended guests. Half shouting in his climax, he groaned as his wife satisfied herself on his rigid shaft. Thranduil leaned his head back, letting his breathing slow as he laughed. "We are using each other well to discuss affairs of state, are we not? Tell me, who is it you are wanting to invite?"

Some moments were needed, before her breathing slowed enough to reply and her pleasure had ebbed sufficiently. "Two groups. One is yet to be determined, but it is as I mentioned once. They will be from among the laundresses, the guards, the kitchen staff, chambermaids, and so forth. I want to know more of what our people do, and who they are. And as you can guess I also wish to make a statement; that we truly do see all here as worthy and deserving of our attention. The second, and of course these include Legolas and Ada, would be Lords Penlor and Merial, General Faelyn, and their wives."

Thranduil's eyes flew open and his head snapped forward as he looked at her, struck dumb. Finally he spoke. "It is a good thing I satisfied my desire before your announcement, because I am not now certain it will be possible to become aroused again. Meleth, are you sure?"

"Yes, I am," she said breezily. "I have not had nearly enough occasion to know your highest placed counselors and military advisors, and it is hardly polite or fitting to invite only the ellyn to what is clearly a social occasion and not a matter of state. Why, is there a problem?"

He looked at her carefully, taking her measure, and saw a peculiar form of resolve in her mind. His eyelids narrowed just a little. "This is where my not knowing will be to my long-term advantage, isn't it?" he probed.

"Mmmm. I will neither confirm nor deny," she said. "But in conjunction with this meal, I do have something else I must ask of you."

"Which is...?"

"To take me to your vault. I wish to be adorned for this dinner in the richest of your jewelry...but it must be other than the Necklace of Girion. I wish to be covered in jewels. Everything about my appearance on this night must scream of your prestige and wealth. And then you may put all of it back whence it came."

He tilted his head, and a slow smile curled up the corners of his mouth, and he leaned forward to kiss her, lifting her off of him at last. A rumble of humor came from his chest. "All I ask is that someday, when all of this...whatever it is...is achieved to your satisfaction, that you will agree to tell me the full story. I do not suppose you wish for a new gown?" he said.

"I would never tell my husband to refrain from clothing his wife as he sees fit," she demurred.

He chuckled again. "I just may enjoy this after all."

Chapter End Notes
While for the most part this story has tried to stay within some frame of Tolkien canon, I wanted to take a moment to explain the concept of the "gwaedh" introduced in this chapter for those who are wondering if I've gone off the rails. You won't find it strictly referenced in any passage of the writings or stories of which I am aware...but...since I started seriously studying the Sindarin language many months ago, I realized that the concept was embedded in the language of the elven people. There are quite a lot of words in the vocabulary (for a language that has an attested lexicon of under four thousand words, that is...) that reference the idea of a "sworn sister/brother", a close bond of friendship, an oath or compact between parties, and the idea of an emotional bond exceeding that of ordinary friends. It was this examination of the elements of the elven language used in the Third Age that planted the seeds of this idea, along with the desire to explore the depths and nuances different kinds of relationships can have.
Privacy

Chapter Notes

[Oreui, Imladris. March 29, Gregorian]

Thanks to those who have written such encouraging reviews and comments this past week, it has meant a great deal to me. A very awful thing happened some days past...I write my stories on the website www.gethermit.com, and for a terrifying half of a day, something happened with the software that governs the login process. I was cut off from access to all my content. There are not words for the feeling a writer has, not knowing if several chapters of original material that exist only in one place might be lost for good....there is virtually no way to ever recreate that. Especially when those chapters were an intense struggle to write in the first place, because I could not see my way forward with the storyline again until very recently. It all straightened out, the website developer graciously took care of the problem quickly, but....just, wow. It was not an emotionally fun experience. I have since backed up all my drafts and made copies of everything, having learned my lesson. Writing something this big is a lot of effort, and knowing that it is being appreciated can make all the difference in the world when storm clouds gather. Thanks again, for reading :-) 

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Waking so early was no longer even vaguely surprising. With a sigh, Nenni rose and dressed, recalling her self-promise to learn more of the Palace. But her mind quickly returned to other events. Truly, yesterday was perfect. I will treasure it in my heart, since so few in my life have ever been its equal. Good moments, yes, those she’d had. But perfect days? Struggling to recall, she was not certain any one of them stood out. The air felt chilly, so she donned a cloak as well. And her crown, in case her explorations took her anywhere without light. But there was little doubt as to her first destination; the Healer's Halls. If there was a new patient of which to learn, that was well too. Before her feet left the doorway, the Queen covered her head, crown and all, with the hood of her cloak. Gliding silently along, few others were seen; at this hour only guards were a common sight. Arriving at the Halls, she slowed her steps, determined to be extremely quiet. It would not do, to disturb any injured ones.

With feline grace her feet padded across the stones, looking for any occupied beds, and to her dismay saw two. Both appeared to be ellyn, and she recognized the sickened grimaces that she had seen on her husband when he had been stung. Did they sleep? It seemed so...she watched them raptly, and did not hear when a figure came to her side. Being aware that she was not alone, she turned to see Thaliel and instantly smiled, bringing her hood back enough for the elleth to see who she was, though it was guessable that she already knew. In a moment arms were around her waist as they embraced. "We are otherwise alone?" she asked in the softest of whispers while leaning her head toward those abed.

By way of answer a delicate hand slipped into hers, bringing her to an adjacent chamber. "We should still speak very quietly, but should the ellyn not be asleep, here we have privacy," she said.

"I missed you," said Nenni, holding her once again in sheer happiness.
"And I you, my Queen," Thaliel murmured.

With a kiss to her forehead, Nenni released her. "Who are they, Thaliel, and how are they?"

"Faelon and Laerion, soldiers of our Realm, and they are as well as can be expected. They were each stung once, and while they will be ill for some days they will both recover fully."

"Not the same Faleon that sometimes guards the rear gates?" Nenni asked, unhappy that the lazy yet amusing guard would have had such a mishap.

"There is only one Faelon, to my knowledge, Hiril vuin."

With a sigh the Queen nodded, turning her mind to the other reason for her visit. "I do not feel right about staying here while you have your duties, but I wished to speak to you. I have a way now for us to meet, and a place for us to spend time unseen, that I believe you will enjoy greatly. But I have to show you how to go there, as well as ensure the silence of a certain ellon. Tomorrow in the afternoon I will ride into the forest with my son, yet I wondered if there is a time I might meet you? Or, would you tell me your schedule?"

Thaliel nodded. "When there are patients here, three qualified Healers share the work in eight or ten hour shifts, depending. I only just arrived here moments before you; I will have duty until ten in the morning. And then duty again, commencing at two in the morning. Beyond that has not been determined; being without a mate here, I offer to take the least desirable shifts to allow others the time with their families."

"So you would be available at eleven? Regrettably, tomorrow we will only have most of an hour together. These next two days are busier than I would like," Nenni said regretfully.

"Eleven, ten, whatever you desire," Thaliel said, hoping that by mention of the earlier hour they could have a longer meeting. "We pride ourselves in timeliness for our duties; unless it is a dire emergency we keep our schedules strictly."

"Then ten it is", Nenni grinned. "When you are released, please go to the Storerooms. If you see me, do not acknowledge me outside; I intend to be attired much as I am now. Proceed through the doors, and I will meet you there. Do you know the Storekeeper?"

"Erudan? Yes, he is a very kind ellon. I interact with him often; many needed supplies are coordinated through him."

"Good, I am glad to hear this; it is to him we will be speaking if we are fortunate enough to find him alone. I will be able to be far less mysterious then," the Queen added with a smile. "I hope you will be pleased," she said shyly.

"I do not see how I will not be, if I may enjoy some time with you, Hiril vuin."

"Ai, a flatterer," she teased, kissing her on the cheek. "It is very hard for me to leave you, but I must not interfere with your work." Arms tightened around her waist, as the chaste kiss was returned. "Wait a moment," Nenni said, reflecting. "Just to be cautious, may I have what is necessary for a dose of the tea you gave me, this morning? Last time I was fine when I returned to sleep, but affected when I woke. Perhaps had I been able to take something for the nausea before it became so pronounced, my morning would not have gone as it did."

"A wise precaution," the Healer agreed, going to a cabinet filled with many small drawers, and procuring a pouch that was placed in her hand.
"Good-bye for now, dear friend." Willing her feet to move, she was on her way, raising her hood again as she left. That Thaliel's expression of regret mirrored her own made her feel better. Schoolgirl, she chided herself, but could not help but smile. As she exited the door, strong hands caught her from behind and stopped her progress. That is either my Ada, or someone who is in very deep trouble for sheer impudence.

He chuckled. Can it not be both? he jested. Besides, I had to take advantage of knowing your location, before you wandered off.

Fair enough, she smirked. Though, while I do not wish to pry your secrets from you, now you are making me curious. You can know the whereabouts of anyone in Imladris, but not here? I had imagined that you could do something like what my husband does, and 'see' where others are.

No, that is not among my gifts. My abilities in Imladris are because the power of Lord Elrond enables them. To find you, here, I must rely on what I can see in your thoughts. I trust, iellig, that you will never use this knowledge against me in a moment of sadness or despair? he asked pointedly.

It was hard to hear the question, but he had a right to ask it. Though she was far better about these matters, it was still her tendency to seek isolation at such times. I give you my word, that I will not. You do not owe me this information, and I will not abuse your trust.

Glorfindel smiled. Then let us explore.

Wait, please, Ada. Before we do, there is something I would like to ask of you, a favor.

The golden head tilted to one side. You wish to know if I would allow Thaliel to call to me, should she need you at a time you cannot otherwise be easily reached?

You are as always free to decline, I would not think badly of you. I am sure you have heard more than enough to know why I ask. And I do not ask lightly, or without reluctance.

A long pause ensued. I will do this for you, iellig. But I will ask a steep price in exchange.

Nenni looked up at him, startled.

I am aware that our agreement regarding your being guarded outside of these Halls has expired.

Her eyes turned away from him.

And the price you ask for this favor will be the extension of that agreement?

Yes.

The expression on her face was impossible to read. Remind me to recommend you for sitting at the trade negotiations come autumn, Ada, she answered, raising her eyes to his with a sigh of defeat. On this as well, I give you my word. Let us move along. Her hand was offered to him.

You are not angry? he asked, taking her much smaller hand in his.

Nenni shrugged. I might have liked the discussion to be just that, a discussion. But we had a saying on Earth: "There is no such thing as a free lunch." Meaning, it is never really the case that something is to be had for nothing. You wanted this badly enough to bargain for it. While I am surprised, I cannot blame you for using the opportunity against me. Though, you are tempting me to find another arrangement, to thereby regain my freedom. Her eyes met his in mild challenge.
His lips parted; he had not counted on her countering in this way. Dropping his head, he opened his heart. Please, how can I ask you? You cannot know how much I fear for your safety. I know it is not rational, and I know how capable you are of defending yourself. And I know too that you understand my feelings, or you would not be going to all this effort to protect Thaliel from hurtful words and gossip. This is my selfishness, because I feel that if something were to go wrong, perhaps I would be able to help. Just as I could not live with myself, knowing that I was not there to try. Even though, his shoulders sagged, the events of this last day proved that this is not necessarily the case.

Her arms reached to hold onto him. Dear Ada. I would rather have simply heard this, for I do understand. Though, it is still hard for me at times. Can I ask you, what has changed between now and the time we spent in Imladris? You were content enough to let me wander the valley on my own, at a time when it seemed the orcs were just as great of a danger.

Glorfindel’s arms wrapped around her shoulders. That is an easy enough answer. At that time, you were not with child. And, my love for you has grown in a way I could not have foreseen. At times, I fear my attachment to you has become too strong, iel’lig. I know that I cannot keep you in a box. And I have promised myself, that once your child is delivered, however much I will wish to keep this up, I will not ask. I do understand that there are limits to the freedoms I can ask you to surrender. And I hope that you can forgive this weakness, and this selfishness of mine. I did not understand what taking on the role of a parent can do to one’s thinking.

Without realizing it, her hand began to rub his back. I may be discovering these same things for myself, sooner than I think. I want to believe that I will not be a stifling or overprotective mother, because I know how awful it was to grow up under a blanket of constant restraints set in place out of barely rational fears. But where that balance is, and how to allow freedom when so much worry goes along with it? I think it will not be so easy, when I find myself in your same position. Thank you, for speaking your heart to me. I think you know there is little I would not do for you, but it is always nicer to be asked than to be...maneuvered.

You are correct, Adonnenniel, and I am sorry.

Do not be. And let us not waste more time on this, I will only have so much energy and I am sure there are important broom closets to discover. Do you know what I wish to find? The place I lived when I first came here. There were living quarters, and somewhere on a lower level was the most amazing bathing area. And I’ve no idea, where I was.

I think I might, he said his eyes twinkling. Come, this way...

*****

When the light of day came, she was at least glad that waking up did not require anyone to come with a forklift to rouse her from bed. Especially since there were no forklifts, here. Yet what was not so good, was that she could feel that all was not well.

"Thranduil?" she whispered, hoping he was not gone.

"I am here, meleth. You feel ill?" he was at her side in an instant.

She nodded. "On the table. I went to Thaliel last night, she gave me a dose of whatever went into the tea that helped me yesterday. Could you?..."

"Stay there, and do not move," he said. "I will block most of what you are feeling, and will just need a moment to prepare this."
Just minutes later, he raised her up against the pillows, helping her to drink it, and insisting that she
consume it slowly, much as Thaliel had done yesterday.

"You made good use of your late night wakefulness, to procure this," he said. "Clearly this
preparation should be kept here, until such time as your body moves out of this phase."

"I was supposed to talk with you about using this tea, and I forgot," she said. "Last night was too
crowded with things to discuss."

"And too crowded with lust, though I have no regrets about that," he added with humor.

"True," she snickered. "It is not helping, that I have become seemingly insatiable, but I too cannot
seem to care too much about it."

The King grinned his agreement with her assessment. "Meleth, there are yet a few things I should
mention. May I ask you to please close off your mind to all, for a short time?" he asked
mysteriously. When he felt himself shut out, he continued and explained. "I had no other way to
tell you without your Ada overhearing, that the diadem you wanted made for him is ready. I
assumed you wished to keep it a surprise. Would you like to see it?" he asked.

"Very much," she said, sitting up.

"Ah ah!" he said, gently pushing her back. "Remain still, for at least five minutes after the tea is
consumed. You have yet a little more to drink. It must be given a chance to be in your body, in
order to work its best. I will retrieve it."

Vaguely wondering how he knew all of this, she did as he asked. It was certainly worth the extra
minutes, to ensure no repeat of yesterday. And when he returned, the precious thing was in his
hands. "Oh Thranduil, it is beautiful," she exclaimed. The blue diamond glittered in the early
morning light. Delicate, tiny diamonds set at intervals into the mithril added to the effect. And at
each of the temples, a single, simple celandine was rendered in enamel, with a yellow gemstone as
the center of each flower. "What are these yellow gems?" she asked, stunned at the loveliness of
the piece.

"Those are yellow sapphires," he said. "I was not going to tell you this, but on further reflection, it
is only right that you know." He seated himself next to her, insisting she first swallow the very last
of the tea. "Blue diamonds are nearly unheard of, in all this world. You could not have known,
when you asked for one, that they are priceless beyond measure. Even King Dain will see this, and
be filled with envy. This gem once belonged to Elu Thingol, and whence it came before that is lost
to time. And yellow sapphires are not far behind, in their rarity or their worth. The value of this
piece is arguably more than that of the Necklace of Girion."

Waves of regret came over her face. "I did not mean to..."

A finger swiftly came across her lips. "I know you did not. And this is why I did not tell you.
Adonnenniel, I give this gladly. We give this gladly, for what is mine is yours. It fills my heart, to
know that Lord Glorfindel will wear these gems. He deserves them and far more; it is beyond
question that his worth exceeds that of any jewels. It was a generous impulse on your part. Do not
regret it, not for a moment. Besides," he chuckled, "a part of me very much likes imagining the
expression on old Elwë's face, were he to know that one of his precious diamonds is now worn by a
Lord of Gondolin, who will doubtless recite many hours of Quenya poems while wearing it."

"Would you put it on yourself for me, so I can see it that way?" she asked, holding it out to him.
Thranduil obliged her, and she admired how it glittered in the light. "Magnificent," she whispered. "Does Legolas have something like this, of his own?"

"Not so resplendent as this, but yes, he does. Ever getting him to wear it, that is another story," he opined.

"Good," she said. "I did not wish for him to feel deprived. And now I have no idea, when to present it to Glorfindel."

"Why not when he comes this morning to meet us? Then you will have to spend less time with all of us locked out of your mind, trying to keep your secret," he teased.

"True enough," she snorted. "Very well, as I cannot argue. And may I be excused at just before ten this morning, if there is anything from which to excuse me? I have connived to smuggle Thaliel into the garden at that time."

"Of course," he laughed. "If you would hear audiences before then, though, I would not complain."

"Deal. And rather than merely batting eyes at each other, it is my intention to leverage her assistance into bringing this medicinal garden truly into existence. She indicated that some of those plants have value, or at least that was how my mind interpreted her words. Having a surplus of medications to trade would certainly please Lord Penlor and give you more fodder for discussion with him, I would think."

"It would indeed," mused the King. "May I come and meet her while you are both there? I would make her feel welcome, especially after what you showed me," he said softly.

"I think that would be very kind of you. Ada too, if he wishes. Only perhaps give us a little while. My guess is, the sight of that garden will make her head explode."

"I have a better idea, if you agree. Why do we not all eat the mid day meal here, so she can be with us? I will ask Galion for a meal for five to be provided."

"You are generous, Thranduil, and kind. I would like that very much. And...if Galion is to see her here, I will also be taking him aside. He is rather integral to my schemes about which you know nothing, so perhaps you will not mind if I insist on a few minutes alone with him after the meal? I am advised that he and Tinivel both can be entrusted with matters of the greatest discretion."

The King shook his head, laughing. "Yes, they can, and, I have not heard a word that was just spoken."

"Good."

"You may rise, slowly, and see how you feel now. I will remove my own interference with your discomfort so that we may see how you are doing.....and?"

Creeping, she carefully left the bed. Moving this way and that, she stood slowly, relieved that the terrible sensation had departed. "Good to go, it would seem," she said happily.

With a ruffle to her head, Thranduil mentioned, "We have time for perhaps twenty minutes in the pool...if you wish."

Reaching forward to caress what was under his robe, she gave a smoldering look. "I wish. Very much."
When Glorfindel arrived to meet them for breakfast as was his usual custom, he knew that mischief was afoot. His daughter was smiling from ear to ear and he could not read her thoughts; it did not take the wisdom of Manwë to work out that she was concealing something from him. Thranduil, though dissembling far better, had enough of a sparkle in his eye that he believed his suspicions were warranted. He also noted that both of them wore their crowns, which usually signaled their intention to perform official duties after the meal.

"My great age and wisdom tell me that you two are up to something," the golden Lord announced.

"That is entirely true, Ada, and good morning to you." She came to kiss him on the cheek. "Would you like to sit for a moment?"

"I suspect I do, whether I do or not," he answered, greatly amused.

Nenni sat with him, enjoying the humor, and then her demeanor grew far more serious. "There is something I wish to give you. It is meant as an outward sign to all; you are now part of our family and the life of this Realm. We are blessed by your dwelling among us, and this gift is to honor to both your past and your present. Please accept it as a symbol of my love, my gratitude, and my affection." Before he had time to work out what she was talking about, he felt something being placed on his head. Nenni had to work very hard to keep her features unchanged, because the sight of it on him exceeded all her hopes. The ornament was dazzlingly beautiful, as was he.

"What have you two done?" he whispered, reaching up to feel the metal and knowing that it would not be something of small worth. Whatever it was rested lightly, and fit perfectly; it was almost undetectable to the wearer.

"Only what is your due, Ada. The looking-glass is over there," she gestured, smiling at him.

He rose and walked, feeling both grateful and reluctant. They did not do anything halfway, from what he'd seen. Though their comportment was modest and unassuming, their dress was often not. He sighed. For so very long, he had been accustomed to the practical manners of Imladris. There had been another time, when greater luxury and displays of wealth would have seemed far more ordinary to him, but that was long ages ago. Another step brought him in front of the mirror, where he beheld the beautiful object. Sunlight streamed into the quarters and fell on the central gem, which blazed with brilliant light. And there were others. His lips parted, and his memory recalled the first moment he had ever beheld his gwador, Ecthelion, and how a stone of similar beauty graced his helm. And...celandines? He reached up to touch the delicate flowers, rendered in gold and gems.

Removing the circlet, he examined it more closely, finding that it was made with clever hooks designed to keep it in place; they grabbed at his hair which he had to first disentangle. Only now, out of the direct light, could he see clearly the color of the stone. He was certain this was an adamant, but it was blue? And not just any blue, but the exact color of his eyes. The Lord of the House of the Golden Flower was momentarily speechless. Usually he would decline something like this; it was far richer than the ornament Lord Elrond usually wore...but that was impossible. It was a heartfelt gift and obviously much thought had gone into it. With a smile, he smoothed his hair and returned it to his brow. "Iellig, Thranduil, this is a beautiful and gracious gift, and I find myself somewhat at a loss for words." The expression of pure happiness on Adonnenniel's face made any mild discomfort on his part pale in comparison. Complete adoration was written on her gaze and her thoughts.

Thranduil embraced him, as did she. "Shall we?" he asked. As the King watched Glorfindel walk,
he wondered about the wisdom of keeping those gems hidden away in a vault. The stone was stunningly beautiful, and almost seemed to have a life of its own. Shrugging to himself, he led the way to the Dining Hall.

Breakfast and audiences flew by. Though it was not easy to keep her mind in the present, she forced herself to do so; she could not allow for her personal enjoyments to cloud her responsibilities. And while she was busy trying to be responsible, she realized another need.

_Hîr vuin?_

Yes?

_Can I be provided with a place to meet with others when I wish to discuss business, things pertaining to the business of ruling? I do not wish to have some of the conversations I feel I will need to have in our home. On Earth we would have called it an 'office'._

_It is the same here, meleth. And yes, you can. I am remiss in that I already have rooms for this purpose, and have not yet taken you there once. You may have your own chamber for this use or you may share my office with me._

_Will you show me later, and I can decide?_

_Of course, Hiril vuin._

_Thank you..._

The time flew, and the clock chimed that it was time for her to depart. As she walked she reached a place in the passageways where she could raise her hood unobserved and bring her cloak more tightly around her. The entrance to the Storerooms seemed deserted enough; hopefully the same conditions would exist inside. Pausing once she was among the long rows of shelves and honeycombed chambers, she listened, and found the hoped-for silence. Now, to find Erudan. While she paced along silently, a slight noise finally drew her notice. Feeling a little mischievous, she crept up on the unsuspecting Storekeeper. As much as she wished to play silly games, Nenni knew better. At any moment they might be interrupted, and she could not afford to waste this opportunity. "Erudan, mae g'ovannen" she said softly, lowering her hood.

Startled, the ellon rose, only to see who it was and bow deeply. "Hiril vuin, I hope you are well."

"I am, thank you. Am I correct in presuming that we are alone here?"

"Yes, to my knowledge."

"Then I wish to impart something to you. Forgive that this command will be more than a little odd. The Healer Thaliel will be working with me on a project that I wish to be absolutely confidential. She has permission to use the door in here, at any time of the day or night, and will be asked herself to ensure she is not seen using it. Under no circumstances is this to be made known to anyone. Unless it has to do with your interactions in her usual business with you, she was never here, and you never saw her. Should anyone inquire whether she frequents here you are to evasively reply that you are not at liberty to say, and inform me of the inquiry at once. If you are pressed, you may reveal that your refusal is by command of the Queen. Do you understand?"

"That is very clear, Hiril vuin. I will obey," he said submissively, eyes cast downward.

"Erudan," she said softly. "Please know that I trust your discretion, and that my words are not because I believe you need to be commanded, but for your own protection. This way, you cannot
be blamed or held accountable for your obedience, because you can fall back on the truthful statement that you have no choice in the matter." What she in fact did not trust was Lord Falchon's position as Erudan's direct supervisor, and his proximity to Lords Penlor and Merial, and by extension to their poisonous wives. There was simply too much she did not know.

He lifted eyes that were grateful to hers. "I thank you for your words, Hiril vuin. They are gracious."

"As are you, my friend. Now I will allow you to return to your duties. I thank you and wish you a good day."

Turning, she silently padded toward the interior closer to the entrance, where she encountered her gwathel. "Thaliel! Please follow me." The Healer was quickly shown the door, and the latch, and then ushered inside. When the door was closed behind them, Nenni embraced the bewildered elleth. "Forgive my poor greeting to you, my friend. That was a hurdle we had to bypass, and now it is done. Come, I must now explain many things." Releasing her, she offered her hand, and walked slowly with her up the passage. "There is a command laid on all, Thaliel, that no one save myself, the King, Lord Glorfindel, Erudan and perhaps a few of his workers may ever pass that door. Though, I doubt many even know about its existence, as the Storerooms are not exactly a popular destination. It is forbidden, but not to you. I have just spoken to Erudan. He knows that you have permission to pass, at any time, and he is under command never to reveal your movements as regards this. However, you are never to be seen passing through that door by any who do not also have permission. You must use your good sense and prudence in this; ensure that you are alone. I have laid down every protection for your privacy that is possible."

"But Hiril vuin, I do not understand. Nor do I know where I am."

"You will soon, dear one. You are in what I have named the Southern Passage, which is not a very exciting title. It was tunneled long ago, and is the means by which you can come to us freely, without being seen."

"Us?"

Nenni laughed. "I am not doing a good job of this at all; I am sorry. 'Us' as in my family, into which you are accepted. My private life is very different than what many here might imagine, Thaliel. I live with the King in our chambers, obviously, but there is far more to it than that."

Thaliel's lips parted in wonder as she passed the waterfall window. "This is marvelous," she said. "It is," Nenni agreed. "But when it is truly meant to be seen is at sunrise. You...can see the fae of other elves, can you not?"

"All elves can, Hiril vuin," she answered, confused. "Yours is...uncommonly beautiful."

"Thank you, though I cannot take credit for it. This window at sunrise, that is what it looks like. My fae. It is lovely, only do not let the strong light harm your eyes," she said, still chagrined over that unfortunate episode.

"What is...all this, and why is it here?" Thaliel asked, gesturing to the sacks and trays of fruits and vegetables, which seemed entirely out of place in a tunnel.

"This is where those in the Storerooms come to remove our production, either for storage or use in the kitchens." The answer was no help at all to bewildered Thaliel.

Moving on, Nenni pulled at the heavy door. "This door can be a little grabby sometimes, but it only
needs a good tug to open. I suppose I should fix it," she frowned. "I told you that there is a way to have your plants within the Halls. I had to discuss a few things with my husband first, and so could not tell you before that I have a garden here." Nenni looked down. "Garden is actually a poor word, for what you will see. This is where my heart is; my sanctuary and that of all who are closest to me. The full use of my gift takes place here, and this is where you are now welcome and invited to be, whenever you choose it. Please, come."

The diminutive elleth's eyes were wide in disbelief, as she was led up the few steps into daylight and the passage door was closed behind her. It was as if she had entered another Kingdom. Gone was the shaded forest outside the Halls, and in its place a parklike garden of a size she could barely comprehend.

Nenni saw her expression, and could only imagine how...nuts this must seem, to someone who had lived in the Realm who knew how long, and was only just finding out about this place. "Sadly, you cannot speak about this garden to others, nor am I able to explain to you all the reasons why this must be. And I am sorry for that; it is a kind of grief to me, that I cannot fully share it. But I am grateful that you can now be an exception," she said softly.

Thaliel's expressive eyes turned to her. "I can see that I am being given an extraordinary honor, for which I thank you. I feel overwhelmed right now, but with time I am certain I will adjust. Would you show me, what is here?"

Nodding, Nenni took her hand. "I can blather on for days about the many aspects. I do not wish to add to the 'overwhelmed' part, so I will gladly walk with you; ask me what you wish. We will have much time together, here. There is no hurry for me to drown you in words and explanations."

The elfin head bobbed up and down, causing her braids to weave about. Thaliel's hair was glossy and completely straight, and not so long as her own (which was also a point of envy). A delicate weave of small braids accented her hair attractively, while also keeping it out of her eyes. She wore no ornaments of any kind, except her golden marriage band. As badly as Nenni wished to ask more about her friend's husband, now was not the time.

Thaliel said little. Her face, however, said a great deal. They strolled, from the drifts of the flowers of Vána around the beautiful bower strewn with rose petals and lilac blossoms, to the strange citrus fruits that had such scent, to the many flowers and the tempting fruits...until finally they passed the athelas topiary. The trunk of the oliphaunt yet waved in the breeze, as it always did. "That cannot be..."

Nenni chuckled. "I was a little silly, on that one, and I never went about relocating it. Yes, it is. And while I fully intend for us to speak of many other things besides plants, there is a purely selfish reason I am glad to have you here. A long-deferred project that I hoped we might do together can now be completed, with your help. I have your plants, medicinal plants from Imladris of which I do not know the names or uses, plants from Galasríniel...it is a mess, really. I know only the athelas. Needless to say I have not gotten far at all, on this task. And there is more, but, we can speak of it another time."

Looking across several plots, Nenni caught sight of the wheat field, and realized that she was now two days off-schedule, for her production. And in all likelihood tomorrow would be equally devoid of accomplishment; it was Thranduil's aur-en-onnad.

"How did you manage to manicure all this so well? You have been here such a short time," the Healer asked.

Looking all around, Nenni recalled what it had been on her very first visit. "There was very little
here, when Thranduil gave this place to me. A few trees, and a few roses. The rest was my doing. Or maybe it is better to say, the doing of my gift. Very little that has been done here is...normal."

"I hear your words, and I know you can cause plants to grow, but I do not fully understand," Thaliel said. "Nor do I wish to pry."

"It is not prying, not for you," Nenni said. "I can speak frankly, but sometimes it is hard for me. Because so much about me is very unusual, I am afraid on some level to talk about myself. It isn't that I am ashamed, or that I cannot speak, but rather that I fear that people will hear it and not wish to have more to do with me, because it is all too strange. I did not ask for anything about my life to happen as it did, but here I am. And maybe I fear too that people who do not truly know me will see the trappings of my life and feel envy, having no idea of the price that I have paid in connection with what I have been given. I often feel awkward and afraid of not being accepted, however much I have learned not to show it. Though, it has become better for me over time. I am not quite the mess I was when I arrived here."

Thaliel chuckled. "I remember that day well. You likely do not recall, but I was among those that helped when you were brought to the Healer's Halls, the day Aran Thranduil healed you himself."

"I imagine I made quite a lasting impression," Nenni snorted. "And no, I did not recall...I hope you forgive me. That was, as they say, quite a day for me. Good grief, it seems like so long ago and yet it was not. Anyway. I can at least decently answer one question, the plants. "Do you see that large bare patch over there? That is where grain is grown. Watch it. And I am sorry, this may startle you."

It was over in seconds, as the grains seemingly launched out of the ground, ripened and turned golden. Thaliel's lips parted in astonishment.

"The apple tree, behind you," Nenni indicated, before the tree bloomed and apples appeared, fully ripening. An apple was picked and offered to Thaliel. "Try a bite, but don't spoil your lunch," she smiled, extending her hand to take it back from the Healer after she was munching on some of it. "It isn't just that I can cause things to grow," she explained, as Thaliel watched the apple turn brown and basically liquefy until nothing was left. "I can control any aspect of the life cycle of any form of vegetation. I can see plants in their smallest components, even to their life force. I can cause them to take on shapes that I wish. Or use them to ensnare and imprison. Some uses of my gift are more taxing than others, and over time I've learned to do more. It is a beautiful, useful, and sometimes frightening ability. I have done my best to use what I have been given in the service of the Valar, and of our people. I do not know why I was chosen to have this gift or whence it came. Where I came from, I was utterly ordinary. There is so much I do not understand, but as my Ada says, I try to believe that there is a reason." Her reverie broke, as she remembered a more relevant point. "Anything here that you see, Thaliel, you may have. If you are hungry, eat the food. If you wish for flowers, take them. As long as you leave any portion of a plant behind, I can grow more from what remains."

Thaliel looked at her, stunned. "I could not imagine any of this, Hiril vuin."

"Ai! I cannot have you calling me that when we are in my home, dear one. You must choose something to call me, even if it is 'hey you.' Did you know, Thaliel, that there is a word for what has passed between us? My Ada told me. Gwaedh. i 'waedh."

She shook her head. "I have not heard that word used that way, Hir-....Adonnenniel," she said, with an almost pained look. "I am sorry, it is hard for me. I am not used to feeling worthy to consort with royalty," she said, her head dropping a little.
Nenni looked at her with sympathy. "I think it is about to get much worse, Thaliel, but have courage."

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"She means that though it will be difficult for you, you must come to understand that you are received warmly into our family, Thaliel," said Thranduil.

"Aran Thranduil," the Healer said, wheeling around at the sound of his voice and curtsying deeply.

"Ah, Thaliel," he said, offering his hand to raise her up. "It must be so when we are outside the walls that define our private spaces. But here, I am just Thranduil to you." He went down on one knee, to be the same height as her, still holding her hand. "Do not doubt that I accept you, Thaliel. The gwathel of my wife is my family, and I welcome you to our home. And our table. Come, it is time to eat."

Thaliel looked very much as though she needed wine, as Thranduil's hand on her back ushered her toward the eastern passage. "This is how you come to our home in privacy, Thaliel. This garden has a second passage, and it connects to our chambers." Nenni took her arm, trying to reassure her. Thaliel appeared as though 'overwhelmed' had increased to 'overwhelmed and vaguely terrified,' to find herself walking just ahead of her King.

"But...I cannot just...barge in here, Adonnenniel, unannounced. It would not be right, or proper."

"I have a solution to that, as well," Nenni said, as soothingly as possible, "though it will add to the list of things that will feel too strange for words. My Ada has gifts of his own, and among them is the ability to communicate by thought at great distances. You need only call out in your mind to him, if you wish to inquire about coming, need me, or need any of us. He will answer you, and he is always either with me or aware of my whereabouts. Thaliel, I will tell you as well, that most of the time, my thoughts are freely shared with both the King and Lord Glorfindel. It is my choice, to do this, and theirs as well. And yet I respect your privacy; if you would prefer in our time together that this not be the case you have only to tell me. And I am so deeply sorry, that everything about me is so peculiar. I did not mean for you to find yourself with such a complicated gwathel."

The contrition in her voice was palpable, and as Thranduil listened, he was forced to realize how odd they still were. And yet, their oddities had come to seem completely normal and ordinary, because it was simply the fabric of their lives, at this point. It was only when it had to be explained to a complete outsider, that it became obvious just how different they were.

"Please," said Thaliel. "Do not feel you have to regret who you are on account of me. The gwaedh I have with you is a strong one, only exceeded by the love I bear my husband and children. Yes, this is all very different, but any Healer who cannot adapt swiftly to changing circumstances is not good for much," she said with a great measure of conviction.

Thranduil chuckled. "I like you, Thaliel. That was well-said."

Turning to look behind her, the elleth grinned up at the King in spite of herself, to see his dazzling smile.

"Speaking of Healers, I am now very glad of having asked for the tea. It averted another disaster this morning, for me. It would seem that my husband is as familiar with its use as you are. Perhaps you both could come to some agreement on what is to be done; I cannot pretend I understand anything about how this works. But it is clear that the feeling of sickness was not an isolated
incident, and I would like to not be incapacitated for as long as this symptom will affect me," Nenni suggested.

"Agreed, meleth. We will manage a solution. I am grateful too, Thaliel, that my wife has had the good fortune not only to meet her gwathel, but that she is a Healer. And a Healer who has experienced these matters particular to ellith as well. It gives all of us great reassurance, to have your assistance for the birth of our daughter."

"I am happy to help...."

Thranduil saw her struggle.

"Repeat after me, Thaliel. Thranduil. Say my name, it will make it easier," he coaxed gently.

"Thranduil." Thaliel giggled. "I know how foolish I must seem, I am sorry..."

"No," said the King. "It is not foolish. It shows your deep respect, for which I am grateful. But when all the trappings are taken away, we are all elves, all the same flesh and spirit. I am not somehow better than you or more worthy, Thaliel. And yet we each have our part to play in the care of our people," he said kindly.

Tilting her head as she reflected on this, the diminutive elleth smiled.

"This is the door to my own private chamber, Thaliel, though it is more or less only a dressing room and a small office for me. I will tell you what...as an added measure of comfort for you, should we wish for privacy, this door will be closed. But understand that if it is open, it is a sign of welcome."

"You need not worry, Thaliel," added Thranduil. "It is, shall we say, nearly impossible to approach me without my knowing."

"As you wish," chuckled the elleth, beginning to relax somewhat.

"And this is the rest of it, which you have already seen, and I hear the welcome sound of a table being laid," Nenni said optimistically. "Excuse me, while I pounce on our poor Steward."

"Aur vaer, Galion," the Queen said.

"A good day to you as well, Hiril vuin," said the Steward with predictable propriety.

"After our meal, Galion, I was hoping to speak with you privately. And what I wish to say to you, Tinivel needs to hear as well. Would I be greatly disturbing your schedules, were this to take place? I am happy to meet at another time as well, as long as it is sometime today."

Startled, the ellon raised his head. "It will be no disturbance, Hiril vuin. I will be nearby, as will be Tinivel, at the time you request. You need only ring, and we will appear."

Nenni nodded, seeing also the look of worry that faintly cast itself over the Steward's face.

"Galion, this is not any form of censure, about which I wish to speak. I do not want you to feel...stressed. I am asking for this meeting because I need assistance, and the impeccable reputation of you both makes you the only ones I feel I can trust."

Worry transformed to vague curiosity, but most importantly, his body relaxed. "Thank you, Hiril vuin."
With a hand over her heart, she left him to finish his preparations.

Thaliel ate her lunch, which for her was arguably more of a dinner, with wonder at the swift transformation of her life. Seated between the Prince and her Queen, she found herself forced into a first-name basis with her rulers, surrounded by the luxury that was common to them. Legolas especially was going out of his way to set her at ease, but even the ever-intimidating Lord Glorfindel looked on her with a soft expression and welcome in his eyes. Whatever she had expected them to be like in private, their love and easy familiarity made it no difficulty at all to speak freely, and soon her special brand of intelligent and quirky humor began to appear...and be appreciated.

"Ai! See how fortunate we are! My Naneth is happy, and we have added both beauty and wit to our midst." The enthusiasm of the Prince was not to be denied, and Thranduil chuckled to see more and more of his son's gentle humor revealed. Too soon the meal was over. With regret, Nenni spoke. "I do not know how to see you tomorrow, Thaliel, with a day of celebration turning our schedule upside-down, but assuredly afterward?"

"Something will be managed," the Healer agreed, stifling a yawn. "Please forgive me; my own hours are often unusual. I must rest during the day, since my hours of duty are when most others sleep. I wish you a happy aur-en-onnad, Thranduil (she still struggled to say it). And at the very least, I will have more of the tea sent to you before this day is over. Your kindness and your welcome have given me great happiness, for which I sincerely thank all of you," she said softly as they all rose from the table.

Nenni embraced her, and kissed her forehead in parting. "Posto vae" (rest well). "And Thaliel, there is one other thing. It will soon be no secret that I will wish your assistance with matters relating to my pregnancy. I would assume Galasríniel is one who can be trusted to know the truth of matters between us? I do not wish an appearance of favoritism on my part to cause you trouble in your duties; I am happy to speak to her if it would be best. Yet you know her and I do not."

"She is fair-minded and not prone to the kind of thinking you fear. I will speak to her privately," Thaliel said. "And I thank you too, for what you are doing to protect me. While I wish it were not necessary, even I am aware that it is for the best, at least for now."

Glorfindel approached Thaliel. "I will escort you back to the Storeroom door. It will give you the chance to understand how we will...communicate." Smiling, he led her away, and had a private conversation of his own with her. When she at last departed the Storerooms, alone, her head spinning with the words of the golden Lord, one thing was certain. Her life had changed, more than she could have guessed. With thanks to the Valar for the many blessings, she sought the welcome solitude of her own rooms.

*****

Nenni was relieved to know that the King had duties of his own immediately after their meal, as it saved her the trouble of having to send him away. She held back Legolas, and knew that Glorfindel would return shortly. Ringing the bell summoned the Steward and the Head Chambermaid. Inviting them to be seated at the now-cleared table, they initially demurred. Her expression transformed. "Your regard for protocol and for our family is beyond question, but if I must command you both to be seated with us, I will do it." Her eyebrows arched in that manner that clearly said, you will not win this one. Looking at each other, they reluctantly sat down. She poured five cups of tea, with an equally stormy demeanor, as Legolas innocently smirked as if to imply, none of this was his fault. Everyone was given tea, and Glorfindel returned.

With eyebrows raised again, she looked pointedly from them, to the tea, and back to them again.
Their discomfort at drinking the beverage was palpable, but drink it they did. "That's better," Nenni said, smiling. "And this, and its tangential subject, is exactly what I wish to speak about. Yesterday I heard my King lament, not for the first time, that a rot exists at the heart of this Realm. And on Earth whence I came, we had a saying. 'See a need, fill a need.' I very much see a need. I may not succeed in the end, but it will not be for lack of trying.

There are two problems among our people here, as I see it; both connected. The first is that while honor is due to those who rule and lead, this perception has gone too far. When I see the humble and good-hearted elves of our Kingdom honestly believing that they are somehow living beings with lesser value, lesser worth than those in possession of wealth, status, or title, it turns my stomach. It equally pains me to see that too many of those with pale-colored hair (present company excepted, of course) seem to subscribe to this notion of inherent superiority. It is possible to maintain decorum and protocol in the public life of our Realm, while yet allowing room in which to see each other as we truly are, equal children of Eru.

Which brings me to the second issue. There are a core of individuals among us who leverage a spiteful and poisonous agenda of rampant gossiping. It is divisive, distracting, and in my royal opinion a danger to the safety of our people. The world outside these Halls is darkening, and any who are not paying heed to it are foolish. A time is coming when we will need each other, depend on each other, as never before. If the only thing I ever do in my service as Queen is to eradicate this cancer from our midst, I will have done much. And I have determined that this is to be my work, done with the help of my family at this table and those in whom trust can be placed. Aran Thranduil is to be left out of this; if he had been able to solve this problem none of us would be sitting here. Though he does not know precisely what I seek to do, I have his trust and blessing. And now, you both. I need your help. I will not ever ask you to compromise your integrity, or the trust placed in you. If I cannot find a way of succeeding without remaining above that which I seek to fight, then I will be content to fail. Yet, I need all the insight I can be given. I do not know what you and the Prince know. I do not know what weaknesses exist by which I might put a stop to this; I only know that I want this behavior to end. I would like to hear what each of you honestly thinks, about what I have said. Nothing said at this table will ever leave it; you have our word."

Both of the servants were stunned at what they were hearing. Galion spoke first, with unexpected emotion, for once dropping his barriers. While Nenni had always hoped for this, it was still surprising. "Hiril vuin, I love Aran Thranduil and have given my all to serve him faithfully. I have seen him pass through a great darkness into an emerging light; the joy of this is more than I ever hoped for. And it has all been because of you. Neither of us are unaware of these matters, nor the damage they have done. We observe, and have ever done our best to mind our own business. Many times have each of us been pressed for information about the royal family whom we serve, and ever have those questions gone unanswered. I would allow my throat to be cut, before I would betray the honor of my service to my King. While I do not see what I can do to aid you, if it is my power to do so, I will."

Nenni nodded, immensely gratified. "Thank you, for your words. I cannot take all the credit you would give me, Galion, for both the King and I owe much to Lord Glorfindel for what you have seen. Perhaps we can all agree to simply thank the Valar, for what has occurred. Tinivel?"

The elleth looked into her teacup, sipping it before answering, with a wry smile. "I never could have guessed, Hiril vuin, when you first came to us, what would transpire. I am proud to serve you, and your family. None of us knew what you would be like. You cannot know the inspiration that your fairness and obvious interest in all have given to so many of us. Being an elleth, I am perhaps closer to the problem you describe by virtue of my position and those under my oversight. One hears many things, even when one would prefer not to. While I have steadfastly refused to spread gossip, I believe it would not violate my principles to pass along some of what comes to my ears,
knowing why the information is sought." This offering exceeded Nenni’s hopes.

With a smile, she also thanked Tinivel for her words. "Then, here are your first assignments, if you feel you can manage them. Galion, however many days after the King’s aur-en-onnad it can be accomplished without undue strain on you, a dinner is to be held here. Our family, as well as Lords Penlor, Sadronnial and Merial, along with General Faelyn. And more importantly, their wives. It is my intention to exceed all bounds of ridiculousness in a display of wealth and ostentatious appearance. And at the same time, after the meal, my co-conspirators and I will attempt to focus on the noble ellith for a conversation dominated by discussion of a positive nature. I wish them to be flattered and unsettled, all at the same time, and to see what comes of it. An example will be set, of emphasizing how our time is used in service to others and to the Realm.

And then, the same day as this dinner is hosted, invitations are to go out for a second dinner; you are the ones who will tell me who is to be invited. I wish for our six guests to be those whose hard and largely unnoticed work keeps this Palace running. Launderers. Cooks. Chambermaids. Dishwashers. Stablehands. Tanners. I believe you get the idea. Ensure that these are elves with enough stability to be largely immune to social repercussions, Silvan, and occupied with tasks that would be viewed by the supposedly loftier among us as hopelessly menial. And if it were to occur that the gossip vine were to learn of those invitations right about the time the nobles were on their way to the first meal, I would consider that to be most serendipitous. Can we accomplish this?"

The sight that next greeted them took Legolas and Glorfindel aback as well as Nenni. Galion and Tinivel broke into soft laughter and turned to each other, holding hands and touching their foreheads together before speaking. "This will not be duty but pleasure, Hiril vuin," said Galion. "And perhaps we should explain our behavior. Tinivel and I have pledged our betrothal, but we have elected to keep this a secret, and to forego wearing the customary rings until the day we speak or vows. Only very few friends and relations know. This conversation shows us that we have no need to explain our reasons for doing so."

Legolas broke in quickly. "Galion, you all but raised me from an elfling. May I be the first of our family to wish you both all happiness, with my whole heart."

Before Nenni could open her mouth, Glorfindel was already speaking. "Old friend, accept my blessing as well. This news gives me joy," he said with great feeling.

"Congratulations to both of you, Tinivel and Galion, and of course we will keep your secret. May I tell Aran Thranduil, or would you prefer he not know?"

They both looked at her, surprised. "Our King may know anything about us, Hiril vuin. We did not tell him ourselves because the opportunity never seemed to present itself."

"Oddly enough, that makes more sense than you can imagine," she laughed. "And while we are having confessions of this nature, I will give one of my own, also asking your help. I have found my bonded gwathel, it is another here in the Palace. I have spent much of the last day scheming and taking measures by which to protect her from becoming a topic of conversation. I would like to ask your help, in that if anything intended to harm her ever reaches your ears, that it reach mine as well."

"Hiril vuin, congratulations," Tinivel said with great sincerity. "It does me good to know that you have found such a companion as this. But it would help if we knew her name?"

Nenni laughed, pinching the bridge of her nose. "This is what happens when one becomes over-focused on discretion. Thaliel, the Healer."
They both nodded, with pleased expressions.

"Forgive my military approach to this endeavor," said Glorfindel, "but I believe it would make sense for us to meet with some regularity. Clearly this is a tactical undertaking of significant proportions."

The servants nodded, and Galion spoke. "I will begin preparations after tomorrow, Hiril vuin, and will notify you when these proposed meals can be set into motion. I would guess that the Prince understands the, ah, social structure of the problem as well as we do, and could add much detail to your understanding. But if I may make one suggestion?"

"Please," Nenni said.

There are unused chambers near to this one, some of them quite large, and all of them with fireplaces. It would take very little effort for me to transform one of these into a formal dining area. I could also bring in furnishings that would facilitate the achievement of your goals; a place for the ellyn to converse with the King, and on the other side of the room, a larger group of comfortable and inviting seats toward which to draw the ellith. The room can be reconfigured easily to accommodate each kind of occasion you wish to host."

A gleam entered Nenni's eye. "I expect that between you and Tinivel you can make this room rival the most overblown of their living quarters?"

"I keep the catalog of all Aran Thranduil's possessions and I am already coordinating fabrics in my mind," he said with a smile.

With a chuckle, the Queen said, "I will volunteer my Ada to create floral arrangements of the greatest beauty; he has a rare gift for this. And I will make it my responsibility to provide gifts of my best fruits."

"Those were done by you, my Lord Glorfindel?" Tinivel exclaimed, astonished; she had seen the stunning flowers in the vases. The beautiful ellon merely smiled and dipped his head in thanks for the compliment.

"Thank you, both of you," Nenni gushed. "I so badly want to believe that those determined to accomplish good can succeed. Time will tell." She held her hand out, and Legolas understood what she was doing. He gripped her wrist, Glorfindel gripped that of his grandson, and Galion perceived what was being asked; Nenni's hold on Tinivel's wrist completed the circle. "Together, for Aran Thranduil" she said simply.

"Together," the others echoed.

It was a happy Queen that walked with Glorfindel to the stables for the promised ride with Legolas. *I know it is only the barest beginnings for this lunatic endeavor, but I feel heartened by their willingness to try.*

Glorfindel stopped her in the passage. *I have not imparted to you enough how proud I am of you, for what you are trying to do, whether or not it succeeds. I wish it could be said that all of our people were above lamentable behavior, but we both know that this is not the case.*

*Thank you, Ada.* That was somehow more of a compliment than anything else that came to mind, to know that he felt this was not a waste of time.

*Adonnenniel, when an ellon as upright and steadfast as Galion confesses to me that the reason he will not fully celebrate the joy of his impending marriage in our traditional manner is the same as*
what you seek to end, then...no. It is not a waste of time at all.

No, Ada. No, indeed it is not.

Chapter End Notes

gwador=sworn brother; a brother not by blood. The irregular plural, though not used here, is gwedeir.

gwathel=sworn sister; a sister not by blood. The plural, also not used here, is gwethil.
Chapter Notes

[1 Ethuil, Imladris. March 30, Gregorian]

"Adonnenniel, can you wake?" filtered through her ears. The voice belonged to Glorfindel, and she felt his touch on her hand. Her fingers moved to wrap around two of his.

*Can,* she thought. *It means, to be able to. And therefore the answer is yes. But I do not want to, nor do I want to move.* She realized that she felt sick again. *Please, let me sleep Ada,* she begged. *I do not feel well.*

"I am sorry, iellig, that you are ill. You will be helped."

*You’re going to get a shovel?* It was a half-formed thought, just before she drifted out of wakefulness.

Glorfindel frowned. He did not understand the reference, though he could guess it was something of which he would not approve. With a sigh, he rose and rang for Galion to summon Thaliel. As far as he knew, the Queen had slept through the night.

The Healer arrived quickly, bowing her head in respect to the Elflord as she moved past him. Glorfindel whispered another request to the Steward, anticipating the successful outcome of Thaliel’s work.

"Why was she able to avoid this yesterday, when she is much worse today?" Glorfindel asked in a somewhat terse tone of voice.

Thaliel took a deep breath before answering. Her training and years of service schooled her to never respond to a family member with irritation revealed in her voice or on her face but...it was perhaps a little harder here, because this was no ordinary situation, with no ordinary patient. The golden Lord baffled her. In the short time she had known him, he had appeared to be one of the most emotionally volatile individuals she had ever met. Kind and gentle, then filled with wrath; sympathetic and helpful, and now brusque. And yet it was obvious that he loved his adopted daughter, so she refused to allow herself to respond in kind. "I cannot be certain, my Lord, but I could guess", she spoke in soothing tones. "When this happened to me, it mattered that the treatments to counter it were taken as early as possible. It may be that the extra time spent asleep allowed her symptoms the opportunity to worsen." Nimble fingers retrieved both salve and cordial. "Could I trouble you again, to make her the tea? Here is another dose, in the event what was sent here has gone astray."

Glorfindel nodded, indeed not knowing where the medicine would be located within these rooms...an oversight he intended to correct very soon. Thranduil had allowed his wife to sleep through breakfast, in an understandable penance of sorts for the outcome of two days previous, when she had been so tired and he’d insisted on her attendance at the meal. Of course what no one had bothered to consider was that the King and Prince appearing alone together in the Dining Hall was a rarity, and the novelty had already generated speculative chatter. Legolas quietly informed Glorfindel of this, after the meal, as he had insisted on remaining in the chambers with her.
Thaliel dabbed salve on a particular spot on the inside of each of the Queen's forearms, a few inches below the wrist, before using her thumbs to begin rubbing it in quite firmly.

With a sharp intake of air Nenni woke from the pressure, and opened her eyes in annoyed surprise until she saw who it was. She still didn't dare move or speak, but realized that soon enough Thaliel would cause her to feel better, and managed a weak smile on account of it. The Healer stopped just long enough to caress her cheek, which elicited a contented sigh. Thaliel smiled to see it, and continued her work. Looking across the room, she tried to fathom the nature of Glorfindel's mercurial temperament. And then a possibility occurred to her. Perhaps everything that had happened between her and the Queen was very sudden, for him. Maybe her insertion into their lives was the least welcomed by the Lord of Gondolin because he was still not secure with some aspect of his life here? He had, after all, only recently arrived himself, and much had happened...quickly. Now his stay here was indefinite. I wonder... thought Thaliel, as she saw him place a saucer over the teacup. When he drew near, she spoke. "Would you like to learn to do this, my Lord?" she asked with a tone of great deference. He was already watching her like a bird of prey, but at the question his expression softened, a little, and he nodded. She explained what she was doing; rubbing the salve in but also stimulating a place on the body that could sometimes help reduce feelings of nausea. And how to find it, and why she used a longer massaging stroke because it was difficult to be precise in locating it. Very quickly, he was working on one of his daughter's arms, and seemed to be relaxing somewhat. Thaliel smiled.

I am sorry I am so much trouble, Ada, Nenni thought. Thank you, for taking care of me. I thank both of you. A feast that Galion has organized would be a terrible thing to miss, she added.

"You are an imp," he said, laughing, and then explaining to Thaliel the reason for his words.

After perhaps a quarter-hour of their attentions she felt well enough to try the tea, and from her previous coaching, drank it carefully. When she was halfway through, she said guiltily to Thaliel, "While seeing you today is more than I'd hoped for, I am truly sorry to be taking your time. Is there something I can do differently, to stop this from happening?"

Thaliel tilted her head in disbelief. "You are the Queen, and you are sorry to be taking my time?"

"Welcome to my world," muttered Glorfindel under his breath.

Nenni felt taken aback. "Do you two genuinely want me to become insufferably unconcerned about how I affect you?" she asked with some hurt in her voice.

Glorfindel opened his mouth to answer but was beaten to it by the Healer, whose green eyes were flashing. "I will not speak for your adar, but what I want is for you to not be sorry when you are being given help you so obviously need. Being given it not only out of duty, but out of love. Do you know how it feels, to hear that? As if you, my gwathel, are somehow not deserving of the same care I would give willingly to the lowest-ranking stable hand?"

Deeply in shock at the unexpected rebuke, she fell silent, with her eyes wide and lips parted. Her obvious inclination was to apologize again, and this was clearly not wanted. Nor was crying an option; the pain and tears were simply not there. There was only confusion, and some frustration. Which left only one course of action. She dropped her head, a little.

"Please forgive my shortcoming. Both of you. I do know, and you are not the first to speak to me about this, though I will give you credit for being among the most direct. This is a very ingrained behavior of mine that has been difficult to stop. I recognize that I must do better, and I will try," she said softly. "If you have more to say, I will listen, but then perhaps you will take some pity on me and answer my original question."
"Take another sip of tea, while I think about it," smirked Thaliel.

Glorfindel's regard for this diminutive elleth had just gone up several notches; he was willing to concede that she had navigated this better than he would have.

"As you wish," Nenni said, smiling contritely as she lifted the cup to her lips.

"Unfortunately, the only thing that comes to mind would be that you could wake at sunrise, drink the tea, and then if you need more rest return to sleep afterward. The tea needs to be in you before your symptoms occur, but needing more rest works against you for this."

"I'll just set my alarm clock," she said, rolling her eyes.

"It will be done," Glorfindel said. "By either myself or the King."

Thaliel did not wish to know just now what an alarm clock was, but saw that the teacup was nearly drained. "Finish it," she instructed, before taking the empty cup. "And come here." She opened her arms and pulled the Queen close. "I have a tendency to speak my mind rather bluntly when I am with family. I can see that you are far more sensitive than you appear on the surface, and I will not forget it. Enjoy your day now, and please extend my congratulations to our King. In all my years I have no recollection of his aur en onnad being celebrated, and it does my heart good to see it. But now I must go. I will assume you have a dose for tomorrow; if this is not the case please send me word; otherwise more will be prepared for days to follow. Galu," she said, and with a kiss to Nenni's forehead took her leave of both of them.

Glorfindel said nothing but did not bother to conceal the look of amusement and approval on his face. Nenni diverted her eyes, and tried to summon an interest in standing up, while she knew she was being stared at. "Go ahead, Ada. You can say it, I will take no offense. It is a lesson I cannot seem to learn, and this time I got what I deserved. What I wish I understood is, why? What am I not letting go of, that I cannot accept my own worth in any kind of consistent manner?"

Her expression was one of sincere defeat, in which he saw how much she genuinely struggled to keep any kind of comprehension of herself in focus. His expression lost its mirth. "Now I am the one who needs to do better," he said, looking down. "I have known you long enough to see the manner in which your past has damaged you. But what is not so easy is to remember that it is unfair to you, to expect that you can be counseled on something once or twice and that you can magically alter the sum of your behavior. Nothing Thaliel said was wrong, or untrue. But unlike your gwathel, I understand whence it originates and you have the right to expect more kindness from me." He moved closer to her, taking her in his arms. "It is not what you are not letting go of, iellig. This tendency on your part to apologize for what amounts to your very existence comes from the anxiety that found a home within you, for such a long time."

Nenni returned his embrace, trying hard to think. *I do believe I have worth,* she frowned as she buried her face against his robes. *And yet speaking the way I did...it feels so normal. So comfortable. What do I do, to be different? Never apologize, for anything? That too seems ridiculous, just as ridiculous as the problem itself.*

Glorfindel spoke to her very gently. "Adonnenniel, I believe you were on the right path. You thanked us for our care of you. Had you stopped there, no offense would have been taken."

*You mean, just say 'Thank You' and not say 'I'm sorry'?*

"I think it would be a good place to start."
She reflected, considering. "I think I could do this. Or what I mean is, this is something at which I believe I have a hope of success."

"You have more than a hope. But I want you to know that even of there was no success, I love you as you are. I do not love you after everything that has ever gone wrong for you is healed, or repaired. I love you this moment, no matter what."

Of all the aspects of her relationship with this ancient ellon, this was perhaps the one most difficult to absorb. Unconditional love. He had expressed a similar sentiment, the day he had offered to serve as her father. These were words she had rarely heard, and on some level they were still hard to fully accept. Love had rarely been without conditions before coming here, and therefore it had rarely been love at all. It should not feel so alien, but it still did. The honest truth is, I struggle to hear your words even as I am so grateful for them. None of that is your fault, or mine. I trust you, with my whole heart. I have hope that in time, the love you offer me will not seem so strange. I am better than when you first met me, Ada, and almost all of that has been because of your efforts. Your unqualified love is a priceless gift, and I treasure it.

She held onto him, savoring this. It was a simple enough thing; allowing herself to feel loved by her father. A father whose love was worth having. A father she admired and was proud to call her own. A father filled with grace and wisdom. The Valar had allowed her this, and she wondered if it was to the Lady Nienna that she owed this blessing. With an immense sigh of contentment she released him, and stood up to kiss his cheek. "Thank you," she said, before adding sheepishly, "I am hungry."

"Come to the table, iellig."

Two covered dishes waited, along with a tray of sliced fruits and cheeses. One of those plates held the sorts of things Nenni liked most; buttered biscuits and honey, eggs with a sauce on them, and steamed vegetables. Her eyes filled with appreciation; now she did not have to dress and parade to the kitchens to have some food. "Thank you again," she said. "You are so kind to me."

"Do not think this is solely for your benefit, Adonnenniel. It is Thranduil's begetting day, and I cannot have you unable to give your husband the gift on which you worked so hard. And were you to remain ill and undernourished, you also would not be able to tell me what I am doing wrong on the piano piece that is currently defeating my attempts to play it." His voice was serious but the tenderness in his eyes told her she was being teased.

"Then I will endeavor to fulfill your expectations," she said. "I would not want to cause ruination." Shaking her head and smiling, she bit into a biscuit, silently thanking whatever ancient elven healer had first worked out how to control morning sickness.

She was nearly done with her food when the King returned. Rising to greet him, she wished him a happy aur en onnad and embraced him. While Thranduil held her, he looked from Glorfindel to the food and back again, rapidly discerning that all had not gone well after his departure. He lifted her chin with his fingers to both look at her and give a kiss. "You were ill again, meleth?" he asked, before directing her with a gesture to please finish her meal.

Nenni nodded.

"Thaliel came, Thranduil," said Glorfindel. "We have been advised that were the medicine administered to her at daybreak, that the outcome of the morning would in theory fare much better. Not being completely familiar with your habits, my friend, I will tell you that I am offering to fulfill this duty if it would be helpful to you. I hesitate to intrude on your privacy; my only wish is that she not continue to suffer each morning."
"I understand" he said, rubbing at his wife's shoulder as she finished eating. Most days I can care for this, my Lord. But knowing that I can call on you should circumstances require it would be much appreciated." The King paused. "It was sensible advice; I can see the likely merit in what the Healer suggests."

"I also did not know where stores of medicines, including her dose of the tea, are kept here."

"If you would please follow me?" Thranduil walked him past the pool and toward his wardrobe, to indicate the cabinets concealed behind decorative fabrics along the walls. The location of the tea was revealed, as well as some other useful ointments. Many other smaller phials and jars were there as well, the purposes of which were left unexplained. Having seen many similar collections in Imladris in the possession of his Lord, Glorfindel guessed that Thranduil's knowledge of the healer's arts likely far exceeded his own. But, this was not a time for that discussion.

When they returned, Nenni was sipping on the last of her tea, and keeping her thoughts to herself while pondering the merits of applying wood varnish to playing cards. In the previous days she had experimented with forming the cards out of hardwood, but as with all precision work, it was slower and more difficult than she had hoped. Perhaps she needed to re-think the entire idea? What if instead of playing cards, she created playing tiles? Like for Scrabble, except...not? Her eyebrows raised. *When in Rome...* And if she could do tiles, perhaps she could also create dice. Then games like Yahtzee could be made as well. Nothing could be simpler for the woodworkers than to create some blank tiles and cubes and then...

"Iellig, it always concerns me when I cannot hear your thoughts and yet I see your facial expressions changing so quickly. I have come to learn that this indicates you are scheming."

Glorfindel sat next to her and smiled.

"I am, Ada," she agreed with an air of mystery. "Even when I am hiding from you, your insight is formidable. Perhaps you would consent to escort me to one of my schemes, if my King tells me that I have no other duties at the moment?" Her bearing was one of compliant innocence.

"Eru save me, there are no duties. Though, I do not believe you wish to be seen in the Halls in your current state of dishevelment, meleth."

Nenni rose to look in the mirror, and frowned. She indeed looked like she had just rolled out of bed; her hair was a tangled mess and she was dressed in only her plainest nightclothes. "I should look nicer today; it is your special feast tonight. I will find something for now, but I hope that you will honor me later by choosing something for me to wear." Disappearing, she emerged with a lovely gown in shades of eggplant that was cleverly embroidered with ivy leaves that wound around the bodice and down the sleeves. More importantly yet, the dress was on the warmer side. And she smiled to see that her husband waited with the comb and a look of expectation. And appreciation. Glorfindel had a sudden interest in styling hair, and paid close attention to Thranduil's braiding, asking a few questions now and again. When he had accomplished what he wished, he excused himself for a moment, returning with a lovely ornament that caused her lips to part. A hybrid between a headband and a tiara, though leaning more toward the former, there were lovely amethysts in the shape of violets, offset by adamants. It was very beautiful and matched her dress. The King set it into her hair, admiring his wife.

"Do you think you can keep her out of the mud for a few hours, my Lord?" he teased to Glorfindel.

"I shall endeavor to try," the golden elf said, thoroughly amused. "Your appearance is lovely, Adonnenniel. I am honored to walk at your side." His teasing had faded away, and the words were spoken with sincerity.
Nenni smiled, and rose to look in the mirror. "Thank you, Thranduil, very much. You are very generous...and why are you giving me such gifts on your aur en onnad? Today is the day for you to receive, I thought," she asked, wondering. "When do I give you your gift? I confess I do not know anything about the customs for this."

He chuckled, leaning down to kiss her. "I am receiving. My eyes are receiving the sight of my wife's beauty, so it could be said that my motives are purely selfish. But to answer your question, it is customary to bring small gifts to a celebration of this kind. I will confess that I do not know what to expect, having not done this in a very long time."

"Then perhaps when we return, you would allow me to give your gift to you privately? Will you be here? We will not be long."

"I will," he agreed. "But perhaps you in turn would agree to come to see my office. Our office. Though today is not a day for duties, I would like you to tell me if sharing this space with me would be suitable."

Her heart leaped eagerly, and the change in her facial expression was all the answer the King needed. He smiled to see it. "We will eat the mid day meal in the Hall," he said. "I cannot bear to think of making more work for Galion, today of all days." He leaned down to accept her kiss of parting, surprised and pleased when her tongue darted into his mouth out of the sight of Glorfindel. It spoke of a hunger that would wait until later. As Nenni took the golden elf's arm to depart their chambers, the expression of undisguised lust in her eyes left no doubt. With his mental discipline intact, he fought back against the stirring in his groin until he thought better of it. After the door closed, he freed himself in the stillness of their chambers and walked to lean against one of the pillars at the bathing pool. Stroking himself as he closed his eyes and thought of driving into the moist and heated body of his wife, his seed burst from him, arcing in creamy ribbons before falling into the waters that swiftly drained. His eyes widened at the sight, even as he panted in the last spasms of his climax...he'd no idea that his body ejaculated so forcefully. He'd long known that the moment of his release gave his wife considerable erotic pleasure, but had never considered the mechanics of it. Over six thousand years old, and still learning, he chuckled, as he snugged up the laces of his trousers and turned his attention to other matters with a contented sigh.

*****

It pleased Nenni to no end when she and Glorfindel passed Lady Sadronniel in the passageways, and caught the elleth's glance of undisguised envy at the jewels adorning her burnished hair. When the noble Sinda did a second double-take at the sight of the blue diamond blazing at Glorfindel's brow, it was as though Christmas had come early, give or take that there was no Christmas here. Their demeanor was politeness itself, as they acknowledged her courtesy and exchanged greetings. Is it wrong, that I am enjoying this too much? she asked Glorfindel silently as they continued on. If it is wrong, then we are both guilty together, I confess. I do not intend to allow such thoughts to dominate my mind, but, I think we can both agree that some mild glee is forgivable.

I was hoping you might say that, she sent, with a squeeze to his arm. Oh, and we are going to the woodworkers' rooms; I believe I recall the way there.

So far, so good, he smiled down at her.

I love you, Ada.

And I, you, Adonnenniel.
It required only a few minutes, to explain her request to the ellon who met them, bowing low. She had not been introduced to any of them on her previous visit with the King, and intended to rectify that oversight.

"There are many of us, Hiril vuin, that labor in these rooms. Our number is greater yet if you consider those whose skill it is to locate the trees whose life is at an end to harvest for their wood, or those whose function is the painstaking milling and drying of the lumber once it is brought to them. I am Arvellas, who oversees all those who work as wood crafters in any capacity. Lendis and Baineth both report directly to me; they are the most skilled with turning and carving, respectively." Two ellith nearby, both with similar coloring to Tinivel's except for having chocolate brown eyes, looked up from their paperwork at hearing their names and smiled in acknowledgement. Delight came over the Queen's face; of course these laborers would be divided into several diverse categories. While not an expert carpenter, she had a better than average exposure to the skills needed for advanced woodworking. Thanking him for the names, she quickly made her requests known.

"Do you have a preference as to which wood?" he asked politely.

"Hickory; but honestly given that these are small items, feel free to make use of any hardwood scraps that are in abundance. It matters that the tiles be of the same color with no variation in appearance, but the cubes can be of any variation. And if I might borrow a small set of wood burning irons once these are ready, I would be most grateful. I would not keep them long and would care for them."

Arvellas seemed very surprised. "You have skill with wood, Hiril vuin?" he asked.

Nenni laughed. "Some. Nowhere near what you possess," she replied humbly. "But I know a wood planer from a sanding block, and can manage enough to competently create some amusements for Aran Thranduil. And as you must be very busy, I thank you again and will take my leave of you; it was very nice to learn your names." Her words were spoken with obvious sincerity, and were met with smiles of gratitude in parting.

"Will you tell me of your schemes, Adonnenniel? They cannot be too secret, if you were willing to have me accompany you."

"For you, anything, Ada," she teased gently. It is the playing cards, for Thranduil's game. I have spent a great deal of time trying to work out how to improve the ones I made, and I cannot see how to succeed. Each possible solution creates five more problems. So it occurred to me that I am not framing the problem correctly. Instead of cards, I am looking at using tiles. Really they are the same thing, and are very durable by comparison. And depending on how these function, many other kinds of games can be made with different sets of wood tiles. She explained dice to him as well, and how many games used those as an equally random means to generate numbers for game play.

Glorfindel listened, and felt this was an interesting insight. He was not so concerned about games and pasttimes, but that she so relentlessly bent her mind to how to solve problems, constantly probing and completely redesigning her problem solving approach...he greatly approved of what he was seeing.

Nennni meandered onto another tangent. I am excited for Thranduil. In so many years, to have not had a celebration for him...that seems so sad. I hope that he enjoys this, and that it brings him happiness.

And yet, iellig, you did not wish to share your own aur en onnad with me. I very much sense there
They were at the chamber door again, and he opened it. She waited until they were inside before speaking. "It is no great secret. On Earth we do not say aur en onnad, it is called a 'birthday.' It is a tradition that marks the day the child is delivered into the world. In the culture I was raised in, the idea was supposed to be that it was an occasion for a celebration and gift giving, mostly with the idea of making the person feel special."

Glorfindel tilted his head, studying the unhappy thoughts and memories that were surfacing in her mind. "And for you, this was nearly always something rather different?" he asked softly.

She nodded, surprised once again at the pain she felt over something that in retrospect should have seemed utterly inconsequential. *Can you please just get over yourself?* she thought to herself, frustrated. *I'm sick of this. We're all sick of this, in here. Siiiiiiick of it.* Painting a crooked smile on her face she said, "Well, now I am somewhere without birthdays. Hopefully my experiences will be nicer."

"We both know that I will ask you more at a later time," he said kindly.

"That is your right, Ada," Nenni acknowledged, with humor, appreciating very much his awareness that this was not a time for an emotional scene, nor a moment on which she wished to focus on herself. Thranduil sat at the dining room table, a goblet of morning wine in front of him, perusing some parchments.

"Tauriel has returned from Dale, Adonnenniel," he said, looking up. "I think you both will find it most interesting to read her report." That his eyes were more amused and less troubled, she found encouraging. Mostly.

"Poor Alfwin," she said. "All this time, our forced guest. And yet there was nothing else to be done."

"About that," Thranduil said sheepishly. "I have been to see him. A number of times. And I confess that I have found the man to be likable in spite of his significant limitations." The vestiges of a smile played at the corners of his mouth. "He still does not understand who I am, even though on one occasion I wore my crown while speaking to him. And he asks each time about the 'nice elf Lady.'"

"All that is commendable and very gracious of you," Nenni said with great sincerity, but not without some gentle teasing in store. "So why do you look so chagrined?"

"Because I invited him to the feast tonight. He is to sit at our table, with both Tauriel and Anthilen to watch over him."

Glorfindel and Nenni both were openly astonished, but she was the first to recover. "Gin melin, Thranduil," rushed out of her as she hurried to him, hugging him fiercely and plastering his cheek with kisses. "I am honored to be your wife."

"You show great kindness to one who bears a good heart. His limitations are not his fault," Glorfindel said approvingly.

Thranduil beamed with pleasure. He had not expected his wife to object, but that she would endorse his impulse to this extent was completely unexpected.

"Does he have suitable garments to wear?"
"Anthilen promised to see to that," Thranduil said. "He is very kind. I do not think I realized this about him until very recently."

Shaking her head lightly to herself, her eyes widened as she realized she had failed to hide her earliest memory of Anthilen and the kindness he showed her when she was nothing but an injured prisoner held in a cell. The King's eyes were wide, to have seen it. "You must not punish him for his disobedience," she pleaded. "It would break my heart."

"You kept this from me, all this time?" the King asked, his face unreadable.

"Mostly I had forgotten it, all this time," she answered truthfully. "Please, Thranduil. I was afraid, and in pain, and his small kindness meant the world to me that day." Glorfindel did not say a word, as he looked on in her memories. He had never asked and had not understood the exact circumstances of her arrival in this world.

"He did the right thing," the King replied. "I will not hold this against him, Adonnenniel. Quite the opposite. It tells me that he has both discretion and compassion in greater measure than I did, at that time. That being said, it was the course of wisdom to keep this to yourself when it occurred. I have changed, since then," he said softly, reaching to embrace her.

"Thank you, Thranduil. Thank you." Her relief was immense as she held onto him, not aware that she was all but crushing his face against her breasts. Glorfindel turned aside so as to keep from laughing, walking over to pet Beren who was in his usual slumber on their bed.

"Meleth," the King was heard to say in a muffled voice, at which point she realized what she was doing and blushed furiously. "I would very much like to see my present now."

"Well, a change of scenery is often a favorable thing," she joked, recovering her equilibrium and clearing her throat.

"In this case, that remains to be seen," he fired back, not about to be outdone.

"You two behave yourselves," the golden Lord quipped. "Your gift is yet in my chambers, Thranduil. I will retrieve it." With an expression of complete amusement, he let himself out.

They looked at each other and burst out laughing. And being no fool, Thranduil used these few moments to kiss his wife luxuriously. "Do I get an extra gift, after the feast?" he asked with eyes full of desire.

"Anything the King wishes," she said in full sincerity, breaking away from him. "And now I will behave, lest my Ada have to come to the correct conclusion about our proclivities," she teased. Thranduil laughed, offering her some of the sweet wine, which she accepted. "I suspect that he rejoices in our closeness, after the sum of what he has witnessed."

"True. But out of regard for him I would prefer to keep his sensibilities intact. Whatever of them he has remaining, that is." They both snickered just as Glorfindel returned.

"You two," he said drily, but with eyes filled with mirth and love, as he carefully set down before Thranduil the two bundles wrapped in cloth; one rather bulky, and the other small. Nenni snickered as she kissed his cheek and climbed into his lap.

"I do not mean to be insufferable," she said. "It is only that I cannot help it much of the time."

"Imp," he said, wrapping her in a hug while looking at the King with joyful eyes. "Go on,
Thranduil. I suspect opening it will not be helpful."

He began with the largest, removing the cloth to see the carefully polished wood of the game board. And while he admired it, he had no idea what he was seeing. Next came the cards, that he handled carefully. That these had taken time, and skill, to create was obvious. "You are correct," he laughed. "I can see that great effort was given to make these, and I have no idea of their purpose. But I suspect this is another game, and that I am about to find out."

"I taught Ada to play this, it is a game called Cribbage. More than two can play, but in my opinion the game is best between two persons. If you will consent, we will demonstrate; you can look on at what we both do. It is far simpler than chess and yet has its own skill involved; it allows for more ordinary conversation with one's opponent during play."

The better part of an hour later, he had a fair grasp of the game, and his eyes were shining. "Thank you, Adonnenniel. I will truly enjoy this. I am truly enjoying this," he smiled. "It is rather compelling," he confessed.

"I am glad you like it," she smiled. "I am working on an alternative for the cards; they are really too fragile. I cannot duplicate the playing cards from Earth, here. Or if I can, how to do it yet escapes me. Bring them to Erebor; perhaps the dwarves can manage something. Cards of thin metal," she mused. "That exceeds my skill, but not theirs, I would guess."

"Dain will believe that all the elves do now is play board games," he grumbled affectionately.

"There are worse ways to spend one's time," Glorfindel grinned, revealing that he held a very high-scoring hand of cards that assured him the victory in their first game.

"Well-done, my Lord," Thranduil conceded, rising. "I will set these treasures on the table near the fire, and we will all enjoy them more later. Would you come see the office, now?"

*****

"This is not an office, this is a cavern," Nenni said in disbelief. The room, if it could be called that, was like the library and yet not. Dominated by a massive hearth in the rear central wall, shelving with documents reached to the ceiling. For the most part, books and scrolls and stacks of parchment seemed to be available in an orderly fashion, but her eye caught areas where disorganization seemed to be the case. A very large desk that she presumed to be his sat at one end, over lush carpets and surrounded by wall hangings. A stunning tapestry of forest scenes hung behind the desk. A sideboard with wine and drinking vessels was present as well, as were comfortable chairs nearer the fire. And away from the King's desk, at the opposite end of the chamber, there were privacy screens. She walked to these in curiosity, and found behind them a desk as large but not so ornate as Thranduil's, absolutely stacked with records and ledgers.

Her eyeballs practically quivered with the impulse to tidy and organize this...many of the piles looked like an avalanche of documents waiting to happen. Her hand came to her mouth. Years ago, at the University, she had seen a professor's office that had been similar in appearance; it looked as though every piece of paper from the man's entire academic career was stacked in a manner that would make any hoarder envious. Thranduil saw, and guided her away by the shoulders. "That is Maethirion's work-space," he said. "When he comes here, we do not speak to him or acknowledge his presence. He will not utter a word. And meleth...do not ever touch his papers. The screens exist so that no one else need look upon...that. He is a valued talent of this realm, but there are a few small things required to ensure his happiness; I have just spoken both of them to you."

"I see," she said, the little muscle beneath her eye still involuntarily twitching. Glorfindel followed
this too, fascinated but saying nothing.

Thranduil guided her to his desk. "I had thought to have another desk brought. You may have one of any size of your choosing. And because you become cold more easily now, I had considered that you might be more comfortable nearer the fire? We could move it else where if you preferred, later on. She stood very still, looking back and forth from his desk to the area he proposed, thinking.

"I would be very happy, to work in here," she said. "A desk two-thirds the size of yours would suit nicely. And a chair measured so that I can sit correctly at the desk. I would like the writing surface to be level with my bent elbows. And I have a habit of crossing my legs or sitting on my feet when I work, and would like enough room where I sit to allow for that."

If Thranduil was surprised by these requests, he hid it well. "It will be as you ask, meleth. I will be pleased, to share this space with you."

She smiled. "I assume that it is not customary to speak aloud in this place, unless some manner of conference or consultation is occurring, especially if Maethirion is working here as well?"

"Something like that," he grinned. "Though being King and Queen reduces the chances that anyone will openly complain."

******

Nenni sat by the fire, very happy. She read a small book of lovely poems in Quenya that Glorfindel had found in the library, while enjoying occasional attention to her feet from Thranduil as the two ellyn played the card game. Very occasionally she was asked to provide clarification as to a rule, but for the most part they were doing very well.

"This is astonishingly enjoyable, for all its relative lack of complexity. Thank you, meleth," he said, his eyes shining. That her gift was honestly being enjoyed, was all the reward she wanted. Wait until Yahtzee, she thought with a smile. And then a completely new thought came. What in Ennor would Monopoly look like? The book went onto her lap, and her eyebrows raised. Gondolin would have to be The Boardwalk, she reasoned. And maybe Lorien would be Park Place. Gondor, the Woodland Realm, and Imladris would be the green properties, or perhaps Menegroth instead of Gondor....

Thranduil and Glorfindel were both openly staring at her, while she daydreamed all of this.

"Come back, iellig," the golden Lord said gently.

Nenni stretched luxuriously. "Now you've interrupted me, how will I ever figure out what the railroads will be?" she teased. Rising, she went to retrieve something that would be more productive than musing on board games: Tauriel's report. She returned with it to the couch and laid back down to read. Her eyebrows were in constant motion, and when she finished, she lowered the parchment. You can't make this stuff up, she thought, before lifting it again to re-read just in case she somehow had misunderstood or inaccurately read the words that were written. Never mind that Tauriel's neat script and highly concise narrative style really left no room for confusion. So basically the Three Stooges have come to an illusion of holding power in Esgaroth, and we have had Curly and Larry in prison for these past weeks. Wonderful. She shook her head, smiling, and returned the parchment to the sideboard.

*****

Their guests awaited them at what would be the fullest Royal Table in Nenni's time living in the
Halls. After Galion's bell, the King swept onto the balcony first, looking resplendent in what she referred to as his "white peacock" robe. It gratified her to no end to see Thranduil wearing her wedding gift to him. Their guests and family took their places as Nenni gave her customary curtsy to her husband. Except this time, he honored her in return, kissing her hand as he raised her up. She flushed with pleasure, that he would do this for her on his special day. The elves below, in addition to their usual gesture of respect to their King, were unusually demonstrative. A rumbling chorus of 'Blessed aur en onnad, Aran Thranduil,' or something very much like it, rippled across the Hall. With a beautiful smile, the King acknowledged their sentiment by placing his hand over his heart.

In a concession to the number dining, the table had been moved further from the balustrade so that diners could be seated on both sides; ordinarily all at the King's table faced the same direction, overlooking the Hall below. Glorfindel, Thanduil, Nenni and Legolas took one side; Anthilen, Alfwin and Tauriel sat opposite. All were dressed in their nicest clothing. No sooner were they seated than Alfwin's face transformed.

"Nice elf Lady!" he said with sincere delight. "I wondered if I would see you again," he said softly. "You are very pretty."

"She is, isn't she, Alfwin?" Thranduil agreed with a kind smile. "Did you know that she is my wife?"

This brought a look of great happiness to the simple man's face, as he processed this news.

"Are you comfortable here, in our Halls, Alfwin?" Nenni asked. "I am sorry that I have not been to see you. I have often not felt well, or I would have done better."

Tauriel's eyebrow raised, but she said nothing.

"Elves get sick?" Alfwin said with both confusion and sadness.

"No, Alfwin," Nenni smiled. "I am going to have a baby, and sometimes that can make the mother not feel quite right."

"Ohhhh," he said, considering this. "Your baby will be very beautiful, nice Elf lady." He frowned. "Do you have a name?" he wondered aloud plaintively.

"I do," she said kindly. "It is Adonnenniel, but you can call me Nenni if you like. Maybe that is easier?"

"Nenni," he smiled, now feeling very happy. "What do you do here, Nenni?" Tauriel and Anthilen were clearly struggling to keep their faces neutral. The dear man was so innocent, so good-hearted, and so...clueless.

I am not about to lie to him...though, she genuinely hoped he would not be overwhelmed. Both her and Thranduil were wearing their diadems, as was Glorfindel...anyone else in Ennor would have understood based on the visual cues of circumstances alone. "I am the Queen of the Woodland Realm, Alfwin. So I do all sorts of different things. But most of my time is spent growing food for my people. And some of the fruits and vegetables you have eaten." As nicely as possible, she smiled at the man encouragingly.

His eyes were now worryingly startled. "Nice elf Lady...is the Queen"? he repeated, half to himself, and half to her.

"Yes, that is right," she said encouragingly. But like a stone beginning to roll down a hillside, she could see it on his face as he looked at her, and then Thranduil, then back to her, the once more to
Thranduil...she could stand it no longer. "He is the Elvenking Thranduil, Alfwin. I think you told me once that you wanted to see the Elvenking? And now you have! We both like you, very much," she added warmly, hoping that this information would not precipitate something...strange.

His lips parted, and he lowered his eyes. "I am eating with the King and Queen of the Elves?" he whispered. Slowly he raised his eyes again. "I am not smart. Others tell me, and I know it too. You have been very kind to Alfwin. Thank you, m-my Lord and my Lady."

*Thranduil, what will happen to him? He is good-hearted and innocent, and to return him to Esgaroth would mean returning him to the clutches of those who will misuse and bring him to harm.*

*I agree, meleth, but what would you have me do? He is a mortal, not one of my subjects. His fate lawfully rests with the King of Dale.*

*Then can we not ask the King of Dale if he could be allowed to live among us? Surely there is some work he might do to earn his way? I know it is foolish and yet it breaks my heart to think of what will befall him otherwise. What do you think those two blackguards in our dungeon will do to him, when they learn he has been an honored guest while they were imprisoned? I cannot imagine that it will be anything good. I feel somehow...responsible for him.*

*I will consider your words, Adonnenniel.*

*Yes, Hîr vuin,* she replied at once, offering no further comment.

The King felt surprised; it was not often that she replied to him thus...since Imladris. But then he realized; *of course.* His wife's thinking was compartmentalized, and this was a matter of rulership. Therefore the authority was his, and she was acknowledging his right to decide.

When the meal concluded, Nenni went to Alfwin, taking his hand. "I hope, my friend, that understanding who we are has not made you feel uncomfortable. It is why we did not tell you from the beginning," she confessed. "We wanted you to feel at home, here. Have you been happy? Surely you must miss your home."

Alfwin looked down, and shook his head No. "I have no one. No one looks after me, and it was hard to find work. I had a brother once, but..." he trailed off. "Being here has been a dream, nice Elv...I mean, m-my Lady," he stammered. "I wish I could stay." And then his face became further forlorn. "I know it is the King's special day, and I have no gift."

Nenni smiled encouragingly, squeezing his hand. "Yes you do. The King's enjoyment of having you as his guest, here; that was a gift in his eyes. He will probably receive many small things from others; do not think your being here mattered any less," she said kindly.

He nodded, seeming to brighten. "Seven hundred and forty-two elves. Three hundred and sixteen candles on the tables. And one hundred an eighty three gifts for the King," he said, gesturing down below to a table piled over with small items.

Nenni stared at him, suddenly thinking along different lines. On Earth, some had autism. And some with autism were *savants.* "Alfwin," she asked, "how many homes are there in Esgaroth?"

"Two hundred and ninety-three," he said happily.

"How many piles hold up the city?"

"One thousand, seven hundred and twenty-two," he grinned. "I like to count things, my Lady."
"I can see that," she grinned. "Here is one more for you. See my wedding rings? How many little gems are there?"

He tilted his head for all of about five seconds. "Sixty-seven."

"Ah, Alfwin. You are smart. Did you know that for some people, all their smart is bottled up in one place only? That makes you special. Very special. I am so glad, that you could eat with us, and I promise you I will visit you soon." She smiled and kissed him on the cheek, and turned him over to the care of Anthilon and Tauriel, who had witnessed every word of this. Before they left the Hall, Nenni took Tauriel aside and spoke softly. "When your duties permit, would you seek me out tomorrow? There are questions I would like to have answered."

The auburn-haired elleth bowed her head formally. "Yes, Hiril vuin," and left. But when their eyes met, both pairs were shining with mirth. The Royal Family descended through the passages to the main Hall, where seats were arranged on a dais, and Maethirion stood ready with a ledger to record. Nearby, The vast majority of the elves had remained below, to watch the King open his gifts. Galion stood ready to pass them along from the table, his features radiant with the success of his planning; truly, the meal had been perfection, and even now, little trays of...were those cupcakes? were being borne around the hall by those who served the food. And while not seated exactly with them, Alfwin, Tauriel and Anthilon occupied a prime viewing location.

Legolas caught Nenni's eye, and gestured in that special manner he had of communicating only by glances that the noble ellith were arrayed not so far distant, watching the proceedings with rapt attention. She waited some moments before looking in their direction, determined to not be obvious. Making eye contact, she graciously returned their bows of the head with one of her own, smiling kindly. Their own gazes had been riveted on her gown and jewels, but to be fair, quite a lot of the elves were looking at them. It was not really so often that they were in this kind of proximity to those who were thought to be of less lofty station, and the curiosity and admiring stares felt understandable.

Though, it made Nenni happy that just as many eyes were directed at the golden Lord to her right, whose great beauty was being seen 'up-close' for the first time by many who had only ever heard his legendary name. If the stares and whispers caused him discomfort, he did not let on, but instead gave only kind smiles as the stunning blue gem blazed on his brow.

Would you offer me your arm to hold, Ada?

Are you very certain you wish to do that, iellig? This is a very public setting, and all here will take note of it.

I am not ashamed of my love for you, Ada. I am Queen, and they can all go stuff themselves if it is somehow a problem for a daughter to show affection to her father.

The mirth came across in his words spoken aloud. "Iellig," he said softly, offering his forearm.

"Ada," she smiled, taking it, even as she looked back to her husband, and the unfettered delight on his face that so many small demonstrations of thoughtfulness would be given to him.

Glorfindel knew why she asked. Though she determined to show nothing outwardly, the stares and attention made her feel anxious. Touching him, in any fashion, helped counteract that with reassurance and a sense of security.

The King received so many things, and each was recorded by the dutiful scribe. Most were labelled as to the giver (or givers, as some were from families), and a few were anonymous. There was a
range of things received, from resplendent brooches given by some of the very wealthy, to one woodcarving that was the effort of an older, shy elfling who had not yet come of age. He was of little means but obvious talent, for the piece was a depiction of Tálagon in the forest, done in a bas relief on previously stained wood. And it was very, very good. The heartfelt appreciation on the King's face as he looked at the young gift giver, complimented and thanked him nearly overwhelmed the slender ellon, whose happiness was complete. Nenni felt it was the single most touching moment she had seen, and then her eyes fell on the ellith that were rapidly becoming a retinue of harpies, to her way of thinking. Their faces were filled with dismissive scorn, because the gift was one that was not made of gems or precious metals, and her ire rose.

Iellig, she heard. Have forbearance.

Her hand tightened on his arm in reply, as soothing feelings came over her. And she was grateful, for what he gave. A rather long time was needed, to open all of the offerings, and at the end the King stood and gave a gracious speech of thanks to all still assembled. More cupcakes were passed around, and Thranduil gave one to Nenni, whispering to Galion to perhaps save a few to send to their chambers. She laughed and attempted to eat the small cake in a suitably Queenly manner, nibbling at it politely when all she really wished was to stuff it into her face in two chomps worthy of a dinosaur tearing into flesh. And fortunately she finished the treat before the King concluded his speech, because the last thing he mentioned was, "two weeks hence, we depart for a diplomatic visit to King Dain of Erebor."

Polite murmurs of interest and approval swirled around the room, and she kept a serene and assured smile on her face while privately wanting to kick her husband's shins for not having informed her of this beforehand. Technically, she had no right to be angry with him; this was another of 'those' decisions. She sighed, carefully. They would have to grow together, in both their marriage and their shared rule. Her feelings could be discussed with him later on; he'd meant no offense, but was rather just being Thranduil...and that could often be counted on to be an unpredictable proposition.

By the time they returned to their chambers, it was early evening, and her mind was sorting many things. Alfwin. Tauriel. Their journey. Their mortal prisoners. Beren. Dwarves. Board games. Circumstances in Esgaroth. Wheat production. Amarantine. Thaliel. Legolas. The Harpies. Seated by the fire, she was trying to warm her feet as she chewed a fingernail. Her thoughts were shielded from Thranduil but not Glorfindel. The King poured himself wine and came to sit with her, taking her feet into his lap. Glorfindel was trying to read the little book of poems, insofar as anyone could be capable of tuning out the stamp mill of his daughter's thoughts. The older elf looked up. "I think it is best I retire now. Thranduil, my blessings once again on your aur en onnad. This day was joyous," he said with a smile.

"Ada, I am sorry," Nenni said, her reverie broken. "I never did help you with your piano problem."

"It can wait," Glorfindel said.

"Can I ask, what piece was it?"

"One of your Mozart sonatas," He obligingly hummed the melody. "I yet have difficulty remembering the names of all the keys," he confessed.

"Show me, the part you cannot play?" she asked.

The image flared into her mind. "Ohhhhhhh that," she chuckled. "That was a rude awakening for me. I will simply tell you, Ada, and perhaps you can work it out. You do not move your right hand, to play those higher notes. Your left hand crosses over your right. First it plays the bass register,
and then rapidly crosses over to play the dyads, then back down again. It is a bit of a challenge at first, but fun once you practice a little." She demonstrated in gestures, and his eyebrows raised.

"Well, I know what I want to do now," Glorfindel chuckled. "Thank you, and I wish you both a good evening." His humming could be heard as he hurried off to the instrument, eager to try the solution to his problem.

Thranduil chuckled, shaking his head, until his face took on a more serious expression. "Adonnenniel, have I angered you?" he asked carefully.

She regarded him, unsure how to reply. Because the answer was both Yes and No, and either way, it had been a nice occasion and she did not wish to precipitate a disagreement, today of all days. "If I answer, can you promise me that if discussing this threatens to become an argument, that we will set it aside until tomorrow? We have been getting along very well, and I do not wish to be the means by which that changes. In fact," she lowered her head,"I think I am afraid of that, more than anything."

"I promise you," he said kindly and without hesitation. "If I am to be honest, you are keeping me out of your thoughts, and have been since the feast. I do not understand why, and fear I have offended you."

She reached across to him, asking to be held, and he pulled her carefully into his lap. "I was caught unawares, when you announced our departure. I felt a little hurt and a lot surprised, that you had not spoken with me first about it. And yet I have no right to those feelings, because you are King and you are not required to consult with me in this manner. I am trying to, as they said on Earth, 'get over myself.' I am sorry. I thought it better to guard my thoughts than to hurt your feelings in turn. This is your special day, and I want it to remain that until its very end."

His eyes widened. "And here I thought it was because of what I said to you about Alfwin," he shook his head. "Adonnenniel, I apologize. This will not sound like a very good defense, but Legolas and I have spent much of our time together working out the logistics of this visit. Who will come, and why. Who will stay, and why. How many guards, how many support staff...nothing of this nature is ever simple; it will not at all be like our visit to Imladris. For a King and Queen to simply go somewhere, without fanfare or preparation, is ordinarily unheard of. I became so caught up in the sense of camaraderie with my son that...I forgot about you. I forgot to include you. I have made you my Queen and yet I continue to behave as if you do not exist at my side and...this was inexcusable. Please pardon me."

Her lips parted, having guessed at a few possible reasons but nothing so simple as this. She shook her head, chuckling as she reached to kiss him. "There is not really anything to pardon. But that you would care about my feelings so much and explain what happened in this way...thank you. Just as you are trying to understand...us, I am trying as well. What has changed most for me is how I am to relate to you as my King. It all seems very foggy now, as I try to learn to fit into a role that you have managed alone for a very long time. In most ways we are even partners, but not this one. I can understand easily why you would have forgotten about me. Honestly, it is mostly funny. I love you, Thranduil."

"In a way, I suppose you are right," he grinned, touching his forehead to hers in gladness that nothing serious was amiss. "There is humor. And I will explain myself, too. Though I managed to not talk to you, I did consider you a great deal. You probably believed we would depart later on, and originally that was my thought as well. But you will have the easiest time of this journey before you grow heavy with Amaranthine. It made sense to me to have this behind us before you could become too uncomfortable. I thought it would also please you that I wish Thaliel to come, to
Nenni smiled at him, because this did indeed constitute a happy thought. "We will figure it out, sooner or later, husband. There are many small matters I would like to discuss, about this. But not tonight. I imagined that you would have other thoughts concerning how you wished to pass the time." Reaching up, she softly kissed his lips that tasted of sweet wine.
Chapter Notes

[2 Ethuil -6 Ethuil, Imladris, March 31-April 4, Gregorian]

“I count him braver who overcomes his desires than him who conquers his enemies; for the hardest victory is over self.” – Aristotle.

This chapter contains an unusual amount of musical/cultural references, listed in the endnotes.

"He said what?" Nenni asked again, leaning forward on the sofa, staring at Tauriel in disbelief. The Commander laughed in spite of herself, her nervousness abating. In all her years serving Aran Thranduil, she had never been invited anywhere near his private chambers, not that this was by any means surprising. But when her answer of the Queen's summons caused her to be at their door, with Galion admitting her, it engendered curiosity. That only the Queen was at home, made this visit seem far less uncomfortable. Wine was poured, though Nenni watered her own, and she had insisted that Tauriel come inside and join her, protesting that she was not about to freeze in the sitting room in order to satisfy formality. And it had turned out, that she wished to ask questions to details not included in Tauriel's report of her errand to Dale.

"King Brand said, Hiril vuin, that those in Esgaroth were a pack of drooling infants. Actually, pardon me. That is not fully correct. He said that those running Esgaroth were a pack of drooling infants. I must be more precise with my words."

Nenni massaged her brow. "And in your personal estimation, why is he tolerating this state of affairs when it presumably lies within his authority to make changes for the better?"

Tauriel frowned. "I asked myself that question," she said. "And I do not have a solid answer. Only intuition. Aran Thranduil does not prefer speculation, Hiril vuin. Which is why I did not list any such thoughts in my report."

"You will find that I am not Aran Thranduil," Nenni said. "My husband and I are different, and value different insights; he has his own brilliance. But impressions interest me, and I very much want to hear yours. I do not believe that males and females always make use of the same information, and yet one is not better than the other." Her eyes fixed on Tauriel's, as she waited for a reply.

"Then, it was my intuition," she grinned, "that he was leaving matters to implode on their own. That he believed that given enough time, the Ship of Fools would sink itself, thereby saving him the necessity of interfering."

Eyebrows arched. "Hm. Sometimes a valid strategy, and sometimes a recipe for very unhappy subjects. Did you enter Esgaroth itself, or was it more that you surveilled it at a distance? Did you gain a sense of the populace?"

She shook her head. "My orders were to be cautious yet thorough. I felt it best to go with those
under me to watch, and listen. For elves to go there is unusual, but we passed through unhindered. I
saw many that seemed fearful, beaten down. There was a sense of corruption, that a faction of the
men existed that were essentially thugs, for lack of better words. As for the current Master of the
town, he is no better in my opinion than the one that lived there during the time of Smaug. In fact,
he may be worse. The old one was greedy and clever. This one appears to be greedy and with all
the sense of a bollard. I want to be clear, I did not interact with their Master nor have I met him. But
my position brings me word of goings-on outside our lands, and that is how I would sum up what I
have heard."

Nenni chuckled. "Well, that is a rousing endorsement! But I think that answers my questions, or at
least all the ones I can think of at the moment. And I sincerely thank you, for coming to me. I
would have sought you out, but the past many mornings have been most inconsistent. I never know
quite when my daughter is going to try to make me lose my breakfast, and there is nothing quite
like the risk of that to keep one from wishing to walk the Halls."

Tauriel laughed openly, appreciating the humor. "Ah, so this is what you meant at the feast. I did
not understand. I am sorry, to hear of the difficulties. Honestly I cannot...imagine."

"Neither could I," Nenni said ruefully. "But to see the King so filled with joy, it is worth the
drawbacks. Did you know, Tauriel," her voice dropped quite a lot, "that I was granted a vision of
my daughter, as a grown elleth? And that when I saw her, she reminded me of you. Fierce, wild,
running through the fields with a bow in her hand and clad as a wood elf on the hunt. It was this,
more than anything else, that made me so happy. No pink gowns for her, my friend. She will walk
in her brother's footsteps."

Tauriel's face radiated enjoyment at both the news and the compliment. "Then I will look forward
to teaching her the bow. I must ensure she can hold her own against the Prince," she smiled, while
the Queen nodded with perhaps too much glee.

Just then Glorfindel entered the rooms, and having finished her wine, Tauriel rose to leave. "Please
forgive me, but I have training to oversee in only a few minutes. Hiril vuin, Lord Glorfindel," she
said politely, bowing before she withdrew.

"I see you have been busy, Iellig," he said kindly, the piercing eyes fixing on her with obvious
concern. "I should like to know your thoughts, but more than that, whether you have felt well this
morning?"

"So far I have had no difficulty, except being woken to drink the tea. I slept like the, erm, I slept
very soundly. It was not easy to wake me."

Glorfindel tilted his head. "Slept like the dead? This is a mortal saying?"

She nodded. "Many humans, especially poets, believed that sleep and death were the same, except
that one could wake from the former. I personally agreed; the difference seemed like it must be
minimal. But I imagine you might not. Come to think of it, you are the only being I have ever met
who can offer comment on the matter based on experience." Her brows knotted, and she hesitated.
"If you would ever not mind speaking of it, what did happen, to you? I feel disrespectful, asking,
and yet it is a central question of every mortal who ever has lived. We have no way of knowing
what lies beyond, for none ever return to tell in a way that is demonstrably believable. People have
stories, but..." Nenni looked down. "I should not have asked. Can you please forget that I did?"

There was an uncomfortable silence between them, before Glorfindel pulled her to sit next to him.
"Iellig, we have agreed to move beyond such thinking, have we not? You may ask, that or anything
else under Anor. But perhaps this is not the best time for me to give an answer. There is much to
do today, and I would not have your thoughts mired in this of all things. And when I do reply, I must emphasize what you already have been told: The Halls of Mandos differ for each, according to their need. My experience would have been just that, my own."

With a nod and a smile, she looked up to see that his eyes were soft and untroubled. "And there is much to do today...because?" Her usual self was quick to resurface.

He laughed. "Well, first, O Queen, I thought we might review your production tables, for the wheat? Surely if we are to depart in two weeks, it would be helpful to see what damage it will do to the schedule. I am prepared to give extra effort, by way of mitigation."

"Then it is nice to see that one of us is thinking responsibly," she grimaced. "Though I do not imagine we will be gone anywhere near such a length of time as we were to Imladris?"

"It is true that I believe your husband means to remain at Erebor for something like only three to five days. And yet we have no eagles, and from what I have gleaned from some late-night conversation with him, it is a significant undertaking to travel. Much like when we went to hunt the orcs, we travel as a large group, and that means with slowness. It is over thirteen leagues to Esgaroth as a bird flies, and as much again from Esgaroth to Erebor. It is not unreasonable that it will be a weeks' journey in each direction, with many on foot and horses drawing carts."

Listening to him, a sense of chagrin swept over her that she tried to mask. Once again, important information was greeting her ears that was nearly common knowledge to everyone else. Yet she was among the last to know; same old story. "I see," is what she said aloud. "So really, while it will not be quite so long, it will be close. This is rather relevant. And if we are not at least where we should be or even a little ahead with the wheat, then we will be that much behind on our return."

"Exactly," he said, not fooled for a moment as to her feelings, but giving her marks for trying to move beyond them. And yet he found that he was the one who could not resist bringing her to him. "I know I should not coddle you, Adonnaenniel, so forgive my weakness. But because it is my right as a father to show such sentiment, I will remind you of what you already know. Thranduil did not mean to exclude you. I heard your discussion with him. I believe that with some time, he will...straighten out, so to speak. His emotional focus is badly fragmented, for him. He is not like you and I, where it is no difficulty to pay attention to the inner needs or wants of more than one individual at the same time. He..."

She held up her hand, but with a smile. "I do know, Ada. I see what you see. My husband has a very different personality than my own, and while I cannot exactly relate, I am at least aware of it. I believe that he loves me, and is trying his best. As for the rest, I will manage. While I cannot help my innermost responses, I do not have to behave like a little snowflake outwardly."

"And yet those innermost responses are gaining in resilience, with time. You are doing very well. Of late, you have done far better than I have."

"That is because we are quite a pair." Her eyes sparkled with humor. "So come, let us look at wheat records," she teased. "And was there something afterward? You seemed to hint that my morning would be spoken for."

"Yes, if you are up to the challenge. It has occurred to me that for some weeks now you have been denied any opportunity to have a second chance at me in the sparring ring. I know that your last defeat grated on you, because you were already fatigued and at a disadvantage that day. I thought you might wish for a rematch, and have been waiting for an occasion when you were not ill or tired."
"You would let me do that?" she asked, incredulous, even as her heart leaped at the chance to fight him.

"I promised you I would see to your fitness, did I not? If your sickness from the pregnancy is at last being controlled, then it is time to return to ordinary routines. But you will wear all your proper armor, none of this leather-jerkin business," he said.

Kissing his cheek, she rose. "As you wish, dear Ada. Now give me a moment to put on other clothing, and while I am thus occupied you can read the wheat tables." A moment later the sheaf of records was handed to him, while she changed, running her fingers through her long hair. An eyebrow raised, and suddenly she had an idea. With a hair stick, she made a zig-zag part all the way to the back, dividing it into two sections. In moments, she had a Sailor Moon double-bun managed, that she stabbed into place with short sticks. *That looks freaking adorable.* Though, she might be the only one who had that opinion. Elves simply never seemed to put their hair up, ever, which was baffling. She snickered to think of how The Aviary would view it. 'Aviary' was her new, kinder mental term for the same ellith that were 'Harpies' when her mood was not so charitable.

Smiling, she emerged. "Are you ready, and do you have a report for me?" Her teasing, when she was in a good mood, could be nearly relentless.

"Yes, I..." speech dropped off as he looked at her. "What in Eru's name have you done with your hair?"

Laughter erupted. "It is something that pleases me for working, is what I have done. Your eyes will recover, I promise. And I am certain that this is less shocking than how my hair appeared when I first arrived here. Elves are very funny, about hair."

Glorfindel walked around her, digesting this. "We are, as of yesterday, exactly caught up in terms of your stated schedule," he said. "So to minimize the impact of this next excursion..."

"We must work ahead and also take into account that what happened to the garden the first time will happen again. Unless...I wonder," she trailed off. *Could Thranduil's own gifts counteract the worst of it?* Later, she would have to ask. "Either way, off to the wars. You are content to work, in your clothing?" Her eyes assessed his fine outer robes.

With a smile, he removed this garment and laid it on her bed, revealing a simple tunic and leggings underneath. The lighter, fitted clothing left the chiseled outlines of his body more visible than she had yet seen, and her eyebrow raised. *I still do not understand how I can beat him in combat. And yet I have.* It was obvious that he was more powerfully built than even Thranduil, which was saying a great deal. Though she had already known this on some level by the feel of him over his clothes, it not the same as a visual understanding. *Never underestimate sharp pointy things, I guess is the answer,* she smirked, turning up the passage. "Beren, do you want to come to the garden?" she hollered to the dozing hound in the next room. The sound of shaking ears and singsong yawns answered that.

"He has a great deal to say, in his own way, doesn't he?" marveled the golden elf at the sounds emitting from the dog.

"You've no idea. And I certainly hope that Erebor has a dog door."

*****

It was hard to focus on her writing when such tantalizing amusement had been spoken to her. It had been a some days since Thranduil's aur en onnad, and the diamond of an ellon known as Galion
had just informed her that all arrangements had been made. Her desired dinner with The Aviary was underway; planned for the evening after next. That gave just over two full days to have Thranduil gather together her excesses by way of adornment. Seated at her desk in their shared office, she could not help but grinning every time she tried to organize her papers.

And Nenni had personalized the room a little, too. Vases of flowers resided on her desk. And then on account of feeling selfish, more vases were procured for Thranduil and Maethirion. Earlier, she had been about to place her few but attractive blossoms on the scribe's desk, but hesitated. There technically was one free corner amidst the towering piles of documents, though whether it was a safe corner for something containing water remained to be seen. *What if the papers experienced a landslide?* Thinking better of the idea after she considered the possible consequences of water, ink and parchment thrown together, she withdrew her offering. Later on, she returned with an arrangement of statice, baby's breath and strawflowers. These could be placed in a dry vase, where they in turn would dessicate into crispness without ever losing their vibrant colors or delicate shapes. And she, in turn, would be free of the potential wrath of an incensed elf at finding his precious records soggy and with ruined script. After she placed her little gift on the corner of his appallingly disorganized desk, no further thought was given to it.

Amidst reflecting on the realities of this upcoming dinner, Nenni found her mood unaccountably darkening. This would require a tremendous use of her emotional reserves and would be tedious in the extreme, small amusements aside. These contemplations were causing wheat production tables and her charts on summer vegetable volumes to blur together. That annoyed her. Suddenly, this whole idea of dismantling the Aviary had lost its charm, but she had no choice. This had been her notion, her wish, and a lot of trouble was underway to enable her first move on the chessboard in this particular game. *And in two weeks we will be gone for...more than two weeks.* This last thought tipped the scales. When Maethirion entered the room, he went unnoticed though Nenni was staring right at him. And when the ellon emerged from behind the privacy screen holding the little vase, his face puckered with a mighty frown, the Queen did not notice that either, for a worthy frown of her own was well underway as she exited the room. With a raised eyebrow he watched her leave, tut-tutting his annoyance when he noted the stopper had left off her ink-pot. Taking the vase, he looked at it again more carefully, admiring the flowers. His pretense of difficulty and churlishness would have to wait. With a smirk, the flowers were returned to his desk, and he extended a long finger to touch one of the delicate blossoms in curiosity.

The mood swing that had arrived was impressive. Marching to the garden, she returned instinctively to the log near the citrus trees, sitting on the ground and leaning back against it. Glorfindel was occupied with Thranduil, which meant that in theory, indulgence in her current frame of mind without interference should be possible. Some familiar part of her found that intention to be immensely pleasing. Curling up, her knees pulled to her chest, she wallowed in how much she did not want to go anywhere, even though this entire trip was at her request. Eyes squeezed shut, the figurative clouds over her head gathered and blackened. And soon, irritation and annoyance morphed slowly into the familiar sensations of feeling only intense withdrawal, tinged with grey shades of sadness, vexation, and a profound desire to do nothing.

"You are not easy to find," Thaliel said quietly, her arm sliding around Nenni's shoulders.

It needed several moments, for Nenni's awareness to emerge enough to muster an answer. "I suppose I am not," was murmured. Caught badly unawares, she cleared her throat even as her fingers hesitantly found those of her friend, interlacing with them. "How are you this afternoon, Thaliel? It has been longer than I anticipated, since I have seen you." A pause came. "You have not found me in the best circumstances. I will need a few moments to be able to behave like an adult, much less a Queen. You still have time to run."
"I was warned," she said, pulling her closer.

Nenni heaved a sigh. "Ada sent you." It was not a question.

"His exact words were that 'quite a frame of mind had come over you', I believe."

Her gray eyes stared at the grass as she spoke in a low monotone. "I had hoped that I might go on a little while before you were forced to encounter this facet of my personality, but, alas. If it makes a difference, I know better than to apologize, this time."

Thaliel's eyebrows raised. It was clear, now, that what the Elflord had told her was not at all an exaggeration or some strange aspect of his humor. Glorfindel had stated bluntly that her Queen and gwathel had a mind that was in recovery from having been seriously damaged, and that sooner or later she would see deeper, to difficulties yet remaining. That the strength she saw displayed outwardly was not deception, but neither was it a complete image, and that pain still remained in spite of tremendous progress.

"Could you tell me your thoughts? Why you feel this way now?"

A snort erupted. "Yes, I am able." Though, the words came slowly. "When my feelings are positive ones, all sorts of ideas have appeal to me, and I pursue them. But when I feel as I do now, the obligation to finish that which I have begun loses all luster, and I would rather crawl into a hole than do anything. I want to avoid the things I ordinarily might view as enjoyable. And people. That is what I do, avoid. Everything. And sometimes the whole thing is precipitated by the sudden awareness that perhaps I have taken on more than was wise. Though," she said with confusion, "I genuinely do not understand what caused this. I have done well, for some time now. And nothing happened to send me back to this, that I can identify."

"You speak with great delicacy, Hiril vuin. Should you wish to be stunningly plain about what you feel you are avoiding, you have my word that my discretion is inviolable."

Her back was now being rubbed in slow circles, causing her to wonder just how much Glorfindel was conspiring in this. Not that it mattered, for her touch was very soothing.

"So you want me to tell you that at this exact moment, I do not want to leave for Erebor, and neither do I want to go through with the first steps of my complex plan to undermine the insufferable ellith that make life in this Palace miserable for all?"

"I believe that suffices, yes." Long minutes wore on, as the relentlessly moving hand caused her to feel calmer. Thaliel finally spoke again. "Have you considered, that you are entering a time in your pregnancy that will cause you to feel depressed somewhat easily? It is a difficult experience for many ellith; one moment everything seems ordinary and the next, even simple obligations feel like a trial to endure."

With a stifled groan of dismay, Nenni leaned forward more, hugging Thaliel's bent knees as she leaned against her. "Joy. That's going to be so helpful when it has been such a...

The queen had stopped abruptly, and to all appearances was refusing to finish her statement. "Such a problem for you in the past?" Thaliel guessed.

"Yes." An impressive amount of misery was stuffed into that one word.

"I do not think less of you, Adonnenniel. There were days I could not rise from my bed. Not because there was anything physically wrong with me or my pregnancy, but because I could not bear to face the day or anything about it. It was difficult for my husband to understand but he loved
me. The Healers counseled him, explaining that it was not my doing or even anything unusual. If you try not to focus on it too much, accepting that this will be part of the experience of childbearing, it helps it to seem less burdensome."

None of this had occurred to her. It had been so common, in her overall life, to feel depressed that her pregnancy had not even entered her consideration. Besides, she still didn't feel pregnant, really. Outwardly, nothing had changed at all. Only being treated like a China doll under lockdown and wanting to puke up breakfast, had really been the difference.

"I did not consider that. I'm not used to there being a reason," came the reluctant admission. "And I am sorry, to hear that you had to endure this. It is not...fun."

Thaliel frowned. "I am gaining the impression that you have had it far worse."

Nenni shrugged. "It was in the past and it is largely much better now. Not a problem, most of the time. I do not mind speaking about that or anything else, but I do not want you to feel sorry for me when I have had more than my fair share of help and comfort since being returned here. While I am not glad that you understand, in a way, I am. It is not easily explained to those who have not had the same experience. Thank you, for your kindness. You are making some progress at ruining a perfectly good bad mood."

A chortle of laughter behind her caused her to smile. "I cannot fail as a Healer, it would blemish my record." The elleth's green eyes were merry, but her voice became earnest again. "There are medicines, which might help you. They cause one to feel emotions with less intensity."

"I used medicines with those effects, on Earth. And they helped...but here I have Ada. He would want me to go to him first, unless I am much mistaken. So...I will remember this, but at least for now, I will decline."

"He can...?" the Healer frowned.

"He can impart calm, and inner peace. I should not say too much. He can be very private, and it is not my place to speak about him or his gifts without his consent. I will only say that he has greatly blessed and cared for me."

"Of course. I did not mean to pry, please pardon me."

Nenni sat upright. "There is nothing to pardon. We are all becoming used to each other, and we are not...normal. In fact, we are all rather odd, and that makes getting acquainted a little more challenging. Yet I am told we are to travel together. I will enjoy that I can spend a great deal of time with you. In fact," she said drily, "I am certain that my delicate condition will require extensive intervention and monitoring, on your part." Suddenly she began laughing. "Of course, that is the best excuse ever. Perhaps I should go on about that a great deal at this grand dinner I am hosting. If nothing else, it will cause you to be viewed with greater status by the Aviary."

"The Aviar- oh, my," Thaliel said, her sharp mind quickly making the connection as she giggled. "Oh that is terrible, Adonnenniel. Surely it is wrong of me, but..." Thaliel melted into full-on laughter, nevertheless.

"Now I have caused you to share in my guilt," Nenni smiled, unable to feel too sorry. "Please realize, that for all my cynicism, I care about them too. I care about all of us, or I would not be trying to do this. It is shameful of me, to share in name-calling and yet..."

"And yet you are my gwathel and this will never go further, and you are at heart given to the same
thinking as the rest of us. Fear not, I too would give my all for any of them. We understand each other, Hiril vuin. But it is still very funny." They held each other and giggled about it, at ease in the trust of each others' discretion.

"Well, my Ada will be pleased with you," Nenni said with mild exasperation, standing up and smoothing her skirts. "You have run off my black cloud, at least for this five minutes."

"He cares for you a great deal."

"Yes," she nodded. "I do not mean to sound ungrateful. It can be a struggle for me, to be cared for by others. As I think you already know, from last time you aided me. I am having to learn to be healthier in my thinking, and that is very difficult for me." Another snort. "On my world, we had a saying, that there were two kinds of children. 'Plays well with others' and 'runs with scissors.' I was the latter sort of person, and yet that must change. The Lord Glorfindel has sacrificed much, with his decision to help me. I owe it to him to try my best." There was a pause. "Thaliel, why are you here? Because you were sent, or was there something I can do for you? Or both, or neither?"

"I was sent by your Adar. But I was not sorry to have a reason to come. It has felt...intimidating, for me, to decide to make my way back here. I know what I was told by all of you, but..."

"You are not used to us, and it feels like intruding? You are free of duty, for the time being?"

The slender elleth nodded. "Yes, to both questions."

"I would feel the same. Perhaps you would like to hear some music? From my own selfish standpoint, I think I would feel better."

"Yes, please," Thaliel said, taking the offered hand. Beren raised his head and yawned as they walked past him through their chambers, flopping back down. "What does he do, when he is not sleeping?" the Healer asked, looking on at the massive hound in amazement.

"Good question. He is either switched on, or off. He is content to do very little much of the time, but when something catches his interest or he feels excitable, it is astonishing. Right around the time I met you, he caused quite a scene one morning that resulted in a mud fight. I cannot even tell you what happened to Glorfindel's robes" she frowned. "Come to think of it, Beren needs to get out more. It is time to resume running in the forest. Or, something."

Thaliel tried to envision the Elflord covered in mud, and found that she could not. Perhaps that was for the best. Moments later she was ushered into the room with the piano. "Sit anywhere you like. If it interests you, you can sit next to me. Or if you would rather relax and listen, choose another place. Do whatever pleases you; no one else ever comes here except Ada and the King."

"What is this?" She walked around the instrument, staring in wonder. It was very beautiful; the finest craftworkers of the Realm had obviously labored on it.

"A precious gift from my husband," Nenni said. "One beyond any hope I ever had. It is called a piano, and is a musical instrument of Earth. I was taught to play when I was a child, and never thought to have one again. It was only created recently; I do not believe too many know of it. Rumor has it that a second one is being made; there are many brilliant musicians among our people."

Plunking down, she tried to find something appealing, and found something stuffed between the pages of some of her books. Cristofori's Dream, why not. It was simple, and lovely. "Do not be alarmed if I end up reaching for keys that are right in front of you. This piece is a little different
than most of the ones I play." Thaliel had sat next to her, still puzzled as she watched the pages of sheet music being laid out. "It is like writing, it tells me what to do. What notes to play, and how fast." Nenni's hands reached for the keys, and Thaliel's mouth opened with a gasp, watching what was done in rapt fascination. And the sounds, they were beautiful, and like nothing she had ever before heard. At the end, Nenni took the measure of her audience. "Good? Bad? Unclassifiable?"

Thaliel laughed. "Very good. And I thought you could only sing," she said admiringly. "I could listen to that all day."

"I am glad to hear it. Though regrettably, I cannot play for you all day; my back would be most displeased. Ada can play too. I could teach you, though I have to warn you that it is something of a trial to learn," she joked, before her expression transformed. "Here is something quite different. This was written by a man who died very young. He was gone before he was forty years of age; a tragic loss of genius. He wrote it during a storm, forced to live in a place not protected from the rains of winter. Some feel that it reminds them of the sound of falling raindrops." Her voice dropped to just above a whisper. "It reminds me of every kind of melancholy, and the rage of having to endure it." With a deep sigh, she began the moody and compelling Prelude no. 15 by Chopin; a plunge into a stormy emotional sea.

Thaliel took the opportunity to stand up, just before the music began, positioning herself just outside of Nenni's peripheral vision. She watched the face of her gwathel as peace with a hint of a smile gave way to a tear that trickled down her cheek, morphing to a gradually darkening anger, only to return before the end to serenity. The expressions needed no explanation; all the needed clarity was contained in the music itself.

After, the Queen looked up with parted lips. "Perhaps this is a bit much for me, just now. Would you mind, if we returned another time?"

"I was about to suggest the same thing, Hiril vuin," she agreed, somewhat concerned. This mortal music was filled with volatile emotion that deeply moved her as well, but the selections she heard could obviously only fuel melancholy. They returned to the royal chambers, which were still empty aside from Beren.

"Would you like some wine, Thaliel?"

"Only a little. It affects me too easily."

"Same problem. Sometimes I water it down, usually when the King is not looking," she smiled. "It is very good, but that hardly matters when one can barely drink two cups of it."

They sat together near the fire, staring into the flames.

"How old are you, Adonnenniel?"

Nenni chuckled. "That depends on whom you ask. I could tell you that I am forty-six years old, or, that I am well over six thousand. Since I have no memory of any of the latter, in my mind I use the former. May I ask you the same question?"

"I was born in this Age of Ennor, just about one thousand years ago. The Woodland Realm has ever been my home, and Aran Thranduil is the only King I have ever known."

"Can I ask you about Mithdîr? I would take no offense if the answer is No."

"I do not mind. I grieved for a long time, and have come to terms with my loss. He is with Mandos, or he waits for me with the rest of our family in Aman. Either way, he is not truly gone, though we
are parted. We united when I was perhaps one hundred years; he was somewhat older than I. There was much love, between us, and the Valar blessed us with our two children. He was a gentle soul, with a great love of the woods and the creatures of the forest. Mithdîr was not so given to books or lore as I was." She laughed. "Reading bored him. He would rather make arrows, or run in the woods. He was a fine archer, though, not so good as the Prince."

"And yet the Prince attributes much of his skill to time spent among the Silvan elves," Nenni murmured, suddenly feeling very weary. And sad, for her friend's losses. It was time to change the subject, lest that part grow worse. "Have you ever been to Erebor?"

"Only during the last battle, near there. All but two Healers of the Realm traveled with the King's warriors, to do our duty."

"You...." Nenni balked at saying more, no longer able to cope with the subject. You had to be there while your family died fighting? is what she could not ask aloud. Her eyes remained fixed straight ahead, as tears pooled out and rolled down her cheeks. Clearly, any capacity she had to be emotionally immune to sorrow was gone today. It isn't the first time, and it won't be the last.

The other elleth watched her, and the scrutiny was recognized. "I am not always like this," Nenni said woodenly. "But sometimes..." A shrug followed.

"It is the best you can do."

"Lamentably, yes. My regret is that my behavior is causing you to feel uncomfortable. Thank you for not..."

"Fussing? I found that always made me feel worse, when others did that," Thaliel said, sipping her wine, sighing. "It is nearing the time when I rest, before my duty later on tonight. May I see you tomorrow?"

"I would like that. Maybe we could sort out the medicinal plants in the garden, together? Shame on me, that could have been managed today." She quickly wiped away the tears at the edges of her eyes.

"No. Not today, Hiril vuin. Tomorrow will perhaps be better," she said softly, kissing her on the cheek. "I regret that I must leave you now."

"I should see you out."

"Please do not. Otherwise I will not feel like I am ordinary, here."

"True. Until next time, then, my gwathel.″ A smile was managed, and returned, as gray eyes held green ones.

Soon Thaliel was gone, and at an adequate distance, Nenni returned to the garden, and to her log, and spoke aloud to herself. "Nothing is working, and I am running out of ideas." The whispered words egged her on one last time; there was no comfort here in moping. I am better off inside. No sooner had she returned to the fire than she found herself no longer alone, as Glorfindel had appeared. Without hesitation she approached him."Please Ada, would you help me?"

The golden Lord regarded her. Today was very different. This was the first time she had openly turned to him and asked him for assistance. There was no coyness or preamble, drama or false modesty, and she had not tried to avoid him or withdraw. It was only simple recognition of her inability to overcome her present state of mind, and trust. "You did very well," he said, praising her choices. "I am glad to help you." He sat and laughed when she began to crawl into his lap.
"Please do not laugh at me. I have used up all of my adult behavior." Her arms wrapped around him.

"I will manage," he said merrily. "How are you able to give humor to others even when you feel mostly sadness, ellig?"

"It’s a superpower. Just not the kind anyone wants." He kept laughing anyway, and while she held onto him and nestled into the crook of his shoulder, a tiny smile curled at the corner of her mouth.

His arms enfolded her, and the feelings that had battered at the edges of her thinking since earlier were banished. An immense sigh of relief issued from her. "Thank you. I was dismayed, to hear what Thaliel told me. If this too is part of carrying a child..." she trailed off sadly.

"We will be discussing this with Thranduil," he said. "While it was not anticipated, I am here for you. You did your best today, and I am proud of you. You cannot help your mood, Adonnenniel. But your reasoning remained sound. You made good choices, in spite of your emotions; I could not be more pleased."

Something cynical tried to surface, but was shrugged away. Glorfindel did not quite know what to think. Her mind was very still, but not for the right reasons. There was weariness, though not of a physical nature. "Would you like to go into the woods? Perhaps to walk, or run?"

As much as a part of her did not want to move, leave, or do anything, this was a huge enticement. "Really? Now?"

"Really," he said, amused and trying not to show it. "Change into your armor, and I will do the same." He stood up, lifting her with him.

*****

He allowed her to lead, and she did. To her chagrin, she had found that Beren's armor barely fit now. Every buckle was let out to the last hole, so much had he grown. I hope he is done changing, and soon, else he will be the size of a horse. What the Lord Oromë had done for him was astonishing. He was fearsome, and powerful, yet very much Beren. And that meant, delighted to be running amok in the woods. With her swords at her back, and she ran. The track was wide, here, and she offered her hand to Glorfindel. They both tried to run on in this fashion, before she realized it was ridiculous and took his arm instead, laughing. It was a simple desire, one born from gratitude. The running felt good, as did knowing that he was close to her.

How fast can you run, Ada? she asked.

Do you really mean, can I outrun you? he smirked.

I am a little curious. I could not run before I came here, it is still very new to me; I like it.

Then take a little head start, and run as fast as you can. We will see if I can catch you.

With a smile of excitement, she did as she asked, having rarely tried to test herself. She gave her all, which delighted Beren, he began singing as he ran alongside her, though he stretched out and soon passed her. The footfalls behind her were audible and closing, which made her try even harder, but with a last effort Glorfindel caught at her arm as she laughed, her face shining. You are very fast, she acknowledged, but I think I expected no less.

You ran better than many who wished for a similar test, Adonnenniel. I am pleased.
She flashed him a brilliant smile of sincere appreciation. From someone who one year ago could not run a furlong without feeling near to dying, this was quite a compliment.

Tell me more of your life on Earth, iellig. Describe your home to me.

Her eyebrows raised. He was interested, in that? Well...my home, our home, was nice enough. Or rather, my home was actually quite shabby, but I kept it as clean as I was able, with Beren in my life. I had a few nice things, but many of my possessions were castoffs from others. With her mind, she showed him. It was not at all fancy.

Your home was yellow and orange and purple? I have heard that the Halflings of the Shire used colors such as these, but I did not realize humans did also.

A chortle erupted. Most did not. I was a little...odd. A lot odd, actually. I liked to see bright colors; they are pretty. Inside I had some rooms; books, places to sit. A piano. I liked to prepare food, so I had many devices to help with cooking. There was a place to store food under the ground, and a little greenhouse for raising young plants. In some ways, the outside was not so different than the garden; some of the plants and trees are from my home.

And how did you live? You were required to...earn your way, somehow?

I sold the food items I raised for some money. But by the time I was taken here...my parents had left me with some means as did Michael when he was killed. I still needed to work, but not as hard as many. The work was not the problem, toward the end. I was the problem. How you saw me today...that was almost constant, and it was so difficult to manage. I kept trying, but...she did not wish to talk about this any longer.

He saw, and asked something else. What were your books about? It seemed as though you had many?

Yes. I liked history, very much. And fiction. Many talented persons wrote stories to read. There was a great deal of literature, on my world. You see, times and rulers changed, but people really did not. They wrote stories about facing difficulties, or exciting deeds, or the explorations of their imaginations. I liked books, because I could become lost in them. I could be somewhere else, in my mind. It let me forget my sadness, for a time. Other books were instructional on assorted subjects, and there was also poetry. There were many poets, and many poems.

Will you tell me one?

You have heard some already; some of the songs I sing are really poems someone put to music. But some were short, and funny. On Earth, there is an insect. I have not seen it here. It is called a fly. They are everywhere, often in great numbers, and they are very annoying. As you might guess from the unoriginal name, they seem to mostly spend time in the air, buzzing around. So a poet wrote a poem about one:

"Little fly, Thy summer’s play My thoughtless hand Has brushed away. Am not I a fly like thee? Or art not thou a man like me? For I dance and drink and sing, Till some blind hand shall brush my wing. If thought is life and strength and breath, and the want of thought is death, Then am I a happy fly, If I live, Or if I die."

There are flies in Ennor, Adonnenniel. ‘Idh’, is the word. But, that is funny?

I suppose it depends on your humor. Mine could be rather morbid. I see your meaning; the poem is about mortality, but humans often found humor in the inevitability of death. When something is
unavoidable, Ada, sometimes all that is left is to laugh about it.

This nugget had made the entire day worthwhile, to Glorfindel. If he was to help her, lacking information of this nature made that task exceedingly difficult. There was too much that in her mind was simply a frame of existence, and one altogether alien to him. Ask more questions, he determined to himself.

Tell me more about this kind of humor. Did others share it?

Yes, she answered, both surprised and pleased that he would ask further when her first expectation was to find disapproval.

And...it cannot have been only poems. How did humans express this?

Well, she said, dropping out of a run as this conversation was now interesting her a great deal, in the earlier days, there were plays, theater. You see, on earth, maybe six hundred years before I came along...she frowned...or rather before this version of me came along, there was a great plague. The dead outnumbered the living, and they had no knowledge of medicine or healing. None that did any good, anyway. And so in these long years saturated with ignorance and misery and despair, they began to create art about it. There was a theme called "Danse Macabre", or "The Dance of Death," in which the living would interact with the dead. Imagine skeletons, that were portrayed walking and dancing around, and wearing clothes and flowers. Skeletons of rich and poor alike, because all were mortal regardless of their station in life. There were so many things along these lines, right up to my own era, where we had things like films and Jack Skellington.

What...who is this?

It was a story, Ada, one I dearly loved. About a skeleton that was king of a holiday that celebrated things dead and morbid, but decided to try and take over Yule, and how it turned out to be a terrible idea when he tried to be someone he was not. It was wonderful, and all set to music.

Though he was seeing a flood of images in her mind, he could not be more confused. And yet one thing was clear; the rush of warm feelings coursing through her. There was joy and excitement, at this recollection.

Oh and it is also a love story, she recalled. Jack, the Pumpkin King, falls in love with Sally, who was created by Dr. Finkelstein. You see, she is the one that tried to talk sense into him, so that he would see reason and understand that it was not a good idea to try to usurp other holidays.

In that moment, understanding came to the golden Lord. They were all metaphors, the things of which she spoke. The mortals used this imagery to explore ideas, concepts, even as they entertained. It was a similar principle to poetry, but on a much different scale.

"Do you know, I have only just realized something about this world?" Nenni stopped walking to look at him. "On Earth there were so many stories. Imaginary stories, stories to teach and amuse, but using subjects that are not real. But here, there is nothing like this. At least, among elves I have seen nothing like this. It is as if no one here needs to imagine anything. And yet at one time I believed that everything in this world was a story itself. That you were a character in a story. I do not entirely know what to do with that."

"We imagine, iellig," he said. "There is much that you do not yet know of your people. Or rather, there is much that has been erased from your knowledge. It is true that none of the Eldar have written songs sung by skeletons, but we have imagined many things," he smiled.
"I suppose you are right," she sighed, suddenly noticing how still the woods around them were, and a glance at Beren revealed that his hackles were raised. She immediately stepped back from Glorfindel and drew a sword, looking up. Nothing. The part of the forest under which they now walked was darker, dense, but then again so was much of Thranduil's realm. A split second later, his own sword was at hand.

_We are leaving here, now, iellig._ She did not so much mind his protective shadow at this moment; his powerful frame dwarfed hers, physically. It bothered her intensely; something was wrong, here. But whatever that something was, it was imperceptible to sight and hearing. This impression seemed to be driven home by Beren's behavior. The hound was tense, hostile, and silent. He remained close to them; the soft, deep bass rumble of his growl was the only sound audible to her. Glorfindel's arm came around her shoulder and guided her to turn and walk where he wished. Her blade was switched to her left hand, so that on each side there was defense, but mostly Nenni walked under the mantle of his guard. The degree to which this felt endearing surprised her, and tentatively she placed her arm around his waist, moving closer to him. Which did not mean she lowered her own defenses; her eyes looked upwards frequently, and her ears listened. And when he did not refuse her arm around him, she did more. Closing her eyes, she used her other sight, the sight of the life of the trees.

_Do you see, Ada?_ There were spiders, or at least she guessed they were spiders; they were being followed far overhead by something that was creating motion in the treetops, and what else it might be was beyond her. _Now they follow, and do not descend?_  

_I do see,_ Glorfindel replied, marveling at the many uses of her gift. _I believe it would be wise to run out of here. I do not understand why they are behaving this way but I believe it would be prudent not to linger for the sake of discovering a reason. Give me your hand, Adonnenniel._

The moment she did so, his large fingers closed firmly around hers, and began to pull her forward. In a very short distance, they were at full speed. More than full speed, since he was using their connection to pull her in a run faster than what she could manage on her own. Only now did a faint and angry chittering sound reach their ears, fading away as they made about a third of a league's distance. And still they ran on, in an abundance of caution, covering a full league before he would consent to stop, finally releasing her hand. Nenni laughed.

"Now what is funny?" His humor was restored, now that they appeared to be out of danger.

"That reminded me of when I was on earth and would attach a lead to Beren with a harness and he would pull me; he could run faster. Then again, who could not?" she remembered ruefully, smiling up at him before sheathing her sword. He reached to ruffle her hair, and that was when it all happened.

Three of them dropped from above, which Glorfindel apparently saw at the last moment, because he shoved her to the ground, hard. Beren erupted, immediately leaping up to bite down on the leg of one and drag it a short distance away. The golden Lord's sword sang as Nenni rolled to a position to draw her swords, rising swiftly to pierce at one of them, but not before she heard Glorfindel's hiss of pain as a stinger tore across the back of his neck. Enraged both at the situation and at herself, she made short work of the spider that Beren had kept more or less immobile. "Let me see, please," she said to him. "How unwell do you feel?"

He did not seem to be going down as badly as Thranduil had, but...that he sank to his knees was not encouraging. "Not well," he said, his eyes wide with shock.

"Call to Thranduil while you still are able, Ada, for at this distance I cannot. Otherwise I will send Beren." Even as she spoke, she moved his thick hair aside to see an ugly and very deep cut.
Goddammit all to hell. How could I have been so stupid? Grabbing a section of her tunic that she somehow dragged out from under her armor, she laid it over the cut and pressed, in the faint hope that if not all the venom present had been absorbed, maybe some of it could be kept from entering his system. In addition to his blood, some fairly vile looking green...stuff...was visible on the fabric, so it was possible that it was not a vain pursuit? As if I know what I am doing when even on Earth there was only one emergency treatment for this, she lamented to herself. Car keys.

Having done all that was possible, Nenni knelt down, asking Beren silently to keep watch overhead. "Talk to me," she demanded, lifting his chin carefully. "If you do not, I will assume you are too unwell to answer and will do as I see fit."

"I have told your husband," he said very quietly. "I feel very ill, but I do not like the idea of remaining here. I want to try to move at least some distance away."

Her brow furrowed. There was a certain logic to what he wished, and yet, she could keep them safe if more spiders came, just as she had done before.

"Please," he asked. More so than if he would have ordered her about, this broke through her resistance.

"Lean on me. I am stronger than I look." What she really wanted to do was beg his forgiveness for being a complete idiot. Had she not sheathed her weapon and been distracted by whatever she'd been babbling about, this might not have happened. This is the forest, damn it all, not an arboretum. In seriousness, what had she been *thinking*, especially when they had just fled from the same danger? Negligence like this was inexcusable, and he had pushed her down to save her from a similar outcome. But all these thoughts were shut away from him; this was not a burden she had any right to discuss at the moment. Worse yet, were it not for her moods and her emotions, they would not have been out here in the first place. The recrimination can wait, she told herself. It has to wait. And then me and I are going to have a very long talk with ourselves.

No you are not, the Little Voice said.

What? Her eyebrows raised in astonishment.

You heard me. Because if you do, you have not been listening to a thing that has been said to you lately. If you do, you do not honor his protection of you, which was given freely and out of great love.

Do we really have to get into this now? Nenni seethed.

Yes, we do, because later will be too late, returned the Little Voice with equal stubbornness.

Glorfindel struggled to his feet with difficulty, his arm over her shoulders. She held him at his waist, with her sword in her other hand. The same mistake was not going to occur twice. And yet reflecting on what was said somehow managed to suspend the usual beginnings of her freight train of guilt and blame. I hate *adulting*, she thought sourly. "You can lean on me more than that. I am not going to fall apart." An attempt was made, to keep humor in her voice.

"Did I hurt you?" he said so softly that it was now a whisper. "You are not letting me hear your thoughts."

"You would prefer that? I was trying to shield you from my mental vomit at a time I do not believe you should be annoyed."

"I would."
I am not hurt, except for feeling guilt over my own short-sightedness, which I am trying to set aside. And Ada, thank you. Thank you for protecting me.

You are welcome, Adonnenniel. They set out walking, slowly and steadily.

What are you feeling?

My body aches, and grows weak, and the thought of food is impossible. Though I do not think I am as affected as Thranduil was, else I would be unable to walk.

I...wish it had not happened. What it took for her to say that, instead of 'I am sorry it happened', or 'I would rather it had been me', or 'I feel terrible it happened', was almost something of a turning point in her life. In this small but important way, she was learning not to focus on herself.

Leaning down, he kissed her on the head. It was all he could offer; dwelling on this topic was more than he could manage now.

That he leaned into her heavily helped her to feel better about herself, and while she tried not to think on it, she was grateful that he did this. Truthfully, she did what was usual for her in an emergency; she committed to enduring, no matter what. One foot in front of another. It was Beren, who was entrusted with the task of keeping track of any enemies. And after not so much time, given their distance from the Halls, Thranduil came, riding hard on Tálagor. Nenni gently steered Glorindel to the edge of the path, so as to give the huge animal some room.

The set of her husband's jaw told her that words of jest would be better left unspoken. Wordlessly, Glorfindel's injury was explained. The mighty ellon could not raise his head without great pain, given that his neck had taken the introduction of the poison. Immediately the elk knelt, while Thranduil slipped off to examine the wound himself. He raised his eyes to his wife; so many emotions played across his face at once. There was worry and fear, anger and disgust.

Show me the cloth you used on the sting, she heard, and once again fished out her tunic. With a motion so swift that it startled her, his sword was in his hand, cutting a piece her clothing away. You are not to have this touching your skin. Bowing her head, she waited for instruction. Mount Tálagor, all the way forward. Are you prepared to take some of his weight, and the reins, on the ride home?

Yes. In seconds, Glorfindel had been lifted into position behind her, and Thranduil mounted behind him. The King's hand grasped her arm.

Where did this happen? Show me where, all of it.

Focusing on this demand was not the easiest, as the elk lurched to its feet, but she took her husband's hand in hers and obliterated all other considerations. Her mind gathered whence they had come, and where they were before they ran.

"Beren!" he called loudly. If Thranduil was chagrined to realize that the hound was but ten feet away, staring phlegmatically at him, he did not let on. Beren had done that to her for years. He could be standing just a few feet distant while she yelled for him at the top of her lungs, so well did his coat camouflage.

A new noise was audible in the distance now, the sound of many hooves. The stables must have half-emptied, Nenni reasoned. This was a great many fighters, and Legolas and Tauriel led them. Any hint of amusement was wiped from her face; whatever was underway was in complete earnest. One soft smile of acknowledgement was all Legolas could spare for his Naneth, as he approached.
his father and bowed his head. Instructions were given swiftly and in a low tone of voice. "Din
dago," Thranduil hissed. "Din dago pân." (Kill them. Kill them all.)

Like a shadow, the company of elves moved off into the trees, with Beren silently leading the
way.

*He is in great pain, Adonnenniel. I am going to erase it, and he will be all but asleep as we ride
home. His head must rest against your back, and he will hold onto you even as I will steady him
and keep him in position. This will not be comfortable for you. You must also direct Tálagor. Can
you do this?*

*Yes, Hîr vuin.*

*Then do so.*

She took up the reins and felt the weight of Glorfindel's head and shoulder leaning into her. That
he was heavily built became beyond obvious, because maintaining anything resembling a riding
posture with what felt like two sacks of seed potatoes seed pushing against her and downward was
not fun. Gritting her teeth and trying very hard to banish thoughts that she deserved this and more
for her stupidity, she silently commanded the huge bull to move into a run and take them home.

As they ran, she would not allow herself to think either, of whether or not Thranduil was angry with
her. If he was, it could hardly outdo how she felt about what had happened. Too much needed
sorting out, and this was neither the time or place; that would come later. As the distance wore on,
her belly and lower back began to ache under the strain of supporting Glorfindel's weight in the
saddle. But they were not so far out as they might have been, and the ride was over soon enough.
Tálagor obligingly once again knelt down, allowing Thranduil to lift Glorfindel into his arms.
"You are to bring a Healer to our chambers at once, Adonnenniel. I will place him in your bed. He
will be tended there."

"Yes, my Lord," she said impassively, shoving her feelings aside. Otherwise the sight of her Ada,
limp in her husband's arms, would be difficult to bear. Casting decorum aside, she ran hard to the
Healing Halls, where Galasríniel was on duty, and stated her need. The elleth began gathering
materials at once. "You are to admit yourself to our chambers without hesitation," Nenni
commanded, before adding softly, "please." The worry was visible in the Queen's face for a
fleeting moment before she turned to depart, racing to their chambers.

Copper hair streamed behind her, and her eyes blazed with vexation as she walked at a pace that
would have been a run for many. It did not help her mood when she passed a perfectly coiffed
Lady Merial in a passageway. Nenni absolutely did not care, that she only murmured a passing
acknowledgement and nodded her head curtly; there was no time for slowing down or niceties.
Wrath was written on her face. Had she been able to notice, the Queen would have seen that Lady
Merial's simpering smile rapidly transformed to wide eyes that showed fear. Being too disdainful to
have bothered witnessing the feast day games, the noble ellith had never seen Nenni arrayed for
combat; swords at her back, knives in her boots, and a fell gleam in her eye as she stormed through
in the black and silver armor that clearly was not ornamental.

Bursting into their chambers, she strode immediately to her room.

"Help me remove his armor," Thranduil said, glancing up as he worked the buckle free on one side
of his cuirass.

With a nod her fingers began working on the vambrace nearest her. "He sleeps?"
"It is the kindest thing," he said. "There is a great deal of pain, from their poison." Tension built up into his face. "I want to know what happened, Adonnenniel. I want to know how this was possible. How apparently only a few of them managed to sting him." His piercing gaze fell on her.

"He will disagree, my King, but the truth is that I was inexcusably and unforgivably stupid. We ran, and conversed silently, at some point ending up in a place that felt unwholesome. Beren behaved as I have never seen before, and Ada wished to leave at once. We began to walk back whence we came, weapons drawn. With my gift I perceived that there was movement in the highest treetops, though it was otherwise imperceptible to sight or hearing. When Ada saw as well, he insisted we run. And so we did, for a very long way. A full league. And when we returned to a walk, a new conversation started, and I did something very foolish. I was distracted and inattentive, and I somehow blithely assumed that no further possibility of danger existed. I sheathed my sword, and the moment I did that, they dropped down. He pushed me to the ground to protect me. There were only three of them, one of which Beren was on immediately. The two that remained had the element of surprise, and by the time I rose with my swords back in my hand he was already stung. I knew better, Thranduil, and saying how sorry I am does not help him. I am ashamed."

He considered his wife carefully. Her current emotional state did not match her words. She had no emotional state, and he had never seen this before.

"You are not upset?" he asked.

"I am very upset," she said.

"Forgive me, but this is not how I have ever seen you express that mood," he pressed, now unbuckling one of the greaves.

His words stabbed, but were no less than she felt she deserved. "My expressing my moods is why all of this happened in the first place," she said with bitterness suffusing her voice. "I was very...depressed, much of the day. That we were in the forest at all was because he was trying to help me feel better."

"Was there a reason for your feelings?" he asked, his voice softening a little.

"I...was reflecting on...this is hard for me to speak of, Thranduil. Thaliel asked me the same question. She told me that this can happen on account of being pregnant, but I am not so sure. This has been a long-standing problem for me."

"You do not wish to tell me?" he asked.

"I will tell you, but may I ask to do that when..." her voice cracked just a little as the first evidence of strain broke through. "Please, my Lord, may we have this conversation later?" she whispered.

He did not see the complete picture as she was not fully open to him, but he had seen enough, and stopped what he was doing to step around the bed. "Meleth." His arms gathered her close. "He will recover. I will recover. And so will you."

She wrapped her arms around his waist, determined not to allow the tentacles of sadness to find their way to her. There had been many long years where an unwavering state that was never joy and never sorrow had been her refuge; it had successfully kept away most of the pain, much of the time. Experience and emotion got a divorce, she thought. And when I remained in that place, others did not come to harm because of me. As she released him, the curtain of self-imposed numbness fell over her, and she sighed deeply. This was an old friend, come to make everything right again. Safe again. Turning, she resumed unbuckling Glorfindel's armor.
Galasríniel came, and Thranduil turned the slumbering ellon onto his side. The area around the sting was swollen and discoloring. Without being asked Nenni swiftly gathered his hair and began to twist it into a coil at the back of his head. When her husband's eyebrows raised, she commented blandly, "there is no point leaving his hair where it will become a mess from salves and the wound itself."

"He is unconscious, i Hîr nin?" asked Galasríniel.

"That is my doing," the King explained. "He was in great pain. We both know that time and managing his symptoms are all that can be done. I wish him to be cared for here. When you are ready, I will allow him to wake."

Galasríniel nodded, producing covered bowls of ointment. "We will need blankets, or he must be placed under the covers. Most of his clothing should be removed; there will be need for a great deal of rubbing in of medicines all over the skin; this one here, for the nausea, must be used first. I will prepare the cordial, at your sideboard, if you will excuse me."

Nenni continued the removal of armor while Thranduil left to procure blankets and loose sleeping pants that would allow him some modesty. Finally, all the armor was off, and his sword removed. All of his things she laid where she kept her own, and while she had a moment, she removed her own cuirass and pauldrons as well, after slipping out of her sword harnesses. Her nimble fingers unbuttoned his tunic, and loosened the lacings on his breeches. Some far corner of her mind managed a crooked grin; in another time and place, the undressing of a body such as this might have felt like unwrapping a present. But that was long ago, and far away. Now, she only tightened the blanketing of a heart that wanted to grow heavy while yet acknowledging her love for him. This was not an ordinary form, but the housing of a sanctified spirit. When Thranduil silently returned, he found her with her eyes squeezed shut, kissing Glorfindel's hand in deep reverence with a look of misery on her face, before the mask returned. He hesitated, waiting a moment before speaking.

"I have brought what is needed," he said. "Now if you will help, we will remove his clothing." Thranduil lifted most of his weight, and still it was difficult for Nenni to work off his breeches.

"He is very heavy," she commented, finally managing to slip them off. Replacing them with the silk pants with the wide-cut legs was far easier, though, they pushed the fabric up to his loins, to aid in the application of the medicine.

"He is," Thranduil agreed, now raising his torso as they both moved his arms to remove his tunic. "While we have not exactly had a contest of strength, I would guess that he is even stronger than I am." This was not difficult to believe, now that she could see him without his garments on. He handed his wife one of the two containers of ointment. "Begin with his legs," she was instructed.

The slow and tedious process of applying the medicine began, and as Nenni lifted and bent his heavy limbs this way and that, all she could generally think is that she was very glad he was on their side, so to speak.

Thranduil, may I ask you something?

Of course, meleth, he said, glancing up at her.

Up to a few moments ago, I have not seen another elven male, aside from you, unclothed. Is circumcision practiced here, at all, among elves or men?

He frowned. I do not understand...
You both have your foreskins, which was a rare sight in my former experience. Seeing you the first time was a surprise, for me. It is common on Earth that when a male is born, when the child is very young the foreskin is cut from the penis. That is circumcision. See in my mind the result on an adult male.

His eyes widened and his lips parted. Why in Eru's name would anyone do such a thing? he winced.

I believe your answer is No, then.

That is correct. That would be deemed a crime, among us. That is...I have no words for what that is.

I did not know, she said, flushing pink in her embarrassment. Thank you for answering.

You still have not answered my question. Why was this done?

It began for religious reasons, it was a command from a deity to be a physical mark of that one's followers. But over time it became more custom than anything else. At the time I was taken away, more parents were refusing to do this. At the very least, there was more discussion and consideration that perhaps it was wrong. And on a completely unrelated topic...are you angry with me, for what happened to Glorfindel? She had stopped rubbing in the ointment because she wanted to hear the answer and be done with it.

He raised his eyes to hers. I am angry that it happened. And I am trying to put that part behind me, just as I suspect you are trying to distance yourself from self-reproach. I apologize, for my manner. I cannot entirely help dwelling on what might have happened, had he not been there. And yet, had you been alone, I suspect your level of caution and your behavior might have been very different. It is a fruitless line of thinking. I am...trying, Adonenniel.

I understand, she said, hesitantly reaching her hand over Glorfindel to touch her husband gently. The one thing she wanted to say over and over and over was the one thing she knew she should not. Because right now, she was indeed feeling sorry for her existence, and voicing that would achieve nothing. He took her hand for a moment, and their eyes met in shared commiseration, which was the best either of them were going to manage. The moment passed, and they resumed their treatment until Galasríniel appeared.

"If you would allow him to wake, my Lord," the Healer asked, taking note of the mood of concern and unhappiness in the room. "The medicine will ease some of his pain and the nausea he will feel. I recommend that he not be pushed down into sleep for awhile. He must have opportunity to ease nature, and the more liquids he can consume the more it will speed his healing. But later, when it is the ordinary time for sleep, your gift would be a blessing."

Thranduil nodded, reaching now for the pain salve, and spreading it liberally over the wound at his neck. Nenni felt useless, and did not want to be in the way. And yet she also could not make herself leave him. He was covered, and not knowing what else to do, her hand slid under the covers to wrap around some of his toes, since his hand was unavailable. She also closed off her thoughts; the last thing he needed was the burden of her stupid and never ending emotions. Feel nothing, she demanded of herself. Feel nothing. If she could manage that, then he would not know anything was amiss. Everything was shoved down and stuffed into a box, with the lid sat on.

The King laid his hand on Glorfindel's forehead, and his eyes fluttered open. "You must sit up, my Lord," he said. "I will help you."
Confusion and disorientation washed over him, but not pain, which told her that Thranduil was keeping it in check. "Drink this, Lord Glorfindel," said Galasríniel, carefully supporting the back of his head as he was helped by Thranduil to sit up. His hands were trembling as he tried to reach for the goblet, and her husband gently pushed them down.

"I will help you. Only drink," the King said, taking the vessel from the Healer and raising it to his lips. "Slowly, my Lord," he cautioned. The many pillows were rearranged so that he could lie back with his upper body elevated somewhat, to help keep down the swelling, and the covers were brought over his chest.

"He will need the pain salve next, and as much liquid as he can manage," the Healer counseled. "Thaliel will come on duty in some hours, and will return with more cordial?"

"Yes. Thank you, Galasríniel," Nenni said.

"I will retrieve the other salve," Thranduil said. "Would you please have Thaliel bring more of that as well?"

"Of course, my King," the Healer replied with deference, departing the room.

Glorfindel and Nenni were left alone, for a moment, and she was unaware of her increasing grip on his foot. He smiled weakly and held out his hand to her, as best as he could. Merely moving it from under the covers was an effort. "Please come here," he whispered.

Held in his gaze, she moved toward him, and took his hand. The weight of those blue eyes threatened to shatter her newly formed convictions.

"Do your best, iellig. That is all I ask. I will be well soon enough. I think you already know that I do not want you to blame yourself."

"I do," she said, blessedly managing to feel nothing.

He tilted his head slightly, wincing as his flesh protested. Something was different, and that told him all he needed to know. "Adonnenniel, do not turn back to old solutions. Not when you have come so far. You cannot hide from me, my daughter."

"Ada, please...you are hurt," she vainly protested, already knowing that this avenue was lost to her.

"And so are you. Of the two, I know which is easier to heal."

_I do not know what to do, or say._ It was true, she could not hide from him. He would not allow her to use the coping mechanisms of old. "I..." Falling into silence, she would not say more. There was nothing else to be done, but try to care for him. Lowering her head, she kissed his hand.

Thranduil had waited a few moments once again, out of respect. If nothing else, he was piecing together that his wife was in difficulty, and distress. When the King perceived their discussion was over for the moment, he entered and offered her one of the bowls. "You must try to drink," he told Glorfindel. "Could you take broth, juice, wine? Water?"

The golden-haired ellon sighed. "I believe broth would be the most bearable," he said quietly. "And thank you, Thranduil, for coming to my aid."

"I was honored. And, I will return in a moment. Adonnenniel, you know what to do."

His voice carried tension, as he struggled to shed his own emotion. But now was not the occasion
to dwell on this; he rang for Galion.

"Where does it hurt most?" Nenni asked, unsure where to begin. Glorfindel was rather a lot of acreage, so to speak, as her eyes roved over the large frame of his body.

"Neck, back and legs," he said with effort.

It was an easy decision; the only one of those parts she could work on without moving him were his legs. "Are you warm enough right now, Ada?" His nod to the affirmative made it seem safe enough to further get her hands slippery and greasy. So she lifted the covers to expose the leg nearest her. He tried to lift his leg to help her, and his muscles shook. "No," she barked instinctively, lightly slapping his leg. "Do not do that. Save your strength." Though when he relaxed and the full weight of his leg fell into her arms, she had to stifle a smile. Everything about him was very heavy. With a concealed sigh, she glanced to the side to see his expression of amusement commingled with discomfort, and began rubbing the medicine into his skin, beginning at his hip. Thranduil's pain relief could vary if he lost focus or moved out of range, she realized.

"Thank you," she heard, as the first small area of him began to feel significant relief from the venom.

So, so many things wanted to come out of her mouth, beginning with 'You would do the same for me' and ending with 'After how stupid I was, this is the least I can do for you.' But those were forced aside, and she simply murmured "You are welcome," as she felt for the hundredth time that she was at best stunted when it came to mature adult behavior.

"Please do not keep me out," he whispered plaintively.

Looking down, she nodded. *I thought your energy for once could be spent elsewhere besides the jumble in my head. I hoped to be placing your needs first.*

He shook his head lightly. *I am not asking because of your struggles. Not entirely. Hearing you comforts me. I have not taken meaningful injury in a very long time and...*

*You do not need to explain,* she returned. *Not for this.*

He was quiet for a time. *Would you sing for me? What, does not matter.*

"Yes, Ada." A long pause ensued. He had asked more questions about Earth, lately. But this one, she should probably explain. "Humans liked to use songs that told stories, without the story being a poem. This is about a train, a mode of conveyance in my old world." Taking a deep breath, she cleared her throat and began singing in a smooth voice in a much lower range than normal.

*Riding on the City of New Orleans, Illinois Central Monday morning rail. Fifteen cars and fifteen restless riders, three conductors and twenty-five sacks of mail. All along the southbound odyssey, the train pulls out at Kankakee; rolls along past houses, farms and fields. Passin' trains that have no names, freight yards full of old black men and the graveyards of the rusted automobiles. Good morning America, how are you? Say don't you know me? I'm your native son. I'm the train they call The City of New Orleans; I'll be gone five hundred miles when the day is done.*

*Dealin' card comes with the old men in the club bar, penny a point ain't no one keepin' score. Pass the paper bag that holds the bottle, feel the wheels rumblin' 'neath the floor. And the sons of Pullman porters and the sons of engineers, ride their father's magic carpets made of steel. Mothers with their babes asleep are rockin' to the gentle beat, and the rhythm of the rails is all they feel.*
Good morning America, how are you? Say don't you know me? I'm your native son. I'm the train the call The City of New Orleans, I'll be gone five hundred miles when the day is done.

Nighttime on The City of New Orleans, changing cars in Memphis, Tennessee. Halfway home, we'll be there by morning, through the Mississippi darkness rolling down to the sea. But all the towns and people seem to fade into a bad dream, and the steel rails still ain't heard the news. The conductor sings his songs again, the passengers will please refrain; this train's got the disappearing railroad blues.

Good night America, how are you? Say don't you know me? I'm your native son. I'm the train the call The City of New Orleans, I'll be gone five hundred miles when the day is done.

Thranduil waited outside the room once again, his eyes closed, and tried to understand what was bothering him. Her song transfixed his thinking, because he had seen just enough of her world that the words painted vivid pictures in his mind. He returned to them, wordlessly bringing the broth Galion had procured. Cradling Glorfindel's head above the angry cut, he assisted him to drink slowly. Sky blue eyes, so filled with gratitude for the care being given, softened whatever was gnawing at the King, and provided distraction.

"Do you know more songs, that are like that?" the golden-haired elf whispered. Thranduil noticed that his wife nodded but continued staring straight ahead. And he saw now in glimmers, that she was fighting against thoughts of tremendous guilt and sadness, and grasping at anything to silence them. He remembered this, before, in her; the very thing he had driven out, or so he thought. What...?

Nenni continued singing, Rocky Mountain High gave way to Country Roads, Sweet Betsy From Pike, My Old Kentucky Home, and The Leaving of Liverpool. Without discussion they moved to apply salve to his abdomen and chest. I could do this all week, Nenni thought. The salve took away any perception of soreness in her hands while she worked. Eventually nothing was left untreated but his back, and this was no longer a two-person task. "Would you leave Thranduil and I alone for a time, Adonnenniel?" Glorfindel asked, his voice much steadier now.

"Yes, Ada." Placing a kiss on his cheek and looking longingly at her husband as she rose; a brief stop was made only to pour a goblet of wine. Taking one hefty swallow, she carried it with her out the door, not caring that she was wearing only her black woolen form-fitting fighting clothes. Thirty seconds later she was seated at the piano, bringing over a small table near to her bench as an afterthought. While she might be in a mood, she would be in a far greater one if wine were accidentally spilled on the instrument. With a great frown she looked at her pile of sheet music, remembering that there was another Chopin Prelude, one that was very difficult. Nothing ventured, nothing gained...and so the pages for no. 24 were spread across the music rack. Maybe the storm in my head can find a way out, here. This is a storm of another kind. But somehow, she doubted it.

*****

"You are ill at ease, Thranduil," observed Glorfindel, as a soft sound of relief escaped him. "Would you like to speak about it?"

"My thoughts are not calm," he admitted. "Nor do I understand exactly why, though I would guess that I am more easily frightened by the fear of harm to Amaranthine than I care to openly acknowledge. I am relieved that my wife and child are safe, but I feel anger as well. And, what has happened to Adonnenniel? I thought we were past this, with her. I feel confused, and unsettled." Some minutes went by, while Glorfindel weighed what he was told, and the last of the ointment was applied in small circles that massaged it into the skin well. Thranduil spoke again. "She blames herself for what happened, today. And I cannot completely disagree. Enough
time has been spent in the forest that she knows the dangers. My wife was not in a fit state of mind to be in the forest today, apparently. I am not trying to cast blame..."

"And yet you are. And much of that may fall on me as well. We are both warriors, Thranduil. Mistakes were made, and most of them were mine. I would argue that all of them were mine, because I knew what had already transpired for her today. She loves being out in the forest, and I weighed wishing to lift her spirits against the chance of danger. It would seem I chose badly. I ask your pardon, for my poor judgement."

"You have it, though I do not really believe there is anything to pardon. While your humility is soothing on some level, I have not forgotten that I earned my own injury in this same manner through similar mistakes. You did not blame me or take me to task. The fact is, my forest is not safe and much of my lands are overrun with evil I am hard-pressed to repel. It is painful to admit that I do not have the power to defend my Realm as I would like. And this too weighs on my mind. Yet none of this tells me why Adonnenniel is struggling against the same sadness and distorted feelings with which she arrived here, and which I believed to be healed."

With great care, he aided Glorfindel to return to lying on his back, arranging the pillows to avoid pressure on his wound, and offering him more to drink. "Problems such as hers are not often seen among our people, and yet they are not unheard of," said Glorfindel. "While only Eru knows for certain, it is Thaliel's belief that this is a function of her pregnancy. I sent Thaliel to Adonnenniel earlier today, when I saw this state of mind developing. And, I cannot disagree. She has made tremendous progress, only to experience an inexplicable reversal. Injuries of the mind...how do I explain this? They can be healed, but it is as if a path is worn, in that person's thinking. A track in a muddy road, if you will. The road can be scraped smooth, and yet under pressure, the road itself seems to wish to produce the same rut as before, the same groove, even though it was repaired. I had wished to speak to you about this. I can drive it away from her, over and over, and would do so gladly. Yet the Healer mentioned a medicine, which might help, and you have healing gifts of your own. " Speaking so much drained him, but he determined to finish.

"There is more. Adonnenniel has given her all to changing and becoming healthier in mind, Thranduil. Everything I have asked of her, she has done with a willing heart. And today she did something that for her was a tremendous milestone. I think you know, what it can require for her to simply ask for help without preamble or lengthy internal discussions. She did everything within her grasp to manage the feelings of despair that came over her, and chose well in the face of failed efforts, which is why I am doubly grieved at the outcome of the day. I hope you can find it in yourself to pardon her, as well." What Glorfindel did not mention aloud was any reminder as to who had desperately wished for this pregnancy; he felt confident that the connection would be made. He paused. "I do not believe I can recall when I have ever needed assistance to make my way to a privy," he said, with self-effacing humor. "I do not have enough strength to walk on my own. Please?"

Startled out of his reflections, Thranduil blinked. "Of course. I was...trying to think on your words." In moments, he carried Glorfindel across their chambers to the necessary door and assisted him with his clothing.

"Elladan and Elrohir would probably give a century of their allowances to see this," Glorfindel grinned.

With a chuckle, Thranduil gave him his privacy, waiting outside. "I do not doubt it. But they shall not hear of it from me. And, there are such devices as chamber-pots. One will be available, before you next have need."
Glorfindel felt extremely thankful for the more luxurious appointments in Thranduil's Halls, which allowed him to manage hand-washing in spite of his weakness. The pitchers and basins used in Imladris would be currently impossible.

"I am...done," he said, laughing softly that he lacked the strength to do more than lean his head against the King's shoulder once he was lifted into his arms. "Meldir, I am not at all accustomed to this. And I believe the device you mention would be wise. Adonnenniel is strong, but I do not know if she could carry me. Not to mention, I imagine she would prefer not to have quite so much of a view of my person."

Thranduil's eyebrows raised. "I am afraid she has already had a view of you, my Lord. I did not know that you had any reservations in this regard; she helped me change your clothing."

"It was out of courtesy to her," Glorfindel frowned. "I thought that perhaps...honestly, I do not know what I thought."

"This is not going to sound as I wish it to, but, she has no modesty. I am hoping I need not parse out the meaning of my words, to you of all people. In fact, I was asked the oddest question, after she...saw you." He shook his head. "Our male parts are unusual, to her, because on earth they...they..." with a look of helplessness Thranduil sent him the mental images he had seen from his wife.

"By Eru..." Glorfindel whispered in horror as he was carefully returned to the bed. "It is no wonder she did not emerge unscathed. No elven fae could manage in such a place, without consequence."

Their eyes met in shared revulsion that turned into shared laughter. "Thank you, that amidst pain and sickness you had room in your heart to help me," said the King, pulling the covers up to his broad shoulders. "I should go to my wife, if you feel comfortable being left alone for a short time?"

"I will be fine, my friend, and you are welcome. The medicines have helped a great deal. I am going nowhere, for a few days."

"Then I will return, soon." With a smile and an easier heart, Thranduil left, and Glorfindel heard his steps out the main door. He had just closed his eyes when he felt a cold nose on his shoulder, and opened his eyes to find himself being stared at by the massive dog, who was sniffing rather determinedly at his injury. This was followed by tiny licks. Glorfindel's eyes widened as the licks became not so tiny, and the long tongue somehow worked its way over his wound, creating an indescribable feeling made more disturbing by the fact that it felt nice. Good, even. Wonderful, and soothing. For many minutes, this feeling of blissful warmth kept on, until with a satisfied yawn, Beren jumped on the bed, turned a few circles, and laid down against his legs with a fair amount of grace given his size. But no one was the wiser, for Glorfindel now slept.

Chapter End Notes

Music: Cristofori's Dream, by David Lanz: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9wxrB41PMhw
Do you play piano? This piece is lovely, and not that difficult on the grand scheme of things. Sheet music: http://henry-william.weebly.com/uploads/1/6/4/8/16483188/cristoforis_dream.pdf
Chopin, Prelude Op. 28 no. 15, "Raindrop". It's worth listening to the spoken introduction: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q8uONLM5U-I

"The Fly," poem by William Blake

Arlo Guthrie, "The City of New Orleans" https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TvMS_ykiLiQ

John Denver: "Rocky Mountain High" and "Country Roads" (so familiar to most that I doubt links are needed!)

"Sweet Betsy From Pike" (American Folk Song) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mr03En-8fH8

"My Old Kentucky Home" (Stephen Foster) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2yQu0sFykbw

"The Leaving of Liverpool" (sea song) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kxiSo1rfmGA&list=RDkxiSo1rfmGA#t=63

Chopin, Prelude Op. 28 no. 24 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nIsCvQPodcM
Silently, Thranduil opened the door to the music room and admitted himself, remaining motionless near the door. This was a composition his wife clearly had not learned, and it was obvious why. Her time had been spent trying to find a way to manage the blindingly quick and roving left hand notes, until she switched tactics and simply slowed down. With her right, she repeated over and over the brilliant scales, trying to gain the needed dexterity. And in all of it, her unhappiness had etched itself on her features, mixed in with a towering passion of strong emotions with nowhere to go.

He forced himself to honestly reflect on what he saw here, and why. So occupied with Legolas in recent weeks, he had not truly wanted to notice the totality of her struggles with pregnancy. The pregnancy he had so greatly desired. Weariness, weakness, severe nausea, and now a return of her disordered mood. She had not once complained to him, laid blame on him, or asked for extra attention; he'd had the luxury of delegating nearly all of his obligations in that regard to a willing Glorfindel. She eagerly satisfied every want of his body. And in exchange for all this, he had failed to truly consider her, as he reveled in his newfound relationship with his son. Only today, when something had finally happened that endangered his unborn daughter, had he truly taken notice, and in turn offered his wife little in the way of comfort or reassurance. The elleth in front of him felt guilt for her perceived failure, and pain of spirit. Why could he not do better? The simple answer is, I am not Glorfindel. But it does not mean I cannot try.

Crossing the room, he placed an arm lightly across her shoulders, startling her, before he sat next to her at the bench, his legs aimed away from the piano. "I am sorry, Adonnenniel," he whispered, taking her into his arms. "I am sorry for my neglect of you, and my lack of compassion today. There is so much that I fail to see." Time passed, in silence, before she finally spoke.

"I hurt," she said, holding him. "And I can manage that, however badly, and get by like I always have. What I cannot manage is to see Glorfindel poisoned on account of my problems, that in turn cause me to make mistakes that cannot be made. It is like there are two of me in here. One is useful and happy and capable. The other exists to try and ruin everything the first one wants to be. I am...so disappointed, in myself. I thought I was doing better, and it feels very cruel to see that I am not."

"No, Meleth. What you cannot do is separate your mind from your body. You are not acknowledging or understanding how you are changing, as our daughter inside of you grows. I wanted this child, far more than you, and it was my responsibility to watch over you. However willing and helpful Glorfindel has been, so much should not have fallen on his broad shoulders. I must find a way to do better. I am going to help you, now, because I wish for you to be able to speak to me without pain."

A familiar numbing of her feelings fell over her. Not so encompassing as he had done for her in times past, but enough that she sighed with relief. "I have not felt neglected, Thranduil. If anything, I feel like I take up more than my fair share of your time. We have done as best we could.
Everything was fine for me, until it was not; I have been cared for. I do not want you to feel guilty.

"While you feel guilty instead, for what happened today?" he lifted her chin so that she had to look at him and the smile that played at the corner of his mouth.

"I suppose telling you 'that's different' will do no good?"

"Something like that," he said, lifting her in his arms to bring her to the sofa in the room. Once seated, he kissed her tenderly, and her heart kindled with love for him.

"I cannot resist you." Her fingers traced a delicate pattern across his forehead and cheeks.

"Something I shamelessly exploit, at times," he smiled. "Though, I am no better." He placed soft kisses down the line of her jaw, and she wanted him. So very much. "Meleth, I want to understand what you meant, earlier. You did not want to tell me, what...set you off, so to speak. Will you? Please?"

Nodding, she leaned into him. "It is hard for me to talk about, because it is everything that *I* have asked for. Everything *I* wanted. If I tell you, promise me you will not try to make changes or...do anything. Everyone has gone to a great deal of effort to do as I wished and...it is a mood, and I will find a way around it."

"You are having second thoughts about going to Erebor?" he guessed.

"And this dinner, that is...tomorrow? Oh good grief, Glorfindel will not be in any condition for this. How...bad will it be, to postpone such a thing for a day or two?"

"It will not be bad at all, for I am King, and I am going to postpone it. You need more time as well, if I am not mistaken."

"I just need to stop feeling this way, is what I need. But I cannot seem to do that on my own."

She was fully open to him now, and he read her thoughts and the memories of the day, and understood the completeness of what had occurred. He stroked her hair. "Adonnenniel, none of this was your fault or Glorfindel's, now that I see all of your memories. I will agree that you could have shown greater caution regarding sheathing your sword, but you did no less and in fact a great deal more to escape trouble than I originally understood. Even with your weapon drawn, I do not believe you would have prevented his being stung. This was...misfortune. And I am afraid this makes up my mind about another matter as well. Until I see evidence that there has been a favorable change, there will be no more excursions into the forest in groups numbering less than four. I do not care who it is or how able a fighter; I place this same restriction on myself."

Disappointment washed over her as it felt like yet another freedom had flown away. "Yes, Thranduil," she said in acknowledgement of his command.

He closed his eyes. There was no question, that this pronouncement would be universally unpopular. "It will not always be like this, meleth," he tried to soothe, seeing both her willing obedience and her dismay.

"I know. It is only that I want so much to be in the forest, and it feels like it is taken away from me more and more at every turn. Please do not think I am resisting your will, I..."

His finger came over her lips. "There is no need to explain," he said, tracing his finger around her rosy mouth, before claiming it once again in a deep kiss. His hand reached down her belly, under
her clothes and between her legs.

"Here?" she asked, having almost completely lost herself to desire.

"Here," he echoed, as he pulled off her boots and eagerly tugged her leggings down. "I wish to taste you," he said, his eyes darkening with lust as he gently pushed her back on the sofa. Their mouths found each other, and for the next quarter hour, only soft moans and touches were exchanged until each brought the other to a hard and deeply satisfying climax. Her hand caressed his soft male parts while her lips kissed the places that were not soft in the least; she felt the same attentions from him on her own intimate regions.

He curled her up and held her against him. "Please tell me you had some way of magically locking the door," she said, waiting for her breathing to return to normal as he stroked her breast. They were both in a ridiculous state of assorted and incomplete undress.

He chuckled but did not answer, which earned him an eye-roll. "About the other, meleth. The journey to Erebor. I understand what you have told me, and it means much that you would confide in me. I will not cause you to regret it. But I would like to ask your feelings on trying the medicine Thaliel suggested. There are times I have been quick to bypass the traditional remedies of our Healers on account of my gifts, yielding to the easy solution of using what can be done immediately. And yet I see how well it helped your nausea. And with Glorfindel weakened right now..."

"I only did not wish to offend either of you. I am willing to try anything, if it will keep me from having days such as this. And while I know Ada means well...I think he...not forgets, but...there are times I need help so much I feel like if I were a barnacle attached to his chest, it might not be enough. I would like it if he had less to do, in that regard. I am already a full time job for him." She paused. "I want to take care of him, Thranduil. It is the only way I am going to feel better about all this. He does everything, for me."

More tender kisses were placed on her brow. "That is why he is in our chambers, Adonnenniel."

"Thank you."

"I told him I would not be gone long. Did you wish to continue with your music?"

"No, not right now. I will return to Ada right after I am fit to be seen in the passageways." With a grin, she began pulling on her leggings. "Are we going to manage to behave ourselves in bed, with our guest so near at hand?"

"No, we will not manage," Thranduil smirked as he returned his private parts to the confines of his clothing. "Have you any idea, how many times he has caused me to fall asleep? I am looking forward to this. He will slumber as though he was a babe in arms. Trust me, he will be entirely unaware of any activities in which we may choose to indulge."

"Oh, my," she said, blushing.

"Our physical love is the least of his concerns, meleth. That you are well, and happy; that means everything to him. He is a father."

"I suppose. I try to understand but..." she laid a hand over her womb. "Not there yet."

"In time, my beautiful wife." He leaned down to kiss her once more.

"Thank you, for coming to see me," she said. "For talking with me." Her eyes met his in
They returned to their chambers, to check on Glorfindel. Nenni clapped her hand over her mouth to suppress a howl of laughter. Beren reclined on his back, splayed out next to the golden Lord, sharing the same pillow with him, exposed fangs gleaming as he snored. The golden elf's head leaned against Beren's, his rosy lips parted slightly in peaceful rest. All four canine legs twitched along with the muted barks of dreaming. It was necessary to leave the room to keep her composure, and was the cutest thing she had ever seen. Thranduil saw her dash out, and rushed in to see what was the matter, his eyes growing wide at the sight. He took a moment, to firmly fix this sight in his photographic memory, and with a satisfied grin, rang for Galion.

He had several messages. They would take their evening meal here, and it was to include broth, steamed vegetables and fruits for the injured Glorfindel. Their dinner with the nobles was to be postponed two days on account of this injury, with apologies and explanation. And a note was to be delivered to the Healer's Hall, requesting more items and medicines to be brought by Thaliel later on. And last but not least, he was to pass along his edict to the Commanders and Generals: No fewer than groups of four were permitted to traverse the forest for any reason. "I am sorry, for so many errands," the King said.

"I have a request as well," Nenni mentioned apologetically. "Please, I would very much like to have more vases here, for flowers. But only when you are able, there is no hurry."

With a serene smile and a bow, the Steward departed. Returning to her room, she felt that their previous conversation indicated an evening inside and therefore comfortable clothes are allowed. Opening her wardrobe, she found a warm gown of mixed colors, and changed out of her black woolens. And because she felt mischievous, she returned her tresses to Sailor Moon status. "I am going to cut some flowers before the light is gone," she told her husband. "Are there any fruits you wish brought back?"

"No," he said, not looking up right away from some papers. "I will go with you, I..." only then did he see her. "Meleth, what in Eru's name have you done with your hair?"

"I am glad you like it," she grinned, knowing that he assuredly absolutely hated it.

"That is not what I meant, and you know that perfectly well," he protested.

"Then do something about it," she retorted saucily, dashing off. She ran hard, but had no head start, and was quickly caught in his arms.

"Oh, I shall," he breathed against her neck, excited by the chase. She felt the nip of his teeth, and then the suction of his lips, as he moved quickly along the back of her neck, leaving reddening marks of possession on her.

"Tell me you did not just place love-bites all over me, Thranduil Oropherion."

"Mmmm I am afraid I cannot do that, meleth," he said, as she felt his teeth again, mildly embarrassed by the fact that this was exciting her more than she cared to admit.

What am I, in high school? she thought with exasperation.

He reached up and removed her hair sticks, enjoying the satin strands as they came tumbling free of their buns and slid through his waiting fingers. "And look! Now the marks cannot be seen at all. Which is most fortunate, a few of them are turning quite purple," he grinned, enjoying every moment of this.
A noise of exasperation escaped her, as her hands pulled him the rest of the way up the passageway. "You are impossible," she chided, closing the garden door behind them as they emerged into the late afternoon sunshine. "Next I supposed you are going to tell me you wish to spank me again."

"I tried that once, and you enjoyed it in the end," he smiled. "We were in a different relationship, at that time. Are you mentioning this because you desire it?"

Well, *that* was a good question. *Am I?* "I....when you did that, I felt many things. Uncertainty and excitement, fear and great desire. And you took me very hard, surely that is not safe for the baby?"

"I would not cause you or her harm, meleth," he said, kissing her and parting her hair to nip at her neck yet again, even as he felt a thrill of want from her. "I am more concerned for your emotions, though. Perhaps just now is not the time for rougher play."

Turning toward him, not entirely sure what had come over her except arousal, sharp teeth bit at his collarbone, sucking hard before dashing off again. Her feet did not travel far, for he lunged and felled her by the ankle into the soft grass. His roving hands were soon pushing up her skirts and baring her bottom, spanking even as he entered her, biting at her exposed neck yet again. Even as she wondered just how many loose screws were rattling around in her psyche, she wanted more. This felt thrilling. *Completely* thrilling. The harder she struggled and writhed to escape him, the more he reddened her shapely behind and drove into her until she shouted his name in the throes of her pleasure. An equally primal noise emitted from him, as the hot spurts of his seed surged into his wife. Trembling with enjoyment that anything could feel so good, she squeezed her eyes shut. He lifted and cradled her against him. Their breathing returned slowly to normal, as they reeled in the aftermath of this intense encounter. Nenni smiled up at him.

*There are times when I wonder if something is wrong with me, that I have these desires. Even when I have been terribly angry with you, there has always been this want. That you would have mastery over my body and my spirit, ruling me.*

He held onto her, his heart full of love and satisfied lust. Rocking her, he whispered into her ear. "If there is something wrong with you, it is wrong with both of us. Knowing that you wish for this inflames me. It always did. But know that I love you, and respect you. I cherish all of you, Adonenniel. You are my wedded wife, and the gift of your body brings me bliss that nothing else can. Though," he frowned, parting her hair, "I can hardly bring you back down the passageway with these marks, I would not relish explaining this to your Ada." He began to touch her, healing the unsightly bruises.

A snort escaped. "He sort of knows, already. Not...with great specifics, but there was a conversation about my having unusual proclivities, because I have felt ashamed of them. He reassured me that while this was not ordinary, perhaps it was also part of our mutual happiness."

Thranduil's eyebrows raised and he chuckled. "It should not surprise me, but it does. He is...remarkable. There are times when it still feels strange, to be so...known, to another besides you. And yet I doubt I am expressing anything you have not already felt to an even greater degree." His hand caressed her hair and the side of her face.

"Probably not." Shifting around, she cleaned herself as best as she could manage with a hand that was then wiped clean in the dewy grasses. "I have come to trust him; he has never given me cause to regret my honesty. Especially the honesty that was hardest to give."

"Me either," Thranduil grinned, lacing his breeches again with a laugh. "My clothing takes a great deal of abuse, from our marriage."
"You mean, our clothing," she countered. "I am hoping that Tinivel and Galion experience similar wedded bliss, and then I might have hope that she will understand half the laundry-related fiascoes she doubtless has encountered and cared for in discreet silence."

"Come," he said, helping her up. "Cut your flowers, before you can no longer see them, and I will hold them for you. It is the least I can do after waylaying you."

"I hardly minded."

Soon she was snipping away with her shears, choosing many of the golden blossoms of Vána and a few of the sweetest smelling roses. "I have been meaning to ask you, Thranduil. When we returned from Imladris, the entire garden was a rank mess of overgrowth. It took some days to set it to rights again. Can you...do something, to stop that from happening, or lessen it?"

"I believe I can. And if I am wrong, it sounds as though you will be no worse off than otherwise. I did not know about this."

"I forgot to tell you. I had Ada to help me with the work, you were busy and...I am sure I did not feel that it was overly important. He...will he need a similar amount of time as you, to regain his health?" With her free hand that was not holding flowers, she opened the passage door.

"I am not certain. He is very strong. And the venom that was on your clothing was venom that did not go into his body. That was very good thinking on your part, to have blotted at the wound right away. We will know more tomorrow morning. Only one thing, can be said for certain. He is a far more affable patient than I was. Even with his pain and weakness, his spirits remain bright."

Nenni nodded, not wishing their conversation to waken him. When she arrived in her room, a Glorfindel who was obviously alert and with a very peculiar expression on his face greeted her eyes. Beren still snored next to him, and it was not possible for her to keep the corners of her mouth from turning up. Hurrying to him, she sat and caressed his cheek. "Are you uncomfortable, Ada?"

He looked up at both of them. "I would give much, for Lord Elrond and the twins never to hear of this," he murmured, his eyes glancing over to Beren, who suddenly woke and seemed surprised to find his nose within an inch of Glorfindel's face. A cavernous yawn in what Nenni thought was a lovely ascending portamento was followed by a contented belch, at which point neither she nor Thranduil could maintain any self-control. Both burst into laughter, while Beren licked Glorfindel's face and rolled upright, stretching and walking his way off of the bed. Glorfindel's expression was not one she had ever seen before or was likely to ever see again, and it did nothing to quell her amusement. But eventually calm returned, and she took his hand. "On my word of honor, no one will hear of this from me. Though, I wish you would relent because it was sweet, and beautiful. Beren does not like just anyone, and he cannot help that he is a hound."

Something like "I suppose" rumbled out of him.

"How are you feeling right now, my Lord?" Thranduil asked, noting the still-peculiar look with which he was being regarded. And then it occurred to him to wonder, exactly when had Glorfindel woken? Their lovemaking session would have been difficult if not impossible to ignore and...while he was not ashamed, it was nothing he particularly relished the idea of Glorfindel having seen. Most fathers would not wish to know of a husband that spanked their daughter, however mutual the desire. For a thoroughly uncomfortable moment, he imagined Amaranthine, wed one day, and him learning of the same thing. He could not help an involuntary twitch at the thought...it was going to be different, to be the father of a daughter and not a son. Smiling weakly, he waited for Glorfindel's response.
"Only a little discomfited," came the too-carefully worded reply, that sailed over his wife's head. And for this, Thranduil was grateful; she would be mortified were she to realize.

"Would more of the salve help?" Nenni asked, happily oblivious.

"Perhaps only on my neck; that is still quite painful."

Opening the container lid caused her to grimace; there was really nothing left.

"There is more in the cabinet, Adonnenniel," Thranduil said, wishing for a moment alone with Glorfindel. The second she was out of hearing, he spoke very quietly to the older elf. "For what I guess you could not help but overhear, I ask your pardon. Please, do not tell her of your awareness. It would be a heavy blow to her sensibilities."

The thoughts lurking behind his sky blue eyes were unknowable. "I was...warned, in a manner of speaking. Being unwed, I have no frame of reference for...that, and feel somewhat taken aback. And yet you both consent to and enjoy such experiences. If this is what my daughter embraces, how you express your love for each other is not my concern. I will remain silent on this subject, though, I appreciate your concern for my feelings."

Thranduil inclined his head in acknowledgement. "I am not certain that being wed would help; I do not think we are...usual. I found myself trying to imagine my own daughter in a similar circumstance, and found that I could not. I will endeavor to show greater discretion in the future, my Lord."

A nod and weak smile from Glorfindel concluded the exchange, as the sounds of her footsteps were audible. And really, what more was there to say? Nenni returned and sat on the bed, smoothing his stray strands of hair that appeared as spun gold in the lamplight. Gazing into his eyes, such love came over her. Before she knew what she was saying, "Len melin" tumbled out of her. Carefully, she hugged him in gratitude, snuggling against him when she felt his arms come around her. Holding her close, he reflected on her many facets. His daughter loved him with the greatest purity of heart. And for all its oddities, she loved her mate in the same manner. Perhaps it was a kind of lesson; love came in many forms. Nenni pulled away from him and began to rub more medicine with strong and probing fingers into the many muscles of his painful neck. They spoke, she sang and read to him, until heavy eyelids caused her to fall asleep doing so. The last she remembered was curling up against him. Thranduil brought a blanket, and saw that she occupied the crook of Glorfindel's shoulder, her hand in a loose fist and her lips around the knuckle of her index finger. She appeared so much as a small child, a sight that warmed his heart as he covered them. The Elflord too slept again, his blond head drooped against her coppery one.

The clinking of tableware woke them, and several moments of bleary-eyed disorientation ensued. Glorfindel's odd absence of any defining personal scent left Nenni aware of warmth next to her and the sounds coming from strange directions. Blinking over and over, her surroundings came finally into focus as she saw amused eyes regarding her and recalled the day. "You must be thirsty," she murmured, rubbing at her face. "I will bring you something. I fell asleep." There was nothing like stating the obvious.

"As did I," he chuckled affectionately, his still-weakened limbs only able to hold her lightly. "Perhaps you would send your husband in here? I do not relish asking you to help me to the lavatory."

"Neither do I, really," she said lightheartedly, kissing his brow. "Though you should know I do not mind for any reasons pertaining to modesty or the necessities of life...after working around farm animals, none of that could possibly matter. It is that while I am much stronger than before, I am
not certain I can carry you or even support most of your weight without both of us ending up in a heap on the floor. That would not be helpful."

Emerging, she passed Thranduil, who had heard the exchange, and winked at her. Galion was laying out the tableware. "I am sorry for the delay of the fancy dinner, Galion. I hope that it has not made your preparations more difficult?"

"No, Hiril vuin," he smiled. "If anything...how to say this? I believe that even more intrigue was created on your behalf by my admittedly cryptic explanation of the reason for the delay. And, you should know as well that Lady Merial was extremely taken aback by your brief encounter earlier today. It apparently has only now dawned on that circle of noble Ladies that your armor and weapons are not for ornamental purposes. They have all been informed by their husbands of your skills, now that they have bothered to inquire. I believe you have acquired a formidable air." The Steward clearly struggled to prevent an outright smirk from forming on his gentle features.

"I see," Nenni drawled. "Though, what possible use to make of it, I will have to ponder."

"Tinivel informs me that Lady Merial is deathly afraid of the spiders," he mentioned casually.

"Is she, now?...hmmm."

"The preparations requested for Lord Glorfindel are on this tray, Hiril vuin. Will you require anything else at this time?"

"No, thank you, Galion. Please give Tinivel my greetings. I take it you will not accompany us to Erebor?" she asked.

"No, Hiril vuin. However, Tinivel will. It is my duty to organize many of the preparations for the royal household; it will fall to her to oversee the care and comfort of your family as you travel."

"Comfort?" That certainly had not computed; she was thinking only of their military excursion in Imladris. "Oh..." Nenni said. "You will be parted, on account of this. I am sorry...I did not realize."

"It is no matter; we fulfill our duties to you and Aran Thranduil with gladness. And," he said hesitantly, "when you return, we will have the joy of our marriage. We have told no one else." The words were spoken with great shyness.

"Galion..." she whispered. "I know you are very formal in your manners, but if you do not allow me to hug you this once, I believe I will cry."

The bewildered ellon stood frozen, but did not resist as the Queen embraced him, even managing to awkwardly pat her on the back. "I could never cause you such distress, Hiril vuin," he smiled, attempting to regain his usual elegant composure.

"Good," she smiled. "I will accost Tinivel at some later occasion. You have my silence; there will be no mention outside these walls. I am overjoyed, for you both."

With a good-natured chuckle, the Steward bowed and withdrew. She elected to wait until Thranduil reappeared, bearing...is that what I think it is? Then again, it made sense. Probably she should not admit that she used to collect chamber pots on Earth, thinking them a rather amusing reminder of a bygone era...though still they had value, for one who was truly ill and unable to easily walk to the facilities.

"Go ahead, meleth," was heard from Thranduil, whereupon she carried in the tray of food. "Broth, vegetables, or fruit?" she said, trying to sound cheerful about his choices.
"Fruit," he said, a little nervously. Appearing so weak felt difficult, and yet he was uncertain that he had the strength yet to feed himself. This fruit was stewed, and warm.

Guessing at his predicament, she smiled kindly. "I will try not to make a mess of this." A spoonful of food appeared in front of his lips. With a sigh, he opened his mouth, having no choice but to be fed as if he were an infant. "Do not feel badly, Ada. You would do the same for me. You would not be in this difficulty, were it not for me." It was indeed strange, to see one so powerful brought so low. And yet after her own experience of enervation and weakness, she fully understood how trying it was, to be thus afflicted. He ate perhaps half of what was there, before his eyes widened.

"I feel sick," he whispered, a look of panic in his eyes. Had he ever, in his entire life, sicked up food?

"Look at me," she demanded, bringing his eyes to focus on her. "Do not dwell on how you feel. Concentrate on breathing slowly and deeply. That, and only that. I will help you." Quickly setting the food aside, she covered it to stifle its aroma, and reached for the salve to help with this, swiftly rubbing it into his arm as Thaliel had done for her. Her husband was quietly summoned to help with this as well. Some minutes later, he sighed as the truly unpleasant sensation abated.

"I am sorry, iellig. I did not truly realize what you were enduring, with this. It is not nice, is it..."

"No, it is not" the King chimed in gently. "But we will help you. Do you believe you can take more food?"

"The broth, please."

"I will be right back," Nenni said. "He needs a straw."

"A what?"

"You will see, Ada. Give me just a moment." Which was all she needed, to grow and cut several of the hollow-stemmed plant stalks and return to him. "You can drink easily, this way. You need only suck on the straw, and swallow. Nothing can spill on you and you can take the liquid at your own rate." He tried, and was very pleased at this new discovery.

"This is ingenious," he said admiringly.

"I cannot take credit," she told him. "They were common, on Earth."

"And yet you adapted to be able to have them here," he said archly.

"Mmmm, not really, Ada dear. You see, there is a bit of a story. The man who invented drinking straws did so because he was drinking out of a straw made of grass, as you now are. And he did not like that it made his drink taste different. So he made one out of paper and wax instead; I am merely making use of what was done since time immemorial, cutting a hollow plant stem. But I did grow you a particularly strong one," she teased.

"You are supposed to indulge me in my time of illness, iellig," he remonstrated.

"Anything you wish."

"Then I wish you to talk to me about what you are scheming on in the recesses of your mind, that seems more interesting than drinking straws." She was handed back the empty bowl of broth.

"Can I interest you in some of the vegetables first, or more fruit? You must keep up your strength."
A spoonful of steamed vegetables appeared in front of him, and he opened his mouth. Swift and patient, there was always a new spoonful waiting, as her eyes were kept lowered.

"Why do you not look at me?" he demanded irritably.

"Out of respect for how you might feel because of this," she answered truthfully. "You are a powerful ellon, I would imagine it is difficult to need so much help. And yet you must eat."

"I am not bothered by needing your help, Adonnenniel."

"Then I will meet your eyes, since I assume that is what you would prefer. As for your inquiry, I am feeling somewhat desperate concerning this postponed dinner. I assume you heard what Galion told me, and yet I do not know what to do, still. I had hoped in all this time that a plan would form, that some idea would present itself for how to help these ladies to want to choose better behavior. So they now realize I can fight as well as many an ellon. What am I to do with that, threaten to take them spider hunting if the gossip does not cease? That hardly sounds practical, or kind. I had wanted to reach their hearts."

"And yet, without knowing them, I must tell you that not all hearts are reachable. You must be prepared for that possibility going into this. Many tried to reason with Fëanor and could not."

"How am I to determine that?" she said, exasperated. "I can try but...I do not trust myself, very much. I fear I am too easy to deceive."

"I think you should give yourself more credit. And while what you say may be true, I am not easy to deceive. Neither is your husband, though for different reasons. Though you did not ask for my help in this way, I will give it. You are trying to work for the good of all, and I admire you for this."

"Are you also saying that I should try to leverage that they are now afraid of me in some capacity?" She was uncertain that she understood him correctly.

"You have a tendency to wish to show kindness, and that is admirable. And yet...how do you view me?"

Nenni laughed, seeing where this was going. "I know you are kind, and fair. And yet we both already know that you are also stern, and have expectations. Expectations that others do not wish to fail to meet. There is a great strength, behind your displeasure. Is this something of a veneer, something you adopt because it is useful?" Now she felt somewhat intrigued, and tilted her head at him.

"Not exactly," he replied. "I am not...pretending, I do feel this way, though it is coupled with great love and regard for those with whom I am close. But I also acknowledge that when it comes to leadership, there is an advantage in this demeanor. It can sometimes motivate better results that simply appealing to the nobler nature of others. Especially if they do not have one. Let me ask you this. When you were seen today, by Lady Merial, were you acting?"

"No. I was angry, worried for you, and when I saw her, waves of intolerance for petty bad behavior were probably coming off of me. I was in no mood for courtesies or...any of those things that might matter when someone I love is not injured."

"While I am not advising you to become someone you are not, perhaps there is a lesson in here."

"You and Thranduil have infinitely more wisdom regarding ruling than I do; I will consider what you have said. Right after I consider the frame of mind I will need in order to make use of it," she
sighed. "Thranduil feels I should try Thaliel's medicine. You would not...mind?"

"I support anything that will leave you happier and feeling better, regardless of the source."

"Thank you," she smiled, feeding him the last of what was provided before bringing a warm, moist cloth, gently wiping his skin.

"Meleth, he should be allowed to rest." Thranduil had appeared in the doorway and addressed Glorfindel. "My Lord, you should sleep now, for a long while, before you next wake. Do you need to be cared for in any way, beforehand?" The King was smiling a little too happily.

"You do not fool me, King of Eryn Galen. You are enjoying yourself," grimaced Glorfindel. "And no, I am well."

"It is regrettably true, my Lord," the answer came, as Nenni giggled at their exchange. Kissing her Ada's cheek, her hands soon cupped a face that slumped over. When Tinivel arrived some hours after, she seemed pleased enough with the care he had received, and praised the arrangement. Closing the door, they all retreated into the main chamber so as to not accidentally wake him.

"The note said you wish to try the medication?" Thaliel asked. "I am sorry, from the sound of it, the rest of your day could not have helped your feelings."

"The struggle continued, though I do not feel so bad just now," she said, sighing. "Thranduil has helped me."

"This is not like the tea," she said. "This is a cordial, taken by the drop, and easiest placed in a small amount of water. I believe you will understand quite soon how it works. Begin with three drops. Wait five minutes or so, take a few more drops if you need to. Every three or four hours, you may take more; you will doubtless work out a dosage. It leaves the body quickly enough."

Thranduil brought his wife a small cup with water, and watched Thaliel set three drops into it, before expertly swirling the contents and handing it to her.

With a cautious sniff and sip, she swallowed, making a face. It was like drinking water with a little too much lemon juice in it. Deciding to end the torment, she quickly tossed back all the liquid. "It is bitter, I see," she smiled ruefully. "Funny how even on Earth, everything that took away pain or feeling was bitter." And she waited. "Will it leave me dizzy or uncoordinated?"

"Only if you take a great deal of it," the Healer replied. "I will stay for some minutes, to ensure this is going as it should, but then I ought to return to my duty."

"Ah, about that," Thranduil said. "Thaliel, unless you object strongly, I wish you assigned here until Lord Glorfindel is fully recovered. My wife requires ordinary rest, and I know that she will insist on remaining at her Ada's side all night unless I have an irrefutable alternative. Galasríniel has already consented."

Both ellith were taken aback; Thaliel by the unexpectedness and Nenni by the masterful maneuvering of her Lord. "As you wish, my King," was spoken in stereo, before both females burst into laughter. "I will tend him through the night, Hîr vuin. The salves will help his body eliminate the venom and he will feel better on waking than if nothing were done."

The King nodded. "Thaliel, even after this...we are leaving soon, for Erebor. It is my wish that you transition yourself to a more ordinary schedule. While your willingness to tend others through the unpopular hours of the late night and early morning is commendable, it will not avail you to have to suddenly be awake during what are usually your times of rest. While I do not anticipate that
myself or Glorfindel will be other than quite nearby, should that occur it falls to you to keep my
wife in good...order," he concluded, not being sure quite what the right word would be.

"My. I feel like quite the managerial challenge," Nenni said dryly, followed by a soft "Ai!" The
medicine had just made itself known. It was not so different than antianxiolytics of Earth, except
there was more occurring than the pleasant yet discernibly artificial disassociation from the outer
world. It could not possibly be...could a drug impart optimism? Grinning, she shook her head.
"Does it..." she asked, looking at Thaliel incredulously. "It does not only stop bad feelings, it
imparts better ones?"

The Healer nodded, smiling. "It is much of how I was able to function for some months of my
pregnancy with my son. Though, I hope you are afflicted less."

"Why doesn't this get placed in the water supply?" Or at least, my water supply, she thought
ruefully.

"Because as with so many things, the more it is used, the less it helps. When you feel you cannot
control a worsening mood, this will aid you. If you find your symptoms lift, you can try to do
without. And while we do not know why, it seems to aid ellith more than ellyn."

Thranduil listened, fascinated. Of much of the herbal lore of their people he had not paid close
enough attention. He knew what plants they used, but preparations, effects, dosages...he had little
idea of any of it. "Thaliel," he frowned, "a thought has occurred to me. We will pass near Esgaroth,
and through Dale. Any of the medicines of our people that might benefit mortals could become
valuable items for trade. I do not know how much time is needed in the preparation of some of
these but...perhaps you could work with Adonnenniel, to that end? I believe she can supply with
you whatever raw plant materials you would like. Gifts could be made to those we will visit, of
whatever we can manage. And my apologies, that I did not think of all of this much, much sooner."

The Healer bowed her head. "Yes, my Lord. I will do my best."

Nenni pondered. "I confess, I would like to see some of this. I had employment on Earth, Thaliel,
doing tasks with a skill set very similar to the preparation of medicines. I will grow whatever you
need and perhaps you would allow me to see a little of what comes next?"

"Of course," she beamed, pleased to no end that her gwathel would enjoy this. "Yet it is growing
late. I will arrange my medicines in the other room, and wish you a good evening." Rising, she
disappeared into the chamber where Glorfindel rested, drawing her cloak around her.

"Perhaps it is best to have an early bedtime, meleth," he said softly, reaching for the ties on her
gown.

"As long as it is a quiet early bedtime, husband. You have had me without inhibitions twice today,
that is something of a record." With not one but two loved ones in the next room, there was no
openness on her part to a lively romp.

He chuckled softly, already counting his good fortune concerning their earlier escapades and that
Glorfindel had not revealed his awareness to her when he had woken. "I promise." Tender kisses
and slow removal of clothing led them to bed, where languid movements brought eventual ecstasy,
and soft sighs in the darkened chamber were the only indication of their shared joy.

"My Lord, may I ask you about something I did not want to but feel I must?" she whispered softly.

"That depends," he murmured, brought back from the brink of sleep, as his arms closed
possessively around her warm and pliant body. "Is it about circumcision? Because that would be a most distasteful topic for me, just now."

"No," she said, lapping at his nipple that was in such easy reach of her tongue, hearing his hiss of enjoyment. "Much worse. It is about projecting power, and authority."

_I believe I can guess what this is about, since you did not conceal your thoughts from me, today._

She sighed, molding herself against him more fully. _I did not want to involve you. I did not even want you to be aware. But I ask myself what I am gaining, to exclude all discussion with one who has ruled for so many years. If you do not wish to speak about this, I will understand. But as I want to succeed, for all of our welfare, it occurs to me that perhaps you have some insight to offer?_

He sighed. _You were right, in what I have seen in your thoughts, that part of why this problem exists is one of gender. Were this circumstance created by my generals and advisors themselves, there is no question that ability or not, such behavior would have been met with discipline and sanctions. But these are their wives, many of them the daughters of the nobility of the Kingdoms of Beleriand. I hoped that these ellyn would find some means by which to curb the proclivities of their mates, so I turned a blind eye. And in doing so, I set a precedent. I think you have seen in me that I have little desire to interact with other ellith. I feel great discomfort. Perhaps some of that was that other females were a bitter reminder of what I had lost. Other of it is, you are my mate and fill my heart and mind; I wished for contact with no other. The reasons no longer matter; because they do not excuse the fact that it was my responsibility not to allow this and yet...I failed, Adonnenniel. I failed to find a way or demand otherwise and we have all suffered the consequences, myself included. It was only in my greatest frustration, at the time of your return, when I demanded change. And even then it was not real difference; it was only that you were absolutely off-limits, or else._

_Yet it was effective, your commands. I did not know the difference...until I did. That I went along in happy oblivion for about half a year, is that not something?_

_Please, Adonnenniel. But it was hardly permanent change, and it did no one else any good._

_Beloved, what do you believe would happen were I to indirectly find a way at this dinner to make my displeasure known?_

_What do you mean exactly...?_

_Well, I was thinking of creating a bit of a ruse. I believe that I could gain the cooperation of Legolas and Tauriel, for this. At this dinner, I could ask Legolas to say something humorous but a bit unkind about Tauriel. Something completely innocuous, . And then I would take the opportunity to politely but firmly censure him, merely stating that 'you know that I do not approve of this kind of chatter, and that I will not hear it at my table.' It would be a bit of an act, but it would also send a strong message, would it not?_

_Silence ensued. You would have to be very careful, meleth. One misstep and I am afraid that your true motive for the dinner invitation would be painfully transparent. That group of ellith is many things, but they are not fools. If I am to be honest with you, the mere thought of this creates knots in my stomach._

_Then I will not do it. And forgive me, for creating a sense of unease. It is exactly why I wanted to keep you out of it. I will simply stick to the original plan. Sometimes the first intention is the best. Yet I cannot help but think that perhaps Ada is right. Perhaps everyone only seeing the side of me that is nice and sticky sweet will not achieve all ends._
I like it when you are sticky sweet. Her eyes widened as his hands roved over her breasts, and an unmistakable hardness pulsed along the cleft of her bottom. I believe my sense of unease is fading, he quipped. Can you pardon me for being unable to have enough of you?

Less thinking. More doing.

Yes, my Queen, the rumble of humor came even as something firm and heated found its target between her legs and a hiss of satisfaction escaped her lips.

*****

The time to the dinner flew by, with the high point of her personal amusement revolving around the necessary trip to the vault. Nenni went alone with her husband, not feeling entirely certain that this room would not constitute another affliction upon her Ada's sensibilities. "So I am clear on this, meleth...I am to...?"

"Place every conceivable item of jewelry possible on me. I wish for you to choose my gown and what jewels you have already given, to match. But not the Necklace of Girion, unless you insist, for Lady Sadronniel has already seen this. Then take me to your vault, and keep going until either there is no more room remaining on my person, or all bounds of taste have been utterly exceeded."

"Then we will need to be quiet; Glorfindel yet sleeps." In an abundance of caution, a great deal of extra rest had been laid upon the golden Lord, to aid in his recovery that already had progressed well. Guided by the hand, the Queen stood with him near her wardrobe as he appraised her with a critical eye. Privately, he felt that emerald green was her best color, followed by hues of purple or blue. Though, the colors of Iavas also did well. He sighed. Green must be ruled out, for if that were chosen, it meant the Necklace of Girion. Really, this would then boil down to what pieces he knew were in possession. However, his collection was excessive by any standards except those of the dwarves. He had given her some pieces, the opals and sapphires; these would be easy to reinforce, so to speak. And yet...the entire purpose of this was to create an aura of power and wealth. Thranduil arrived at a decision. Her gown would be the one of soft wool, in a steel gray. The beauty of this garment was in its simplicity and its design; while being extremely modest, it left little about his wife's charms to the imagination. It fitted her form flawlessly, moved with her, accented every voluptuous curve. A wicked grin was suppressed; he would spend much of this meal considering her body and aching for her. All the better, for when he could unwrap his prize afterward. Please put this on, Adonnenniel. I will need to see the clothing to choose the rest.

In silence she changed, glancing up with sympathy at the slumbering form of her beautiful Ada. Still she felt saddened, that he had taken injury on account of her. Saddened, and yet increasingly grateful, for as the days had passed too many thoughts had entered her mind on what this might have meant for her unborn child. The skirts tumbled over her legs as she released and smoothed the luxurious fabric, that felt much like cashmere on Earth. Her hand ran over her belly, still smooth and flat. Magnificent, thought Thranduil. What jewelry she possessed laid on a shelf, and he deemed none of it suitable, for he had a mind to drape her in white gems. Come, he said, handing her a light cloak. This will ensure your dress is not seen. They traversed the passages needed and entered the vault. Nenni suppressed a smile, to see that her husband looked vaguely disappointed at not finding the guard in any sort of slouching or other dereliction of his duty.

Once inside, he went to work in earnest. "Stand here," he requested. He moved about, bringing rings, bracelets, arm cuffs, belts, hairpieces, earrings. "You ears," he frowned. "You do not wear earrings?"

"I certainly used to," she smiled. "There were no shortage of places in which my ears were pierced. But you never mentioned this nor did I think to ask. I was not wearing jewelry the day I came here.
"I forgot about it. Are the holes still there?" Who even knew, what had healed or been left alone. Her tattoos had survived the transition of her body, so maybe the piercings had as well?

"I believe so," he said. "But if you have not worn them in so long...it might hurt, meleth, to place them on you."

"Eh, shove them through. I've done it before. Unless they were magically healed when I came here, those holes take a very long time to close over; I've re-pierced some of them more times than I can count. Only...the ones up in the cartilage, those can hurt."

"Meleth, how many holes are there?"

"Eight, last I checked. Three on the right side, five on the left."

"Oh by Eru," he muttered, only now noticing all the tiny spots. "How did I not notice those? Hold still." Slowly and carefully, he threaded and fiddled and compared until he looked at her with a satisfied chuckle of approval. "Yes, that will do."

Lightly wiggling her head, she tried to feel what had been placed on her and was very curious. It was heavy, and the weight of jewels on her ears felt interesting, after so long, but good. How had she not thought about earrings, exactly? They were a great favorite, on Earth. Oh well. Thranduil kept working, until her waist, throat, neck, chest, wrists, fingers ears and hair seemed like they must be ablaze. He pondered brooches, and decided against it; they would only weigh down the fabric unattractively. What he had already done, plus styling her hair; it would be without equal. Nothing could now erase the smirk that played across his lips.

"We are done here, I believe," he said happily. "Now to cover you again and sneak you home."

Donning the cloak a second time, he now insisted the cowl be raised as well, and brought her along hastily, occasionally stopping them before proceeding onward. This endeavor was becoming more entertaining all the while, and soon they were back to their chambers.

"Am I permitted to look?" Her curiosity for the mirror had increased steadily.

"With the understanding that I am not done yet, on account of your hair, yes you are." He lifted her cloak off. "Well? Was this what you had in mind?"

"By the Valar, Thranduil," Nenni whispered. There were no adequate words for her resplendence. "It is what I wished and...I feel terribly immodest. Oh, my. This is... this is..."

"Beautiful."

They both whipped around, to see Glorfindel standing in the doorway, admiring her. Nenni flushed scarlet, somehow feeling like a shameless narcissist, until she remembered that this was the entire point of the exercise. Hurrying to him, she worried. "Should you be out of bed, Ada? Are you well enough?"

"To see such loveliness, yes, I am well enough," he admired, his eyes roving over her form, laughing. "You are certainly going to make your impression, iellig. This is truly..."

"Excessive," said Thranduil happily, as his enthusiasm grew. "I am afraid I am enjoying this entirely too much. But as it is, all this must come off and be laid out, except the earrings; those can remain. A small decoration was relocated from an otherwise empty tabletop; this allowed for the organized removal of all the jewelry. The simplest solution was for her to stand like a mannequin until the King removed the last of it. "Now the gown, I will help you." Glorfindel obligingly brought a robe, glad that he had the strength to do something. Finally. "Here then, is the plan. You
are both to eat a little something," the King admonished, eyeing Glorfindel especially. "Take wine or water, if you wish; some miruvor would not go amiss to help restore your strength. Then you may both enjoy a quiet pursuit by the fire that will allow me to style your hair, meleth. This will take quite some time, for what I have in mind. By then it will be time for all of us to dress. If I may, my Lord, I will provide you with garments from my own wardrobe."

"Perhaps Ada would like to bathe, Thranduil? We cannot forget that he has been all but immersed in ointments. Surely there is time?"

"I am forgetting myself," the King whispered. "Of course, meleth, you are correct. I would be honored, to assist you, Glorfindel; you should conserve your energy."

"For eating and talking?" the golden elf asked, amused yet touched. "I accept with thanks, for I can feel that I am yet weak."

With smiles and animated conversation, the three readied themselves with a sense of mounting amusement, at last only a few hours away from this thoroughly anticipated meal. Nenni could not help feeling like some part of her was back in high school. *It probably says something about me that I keep thinking about the opening moves of a game of chess, but, whatever...when in Rome...*
Look Who's Coming To Dinner

Chapter Notes

[8 Ethuil, Imladris. April 6, Gregorian, later that day.]

The names can get a little confusing so here's to help...The Ladies all take their titled names from their husbands, but of course have names of their own. Needless to say, they prefer to be addressed formally by all those they consider beneath them and beyond, but are on a first-name basis with each other.

Eruanna is the wife of Lord Sadronniel (and is also called Lady Sadronniel)
Miathiel is the wife of Lord Merial
Cuilwen is the wife of General Faelyn
Vanafindiel is the wife of Lord Penlor.

"You look marvelous, Eruanna," Lady Faelyn beamed. "Surely you will outshine even the Queen tonight!"

"I am not so certain that matters," Lady Merial groused morosely. "Our Queen is not so much given to luxuries, it would seem." Still, her chance encounter with their armed sovereign in the passageways dominated her thoughts.

"Miathiel, I have already told you a hundred times, this is not the case," said Lady Eruanna Sadronniel with a deep frown, as she traced her fingers lightly over her stunning new necklace of sapphires. "Of all of us, only I have chanced to dine with our King and Queen, and she most certainly does care for jewels. Adonnenniel possesses a piece made of hundreds of emeralds; that is hardly what someone who has no love of finery wears."

"That is exactly my point," Lady Merial shot back, not to be dismissed. "Only you have seen this grand display, because our Queen does not truly favor such things."

"Oh, please," Lady Faelyn snorted in annoyance. "Miathiel, you need to move beyond your encounter with the Queen. So she fancies herself the next Tauriel. What of it?"

Lady Penlor could keep her silence no longer. "I would use great care, not to say such a thing outside our circle, Cuilwen. Commander Tauriel is held in no small esteem throughout this Realm. And if you have not been listening, to make light of the skills of one who can best the Lord of the House of the Golden Flower with a sword...this is not something you wish overheard."

"I think I know that much, Vanafindiel," Lady Faelyn said crossly, becoming positively grouchy at the unusual resistance from her ordinarily like-minded friends. "I am not a complete nobody, last I looked."

"I did not indicate that you were," Lady Penlor replied archly. "I am only trying to encourage you to adopt an earnest frame of mind, for this evening. Can you recall, precisely, the last occasion on which we all have been shown the honor of being invited to the King's table as a group? Because I cannot. And rumor has it that the Prince and the Lord Glorfindel will dine with us as well. To eat at the same table with the mighty reborn Lord from Imladris, said to be specially blessed of the
Valar...this is a rare opportunity."

Lady Sadronniel seconded. "I believe what Vanafindiel is trying to say, Cuilwen, is that if we earn a favorable impression, perhaps such invitations will not be so rare. And if that were the case, imagine the bolstering it would give our positions! More honor, more prestige would be ours, to be able to lay claim to a close relationship to the King and Queen. Long has Aran Thranduil kept himself apart. And while we know that those among our nobility who once desired a match with him have had those hopes utterly dashed by the restoration of the Queen, it has only begun to bode well, for our interests."

For the first time, Lady Merial found that the conversation of these ellith she had called close friends for ages now wore very thin. And she could not pinpoint why, exactly. Nothing had changed, unless it was within her. Something about her chance encounter with Adonnenniel the other day had struck deeply. An uncomfortable concept had begun to take shape, in her mind. The sight of the armed and harried Queen had forced a realization: Adonnenniel was more than an ornament at the side of Aran Thranduil. She held power and force of her own. Their Queen possessed skills. Was capable. Could fight better than many ellyn, and it was rumored that she had musical ability in addition. And what can I do, exactly? Wear gowns and jewels, and plan to eat dainties at teatime? A sense of shame where none had existed before began to permeate her thinking. Perhaps it was a mood, a darkening cloud that would pass. But as she gazed at the simpering faces of her cohorts, a foreboding of change alighted and would not depart.

*****

"You are certain this is not overtiring you, Ada?" This was the fourth time Nenni had asked this, as she handed him flowers with a worried expression while he arranged them in a vase.

"Iellig," he looked to the heavens, understanding that his same over-protectiveness was returning to haunt him. "I have already admitted that I am yet a little weak. But a 'little weak' for me means, much stronger than most others all the time. I promise you I am not about to faint or wither away. Though, I am growing cross and slightly frustrated because of your worry and hovering."

"Ouch," Nenni thought, even though it was deserved. Valar, I have turned into my mother, she reflected, appalled with this sudden insight. Oh how she had loathed it, when mother had behaved this way. It had become so awful as she aged, to the point that her and Michael would make fun of it afterward to try and relieve the stress of enduring her fussing and smothering tendencies with something resembling grace and resignation.

Glorfindel followed this new awareness with interest, including the regret and disappointment, quickly turning to his daughter. "I know you did not intend this, Adonnenniel. Do not become downhearted, not now. I should have said something different. Which is that I thank you for the love you show me. I only wish to reassure you that it is not necessary to fear for my health. I would not lie to you, and hide illness or pain; I have been truthful with you thus far." His sky blue eyes were even-tempered, calm. Moreover, his words were true. He had never given reason to fear deception or being misled. "Now hand me another sunflower, please. A deep red one."

Nenni did as he asked, with a big smile. Now she could not help thinking how much she loved him, hoping he did not mind too much.

The last hour flew by. Galion had come for the flowers already, and Thranduil supervised the elements of their dress and appearance. His wife's hair was woven into a stunning and complex design, the likes of which Glorfindel had never seen. It was a little like the weaving of fabric, except that it was hair. Bedecked with diamonds once again, she watched in silence as Glorfindel's own golden locks were braided and he was robed in exquisite garments of cerulean embroidered
with golden celandines. When the blue diamond was placed on his brow it felt to her like a portal through time, to a vision of when he ruled his house in fair Gondolin. It required effort, to keep away the moist tears that wished to form in her eyes, so beautiful was the sight of him. And Thranduil too outdid himself. He wore the peacock robe his wife had given, the crystals in the train sparkling at every turn. "Well," said the King, utterly pleased with the result of his efforts. "I believe we only lack our son."

As if on cue, Legolas knocked on the outer door before admitting himself. "Adar, naneth, Lord Glorfin..." The Prince was rendered speechless by the sight of them. He too had worn his finest, but that could not match what his eyes beheld. His handsome outfit of emerald greens with golden accents, however, made him the closest color match to Nenni.

"Escort your naneth to the dining room," Thranduil suggested, smiling. This pleased Nenni to no end, and she smiled happily.

"There are not words for the beauty and radiance of your appearance, naneth," he whispered.

"Thank you, ionneg, but am I excessive?"

"Oh yes, completely," he chuckled.

"Good." With her head held high, they exited the door and arrived less than a half-minute after their guests, who all waited in a group as they were served the finest vintage of the King's wine by Galion.

"Good evening," Legolas greeted with courtesy.

"And welcome," Nenni added warmly, with Thaliel's medicine flowing through her veins. "We are delighted, that you could join us."

Bows and light curtseys followed the sound of their voices, but when all of them at last raised their eyes; that was a moment Legolas would cherish to the end of his days in Ennor. Every one of them gasped at the sight of the Queen. Any hope Lady Sadronniel had of winning in a contest of jewels or beauty had just been utterly smashed to tiny bits. Nenni completely ignored the fleeting look of pained envy that she saw written on some of their faces. The point had been, to make a point.

Cheerful Legolas rescued the moment. "Wine for all of my family?" he asked courteously, smiling at all the nods. Galion responded with a bow of his head continuing to pour. Nenni sidled her way over to the formally attired Steward, who lowered his eyes deferentially. He did not need to speak aloud, to tell her what he thought of her appearance.

"The other orders you gave concerning the previous hour were seen to, Hiril vuin," he mentioned very quietly and discreetly.

"You are the most priceless treasure in this room, faithful Galion," she replied with equal circumspection. "Thank you."

"Hiril vuin." Her glass and one for Glorfindel was given, with a deep bow of his head. But not before a fleeting look of gratitude for the praise could be noticed.

"I believe some introductions are in order," the King said, taking the initiative to formally introduce Glorfindel. Nenni appeared at his side, offering his wine with clear reverence. She knew that her every motion and expression was under observation, and was careful not to touch him with the easy familiarity and affection usually shared between them. And she was up next as well, not having ever encountered Ladies Faelyn or Penlor beyond seeing them at a distance. They were
greeted warmly, but with a projection of strength. For that was her mood, this evening. Thaliel's medication left her in a frame of mind she would give a great deal to always feel. Confident, self-possessed, but still warm and with humor. Dark clouds and doubt were held at bay, and at this exact moment, such a demeanor was embraced with a prayer of thanks.

Little place cards were at the table, and Thranduil watched Galion for the subtle signs that their meal was ready for service. He invited everyone to take their places. The seating had been done with great strategy in mind. Everyone knew the Lords and General were level-headed and sensible; these were seated at the right and left Thranduil. Nenni and Glorfindel sat across from each other, physically dividing the ellyn from their wives. Nenni had Lady Penlor closest to her, whereas her Ada had Lady Faelyn. Legolas had the foot at the table, with the Ladies Sadronniel and Merial. As the Prince was capable of charming the warts off of a toad, it was decided ahead of time that he could manage two of them. And this of course delighted the ellith, who believed that they had been favorably granted more time with the royal family.

The dinner conversation immediately took a turn, however, even as the first bites of the seasoned vegetables were being taken. General Faelyn spoke."I felt regret, to hear that you were injured by a spider, Lord Glorfindel. I trust you are restored to health?"

"Yes, thank you. I am almost fully well."

Nenni did not miss the shudder from Lady Merial, while her Ada replied.

Lord Merial continued the topic."Though it may prove unpopular, my King, I cannot disagree with your new command. The boldness of these creatures grows."

"I am afraid you can only expect it to get worse," said Glorfindel. "Evil things are increasing again in number, and gaining in strength. Even the peace of Imladris has seen disturbance, and the tidings from distant lands are ones that give cause for concern."

Lord Penlor shook his head. "Such news bodes ill for trade, and prosperity."

"And yet a watchful peace continues," said Thranduil. "I hope to strengthen ties with our eastern neighbors, soon. It has been too long since we visited. And speaking of trade and prosperity, I intend to get to the root of whatever is the matter in Esgaroth. And why the King in Dale is tolerating whatever difficulties are transpiring."

"You will be taking a substantial force as an escort, I understand, my Lord?" asked General Faelyn.

"Yes. I wish for safety for my wife, on this journey." He raised his eyes to Nenni, smiling. "Or rather, I wish to avoid any necessity for her to draw her own blades. I fear I might not hear the end of it, were there such an occasion."

An arched eyebrow and a smirk at the corners of Nenni's mouth reflected her husband's good humor. "We all have the best interests of the Prince's sister at heart," she smiled cheerfully. Glorfindel watched her very carefully, trying to discern if she was scheming anything. This level of concession on the part of his daughter was not exactly normal.

Nenni saw his slight frown.

_Fear not, Ada. For once my words are sincere. There is no hidden resistance in them._ Her eyes were soft, as she looked at him in silent speech, unable to help admiring his great beauty as she did so. Thaliel's medication was the blessing of all the Valar, at this point. Nenni felt like the best
possible version of herself. Angelic, even. Nothing could bother her, no unkind thought could find a purchase. *How I wish this was really me.* The thought came with the barest touch of sadness.

The conversation ranged far and wide, and kept traveling the table, though mostly the conversation kept near to aspects of the journey to Erebor. And finally, it happened. "I have heard that Dwarven manners can be...interesting", said General Faelyn, diplomatically.

"As interesting as the manners of farmers and sailors," Lady Faelyn quipped acerbically. The General sighed, but did not intervene. Though, he did notice, with no small amount of alarm, that Aran Thranduil laid down his fork after hearing the comment; the expression on his face hardened. Even the generally unflappable Glorfindel's eyes flared in trepidation at what was said, his attention shifting to focus on his daughter.

Nenni laughed prettily and replied immediately without forethought. "I did not think my manners were that dismal, Lady Faelyn. Have I managed an accidental breach of etiquette? Old habits are difficult to break." Nenni had the speechless attention of everyone in the room, though she herself was blissfully unaware of having said anything besides a remark of self-deprecating humor.

"What do you mean, my Queen?" Cuiwen asked, baffled. "I was speaking of the Dwarves, not your Majesty."

"But you *were* speaking of me, were you not?" Nenni replied, smiling happily. "I was a sailor, aboard a lovely wooden ship, on Earth. And later a farmer as well. Arguably I still am, for that is much of the work I do here, for our people." She watched as the elleth's face became vaguely pale, and twisted into anxiety. "I assumed you were teasing me," the Queen added, now that it was beginning to dawn on her that she had not been teased at all. "No offense is taken. It is true enough, that those pursuits do not lend themselves to fine manners. And yet they fill the heart with wonders, amidst many trials. Have any of you been to sea? I wish I could share my recollections with you, somehow. Sights so rare and beautiful, that those who had never seen the watery part of the world could not understand."

"I would like to hear of one," spoke Legolas. He was not entirely certain, what his Naneth was doing, but she appeared utterly unaware that she had the entire room by the throat, thanks to the grievous misstep by Lady Faelyn.

Meeting her son's eyes, she nodded happily. "Near my home, the sea to the south was warmer than to the north. Creatures lived in the water, thousands of them, tiny and invisible to the eye. But at night, if they were disturbed by motion, they emitted light from their bodies. The water would shine and shimmer with a pale green light. So when our ship passed through these places on a clear night, with the stars gleaming overhead, the water too was like a firmament of stars below. Except these stars in the water seemed brighter, like sparks. Gentle animals that swam in the sea would follow alongside our ship in greeting. They had the appearance of fish, but breathed the air like we do, and were the size of large dogs. I do not know a word for them in our tongue, but in the language of my home we called them porpoises."

Thranduil was at a loss. His effort was channeled into controlling his anger at the rude and unnecessary comment from the churlish elleth. Not to mention, he wondered what in Eru's name his wife was playing at. But as the seconds passed, he realized that she was playing at nothing. Genuinely oblivious to the shock and dismay of those around her, she was simply...talking. And his son had seen the opportunity for what it was, and was keeping Adonnenniel engaged in this line of thought. *Stay out of it,* he admonished himself as he reached again for his fork.

"I have been to sea. Obviously," added Glorfindel, who after seeing the sum of this conversation elected to add his support. "While I did not witness what my daughter describes, the sea is indeed
beautiful. I had never known, what it is to look everywhere under Varda's creation and see only the stars above. It was a glory to Eru, and not a memory I will ever forget."

Now Nenni wanted to ask him very badly what the ship was like, in which he had sailed. But not here, not now. There was too much fear of crossing some unknown boundary, and he was a very private ellon.

Lord Sadronniel asked, "What did the ships do, in your former world? Bear those who sailed from place to place?"

"In part. But more than anything, trade. And to an extent, warfare. The ships carried valuable cargo, for commerce. Tea, sugar, spices, furs, gold, desirable foods that grew in one place but not another. Anything that could be bought or sold for a price that justified the expense of transport."

An approving eyebrow was raised, along with a sense of regret that for their part of Ennor, such expediencies were regrettably...useless.

Galion had been discreetly removing plates from those who were finished dining, offering next the King's finest vintage of Dorwinion wine. If the Steward had ever enjoyed an evening as much as this, he could not recall when. It gave him great pleasure to imagine the look on his Tinivel's countenance, when he told her of Lady Faelyn's spectacular blunder.

It was time to withdraw for after dinner conversation. Understanding this, Thranduil gratefully invited the Lords and General to join him at a seating for five, citing a desire to discuss whether the spiders were impacting the movement of goods and supplies adversely. This left the remaining seven of them to their own area, as had long been planned. Legolas took the initiative, cheerfully suggesting where each of the Ladies might sit and making a suitable fuss. When they were settled with their wine, Legolas turned his attention first to Glorfindel. "My Lord, I was unable to see you sooner, and inquire after your health. I am grateful, to see you recovered. Was it very difficult?"

"Thank you, Legolas," he smiled warmly in spite of being very tired of this subject. "I was well tended to. While it was not pleasant, I have experienced worse."

To Nenni's great surprise, Lady Merial asked a question to no one in particular. "I wondered if I might ask," she almost stammered, "what is done for the sufferer, when that happens? The stings, I mean. I know nothing about them except that they are supposed to be terrible."

Glorfindel regarded her searchingly before answering as tactfully as he was able. "They leave the victim very weak, in great bodily pain, and with an inability to consider taking food. More than one kind of medicine is given, to treat all those different symptoms. It is necessary to sleep and be assisted with most everything, until some strength is recovered."

The Lady nodded her thanks, summoning the courage to add only, "I am sorry, that you had to endure this, my Lord."

"Is it making any difference, Legolas? The change in the patrols, I mean." Nenni had heard no news on this matter, these last few days.

"I think so," the Prince answered carefully. "I do not have to tell you that the new command is
unpopular, but eight eyes are better than four. So far, no one else has taken injury."

"Well, that at least is positive," Nenni said. "And fitting. The spiders have eight eyes, and now so do the elves. The added training will prove valuable. We will need every advantage; I fear matters will only become more difficult."

"Difficult why, Hiril vuin?" Again, it was Lady Merial. Lady Faelyn still bore an expression of mortification, mechanically sipping at her wine every few moments. Ladies Sadronniel and Penlor were doing their best to pretend the conversation interested them.

"The world outside this forest is darkening, my Lady," Nenni answered carefully, wondering if this elleth had been paying any attention at all to the dinner conversation? "It is my belief that we need to prepare for far worse to come, while we yet have time. Think of how we can help, while we yet have time."

"Who else thinks this, Hiril vuin?" Lady Sadronniel said, her voice laden with skepticism.

"I do," said the Prince, trying as well not to echo disbelief. This exact matter had been discussed already! "So do our brethren in the Golden Wood, that I have chanced to meet these last years.

"As do I," said Glorfindel. "Neither do I feel Lord Elrond would disagree, were he here to answer." He couched this carefully. In no position to betray his Lord's confidences, this answer satisfied both the need to make an impression as well as discretion. Silence fell over the little group, until it became an uncomfortable one. Galion passed through once again, offering to refill wine. Ladies Penlor and Sadronniel accepted a little more, wordlessly. Internally shaking his head at their unkind dispositions, Glorfindel held up his glass as well. When the Steward came to him, he thanked him warmly and added more: "The meal was truly enjoyed and appreciated, Galion. Thank you, for your noticeable efforts, old friend."

"What Ada said," chimed in Nenni, beaming. "All of it was wonderful, Galion, thank you."

The Steward bowed deeply, saying only "Hiril vuin", by way of formal reply, but she did not miss the gratitude in his eyes. Suddenly Nenni became aware that Thranduil had risen. Unlike on Earth, there was apparently an unwritten rule to these occasions; when the King stood up, it was a sign that the event was concluded. He had monitored carefully enough the conversation in which his wife was engaged, and felt it wise to end this before any more could occur of a volatile nature. Not to mention, his nerves had had quite enough for one evening.

In what seemed like a flurry, polite words of parting were given, and Nenni found herself drifting back to her comfortable chair with her glass of wine. Well, that went well. At least, I think it went well. I had a nice time...

"Naneth, I cannot believe you did that, but it was magnificent," chortled Legolas, attempting to avoid the hearing of his father.

"I am not deaf, Ionneg. But that being said, do not worry. I have no intention of interfering in your schemes. I just hope they do not involve too many more occasions of this nature," he said, drinking deeply of his fine wine.

"What did I do?" asked Nenni, truly baffled. "Did I really do something that was unmannerly, and none of you will tell me?"

Glorfindel came, sitting next to her, and taking her hand. "No iellig, you did not. What Legolas is referring to is that you responded in innocence to Lady Faelyn's comment about sailors and
farmers when she meant it as a grave insult to the Dwarves. You pressed on with the fact that she had just insulted you as well, and somehow managed to not create any ire or indignation."

"But I had no ire, I thought perhaps she was teasing me, at first. I did not...oh, dear," she said, crestfallen, massaging her forehead. "Well, I hoped to accomplish something. I suppose I did, though perhaps not what I intended. Thranduil, I am sorry, if I caused you grief."

"You did not," he said, immediately setting down his goblet to lift her into his arms. "You were speaking with an honest heart, with pure intention. I could never fault you for that, meleth. You were kind, and spoke movingly. I am afraid that if any fault is to be had, it lies at the feet of Lady Faelyn."

*****

In the Palace wing where many of the Sindar had their suites of rooms, polite words of parting were exchanged. Lord and Lady Merial had retired first, on reaching their door. But for Lady Faelyn, there was no mistaking the frozen anger behind the eyes of her friends. When the door closed behind them, her usually reserved husband offered his words. "Congratulations, Cuilwen. Insulting the Queen at dinner; quite an achievement even for your little group. You will not ask my advice, but I will give it anyway. Times are changing. You can be part of that change, or be swept away by it. The choice is yours. I love you, wife, but for long years I have not loved your associates or the manner in which you choose to fill your time."

Lady Faelyn stared back at him, her lower lip beginning to tremble. Heavy steps took her to their bedchamber, where she began removing her finery. In bed, with the lights extinguished, unhappiness and embarrassment unleashed silent tears. Faelyn reached for her, drawing her close to him, as she wept openly. "What do you mean, 'times are changing'?" came out through hitched breaths.

"Cuilen, if you have been blind all this time, see now," he said softly. "Sauron rises again, and war will come. I cannot say when, but this is not the first time we have seen this darkening of all that surrounds us. Our people must either stand by their leaders, or pass into the West. And I, for one, will not abandon Aran Thranduil and our Queen. Adonnenniel sees what you do not; evil will descend upon us. It already is descending. I am not permitted to speak of all I know, but I can tell you that she works tirelessly to prepare our people to survive that eventuality. Not only to be able to survive, but even help those of the other races. That is what is needed, my love. Not idling the days away in pursuit of empty pleasures and spitefulness toward others. Please, Cuilwen, consider my words. If it is favor you seek, you will not find it by how you and your friends have behaved in the past. Our Queen is a seafarer, it would seem. At Mithlond there is a saying among our brethren: 'Be an oar, not an anchor.' Turning to her husband's warmth and strength, a sense of being held back from tumbling off a precipice came over her.

"I have been a fool, Faelyn" she whispered, ashamed, into the comforting scent of his pale blond locks of hair. "Would you be willing to help me, even after all my folly?"

"What is it you wish from me?" he asked, cautiously. While he wanted to believe her heart could change, he had seen too much of the machinations of these ellith to fully trust her motivations.

"Your counsel, and guidance," came the ready answer. "I need to be...different, and I do not know how, exactly. I will be remaining at home, for some days. I think it best that I find other ways in which to occupy my time, while I find somehow the courage to turn my back on those I have called friends. The same friends that are very angry with me, for my words tonight. Perhaps it is no loss. I do not know what to do with myself, Faelyn. I am not like you, a capable fighter. The truth is, I am a useless ornament at your side, with no skills."
Faelyn reflected, while he held her close, kissing her on the forehead. "I once courted an elleth long ago, who had dreams of being a Healer," he murmured. "She knew much about herbs and medicines, and cared about being able to help others."

"And she lived in Doriath, in Beleriand lost to the seas thousands of years past," replied Cuilwen, remembering sadly that vocation abandoned long ago. "She met a noble and handsome ellon who fought bravely and won renown for his courage and his brilliant mind, and she turned aside from those things, distracted by his love and having no further need of occupation."

"It is not too late to reclaim that path, Cuilwen. Many of the Healers of this Realm have already departed. In a few short years, with the skills you have already learned..."

A kiss to his mouth deeply surprised him. It had been a very long time, since they had sought each other in this way. They were companions more than lovers, after being wed so long a span of time. "If I am to reclaim the past, then I would do so in more ways than one," she whispered to him.

Moments later, her husband's deep thrusts into her willing body fanned more than merely the flames of passion. Regret over wasted years and prayers for a changed heart brought many tears; these cleansed her spirit of pettiness and spite. When his emission filled her, for the first time in years she felt hopeful of...something. Something new. Her arms held his powerfully built body, unwilling to release him. It was no matter. With a smile of joy, he began again.

****

"How did you enjoy the dinner, Miathiel?" Merial politely inquired of his wife, wondering greatly at the delay in her response.

"I enjoyed it," came the hesitant answer that turned bitter. "Though I seem to only now be aware of many things that are obvious enough to everyone else, because I have spent long years wasting my time in worthless pursuits."

"Miathiel?" he asked carefully, watching as she undid her pale braids.

Nearly in tears, she confessed her state of mind, and what had brought it about. Merial hardly knew how to respond. He had long hoped that something would happen, though privately he had never believed that his wife was the true force behind her ellith friends and their endless scheming. He assigned that role to Eruanna, Lady Sadronniel. Miathiel was simply never as strong a personality, and had latched on easily to the others in a quest for approval and wishing to have a sense of belonging. "What am I to do?" his wife asked tearfully. "I learned too many things, tonight. When Cuilwen said that, and the Queen answered as she did...I thought I might be sick, Merial. It came crashing down on me all at once, how hearing so many words spoken by me and my friends must have made others feel. And wasn't that the point of it all? What have I done with my life? All that I am, I owe to my good fortune in being born to parents at the court of Elu Thingol, and being wed to you. Nothing more." The words were laden with misery.

Merial sensed that it was possible his wife had reached a turning point, and he would be foolish not to encourage it further. "Miathiel," he replied slowly, choosing his words with caution. "It is never too late to choose to be different. Look at Aran Thranduil. He has worked very hard to be someone else, and the Valar have blessed him. And...I could be wrong, but my heart wonders if there was not a greater reason, for our invitation tonight. I believe a message is being sent, that the time for tolerating hurtful games and these...occupations of your friends... is at an end. The Queen clearly does not endorse or support this kind of thinking. Aran Thranduil never did. If you wish to earn her favor, or set out in a new direction, speak with her. I have seen her in circumstances which I am not at liberty to discuss, but I can tell you that she is forgiving. And kind. If you wish to change, Miathiel, seek out those that will help you, not hinder."
Nodding slowly, she raised her eyes to her husband, who now stood next to her, resting his graceful hand on her shoulder. "Am I good at anything? Anything at all? What can I do, besides breathe the air and take up space?"

Merial regarded her, hesitating but electing to risk it and speak. Kneeling at her side, he took her hand in his, and held her eyes with his own. "Long ago, I knew an elleth that was also kind. Who liked to listen to others, and who spoke encouragingly. Who found ways to express gratitude. Who did not consider it beneath her to help others at their tasks, even though she had no need to work to earn her way. Who enjoyed brightening the day of others with a kind word or small consideration. I do not believe she is gone, though she has been overshadowed for a very long time. I loved her then, and I love her still."

Her eyes dropped, and pooled with tears as she reached for her mate. "She is going to try to return," Miathiel whispered. "Please help me? She left in the first place because she was not strong enough to make the right choices." There was a long pause. "Merial, I am so sorry..."

Tears of joy came to his eyes. "I will help you, wife. But I want you to understand...like as not you will become a victim of those that you yet call friends. Are you prepared, for this? It will be painful, for you."

Miathiel nodded. "I will find a way. I must. I cannot continue, as I have been. If that is to be, then it is even more evidence that I never had friends in the first place." With consideration, her husband helped her into her night-clothes, and entered into rest with his precious wife held in his arms while he prayed for strength and guidance, for both of them.

*****

Eruanna stood in the corridor of the passageway, alone with Vanafindiel. Their husbands had already retired to their rooms. "That brainless troll", she spat. "This evening was a disaster. A complete and utter disaster, because Cuilwen is too stupid to listen. Eru!"

"Calm yourself, Eruanna. Go inside, have some tea," counseled the less volatile Lady Penlor. "It would be best to simply regain your composure. Remember, neither you or I said many words. I am not certain I said anything at all, except for the necessities of courtesy. We did well enough; this was one dinner. Do not lose all perspective."

"I suppose you are right," Lady Sadronniel agreed morosely, only slightly mollified. "It would not be the first setback I have weathered."

"That's the spirit," Vanafindiel encouraged. "Now, rest well, and I shall do the same. Come tomorrow, for tea. Just you and I; I would rather not interact with Cuilwen just now, and I find Miathiel's mood of late to be tiresome. What say you?"

"Yes," Eruanna nodded, placated. "I should like that. Thank you, Vanafindiel. You are always such a dear."

"Well, birds of a feather..."

"Flock together," Eruanna giggled, tiredly. "You rest well, also."

With a last nod, Vanafindiel smiled and made her way to her room.

*****

"You are not entirely correct, Aran Thranduil," Glorfindel said with a very earnest expression.
"Lady Faelyn is just as much a victim, herself."

"What?" asked Thranduil blankly, before holding up his hand and pinching the bridge of his nose. "No. This began with me being asked to stay out of it, and stay out of it is what I feel would be best for me to do. With respect, my Lord," he said softly to Glorfindel. "I yet struggle with my own difficulties. Please excuse me, I wish to return to my chambers. Continue your conversation, if you wish." Turning, he left the room, while Nenni's eyes followed him with thinly veiled longing.

Glorfindel saw this and smiled. He would not continue this conversation much longer. "I told you I would offer my help, Legolas, Adonnenniel. Which is why I will tell you now, the true root of this problem is Eruanna Sadronniel. Prepare yourself, Queen of Eryn Galen, for you will find that the seeds of a changed heart have already been sown with Lady Merial. Lady Faelyn too has not gone home unscathed. You may be approached sooner than you think. Regarding the other two; I cannot see so clearly."

"Divide and conquer," smiled Legolas. "If that much was achieved here tonight, it is a great accomplishment."

"Tonight revealed many things. At least, to me. Of the eight guests that came to this table, it did my heart good to realize that only one heart is truly in question as to whether it is beyond aid. This is all I feel it is necessary to say, for now."

"Thank you, Ada," Nenni said. "For everything. I will reflect on your words. And you also, Legolas. I could not have managed this without your support."

Glorfindel rose. "I am feeling recovered enough to seek my own bed this night; I hope that you will not object, iellig. I wish to take my rest, now. Perhaps, Legolas, you would walk with me?"

"No," she shook her head. "I do not object, and I wish you a good rest, dear Ada. You also, ionneg. I will see you both in the morning?"

"Of course," they responded, ushering her out the door in front of them, and seeing her home before continuing on their way.

_Eru, I am glad that is over with._ The latch clicked into place, and Nenni turned to pass through the parlor and come to a standstill at the sight of her magnificently attired husband, standing proudly.

"I wondered if you would grant me the privilege of enjoying your beauty as I have longed to for hours now," he asked. His voice was husky, so obviously tinged with desire at the sight of his bejeweled Queen.

"Only if I am provided with the same," she answered saucily, crossing the room to run her hands over his body, sending chills of delight through his powerfully muscled frame.

"I believe I can manage that," he said, leading her toward their bed.

"No," Nenni resisted. "This was a special evening. I wish to have you under the starlight, by the soft glow of golden blossoms."

Lifted into his arms, he brought her lips to his in a soft kiss, teasing her with his tongue while gentle hands traced over her breasts and the softness of the fabric that covered them. In moments he laid her on the bower, his eyes widening. "By the Valar," he gasped, gazing on her. In the light of the blossoms of Vána, every gem adorning her body was set ablaze. "Adonnenniel, look down at yourself, and see the jewels."
"What is this? I do not ever recall seeing the like and yet, I do not often wear such ornaments." In truth, the sight was very lovely.

"That may need to change," Thranduil breathed, swiftly becoming overwhelmed with desire. The swelling in his breeches was straining to be freed.

"Come," Nenni smiled. "We must take care of the clothing we are privileged to have, after the effort to appear thus." Swiftly she removed his garments, while his own nimble fingers laid aside her adornments. Reclining on the bower, her heart filled with love to watch her husband caress her body, lavishing kisses over her womb. Unable to slow down too much, he soon was straining within her folds, as her unstifled cries of pleasure fed his lust. Turning her with their bodies still connected, he lunged into her from beneath, seeking her breasts with his mouth, appreciating that they already appeared to be swelling slightly with her pregnancy.

"How I love you, meleth!" he cried as his ecstasy came and his seed rushed into her warm depths. His bliss was only heightened, to feel his wife's pleasure crushing against his member, and her collapse onto his body.

"And I you," she whispered, covering his throat in tender kisses. "I know tonight was not pleasant for you, Thranduil. You cannot understand what it meant to me, that you would help and support me as you did."

"No, meleth. This was duty, that you found a way to make less onerous than it otherwise might have been. While I will not say that I enjoy those ellith, if there is a chance for matters to improve, then it was more than worth my while. Though," he said with chagrin, "I really cannot believe that Lady Faelyn could take such a misstep. That was bad, by any standards. And now that I am no longer angry, I confess I am beginning to find it rather funny. Sailors and farmers," he chuckled. "What were the odds?"

"Very low indeed," Nenni laughed musically, still relishing the pleasure of feeling his firm length embedded inside of her, and pushing down against him.

"So my little sailor is not yet satisfied?" he grinned.

"Oh, be careful, my King. Do you truly wish to go *there*? For I will tell you that when a lusty wench finds herself filled by a belaying pin of solid oak, she would be a fool not to make fast her line to it."

"Perhaps I need to learn more, about the sea."

"I think so," she said, driving herself down on him again as he groaned with delight. "Everyone should appreciate what it is to ride the waves, should they not?"

With a contented laugh, he resumed his kisses, and was heard only to say "Mmmm hmmm," under the shining stars.
Leaving

Chapter Notes

[12-15 Ethuil, Imladris. April 10-13, Gregorian]

Dear Readers, thank you so much for your comments, and patience...you've no idea how encouraging it is, when the writing becomes thorny :-D Enjoy!

Papers liberally covered the surface of the dining table at which Nenni and Glorfindel sat. They were reviewing items for the journey to Erebor; what had been discussed, where their work in the garden currently stood, many things. Today her dress was a relatively plain one in which she liked to work; shades of brown with matching leggings. The woolen fabric was nice enough, but relatively rugged and coarse, with flowers in autumn colors embroidered at the bodice. Underneath showed a thin and very ordinary homespun tunic. The Queen rubbed at her eyes that seemed to swim from viewing too many details, and the golden Lord asked her to close them for a moment.

"You may look, now," he said.

In front of her rested a diminutive bouquet, made up solely of all her smallest flowers. The arrangement was enhanced by a tiny but attractively glazed earthenware vase, and her face flushed with enjoyment to see this work of art. "You made this for me?" Surprise and a heart melting with love were revealed by her tone.

"Yes," the ellon smiled.

"Ada, it is beautiful," she whispered, her eyes shining with appreciation as it was examined from every angle. Delicate celandines, tiny baby's breath, little sprays of strawflower and pincushion flower, feverfew and a stem of delphinium, and one perfect white rosebud at the center of it. Rising, she hugged him with all her strength. "Thank you for this, so much." Just as quickly, it was picked up again, and admired more. "Why? Is today special?"

"Yes. You are my iellig, and I love you."

Her cheeks grew a little pink, before she gazed at him over the flowers. "I am very glad to have you, dear Ada." A memory had come, from when she was a very small child, but this was pushed aside when a soft knock was heard at the door.

"Just in time to break up our little moment," Glorfindel teased. "I will answer the door. But after, I want to know what it is that you have recalled." Opening the portal revealed a very well-dressed Lady Faelyn, who appeared extremely distressed. Immediately, she curtsied at the sight of him.

"Mae govannen, my Lord," she said with lowered eyes. "I wondered if it would be possible, if the Queen would...if I might..."

"You wish to speak with Adonnenniel?" he asked kindly, seeing the extent of her struggle and perceiving why she might be here.
"Please, yes," she breathed, her heart now pounding.

Glorfindel held the door open for her, gesturing for her to enter.

"Ada, I think I will make some tea, do you wish for an...." the question died on her lips, when Nenni raised her head from her parchment to see who had entered. "Lady Faelyn," was all that managed to escape her lips. Recovering herself, Nenni rose to greet her guest. "Forgive me, I was not expecting...which does not matter. What can I do for you?" she asked, even as the elleth dropped into a very deep curtsy. Nenni drew her back onto her feet, baffled, but said nothing. It was not necessary.

"I came here to apologize," the elleth began, visibly fearful. "To ask your forgiveness. What I said at dinner, after your gracious invitation...there was no excuse and I am truly sorry for my words."

"Thank you," Nenni answered politely (if reservedly). "You are forgiven." What was not so obvious was....why? Why is she doing this?

_Edito: Do not forget what I told you earlier_, Glorfindel said to her silently.

Lady Faelyn did not move save for her hands, that wrung together nervously.

"There is more you wish to say?" Nenni guessed. "Please, come in here and sit down. Will you have some tea to drink?"

"No tea, thank you," the agitated elleth replied, though she did allow herself to be guided to the stone bench. Her gaze could not resist surveying the unassuming chamber, that she had believed would be so opulent. In Cuilwen's imagination, every surface of the King and Queen's chambers was gilded and covered with jewels, and the stone walls could not be seen for the tapestries and other fine decorations that would be hung on them. Inhaling sharply, her eye fell on Beren, whose keen gaze watched with far too much interest for her comfort.

"Back to sleep, Beren," Nenni encouraged, soothingly. "We must let our guests be comfortable." With a deep rumble and a titanic yawn, the great hound flopped back over to resume his slumbers. Gazing on him adoringly, she added, "Do not be afraid of him. Though, you may be afraid for your clothing; he drools."

Lady Faelyn stared at her in disbelief, only now noting the Queen's very plain dress... and was astonished that, too. In the last two minutes, many things she had believed would be the case about how their rulers lived had been proven untrue. The King and Queen allow a giant dog on their bed?

Nenni followed the expressions flitting across her guest's countenance, and wondered. "What troubles you, Lady Faelyn? Does how we live surprise you?" This was also a guess, but as Queen, she had far more latitude for such boldness.

"Yes. And...my name is Cuilwen. Please call me that, if you wish. I have earned no title; that was my brave husband's doing. I...forgive me, this is very hard for me to say. It is no secret that I have spent my time unprofitably. I have done a great deal of harm, Hiril vuin, and I wish to do change for the better. But I cannot do so without help. No one would have anything to do with me, and I could not blame them." The elleth looked down, her words measured and spoken with humility. "A very long time ago, I had studied to be a Healer; I did not finish my learning. And when I say a long time ago...I mean in Beleriand, a long time ago. I am tired of being useless. Good for nothing, except mean-spiritedness and causing difficulties for others. Please, I wish to turn aside from what I have been, before it is too late. I am unsure how, or where to begin. Could you find it in your
heart to help me? I know I will have to work hard. I will set aside the fine clothes and the 
hairstyles, none of that matters any longer. I did not mean to stare at you or your home, it is just 
that..."

"Just that...what?" Nenni asked. Were it not for Glorfindel's reassurance, right now her assessments 
would be riddled with suspicion. But no one could fool Ada; in that she placed full trust.

"I may speak freely?" Cuilwen asked, seeing the nod of permission in response. "Look at you, Hiril 
vuin. I imagined you would wear beautiful clothing at home, be surrounded by luxuries and 
grandeur. Yet I find you in the commonest dress imaginable. I am told that you work hard, for all 
of our people. And your rooms are modest, unassuming. I want to be...like you. I want to help, 
somehow. Be useful. Be...good. I am so ashamed, at how I have wasted my years of life."

The Queen smiled, in spite of the seriousness of what was being said. "I do wear nice clothes, 
sometimes. I have them; there is nothing wrong with those things, the gifts my husband generously 
gives to me. There are luxuries here; lovely goblets, soft linens, pretty rugs. A bed large enough 
for Beren, and that beautiful bathing pool. But I can do without those. I have done without those 
things. I am about to do without them again, come to think of it. They are just that; things, and 
need to be kept in their proper place. Your words are heartening, Cuilwen, and I am pleased to hear 
them. But I must understand what exactly you are asking, if I am to help you. What is it you 
want?"

Cuilwen's head lifted, a little. "I would like to continue my learning. My husband says a time of war 
will come. War means injured elves. If I could be taught enough...anything at all. I will fold linens, 
or mix ointment. I would do whatever I am asked...but Healers are known for their kindness and 
discretion. I have exactly the opposite reputation. Please, I would like the chance to earn...a chance. 
I do not expect to be given anything freely or easily, not after how I have behaved. I will soon be 
outraged by my former friends, if that has not already happened. If I cannot be accepted within 
the Healer's Halls, then please, I would beg you for some assignment. Anything, as long as it is 
honest work. I cannot go back to...them."

Nenni stared for some time, considering. "I am leaving, very soon, and will not return for a few 
weeks. This does not allow for much time but yes, I will try to help you. I will be very frank. You 
assessment of your reputation is not wrong, but I will not hold your past against you. It is difficult, 
to change, but the Valar bless a repentant heart. I want you to know that if you need someone, a 
friend, I am here for you. I am not perfect but I care, and I want you to succeed. I am telling you 
this because you will endure a period of being lonely, and mistrusted. Maybe worse. It will take 
time, for others to believe you."

"You are very gracious, and kind, my Queen," whispered Cuilwen, who now had tears streaking 
down her face. "I do not deserve this, and I will not forget it. I will return to my rooms now 
and...wait." Nenni rose, as did the Sinda elleth. What neither of them had heard was that the King 
had returned, and listened to this exchange with mixed emotions playing across his face. If this was 
in earnest, he was glad. But the misery, this group had caused...

"Aran Thranduil," gasped Cuilwen, dropping to her knees in front of him. "My Lord, forgive me 
my many wrongs. Please..."

Thranduil stood frozen, unable to process this. Nenni did not wait, but went to her side. "He 
forgives you, Cuilwen. I know he does." Raising her eyes to her husband, she pleaded with him. 
*Say something to her. Even if it is only the three simple words she needs to hear. Please, do not 
crush her spirit by withholding your pardon.*

The King forced himself to speak, though the words came slowly. "If you are sincere, Cuilwen,
then I forgive you." Surely he could not be blamed for inserting a qualifier; not after the sum of her deeds. He did not reach out to raise her up as he ordinarily might have; there was simply too much antipathy. Not to mention, this had been sprung on him in his private home with no warning.

To all their surprise, Glorfindel extended his hand to return Cuilwen to her feet. "You are distraught, and must take a moment to recover." He maneuvered her to sit at the table, and offered a goblet of water. "Drink it, you will feel better," he insisted, in what Nenni recognized as tones that contained a healing influence. He chose his next words carefully. "It is painful, to realize our sins. Remember that these tears are a path to redemption; the first steps toward honoring the gifts given to our people in light and truth. Your feet have strayed, for a very long time. Determine to keep to what is right, and the Valar will bless you. In this room are those who will help you, but we will expect to see evidence of your contrition."

The words of the golden Lord sank deep into her heart. That one chosen of the powers of this world would speak to her, in this way...her head bowed and nodded, as her fingers wiped away her tears. "Thank you, my Lord," she whispered. "I thank all of you." Finishing her water, she rose and departed with a final curtsy to them, feeling more at peace than in a very long time.

"Valar!" exclaimed Thranduil some moments after the outer door closed, shaking his head. "And yet..." his eyes cast down, as he recalled his own grievous mistakes, and what it had felt like at those moments of painful, tearing realization and regret. He sank into his chair, with his wine.

Glorfindel laid a hand on his shoulder. "I do not ask you to believe her, Thranduil, but you may believe me. Her words are heartfelt, and even now you realize that you understand her better than you wish to."

"I know," he said softly, reaching for the comfort that hand brought. "Please do not think ill of me, in this. This elleth, and her friends...they have been at the root of so much harm. Even when I was at my worst I was...no, I cannot even say that. They represent the one problem I could not solve. A form of defeat and defiance that I could not master. Glorfindel, I do not know if you understand the fullness of what I endured from them. Among their adherents were those who believed that perhaps the Statute of Mandos applied to the loss of Adonnenniel. Lady Faelyn numbers among those I have known for my entire life, and those ellith knew how my wife was...taken. They knew of my injuries from the dragon, though with the passage of time and my assuming Oropher's throne, even they feared to speak of those things aloud. In the midst of my grief and bitterness, many times they tried to entice me to take interest in another elleth. Maneuver me. There was no regard given to my obvious unhappiness or my firm and constant rejection of any such advances." His face now contorted, with the memory of such pain. "I have never given my heart to any, but my wife. Never wanted any other, but Adonnenniel. Their disregard sickened me, repulsed me in a way that even now is difficult to forget. It was a deeply personal violation against the yearning of my spirit. Though I do not understand emotions as readily as you both, I do have them." As he spoke, a tear traced down his cheek.

Nenni stood openmouthed, hearing his words. "You never told me these things."

"Nor did I know, my friend," Glorfindel said, moving to embrace the visibly upset King. "Much is clearer, now. I am very sorry, to hear this, and for the pain you must have felt."

"Just, sweet baby Jesus," Nenni said. "It is better, that I did not know until now. I am not certain I could have maintained enough impartiality to..." her head shook. "This is the sort of thing that would have been common to women on Earth. It did not occur to me that elves could behave in this manner."

"These elves could," he said, his lashes moist and his voice breaking. "Meleth, you could not know
what it was for me to have you in my arms once again. Before you returned, I rarely socialized. This was why; each occasion was viewed as an opportunity by them. What little comfort I might have had in pleasant fellowship was denied me, because of their constant scheming. It is difficult to forget, or forgive. But I do not have the right to deny another the clemency I was freely given when I sought to turn away from my own misdeeds. Mercy given by the Valar...and given by you, my wife. And you also, my Lord. You have kept my feet on a straight path and it is my duty as well as what is right, to help any of them that truly wish to change. I only wanted you to have knowledge of why I struggle with them."

Nenni sighed, holding him as well. "That much now is crystal clear. While I am so sorry, Thranduil, for your experience...that any of our efforts might have made a difference, for even one of them...it is more than I hoped for. And I would ask both of your advice. Cuilwen is right; her reputation is terrible and I now realize that more elves will feel as Thranduil does toward her than not. What do I do? Talk to Thaliel? To Galasrínial? I will be honest, I am torn. One such as her...well, she is right. It is not deserved, to simply waltz in and study as she wishes. And yet a part of me worries. What if by lack of support, she returns to her old ways in a moment of weakness? That would not be helpful. And we are to leave so soon...I wish to see something in place that gives her a purpose; the idea of waiting until our return makes me frankly nervous."

"I do not think I can give an answer in time, meleth, but I do think you should ask your gwathel. Thaliel is coming, and has just entered your chamber."

"Then I suppose I will ask Thaliel after all," she murmured, feeling encouraged by the nod of approval from Glorfindel.

"Ask me what?" Thaliel smiled, crossing the room to hug her. It was no secret that the Healer was becoming very excited about their journey. It had been long, since she had been out of the forest, and was greatly looking forward to all that would come. Thranduil had kindly seen to it that Thaliel was provided with two or three garments of considerable opulence; Thaliel would be seen in close connection to the Queen and Thranduil did not want her to feel a sense of exclusion on account of clothing. Tinivel would be seeing to Thaliel's needs as a member of the Royal Household, for the purposes of this excursion.

"Do you have time to sit, and have some wine? While my question will be brief, your answer may not be."

"That sounds ominous," Thaliel quipped. "Perhaps half a goblet, then. I wish to be awake to enjoy the dinner to which you have so graciously invited me tonight. And, I do have time. My duties are completed, really, so except for my own plant projects, I am officially without occupation except for seeing to your well-being, Adonnenniel."

Glorfindel provided the wine, much to both of their surprise, and joined them near the fire. Thranduil too came and sat, thinking that perhaps he would hear...something. Something to help him master his feelings of antipathy.

"I told you about my plans, the dinner we had with the...(Nenni almost said 'Aviary', but stopped herself in time, until it dawned on her that her thoughts had not been private. Oh well...)...nobles and their wives. By what I choose to believe was blind luck, something was said about Dwarves, which in turn caused Lady Faelyn to comment unkindly about the manners of sailors and farmers, by way of comparison. I am afraid that I was well-dosed on the medication you provided, and, ah, took the bull by the horns. I believe I was nice about it, but I obliviously drove the point home that I was, am both of those things. And it is equally true, my manners can leave everything to be desired, when I have no appearances to maintain. Anyway. I do not know what happened, but she left here
not long ago. Lady Faelyn, I mean. We were apologized to, and heard many words indicating that she wishes to walk a different path, to turn aside from her friends and fellow harbingers of unhappiness."

Thaliel listened carefully, only the occasional blink betraying her feelings concerning what she was being told. "If this is in earnest, it is a remarkable shift, a difficult change of heart. But none of that has anything to do with me, so I suspect there is more?"

"Yes, clever one," Nenni smiled, before her face took on great seriousness. "Thaliel, what I am about to say...please understand that I am telling you to seek your advice. Your guidance. I do not expect that our closeness makes any demand on you. Lady Faelyn, Cuilwen, if we are to use her name, lived in Beleriand. As did all of us, though I have no memories of that time. We were told that she had aspired to be a Healer, and had abandoned those studies more than an age ago. I did not ask the reason. She is begging to be allowed to be useful, somehow. To earn a chance to resume her studies, though she is acutely aware that her reputation and the qualities seen foremost in a Healer could not be at greater opposites. And that if she cannot be permitted this, that she be assigned something. Anything, as long as it is honest work and something that gives her occupation to remain away from her former friends, who she apparently has turned or will turn away from."

Thaliel's eyes widened. "Oh, my."

The King spoke. "In this...effort, of my wife, I have agreed not to interfere or become involved at more than a surface level. I have only one comment, Thaliel. I am not eager to see Cuilwen or those like her receive special concessions or favors. And yet I am equally aware of how long this has gone on, with no hope of a changed heart amongst them. I too, am struggling to find wisdom."

Thaliel met their eyes levelly. "I am a Healer...obviously. It is my vocation to help others. Usually our people require assistance to heal in body more than mind, and yet healing is healing. I do not need to tell you that there are not as many qualified here as we would like. My advice would be this: Adonnenniel, you should speak to Galasríniel. It is the respectful thing to do, since Aran Thranduil has charged her with the oversight of our craft. Let her determine what the Lady's skills and knowledge are, for this is something unknown. Our Head Healer is compassionate and prudent, and will feel as I do about considering the need to not only train a Healer, but to heal that one as well."

"Then I must hurry," Nenni said. "When will I find her available?"

"Now, and for perhaps the next two hours."

Nenni felt torn, but what was needed was clear. "Bother," she said, sipping her wine. "Could I prevail on you to remain here, Thaliel, while I care for this? Forgive me, but I feel I must see this resolved before I leave."

"I will stay," Thaliel smiled. While it felt slightly awkward to be asked to remain with these two ellyn, she had best become used to their company. There would be a great deal of it, soon enough.

Internally balking at the notion of changing clothing, Nenni hastened out the rear passage and to the Healer's Halls. Recent events made her more determined than ever to not appear as a fashion plate all the time. Arguments could be made either way, but just as there was nothing wrong with appearing regally, there equally had to be no fault being seen in honest garments fit for working. Arriving swiftly and finding Galasríniel only lightly occupied, her story was told. Just as Thaliel had indicated, her response was marked by reflective interest. "I would like to interview Lady Faelyn, my Queen. With you present. After which I will be able to tell you what I feel would be best. I would prefer this not happen here."
"Name a time, and this can be held privately at my office."

"An hour after the mid day meal chime tomorrow."

"I will have Cuilwen there."

"Hiril vuin," the Healer said, bowing deeply.

******

"Galion will be glad to be rid of me," jested Nenni as she wrote out the instruction to be delivered to Cuilwen at her quarters before ringing the bell.

"It went well?" asked Thaliel.

"Yes. All I hoped for was consideration; that was given, and more. I promised that I would help, not that I would guarantee miracles."

"It is still very kind of you."

"I am trying," Nenni smiled.

******

In the evening was their dinner, and new faces were seen. Groveren, a smith employed in the forges. Lendis, a cook, and Maeben, one of the laundresses. Athaeben and Alagos, a woodsman and guard, respectively. And Eirien, a chambermaid. To say that the hosts of this meal were more relaxed and content than at the first such occasion would be a grave understatement. The Royal household wore clothing that was clean and neat, but fairly ordinary. Conversation came easily. Glorfindel wished to know all about how firewood was procured, whereas Nenni learned of the cleaning and restoration of fabrics. Maeben was thrilled, to discover that the Queen had a fairly obsessive interest in cleaning anything at all, and how it was accomplished. Legolas had many questions for the smith, and when Nenni was done with Maeben she was quick to ask the cook about their scheduling and meal planning. Thranduil, for his part, delighted to make better acquaintance with a guard from the ranks of his soldiers. Appreciation and courtesy abounded, with Thaliel quietly listening in wonder to hear what her fellow elves did by way of their duties, unseen and unheralded.

Later, it was not necessary to ask Thranduil if he had enjoyed this meal; his demeanor fully reflected his relaxed happiness. At least one thing in my schemes has pleased him, Nenni thought to herself with contentment. Galion was praised lavishly for his efforts, and at this point the Queen insisted that once they departed, that he take one day and set it aside for his own leisure. "Just one day, faithful one. I promise you may work on all the rest of them. But in turn, pledge to me you will do this, that you will for once have a day to yourself." Reluctantly, he agreed, smiling and thanking her.

I win, Nenni exulted to herself. I finally win. Galion had come to be beautiful, in her sight. His appearance might seem unassuming and plain to some, with light brown hair and generally unremarkable hazel-colored eyes. Yet Nenni saw in him thousands of years of support for her husband, and a staunch pillar of uprightness that guarded the welfare of her family. It had been discussed with Thranduil and Glorfindel, and gifts for the wedding of Galion and Tinivel had already been commissioned.

The next two days saw the interview of Cuilwen, which near as Nenni could tell (for she herself spoke little) went favorably. It was agreed that at the very least, occupation of one kind or another
would be found for her, to be revisited on the Queen's return. It did not require spelling out, that this was a brief probationary period that would evaluate the elleth for suitability. Both of them were thanked profusely by Lady Faelyn. Her face was one that revealed strain, and Nenni noticed that her dress and hair were still neat, but completely ordinary.

*****

Tinivel found Nenni the day after, to share a matter that had come to her attention. Eruanna and Vanafindiel were overheard by one of the chambermaids in a fine state of ire about Cuilwen's apparent refusal of some social invitation the pair had issued. Lady Faelyn had apparently replied to her former friends via a brief note that she was "no longer available, having taken up other occupation." But worse yet, apparently Lady Merial had basically done the same. And no one knew exactly where she spent her time, only that she too was somehow "no longer available."

"Two defections? My, that is welcome news," Nenni murmured to Tinivel. "Though, I hope Lady Merial is...alright. She did not come to me and...there is not time now to sort this out. Yet her husband is a good ellon; hopefully she has his support for whatever is occurring."

"Hiril vuin, you should give me now what things you will wish taken on your journey of a personal nature that you will not wear at tomorrow's departure. It will by my duty to see that your belongings are cared for."

Nenni nodded, and asked Tinivel to follow her into her bedchamber. Her recorder music, her plastic recorder, and her crown were placed into her leather satchel and handed over.

"Only this?" Tinivel's eyes widened.

"I should bring more? Oh! A hair comb, how foolish of me." This item was added to the pouch. Still Tinivel stared.

"Was I mistaken, that you would bring a tasteful selection of clothing, and that I would have changes for what I wear under my armor?"

"No, Hiril vuin. Those matters have already been cared for as well as other items for your family's comfort."

"I do not need to bring my own blanket, is this correct?"

Still Tinivel stared, before answering affirmatively.

Nenni laughed. "Tinivel, I feel rather as though I am under examination and failing. Would you please tell me what I am doing wrong? I am inexperienced, and I do not wish to blunder. If there are more things I should be taking please, tell me."

"There are not, my Queen. Please excuse me. It is only that I have served the noble ellith in this regard as well and they brought...a great many things, Hiril vuin."

"Oh. Then I will take your bewilderment as a compliment," she said drily. "There is a small chance that Aran Thranduil will feel a need to have me wearing some ornaments or other, but if it is amenable to you, most all of those would fit quite easily into this same bag. There is yet much room inside."

"That will be fine, thank you," the elleth smiled, chuckling. "I confess, my Queen, you are bringing even less than I am. Which humbles me."
"Yes, and no," Nenni said, smiling. "What is most precious to me that will come on this journey... they all have legs of their own."

"Well said, Hiril vuin." With an expression of happiness, Tinivel departed.

*****

"i Aran nîn, what of Alfwin?" this topic had been left far too long, and could not abide further delay.

Thranduil sighed. "I have not yet decided, and my heart is heavy." He looked at his wife, who was struggling to contain herself. "What would you have me do, Adonnenniel?"

The answer burst forth. "Leave him here, and offer him employment. He may not be your subject, but he is a free enough person, with the right to come and go and move elsewhere if he chooses. He told me he felt that being here is a dream, Hir vuin. Speak later with King Brand, if you feel you must, though I would not. What is one man who has chosen to move along, out of all those who dwell there? Nothing. We both know what will come, not so many years hence. Here, he will survive. Out there, like as not, he will be slaughtered. He has no one else in this world. My heart cries out that this is the right thing to do, Thranduil."

The King sighed. "Give him a job doing what? He has no discernible skills, meleth."

"Ah, that is not actually true. Though, I found out by accident and forgot to ever mention it again; we have been busy these last weeks."

"And?"

"I do not know how to say it here. In English we would have called such a one a savant. Seemingly defective in his mind, except for one area in which intelligence far exceeding what is ordinary is displayed. Alfwin can count."

"Meleth, an elfling can count. I fail to see how this is helpful."

"No, Hir vuin. I mean, he can count. You could place him in front of your army and in seconds he could tell you that you have four thousand, six hundred and seventy-two warriors. You can bring him to the dining hall, and he will tell you that seven hundred and four plates were in use during the meal. That is what I am trying to tell you. Which is why he should be assigned to Erudan in our absence, to see what comes of it. For all I know he can count grains of wheat in a sack, but regardless, I cannot think of a greater aptitude for one who maintains inventories."

Thranduil blinked. "I will care for this immediately, in person. If I come to have regrets, so be it. Technically I have the right to keep him prisoner for his deeds, were I to be a tyrant. So I will just as technically do this. Every now and then, there has to be an advantage to my station. Not to mention, now I have to see this for myself."

Glorfindel entered their chambers just as Thranduil exited, walking to his daughter, who sat unaware of him near the fire. Her thoughts were on their departure tomorrow after the morning meal, and her combined gratitude and sorrow that the only reason she had it together, to use the vernacular inside of her mind, was Thaliel's medicine.

"I have seen this notion in your mind before, Adonnenniel. Will you tell me what troubles you?"

"Only if you come sit with me. Please," she added, not wishing to overdo it with her teasing.
"Is this more to your liking?" he asked, scooping her into his lap, still marveling at how small she was by comparison.

"Yes," she said, shamelessly holding onto him, glued like a barnacle on a piling. "It is an old conundrum, Ada. On Earth, I took medicines for my mind. Though, I could only wish they worked as well as this elven cordial does. I would sometimes feel...guilty, defective, for needing them. Even though I knew better, it seemed shameful, to need help to think and feel normally. I wondered who I was. Was I me? Or was me who I was when I took the medication, and seemed like a better, more desirable version of myself?"

"What happened if you did not take these medicines?" he asked, slowly rubbing her back.

"For awhile, nothing, for it was such a thing as to linger in the body for days, even weeks. But eventually it would be gone, and my feelings would turn on me. I would become terribly sad, for no reason. Cry, for no reason. Have thoughts of despair, or wishing to die, for no reason. It was very painful, even at the same time my rational mind would be thinking how utterly ridiculous those terrible and negative thoughts were...and yet that awareness could not overcome the other. Though I tried many times to do without, in the end I always had to return to the medicine. Until finally, I gave up and accepted that it simply had to be."

"I do not think less of you, for having this difficulty, or for choosing to accept what relief is available to you. It is the same as the help I give, to my eyes, except that it does not wear off so readily."

She nodded against his chest, more able to accept hearing this than ever before. "It may make no sense either, but it helps me, that you would say that. I believe you more than I believe myself."

"Why is that?" he teased.

"Well, of the two of us your mind is the one that actually works normally all the time, instead of in fits and starts."

"Perhaps. But your mind is more interesting."

"I suppose. But I still do not know what I would do without you," Nenni said, playfully bending his fingers this way and that, fascinated at the size and strength of them.

"You do not have to know."

There was no reply, but a moment of perfect happiness settled over her, as her ears heard his heart beat in his chest and her arms held him just a little tighter.

"You did not ever tell me what you remembered, after I gave you the flowers earlier."

Nenni chuckled. "It was a small thing...a memory of when I was very young, and a man who liked me and would always give me a flower. I think he was a barber; it was when my grandmother and I would walk to shop for groceries. I have always liked flowers."

"I would not have guessed," he teased, kissing her head.

Thranduil returned after what seemed like most of an hour. "Eru! I am sorry to have taken so long. Erudan tested him by asking him to count how many threads made up the weft of a burlap sack, without first knowing the answer. Meleth, you were right...Alfwin is astonishing. He was overjoyed, to learn he can remain and wished you to have his thanks..."
Rising from Glorfindel's lap, Thranduil was kissed. "But my thanks are to you, for allowing this. This is one of the nicest things you have ever done for me, and I am very grateful. I would have felt heartbroken to see him being returned, and now I will be happy instead."

"I can do better than that," he countered, grinning. "Return to your Ada. I have not forgotten that you asked me to keep your garden from becoming rank with growth in our absence."

With double gladness, she resettled herself. "I love you both," Nenni whispered. "So very much."

*****

The meal had been eaten, and Nenni's attired herself much as she had to leave for Imladris. In short, the Queen was armed and armored, and her hair braided back much as it would be for combat. Smiling, she remembered fondly what had transpired last night: her guess of the previous day had been correct; Thranduil had wished to bring an array of jewels for her to wear. But in the end, he was persuaded to take a different tack. "It is not possible to out-Dwarf the Dwarves of Erebor," it was pointed out. "Have me bring just one piece. You choose. Allow our hosts to have the glory, so to speak. Besides, of the two of us, you will always be more striking."

Not completely convinced, he nonetheless assented. "Well, they certainly will not have your beauty, meleth. I suppose I will manage."

Nenni grinned at this endearing memory, even as the formal assembly she had not been aware would occur took shape in Thranduil's Hall. Beren stood proudly in his new armor, sized to accommodate his body that blessedly appeared to no longer be growing. The tanners had outdone themselves; the leather had been dyed to match the irregular brindle of his coat that made him so difficult to see against many kinds of terrain, and blended with the sections basically comprised of a chain mail. It was light, silent, and afforded him good protection against a range of weapons.

Many of those in the Palace had assembled to see them off. From her position at the King's side, she had a commanding view of all in attendance. Including, to her great interest, Einur and Stathard, who were apparently to be marched in bonds to Dale. Because that will be a fun walk, Nenni mused. Not. It was impossible, not to shake her head undetectably, in disgust at these two. They had been provided with clean clothing of elven make, she noted, and no longer wore the greasy finery in which they arrived. Their realm had been gracious hosts beyond what these two deserved, that much was clear. No one is going to convince me, that the prison cells here are a meaningful hardship. The sizable number of warriors comprising their escort now moved out through the Gates, to turn before the bridge, proceeding east toward the stables. Arrayed all around them were the King's Counselors, Generals and Commanders, their wives, and of course the Prince, who caught Nenni's eye with a merry grin. Nenni felt fleetingly sorry for Cuilwen, who appeared visibly uncomfortable, but maintained her poise and dignity. Faelyn is holding Cuilwen's hand, she observed approvingly, the corners of her mouth barely twitching in gladness at the sight.

Next came Anthilen and another ellon unknown to her, who had the unenviable task of marshalling Einur and Stathard. Momentarily distracted by Beren's fine appearance, Anthilen's grip on Einur faltered, and the man twisted round to spit at Nenni, hissing a single invective as loud as could be managed: "Elven BITCH." Some combination of horror and anger passed over every face within earshot, not in the least that of the King and Glorfindel. Gasps echoed around the Hall. But even Thranduil could not match the reaction time of his wife.

This is mine, came the silent communication from Nenni, whose sword was already in her hand, her eyes flashing. Thranduil gave the barest of nods, realizing that perhaps this was best, as the man's head would be perilously close to being parted from his neck, were he to intervene. Glorfindel stood silent and rigid, his eyes blazing.
"I tire of your antics, Einur," she spoke in a voice of deadly calm. "From the first moment you came to these Halls, you showed yourself to be ill-prepared and pathetically inept. You were allowed to depart peacefully, and instead staged a cowardly assault on two innocent and hardworking elves of this Realm. And then you attacked three members of the King's household, since apparently your appetite for stupidity is nearly bottomless. You were held here for your crimes, but not in any way abused. I see that you have been fed," the blunt edge of her sword pressed meaningfully into his roll of fat, "kept warm, provided with clean garments. And for all this, you yet offer childish insults."

Nenni paced around the man, who was her match as to stature. The volume of her words now increased somewhat, her clear voice projecting for all to hear. "Perhaps," she continued, as the tip of her sword traced the lightest scratch across the skin under his chin, "you yet fail to match actions to consequences. Perhaps," the blade continued to dance with pinpoint precision over his cheek, its razor edge leaving only the finest bleeding design on his skin as his terrified eyes tracked its progress, "there is much you do not understand about me, and how dimly I view the kind of filth who preys on those who are defenseless. Who takes pleasure in the grief and suffering of others. Whose heart is no better than that of an orc."

Einur's face paled with fear, his momentary bravado dissolving away into a cold sweat under the restrained menace of her words. And, a peculiar sensation now came to his arm, though he could not place it. He assumed it was the elven guard, resuming his hold.

"I will tell you something, Einur, and this is the last warning you will receive from me. Offer me or any elf here any manner of assault again within the borders of our lands, and I will judge that we have been mistaken, and that you are indeed an orc. You will be given a choice, and provided with a sword. You may face me, or you may face him," her head bobbed toward the one who held his arm, which was suddenly encompassed with crushing strength. Einur looked down to see that it was not the elven guard at all, but the Queen's hound, who now released him and held his massive head but a foot from his face, teeth bared and with streams of salivation pouring from his growling mouth and onto the man's clothing. "I will leave it to you to guess, with which one of us you will find a better outcome. Though I will warn you, he is not above enjoying himself while he kills."

Nenni now turned her focus to Anthilen, speaking to him. "You will please come to see me, when your duties allow," she said softly, dismissing both of them to move along. Her hand caressed Beren's head. Bending, she murmured musical, soothing words in his ears. Repeatedly, he licked his lips as the intense excitement slowly faded from his body. Both moved to resume their positions next to the King.

Not bad, Nenni heard with amusement from her husband. His heart is all but bursting with fear, and the man somehow did not soil his trousers. I believe you made an impression.

Did I overdo it? Veiled mirth played around her eyes.

No, I believe that was just right. On a number of counts. For Nenni could not see what Thranduil had, with the sight of his gifts; the Ladies behind him stood rigid, terrified, having heard her words and seen quite another side to their Queen. With a shrug, her sword was fluidly returned to its sheath, where to the perceptions of the Ladies, the blade made a alarming arc too near their personal space. Eventually, it was the rulers' turn to depart the Halls as well.

Lady Penlor, Vanafindiel, had spent the last several minutes weighing many things in her mind. Ever an shrewd opportunist, much like her husband, it was her perception that the changing political realities of their world had just been declared with a resounding finality. Short of the death of the Queen, their former games were finished, as would be those who were caught playing them. It is no matter, Vanafindiel told herself. Fortunes change. Pulling on her husband's arm, she
silently drew him aside. "My Lord Penlor. It occurs to me, why do we not accompany our King and Queen? We have the resources to see to our own comfort along the way. Surely there is no necessity, to even proceed to Erebor? We could have opportunity to linger in Dale, and you could acquire firsthand news of the goings-on with trade in that region and to the south. It is long, since you attended in person. There would be the considerable protection of the King's escort, and with our own horses and belongings it would be simple enough to be caught up to the party by later in the day or tomorrow morning, at the most."

Penlor's eyebrows raised. All these things his wife mentioned were valid observations. The weather was fine, and they had not traveled together in quite some time. It was only necessary to retain a valet, cook, and chambermaid; that was entirely affordable. "Come then," he smiled. "I believe we are going on a holiday. Give me a moment to have a word with the Prince, and we will speak to Galion about one of the valets, to make our preparations." The handsome blond ellon momentarily was seen murmuring to Legolas, who smiled and nodded, not missing that the abandonment of Eruanna, Lady Sadronniel was obviously at hand.

Those in attendance dispersed, and the Prince insouciantly made his way to the stables to see his family depart. With a sigh, he realized that Tauriel would not be here to help him with his duties, as she had before. This time, she was in charge of the forces protecting the King's household. *There is Adar's wine*, he thought with a smile. *And perhaps Maethirion will feel generously disposed...*

Eruanna turned, finally, seeing that her husband was prepared to depart. The pretty Sinda had brewed a fine temper, that she fully intended to vent onto her friend Vanafindiel. Only, a mighty frown ensued when Vanafindiel was nowhere to be seen. Sadronniel had heard and seen all the same things as the rest of them, and gazed down at his wife with a heavy heart. Once back at their rooms, she sat in front of her vanity mirror, combing her long, pale tresses, the expression on her face unreadable. Sadronniel decided that it was beyond time he displayed something resembling a backbone. "Eruanna," he began in tones that were reasonably kind and matter-of-fact, "it is perhaps time to consider that circumstances are changing. Have changed. I love you, wife, and do not wish to see you hurt."

In spite of the hurt you have doled out to others, while I looked on and said nothing, is what he did not include. His mate had not always been this bad. But when Feredîr had been slain, in the last battle...it was as if her heart had blackened, hardened. Eruanna had loved her brother dearly. Always one to have a weakness for gossip and intrigue, it had become so much worse since his loss. The same event that sowed the seeds of positive transformation for their King had caused quite the opposite, for her. When after many minutes his wife did not reply but only continued brushing her hair, he felt a crushing weight settle over his heart. Turning from her, Sadronniel left their rooms and sought solitude elsewhere.

*****

Legolas met their party at the stables. Glorfindel was gifted the permanent use of the steed that the King owned but never rode on account of Tálagor; a powerful black stallion named Fuinor. This allowed Thaliel to ride the Queen's gentle mount Gilroch; as they both preferred, the rulers would share the great elk. With a knowing smile of irrepressible amusement, the Prince briefly shared the words of Lord Penlor. Thranduil chose to view only the side of it that he wished; that his most capable trade counselor would enhance the diplomatic function of their sojourn. Nenni, Glorfindel, and Legolas focused on an entirely different aspect. That Vanafindiel was accompanying her husband could mean only one thing: Eruanna had now been abandoned by all her closest allies.

Hugging Legolas to her tightly, her heart felt sad at the knowledge she would not see him for perhaps three weeks, which at this moment felt like an eternity. "I will miss you, ionneg, and think of you every day. Do not drink too much of your adar's wine." The teasing was met with a chuckle and a kiss to her cheek. His naneth was not stupid.
"Be well, naneth. I will expect to hear of your success with the Dwarves."

"Well, we both know I have a weakness for fool's errands."

"Eru! Naneth, do not let adar hear you say that."

"True. I have already made enough of a spectacle of myself for one day."

Their eyes held each other's gaze. "I will be laughing about that for the whole time you are gone. Every second was worthy of committing to memory," Legolas teased in a quiet whisper.

"Enough, you two," Thranduil said, rolling his eyes. "Else two cycles of the moon will elapse, and we will yet be at the stables waiting for you to complete your good-byes."

"You see how it is, ionneg? Practically a captive, I am," she giggled.

With what could only be interpreted as a chortling sound, Glorfindel caught her at the waist and lifted her up to Tálagor's back. Surprised and still laughing, she kissed his hand in thanks, suddenly reassured at the sight of him. How glad I am, that you are coming with us. However much bravery and happiness she portrayed externally, it was still nothing more than an overlay on the anxiety that lurked beneath. The golden Lord saw the cracks in her facade, and retained her hand a moment longer in his own to impart what encouragement he could. If nothing else, he realized, she did not currently have her medicine and was in no position to ask for more amidst the flurry of preparations. The gratitude in her expression, a peculiar mien he had come to recognize as being only for him, was evident. And, he had a matter to attend to of his own.

Thranduil sprang up lightly behind and drew his wife against him, silently asking her to take the reins and direct the elk to join the procession. Glorfindel courteously ensured Gilroch's harness was in order for Thaliel, being uncertain what degree of equestrian experience the delicate elleth had, before mounting Fuinor. The spirited horse caused him a pang of yearning for his beloved Asfaloth. While in Imladris, he had asked for few considerations, but Lord Elrond knew that his friend always wished for a white stallion and would always name it Asfaloth. And mostly, the respect he commanded was sufficient to avoid being teased about this particular foible. Though, with a twinge of guilt Glorfindel swiftly acknowledged that this also was a magnificent steed, likely capable of great speed and stamina. He would not be mentioning this to Asfaloth.

His eyes scanned the distance ahead, and he saw what he sought, directing the horse forward. When he neared Anthilon, he dismounted, asking Fuinor with a word to walk at his side. Laying a hand on the ellon's shoulder, he indicated his desire to guard Einur; this would allow the guard to report to the Queen. Paling, but with respect, Anthilon bowed in cooperation and returned up the column. Einur glanced back at his new overseer and instantly paled. "So you remember me?" Glorfindel asked, his demeanor betraying no emotion. The man nodded, perspiration already beading up on his brow while Stathard watched and said nothing. He was not about to enmesh himself in further difficulties. For a time, they walked in silence. "Tell me, have you ever heard of an elf named Glorfindel?"

Einur cleared his throat, having been convinced that further displays of ill manners would be unwise. "Yes. Everyone has heard that name. According to legend he slew a balrog but perished, was given life again, and returned to Middle Earth. And long ago, he set the (he hesitated, and could not make himself say the name, even in the light of day) Evil King to flight. He is said to be among the mightiest of the Elflords, dwelling across the mountains."

"That is a very good account. I will add a few things you do not know, so listen carefully. Glorfindel is the father of the Queen of this Realm. The Queen you have repeatedly insulted. He
wishes to see a complete reformation of your behavior toward his daughter, probably including an apology."

Einur's eyes bulged from his face. "The elf Glorfindel is angry...with me?" Fear roiled through him.

"Aran Thranduil is no less incensed at your display. Were I you, I would be considerably concerned. Not to mention, you do understand that the Queen is as skilled with weapons as both her husband and Glorfindel? She is a fearsome opponent. Arguably, three of greatest elven warriors on these shores are all very perturbed with...you."

"My life is over," the portly coward muttered in misery. "I was angry, for having been held for so long, I did not think..."

"No you did not think, you corpulent moron," Stathard spat, unable to remain silent any longer. "Do you think the Master wanted you to begin a conflict with these elves?"

"Then why did you go along with it?" wheedled Einur.

"Because you were in charge, and I used to be a soldier, that is why! I was hired to follow orders, only to learn too late you had no right, no idea, no..." a guttural noise of disgust escaped him. "I have a family to feed. I needed the coin. Had I known that taking this position would lead to me being held in bonds by the Elvenking...but I did wrong and have no one to blame but...oh, never mind. I will not lose what remains of my dignity by begging off like a coward who cannot accept just punishment."

Glorfindel's eyebrow arched. Neither of these two were terribly bright or good individuals, but this second one was something more of a man. "All this trouble, only to earn money?" At this point the question was a baited hook, cast into the murky waters.

"Times have never been as good in Laketown, sir. It is not like Dale, where wealth flows easily. A living is hard to come by. Or should I say, a less than honest living is difficult enough. Trying to earn honest coin is nigh well an impossibility. The Master sees to that. He is greedy..."

"How can you speak that way, Stathard?" Einur panicked. "He is our employer. Do you wish to end up cleaning fish at the docks? Are you mad, to tell this to the elves?"

"I will speak any way I wish, you blundering fool! Every word is true, and do you believe that you will waltz back to Laketown and be handed a goblet of wine in welcome? In case you have not noticed, we are prisoners, and will be judged by the King in Dale. The Master's greed is what you can thank, for being in this mess in the first place. He thinks only of gold, though he cannot eat it. Which is something of a marvel, as he is fatter than you are, Einur."

"Who appointed the Master?" Glorfindel pressed. "It sounds as though your people struggle to have enough. Why would such a terrible leader be tolerated?"

"Isn't that just what we would all like to know?" Stathard answered darkly. "The first question is easily answered; King Brand. The second...." he shook his head. "I do not like the looks of some of those I have seen come and go. It is rumored they hail from the south..." with a shudder and a pursing of his lips, he would say no more about this.

"Glorfindel is not....here, is he?" Einur whined, looking all around fearfully.

*By Eru, what a dimwit,* the golden Lord thought. "Yes, he is, I am afraid."
"Which one? Please?" the man wheedled.

"Oho, so now you find some manners? That is something, at least. Glorfindel is right here, for I am he. I would have thought that perhaps you could have pieced that together by now. Either way, here is your guard, come to rescue you from my fearsome clutches," he said drily. Stathard began shaking with laughter at Einur's horrified expression, while Glorfindel nodded kindly at Anthilen.

"My Lord," Anthilen said with a bow of deference. He smiled now, his heart placed at ease by his conversation with the Queen, and accepted charge of his tiresome prisoners once again.

Mounting Fuinor, Glorfindel asked the stallion to remain still, allowing his family to catch up to him while he pondered the tidbits he had learned.
The Desecration of Smaug

Chapter Notes

[17-18 Ethuil, Imladris. 16-17 April, Gregorian]

Everyone, I am SO sorry for how long it has taken to post an update. I feel guilty to the point that I didn't even proofread this chapter for the tenth time like usual; I'll just set it free without being so damn picky. As work on the "Lasg'len" fic continues to race downhill like a demented snowball, so much of my time has gone to that project. And, as usual I've had to battle quite a lot of writer's blocks here...the road from the Woodland Realm to Erebor might not be that many leagues long, but figuring out the unfolding plot may as well be the Shire to Harad. It's happening, but I think I am overtaxing my Muses lately.

Another development has been that I've become friends with another Tolkien fanfic author (Zhie) whose 15+ years of writing have yielded a connected collection of stories with such depth and complexity that it makes this Adonnenniel series seem inconsequential by comparison. Many discussions about composition techniques, story organization and...writer stuff...have been happening, as well as the chance to powwow with a creative mind who has given endless thought to the characters of Glorfindel and Erestor. While it is taking my time away from here, a little, in the end these side adventures always result in more refined ideas and better storytelling. Rest assured, this fic is not abandoned. It's just coalescing slower, these days :-)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When Thranduil told Nenni that their progress would be slow due to the nature of their travel, he had not been in jest. This was nothing like the orc hunt in Imladris, where at least a goal had existed of covering as much distance as possible in a day. Something entirely different was in effect, here. Late afternoon, with plenty of daylight remaining, they halted. Just as they had done the first two days. Those assigned to care for them flew into motion, erecting tents, unpacking wagons, and in general going to immense bother to erect a private and home-like space for the royal family, complete with soft mattresses and carpets that covered the ground cloths of their canvas tent. If 'tent' is what it could be called, because 'canopy' or 'pavilion' seemed like better descriptors. Nenni divested herself of her fighting gear and appeared in Queenly clothes as Thranduil asked her too. He was not immune from this either; his armor came off and he exchanged it for luxurious robes. Cooks set up their wares, and seemingly everyone but the small group of them had duties to perform. Thaliel and Nenni watched in astonishment (and for Nenni, vague discomfort) as they sat in their pretty dresses on an actual small sofa while Tinivel bustled with activity all around them. Glorfindel had the most freedom to do as he pleased, though even he relented to divest himself of his armor in favor of silken robes...but his sword was never absent from his side. Thranduil too remained armed in this manner, even as he insisted once again that his wife simply rest comfortably.

"They did not tell me that being treated like a porcelain doll was part of this," Nenni whispered to her friend. For the first two days, she had held her silence, trying to appear to Thaliel as though this was less strange to her than it truly was. However, the strain of being waited on hand and foot was mounting. "I am afraid that I am not accustomed to being quite this useless, while those around me are busy at work."
Thaliel turned to see the barely-hidden distress on her gwathel's face and perceived it would likely worsen, so she quietly went about preparing tea from the water that had been set on a candle warmer some time previously. Smiling, she offered it to Nenni, who glanced at the cup and then her friend. It was not hard to guess, what had been added to the tea.

"I suppose you are right. Thank you." Sipping at the cup, she tried to gain some mastery over her feelings. Every bit of this had been bypassed in Imladris, where an entirely different culture had supremacy. Even during that visit, Nenni had realized that a time would come when it would be required that pomp and circumstance be observed, but that knowledge did not prepare her nearly enough for the raw discomfort of being so visibly elevated in this manner. Especially when it was based on nothing at all, in her view.

Thaliel watched thoughts to which she was not privy play across her friend's grey eyes. Adonnenniel's eyes were such a pale grey, though the edges of her irises were a little darker. Exotic, yet at times unnerving, especially when reflecting any intense emotion. "Why do you feel this way about it?" the Healer asked carefully, still recalling how hurt the Queen had felt when admonished for failing to accept needing help.

Nenni looked up from her teacup. "Many reasons. Where I came from, I was nobody special. Just another person, like millions of others. I found myself dropped into a monarchy, and had to learn quickly to accept the rule of a King. And then being wed to one, and then being asked to become a ruler myself. But none of those changes in my circumstances made me see myself differently. I do not believe I am better than anyone else, and in my old world, we showed that equality by each of us doing for ourselves. My mind understands why there is a King and Queen here, but a part of me still struggles to accept it."

"You feel false, asked to be something you do not believe you are?" Thaliel guessed shrewdly.

"Something like that. All I know is that I want to take off this dress in favor of a garment that can get dirty, and ask Tinivel to sit down while I serve her dinner instead. All the many kind things she does for us are hidden from sight ordinarily, and I find that watching her...wait on me...is almost painful." Beren, sensing his mistress was not in a happy frame of mind, ambled up to sniff and lick at her eyeballs, and seconds later Nenni spluttered and finally smiled at the hound's relentless antics. Seemingly content, he now climbed onto the sofa, much to the alarm of the two ellith, and somehow found room to wedge himself mournfully into the much too small area. Nenni moved closer to Thaliel apologetically, which gave Beren enough space to happily slump against the Queen in a bizarre seated position.

Many things were becoming much clearer to Thaliel, hearing this, but she wished to be certain. "Tell me, what were some of the tasks you did in your old life that you would consider the meanest, the most unfit for a Queen?"

A sharp burst of laughter escaped Nenni as her hand flew to her mouth and a huge smile showed her brilliant white teeth. "Ha ha! That is a very long list. Cleaning animal manures off of everything? Disposing of dead and rotting creatures? Scrubbing at soiled carpets, being covered in the mess from rotting fruits and vegetables...? Caring for sick and injured animals or people? Washing raccoon blood off of this boy here?" Absentmindedly, she draped her arm over Beren, who managed to look offended at her words. "Somehow I was surrounded, by wastes and decay. My hands were rarely clean, except I suppose when I was cleaning...I lived on a farm; it is simply how things were. I did not mind at all; it was honest work."

"I see," said Thaliel, smiling. It was becoming a considerable effort, to ignore the very funny expressions on the dog's face. "So finding yourself in this life...it was not a small change but a large
"You could say that," Nenni gasped softly, feeling the medicine suddenly taking a powerful hold. "Oh! I see you were taking no chances." Tension melted away from her as forced relaxation pitched her forward.

Thaliel caught her. "I have you" she reassured. "And yes, I am guilty of administering a stronger dose. It will make listening to me easier."

Nenni’s expression changed, wondering if she had chosen some words that would have been better left unsaid. "Listening to you? I hope I have not offended you again. I did not..."

"Stop talking. My Queen," Thaliel interrupted pointedly, with humor in her eyes. She found a light blanket, and arranged her friend more comfortably before saying more. The Healer sat practically in her lap, but turned to face her gwathel. "Now, hear what you apparently do not know. I told you, once, that I am not really very old. That all I have ever known is the rule of Aran Thranduil. But this was not the case, for my mother and father. They bore me later in their lives, and remembered the time before Oropher and Amdîr came to the woodlands this side of the mountains. The elves here, my people, were poor. Scattered. Leaderless. Always living hidden, in fear, and existing only to survive. Oropher and the Sindar who accompanied him did not conquer; they came in a spirit of helping, and teaching. My father was among those who begged Aran Thranduil's father to assume rule over us, and pledged themselves in service. With the passing of years, the Silvan elves were lifted from the meanness of living in isolated communities to having culture, dignity, purpose. Oropher did not try to take away our heritage and our love of the woodlands but rather worked to add to it. Some of the Sindar felt differently; they had prejudices. Oropher would not hear of it, and ultimately his strength and force of personality won over all of them. Our Silvan woodcraft was refined and widely disseminated. Our language and his blended. We were glad to see our King gain wealth and power as we learned to trade with the nearby lands, because it was our wealth and power as well. He was the symbol of all of us. And when our beloved King was lost, Aran Thranduil became that and more in his place, for according to my father he is far greater than his adar. I do not know if you can understand what pride and love we feel, to look on our rulers and see their grandeur. Can you understand at all, what I am saying to you?"

Nenni nodded, her eyes pooling with tears, for she easily perceived the nature of this rebuke. "I often manage to only consider myself. Think only of myself. I..."

Thaliel would have none of it. "No! That is not why I told you this, and you know it. Find a way to turn aside from such thoughts." She pulled Nenni close and held her. "You are strong, I have seen it. I love you, for these frailties you also have, for now I understand so much more of your heart. I can see that you never asked for any of this, and that must be why the Valar have chosen you to have it. The trappings of your station are not for you, Adonnenniel. They are for all of us. This is what your people wish you to be, need you to be. You and Aran Thranduil symbolize their pride, their joy. Do not take that away from them. You can still do this without becoming someone you cannot abide. I know you can. Aran Thranduil understands this already, but he has never known any other life. Perhaps he has never explained these things to you in a way you could truly hear."

Tears were wiped away with a kerchief as Nenni tried to absorb what had been told to her. Because no, this viewpoint had never been made plain, though it had been hinted at in one form or another. How she wished, sometimes, that her husband could communicate better on certain nuances pertaining to...well, many things. But that this was not his best strength...that was not exactly news.

Glorfindel stood silently a few steps behind them, having overheard all of this either in his
daughter's thoughts or in person. When he detected her distress he had come quickly, but then waited once he realized what Thaliel sought to achieve. It saddened him, because this was a necessary lesson but one that would hurt to realize. Did, hurt her to realize. Deciding to join them now, he pulled up a chair near to Nenni after nodding in greeting to Thaliel. "Iellig," he said in a kind voice, "what your gwathel says is true. For it was much the same for me, in Gondolin. A people derive great strength, and reassurance, from what they see in their leaders. It is a need to believe that they follow something greater than themselves, which in turn brings out the best in them. When, of course, that leader is a worthy one."

Nenni started to open her mouth in protest but was cut off by him immediately. "Ah-ah, I said 'a need to believe'. That is not the same as a claim to inherent superiority. I know that your mind is more than able to understand the difference. You cannot resist, Adonnenniel. You have vowed to undertake this role and now you are being told in the clearest possible terms what your people want from you, and why. That you would not choose this for yourself...it changes nothing."

Her shoulders drooped in defeat. "Why is this so hard, Ada?" she whispered, reaching to absentmindedly fondle and knead at Beren's silky soft ear while the hound rumbled in contentment.

Glorfindel reached to take her hand in his; her limbs were limp and yielding. "Because you are good, iellig. Because you do not see yourself as any different from those who clean the fireplaces or muck out the stables. You would be content to do any of those things, because you do not honor others according to their wealth or clothes or occupation or appearance. What interests you are their hearts. You still have plenty of opportunity to work amidst soil and decay, if that is your desire. Only accept that in this, you are being asked to play a role when in the sight of many. I know you can pretend. You do it when you sing. Use that gift in one more place. Listen to what your gwathel has said to you; she did not speak without serious consideration. And I am certain that she does not wish to dose you so strongly again," he teased.

Thaliel kept quiet but listened with a heart that was deeply moved. Her experience of Glorfindel had been variable and unpredictable, but instinct told her that the voice she now heard was his truest one. Wise, and loving. Honest, and upright.

"I did not understand," Nenni murmured. "And I did not want to. Thank you for your direction. I will do what I have promised, and should you see me faltering, I imagine neither of you will hesitate to give a reminder. And Thaliel, thank you for understanding...me. It means more than I can express, that at least a few persons will know what I am truly like. Because I could not bear it, if I were thought of in any way like the...."

"Aviary," both Thaliel and Glorfindel concluded for her, grinning at each other.

A cavernous sigh came from Nenni. "Exactly. I would like to walk, outside. Enjoy the sight of the Lonely Mountain from somewhere besides the back of Tálagor. Could we?"

At the word 'walk,' Beren came suddenly awake and sprang off the sofa, to begin excitedly pacing through the tent, a bounce in his step.

"Then give me a moment with your hair comb, and we will walk. I would be glad to accompany you both." Glorfindel rose, happy to have a reason to comb out the unbraided ends of her luxurious coppery hair.

Tinivel waited beyond one of the canvas flaps, having heard everything, and knowing the Queen would need a wrap against the increasing chill that formed near the river. But she lingered a few extra moments, still caught under the spell of what she had just overheard. The pride and love she
felt, at the inner beauty of their new monarch...there were not words. While knowing that there was no such thing as infallibility, Tinivel saw that even the Queen's weaknesses were strengths. Her heart was pure, unselfish in the extreme, and had as its guard and guide an ellon who was quite possibly the most morally upright of all the children of Ilúvatar. While it might be true that the time of the elves in Ennor had reached its evening, for their own Silvan people in Eryn Galen it seemed as though a long night yielded to a breaking dawn that would not be denied. And in a few short weeks, she and her cherished Galion would give themselves to each other in the sight of Eru. Her heart could burst with joy. Knuckling aside a tear, she summoned her practiced discipline, and moved a cloth flap aside to enter and find garments for her Queen, and Thaliel.

Outside, each elleth walked on either side of a watchful Glorfindel, and Beren walked in a stately manner at her side as Nenni continued to fondle his ears. As they passed the cooks and grooms, the soldiers and valets, Nenni watched their reactions to her through a changed understanding. When they bowed and curtsied and looked on with happy admiration at her lovely gown ...her perspective had altered, and she could witness, perceive what Thaliel had spoken of. They were right, it was true. Had Thranduil understood this?

"He does, Adonnenniel. You already do not need me to tell you that he...

No, I do not, Ada. I am not angry with him. It was never going to be possible for him to teach me every lesson. Especially this one. He cannot understand my world view any more than I could understand his. What you and Thaliel have both told me was said in a way I could hear. I am grateful.

They rounded a corner of the grassy path, and Thaliel's face lit up. "The Lonely Mountain!" she exclaimed. "And Esgaroth. Or rather, the new Esgaroth. The last time I passed this way, it was a smoldering ruin of piers and pilings with a dead dragon half-roasted on top of the cinders." Her petite nose wrinkled in disgust at the recollection.

"Oh," Nenni gasped softly. That meant that soon she would get to see...or at least she hoped...

Iellig?

I hope you do not think ill of me. I have long wished to see the skeleton of the dragon, or what might remain of it. Please understand that nothing like them existed, on Earth. I cannot help but be curious. She gazed into the distance, looking at the mountain, and wondering about this world. On Earth, this would surely have been called a composite volcano? An isolated landform, of this shape and size? And yet from what she knew of how the Valar had shaped Arda, had any geological processes taken place at all, in the ordinary sense of the word? It seems like the main geological process was named Morgoth, she frowned. Like a spoiled brat, always trying to ruin everyone else's toys. Once again, what I know of the earth sciences is just a 'maybe' because...it is different, here. But gems were mined in Erebor, and gems also usually meant 'volcano'. Who even knows...but however it arose, it is beautiful. The symmetry of the lovely peak pleased the eye, as did the snows that graced its summit. Nenni drank in the sight for a long time, counting it as one of the natural wonders of their home. To think that I could ever be here...it is still like a dream. And standing next to Glorfindel...she stole a glance up at the ellon who was far more lovely than the mountain, and shook her head imperceptibly. There were times, when the sheer weirdness of it all still threatened to intrude. I have been here not quite eight months.

Glorfindel's large hand gently took her shoulder, guiding her to turn around. Daylight was beginning to fade, and it was time to return. Nenni silently asked for that hand to please remain where it was. While she would still be cautious about public knowledge of her relationship with Thaliel, not so with her Ada. At least, not to this small extent. As they moved along, Nenni heard a
voice call out: "Queen Adonnenniel! Please." Frowning, she tried to make out who it was in the
dimming light. Apparently it was one of the men of Esgaroth; both were shackled, and these were
attached to a tree while their guards kept a watchful eye. But for a change, the words had been
polite, so she walked toward them, stopping outside of what she would call a 'spit-free zone'. Beren
growled, barely audibly.

"What is it?" she asked levelly, uncertain which of them had spoken.

"I want to apologize for my rudeness. For all of my behavior. I am sorry," said Einur.

Nenni simply stared at him for a moment. Her thoughts were a little slowed, dulled by the strong
dose she had been given. "May I ask, why the change of heart?" No contempt existed in her voice,
but neither did her usual kindness.

"Because it is true that I have acted very badly, and my actions were foolish. I was...encouraged, to
see that much."

Her pale grey eyes regarded his. "Then thank you, for your apology."

"Thank you, for being willing to hear it, Lady."

Perceiving that this was all he had to say, Nenni looked up at Anthilen to see the barest shrug of his
soldiers. Stathard, she observed, rolled his eyes but said nothing. Weird.

The three of them returned to the tent, where carefully placed braziers offered warmth against the
chill. Nenni was asked to sit near one, while Tinivel took her wrap and offered in its stead one of
her thick robes. Soon the Queen was bundled cozily and surrounded in soft warmth as dinner
preparations were being made. "This is a far cry from a military action, Ada."

"Surely you do not mind too much?" he said, leaning his head against his steepled fingers with
amusement.

"I was warm and comfortable either way. Mostly. Give or take a few instances," she grinned.
"Though I will say that I am appreciating remaining clean."

"I have been on enough of the other ind of outing that I am enjoying this a great deal," Glorfindel
grinned. "In fact, the next time I wish to watch Lord Elrond's eyebrow raise, I will suggest this
mode of travel to him."

"Then I hope he accepts, as he will find it most enjoyable. Though, I do not know who can plan so
well as Galion and Tinivel."

"Lord Erestor could, but I am afraid his mind is not given to considering wraps and furniture."

Nenni giggled. "How I wish I could have known him a little better. I imagine he is the sort you can
ask a question, and three goblets of wine later he might be close to exhausting the sum of his
knowledge on a given matter."

"Four," the golden Lord corrected, without a hint of sarcasm. "I learned long ago, not to ask unless
I truly wish to know. And, I hope your wish is in earnest. For my understanding is that he will
begin the journey to come to your Halls sometime near to summer."

"Really? He will? What an honor, that would be. To have both of you? With us? I am afraid Lord
Elrond will become cross that we are stealing all of you away. Though...if what you say is correct,
he will arrive in the late summer and...he will not be alone, will he? I could not bear to think of him
traversing our forest unguarded and..."

"Iellig!" he held up his hand, mildly exasperated with her worrying. "He will not be unguarded. I myself will escort him through your forest. And before you become further agitated, I too will be guarded. While I dwell with you, I also must obey the King's laws."

"Good." I suppose my going with you is out of the question, she thought, already certain of the answer. "Though I still feel sorry for Erestor. He will come all that way and then..." Nenni frowned, as the realities of the calendar washed over her. "He means to stay the winter, unless he too has eagles for friends."

"He does not."

"I would not have thought that our library held quite that much potential fascination. Though, it is not as if I have formed a close relationship with it. Yet." The clock was ticking, against when she would be weighed down with growing Amaranthine.

"Iellig, I am afraid I have a confession to make," Glorfindel said with some unease in his voice. "Erestor is not planning such a long stay on account of your library."

Nenni blinked at him as possibilities sifted through her far too relaxed mind. *Erestor was not among the Imladris musicians, nor did it seem like hunting held any interest. Surely not anything about the garden?*

"Adonnenniel, it is *you*," Glorfindel confessed. "I am afraid I said too much to Lord Elrond about your knowledge of biology. The human body, and its workings. These...sciences, the learning about which exists in your mind alone. This was mentioned to Lord Erestor and he has apparently been inconsolable, that this trove of information escaped his grasp. I believed you would not object."

"You mean to tell me that I am expected to disgorge what I know to Lord Erestor? So that he can make record of it? Oh, Ada..." Only the strength of the medication inside her kept the waves of anxiety at bay. Glorfindel did not understand, she was no master at sciences. And with her memory, she often had to think things through for hours, to remind herself of facts, and reconstruct her recollections of some things. Yes, she'd stared for days of her life at the Periodic Table of the Elements. It did not mean that she could flawlessly jot it down onto a parchment, *even if I do still recall the atomic weight of oxygen.* She would have to puzzle, ponder, reflect, recall...wait, had she not written out what she remembered of it, when first she came to Thranduil's Halls? Probably? "Sweet baby Jesus," came out in a whisper.

"What is wrong? If I have made a grave error, I will seek to undo it," he said, his tone filled with concern. He truly had not expected this reaction.

Nenni shook her head. "Do not," she said, casting her eyes down. "There is no loss here except that of my pride. Ada, it is true that I know many things. I have no right to withhold that learning, if it is what all of you desire to have. But...Erestor is brilliant, Ada. His mind is sharp, honed. Precise. By comparison, I am a blithering idiot, and he will find this out about me soon enough. And I am not like Thranduil, I do not have his memory. If I am very fortunate, Erestor will not make fun of me too much, for I have seen that his wit and sense of humor is as sharp as his acuity of thought."

"He will do no such thing, or he will answer to me," Glorfindel growled, now understanding her fears.

"Ada...no. Just...please, do not. Please forget, that I said what I did. When the time comes, I will"
find a way. It would not be the first time I needed to adjust to someone...like him. Whatever else he is, I do not believe Erestor to be unkind. Just...different. I am not myself right now."

"I am sorry, Adonnenniel. I did not mean to be...unhelpful," Glorfindel murmured contritely.

"Do not worry. But I am grateful to know about this now, not later. Perhaps on my return I can try to write a draft, outline...something. I need a way to write that is not permanent. We had slates, on earth, where chalk was used to write and then it could be wiped away. Then for some of these subjects that will be difficult to recall, I will not have to waste materials."

Thaliel listened to this entire exchange. "What do you mean, knowledge of the human body?" she asked.

Nenni shot her gwathel a very guilty look. Here Thaliel was a Healer, and because Nenni was Nenni, this conversation had never happened. "I was...educated more than most, about how bodies work. Health care, medicine. Like, that the liver has three lobes and the gall bladder is attached and the function of the bile it secretes is to break down the fats that digest in a certain portion of the small intestine that we named the 'duodenum'. That bodies have reproductive systems, and endocrine and excretory and skeletal and nervous and muscular and renal and more...systems. What they all do, how they operate, which structures comprise them..."

"...and chemicals," Glorfindel added proudly.

"Yes. And chemicals," Nenni murmured.

Thaliel felt like all the air had been removed from the room. "How many bones are there in a human body?" she asked quietly, already knowing the answer. For elves had only two less, on account of a fusion plate not existing in their race's skulls.

"Two hundred and six," Nenni answered. While she never retained facts that mattered, memorized facts (especially if they involved a number) tended to cling to her mind like lichen onto stone, never to be dislodged.

"Tell me two functions of bones."

"To..." Nenni hesitated as she strained to recall..."to support the fleshy structures of the body and to produce blood cells."

"Blood cells?" Thaliel asked, baffled.

"Yes, the assorted structures invisible to the eye that transport oxygen to the organs and carry away chemical wastes and fight off infectious organisms and cause blood to clot and..." she stopped speaking, seeing at the Healer's expression. "Thaliel, I am sorry. Please do not be angry with me. I was not keeping this from you, it is only that...

Thaliel held up her hand, close to losing her composure. "I require some time to myself. Please excuse me." In a blink, Thaliel was gone. Her words were said with disconcerting detachment in which no anger could be detected. Her voice did not have to hold anger; Nenni could easily extrapolate how her friend must feel.

Glorfindel knelt in front of his daughter, to be at her eye level. "This time, please leave this to me, Adonnenniel. This is my doing. Allow me to correct my mistake. Do not become sad. I promise you that all will be well." Nenni nodded, and Glorfindel must have asked Beren to come sit with her, because he once again came lumbering over to jump on the couch and flop against Nenni, placing a noticeable strain on the furniture joints as he wriggled into a position he felt was
suitable.

When Thranduil entered the tent, some minutes later, he found his wife and hound with equally forlorn expressions. *Eru, these two have spent much time together,* he thought. The scene was extremely funny except...even with his obtuseness, he could see that matters were not right. He too knelt down, to kiss her cheek softly. "Meleth, would you share some wine with me?"

No answer came right away, but she did lean forward to kiss her husband deeply, wanting to feel his strength. Her affection was returned, and the offer of wine accepted. Doing her best, the attempt was made to behave other than how she felt. "Is everything going as you wish, my King?"

"Mostly," he answered, offering her a goblet. When it became obvious that he seemed disinclined to elaborate, she tried a different variation.

"We walked to the bend of the road, to see the mountain and Esgaroth," she told him in a voice devoid of expression. "It is quite a sight."

"Yes," he agreed, but said no more.

*It is a sight I wish to see again,* she thought. Rising, her goblet was set aside and she wordlessly asked Beren to accompany her. Stepping outside the tent flap, she walked past much of the camp, lost in her own thoughts, until she was at the bend in the road. Beren sat next to her, alert, while she tilted her head at the moon rising, and its reflection on the Long Lake. Her family had been very confusing, today, and there was only one means by which she could indeed not become sad. She pulled her warm robes closer around her, and sang.

*Beloved, gaze in thine own heart The holy tree is growing there; From joy the holy branches start And all the trembling flowers they bear. The changing colours of its fruit Have dowered the stars with merry light; The surety of its hidden root Has planted quiet in the night; The shaking of its leafy head Has given the waves their melody. And made my lips and music wed, Murmuring a wizard song for thee, There the Loves a circle go, The flaming circle of our days, Gyring, spiring to and fro In those great ignorant leafy ways; Remembering all that shaken hair And how the winged sandals dart Thine eyes grow full of tender care; Beloved, gaze in thine own heart.*

Not far away, Stathard's sharp ears heard the plaintive melody. "What is that?" he asked Anthilen in wonder.

"That is the Queen, singing."

The man glared at Einur in disgust. His apology was not nearly enough, for having insulted one who had such a lovely voice.
Nenni continued to stand with Beren, after her reflective song. "Well hound dog, let us hope that everyone is done gazing in the bitter glass," she said in English to him. "Perhaps myself included." Bending down, her arms wrapped around the warm fur at his neck. "Come, perhaps your dinner is ready." At this, Beren perked up considerably, causing her to laugh. When they returned to the tent, she found herself stared at. Ignoring this, she resumed her seat.

"What was that song?" asked Thaliel, who had displaced Beren.

"It is a poem set to music, called 'The Two Trees," came the simple answer. Her hands were folded in her lap. Thaliel reached to carefully lay her hand on top of one of Nenni's, before she could work out..."How could you possibly have heard that?...oh." It was an absurd question, really, given that Glorfindel and Thranduil were both here. A sigh escaped her, though she did take Thaliel's hand, lacing the Healer's fingers in her own.

"It was lovely. I have not often heard you sing. And...I am sorry, for how I behaved. My reaction was very unfair to you."

The Queen smiled and squeezed her hand. "Thank you, but I am the last person who is going criticize another for reacting strongly to...well, anything, really."

"Sing something else, please?" Glorfindel asked."Are there more songs, based on poetry of Earth?"

"Yes...this one touches on an old poet of Earth; it is called 'Dante's Prayer.'

_When the dark wood fell before me, And all the paths were overgrown. When the priests of pride say there is no other way, I tilled the sorrows of stone. I did not believe because I could not see, Though you came to me in the night. When the dawn seemed forever lost, You showed me your love in the light of the stars....Cast your eyes on the ocean..._

The strangeness of singing these words to elves suffused Nenni, sometimes. How could she ever explain to them about things like the Divine Comedy and the kinds of things depicted in this metaphorical journey to God? Such archaic sentiments barely made sense to modern humans; explaining it to ones from another world would be hopeless indeed. _And yet, I have always loved this song because it means what it means to each listener, and the imagery is beautiful. The song could be about all of you, my chosen family, or none of you. What difference does it make?_

Glorfindel found himself drawn to this, so strongly. Though he heard her thoughts as she sang, his daughter's emotional undercurrent came through with far more strength. Thranduil too was ensnared, and moved behind her to touch his wife's shoulders even as Glorfindel knelt to rest his head in her lap. It warmed her heart, that they would come close to her, and she could not resist weaving her fingers lightly through her Ada's beautiful golden hair. And through it all, the King kindly allowed Thaliel to once again understand the words her gwathel sang. When the song finished, and her reverie broke, Nenni saw that the usually imperturbable Thaliel was in tears.

"Meldis, what is wrong?"

The healer shook her petite head as she wiped at her cheeks. "I am sorry. The song...I was reminded so much of Mithdir. I do not often allow myself to reflect on such things but...I miss my husband."

A great sadness rose in Thranduil's heart at hearing this, for this was a sorrow he did not wish for anyone to feel. And yet, it was a tragedy of their kind. Though, most every wed elf had the hope of reuniting in Valinor. He had been told why Thaliel remained, and he was grateful, and humbled.
"May I touch your arm, Thaliel?" Glorfindel asked. He too was moved with pity.

"Yes," she said dully, only to have the sensations inside of her transform once the golden elf's hand laid on her. Surprise suffused her features. The sense of grief, the weight of sadness lifted, replaced by...peace. "Thank you, my Lord." Her tones were quiet, and filled with reverence.

"You have sacrificed much, to give to others. I have unwittingly caused this evening to be a trial for you; it is the least I can do. You are welcome," he said, with a kind smile, withdrawing his hand as he stood up.

"Our meal waits for us," the King said. "Come."

Everyone seemed settled now. Resolved. Their meal of stew and steamed dumpling was simple and delicious, and with the extra medication still floating through her, an early bedtime was entirely welcome. Blessedly, Beren was content to stretch out on the soft carpets, and did not feel the need to try to hog their bed. Thaliel had excused herself to rest as well, having a private area inside this tent much as Glorfindel did. Thranduil excused himself to oversee the camp one last time before retiring, leaving Nenni with Glorfindel.

_You did well today, iellig. I know that not everything about it was easy._ He tucked her blankets around her a little more snugly, and smoothed back her copper hair.

_I managed, thanks to you all. But Ada, I hope she does not give me so much of the medicine again. I did not...like it. There is feeling calmer and then there is...what I was. I would rather be a little agitated still, than feel like half of myself is on the other side of the room. I do not mean to complain..._

_It is not a complaint. I hope you will forgive me but...I took the liberty of speaking to her about this. Thaliel meant well, genuinely not wishing for you to feel any sting from her words about your position as Queen. It will take time, for her to understand you, especially without the..._

_Ability to read my mind?_

_Something like that. You are loved, Adonenniel, but you are very different than any elf she has ever known. I am trying to mind my own business, but there are times I cannot stop myself from feeling as though I must explain some things to her._

_Were it anyone else, I would probably be annoyed. But...I cannot be upset with you. You are...well, you. And I am not...normal._

He chuckled. _I suppose I am._ And now you must rest. Tomorrow we will pass the Gate to Esgaroth.

_Are you going to send me to sleep again?_ she asked with somewhat accusatory overtones.

_No. I will leave that duty to your husband, who returns even now. So I will take my leave. Rest well, beloved iellig._ Leaning down, he kissed her forehead, and departed. Smiling and feeling loved, Nenni blinked, hoping Thranduil would come to bed. There was no fear of disappointment, as he soon appeared in their small private sleeping space.

_You are still awake, meleth?_

_Yes. I was not made to fall victim to more of Thaliel's tea or Ada. I count myself blessed,_ she said drily.
He smirked. *There is still me*, he quipped.

Oh, I am aware of that. *Fortunately my easygoing good nature tolerates all of this oversight. At least, until it does not.*

His eyebrow quirked while he disrobed, understanding that while she was teasing, her words contained a definite kernel of truth. Adonnenniel could only be pressed so hard, without...consequences. *Then perhaps you will be glad to hear that I have gone to great effort to plan something you will like, for tomorrow.* Drawing back the furs and blankets, he climbed in to feel the bliss of her warmth.

*I will be allowed to verbally abuse the Master of Laketown?* Her eyes sparkled with mischief; everything below her nose was hidden under the coverings.

Imp. No, that is not what I had in mind. *You asked me to see something once, and tomorrow before the sun rises we will do just that, traveling ahead of our company. I hope you understand, I do not wish for this to be well-known. Your adar will come with us, as will Anthilen and Tauriel. But I must emphasize, we will not linger for a great while.*

*You will take me to see what remains of the dragon?!* A note of hopefulness was in her words.

*Yes. We will see what we will see.*

Kissing him in gratitude that he would allow for her strange request led to his eager response. They were very quiet, in their lovemaking. Thranduil still felt a fair amount of chagrin over what lived on in his mind as the Spanking Episode. He never wished to see that particular expression on Glorfindel’s beatific face again, of that he was certain. And after seeing poor Thaliel’s grief tonight, the last thing he wished in all this world was to broadcast his own marital joys when she was denied her own. It still weighed very heavily on his heart, every one of his people whose lives on these shores were ever lost. With movements subtle and restrained, their passion spilled over into release. Only the softest of moans betrayed his wife's ecstasy when he spent himself into her body. Sleep came easily now, as a soft breeze ruffled the tent flaps while the nightingales made their melodies in the distance.

*****

If five minutes had passed since falling asleep, it was news to her. Or at least this was her feeling when she was wakened in the darkness. Glorfindel waited for her to dress and while still occupied with buckling her armor, he appeared with a hot cup of the tea to keep her sickness at bay.

*You remembered*, Nenni smiled gratefully. Because she had most definitely forgotten.

Drink, he encouraged, taking over the buckling of her armor.

*Ada, really, this is too much. What has my life become when the Lord Glorfindel is fiddling with buckles so I might sip tea?* 

*More efficient?* He playfully tugged at her hair. *I would think that you and I are well beyond such need to consider our loftier aspects.*

*Are we?* This gave her great pause. Nenni now sipped her tea in a far more serious frame of mind. She did not see that she truly had a loftier aspect. Not really, theatrical trappings aside. What if...*do you mean to say what I think you are saying?*

*That depends on what you are thinking, iellig.* His teasing was relentless.
Are you telling me, Ada, that you wish me to view you as ordinary? I can see that you are feeling lighthearted this morning, but this...matters.

He removed her empty cup from her hands and insisted she sit, tilting her chin up to look at him much as Thranduil often used to in the early days of their relationship. Yes. That is what I wish. At least, that is what I wish from you. I am tired in some ways, of always being held upon a pedestal. Adonnenniel, there have been few chances in my life to be seen by another as an equal. Not as blessed of the Valar, or the balrog slayer, or the mighty Elflord, or any of the things I am called when no one thinks I am listening. I understand that I have a duty; I accepted this willingly, long ago. But not without some degree of yearning to be seen as just...myself. I told you when I offered to assume the role of father to you that I asked nothing in return. To that I still hold. But...I would like so very much to not be constantly be placed on high. You and Lord Elrond are the closest I will ever have to...this, on these shores. And my friend is now far away from me.

Nenni studied his face in the dim candlelight carefully. This was asking nothing, and everything, at the same time. I can tell you that I am willing to try, Ada. But I will not always succeed. I...do not know how normal daughters relate to normal fathers. That has been denied me, and...that is why you ended up in this role you have chosen and for which I am grateful. I can try not to...idolize you. I think, I hope, I already have set this aside to an extent. I think I understand what it is you want. Can we agree to continue this dialogue, especially if I behave in a manner you would rather I not?

Yes. His forehead touched to hers. Thank you.

She embraced him, pulling herself close to him in spite of the awkwardness of their armor. There is something I never told you. Amusement suffused her voice. The first moment ever I beheld you, I saw that you were very beautiful. That your face spoke of kindness, and that your eyes were merry. When my husband spoke your name, for many minutes I had no foggy clue who you were. The name Glorfindel did not register in my mind; I had to think and think until I could finally recall. I truly did not know or remember enough about you to realize, well, much of anything really. But I could perceive quickly that you were more than me, Ada. More whole, wiser, older, gifted with strength. Her shoulders shrugged. I accept all of you, including what it must feel like to carry the weight of unusual blessings. I will do my best.

Releasing her hold on him, nimble fingers finished the last of the buckles. Looking up to see his radiant skin in the low light, she noted that his expression was one of ambiguity. Reaching up, her finger lightly tapped his nose.

What was that?

I tapped your nose. You said you wished to be ordinary. That means I can be impudently playful at random moments. With a stifled giggle she gave a peck on the cheek, before slipping into her sword harness.

Does that mean something? His eyes held mirth.

Affection. And some feel that the gesture also means, to keep a secret.

"It is time to depart," Thranduil said in whispered tones. "I hope you do not mind, Glorfindel, that we will all go on foot. It will be much easier to pass unnoticed without riding."

Running, Nenni thought happily. Excellent. "Has any sort of note been left for Tinivel? I would hate for her to wake and worry about our absence."

"Tinivel will not worry, Adonnenniel. But word has been left with Thaliel, regardless. Now, come."
Unsurprisingly, Beren was already at the bend of the road waiting for him. Nenni wondered what forklift her husband had used or needed in order to rouse the dog in the first place. Then again, Thranduil was very strong. They ran on in silence, with Tauriel leading the way. The road was wide enough for wagons, so certainly room enough existed for her to run with Thranduil and Glorfindel at her side. Part of her mildly wished to roll her eyes, but not really. *I have not been so tired that I have fallen on my face,* she mused. Mists came from the Long Lake as their feet traversed the distance. Nenni felt uncertain as to the time or distance; the moonlight and the mists lent a certain inability to fathom much besides the road right under her boots. Yet after a time she thought she could make out a ruin of pilings and general wreckage. *That must be the first Esgaroth?*

*Yes, meleth. That is our destination.*

*I wonder if it will look like the dragon skeletons in Skyrim?*

Thranduil stifled a chuckle as he remembered the remarkable video game on earth, only to sober as he realized how much he had been healed in the intervening months. If he had been told a year ago that he would voluntarily be visiting a dragon skeleton, he would have shuddered in disbelief and grief. And now...

*What is Skyrim?* Glorfindel asked.

*My favorite video game, that I played on Earth. I could explain better later about them, it is a very advanced technology and I fear now is not the time.*

*That might be for the best,* he smiled, already baffled at the glimpses in her memory of...whatever they were, that he was seeing.

As dawn was breaking, they approached what used to be the long pier called the Great Bridge, before its destruction. *No doubt the new settlement used the same names.*

Tauriel stopped. "The stability of the pilings is still very good. I cannot say the same for any other part of the structure. Though as a rule, I have found that intact wood is sound enough, while anything charred is suspect." The Commander's grin hinted that Nenni was not the only one to have this kind of curiosity.

So across the decaying structures they went. For the first time in weeks, Nenni felt simply so pleased that she was not being defended against something. No one was telling her she could not climb and leap and tiptoe. There was no need to refrain from being an elf and enjoying the agility of their people. Those thoughts were blocked from the ellyn, of course, but the sheer elation of clambering over these rotting ruins wrote itself onto her face. As Esgaroth had never been that large even at the best of times, some minutes later found them near to what had been the Market Pool, and that which she had wished to see. Her sensitive nose still caught a scent of rotten flesh, or what in her former life she would have termed 'old dead thing'. Which was distinct from 'dead old thing', but, that did not need elaboration.

*There he lay.* The creature she'd wondered about since fourteen years of age, when she found herself deeply engrossed in her first reading of *The Hobbit:* "*There he lay, a vast golden red dragon...wings folded like an immeasurable bat.*" Nenni murmured the quoted words softly, as she beheld the remains of this once-mighty malice. No muscle or organ tissues remained, but to both her delight and surprise, almost none of his bleaching bones were submerged. So strong were the ligaments that had dried in the sun, the skeleton remained all still intact, held together by the mighty sinews all these decades later. Hoping that this would not forever brand her as some sort of morally backward individual, with a child's delight she sprang into the skeleton, moving up the
vertebrae with her nimble feet on her way to see the wings and skull. Thranduil had warned they
would not remain long here, and she did not intend to waste a second of this.

Tauriel and Anthilen glanced sideways at each other, grinning to see her enjoyment of this
moment, which was not as peculiar as Nenni suspected. They were wood elves, never truly exposed
to the full horrors of Morgoth's dragons in their lives. The Queen's curiosity was different in their
eyes than for Thranduil and the Lord of the House of the Golden Flower, who had seen the wars
and the great evils of the north. Her secret was safe with them. Glorfindel, however, had a different
reaction than to merely smile, and rushed to follow her.

Smaug was immense, Nenni thought, wishing like anything that somehow one day Bilbo could be
told about this moment. Her awe and admiration of the little Hobbit had just soared off the charts.
Smaug had not been the size of an elephant, or a whale...this was more in the brontosaurus range.
And maybe he was even bigger than that. Ducking out where the front of the ribcage met the
scapula, she hopped over to a pair of pilings, grabbing onto one of the claws of his twisted wing to
steady herself. It was quite loose under her hand and in a fleeting second of curiosity she twisted at
it, stunned when the curved talon broke off easily into her grasp.

Marveling, she turned it round and round. It was heavy, and fit in her hand. Still, it was sharp; it
might as well be made of metal. Valar, this is the ultimate transplanting tool, and I want it. No
hesitation was needed; up into her cuirass it went, where something that large could be hidden
from view, give or take that it would now uncomfortably press in on her. This acquisition was
better than Christmas. After the stamp dragons had left on the course of her life and even her very
flesh, it seemed deserved as well.

"Is that wise, iellig?" The voice startled her as she turned around, not realizing Glorfindel had
trailed her so closely.

His piercing gaze was returned with open-hearted honesty. "I do not find it un-wise. If you have
reasons why I should not have it, I will listen. Though, reattaching it will be work indeed."

"He was a servant of Morgoth. You wish to keep a reminder of such evil with you?"

"Was, Ada. It is nothing more now than a defeated ruination. There is no spirit here, just a hollow
shell, however impressive as to size. You do not yet know of all my peculiarities. And, while
others might think differently, I have had my very fae assaulted by...his kind," she said, with a
sweeping gesture of the skeleton all around her. "To me it is a fitting mockery, and an amusement,
if I wish to make a dragon claw into a garden tool. Perhaps it is even a trophy of sorts. I am here,
and Smaug is not."

For many searching moments, Glorfindel considered her words. "Very well. I will not object. But I
advise you to reveal this to no other."

"It will be wrapped, and placed in my private pouch, on our return. And I wish to see the skull,
before my time here is gone. Perhaps a tooth is loose," she teased, darting off.

For a few moments, he stared in mild disbelief. Eru, she is peculiar. With a smile he followed.

Coming to the front of the massive skull, her eyes grew wide. There really is a loose tooth! The
smallest one rattled in its socket, and she lifted it out in wonder and barely restrained greed. Down
her boot it went, an odd bulge that competed for space with Elladan's knife. If only this entire
skeleton could be in the garden, trellising grapes and flowering vines. Alas. Pacing this way and
that, her mind worked out more of how the dragon must have actually appeared. Like the movies,
yet not. A longer snout, more teeth and smaller teeth, except for the teeth better categorized as
outright fangs. Sadly, those would not be going anywhere. *What an accent they would make, in a garden of small cacti...*

*Iellig, Thranduil says we must away.*

Yes, Ada. One last admiring look at this masterpiece of biological architecture was given, before she moved with both speed and caution back toward the rib cage and its easy path to the remnants of the Bridge. Beren, Tauriel, Anthilen and Thranduil had remained where they were, apparently having had no wish to examine the remains more closely. Or in Beren's case, he would have had to swim. All together, they broke into a run once back on solid ground.

Everything was well enough at first. The claw was annoying while it jostled against her belly and occasionally dug into a rib, but only that. After the first mile and a half, Nenni took a peculiar step that caused the tooth to shift within her boot. Rub, rub, chafe, rub. From time to time a shake of the foot or other subtle maneuver was executed, to return the tooth to its original position. After many failed attempts, the thing finally moved itself, though doubtless a blister or worse had already occurred. Discomfort mounted, but she refused to utter a word. Anyone would refuse to speak up, when they stood to never hear the end of a matter. That and, occasionally Beren would come by and sniff at her boot, with a puzzled expression on his face. Leave it, Buddy, she silently reassured him.

Finally they neared their camp, and slowed to a walk. They made a dignified procession, the ornaments on their armor shining bright in the early morning sun. When Nenni pulled the tent flap aside, her only thought was to be alone long enough to take off her boot. All but dashing into their little bedchamber and diving to the opposite side of the bed to open her leather satchel, something resembling a scarf caught her eye. With swift and sure movements, tooth and claw were wrapped and stuffed into the satchel. A sigh of relief and a smile accompanied her success. At least, until she pulled down her sock. 'Blister', it turned out, was an understatement. Hurriedly pulling her sock back up and stuffing her foot into her boot, she sat down and pondered her options while biting at her fingernail. Opening the tent flap, a smirking Glorfindel crossed his arms and regarded his daughter.

*Would you help me? I would rather confess my folly to you, Ada, though I suspect you already know.*

Yes, I do. And you have already paid enough of a penalty for your whims that to me seem rather foolish, he admonished. *Sit down, and give me your leg.* His eyes flared in surprise when his fingers worked off the sock. *I can improve this, but if you wish to depart here with this healed and have time to eat anything, I must call your husband.*

*Please do, then. I will not be able to hide it forever anyway.*

Thranduil appeared very quickly. "I do not understand," he said at the sight of the burst and angry blister, realizing she was keeping something from him.

"Would you let me explain when we are underway? This is...I would like the chance to tell you everything and not only one tiny bit. Please?"

"Yes." He rather strongly suspected that this would be at best amusing and at worst ridiculous. In moments, the combined gifts of both ellyn left her with healed skin and on her way to hot porridge and honey.

"Thank you, Thranduil. For all of what you did on my behalf. I...enjoyed myself very much." A gleam in her eye appeared that had not been often seen, a particular sense of obvious elation that he...
"You are welcome, wife," he murmured, holding her against him while his flaxen hair tumbled over her shoulders. Happy eyes were raised to look at Glorfindel, who also smiled at the unusual strength of a positive emotion that had not come from medication. Ushering Nenni out, they now found Thaliel patiently waiting.

"Good morning," the Healer spoke in greeting, immediately moving to prepare tea. This was observed with a slight dampening of spirits by Nenni, who watched for a moment before silently moving toward her. With a hand placed lightly on her arm, she interrupted Thaliel's activity to offer an embrace. Yesterday had unraveled, and a repeat of that was not wanted. The ellith briefly locked eyes before pulling each other close. "I am sorry, for giving you so much extra medicine last night," Thaliel whispered. "Your Ada explained more to me. I will not do that to you again. Please believe that I meant well." It felt bothersome to her in the extreme, to understand that she had made a significant error in judgment.

"I do," the Queen murmured in return. "It is forgotten. I am very glad to have you, and him. Sometimes I require translation. Maybe usually, I require translation," she observed wryly.

"I am learning," Thaliel smiled, parting from their hug in order to finish the tea. "You will find this to be more acceptable." The cup was left in Nenni's place at the table, where Tinivel quickly served their food. The moment their meal was finished, she and a number of others would fly into action, striking their camp. And so it was. Nenni kept only her satchel containing her prizes on her person. Though to be fair, it also held her comb, crown, recorder and some music. Knowing that she would only be in the way, her steps took her to Gilroch and Tálagor, with two small apples smuggled for them. Thaliel joined her, and Nenni handed over an apple. To give to my horse than I never ride, she lamented. Poor Gilroch. But either way, it has worked out well.

The great elk was happy to receive the sweet treat, and Nenni stroked his hide. Thaliel looked on in awe. "I have never been this close to him."

"Someday we will all go for a ride, then," said Thranduil kindly, hearing her words.

"Thank you, my Lord," the Healer said, a little nervously.

"He carries three easily, Nenni clarified. You could sit in front of me. Tálagor is a wondrous animal, and so kind to carry us everywhere."

Thranduil rolled his eyes. "You spoil him, meleth."

"But he likes compliments, my Lord."

Even Glorfindel laughed, when the elk vigorously bobbed his head in seeming agreement, before offering to assist Thaliel once again with her horse.

"Up, my Queen. Tonight we will stop outside of Esgaroth."

Because that won't be amusing, Nenni smiled, as she sprang up to her place on the elk's back and waited for the signal to get underway.
Loreena McKennitt's song that sets W.B. Yeats' poem "The Two Trees" to music:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=chU3ZZ67-VI This particular poem is a rather profound rabbit hole of interpretation; I spent more time than I want to admit reading analyses of the text and just...thinking. If of interest, here are a few links to further your consideration: http://plagiarist.com/poetry/1189/comments/ and https://wmjas.wordpress.com/2013/03/27/the-two-trees/

Loreena McKennitt's "Dante's Prayer" https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FDw3CyOmj20
The Master's Invitation

Chapter Notes

18 Ethuil, Imladris. 17 April, Gregorian.

Does your newfound interest in the contents of your satchel have anything to do with why you would not explain yourself this morning, meleth? The King asked, his voice amused.

I will not try to evade you. Yes, it does. Idly, Nenni wondered if her husband had any idea, how irresistible his beauty alone made him. The sight of his stately form, regal bearing and statuesque loveliness often still set her emotions reeling as much as the first time she ever beheld him.

Will you tell me now?

A smile played at the corners of her mouth before she sprang up to Tálagor's back. If that is your desire. I have collected certain things all of my life. Mine is what is known as a morbid sense of humor. It began, as I recall, when I found a dead animal one day. I was perhaps twelve. It was of a small mammal, perhaps the size of a cat. I kept the skull, and named it Wilbur.

Thranduil wished to ask very much if she was joking, except that the images and memories that accompanied her words already told him that this was not jest. What manner of animal was that? And why was this of interest to a firieth?

It was an opossum. I do not believe you have them, in Ennor. And what was of interest was that it was dead, and I could see how the bones joined together. I have long had a fascination with medicine and health, but in some ways it began with...this. When I was very young, I liked the dinosaurs, but then my interest went onto really anything, if there were bones. Or body bits to see, and learn. And perhaps too, I enjoyed the knowledge that this interest seemed shocking and peculiar to others, though that was not such a big part. Later on, at one of my places of employment, I was able to learn much more. I befriended the man who prepared the dead animals for study, and I could ask him questions.

Thranduil saw the images in her memory. Eru, did you really drink coffee and converse whilst sitting on a dead horse, meleth?

Er, yes.

This is all another facet of your unique personality, I see, but what does this have to do with why your skin was blistered?

I am a little afraid you will be angry with me. Or perhaps, 'appalled' is a better word. But...Thranduil, I have already told you enough. You took me to see the skeleton of a lifetime today, and it exceeded all my hopes. I was unable to refrain from keeping something to remember my visit. But I did not wish anyone else to know, so it had to go down my boot. Everything was fine, until the thing shifted and rubbed away at my skin.

You...you did not...you could not have taken a piece of the dragon, everything is too large.

Erm...no, it isn't. Wasn't. It really was no trouble at all, and fit rather nicely. Which is all to say,
Yes, I did.

Eru. Meleth, I am not angry, but I would like you to speak plainly. What, exactly, have you done?

A claw and a tooth of Smaug the Immense and Rather Skeletonized are in my satchel, wrapped in cloth to hide them, is what I have done. The first broke off in my hand on accident and the latter was loose and too tempting to pass up. I would cart off the entire thing, if I somehow could. Oh, the garden I would plant! I was thinking of how wisteria could go on the wing pinions, and grapes along the ribcage. Potted succulents along the skull, and...

MELETH!

Yes, my Lord? she asked somewhat meekly, realizing that perhaps this had pressed his sensibilities too far.

You ran a league, with a dragon tooth stuffed down your boot?

Yes, that...sums it up.

Do I wish to know what you intend to do with these...souvenirs?

I am not fully certain about the tooth, but the claw is definitely for transplanting and seeding in the garden.

Something like a groan came from him, followed by a chuckle. Turn to look at me please, Adonnenniel, he asked. Twisting on the elk's back allowed her to mostly manage this. His gloved fingers caressed her cheek before he leaned down to kiss her in a manner that was restrained yet conveyed his love. You are a strange creature, wife.

Probably. But thank you for accepting me as I am. And, if I may completely change the subject...I take it we will not be paying a visit to Esgaroth?

I had thought it best to avoid that particular bit of instability, especially since we hold two of their finest citizens captive at the moment. That and, while I have not beheld the new town with my own eyes, I doubt it offers much in the way of anything to see.

Glorfindel rode up, to walk his horse alongside them. Thranduil, iellig; I am overdue to reveal to you some information I learned from the two men you hold as prisoners. May we speak now?

Of course, my Lord.

The one called Stathard is far less of a fool than the other. He was hired, as opposed to being a fully willing participant in the foolishness that occurred in your Realm. A mercenary, if you will. He made it rather plain that his primary motivation in all this was the family he supports, as opposed to a malicious heart or ill-will against the elves. Were it not that his heart is not hidden from me, I would have suspected that his words were chosen to gain favor. And yet this was not the case. Enough integrity exists there to accept what judgement he receives for his crimes. The other...Eru. But this is not what interested me. More was said about the dim opinion Stathard has of the town Master at Esgaroth, and I asked why such a leader is tolerated. He implied that King Brand is responsible for having set the Master in this position, possibly because of the influence of some unsavory individuals. Individuals who come from the south. He would say no more. I for one would be...interested, to see what I can. But not at risk to my daughter. Stathard made it clear that Esgaroth is overrun with corruption and that its people lack for necessities.

Nenni blinked, which was more polite than rolling her eyes. While she felt this was a ridiculous
level of treating her like a China doll, promises had been made, and this sojourn was at her husband's good graces.

Thranduil broke his mental silence after reflecting on this news for some minutes. *I like the picture I now see a great deal less than before, when I add this information to what my Commander provided. I, too, now wish to pay close attention. Thank you, for what you have shared. We will see what transpires. As it is, our planned camp for the evening will take us rather close to their Gate. I have no intention of figuratively knocking at their door, and yet unless they are truly asleep, our passing will not go unnoticed. If we are invited, I will not refuse without reason. However, the four of us travel as a unit. That includes the hound. We will go nowhere without a compliment of four patrols. It would take an unimaginable level of madness to consider accosting us, and perhaps something could be gleaned.*

Glorfindel appeared unhappy, at this news.

Thranduil noted his expression and clarified. *Fear not, my Lord. There are many 'ifs' built into my words. And honestly, I worry far more for the welfare of anyone who offends my wife, at this point. Trust me, King Brand has no wish to be in conflict with our Realm. We are responsible for much of his commerce and wealth, and have had friendly relations with Dale for many generations of men. If there is even a shade of a threat from southern lands, I would know of this sooner and not later. I am aware of...time.*

Nenni hid her reaction to Thranduil's words. It was difficult not to be childish and a little...gleeful. From time to time, she just wanted to hear that someone remembered: *I have ability, and can hold my own.* Even as she understood Glorfindel's fears and concerns, and patiently endured them out of love for him. Still, those few words of acknowledgement...her hand slipped down to find her husband's thigh, and a gentle squeeze of appreciation was given.

All this while, Thaliel rode just behind them. It felt a little...odd. Now that she was aware that her new family shared their thoughts without words, it had not been difficult to notice when they did so...at least, some of the time. The manner in which they regarded each other, the changing facial expressions; those were easy cues to read if one understood what was transpiring. While no offense was taken, some sense of awkwardness lingered. *The truth is, I am at the center of the rulership over our people, and yet I am not a ruler myself. Nor do I wish to be. It is inevitable that there are matters from which I must be excluded.* In her heart, some part of her still remained slightly in awe. Her gwathel was *Queen.* Surely that did not happen every day! And Adonnenniel was beautiful, inside and out. Someone to learn of, and appreciate. The Healer had the simple gratitude to accept all of their circumstances with grace and calm.

Nenni wished that she were free to ride with Thaliel. They could converse and enjoy each other's company. But to do so would be to betray the existence of far more of a relationship between them and, her wish to protect Thaliel's well-being would have to overrule her personal desires. It would be necessary, to be content with spending time with her at the noon meal.

A small canopy was swiftly erected for them, when this time arrived, which since the beginning of this excursion had appalled Nenni. Though, having taken to heart the lesson learned, she said nothing. *All this fuss in order to eat a simple ration. Eru, it would do just as well to sit on a log or on the green grasses.* And yet while she thought these things, she sat confidently, regally, in the chair provided and acted a part she did not feel. Glorfindel, who had a place next to her, offered his arm and it was taken with gratitude.

*You are doing well,* he complimented. *Could I not hear your mind, I would never know your true feelings.*
Thank you. It is nice to know that I can still act.

Imp.

A broad smile spread over her face for no apparent reason. Then Thaliel appeared, and a reason became apparent. "Would you join us? I had hoped to ask you, too...I would like some of the cordial, if it is not too much trouble?"

"It is not," flashed the emerald eyes with amusement before she turned to care for this. "I only need a moment."

"Is everything well, iellig?" Glorfindel asked.

"Mostly," she smiled. "Or at least, there is nothing new to report."

Would you care to elaborate?

Nenni hesitated. I do not wish to have a...disagreement. But because you ask I will answer. We have talked about your guarding of me, Ada. I understand, respect, and will abide by our agreements. But it does not change that there are times it is difficult. I do not enjoy being made to feel as though I cannot manage for myself. This goes back the length of my memory...it is not only you. I have never liked being fussed over too much, or when others worried for what I felt was no reason.

But there is a reason, here.

I realize that you believe there is. I will not debate with you. I was only explaining my current feelings. That I have them changes nothing. With respect, Ada.

Glorfindel sighed. He did understand her viewpoint, and knew that he would find the same arrangement tiresome in the extreme. Any yet he was not with child. It was better, to let it go entirely. Then thank you for your answer, he smiled crookedly.

I love you. A smile followed that left no doubt of her sincerity.

At last Thranduil joined them, and Glorfindel grinned. "Is it allowed to ask where you keep scuttling off to, my Lord? I feel as though you have some mysterious endeavor within our ranks."

"Perhaps," he said a little too sheepishly. "I have been taking advantage of the moments Vanafindiel is absent in order to speak with Lord Penlor, if you must know."

A strange noise came from Nenni as she worked to stifle a chortle. "Oh, dear. I suppose that will become awkward, sooner or later. I am guessing that you do not intend to invite them to eat with us as we travel?"

"I certainly had not planned on it. You cannot tell me you wish this?"

"That would be too strong a word," Nenni replied. "It is more that...it would be interesting to see what could be gleaned from her. Of the four of them, her actions and motivations are the most veiled to me."

"I could make an educated guess," Thranduil said. "But it would be of an uncharitable nature. Rats do not remain aboard a sinking ship, Adonnenniel."

"Ouch," said both the Queen and Glorfindel in concert.
"I did not tell you, but your display in the Halls prior to our departure made quite an impression on those ellith standing behind us. Let it suffice to say that now, all of them have seen you angry. And I am fairly certain the sight of Beren did no harm either."

"He was rather fearsome looking, wasn't he? " The question was addressed to no one in particular, as she leaned down to scratch his head, while he made an obliging footrest for her. "It must have been the fangers. Does mama's hound dog have big sharp fangers?" The rest of her words were lost in a series of endearing nonsense murmurs that caused the dog to wag his tail while Thranduil and Glorfindel rolled their eyes at each other.

"I saw that," Nenni quipped. Which was untrue, but a very good guess on her part. Both ellyn burst into what passed for dignified laughter, and fortunately Thaliel returned just then.

"Drink, Hiril vuin," she suggested.

"Thank you very much, Thaliel. Please sit with us now; I am certain the food will arrive sooner if you do so. At the mention of the word 'food' Beren's head lifted for a moment, before dropping again with a sigh of disappointment. Nenni smiled. It meant so much, in a way none of the others could probably even understand, to have Beren. *Something from the old life, that came with me into the new and yet however much things changed, some matters remained the same.* Slipping off her boots, her stocking-feet pushed in little motions up and down the hound's spine, garnering rumbles that were very difficult to hear but were very much there. Beren liked and disliked what she was doing, all at the same time. They both had things they did to the other, in affection, and it was Nenni's guess that they each knew the other found it annoying on some level. Like on Earth, when the dog would wait until she had her glasses on, then stand on her lap to lick at the lenses.

"What is that noise, he is making?" Thaliel asked, her head tilted toward Beren.

"He is complaining. What I am doing feels good, but it is also interfering with his sleep. Beren often has a great deal to say." Her feet slipped back inside her boot, just before Tinivel brought their trays of food. Nenni noticed that she looked slightly harried, and frowned. And she was not alone, in her observation.

"Is everything well, Tinivel?" Thranduil asked.

A mask worthy of one about to be the wife of Galion dropped into place. "Yes, Hîr vuin. May I pour you wine?"

Thranduil smiled. "Yes, please. But only after you tell me the full truth, and not what your impeccable adherence to propriety demands," he said kindly. "I sincerely wish to know, Tinivel."

The elleth froze, color rising to her cheeks. To complain was against protocol, but it was also a direct request from the King. Her shoulders sagged a little. "It is Lady Penlor, my King," she said very quietly. "Demands are being made on the staff that are dedicated to the service of the Royal Household. We are managing well enough, but it has added some...strain."

"I see. Thank you, Tinivel."

Tinivel appeared a little nervous, at seeing the King's expression darken, and hastened to fill his goblet. The rest of them politely refused the offer of wine, and the carafe was left at their table as she hastened off.

"Thranduil, how does it work, with Tinivel, Galion and the nobles?" Nenni asked very quietly. "I have never quite understood the concept of the housekeeping staff and who does what for whom."
He sighed, seeking to marshal the irritation from his features. "Tinivel and Galion are Head Chambermaid and Steward, as you know. Under them is a staff, valets and chambermaids; these have such a wide variety of skills it is hard to know where to begin, and in turn these supervise those who perform more rote functions. Foremost, Galion and Tinivel are charged with caring for the needs of the Royal Household. Which, for the longest time, has simply meant...me.

"Legolas moved into his own quarters centuries ago and though he is entitled to all the same courtesies of service as I am, he has eschewed them. Mostly, my son lives as a common soldier, albeit with much finer furnishings and more floor space. He takes his meals in the Dining Hall, or simply seeks what he wishes at odd hours from the kitchens. It has been thus for many a long year.

"When...before you were returned to me, Adonnenniel, there was little in the way of duties for Tinivel. Caring for my clothing and the cleanliness of my chambers was no hardship. Galion's time I have always prevailed on to a greater degree, for his duties are more varied and he is in many ways a liaison between myself and those who care for assorted administrative functions."

Nenni and Glorfindel both watched as he massaged his forehead, exchanging glances that noted Thranduil's strain from speaking about these matters. "And the nobles...it has ever been the right of those named to higher stations of service to enjoy the same luxury of care. All those who are Generals, Commanders, Lords, and scholarly Advisors may ask for food to be served in their own chambers, housekeeping services or the fulfillment of small errands. There is also no constraint on the hiring of warriors who are off-duty. For example, if a soldier has a week's leave, and one with wealth wishes to hire that one to run to Dale and back on some errand or other, that is permitted as long as the commanding officer of that one is duly informed.

"All the rest of the Realm, by contrast, care for these same things themselves. The privilege is in acknowledgement of the considerable demands on the time of ones appointed to such duties. I know for a fact that some; Tauriel, for example, refuse all such concessions. Whereas others...Lord Penlor is the one technically entitled to this privilege. But in practice, it is impossible to deny the spouse of such a one access to the same perquisites. So Lady Penlor has long been in the habit of behaving as though she is the one deserving of such entitlements."

"I see," Nenni said. "Thank you for explaining this to me." Tinivel now reappeared, serving something very like sandwiches, with sliced fresh fruits and...were those cookies?

The afternoon passed uneventfully, which was just as well. Perhaps it was the early rising, but significant fatigue began to afflict the Queen, who felt rather determined not to let on. When camp was made a few stones' throw from the Gatehouse of Esgaroth, the expected lovely gown was donned, and her hair unbound to fall in shining waves near her hips. As it was a pleasant late afternoon, she sat in her chair outside of their tent. Pavilion. (What to call it still felt elusive.) The emerald on her diadem glittered in the waning sunlight, as she did her best to look suitably ornamental. Beren came and sat next to her, sampling the air from the Long Lake, so nearby, with his sensitive nose. "No swimming now," Nenni admonished. "Tomorrow is better, if you still wish to."

A rumbling stream of sassing and disagreement issued from him, followed by a cavernous yawn.

"It is not my fault," Nenni answered crossly. "We are not home, and we cannot ask for those serving us to have to contend with towels for a wet hound as well. Besides, I am not too convinced about the smell of the water in these parts. I for one like it when you do not find new perfumes of the kind no elves can abide." Leaning over, she kissed his nose. "Remember, if you are going to stink, have it be because you killed something foul."
Beren tilted his head endearingly and apparently decided this was not anything with which to trouble his mind, and returned to his sniffing. Yet something about his extended interest in doing this...from her chair, she could see that four figures, one of whom was rather corpulent, were making their way along the Great Bridge that connected the town to the shore. Frowning, she recalled her husband's earlier conversation with Glorfindel. Valar, please, not an invitation. I am not certain all the tea in Thaliel's bag can overcome the smells likely to be in that city. She could only imagine what...fare...was at the tables of even those with some means here. A fresh fish from fresh clean water was one thing, but this lake...her nose wrinkled in disdain.

Thranduil and the golden Lord were nowhere to be seen, which seemed mystifying given that their camp surely was not that large. Taking a deep breath, resignation crept in. It was entirely possible that some Queen-ing would be required. Which was much like Adult-ing back on Earth, but potentially worse. Eru, what if he is worse than Einur? And still the four figures walked, until they were met by no less than Tauriel, flanked by eight warriors. Suddenly, Nenni felt glad of Beren's proximity. Her hand rested on his neck, reflexively petting him. When it became apparent that the men were indeed approaching her, some attempt was made to plaster on an expression of neutral serenity. It was the only means at her disposal, to hide her annoyance at this unwanted visit. Suck it up, cupcake.

Tauriel spoke formally, approaching her with head bowed. "Queen Adonnaenniel, may I present the Master of Esgaroth, who desires an audience." Only a barely perceptible twinkle in the Commander's eye revealed her true feelings on the matter, as she withdrew to an appropriate distance while the town Master gave a florid bow, sweeping his foppish hat off of his greasy head, feather plumes and all.

"Queen...forgive me, what did she say your name was? Elvish names are so difficult. It's taken me all this time to learn to say 'Thranduil'. Speaking of which, I had dearly wished to speak with your King. I don't suppose he is here?"

It's deja vu all over again, Nenni thought, as her expression took on the slightest hint of displeasure. Though, the amusement at hearing that he most definitely could not say 'Thranduil' somewhat balanced it out. "I am Queen Ad-on-nen-ni-el. However if you are not capable of saying this name, perhaps you would find Nenni easier?"

"Of course. And your husband is...?"

Nenni gestured expansively, with a pleasant smile on her face. "Do you see him?"

The Master cast his eyes around hopefully and finally had to shake his head No.

"Then, I see the possibilities as follows: You and I can converse in a friendly manner, perhaps including informing me to what we owe the pleasure of your visit, or, we can stare at each other while I ponder tariffs and upcoming trade negotiations?"

The man looked at her, his eyes shifting from surprise to an attempt at dissembling. "Tariffs? Surely a Lady so lovely as yourself does not wish to be troubled by such matters of state."

"Surely," she smiled in return. "Why would a Queen possibly have any interest in matters of state? Pesky, troublesome things, commerce and the like. How does trade fare for you, these days? You must have a busy exchange, what with the bounty of the lake and the local wine-producing regions. Not to mention, the nearness of Dale, and Erebor." Her eyebrow arched up, waiting for his response.

"Well we, ah, that is to say, I..."
Nenni leaned forward a bit, listening with rapt attention in the event an actual coherent sentence escaped his mouth all at once.

"King Thranduil! Ah, just who I was hoping to see!"

Nenni’s eyes did not move from the insufferably rude man, whose insufferable rudeness was made all the more grievous by his apparent oblivion concerning anything having to do with his manners. Unseen by his wife, Thranduil gave a curt nod to the man before sitting next to her. Ignoring the Master completely, Thranduil kissed her warmly on the cheek, and laced his fingers into hers. Finally turning his attention, he spoke in a voice that held no ire but was quite clear. "I will overlook this once, that you have been asked a very simple question by my Queen that you have not answered. You are being informed now that she rules at my side with my full authority. In the future, I expect that the Queen will be spoken to with the same courtesies and regard you would give to me. Though perhaps you would give me none, given that your representatives committed acts of aggression against both my people and my family. Is this the reason for your visit; to offer explanation for what has transpired? I will certainly be asking King Brand to clarify this matter."

"Acts of aggression?" The Master paled visibly and broke out in cold perspiration.

"Yes," Thranduil replied, beginning to enjoy the man's discomfiture too much. "Your Einur and Stathard attacked two of my subjects that live at the borders of my Realm. And later on, my wife and her father, and my son the Prince. Something about your unhappiness with the tariffs that were already agreed upon in our annual negotiations, and that you were willing to take any action necessary to recover the gold lost from these?"

A blotchy hue was coming over the Master's face as he tried to process this news and turn it around in some manner that might avoid personal disaster. Ever the politician, he went down on one knee before the King. "My Lord," he said beseechingly. "Please believe that while it is true that I sent my representatives to parley for a reconsideration of our agreement, I never ordered nor desired any such action on their part. I wondered what became of them, when they did not return. This is why I approached you, when the town guards informed me of the passing of your company...to...inquire." He had heard enough of Thranduil's fabled reputation for being able to perceive lies; his only recourse was the truth. Or at least, what of the truth he could tell.

Thranduil guessed at this circumstance, and felt there was more to be uncovered. And unseen by the Master, Glorfindel had come up behind the man in silence, watching and listening.

"Then I will inform you that your two men are in my custody. I have the right to seek judgement against them from your King, which is generosity on my part. I am lawfully permitted to dispense my own justice for crimes committed against my subjects on my own lands. And yet out of regard for what I had believed to be our good relations, their heads are yet attached to the rest of them."

"Of course, my Lord," came the obsequious reply. "I am certain that this was a vast misunderstanding. Is there any possibility that you might permit me to make amends, by inviting you to share my table this evening? And of course, your beautiful wife and any honored ones who accompany you?"

A flare in Glorfindel's eyes and a silent plea was met with a barely perceptible nod from Thranduil. The golden Lord now spoke, revealing his presence. "What of the safety of your city? The word that has reached my ears tells of lawlessness. If you will forgive me, your invitation will only be accepted with the understanding that we will travel with an escort of our own warriors."

Rising up as quickly as his aging knees and excess of weight would permit, the Master turned to see this formidable giant of an elven warrior towering over him. Though not so tall as the
Elvenking, thinly veiled strength radiated from him, and it was all the Master could do not to quail in nervousness. "Anything you wish, my Lord." Not being in any position to argue or feign insult, full capitulation was his only option thanks to the apparent deeds of his fool of a deputy. "Please forgive me, I do not believe I have made your acquaintance?"

"I am Glorfindel of Imladris, though currently residing in the Woodland Realm. I am father to the Queen." The pride and fierce love behind those words left little at which to guess.

"Surely not THE Glorfindel?" The Master asked in astonishment.

"There is only one Glorfindel," replied Thranduil impatiently. "And we are honored to have such a one among us. We accept your invitation; seven of us will dine with you."

Hiding her disappointment took considerable effort, even as it ran headlong into curiosity as to what this Esgaroth might look like. Pitiful though it likely was, that did not alter that it was a setting in the beloved stories; one that she was now being given a chance to see. Valar, do not let it be like in the films, where sheep’s bollocks were what was served for food. The mere thought of such fare caused a wave of nausea to course through her.

With a deep bow, the Master prepared to retreat. "You honor us. I will send two guards some time before dusk, to guide you to my home."

Once he was at a sufficient distance, Thranduil said, "You will accompany us, Thaliel. As will Lord and Lady Penlor, and Commander Tauriel. When Tinivel reappears, word will be sent so that preparations can be made."

“You *want* to dine with Lady Penlor?" Nenni asked silently, with amusement.

It is a diplomatic invitation, meleth. And therefore one to which it would be inappropriate to exclude them. Besides, you saw the man. I believe in the end this may prove quite a chore for her delicate sensibilities.

It is not *her* delicate sensibilities that concern me, if I am to be honest.

Glorfindel stepped behind her seat and laid his hand on her shoulder. I will care for you, iellig.

Covering his hand with her own, she leaned against his arm in affection. How she would rather spend the evening was quietly, in her Ada’s arms, listening to him read or speak to her. But this was duty, and maybe the food would even be edible. Glorfindel said nothing, but found these uncensored feelings to be touching. "If you will pardon me, I believe I will inform Lord Penlor personally. This will allow me to walk a little more, and give Tinivel one less thing to do." Nenni released him at once, absentmindedly, finding herself far less disturbed at the prospect of this dinner than she would have expected. Until she remembered, the cordial. It had been a good idea, after all.

"Please excuse me, Thranduil. I have become tired, and wish to rest. A little sleep would help me, before tonight."

"Of course, meleth," he smiled, rising with her. "I will see to your comfort."

Nenni smiled, guessing the sort of comfort he meant. And yet it was a way to help ensure that sleep came. Moments later found the King occupied underneath the skirts of her gown, until the level of her desire was great indeed. Forcing himself away from his enjoyments of her intimate areas, he freed himself quickly to push into her in one long, slow thrust that caused her to stifle a moan of enjoyment. Slowly, carefully, with every thought and tiny motion seeking to provide his
wife pleasure, he brought her to a blinding climax that left her clinging to him with all her strength. Relishing the spasms of her bliss, he waited for a time before slipping out of her. "What about you?" she whispered.

"Later, tonight. If this invitation is as tedious as I fear, I will have the joyful thought of anticipating my fulfillment afterward." A few tender kisses later, he tipped her into a light sleep that left her lips curved in a contented smile. Taking a moment, he restored her to order and smoothed her gown before tending to his own clothing and covering her with a light blanket. *How I love you*, meleth, he thought, admiring the sight of her. He thought he detected her breasts just beginning to swell with her pregnancy. But the real marvel was that with her at his side, matters of his Realm were no longer tinged with a pallor of obligation. Even though she was new, and inexperienced, the companionship he derived from her mere existence was more than he could easily put into words.

He returned to his seat not long before Glorfindel returned. "She rests?" asked the golden elf.

"Yes."

Glorfindel took Nenni's vacated seat with a look of one struggling to find words. "Thranduil, I want to give apology, if my words overstepped my bounds with the Master of Esgaroth. The truth is, I struggle with fear for Adonnenniel. I know I am overprotective of her welfare, which is almost absurd given her level of fighting prowess. I tell myself that it is on account of Amaranthine but full honesty is that I am afraid of loss."

"There is no need to apologize, my Lord. You did courteously ask my permission to speak, and I gave it. I took no offense by any of your words. But..." he looked at his friend and mentor, uncertain if he should pose this question. "May I ask if there is a reason, for your fear? You owe me no explanations, but if I could ever be a listening ear I would be honored. Though I doubt I could ever help someone so..." the King stumbled over his words, lowering his eyes "...someone like you. I know that in this regard I have little to offer."

The sky blue eyes considered the Elvenking. "All of us need compassion sometimes, Thranduil. Even me," he smiled crookedly as he gazed into the distance. "There is a reason. I had a dear friend once, a vibrant and fearless spirit. Her name was Aredhel. I know that I cannot make such extrapolations, and yet a part of my heart ruled by fear cannot help doing so. Her loss devastated me."

Thranduil's lips parted. "I...am so sorry," he said with sincerity. For many long minutes, he spoke. "Glorfindel, I would feel the same. Except... I think in the eventful days of our becoming acquainted, there is something to which we once referred, but you were never told the entire story. The Valar themselves have given assurance that Adonnenniel cannot be lost. I would gladly share my memory with you of their appearance to us, if it would ease some of the weight on your heart. I do understand fear of loss, my Lord."

Surprise flickered across the ancient ellon's eyes. Yes, they had made reference to this. Possibly more than once; it was hard to recall, amidst the many extraordinary happenings that had touched the lives of the King and Queen. "If only for the grace of the memory, I would accept this gladly if you are willing. But...perhaps with more privacy?"

Nodding, the King rose to enter the tent, seating himself. "You are ready?" he asked, opening his mind and heart to Glorfindel on seeing his assent. Even the chosen of the Valar's unseeing eyes opened wide at the power and clarity of the vision preserved in Thranduil's perfect memory. Though he knew it was an echo, it was difficult to not fall on his knees at the sight of the two Vala. He witnessed and listened, as the words were spoken to his daughter: "Nâmo has decreed that having been torn from your rightful place with him once, that you are barred from the passage
through his Halls. Vairë will weave your life, and that of your husband, in her eternal tapestry, until the end of time itself. Having been cruelly sundered once, unlawfully, you will never again be parted." And with a fading shimmer, the vision ended, after Vána scattered the precious blooms he knew so well onto the forest floor.

A tear coursed down Glorfindel's cheek that Thranduil brushed aside, holding his arm in reassurance. "I have been so foolish," the golden Lord whispered in relief and gratitude. "I did not understand. Not like this."

"You have not been foolish, beloved Lord. You have been a father."

"I have made her miserable, Thranduil, in my own selfishness."

The King smiled. "And yet she loves you like no other. You often give me sound advice, Glorfindel. If I may presume to offer just a little of my own...do what you will with what you have learned, and move forward. No recriminations. It is not what she would want you to suffer, and life is full of enough of them as is."

A snort escaped him. "This is true," he agreed, still filled with reverence at what he had seen. "Thank you, again. I...it was not granted to me, to ever behold this Lord and Lady of our Powers. My heart is filled with joy, at this vision."

Thranduil very much wondered what the one seated with him had seen, and yet it seemed disrespectful to ask. So instead he acknowledged his words with a bow of his head.

"Manwë, Námo, Varda and Nienna. Mostly the latter," Glorfindel answered softly, to the question he saw that the King would not ask. "To be sent forth with power is to be charged with a understanding of mercy. And yet I am still being taught," he said with humility.

"As am I." Thranduil had rarely felt so drawn to this ellon as he did now, his mentor and his friend. Impulsively Thranduil embraced him, closing his eyes. "I am filled with gratitude, to call you family. Please know that I owe you a debt I can never repay, and would do what I could."

The embrace was warmly returned. How Glorfindel wished, sometimes, that he had the luxury of openly confessing that he too had flaws. Struggles. And yet that he had confided in Adonnenniel was the limit of what his heart told him was right...at least for now. They released each other, and Thranduil offered wine that was gratefully accepted. To their surprise, Lord Penlor appeared at the tent entrance, his head bowed to Thranduil.

"Penlor, come in," Thranduil said affably. "We were just about to have some wine. Would you care for some?"

Glorfindel studied anew the hazel-eyed, pale-haired ellon who of all the Lords appeared most physically similar to the King. Not a strong similarity, but their hair colors were at least within a shade of the other. "At the risk of annoying Vanafindiel, I will gladly accept," he said acerbically, bowing courteously to the golden Lord as well. When Vanafindiel had first suggested this sojourn, he had thought it an excellent idea. But with each passing day it was becoming more apparent just how spoiled and unreasonable his wife had become over the long centuries. Her constant demands for small luxuries were straining even his patience, and wine was most welcome.

"I must warn you, the Queen sleeps in the next room. If we speak quietly, she will not wake," Thranduil noted, distributing the wine. "I am glad you came, Penlor. This invitation tonight represents an opportunity. I will be forthright; I am less interested in assessing next year's tariffs or what might be traded than in learning what I can about what influences are operating in Esgaroth."
"Influences, my King?" he asked, puzzled. He was no warrior, and yet bad political relations made for bad trade.

"What I want mostly are all of our eyes, paying attention. An assessment of the standard of living here. What sort of persons seem to dwell in the town, and their mood. Whether anything unusual in a home of Men is noted."

"What really caused you to need to imprison two of their highest officials, for the last many weeks," Penlor added drily. "I will do my best, Aran Thranduil."

Thaliel arrived, and nearly froze at the sight of the three ellyn. She curtsied to all of them deeply, giving a glance of appreciation when the King raised her up. "The Queen sleeps, Thaliel. She felt tired."

"I will watch over her, my Lord," she said before excusing herself. It was preferable to sit at the edge of the Queen's bed than remain near Lord Penlor. Though to be fair, she did not truly know him. It was only the reputation of his wife that caused feelings of desiring to maintain a distance.

"The Queen is unwell?" Lord Penlor asked, suddenly concerned at the presence of the Healer.

"Thaliel travels with us as a precaution," Thranduil smoothly explained. My wife has suffered many of the difficulties of being with child, and I wish to ensure her health and comfort as we travel."

"Of course," Penlor nodded with approval. It had been long ages, since he and Vanafindiel had brought their own little ones into the world, all of whom now dwelled across the sea. He sighed, to remember such happy times as he drained his cup of wine. "Children are our finest blessing, my King. I wish you the joy of welcoming your daughter."

Behind the heavy canvas curtain, Thaliel sat, holding and stroking Nenni's hand. The edges of fingers and the palms had roughness, revealing the calluses and healed blisters of one who did physical labor. Taking a more careful look, she saw the scars under the wedding rings, and wondered greatly. Very carefully, her fingers began probing a place on the hand thought to promote well-being. Even the Healer doubted this actually did any good, but it was all she had to offer, lacking the gifts of Glorfindel.

That same elf now peeked in on them, knowing that no one would yet have spoken to Thaliel about the evening's invitation. He silently seated himself on the bed, once he was certain his presence had been observed. Thaliel nodded her head in acknowledgement of the news, flattered and surprised to have been included at Aran Thranduil's insistence. My Lord, she asked humbly, would you tell me why her hand is scarred? I have never seen the like of the marks left on her skin. Glorfindel hesitated. Her curiosity was understandable given her duties and interests, but this was not his news to impart. And yet, in his heart he knew that this was information his daughter would not keep from her gwathel.

Because I know she would tell you herself, yes, I will. Aran Thranduil was injured once, grievously, by the greatest dragon of Morgoth's designs. The King possessed the power to keep this damage from being seen by others, though, which is why he ever appeared as you now see him. Suffice to say, half of his face was burned beyond repair, and an eye was lost. You have perhaps not yet been told Adonnenniel's story of the powers that returned her to this world; they involve the fullness of the events that injured the King. But I digress; some time after she arrived here an opportunity was afforded her to heal the otherwise incurable injuries dealt to her husband. It involved a terrible physical and spiritual trial that she successfully endured. The one lasting consequence of her
sacrifice are those marks; they are the burns of a dragon's fire.

Thaliel's eyes had widened to saucers during the telling. This was beyond anything of which she could ever conceive, and yet the pride she now felt...to be connected to one who would pay such a price for another...

Nenni stirred, feeling her hand held and rubbing at her eyes. "Did something happen?" she whispered, suddenly anxious at seeing both of them.

"No," Glorfindel said very quietly. "Lord Penlor is speaking with your husband, and we were indulging ourselves watching you rest. Thaliel asked about your scars, iellig. I hope it was permissible that I chose to tell her."

Nenni snorted, squeezing Thaliel's hand. "You know I do not mind, Ada. You have my full trust. And, whatever that is you are doing to my hand feels unusually nice." For a few moments her eyes followed Thaliel, who looked mostly at her hand. "Are you troubled by what you were told?"

"A little overwhelmed," the elleth admitted. "It is well outside of my experience and...it sounded very bad."

Nenni sat up, to hold her tightly. "It was not fun, but it is well in the past. I do not really even think about it, except when I chance to see the marks. I felt proud, to help my husband in such a way. And I really do wish so many things about me were not so...weird. At this point, I more or less roll with it, as we would say on Earth. I hope you can as well."

Thaliel chuckled. "Then that makes two of us. I am to eat with you tonight. This is unexpected."

"Then maybe it is something with which to become accustomed," Nenni smiled, releasing her and trying to climb out of the tangle of blanket. With an amused smile, Glorfindel pulled the offending fabric aside and began folding it neatly. "I will not always wish to keep our relationship a secret, Thaliel. Already, I tire of dissembling. I am afraid that you too are caught in this net of keeping up with us and appearances. And tonight, that means Esgaroth, in all its splendor; glory undimmed since the...something or other."

Both Glorfindel and Thaliel burst into laughter, no one was trying to be quiet now. "You are precious, iellig," he chuckled. "Perhaps your husband is right, and that it is Esgaroth and not you for which I should be concerned."

"I will try to control my sense of humor, for the sake of the Realm," she murmured drily.

Thranduil's seemingly disembodied head of flaxen hair appeared through the canvas flap. "Clearly, meleth, your rest has come to an end? Lord Penlor has gone. Mysteriously, Tinivel is nowhere to be found, and he needed to return to assist his wife."

Glorfindel's eyes narrowed. "Mysteriously, Aran Thranduil?"

The King feigned an air of irreproachability. "Surely it is my prerogative, if I choose to assign my Head Chambermaid and two of my underlings to outfitting one Commander Tauriel in appropriate attire?"

Laughing, Nenni crawled toward him in an extremely ungaily manner but did not care in the least, reaching to give him a kiss. "Far be it from me to question the great and terrible Elvenking and his righteous decisions."

"My wife is an imp, Thaliel. I hope you have already ascertained this."
"Imp?"

"I will tell you on another occasion," Glorfindel answered, rolling his eyes. "Suffice to say, he means a creature filled with mischief."

"Ah," Thaliel said, trying to hide her smile. "Then if you will pardon me, I too should prepare myself for this...occasion."

"Tinivel has left a gown for you in your sleeping area," Thranduil said kindly.

"Then I will go with her, and help. I am certain there are laces or other unmanageable constructs," Nenni smiled.

As neither he or Glorfindel could offer with any decency to care for this function, he could hardly object but reminded her, "Return soon, so I may braid you hair." And then, in a rare gesture of love for his wife, he added "You too, Thaliel, if the offer would not offend propriety and would be welcome."

"Oh, please let him!" Nenni begged with enthusiasm. "I would so like to watch him braid another's hair; I have only ever seen it once. He is very good..."

Nodding helplessly, Thaliel managed to stammer out something about being honored, as her gwathel led her by the hand, suddenly feeling much more enthusiastic about the evening's plans.

"I may never wholly understand her," Thranduil murmured to Glorfindel as the two ellith disappeared behind another canvas flap.

"I concur," said Glorfindel. "And yet it is just this sort of thing..."

"That is why we love her."

*****

As promised, the Master's men arrived to guide them. Nenni felt terribly odd without her swords, and yet her husband had none either. Their escort, however, did. Bows, as well. Being new to all this, there was no choice but to observe, and learn. In her mind, she did not hide her contentment to be on her husband's arm and only two paces in front of Glorfindel. Beren strode at her side, as was his custom, his mistress' hand resting on his ivy-wreathed neck. Thaliel and Tauriel walked side by side, each privately amused at the other's obvious (at least to elven eyes) degree of being unaccustomed to such fine clothing. It was a simple enough matter to assign Tauriel the Queen's least fancy dress, since they were similar enough in build and stature as to wear each other's garments with ease. Privately, Nenni thought that particular outfit looked rather better on Tauriel.

In an allowance to herself, Elladan and Elrohir's knives were hidden in her fine leather boots. After the incident with the orc...these clothes made her feel vulnerable. They knives were placed there in secret, for all the good the secrecy would do; but she did not want Glorfindel to feel insulted.

*Iellig, I understand why you wish to have them. Please do not worry for me; I too am armed unseen. What makes you feel more secure and happy, that is what I want for you.*

No reply came, but it did not need to. He could see her tense shoulders relax more, and perceive her gratitude. And then her first step came onto the long bridge to Esgaroth. The familiar sensation of striding on a pier brought a smile to her face. How many of these had her feet found, going to and from her ship? The only thing missing here was the smell of real water; the ocean. This lake was still failing to impress her, but it could hardly help itself. And to be fair, it was cleaner in
appearance than many a similar body of fresh water on Earth. The fact was, lake-shores often simply did not please the olfactory senses.

Mostly, she tried to keep in mind that this was duty. Her carriage and expressions, jewels and fine clothing, the beauty of her elaborately braided hair under her flowering crown; everything pertaining to her was about to be on display and under close scrutiny. It was rare, for elven rulers to venture to places such as this. For some of the people here, this would be the sole chance in their brief lives to see and form an impression of their ancient race.

The bridge was very long indeed, but when it was traversed they found themselves among the dwellings of a city built only of wood. It reminded her a little of a budget version of Venice, truth be told. Venice meets...what was that city in the Elder Scrolls Oblivion game, the one that was right on the water?...Bravil. That was it. Minus the stonework. However strange that conflation might seem, the description fit, even if only she would ever understand it. The appearance was less...run down than she feared, and her sharp eyes noted that the construction of the homes and shops seemed to feature some very advanced carpentry. Yet to her surprise, few people were anywhere to be seen.

In fact, no people were anywhere to be seen. Why? Just before she concluded that something was deeply wrong here, a small child, a little girl was seen running down the planked walkways. She adroitly managed to avoid the reaching arms of the Esgaroth guards to run straight at Nenni, before whom she stopped and gawked, with her finger in her mouth. Seeing that one of the guardsmen was coming for the child with a most unkind expression and feeling utterly contrary, the Queen swept the child up into her arms. The poor cloth of her dress, less than perfect cleanliness, and body frame that spoke of being fed barely enough were all duly noted.

"What is your name, child?" Nenni asked kindly and with an encouraging smile. That such a little one had approached in spite of Beren's proximity amazed her.

Her eyes grew wide and slowly the finger came out of her mouth as she looked from the Queen to the King and back again. "Hilde", she murmured shyly. The guards, while exceedingly annoyed, did not dare to interfere.

"I am Adonnenniel. But you may call me Nenni. Can you say Nenni?" the Queen asked gently.

"Nenni," little Hilde nodded. "You are the elf-Queen?" The question blurted out.

"Yes, I am. And the Elf Queen is very happy to meet such a brave girl."

At that moment a terrified mother came bounding along, and the expression only worsened when she saw the location of her daughter. Nenni observed the glowering guards, and the fear in the woman's eyes as she hesitated to come nearer. Nenni asked Hilde, "Is that your mother?"

Hilde nodded solemnly. With that, Nenni walked directly toward the child's mother, determined to ignore the stares of the guards. When she handed the little girl off, she deliberately chose an angle that would block the woman from the direct observation of these men. "Your daughter is lovely," complimented Nenni with a kind smile. "Yet I imagine you are anxious to have her back."

"Thank you, kind Lady," the woman said, clutching her child in her arms. "I did not see that Hilde had gone out; we were all told to remain..." suddenly she silenced her words in both fear and understanding. "You are the Elvenqueen..."

"That is Nenni, mama. She is very nice," the little voice squeaked.
Nenni's face lit up in an appreciative smile; she had not expected Hilde to remember. "Bless you, Hilde," she replied, before addressing the mother. "Be at peace, all elves love little ones." A kiss was given to the little girl's cheek before Nenni returned to her husband and the woman all but fled with her child. Her eyes held those of the guards unflinchingly, until their discomfort became palpable and they averted their gaze. There were not adequate words for how strange it was for the Queen to find herself among humans once again...when she had so recently been one herself.

Thranduil smiled to himself. This was exceeding his hopes, for...learning. They continued on their way, past many structures, some of which appeared newly built if the weathering of the untreated lumber was any indication. At least some prosperity had existed...at some point. Their journey along the deserted piers ended at an ostentatiously large dwelling that sat alone in an area that seemed strategically placed to observe the comings and goings of all boats that would enter a sort of wooden harbor.

_This must serve as some manner of commercial center_, Nenni reasoned, trying to sift the assorted things she had seen. And yet she lacked knowledge. _My Lord, by the mortals' reckoning, is this some manner of holiday or a day of rest?_

_It is not, meleth. I see that you are observing much the same points of interest as am I._

Just then, the Master appeared on the broad steps leading to his home. "Welcome, honored guests," he declared, with a sweeping bow. His clothing had been exchanged for a thoroughly clean suit in bright shades of blue brocade. It also appeared as though he had bathed, if the sudden disappearance of oil from his hair was any indication.

Knowing that any gestures Thranduil made toward this man should be imitated, she duplicated the slight nod of his head and genial smile. Their escort guards arrayed themselves formally at the base of the home's steps, and stood as living statues. They were all led toward the upper story of this home, passing many items that revealed a display of wealth. _This must be a dwelling that accompanies the position_, Nenni reasoned, seeing that there were portraits of more than one man who had seemingly occupied this office. Something like a Governor's Mansion.

Pleasantries and some explanations of special objects or artwork received occasional comment from the Master, before they began the ascent of a grand staircase to the next story. These carpeted steps led past an impressive bank of both stained and clear glass windows. Potted plants there were, some very impressive specimens. Passing one, her eyebrows raised. _I would not have thought these existed, here_. The gorgeous green fan leaves and showy, bright red seed pods were very well known to her. "What is this?" Nenni asked the Master, speaking for the first time. "It is lovely." Admiration suffused her voice.

"That, my Lady, is my prized possession. Very rare, and hard to procure; it comes from the southern lands. It makes a very rare and valuable elixir," he smiled.

_Maybe if your name is Locusta_, Nenni thought. _You can take that elixir and... _suddenly, trepidation settled over her. Thaliel too, paused to admire the plant, though it appeared to puzzle her.

They were guided directly to their seats at a large and impressively appointed table. That it had much in common with the finery of the King's own table caused her to raise her eyebrows. Really, this home was much like what she guessed people imagined theirs to be. The appointments were opulent out of character to the town and the construction of the home; what might have come off as a declaration of prestige instead screamed 'attempt to overcompensate.' Truthfully, some of his wares looked much like her own former sets of china and crystal (that now belonged to Brian, she thought with mild regret) but...that little girl had appeared to not have all she should have to
eat. *This* should not exist in anyplace where *that* was the case. Especially when it was obvious that their town population could not have been too great.

As was both hoped and feared, Nenni and Thranduil were assigned the places of honor on each side of the Master. Glorfindel more or less insisted on sitting next to his daughter, and made that intention apparent by his understated but definite refusal to do otherwise. Lord and then Lady Penlor sat next to the King, with Thaliel and Tauriel at the ends. Mercifully, Tauriel chose the seat next to Lady Penlor, leaving Thaliel next to Glorfindel. Beren had been promised an extravagant reward for his current level of theatrical contribution; as if he did this every day, he sat at attention a foot or so back from her seat, in a clear line of sight to the Master. The hound fixed his gaze on the man, and with unwavering attention, began to stare at him. Nenni did give the Master credit for not outwardly reacting in any manner; it could hardly have been usual that the largest hound in Ennor entered his home and sat near his feast table without explanation. *He is a politician*, she reminded herself. *It is his job to pretend many things.* Human political figures were simply not ever trustworthy, in her estimation. *Here comes the new Boss, same as the old Boss.* Some things did not change.

And yet she paid extra attention to her dog. He did not growl, nor was he particularly tense, but Beren's level of interest in this man where none should exist...well that interested her, in turn. Because something unusual was afoot, and that alone meant a reason to remain alert. More confusion washed over her. And fear. Her senses went on alarm in a way very rarely experienced, while she watched wine being poured for all of them by a manservant who had a very unsavory demeanor. Suddenly, the pieces clicked into place. Though she looked politely at the Master as he nattered on about something or other, her thoughts ran to the ellon at her side. *Ada, you must help me. I do not know what to do.*

*Iellig, what is it?*

*Something is not right here. Beren has never behaved this way. And...that plant we passed, Ada. The one I asked about. He said it makes an elixir. I raised that plant on Earth, and it makes no elixir. Its seeds contain a deadly poison. One of the most powerful poisons of my old world. What would you do, if you wished to strike a blow to the heart of the elven Realm? I do not wish to falsely accuse, but I can think of no finer strategy than to feed the royal family a poisoned meal, the signs of which will not manifest for the better part of a day. I would tell myself I am being paranoid, but for his evasion about the plant. I am certain, of what it is.*

Glorfindel did not delay, reasoning that their safety came first. Each elf present was silently told not to take food or drink, unless the King first did so; then he relayed the information to Thranduil.

Perhaps only her knowledge of her husband's face allowed Nenni to perceive the hardening of his jawline. *What would he do?* She herself was considering simply invading the man's mind. Though it was forbidden, was it forbidden when lives were at stake? And yet she was hardly the most skilled at this.

*Meleth, he must be made to openly think of this intention, if it exists. Is there a means by which you can do this?*

*Iellig, it is the same for me; I can glean much if he can be provoked.*

Her lips parted. *Why not.* The question was asked boldly. "Your 'refined elixir', from your lovely plant along the stairs. What does it do?" Nenni smiled, gesturing to the ellon across the table. "Our Lord Penlor ever seeks out new and valuable curiosities."

A dip of his head and a smile from Penlor acknowledged her words.
The Master's eyes flared ever so slightly as he dissembled with a smile. "Surely, talk of apothecary does not interest my Lady?"

"Yes, it does," she said brightly. "But talk of poisons interests me yet more. I find it terribly challenging to find the strong ones, don't you?" Nenni saw her husband's eyes lock onto the man as he made a pretense to touch him, clapping him on the shoulder.

"You must allow for my wife," he jested. "Our Queen has an unusual sense of humor."

"But my Lord," Nenni protested. "Now I want some of that lovely plant. I did not know they grew in Ennor. What did you say they are called here, again?" she pressed the Master. "You see, I kept many of them, at one time. Is it not impressive? Just one or two seeds, to kill an adult human?"

The man's face grew red then pallid with fear, as he saw the King's eyes harden. "You have three choices," Thranduil said with deadly quiet. "You will confess your intention aloud to everyone at this table and depart with us immediately on a pretense, to be taken unharmed to the King in Dale for judgement. Or you will drink the wine in front of me, every last drop. Or, I will instruct the hound to tear you to pieces where you sit." Beren chose that moment to yawn and lick his lips with interest, revealing the gleaming fangs along with a rumbling growl.

In fear and anger the Master stammered, "You can prove nothing! Are you mad, to accuse me of trying to poison all of you?"

"No, I am not mad. But you are ignorant beyond belief, if you do not know that among the gifts of the Eldar is the ability to see into the thoughts of others. You have only few seconds, until I give him permission," he nodded in Beren's direction.

Lady Penlor, her delicate sensibilities pushed past their limits, covered her mouth with her hand and made to rise, only to be firmly pulled into her chair by her husband. His arm came around her, and he whispered into her ear. Tauriel sat stony-faced, and Thaliel simply appeared appalled.

"No, my Lord King," Glorfindel said, rising. "I ask the right to lay bare the schemes of this agent of evil." His large and powerful hand pushed into the man's chest. "This is your last chance to speak of your own volition. Whom do you serve?"

"I once was of Gondor, but dwelled long in Haradwaith," he caved at last, gasping under what must have been crushing pressure. "Where what remains of the Black Númenóreans yet dwell. I was...sent. The opportunity you presented...I would have been well-rewarded," he confessed with little emotion.

"King Bard knows of this? Of you?" asked Thranduil impassively.

"No. Though it was my...own Lords, whose influence made my appointment possible." There was a pause, as Glorfindel removed his hand, his blue eyes devouring the man, who sighed deeply before continuing. "I was to harm you if I could; that was a best-case scenario. Or at the very least, learn more of your people, your strength, your vulnerabilities. I imagined that was to be the work of long years, and then you were at my doorstep. Yes, all the wine is poisoned, save mine. I choose to leave with you."

Nenni stood. "Thaliel, you will please come with Beren and I." Turning on her heel, she led her gwathel back to the castor bean plant. "You have pockets, yes?" Nenni asked.

The Healer nodded mutely, as Nenni asked her to hold her skirts like a basket. "When I force them to, the pods will burst open rather violently. Your task is to save as many of the seeds as you easily
can and keep them for me until our return to the Halls." With a somewhat bizarre popping noise, the cluster did as she described, but the two of them working together managed to contain almost all of them, and very swiftly the oddly patterned seeds were pocketed. "I will explain later, and I am sorry for this...all of what has happened. I at least wish you to understand, I never went around poisoning others. The seeds cannot harm you to touch them; they must be ingested. And...it would be best to keep this between us, I think."

Thaliel nodded. "Had you not known what this was..."

"The irony does not escape me," Nenni said. "I would laugh, except that someone could have died. And I don't mean that sack of orc dung sitting upstairs. Come, let us return before my Ada grows nervous."

The ellith arrived in time to see everyone preparing to leave the table. But at the last moment, the Master's hand shot out to guzzle down the contents of the King's wine goblet. When the elves who had been prepared to keep him prisoner stared at him in disbelief, he grinned sardonically. "I will be killed, both for my failure and what I have revealed to you. Better it happen on my own terms and in your custody. Then at least my family will not suffer as well."

As if nothing at all was the matter, the elven company exited the manor home with the Master, and once reunited with their guard departed the city swiftly. What will happen to all of them, the townspeople? Little Hilde? Nenni wondered. And yet, it seemed they had enough problems of their own to consider.
Unchallenged, the elves found their camp once again and more than even perhaps the King, Commander Tauriel was fit to be tied. Nenni ordered her to remain, seeing that she was about to move off in a flurry, borrowed gown or not.

"Please, come inside. I wish to speak to you, and see you helped out of those garments before you care for your duties."

Frozen with wrath, the proud elleth nonetheless obeyed. With a gesture, the Queen indicated to Tinivel to care for the Commander first, as the three of them moved into a private space within the tent.

"Listen carefully, Tauriel," Nenni said gently. "I feel your anger. I know Aran Thranduil does as well. In spite of all our extra gifts, we came within a pinch of all being successfully poisoned. You cannot blame yourself for this. Nothing you reported to the King or privately to me could have let us understand that this level of malice lay at the heart of Esgaroth. As it is, we must yet remain level-headed, because that malice has only perhaps two days to live. I do not need to tell you that us having exited the town without interference makes no sense; it is this that I wish your able mind focused on. Speak with the King once you are out of these clothes. Determine if we are safe to remain here for the evening; whether your host is sufficient to repel their guards should all of them take action. We have a great asset in the bridge that could be held against them, and yet they have watercraft. Either way, far be it from me to tell you how to fulfill your duties. But I want your promise, that you will not hold yourself responsible for this. If that man could evade both the King and Lord Glorfindel, he had an unusually advanced ability to deceive."

The hard line of her jaw and her lips pressed thinly together eased, but only a little. "You are unfair, Hiril vuin," finally was spoken.

"Probably. But at times we all need perspective reinforced. There will come a day when you will have a thing or two to tell me. And I will listen. We are all on the same side, as they say." Nenni smiled encouragingly as Tauriel mostly was restored to her leather armor. "That and, I care about you too much to allow you to storm off, thinking and feeling as I would if I walked in your boots."

This arrested her attention, and brought a reluctant smile. "You have my word, Bereth Adonnenniel. And...what is to be done with our...prisoner?"

"Bind him, but someone should observe him closely. At some point he will sicken. I must...consult with the King as well, about him. But not before you have had your opportunity; the safety of all here is more important than the comfort of a thwarted murderer."

With a crisp bow of her head, Tauriel strapped on her last weapon and left to speak with the King. Nenni was left with a horrified Tinivel that she could see was fighting back tears, and moved to
embrace her. "All is well, Tinivel. We are all unharmed, and will remain thus. I am sorry, for this
distress, but I must ask you for something...the events of tonight left us without having had a meal.
Could you please see to it that some food is made available here, for six? Nothing fancy...only
something to fill our bellies. I will ask Aran Thranduil in a moment if he can stomach Lady
Penlor's presence here. She was badly shaken by what occurred, I am afraid. If he gives his
permission, I will extend the invitation to them myself."

That Tinivel embraced her in return revealed something of the extent of her emotions. "I am sorry,
for my display. Please pardon me."

"There is nothing to pardon, unless it is that I am going to insist over time to both you and Galion
that you must learn to stop this," Nenni said pointedly.

Tinivel's face appeared stricken, at her words, and the Queen gently rubbed her shoulder. "Can you
not understand," Nenni insisted softly, "That your feelings matter as much as my own? As
Thranduil's? You matter, Tinivel. You are not less than we are. You would comfort me, were I
upset. Do not feel wrong for being possessed of emotions. This...royal protocol. I understand why
it is necessary, but you must know by now that I do not fully approve of it. I will compromise on
not interfering with its existence where the image we present to those outside our family must be
maintained. We all have our part to play. But when we are alone... I love and appreciate you,
Tinivel. An unpleasantness happened tonight that would shock anyone, but we are unharmed." A
kiss was placed on the elleth's cheek.

"My Queen," Tinivel whispered, bowing her head. "I will see to your wishes. All of them," she said
with a weak smile of appreciation, disappearing.

For a moment, Nenni tried to gather up scattered thoughts, that seemed to flit around and resist
organization, before working out her next task. It was necessary to seek Thranduil's guidance.

The King was with Glorfindel; Tauriel had apparently made shockingly quick work of consulting
with him. When it came to anything military, he never seemed to be at a loss for what to do. "Will
we remain, or depart?" was her first question.

Running his hand distractedly through his fine hair, he glanced her way. "We remain. The number
of warriors accompanying us was chosen with such an eventuality in mind, though I could not have
conceived of this particular outcome. Obviously," he spat in frustration before turning his full
attention to her. "Meleth, your intelligence alone was what saved us this evening. Your knowledge.
It was a perfectly set trap, thwarted only because you know about many kinds of plants. I am
grateful, and proud."

Nenni grinned. "Well, it is nice to know that my odd interests have served a purpose. Though in
this case..." she shook her head. "I must ask some things of my King, Thranduil. May I?"

He nodded, while he poured himself wine.

"The first is that we are all now safe, yet absent our meal. I would ask you if Lord and Lady Penlor
might join us here. Even I can work out that she was badly frightened, and not having to serve
them food in a separate location will ease the burden on those caring for us."

With a deep sigh and a long swallow of wine, he answered in an almost too-calm sonorous voice.
"They may."

"My next questions are far less pleasant, and I would ask your counsel as well, Ada." Nenni
walked to sit with Glorfindel, seeking the reassurance of leaning against him. "Soon the Master
will sicken. What he has done...his will be a terrible death. He will suffer and perish in agony, in our custody. What will it look like to King Brand, when we appear at his doorstep bearing a poisoned Master of Esgaroth? Can this somehow be turned against us, or will we be accused of having taken this action against him? Should a dispatch be sent ahead, to notify him of what has occurred? And this is awful, but...I cannot ask you to consider healing him. I am not even certain it is possible, given this issue of how poisons affect us as well. The Master must know more than he told you. More, about whatever his handlers wanted, or why they acted, or who indeed they are. If I am not mistaken, before the end he will beg for death. Why not offer to grant him sleep into which he can perish in peace, in exchange for his willingness to open his mind to you?"

Thranduil pinched the bridge of his nose, taking a seat opposite them. "The former is already decided, Adonnenniel. Two riders are already dispatched to Brand, bearing the news of our attempted assassinations. Regarding the other..." his words trailed off, into silent reflection.

Glorfindel interjected. "While a part of me still tries to reconcile that an elleth can think as you do, I cannot disagree with your assessment of this opportunity, iellig. Horrifying though it is, such things are the realities of war. And I believe it would be a grave error, to view this as being other than an act of war."

"In a manner of speaking, this has provided an opportunity," said Thranduil. "I am not concerned that we will be viewed as assailants. In this, the elves' reputation is beyond reproach. We have never been poisoners, and...even when I was at my most deplorable, nothing even close to such a thing ever would have been done by me. I have ever helped and been a good neighbor to the men of this region. However, that we were assaulted in this way provides me with quite a lot of leverage to get fully to the bottom of what the extent of this 'southern influence' truly has been. We are making this journey to promote stronger ties with those with whom we need to ally, and this rather sharply illustrates the need for such alliances. And now meleth, I have a question for you. Why did you have Thaliel retain the seeds of that plant, if you do not mean to have it for yourself?"

Glorfindel's eyes fixed on her as well. "I too wonder this, iellig. You did not hide your actions from us, and yet your thoughts at the time of doing this were veiled from me."

Nenni arched her eyebrow at them. "I hope," she said quietly, "that your words do not contain the accusation that they seem to. I would like to think you believe better of me. But if not, the reason is that the plant is not only a source of poison. A unique oil can be extracted, valuable for many uses. Among them, curative properties. It is surprising, but nonetheless true, that it is a ridiculously useful medicinal plant. Not to mention other applications. I had intended to guide Thaliel through the use of it, to add to her pharmacy."

Glorfindel's arms came around her. "Please forgive me. You deserved better than my suspicion."

"And yet I earned it, nonetheless." Deeply hurt, she rose, shrugging off his embrace. "If you will both pardon me for a short time, I need to inform Penlor and Vanafindiel of their meal." Rising, she left the tent, to try to work out her thoughts, though once outside, her steps were not hurried. I feel...insulted? I do not know how to feel. It is true that in anger I have done some terrible things since coming here. But Glorfindel himself removed my ability to use my gift to torment or kill. Not to mention, apparently the part of me capable of wishing to do so. Maybe I feel so disappointed because...the poisoner's act is never one carried out in passion. It is the coldest, most calculating means of killing I can think of. Almost always, it means a terrible death to the victim, and yet it often also requires the deliberate deception of the one to be killed, right to their faces. Just as the Master meant to do to us; watch us drink his poison without batting an eye. Is this what they believe me capable of?
They are under strain too, and are not perfect. You know this. Have you never said something awful to someone out of stress? asked the Little Voice.

Not like that, Nenni flared back. It is one of the few things I can say for myself, actually. So, nice try, but...no. You're actually not helping their cause one bit.

Well then perhaps you can at least acknowledge that you have too many strange proclivities that they do not understand, and it causes them to wonder? You wanted the bones of a dragon of Morgoth. Can you not see how that seems, to them? And right on its heels, you reveal a sudden, detailed knowledge of poisons?

Nenni was having none of it. I know how to torture, too, because I can *read*. It does not mean I ever sought to torture anyone. Or even considered it. Merely knowing about that which is evil is not the same as using that knowledge. If that difference cannot be made out, I am afraid matters are dim, indeed. Or do you recommend I march in there and reveal every horrible thing my mind has the knowledge of, just to, you know, get it all out in the open and avoid future accusations?

The Little Voice remained silent.

Yeah, I thought as much.

When she reached the tent of Lord Penlor, Nenni simply declared, "It is Adonnenniel. May I enter?"

A flap was hurriedly moved aside to admit her, with a bow from Lord Penlor.

"Thank you. I wished to invite you to a simple meal with us, since you did not dine. Obviously." A note of disgust lingered in her voice. "And also, to inquire of your wife's well-being. What happened must have been very shocking."

Lord Penlor gestured behind him, to a small couch, where Vanafindiel sat. Though she made no sound, tears trickled from her stricken face that she dabbed at with a kerchief. With a hidden sigh, Nenni went to her and pulled her carefully into her arms. "I am so sorry, for your distress." The words were as soothing as she could make them. "While I did not expect what occurred, war is coming. And this is one of the many faces of war. Try to calm yourself. No one was hurt, and no such thing will happen to us the remainder of this journey. The one who tried to commit this act will pay for his crime in a way beyond our reach. You are safe, with your husband at your side."

Her lip trembled. "What if we had been attacked before we could leave that home? We were defenseless, in there alone, with that monster..."

"No, Lady Penlor," Nenni said firmly. "We were never defenseless." The Queen lifted her skirts to reveal the knives in her boots, one of which she drew to show Vanafindiel. "I was not the only one thus armed. I can kill with a single throw. As can the King, as can the Lord Glorfindel and most certainly as can Commander Tauriel. And this does not even begin to address...you do not know what we can do. No harm would have been allowed to befall you, regardless."

"But if we had taken the wine," she continued, sobbing.

"We did not," Nenni said with firmness, giving her a light shake. "The Valar blessed us and his scheme was perceived in time. You must pull yourself together, and look on what went favorably. We are all safe and unharmed. There will be greater trials in the years to come, my Lady. We must prepare ourselves for those realities. Though we enjoy the safety and luxury of our King's Halls, the deeds of the world yet continue outside of them. Take heart. Did you not see the little child that
ran to me? Her clothes were as rags and she was too thin. Her mother did not appear to be much better off. I worry far more for those less fortunate, that suffer through no fault of their own. Now dry your tears, and join us as soon as you may. There will be wine; Eru knows we all could use some." With a kiss to Vanafindiel's forehead, Nenni rose and bobbed her head in acknowledgement to an astonished Lord Penlor. Her steps took her back outside, where her original troubles were still unanswered.

There is no answer, Nenni thought as twilight abated into the starry night. Only the choice to forgive and move on or sit around bemoaning the injustices of life. So they thought that of you. It hurt your feelings. Lots of things do. They love you very much, it was a mistake; get over it. Besides, this is just another consequence of this wacky thought-sharing. When you never kept them out, they never wondered. But now that what they see is much more random, well, can you completely blame them? When people don't know, they imagine the worst. That's not really so unusual, especially when everyone is already stressed.

Glorfindel had not moved from where she left him, and the sorrow on his beautiful face was plain to see. Immediately, she seated herself in his lap and embraced him. "I needed a moment to think. I love you Ada, and hold nothing against you." Those powerful arms encircled her, and squeezed her tightly. With a kiss to his cheek, she rose to face her husband, who also had not moved. "My King, may I please have some wine?"

With a nod he rose, but she caught his hand and pulled him into an embrace. Though no words had been said either way, imparting to him that this accusatory element was no longer important to her felt necessary. "Thank you," he whispered, before kissing her head and procuring the wine. An exchange of glances told him Glorfindel wished some, too.

"Where is Thaliel?" Nenni asked, only now realizing her absence.

"Here," the slender elleth said, emerging. "I too needed some time to think. I could not help overhear what was said, and I also want to tender an apology. It bothered me, to be asked to store those seeds, and now I understand. Please forgive my lack of trust."

"Do not,.just...it is not your fault. This is one of many prices to be paid for what my life was, before. Maybe I should say this now, to all of you. How to poison is not the only awful thing of which I have knowledge. There are lists, I am sure. But knowledge does not equal that my heart is bad or that I ever sought to commit acts of evil. I have ever had a strong curiosity about many things others find repulsive." She shrugged, taking Glorfindel's cup to him. "And there it is."

Thranduil took one look at Thaliel and poured wine for her too, though a smaller amount than the rest of them had, for which he was thanked appreciatively. There was a spot next to Nenni, though it was not quite large enough. With a chuckle, the Queen patted the spot anyway, beckoning her. Squirming in, the Healer felt Nenni's arm come around her, and nestled contentedly against her. With a sigh, she sipped at her wine.

"Lord and Lady Penlor will be here any moment," Nenni said reluctantly, arching her shoulder to lift her arm off of Thaliel, only to have her wrist held tightly by Thaliel.

"I no longer care, Adonnenniel. At least, if you still wish to conceal what lies between us, do not let it be on my account."

"You are certain?" Nenni asked.

"Yes."
Her arm sank happily back around the elleth’s shoulders, indicating what Nenni thought about all that. And so it was that Penlor and Vanafindiel found the three of them on the sofa, crammed together in a series of arms around shoulders. For Glorfindel too had placed his arm around his daughter, and at the moment dared anyone to comment on it by word or gesture. Thranduil smiled in silent amusement, offering their guests simple words of welcome and filled cups of wine. Directing Lord and Lady Penlor to be seated in the remaining chairs, none spoke for a time as they sipped on the wine. Penlor held Vanafindiel's hand; it was obvious that she had only recently regained some command of her emotions. If she was even aware of the Queen's affection toward Thaliel, it was not visible.

To everyone's astonishment, Lady Penlor spoke. "When this is all sorted out, I want to help those people. If it is true that war is coming, then starving and ill-clothed neighbors cannot be useful allies. There has to be a way to ensure that no child runs around hungry like that. Penlor, how can this be done?"

Lord Penlor's eyes bulged in his handsome head. **Who is this, and what had she done with Vanafindiel?** "Well," he replied slowly, "there is of course the provision of charity, but for such as this we would require the permission of Aran Thranduil; we are his subjects and Esgaroth belongs to another sovereignty. But the greater question is the reason for their poverty, Vanafindiel. A population kept in want is not always because the means are not there. You saw the Master's standard of living, and that civic improvements were taking place. There is wealth in the town, but who is keeping that wealth and how it is being used, those are other questions."

"Surely that can be ascertained?"

"I believe that before much longer, that will be the case, Lady Penlor," Nenni interjected smoothly. Silently, she called to her husband. **Thranduil, I cannot require anything of you. But if there is a chance for this elleth to actually wish to turn her mind to a useful and kind pursuit, Valar, I beg you to help make that possible. Even if this particular impulse is not the most profitable of what we might hope for, it is a spark to be nurtured into a flame.**

The King leaned back in his chair. "You are in earnest, Lady Penlor? If politics were not an obstacle, what would you wish to do?"

"Please call me Vanafindiel, Aran Thranduil. All of you, here. I am seeing only now that it is beyond time my airs and conceit fell by the wayside. I am not without means, my King. It would be as nothing, to ensure that fabric and sewing materials, cookware and foodstuffs were available to the firith of that city. While we saw few persons of any kind, were I to guess, I would find few enough of the men lacking for suitable clothes. Widows, wives and little ones are the most likely to do without. If I could have assistance and protection, I would return to Esgaroth, to ensure that such wares go directly to those that need them. No corrupt guards or men like the Master, to divert such items into their own hands."

"That would be a noble effort," praised Nenni. "There was a charity in my world of old. They worked to ensure that the females of a community were empowered with the means to acquire their own food and income, because it was proven that well-being would spread in this way. The community would then grow stronger, and prosperity would spread."

"Perhaps it is yet another element we may leverage with King Brand," Thranduil mused. "While I do not wish to rule Esgaroth, I think I have some right to demand that a system of oversight be put in place to thwart the corruption that so clearly occurred and doubtless yet remains. I do not have the authority to make such rules, but I very much have the option to decline trade with those that displease me. It is a powerful incentive. And, few rulers will openly object to outside assistance of
this kind."

"Not to mention, 'nature abhors a vacuum', as we used to say on Earth" Nenni interjected. "The Master's absence will be found out, and someone just as despicable will see a chance to take his place. And, this makes me wonder rather a lot about our dear Einur. Perhaps his apologies were nothing but silken words designed to divert us away from realizing what is really occurring here. What was that, the Master said? 'I was to harm you, if I could.' Maybe Einur is not so stupidly innocent as he would have us believe."

"I disagree with you, iellig," Glorfindel said firmly. "I had this in mind, when we...interacted."

"Then I will not let at least that much concern me," Nenni said. "I trust your intuition."

Their simple meal was served by Tinivel, and much of it was taken in appreciative silence. Though it was stew and biscuits, no doubt existed as to its wholesomeness. Penlor and Vanafindiel thanked them profusely for the food, and retired without delay. Thaliel did the same, pleading tiredness. Though they all felt weary, there was yet more to discuss. "By this time tomorrow, Thranduil, the Master will be quite ill. Depending on how strong the dose, he will die in a day and a half to three days from now. Have you given further thought to my question?"

"I have. I do not relish this, Adonnenniel, but I equally see no way around it."

"If I can help you..."

"No, iellig," Glorfindel interrupted. "This is something best left to your husband. And myself, if he will accept my assistance. You have a gift, Adonnenniel, but not for this."

"As you wish, Ada." Nenni knew that she could not enter the thoughts of others with the skill they had, and she certainly could not send another into sleep.

The golden Lord rose. "I will take my leave of you both, now. I find that there is much on which I wish to reflect." Though, this did not stop him from wrapping Nenni in a warm embrace. Sleep well. Though you have willingly forgiven my mistaken accusation, I have not told you how proud I am of you. Your husband is right: your learning saved us. But more than that, your trust of me is what caused you to share the warning in your heart. I am very sorry to have doubted you, Adonnenniel, and I want you to know the shame I feel. The ease with which you forgive does not erase this, for me.

Mistakes happen, Ada. You already know that I make them too. While I thank you for your praise, that you knew what to do saved us just as well; I doubted my own observations and was afraid to give them. I love you, very much. Rising to her toes to kiss his cheek, she departed for bed. Thankfully this gown was one that could be removed without assistance, and she crawled tiredly under the covers. And yet the hoped-for quick fall into sleep did not come, as the inevitable flood of all that was seen and done washed through her mind. Like in a butter churn the thoughts sloshed to and fro: Being tired, the Master, Lady Penlor, little Hilde, Thaliel, the Master, Ada, castor beans, the Master...this seemed hopeless. More answers were wanted, and she would not find them here. Rising silently, her black woolens were donned, and a cloak. And her swords, boots and crown. Beren snored loudly in the middle of the bed, and it seemed best to leave him thus.

The night air had a bracing edge; a damp chill that seemed to rise from the earth so near to the lake-shore. Ithil shone brightly overhead, dimming the glory of the starlight. The mere sight of the heavens calmed her. Varda, she thought with reverence, wondering at the Lady who had created such brilliant works. Still it seemed impossible, to reconcile her knowledge of astronomy with the workings of the Queen of the Stars. And yet especially after meeting Glorfindel...there were no
doubts. Perhaps someday I will have that understanding, and yet it does not matter so much. That I
live daily touched by their grace, it is enough. Her promises to Glorfindel left her unable to leave
the boundaries of their camp, but she could still walk and think as she moved past fire after fire,
hearing the murmured exchanges of the soldiers' fellowship. Eventually her goal was discovered;
the Master sat bound to a small tree, watched by Tauriel herself much as a cat waits for a mouse to
move an inch, that she might pounce on it.

"Has he eaten?" Nenni asked quietly.

"Yes, Hiril vuin."

At that reply, the man's head came up, and regarded her dispassionately. "You want something," he
said. It was not a question.

"Not, I think, as much as you will, in a while," came the even retort. "How are you feeling?"

"Well enough," he said determinedly.

"I assume you know," Nenni pressed pointedly.

"Know....?" his face flickered in confusion.

"The manner of the death you have chosen. Poisoners usually do."

He shook his head. "I only know that it will work, unfailingly. What else is there to know?" he
asked with hoarse laughter.

"You are jesting," Nenni said, her voice filled with disbelief. "It will begin with nausea. Purging.
You will die slowly, in very great pain. How could you use such a thing, without understanding?"

For the first time, doubt flickered on his face, though he kept his silence.

"You are right, there is something I want. An answer. I am curious. Why? Why serve such ones as
you do, who would force you to such an end?"

Now it was his turn to show disbelief. "A Queen asks this question? To have wealth, power, and
position. of course. That is worth any price."

"And do what with those things?" Nenni asked, still not satisfied.

"What do you do with them? You are obeyed. Catered to. Riches and luxuries are yours. A mere
word from you, and others act."

"You know nothing of me, for that is not what I 'do with them,'" she said after reflecting on his
words for a time. "Those things are granted me, in honor of my station and at the generosity of my
King. What I do is serve those who call me Queen. And serve my King and husband. You know
nothing of care, or duty. Or power, except a child's understanding." A long pause ensued. "Have
you a name?"

Now, the Master sneered. "Not one I am willing to share."

"Rest well, then. While you can." She continued her walk, treading slowly through the darker
places so as to better see the stars. Is something wrong with me? How is it I do not care about
something others seem to care about so very much? Or maybe it is the only thing *right* with me.
This preoccupation with being powerful...it is as if to want it is to be corrupted. Maybe this is up
there with trying to understand why some people are just... bad. I cannot ever seem to comprehend, and yet perhaps that is for the best. Nenni looked to the heavens. Do the Valar wonder, at Melko? Do they ever converse as we do, and puzzle at why? Why his heart turned and blackened, when he was given everything?

An arm came around her shoulder. I believe they do, meleth. You reflect on many things and yet I think you already see, there are often no answers. Leaning down, he pulled her into a kiss. At least, none that will ever make sense. Will you join me in our bed? I do not wish to lie alone.

It will cost you a few more minutes' walk, holding my hand.

You still do not bargain well, Adonnenniel.

I do not have to. For the rest of what I wish, there will be no need to ask.

A snort escaped him. Then I stand corrected.

Excellent. Because what I lack in skill at negotiating, I make up for in other kinds of diplomacy. Nenni did not need to see his lips parted in surprise, as she smiled and tugged at his hand to follow her.

*****

It was very early when gentle shaking wakened her. "Sit up for me and drink, Adonnenniel," Thaliel whispered. Her medicines had been prepared all into one cup of tea.

"So sleepy," Nenni breathed, barely coherent and weak with slumber.

"I know," the Healer said in tones that were barely audible. "I will help you."

The warm beverage was pressed to her lips, and somehow all consumed before Nenni slumped back down to horizontal again. She wanted to say so many things, and none of them could come out before sleep tugged her down again. A weak squeeze to her gwathel's hand was all that could be managed, before regular breathing signaled that she had returned to rest.

With a smile Thaliel gazed for a moment at the sleeping figures of her sovereigns. A bare flicker of yearning came, while she remembered the simple joy of being held by her Mithdîr, in their own bed. Someday, my husband. Her thumb traced over the gold band on her index finger. In the meantime I pray to the Valar that you are well, and happy.

*****

Camp broke the following morning in a heavy, misting fog that swirled and muffled sound. It was with extreme gratitude that the Queen was not required to stuff herself into a gown. Contentedly she strapped on most of her armor, until the arrival of their biscuits and porridge quelled all other pursuits.

I really must ask how they manage the biscuits with a campfire, though she already knew the basic answer. It had to be something like a lidded iron vessel. Those were a touch tricky to master, but oh the results... the butter melted over the steaming creation that was sloshed in honey. Not a bit of it went to waste.

Glorfindel looked on in amusement as he watched her eat, believing her to be a vast source of endless entertainments. Nenni would place dried fruits and nutmeats in little patterns on the surface of her porridge before eating it, a little like an edible canvas. She did not begrudge herself the supply of delicious dried cherries and figs, as it was her own labor that had produced them in the first place. A smiley face with fig hair had almost been completed when Thranduil huffed. "Eru,
meleth. Will you teach our daughter these proclivities?"

Nenni’s eyebrows raised, regarding her husband. "That would depend on her, I suppose. Not everyone has the compulsion to make their breakfast bowl into an art tablet. I miss painting and drawing, so this is my outlet. There is no mess, and you will not be required to see it for much longer, my Lord King." Her tone of voice was respectful, though Thranduil guessed it was intended to be dripping with sarcasm. That it was so difficult to discern the emotion behind her words left him unable to respond. Thaliel smiled and ate her porridge like a normal elf, but did not look up.

Glorfindel, however, could not resist. "It is a pity you lack strawberries, iellig. Two slices would make lovely lips."

Nenni pondered this. "Blueberries would make better eyes, too. Alas, Ada. We are sadly limited."

"Well," said the golden Lord, his eyes glinting with mischief, "it was the thought that counts."

"Not you too," Thranduil groaned. "Have mercy, today I must likely deal with the Master. And I am unable to find any humor in it."

Glorfindel sobered. "Forgive me, my Lord. You are correct."

"I too am sorry, Thranduil. I had already pushed it from my mind, which is inexcusable on some level. I...my thoughts seem a little muddled, just now."

"You may blame me," Thaliel said pointedly. "Though you hide it well, the events of yestereve were a strain. It is better for the child, Hiril vuin, to maintain yourself free of cares to the extent that it can be managed. But you were still given less medicine than on the day before."

Nenni sat up straighter in surprise, but found that she did not actually care. "As you think best, Thaliel." Returning to her porridge and biscuit, steady eating pushed conversation aside.

The weather did not break or lighten, and today she was grateful for Tálagor's massive body that radiated such warmth; sitting astride the great elk was much like being seated over a heater. Though Nenni was already contentedly warm, Thranduil protectively brought his cloak around hers, holding her against him to the extent their armor would allow. Their company rode on slowly, keeping much closer together in the thick mists that blanketed everything in sight. Three days' travel would be needed, perhaps four, to reach Dale. The ellon sent as messenger to King Brand would not return until sometime tomorrow; it was roughly five leagues in each direction and there was no need to demand so much of the horse that bore him.

As the day progressed, Thranduil's mood seemed to retreat into the mists. His arm did not leave off encircling her, and at times the Queen held it fast against her. In all the hours that passed she kept silent except for one thing. I love you, my Lord, and would help you if I could. My quiet is because I hope that is what you desire most. An affectionate squeeze was confirmation enough, and so Nenni kept occupied with her own thoughts.

They did not stop for lunch in the ordinary manner but instead halted much as they had for the Imladris orc-hunt; a brief pause with waybread and dried fruit distributed, and a little time for those riding to dismount. After only one-half hour, their procession continued silently into the gloomy surroundings. As the afternoon wore on, Thranduil perceived how tired and drowsy his wife had become, even as his own senses became more attuned to their path. Wordlessly beckoning Glorfindel, he elected that Adonnenniel should go with her Ada, in whose arms she could safely sleep. Perhaps it was nothing, but his intuition told him to remain alert.
When Nenni was told what the King wanted, relief mixed in with annoyance. She had tried so hard to remain alert and keep her bearing dignified, though doing this had almost become a torment. No word of protest was spoken, as Glorfindel swiftly took her to ride in front of him with a motion so fluid it was doubtful any others had noticed. Seated sideways against him, Nenni wrapped her arms around his waist and leaned her head against his cuirass, lulled almost immediately to sleep by the regular fall of Fuinor's hooves. She was unaware, that he carefully tucked her cloak all around her and then covered her with his own as well, enveloping her in warmth.

The light was fading, when her Ada gently shook her. *Something is happening, iellig; you must wake.* A few blinks were needed to return to reality, but fortunately the nap had helped a great deal. Give or take a feeling of detachment, she regained her awareness quickly.

*Can you elaborate more on 'something'?><

*Our company has stopped, and the King has moved to the rear of the column with most of our guards. My ears detect the sound of many boots marching.*

*I will do as I have promised you, which is...nothing.* Shifting on Fuinor's back, she moved a leg over his neck to ride astride him.

*Adonnenniel, I have some things to say about our...agreement. I received an education in how unfair I have been to you, but had hoped for a more private and relaxed occasion to discuss it.*

*Please speak plainly, Ada, if you are granting me some sort of repeal of your rules. I can guess that we were pursued from Esgaroth, and in the event this goes badly...*  
*I would still prefer that you do not engage in a fight. And yet if this goes ill, do as you feel is best. I will be at your side, if it comes to that.*

Her lips parted in astonishment. *Thank you, Ada. Is it possible to move into a position to better hear, or could you allow me to know what is happening?*

For an answer, Fuinor walked to a position that flanked Tálagor, and held still as a statue. It was true; the sound of many footfalls swiftly marching approached their company, which was already arrayed defensively. Wagons and non-military staff were encircled in a protective ring by warriors both mounted and on foot. At last faces appeared from the mist. They were guards from Esgaroth, and many appeared unsavory indeed.

Nenni recalled something. *Thranduil, I never learned all of how it works...but there is a chance that their poison can be used on weapons as well. I thought I should mention it.*

The King's eyes widened. This was becoming ridiculous. The leader of the men stepped forward, who was very surly in appearance. *"We demand to speak with the Master."*

"On whose authority?" Thranduil asked. "He is enroute to see King Brand of Dale, as are we."

*Beren,* she commanded in her mind. *Find out how many of them there are.* The thick mists made it difficult to determine their numbers. Nenni glanced at the coil of ivy around her vambrace. *Ada, you are my protection right now. I am going to lay my traps; I will not be paying attention for some moments.*

Glorfindel had somehow forgotten that his daughter relied on more than steel, and watched in fascination as a coil of ivy grew into her hands. Much like a frisbee, with a light toss it was flung to the ground in front of and well to the side of the elk. Hidden under her cowl, the Queen's eyes closed as her inner sight took over. The vines grew, and grew, and grew, silently extending
themselves and snaking all along the road and the column of men. When the dog returned from circling the guard of Erebor, it was learned that their number was thirty to thirty-five, give or take. Some were archers. Most were not.

Through their connection, Glorfindel saw what Nenni did; that with a moment's notice it would be possible to immobilize most if not all in the ranks of the men.

"We need no authority but our own," growled another of the guard. It was impossible not to observe that this one had much darker skin than would be usual for a native of this region. Surely this was a characteristic of those from Harad, in the far south?

"Then your request is denied," responded Thranduil archly. "Your Master attempted murder, and will answer for it by the laws of this region. He will remain in the custody of those he sought to harm. Namely, us. I suggest you return whence you came." Still the men did not move, though more anger and determination hardened their features. Thranduil realized his predicament. If it was as he suspected, and this group did not have loyalty to King Brand but rather was in the service of darkness, they would likely be attacked. "I will say again, remove your company now, or your presence here will be considered an act of aggression against my people. You do not seriously believe that your number is any match for my warriors?"

"We do not need to be a match, Elvenking." The knowing smirk on his face left them with little doubt as to Nenni's guess.

She had heard enough, and slid in a fluid motion off of Fuinor's back, to retreat backward and disappear into the mists. Remain where you are, Ada. I will not be seen. Please trust me. Her concern was the archers. With her vision heavily obscured, her ability to accurately immobilize individual men was nonexistent. And yet there was still a way. She slipped around to reach Tálagor's side.

Thranduil, I need your inner sight. Give me your hand. Stall for time.

His right hand slid down to grasp hers, even as he smiled and spoke to the man and then Tauriel. "Perhaps I have been hasty. Commander, would you please bring the Master forward?"

With a cruel smile that boded nothing good, the man puffed his chest out a little and gave a curt nod of his head.

Now, Nenni could see. Their long practice at joining their skills allowed her to easily perceive each of the men as her husband did, even as all her vines were now visible to her. With a squeeze to her husband's hand the vegetation surged to life, but first and foremost it took the archers at the rear of the column; all of them already had arrows nocked. Arrows that were doubtless tipped with poison. On these especially she vented her gift. Each bow was ensnared, each arrow and quiver buried and inaccessible under the thickening and weaving plants. When yells from the rear befuddled those in front, their bewilderment did not last long. Help me, she begged her husband. Her usual measure of strength was failing, lost to fatigue and probably also to Amaranthine. While she felt her husband's aid, it was not going to be enough...until she felt a third hand encircle the one held by Thranduil.

I am here, iellig, and will give all that you require. Vigor surged into her body, allowing her to redouble her efforts. In seconds every one of the men were bound to the ground where they stood even as Tauriel arrived to shove the Master forward. It had been most of a day, now, since he had consumed the wine, and the beginning signs of his illness were unmistakable on his pained face.

"You all followed?" he spat. "Fools! You only had to remain..." he paled, and retched where he stood, much to the Commander's disgust.

Thranduil now spoke clearly to all his warriors. "Take them prisoner, and disarm them. Use
caution; assume that all of their weapons are poisoned. Any who resist or attempt to flee, you are to pierce them with their own arrows. We camp here.

"You conniving bastard," the leader of the guard spat at Thranduil, his face contorted with rage as he struggled to reach for a knife with his bound hands. In a split second his screams tore through the lake-shore, as Beren bit his arms and crushed them to the bone, shaking him violently until the weapon dropped to the ground.

Nenni marched forward, incensed, swiftly picking up the weapon. "Leave it," she demanded of the hound. "Good boy."

"Good boy?" the man choked with pain and anger. "That thing bit me!"

"And he will bite you again, if I hear another word out of you. Only next time I will not ask him to stop. You are owed nothing. Deserve nothing. You are a pack of worthless, murdering cowards and every one of you belongs at the bottom of that lake with a stone around your neck."

"Please, no," another one of the men was heard to say. "Mercy. I have a wife, and children. They forced us to come here," he pleaded. "You do not know what it has been, what we have endured since these ones came to Esgaroth."

Nenni walked to him. "Is the one who led you here a native of Esgaroth?"

"No, Lady. He is from the south, along with many but not all of the men here."

"Silence!" The lead man roared. "You were warned, what will happen to you and your kin!"

Nenni turned to the man. "You also were warned," she said in a voice colder than ice. "Beren, remind him to be quiet." Much to her surprise, the dog did not bite. Instead, he reared up to put his forelegs against the man's shoulders, knocking him down. His tail wagging, he dragged the screaming man in the direction of what Nenni guessed might be Anthilen with a lot of impressive but harmless growling and slavering. The man clawed and scraped at the earth, trying to arrest his progress. Those fingers won't feel so good, by the time he gets to where he is going. She shrugged. Not my problem. Her attention returned to the townsman. "I am going to free your legs. Try to run away, and nothing good will befall you. Identify for us now which among this company do not belong among your people."

Thranduil had by now dismounted to stand at her side. Unsurprisingly, thirteen more of their number beside the man Beren had removed, and all of their archers, were named as outsiders. "Take these into custody," the King commanded Tauriel in their hearing. "They are to be thoroughly searched. Cover their eyes. Leave them in their bonds. If they make any attempt to converse with their fellows, give them to the hound." Tauriel bowed her head to her King, only the merry gleam in her eye betraying how much she was enjoying herself.

Once the southrons were led away and out of earshot, Nenni asked the townsman who had originally spoken, "What are you called?"

"Feric, my Lady" the man said humbly. "And for our deliverance, we thank you. Please, we ask to be held apart from the others in captivity."

"If you will answer my questions, I will release you," Thranduil replied. "I have no quarrel with the true men of Esgaroth."

Feric went down on one knee before Thranduil. "I am at your service, my Lord."
Nenni backed away slightly and stood next to Tálagor, against whose side she leaned. Someone needs to take that goddamned plant and drop it in the lake. And I would love to be the one to do it. It bothered her intensely, that to all appearances, less than two dozen men had infiltrated Esgaroth and with the aid of one botanical specimen had apparently kept the entire town of good people hostage to fear and uncertainty. Probably their biggest salvation was that in someplace like Esgaroth, a heated home with greenhouse-like windows was the only place such a thing could have been kept alive. The southern lands must be overrun with castor beans, given how easily they grew in warm climates. What else do they have here in Ennor, that can wreak havoc? From here on out, I am keeping closer watch. Monkshood to giant hogweed, who even knows? Then it occurred to her. Thaliel. Thaliel would know, you blithering idiot.

Listening carefully to Thranduil's questions along with the townsman's answers, she learned that quite possibly the most hated one in all Esgaroth had been Einur. Greedy and ambitious, he had played the Master's sycophant from the moment of his appointment. Constantly trying to curry favor, the Master had seen him for the opportunity he represented; an insider who could be put to use to help suppress and control the population. Though near as she could tell, Einur had not been party to any attempted use of the poison. Perhaps he did not know it existed.

As the minutes moved along, she had kept an eye on the Master. He had not moved much, from a kneeling position a few feet away from Thranduil. "Can you stand up?" Nenni asked in a tone of voice so flat and devoid of warmth that it astonished her to hear it in her own ears.

He nodded his head affirmatively, though his skin was beaded with perspiration.

"Then do so, and you may return to your guard and find what rest and comfort you may."

"I suppose you are enjoying this," he said through clenched teeth.

Her grey eyes locked onto his. "Enjoying? Enjoying what, watching you die slowly? Or did you mean watching your schemes unravel? To either, you would be incorrect."

"Hiril vuin, might I ask you to accompany me?" said Glorfindel, who had decided enough was enough. Far too much had happened, today, and their tent had been erected.

"Yes." With a nod to Tauriel, who observed the man much as one might a cockroach, Nenni took Glorfindel's proffered arm. Esgaroth, the gift that keeps on giving, she thought bitterly.

You have done much here, iellig. I do not think I need to tell you, what advantage the collapse of these schemes gives this entire region.

Ada, I... right now a struggle to care about politics was underway. Or, something was underway...what is the matter with me?

Come, he said, covering her hand with his. He guided her into the tent, grateful to see that Tinivel had provided warm blankets against the chill and that already the braziers were lit. He helped her out of her boots and cuirass; then swords and all, he drew her against him and covered both of them with the blankets. Only then did he start to fiddle with the buckles on his own cuirass. Smiling a little at his silliness, her nimble fingers found some of the fastenings until the armor could be removed. "I imagine that is more comfortable," he smiled, kissing her copper head that nodded in agreement against him. Try to reflect, Adonnenniel, and I will see if I can help you.

I feel angry at all the unexpected things that happened. I understand that this has done much good. But I feel...spoiled. Tired. Upset that this has not been what I...
Expected? His broad hand rubbed at her back. *Your mind that struggles with things that do not occur as you believe they will. I have seen this before, in you. Why does it matter so much, that you have an understanding of what is to come before it does? Can you tell me?*

Her fingers clutched the blanket around her tighter, before searching out the comfort of his hand. *I become anxious, if I do not know, came the slow response. There is no order. No...no way to...prepare myself. It feels like being defenseless...*

*I see,* he said, concerned about the anxiety that only trying to answer the question was producing. *Then we will not worry about it now,* he soothed. *You did so very well, and the day has been gloomy and cold.*

Thranduil silently entered the tent to see Glorfindel and his wife bathed in the soft golden light of the Elflord's healing grace. Both their eyes were closed, and he watched in wonder as the tense frown on Adonnenniel's features relaxed into a soft smile. There was love, so much love. The King bowed his head, giving thanks to Eru and the Valar for the gifts of their people. However much these blessings had woven into the tapestry of his life, they never ceased to be a source of wrenching beauty. *Perhaps that is the difference,* he wondered as he looked on. Those men outside, who sold themselves willingly or otherwise into the service of darkness; this would not reach their hearts. *And that such is the case...* His head shook for the sorrow of it. And yet it was not his to change, though it was his to defeat. He had been walking among them, weighing what he could perceive of their hearts, and each series of thoughts led to one inescapable conclusion.

From the opposite side of the tent, he saw Tinivel enter with a gown in her arms, only to stop in her tracks at the sight in front of her. For a moment all traces of formality were utterly banished from her mind, as she openly stared at the father and daughter. The light diminished, until it faded away. *Thank you, Ada.* Nenni felt his kiss of blessing on her forehead, but moreover it felt like the past two days had been washed away. Even if it did not last, the sense that she was about to fall off her own cliff had vanished.

*You are welcome, iellig. I wish that we could remain here for much longer, but my powers of observation tell me that I am wanted by your husband and that Tinivel waits to attire you as befits a Queen. But I promise I will return when I may.*

Her eyes flew open and one sweep of them across the tent confirmed the truth of his words. Uncurling herself slowly, she kissed Glorfindel's hand before releasing him to examine the gown Tinivel brought. "If you give me a moment, I will change into it, but perhaps you could help me with the closures?" Tinivel bowed her head and waited. By the time Nenni emerged from stripping off the rest of her armor and underclothes, the ellyn had gone. Returning, she moved her long hair aside to expose the long series of laces that began practically at her tailbone. Thankfully this was a warm garment made of heavy black wool and beautifully embroidered. "You must have known that these mists and fogs gather near the lake. I am very glad of that," she said as the elleth tightened along the tedious eyelets.

"Hiril vuin," Tinivel replied politely. There was an edge to her voice, and Nenni guessed at the reason. Though, she waited until the dress was managed before speaking.

"Tinivel, did what you see disturb you?" she asked kindly, boring into her eyes. The flicker of discomfort that passed there told her much of what she wished to know. "You and Galion bear a unique burden, of witnessing what no one else does—though your duties require you to pretend otherwise. Yet you still think and have feelings. I know you will not ask me because protocol demands that you do not, but I have no wish for your mind to not be at ease. For your faithful service to us, you deserve at least that much."
Nenni held up her hand, smiling. "Please let me finish, before you tell me it is not any of your business." The crestfallen look on Tinivel's face proved her arrow had struck home. "I am not really what I appear to be on the outside, Tinivel. Or rather, what most see makes up only part of the whole. Glorfindel did not undertake adopting me as his daughter lightly, but in sacrifice. To help someone, who needs an unusual amount of help. For reasons I do not fully understand, the grace the Valar have given to him found its way to me. To us. I revere and love him, and in private, a place inside of me that never knew a real father finds healing. I know it is not usual to see a grown elleth behaving as a small child; but so it is, between he and I. I have no fears, concerning the discretion of you and Galion." Reaching forward, the Queen kissed Tinivel lightly on the cheek. "You are our family, too," she whispered.

To both Nenni's despair and understanding, Tinivel dropped down to one knee, holding her hand. Smiling weakly, she stroked the smooth brown hair with her spare hand. And she remembered Thaliel's words. Tinivel would never cross fully into their inner circle, and yet that was...how things were to be. As she stood there, understanding suddenly came in a blinding flash. This was what Glorfindel meant. This was what Glorfindel dealt with...walking the knife edge between being regarded as something more than ordinary, while at the same time having needs and wants and feelings just like anyone else. Maybe then, there was a compromise of sorts. A way to meet both needs and what was needed, by others. "Galu, Tinivel." Raising her up, with a dip of her head, she asked "might I please have some wine?"

Suddenly looking much happier, the elleth departed to care for the request. Still struck by her realization, Nenni returned to the sofa and sat.

"That was well done," said Thaliel, who had obviously waited to enter.

"I am not certain I fully understood, until just now. Until I just saw that I do the same thing to my Ada. And that he allows it, presumably because he sees that I need this from him. Just like...they need this from me."

"I am proud of you, for...since we spoke, I have tried to place myself in your position. And I find I cannot imagine the weight of the burden you carry, in view of how you see yourself. I had always imagined that it was different, for those who rule."

"Well, I cannot speak for Aran Thranduil," Nenni mused. "I suspect he had far more of a chance to see himself in a kingly way...whatever that even is...do you know, I am not sure I have ever asked him exactly this?"

"I suspect you will, soon," Thaliel smirked, seating herself next to Nenni and shaking the warm blanket over both of them. "Now tell me more about this plant of yours, that has caused so much trouble."
Glorfindel felt both proud and astonished at Thranduil's forbearance. He doubted he himself would have shown so much. Then I will tell you that were I in your position, I would not hesitate to press my advantage. He is not like the man of Esgaroth, that showed you regard and courtesy. He has openly confessed to being in the service of those who serve Sauron. Worshippers of Morgoth. There is only one caveat. You were targeted, Thranduil. While I do not believe that the designs of the enemy could somehow anticipate that you might seek to invade this man’s mind, there is always the possibility that what you learn there might be tainted. That he might have been fed what his handlers wished him to believe, the better to deceive you. That has ever been the greatest skill of all their ilk.

Then you would not object to standing as witness to my deeds, and what I might learn?

I will be at your side.

There is more, Glorfindel. The matter of the others. In my heart, I know that the best course of action for all in this region is for the thirteen of them to simply be slain. They are as orcs. Set free, they will return to the south bearing news of the movements of powerful elves as well as one wielding a previously unknown magical gift. Perhaps I am overthinking all of this, but I would give much to not have word of us spread south of Mordor. And yet the execution of so many men, outside a battlefield; this is not our way.

Hesitation spread over the features of the golden Lord. He had hastened once to carry out the slaughter of another. And then as now, there was seeming justification, and yet there were also other ways. Imprisonment, perhaps in the custody of the ruler at Dale. It is not our way, he agreed. I would urge you not to darken your hands with their blood, except at last necessity. There is another authority, to whom they are supposed to be answerable. Surely it is better, to explore that fully?

I had considered this, Thranduil admitted. And yet therein lies another disadvantage. Once we arrive at Dale, it will be known that they are in our custody. Here, now, none aside from my people know of their circumstances.

None, you mean, except those men of Esgaroth you have sent on their way. I can see why you might expect their loyalty, and yet these are not the Dúnedain. While I do not accuse them of any ill will, they are but common men. More prone to the vagaries of their race.

Thranduil shook his head. I once thought as you do. But Adonnenniel's return to me, and my brief time in her world...she was not alone, Glorfindel. Her views are still largely touched by her experience of humanity. Though housed now in an elven body, her spirit is not fundamentally changed since the day of her arrival. The lesson of her, and her friend Brian...it lingers with me in a manner difficult to explain.

Then you will at least delay, on this?

Yes. If anything, Thranduil felt some relief, to have a second opinion encouraging him away from what he really did not wish to do anyway.

I need not tell you, though, that it is not only my counsel you should seek, in this, Glorfindel noted pointedly. I am not an avowed ruler of your people.

You do not, the King smiled. And yet the thoughts of one who ruled the House of the Golden Flower are welcome.
They found the Master of Laketown under the watchful guard of an emotionless Tauriel. While she was not cruel, a certain dispassion lived in her that Thranduil knew made this duty easier for her than others of gentler disposition. He had been kept apart from the rest of the human prisoners, to the extent possible. Thranduil and Glorfindel looked at the man, and at each other. "You are in pain," the King stated, matter of factly. "I would like to offer a bargain. I can cause you to fall asleep and remain thus, until the inevitable occurs. No more suffering. For all the pain that you have now, I am told there is worse to come. But I want something in return," Thranduil said, laying a hand on the man's face.

"What?" he glowered through clenched teeth, as he struggled to breathe evenly against the wrenching discomfort and sickness in his belly.

"Information. The knowledge of who you serve, and their intentions. You were not sent to these lands on a whim. Tell us what we wish to know, and we will greatly ease your passing," said Glorfindel, knowing that the longer they dragged this charade out, the more the man would think on these matters.

"How many are there still, in Sauron's service?" Thranduil asked, probing deeper amidst the uncontrolled hurt that ravaged the man's body.

"How was King Brand threatened, that he installed you as the Master of Esgaroth?" Glorfindel pressed.

"No," the man hissed. "You do not know what they will do to my parents, if I talk to you. My sister. I pay now for my choices, but would spare them if I can."

The ellyn looked at one another, nodding in agreement. The man was not lying; at the least, this was how his handlers enforced loyalty in their servants. They would spare him the understanding that he had already told them what he wished to know, by thinking it. The golden Lord spoke. "Our race does not know what awaits the spirits of men. Though you deserve it least, you will still be given this mercy." Thranduil removed his hand, while Glorfindel's took its place. Immediately the man passed into a deep slumber. "That told us little, and yet much," he said, his golden locks sweeping back behind him as he rose.

"He will need little oversight, now, Commander," Thranduil said with some sadness. "Leave him bound, and place him somewhere out of sight. It will be his corpse, that we bear into Dale."

_Better him than us_, Tauriel thought. The man had brought all of this down on his own dishonorable head. Summoning two of her guards, they bore him to one of the supply wagons, which was guarded in the center of camp already. The Master was covered, much as with a shroud, though one that still allowed his body to breathe while it could. He was now beyond the aid of all.

The ellyn returned to the tent to await their supper, to find Adonnenniel disgorging her extensive knowledge of trivia as it pertained to the plant, both morbid and useful. Thaliel found it particularly revolting to learn that its very named derived from the similarity of the seeds in her possession to a bloodsucking, disease-transmitting insect of her Queen's former world. _Ricinus communis_; ricinus meant 'a tick'. "Nobody misses ticks, do they, Beren?" Nenni asked. A few thumps of the tail were all she had by way of a response. Besides, what did he care? He was never the one who had been required to remove the disgusting creatures from his fur.

Glorfindel unabashedly stole the remaining seat next to his daughter while Thranduil procured wine, smiling when she leaned against his shoulder. "I am afraid I must turn your conversation toward more serious matters," Thranduil said. He had been spared much of the distress he originally feared, and therefore was in a far better humor. "Our interaction with the Master of
Esgaroth is concluded, and you should know the outcome. As well as what other counsel I took with Lord Glorfindel."

Thaliel grew nervous, clutching at the blanket over her lap and wondering if she ought to leave. The King seemed to perceive this, and held up his hand. "Remain, Thaliel, unless you do not wish to stay. Your discretion is beyond question, and it may be from time to time that there is some insight of your own you can offer us."

"Hîr vuin," the Healer bowed her head, relaxing gratefully. Truthfully, it was damp and chilly, and she felt loath to leave the warmth and comfort here. Thranduil repeated all that had transpired, watching his wife's face carefully. When the matter of their prisoners arose, a frown furrowed her brow. It reminded her a little of the assorted goings-on of the second World War. Enemy soldiers would be take prisoner. *I am pretty sure that the Geneva Convention forbade taking the lives of those in custody, which is why those powers that acted in such a manner were viewed as demonstrating criminal behavior. But this is not Earth, and no one here signed any treaties.* The truth was, she very much understood Thranduil's line of thinking and even agreed with it. They slaughtered captive orcs without hesitation; were these men so different when they behaved much the same? And yet her Ada did not counsel without reason, and she alone here knew the reason for that counsel. "I do not like the idea of relinquishing them to King Brand. Not until more is known of his heart. Do you actually know him, Thranduil? Personally?"

"No," the King replied. "I knew Bard, who became King in the years after the death of the dragon. Brand is that one's grandson. I am told he has similar years to your own as a mortal, Adonnenniel. He has children who have reached their age of maturity. And I will tell you now, I also hesitate to hand them over. All other matters aside, Dale is not the Woodland Realm. My prison cells are secure. Or at least, secure under ordinary circumstances," he smiled, still recalling little Bilbo's success. "But Dale has no such resources, and certainly not for this many. I would wager Erebor does, but this is not the quarrel of the Dwarves."

"And it is hardly fitting to come on a goodwill visit only to add, 'and oh by the way, could you lock these fellows away for us and forget the location of the key?' " Nenni added with no small amount of sarcasm dripping from her voice. Glorfindel laughed heartily, thinking this rather funny. They fell into a reflective silence, enjoying the comforts of their tent and each other, when a great commotion was heard outside. Thranduil and Glorfindel cast down their fine outer robes and immediately drew their swords, while Nenni did the same but then returned to her seat. In an unusual shift of her outlook, she elected that unless it came into this tent to meet them, she would remain where she was. It was what her Ada would want most. Her blade was held up, its razor edge turned toward the tent opening while her arm came protectively around Thaliel's shoulders in reassurance. Whether her husband and father were of the same mind, she was unclear, but neither departed as anticipated. They too stood alert, waiting. Some minutes later, silence resumed and a deeply perturbed Tauriel came to them, her body rigid with anger.

"Aran Thranduil," she said formally and through clenched jaws, bowing deeply. "Orcs set upon the edges of our camp. All the prisoners save Einur and Stathard were slaughtered, before we in turn dealt the same to them. None of our people took harm."

"And the Master?" The King wished to be certain he understood fully.

"He was not attacked, but perished not long ago. I was making my way to inform you of his passing when this...occurred."

"Thank you, Commander," he said evenly, looking at the rest of them in disbelief. "Destroy the carcasses of the orcs." He thought for a moment. "And the men."
Tauriel was stunned; she had expected to be severely reprimanded that this had been able to happen. *The spiders of the forest are preferable to the road to Erebor,* she thought. *Eru, this errand...*

Nenni sheathed her sword, and pondered how there was no word in Sindarin approximating the one that fit best.....Karma.
Hello, wonderfully patient readers! This November I participated in a novel writing challenge, which meant tearing myself off of my nearly incessant occupation with the Lasg’len story. The novel part went pretty well, and is now the second installment in a smaller series called Peace and War that looks at all the things you never knew happened during the Second Age. But I felt pretty determined to get back here to Ereb and DO SOMETHING. And I did. So here is the next chapter and, before the next two nights are out, I am determined to finish what will probably be the final chapter in this book. So that I can then think about starting the next book. I have felt really unhappy for months now, about how badly this story has stalled. And...what a conundrum...it isn't that I don't have ideas or material, it is that I apparently really do not have an easy time of writing dwarves. Elves flow. Dwarves are like a logjam that cannot clear itself. Anyway. I threaded my way out of that and...it won't take another 3 months to publish that last chapter, I promise that much. And there will be more beyond it, though when I can't say...so if you like this series, please consider subscribing to this story if you haven't already. When I start publishing the sequel, I will put up a fake chapter here by which to notify you, then you won't get your inboxes spammed with notifications for my other stories. The upside of all these delays is that I've learned a lot more about Middle Earth (heck, Aman too) so hopefully that will help with the future. Thanks again for your continued support and...enjoy :-) !!

The three days after they were set upon by both men and orcs were most notable for their tranquility. This calm state of affairs did not stop those of the Royal Household from individually and collectively dissecting every facet of what had occurred. Theories were proposed and rejected; none of them could manage to believe that the attack had been some random occurrence, yet it had been inexplicable in the extreme. Even orcs, foul and stupid as they were, generally had no desire to be sent on a suicidal errand. In the end, all had to come to terms with the knowledge that unless they gained further information, accurate understanding would not be theirs.

At noon they stopped for a more relaxed and elaborate luncheon; they were perhaps an hour's ride from Dale now. Tinivel and Tauriel conferred to ensure that all their party would arrive well-fed; plus there was the requirement to arrive in the city dressed in finery. Nenni ate her lentil and vegetable stew with dumplings thankfully. All her life, she had never, ever taken the luxury of a hot meal for granted. Of course it was possible to make do with cold food, and often necessary. But hot food...there was simply something about it. Especially lunch. Afterward, gowns which were very beautiful yet still suited to riding were brought for the ellith, while the King and Glorfindel were provided with heavily embroidered surcoats of midnight blue and sapphire blue, respectively. They were also brought their diadems. A dark silver sash that draped elegantly down Tálagor's side added prestige to his appearance.

While nothing would part her from Elladan and Elrohir's knives, the Queen relented as to parting from her swords. Her dress was in shades of deep lilac and greys, and her harness would look
ridiculous with it if equipped. Besides, short of an attack by a dragon, nothing was going to be able to bother her on Tálagor's back. So it was that the company made its formal entrance into the city of Dale. Nenni's first impression was of an Italian village, reminiscent of Tuscany. Roofs of rosy terra cotta tiles were offset by planters containing bright flowers. Homes and places of business appeared maintained and manicured. The streets were clean, and trees providing shade and greenery were planted in abundance. Prosperity and peace seemed to abound; so different, from dour Esgaroth.

And the people! When she sailed on her ship long ago, the running joke was that they lived in a fishbowl-- and it was true. People would come to gawk at the sailors on the colorful vessel as they worked; the crew was as much an attraction as their vessel. Much the same was happening here. Nenni had prepared herself in every way possible to accept that she was part of an elven spectacle. It was rare enough, that the Elvenking ever made an appearance outside his forest. One venerable old widow who now watched them pass by had been a small child, a terrified refugee of Esgaroth, when Thranduil had last come. No others here had ever laid eyes on him, and now word had spread that he had taken a Queen. In fairness, they had been told that his Queen had been restored to him, but as these knew little of the ways of the Eldar, that statement had proven to be unfathomable to the extent that something more easily understood had found its way as a substitute.

Nenni met every eye she could, smiled at every child. To young ones that waved in greeting, she returned the gesture in a way she hoped was still dignified. "Mama, they are beautiful!" a small voice rang out just before an embarrassed mother tried to shush her little daughter while managing a fussing infant in her arms. Though usually this would have seemed distasteful, today she found that it was...fine. And perhaps she did not owe all of that to Thaliel's medicines. It felt peaceful in the city. Orderly. Quiet.

Their path took them to the residence of the King, which was really more of a very large home, set a little outside of the town. Nenni guessed the dwarves must have helped, for this was a different kind of dwelling. A large edifice of stone greeted her eyes, with generous open space in front. The original city walls had been expanded to encompass this...she really was not sure what to call it. It was by no means anywhere approximating a castle (unless 'tiny castle' was a valid descriptor) or Thranduil's Halls. 'Manor house' would probably do best. Clematis vines blooming in many colors ran up much of the facing, and some neatly trimmed hedges added formality. Colorful banners of the King's insignia flapped in the breeze; a black arrow over a compass rose of yellow, orange and reds. It was attractive, and certainly the symbolism was obvious enough. Descendants of the dragon slayer, and a center of trade for north, south, east and west.

A delegation waited to meet them, and care for their horses; those numbering among their escort would set up camp in the empty field. Clearly this had not been the first use of this space; Nenni's observant eye caught fire rings set into the turf at regular intervals. Thranduil elegantly dismounted and held his arms up to his wife. It was easier and far more elegant to have him lower her to the ground, at which point he offered his arm to her. Glorfindel did the same for Thaliel, and so it went also for Lord and Lady Penlor. Beren immediately found his place under his mistress' hand. Tauriel stood among them as well. There was no need for shouting or orders; everyone knew their tasks. The Royal Tent would be erected, regardless of it being anticipated that they would be lodged inside King Brand's home; one never knew.

One who appeared to serve as a head butler greeted them and led them into the grand home, of which the elves instantly approved. Unlike the Master's dwelling in Esgaroth, that screamed a little too loudly of an attempt to flaunt prestige, this was suitably grand while being tasteful. Rich carpets covered polished wooden floors, while works of art on the walls portrayed scenes of natural beauty. Though, there were portraits of the rulers; Girion, Bard, Bain, and now Brand. They were
led into a reception room where no further attempts at formality were displayed. King Brand appeared swiftly to greet his honored guests, and when they were announced an unusual concession was made.

Brand bowed humbly to Thranduil. "Welcome, my Lord and Lady, to Dale. I am deeply honored to be visited by such esteemed guests. I hope that I may offer you and yours lodging in my home, and an invitation to dine with me as long as you see fit to remain."

Thranduil dipped his head lightly in acknowledgement of the courtesy. "We would be pleased to accept your hospitality," Thranduil said. He next introduced them in turn. All were unknown to King Brand, save Tauriel, but with considerable gratification Nenni did not miss the flaring of his eyes when her Ada was introduced. Apparently all of Ennor knew the name of the great Elflord, and it pleased her greatly to see him accorded this honorable recognition. The King himself stood tall for a man, only a few inches shorter than Glorfindel. He was brown-haired and blue eyed, though that shoulder-length hair was shot through with streaks of gray. As was his beard, which he kept neatly trimmed and groomed into something like a goatee and mustache. While she had never preferred facial hair on males, it at least could look attractive when well-manicured. Otherwise, it unfortunately had a tendency to harbor...too many...things. Things of an undesirable nature...

Brand's clothing was luxurious but understated. Clearly the material was costly, but it was worn with neatness and not excessive ornamentation. Long, modest garments were common here as elsewhere; trousers of fine gray wool were covered by a long surcoat of emerald green, ornamented with gold thread. A tunic of gray silk was belted by rich leather, and on his head rested a simple yet elegant crown. This ornament was reminiscent of one from the Middle Ages, to Nenni's thinking. Made of both mithril and yellow gold that wove in an openwork band, four points each held a different gem: Sapphire, ruby, emerald and diamond. Mostly, though, the Elvenqueen keyed in on something different. The trappings meant little to her; she was far more interested in how it felt to be near him.

He projected strength without hubris, calm and sincerity. That he showed them deference curried her favor, but these observations were filed away for further consideration. There was much to be discovered, about why this man's decisions had enabled the debacle that was Esgaroth. And apparently this was on his mind as well. With a slightly sheepish expression, he spoke again. "I have heard far too much, about what has befallen you whilst you journeyed," he said hesitantly. "You are owed the courtesy of answers, and yet I would be remiss not to offer you the refreshment of your rooms, first. Perhaps once you have had a moment to gain some comfort, we might speak?"

He seemed to be addressing all of them, still uncertain about their roles or status. Fortunately, he was saved the bother of wondering further. "I believe we would appreciate that," Nenni said, looking at him directly. "A place where myself, my King, and Commander Tauriel might speak with you privately, perhaps?" Her words were kindly spoken but left no doubt. As badly as she wished to include Glorfindel, it would not have been appropriate. As it was, he would hear all that transpired through her. Ordinarily she might have remained silent, but Thranduil knew why his wife had chosen to speak. And after the experiences to which he had already been witness between his Queen and human males, it was just as well that she claim her authority at the outset.

"It will be as you wish, my Lady," he said with a dip of his head. If it surprised her, that he spoke to her as an equal, she gave no indication but only returned the gesture. "Bernand and Heltha will show you to your rooms." He gestured to the same man they had already met, and woman who, based on her neat, uniformed attire, was likely some equivalent of head chambermaid. Heltha gestured politely to Lord and Lady Sadronniel, as well as Thaliel and Commander Tauriel, to please follow. Bernand did the same, with greater deference, to the rest of them.
Perhaps it is the diadems, Nenni mused.

Behave yourself, iellig, Glorfindel returned, though his tone was merry.

Always, Ada. At least, when duty requires it. A brief look of pure love was given him, before her mask of formality quickly dropped back into place. It turned out they had adjoining chambers which became a suite by the use of an ornate door, and whether it was left open or closed. A richly appointed bedroom that quite possibly outstripped their own for finery was shown them; a door separated this from a large sitting room with many comforts. A warm hearth, fresh flowers, wine and freshly prepared treats and sweetmeats sat next to a small platter of cheeses and a kind of bread that Nenni charmingly thought had more in common with a rustic baguette, than anything else. Opening one more door revealed a similarly appointed sleeping room for Glorfindel. For cleanliness, all was much as in Imladris; there were closets with indoor plumbing for life's necessities, but a ewer and basin along with cloths for ablutions seemed to be how one kept bathed. Really, everything was quite lovely.

"I am to ask if the Lords and Lady wish the services of valets or a lady's maid," the man inquired formally. "Please forgive our ignorance of your customs."

"Not for me, thank you," Glorfindel replied kindly. "But I am grateful for the courtesy."

"My Queen and I will also not find this necessary," said Thranduil, standing tall and proud.

"My Lords. My Lady," the man replied, bowing deeply to them. "In an hour's time I shall return, to guide Your Majesties to His Majesty."

Eru, what a mouthful, Nenni could not help but think, though she dipped her head with grave courtesy. Soon the outer door was closed, and the three of them relaxed, looking around and smiling.

"I will assume it is safe to drink the wine here," Thranduil said, rolling his eyes. "I am not particularly looking forward to this discussion," he noted, "but at least there is refreshment." Glorfindel laughed and poured for all three of them. The King drank deeply and appreciatively. "Either my reputation precedes me, or our host knows his vintages."

Nenni tried hers, and her eyes widened. "Perhaps a little of both, my King, but I would say forty percent the former, and sixty percent the latter. This is the equal of the best I have had since coming to you. Do you agree?"

"I am afraid I do," he said ruefully. "And I really must task Penlor with obtaining some of it."

They washed their faces and hands, enjoyed a few of the foodstuffs (Nenni particularly appeared deeply impressed with the gloriously sharp cheeses), and appreciated their wine, seated near the fire. The hour flew by all too quickly.

*****

"He openly confessed to trying to poison all of you?" Brand paled visibly. The soldier who had been dispatched by Thranduil to King Brand some days ago had been given exact and minimal words to relate to the King of Dale.

"He had little to gain from further deception," said Nenni. "What intrigued me more was the fiasco of all those loyal to him chasing us down with poisoned weaponry, apparently with some notion of fulfilling his original intention. Those men kept the good townspeople in fear and want. Children, lacking food and decent clothing. I am sorry to say the Master was paid back deservedly for his
choices." The Queen rose to her feet, pacing slowly near where they conversed, seeking to still her emotions.

"Perhaps it would be better if I asked you to summarize the totality of your experiences with those of my subjects," Brand asked. Uncomfortably. "Please know that I am deeply troubled, and...sorry." He looked down for a moment, before raising his eyes. "My Lord Thranduil, behind closed doors I can speak freely to you the things I cannot afford heard otherwise." The man's gaze fell on the beauty and sense of power embodied in the elves before him. "Compared to you, I am as...nothing. My people name me King and I do my best to meet my obligations to them...yet I am little better than a city mayor, sandwiched between two realms of enduring might. I will not put on airs before you, who have lived and ruled since before fifty generations of my sires were ever born."

Thranduil dipped his head in acknowledgement of the courtesy, and proceeded to do as the man asked. With conciseness Nenni envied, he itemized all that had befallen them, from the first debacle of Stathard and Einur's request for an audience in his Halls to the improbable orc attack upon the imprisoned men.

Brand rose out of his chair to pace around as well, agitated at all he had just learned, leaving Thranduil and Tauriel as the only ones still calmly seated. Seeing this and being drawn to it, Nenni quietly returned to her place next to her husband, and laid a hand on his forearm. This was immediately covered by his own palm, with gentle pressure and reassurance. Thranduil's eyes did not leave off following Brand for even a second. "I believe we would now like to hear what transpired on your end," the Elvenking asked.

"They came to me, perhaps a year ago," Brand responded slowly, hating the memory. "They offered both enticements and veiled threats, and seemed to ask so little. The old town master of Esgaroth had passed on, not long after he had built a fine new home. I was considering who might suffice to manage in his stead. They brought...him, the Master you met, at a time so opportune that I did not question until later that it was all a little too smooth. Too convenient. They wanted him appointed, and Einur vouched for his capability. I will confess to you now that I also fell to the enticements of their coin. And fear. We are peaceful here, my Lord, and it was made very plain that if I resisted that their wishes, the consequences would not be nearly so palatable. I have no expert fighting force at my command; only a volunteer militia of sorts. We were not to mention any of this to the Dwarves; it did not concern them. Nothing at all was said about you. Though we trade with you..." he looked helplessly at Thranduil. "I ask your pardon, for all that has befallen you. This was my failing, my naivete. I let myself believe that it was all inconsequential. And that Einur....they were as a group of unruly children, as to how things were managed. I thought that if I gave them enough rope, they would manage to hang themselves with it." He shook his head and resumed his seat.

"No word reached you, of the conditions in Esgaroth?" Thranduil probed. He was certain he was being told the truth, but after their near-assassination he felt determined to ensure that it was a complete truth.

"It had," Brand admitted miserably. "It reached my ears that they had sent soldiers that were loyal to the Master. He had more of a military force than I. Commander Tauriel, when you came and told us of what had transpired with the Master's deputy and...whoever the others were, I felt perturbed but did not feel safe in speaking of all that I knew. I hoped that the Master was blundering badly somehow and that it would....all go away somehow. But please believe me, I did not know that it had become so bad as that for those in Esgaroth. Did not know, because I did not want to know. I am ashamed."
"And if I may ask, who are 'they'?' Nenni inquired. "What do you know of who these ones were?"

Thranduil now paid very close attention indeed. "Men from the south. South even of Gondor, were I to guess. Their words made it apparent that they were emissaries that served other men. Their skin was swarthy, their manner cold and cruel. I will not try to dissemble; they were frightening. They had the air of persons prepared to do anything to have their own way. Anything at all..." he trailed off.

"War will come, Brand," Thranduil said, holding the man's eyes with his own. "These small events were the merest taste of what will arrive, sooner or later. I know that you cannot recall the great battle your grandsire survived, but I can. Darkness rises again in the south, and the same horrors that were visited on this region once will return again. It is in part for this reason that we make this excursion. We must all work together, lest any fall. It has not always been thus, between Men and Elves and Dwarves. Yet I hope it may become so again."

Nenni pitied the man, and how his features crumbled in the face of these words from her King. "What would you have me do?"

"Prepare," said Nenni. "Secure stores of food for your people to hide, and last as long as possible. We are working to fill our storerooms with grains. Gather medicines, blankets, the things needed if all else is destroyed. Hide them where they will not be found. Determine now, where your young and old and weak might safely hide and seek shelter."

"If you wish it, we can offer some training of your citizens as to combat," Thranduil said, looking meaningfully at his Commander. "They should have decent weapons, and some armor as well. But more importantly, the skill and confidence to use them."

"It is my belief that we yet have a few years," the Queen spoke carefully. "Time in which to ease the blow that will surely come."

"You might consider tighter security for your city as well," Tauriel opined. "You have sturdy walls. Defensible ones. Perhaps it is also time to monitor more carefully who comes and goes. Guard your gates. Appoint watchmen. Record the arrivals and departures of those who hail from distant places."

Brand nodded carefully. "I can see that we also need more regular communication," he sighed. "I will withdraw soon, but see you at our evening meal. I know you mean to press on to Erebor, but before you depart I very much wish to have the outline of an agreement between us, if it suits you. I have had my failings as a Leader, but ever we have tried to help and protect our people. If this is to be, then I would be a fool to ignore your warning and your counsel. While I must maintain appearances of autonomy to my people, Lord Thranduil, you will find me heavily inclined to accept your advice. At this point I feel I owe it to you, even were it not the right thing to do."

Nenni blinked. Was it really going to be this easy, when Esgaroth had been so hard? Hope for the best, expect the worst. And yet.... "There is another matter, my Lord," the Queen said, looking squarely at Brand. "Stathard and Einur are yet in our custody; they are yours to judge."

"Einur...." Brand muttered, massaging his forehead.

Nenni was not making a fully successful job of keeping all forms of smirking off of her face, as she pondered what she herself would devise for the man. It assuredly would not be pleasant, or dignified. Her smile broadened, though she was unawares, as her mental fantasy unfolded and expanded. At least, before reality intruded.
"What would you do, to punish him, my Lady?" Brand asked.

When she did not answer right away, Thranduil gently squeezed her hand. "Hiril vuin?" he asked aloud, smiling because he knew exactly where her thoughts were.

"Pardon me?" she said, her reverie breaking. "Please forgive me, my attention wandered," Nenni admitted, blushing sheepishly. "I did not hear your question, King Brand."

He could not help but smile at the charming beauty seated near him, who seemed veiled in...unusualness. "I asked, my Lady, what you would do to punish him, were the choice yours?" he repeated kindly.

She hesitated, weighing how appropriate it would be to speak on this matter. It was not helping at all, that she still could not fully control her facial expression. Finally she shook her head and grinned broadly. "With the understanding that this remains behind closed doors and that I cannot accept responsibility should you actually do this..." Her eyes were lifted to lock with his in all seriousness. "To punish Einur, I would appoint Stathard as Master of Esgaroth. The actions of Stathard were the result of need, as opposed to greed. He had courage enough to manfully accept that he would be judged, and I have reason to believe that he did not know anything of the greater forces at work. He spoke honestly to Lord Glorfindel when questioned. I believe that despite his mistakes, he has integrity. Certainly he was not in favor of the ill turn of affairs that had developed in the town, or the former Master. Beyond that, I believe Einur is dangerous. Not in the classic sense of having skill with weapons, but as a vessel of cowardly greed and malice. I wish I could tell you how to help such a one, but I cannot. Whatever you choose for him, I would advise that it involve careful oversight. Left to his own devices or returned to Esgaroth, I believe he will yet find a way to cause further harm."

"I am afraid I agree," said Brand, in reference to her latter observations. "We do not maintain a large prison here, but we do have one. Into it both of them shall go, while I weigh your words. Your warriors have doubtless been charged with their oversight for far too long; as soon as we are done here, perhaps I could persuade Commander Tauriel to oversee their transfer to our cells." Nenni saw the Commander incline her head with only the faintest trace of a smile.

Brand sighed. "If there is no more you wish to address, I believe we might conclude this discussion. Our meal will be served in perhaps two hours, after which you can rest in greater comfort if it please you?"

Thranduil bowed. "I would like to depart here with a solid arrangement between us, King Brand. Perhaps tomorrow I can charge Commander Tauriel to work with whomever you designate, with a view to an acceptable implementation of what we have discussed? I have absolute trust in her organizational skills, and should more time be required, we are not far from Erebor. I have received word from Dain that our arrival is hoped-for in the afternoon tomorrow, at which time we will be pressing on."

"Of course, my Lord. That would be most satisfactory." With polite nods, all of them rose and went their separate ways. In a matter of moments, they were securely in their rooms. For whatever reason, a lingering impression of doubt fell over Nenni. Something told her, not to speak aloud.

*"I too feel it, meleth," she heard from Thranduil. *Something is not fully right here, though I cannot say what.*

*Brand seemed fair in speech and thought, but why does my heart warn me otherwise? I cannot say why I believe this is so, my Lord, but there is something here that reminds me of Dennis, on Earth. That one would always tell you what you wanted to hear, in words that made him seem so utterly*
believable. For years I told myself to disregard the little warnings of my heart, and look where it got me.

It was not your fault, Adonnenniel. There is no honor, in what he did to you.

Glorfindel emerged from his room at that moment, and Nenni felt compelled to seek refuge in him. There was both a fear and hatred of liars and manipulators, and while she could not be fully certain Brand was either, the threat of it alone was enough. The older elf embraced her, and sat to draw her into his lap, where she gratefully curled up.

The Elflord's voice flared in both their minds. I have not Thranduil's gifts, but some facet of my insight tells me that there is a sentience nearer to us than should be. Which is to say, a person. There is some possibility we are being surveilled.

Thranduil closed his eyes, sitting across from his wife to make a pretense of taking her feet into his hands. The reality was somewhat different. There is a man, he said. Where the gauzy white fabric hangs against the wall, there is a device to open a hole there. Behind it, he watches and listens. Then at the very least, we should converse somewhat, else this will be thought most peculiar, admonished Nenni, who was not about to move. "I though King Brand was very pleasant," Nenni murmured. "It sounded as though he has had a rough time of it, with all that has transpired."

"Ruling is always a rough time, wife," Thranduil chuckled.

"I disagree, my Lord," Nenni answered. "Ruling is not always straightforward. It is not like battle; see an Orc, kill an Orc. There are nuances."

"You sound like Maethirion."

"Then I will take that as a compliment; for Maethirion is sharply observant and accurate in his assessments."

Glorfindel chuckled. "And I am keeping out of this. I wonder, what will they have for dinner?"

"Food," Nenni teased. "But let us find something lighthearted. Do you have your poems with you, Ada? The ones in the older speech?" Even here, she would not utter the word 'Quenya' aloud. Though, why they were still speaking in Westron, she had no idea. Oops.

"I do," he answered, drawing the small book from his robes. Glorfindel began to read the lovely poems aloud, calling to mind the valley of Tumladen and the mouth of the Sirion, in beautiful Beleriand lost beneath the seas. His daughter happily lost herself in the verses, while Thranduil appeared to listen to the tongue he did not understand but in reality considered at length the possible reasons for what they had seen and heard.

As they made their way to the evening meal, Glorfindel's aid was enlisted to silently inform all others in their company of what they had discovered. Basically, that while they were not believed to be in danger, that all was not well here and to assume that they were being spied upon in the 'privacy' of their quarters. And that should anything go amiss, that they were to call out to him in their thoughts. They were far from helpless; Thranduil knew that for all his long service as a Lord, Penlor still knew the business end of a knife and that they were ensconced in his boots. All of them, save Vanafindiel, were armed in some manner or other, though not visibly.

Glorfindel, as much as it grieves me to ask this of you...
...You wish me to look into him, Thranduil?

That we were being watched in such a manner violates every rule of hospitality and speaks of worse intentions yet. I would rather not forsake any advantage, especially given the sum of our experiences since nearing these lands.

I do not disagree, if for no other reason than the safety of you and my daughter. That being said, do not discount the possibility that what was done was not at Brand's command.

You speak justly. I am attempting to suspend the tendency to jump to conclusions. Though, this is beginning to feel much like the layers of an onion-root.

Indeed.

The meal was pleasant enough, and Glorfindel was humorously able to tell Nenni that if they were being poisoned, it was at least not at Brand's command. Which her sense of humor found to be strangely reassuring. King Brand made lighthearted inquiries about Nenni's preferences, and by way of answer found himself forced to listen to the Queen's interest in flowers and plants. Though, she did not press it too far. Only a minute past the point where his eyes glazed over, in her own version of retribution. Glorfindel informed both of them of what he had gauged of Brand's thoughts. Which to sum up, amounted to a man fighting to keep his options open and play both sides of the field, so to speak. He very much wanted to curry Thranduil's favor, but he equally thought he could seek to appease his dangerous acquaintances from the south rather than risk open challenge. In short, he was not malicious so much as foolish, to not understand that this game could not be played forever.

Once back in their rooms, for whatever reason, she did not feel safe. In the end, with both apologies and pleas, she asked if she could sleep between both ellyn, with Beren near her feet. Thranduil understood what was happening, even if Glorfindel did not. Once his wife slept, he silently told the Elflord more of what Nenni had endured in her time on Earth, guessing that she had never spoken to him of the specifics of how her trust in herself had been so badly eroded and damaged. Glorfindel's pity and anger blazed in equal measure, as he listened. After much discussion, Thranduil was thanked. Their arms met over her body as they clasped each other's arms, before lowering to protectively hold her while they rested.

*****

The next day dawned clear and sunny, and after a servant provided a breakfast in their quarters, they were informed that the King would be pleased to lunch with them before their departure, having appointments and business to which he must currently attend. And that perhaps they would enjoy themselves in the markets of Dale?

"Shopping?" Nenni said, her eyebrows arched, after being reassured quietly that they were indeed alone.

"You do not like to go to markets?" Glorfindel asked in disbelief. Even he had greatly enjoyed the daily markets in Gondolin, where he could examine everything from apples to arrows at his leisure, and greet new elves and old friends alike.

"I should not form an opinion," she said. "On Earth, it was not my favorite pursuit. I have not ever seen a market in this world, though. And what would I do if I wanted something? Is there money, here? I have no idea how to transact for so much as a fruit tart."

"There is money," laughed Glorfindel, pitying how little she knew. Having lived long in Ennor, he
had seen a great deal of them. In the summer months, there was even one in Imladris; the caravans of peaceable traveling merchants would arrive in the valley, selling articles of clothing, decoration, ornaments...really, it was quite nice. They might remain a week, before heading west toward Bree-land and all the small settlements along the way. "It is by weights of metals, iellig. Twenty coppers equal a silver. Twenty silvers equal a gold. They are discs, easy enough to carry and acknowledged as a currency by all the free peoples of Ennorath. Of course there is barter, should one have something with which to do that."

"You forgot one," Thranduil chimed in. "Twenty gold equals a mithril."

"True," conceded the Elflord. "But having one of those in my pocket was a rarity indeed, however generous the Lord Elrond is to those in his service."

Thranduil flushed a little, at this comment. Nenni smiled at him, and gave him a chaste kiss on the lips. It was not his fault, that he was richer than Midas. Though likely, not as rich as those about to be their hosts. He cleared his throat. "It is quite simple, meleth. You are my Queen. You will be provided with a suitable purse of coin to take with you. Should you wish for something in excess of what is in your purse, you are simply to arrange the purchase and inform Tinivel of it prior to our departure. The merchant will likely be too glad to provide the receipt with his or her stall number. It will be cared for."

"Hm," she said, eyebrows raised. "A credit card with no limit." She shrugged. So rarely did she want anything, it was hard to imagine what might possibly tempt her.

Thranduil sent his Queen with Tinivel and Glorfindel, citing the need to confer with Commander Tauriel at length and having no interest in the market past the wine stalls--and that was what Penlor was for. He and Vanafindiel would also go, to examine the wares and the current state of prosperity, and a guard of four warriors would accompany them. Beren, who had slept through basically everything yesterday was to stay with Thranduil. This was mostly to not cause a scene, with the gigantic hound in a crowded place where food would be sold. That had the potential to be a very bad idea.

Dale, it turned out, was the ultimate for people-watching. The first vendor they encountered was a diminutive dwarf. As Nenni's eyes took in the...dress and bosom and beard? of the Dwarrowdam, she had to fight with all her ability to not stare.

Dwarf women have beards, she reminded herself.

Given her own adversity to body hair, this truly struck her as some kind of fate worse than death, even though she knew that to their race, there was no such thing as enough of it. But more than that, something came back to her. Markets. Farmer's markets. Hours standing there, smiling when one did not wish to, hoping that a friendly face might bring a customer, and perchance a sale.

Do you remember what it felt like, to be there for long hours in the hot sun, knowing that the ones who came to see your fruits and vegetables could more than afford it, but would turn their noses up because they felt the supermarket sold the same things? The same ones that would say how wonderful it was to have a market to visit, but never spend a half-dollar on a fig? The Little Voice was speaking rather insistently. Do you remember spending ten hours working, only to earn fifty dollars?

I remember, Nenni admitted. Though I had wished to forget.

At her side, Glorfindel listened in wonder, but said nothing. Her reverie was interrupted. "Glondis, at your service," said the dwarrowdam politely.

"Adonnenniel, at yours and your family's" she answered while inclining her head, having actually no clear idea what tangle of functioning neurons could possibly have remembered the proper
response. "What are these, please?" The objects on the table between them baffled her. They appeared to be of silver, some set with gems, but what did they do?

The dwarf picked one up. "For the little ones, my Lady." Shaking it produced a rattling noise.

The Queen's cheeks flushed faintly. *A baby rattle...because anyone else in the universe would know that. At least I know I still qualify for the Dismal Mother Award.* Aloud she said only, "They are very lovely. How much is this one?" Her finger hovered near a rattle with a gem she supposed might be amber or topaz; the color seemed a little like vomit, honestly.

The dwarf eyed her carefully. "Amber, seven silvers," came the reply.

Nenni realized, she had no barometer of what things ought to cost in this world. Did they haggle, here? She had no wish to be rude, and she did not mind making purchases that might buy goodwill in turn, but not at the risk of naively overpaying...and some sellers would ask for the moon, hoping the buyer would be dumb enough not to bargain. "And the one with the purple stone?" Her face remained a mask of vague curiosity, though this was the piece she wished to have; the reddish purple color was perfection itself.

'Amethyst. Three silvers."

"And the green?"

"Emerald, much more costly," Glondis declared. "Twelve silvers."

"Thank you, for answering my questions," Nenni said with sincerity, moving away from the stall.

"Wait!" Glondis exclaimed. "Two silvers less, on any of them, if you are interested."

The vague note of desperation in her voice was unmistakable, and it caused Nenni and those with her to pause. The Queen returned to the table, tilting her head and speaking softly. "What are you charged, to have a space at this market? Do you pay a stall fee?"

The dwarrowdam's eyes darted furtively to each side, to see who might be near. "Twenty percent of my sales, or at a minimum, ten coppers each day. I only come once a week. These are the extra pieces my husband makes, and is permitted by King Dain to sell solely for our family's income."

"Twenty percent seems high," Nenni frowned. "Is it?"

"Yes," said the dwarf in very quiet tones. "But it is a busy market, and many who come here have wealth. On a day that I can sell a few pieces, it offsets the high fee and we can add the coin to our savings."

Nenni smiled wryly. "Then I accept your offer. Here is your one silver, since I wished for the one with the purple stone." Right away, the rattle was placed in a small bag of felt, that would keep it from tarnishing, and handed over in exchange for the coin. Nenni paused, placing two other coins discreetly under one of the rattles. "And here are the other two, which is what I know you need to ask for the piece to make the profit you desire. Since the sale price of the rattle was one silver, you can honestly only be charged twenty percent of that. The other two coins are for the pleasure I will have at seeing this in my daughter's hand, and remembering making your acquaintance. I wish you a pleasant day."

Astonished, Glondis bowed low, whisking the extra coin away in a manner not detectable to anyone watching. She knew who this had been; all of Erebor was abuzz with the expected arrival of the elven rulers. Word had gone out that the Elvenking's wife had hair of burnished copper; this
and the diadem she wore left few other possibilities. What she had not expected to find was such kindness of heart. How could a Queen understand selling in a market? And yet she had; the two silver coins now safely in her pocket were free and clear. It had already been a very good day.

As they drifted along to see what else was of interest, she heard him in her mind.

*That was very well done, iellig. I am both proud and impressed. So much that I will even overlook your harsh assessment of yourself at not recognizing a rattle.*

*Your oblique chastisement is duly noted, dear Ada. But even you have to admit, it is pathetic that I did not know.*

*I will allow that many ellith would have recognized such an object, and that is the best you will get from me.*

*Fair enough.* Her eyes raised to look at him; for a moment she allowed an expression of purest love to go out to him, before her public mask fell back into place. "I confess I have no idea what to look for, here," she confided to Tinivel, who seemed mildly overwhelmed at the crowds and busy streets. "We have fruits and vegetables. Plenty of plates and cups, too. Our King has someone managing the wine....really, what is left?" As they rounded a corner, an instrument maker's stall greeted her eyes. "No, no, no. You have enough things to play and you have instrument makers. Just, no. And yet she could not completely control her curiosity. There were small harps and what she would have called a zither. Lutes and carved wooden flutes. Perhaps back home, she should ask about a small harp. Not to have, but to try...but who am I kidding? At some point there will be a violin, and there is still the piano. Only so many hours in the day exist to practice music; I need another instrument like I need a hole in the head.*

With a light shake of her head, she moved herself along. Truly, it seemed hopeless, until they arrived at the glassblower's stall. "Tinivel," Nenni asked in Sindarin, "as far as you know do we have a glassblower in the Halls?"

"No, Hiril vuin. All of our wares are earthen; whatever shaped glass exists in the Realm, such as the fine goblets Aran Thranduil has or mirrors, would have been purchased elsewhere."

Nenni's eyebrows raised. They never seemed to have enough vases, and there was Tinivel's upcoming marriage. Perhaps their faithful caretaker would appreciate the luxury of a mirror, for their home? They had been here well over an hour now, and all she had managed to want was a single small item. After conferring with Thaliel and Glorfindel, two beautiful wine glasses in many swirling colors were chosen for Tinivel and Galion, in addition to a mirror framed with metalworking that certainly appeared to be of dwarven make. On her insistence, the ElfLord chose five vases of assorted sizes that pleased him most, heavy and well-made. And in the end, one last item caught her eye. A pendant on a golden chain of glass with an iridescent material embedded in the layers. In the sunlight it glinted in brilliant colors of emerald, and even in dimmer light seemed to have its own illumination. This was placed by her around Thaliel's neck, where it shone with the same brilliance of her eyes. "I would like you to have this, if it would please you," the Queen said softly.

A happy smile and a nod were all she needed to see. No other wares she could see seemed necessary; the merchant was paid and with the exception of the necklace, arrangements were made for the purchases to be crated with straw and delivered to their retinue at King Brand's...home. Tinivel lingered behind, having seen a stall selling apothecary's items, and it was decided that two guards would remain with her, while they returned.

Nenni did not feel sorry, when on their return it was unnecessary to re-enter Brand's palace. Having been spied on, whether by his command or not, was beyond crass and creepy. That the guest
quarters had obviously been constructed with a view to this being possible, was even further down the path to the cesspool, in her estimation. Had they been...ordinary, they might have made love right in full view of whoever it was that chose to be the voyeur. Either way, all of it was sickening and the man was resoundingly fallen from her favor. Three insults to them that were directly or indirectly caused by the mortal ruler were more than enough for her. With relief, they sought their tent, which currently lacked their beds but the rest of the furnishings for their comfort were present.

Nenni sat on the sofa, pleading with both her eyes and her thoughts for Glorfindel to sit with her.

"What troubles you?" His question was simple enough, but she was not finding it so easy to answer.

*I will try.* *I thought the hard part of this visit would be going to Erebor. As in, the thing we are about to do next. I truly did not believe that we would have so much drama and intrigue among men. I thought all that would somehow be with the dwarves. My thoughts are muddled, and I am...very disappointed at the sum of what we have encountered so far outside of our Halls.*

*It has ever been thus, while Morgoth and Sauron remain undefeated, Adonnenniel.* He pulled her against him, and rubbed her back. *Try to imagine the feelings you are having now, but directed at your fellow elves. This and worse, even. Much worse.*

The sudden awareness came, of what he meant. *I apologize; I did not mean to sound as though my troubles mattered, in the wider world. I am not sure I could have managed to live through all that you saw. In fact I would guess that it would have broken me utterly. I think I only want some comfort, Ada. I know it is childish. But when I sit here with you, I feel like I can manage. Because you are strong. I know I am not explaining myself very well.*

*On the contrary. I understand better than you think, now that you have used those words.*

No more was spoken between them, as she rested in the love and sense of strength he provided. It was still so, so new. A father to turn to, not turn from. With eyes closed, all her thought became a prayer to the Valar in thanks for him.

Glorfindel held her, and wondered. He was beginning to see threads, connections where none were obvious before. Time would tell.

Some inner sense caused her to break from her retreat and rise, only moments before the return of Thranduil. "All is as settled as it ever will be, here," he smiled. If there were hints of sarcasm in his voice, who could blame him? "And now we can move on. The distance is quite short, but after the sum of our experiences, we will move all of our retinue to outside the gates of Erebor. Are you ready?"

"Yes," Nenni smiled, trying to suppress a sense of giddiness. It was hard to believe, she would see with her own eyes one of the great Dwarven realms of this world. With eyes shining in happy anticipation, she followed after her husband. "Whatever else happens, Thranduil, thank you for this."

He laughed. "It is I who should thank you, Adonnenniel. Were it not for you, we would not be doing this. And if nothing else, I can see how very badly we need to be doing this. Assuredly, this will be better than the last time I visited."

Looking at Glorfindel, who had followed them out, she grinned. The Elflord raised his eyebrows. *Eru. If nothing else, this was going to be interesting.*
If anyone was sorry to depart Dale, it was news to her. The shenanigans to which they had collectively been exposed had pleased none of them. Later, Nenni was sure she would hear what Tauriel had made of Brand's 'interest' in their offer of assistance by way of strengthening his city's defenses. As they rode on, seated tall on Tálagor's back, she spoke to her husband. 

Was he simply a complete and utter liar, or did he half-believe the things he was saying to us? Brand, I mean. You seem to be more phlegmatic about the sum of our experiences than I.

I will confess to feeling shamelessly entitled to abuse my gifts, this visit. I do not think all of what he said was untruthful. In fact, I am not certain anything he said to us was an outright falsehood. But he does not have the lordly manner of his grandsire. I will stop short of calling him a coward, but I will opine that he is...slippery. He ever keeps shifting his footing, seeking the firmest ground upon which to stand. His allegiance and his integrity waver to and fro. He believes he can navigate his current problems by playing both sides, by avoiding making firm choices. He was given what counsel I am willing to give. We can and will offer help that is wanted. What I agree to, with him, is done with my eyes wide open to the inconstancy of his thinking.

Then what good is any of it? Any of our helping him, I mean.

Maybe no good at all, as of this exact moment. But there is yet time. Much will be revealed, with this visit to the dwarves. It is very much my hope, to strengthen ties with Dáin against what is to come. Unlike with Brand, I have no fear that the dwarf King is lending an ear to men from the south. Quite the contrary, he would give them a most rude reception. The dwarves have no love of Sauron or his ilk. Like our own people, they know the high price of hoping evil will stand still and pass them by. If nothing else, I can count on a certain soundness of reasoning, in Erebor. I would like to trap Brand between two pressures that will prove greater than the ones he has faced so far. It does not matter how he is made to discover his fortitude, so long as he does.

Hm. I understand, but you will forgive my lack of favorable impression. The petulant part of me wishes to indulge it awhile longer.

You really do not approve of him, do you? the King teased gently.

I do not. We had a saying, on Earth. Please forgive the unrefined nature of this comment, but a male should not allow someone else to keep his testicles in a jar, and ask them back only on occasion. And that goes for females too.

A choking sound came from the side of them, where Glorfindel was attempting to keep his composure.

Sorry, Ada.

Females? I will likely regret this, but now I must ask.
Well, there was yet another saying, Nenni explained. 'My imaginary balls are bigger than your real ones.' Testicles are a state of mind, Hîr vuin. One has them, or one does not, regardless of actual gender.

Thranduil pondered that dwarves might be the least of his concerns.

*****

Assembled there was what she would later think of as an organized fanfare, as they approached the gates to the Dwarf kingdom. The damage that must have occurred from the dragon and the war had been repaired, and the scale of the ramparts astonished her. Their own Halls were large and exquisitely beautiful and ethereal as all things elven were, but the size here...it baffled. Not that great amounts of time were allowed for the consideration of such matters or generalized gawking. In what would be a polar opposite of their arrival at Imladris, all their mounts had to be cared for with ceremony; each horse was led away by dwarven grooms to the underground stables.

Tálagor created a serious obstacle for their hosts' preparations, as with his antler spread he could not fit anywhere at all that involved a doorway. In the end it was agreed that he would simply roam free for the duration of their visit in the nearby wide grasslands; he was never out of earshot anyway. So in the end, his trappings were taken away and he trotted off proudly to graze a short distance off.

And there was an order of procession. The King and Queen would enter first for the formal reception before Dáin, and then greet those of the Royal Household. Then the nobles and ones with rank, followed by their elven guard who would both escort their rulers as well as bear the gifts long prepared.

So it was that with her insides twisted up in another knot of sheer disbelief, Nenni found herself about to traverse the long stone walkway, pleading in her mind for her husband to reduce his characteristic long, confident strides. Both so that she could have a chance to see, and not appear as a small child trying to keep up with him. He paused, and gave her a look of pure love that took her breath away for its sincerity. To her surprise, he offered not his arm but his hand, and her fingers gratefully laced into his. A brilliant smile lit up her face to see this unexpected affection at a time she imagined he would prefer greater formality. They did walk slowly, though she did not allow herself to look all around like a lost schoolgirl. It had been how many months ago that she had told him of her wish to see this kingdom, and now it was a reality?

The oddest mood came over her. I just want to find friends here. No poisons, no weirdness. Friends. And fellowship. Please do not let that be too much to ask. From behind, Glorfindel laid a large hand gently on her shoulder in brief reassurance. A brief twist of her body allowed her to see and smile at the beautiful Elflord, and the blue gem that blazed at his brow. With a tug at her hand, and eyes that drank in his wife's unassuming beauty, Thranduil playfully plucked a single blossom from her crown, and handed it back to her. What he meant was not certain, but her interpretation of his gesture was certainly unhesitating. As they walked forward, the flower multiplied as she wished it to, until they were both standing some few yards from the throne of the Dwarf King. She knew that she was not to bow or curtsey or really do much of anything, since according to protocol Dáin was her equal and not her superior. While she stood there, meeting his eyes, the peerless blossoms massed into a chain that spread between her hands. With a warm smile, she stepped forward tentatively, extending her arms to offer them; waiting to see if the advance was welcome.

The old King met Thranduil's eyes with a neutral courtesy, baffled to see the Elvenking smiling warmly in greeting. And then he observed carefully the Elvenqueen, and it was all he could do to keep his composure. There was a loveliness, of a like not often seen. Beauty without pretense, but
moreover a visible kindness of spirit...and an obvious magical gift. He watched as these glowing flowers, the same as on her crown, grew and were offered to him. Later on he would wonder what came over him, that he reached out a hand to indicate his willingness to accept them from her. A dazzling smile graced her face when he did this. The blossoms were carefully placed into his powerful grasp, before she reversed her steps to take Thranduil's hand once again. Together, they inclined their heads in greeting.

"It's been awhile, Thranduil. Decided to take a walk? Have some fresh air?"

The Elvenking chuckled and smiled. "Indeed. My wife wanted to meet you, and see the magnificence of Erebor. As it has been too long, I could not refuse her. May I introduce my Queen, Adonnenniel?"

Thranduil turned now to Nenni. "And of course, this is Dáin Ironfoot, King Under the Mountain."

"I am at your service," Nenni spoke. This was said quite politely, and with genuine sincerity.

"At yours, and your family's," Dáin answered with an increasing tone of good humor in his voice. He looked up again at Thranduil. "You might've brought her with you last time there was trouble, laddie," he grinned at the Elvenking. "Her skills of appeasement are a few leagues better than yours."

Thranduil chuckled good-naturedly and inclined his head. "A great deal might have gone differently, had my Queen been at my side then," he readily admitted. "But she is here now, and I am grateful." He bowed his tall form to kiss his wife's forehead, clearly besotted, to the amusement and interest of Dáin. "But she is not the only one I must introduce to you. Please meet Adonnenniel's father, Lord Glorfindel." He gestured the golden ellon forward; the Elflord bowed deeply in respect to this ruler. It cost him nothing, and he hoped it would pave the way for future good relations that would prove rather...necessary.

Far in the shadows, unseen, the venerable dwarf Glóin watched and listened with suspicion. He recognized the guardian of Imladris well enough; his face and form were impossible to forget. Though they had been treated well enough in the house of Elrond, he had *not* forgotten their housing at the hands of Thranduil, however many regrets had been hinted at in the intervening years. Why the elves were here, and what they hoped to accomplish or what manner of ingratiaton might be planned...well, he would very much keep his own counsel on this matter.

"And Lord and Lady Penlor." They were brought forward in turn, including Commander Tauriel and Tinivel.

When Tauriel was shown, Dáin cast a critical eye. "A Commander, and yet I do not recall you from the battlefield?" Dáin queried, missing nothing.

Tauriel lowered her head, reminded of a persistent shame. "That is because I committed treason against my King," she said softly. "I fought there, but departed once the fighting was done."

"That is behind us now," Thranduil said adamantly, placing a hand on her shoulder. "While I admire your honest humility, it is a matter to set aside. You did me more good than you will ever know, that day." He released her with a squeeze of affection while Dáin witnessed what certainly appeared to be an unscripted exchange of a rather personal nature. "Enough of dreary remembrances," the Elvenking said with a smile. "We brought presents."

*****
The day was wondrous. Soon the formalities of their reception were set aside, and they were shown the great Kingdom Under the Mountain. Dáin himself elected to undertake this role, if only because he wanted the opportunity to study the elven monarchs closely himself; he would not defer this to his subordinates. They were of course guided through the levels that housed dignitaries and honored guests, all while more information was offered about the general organization of the city and its inhabitants. When the overview was concluded, and all the members of their party settled in their quarters, Dáin turned to the Queen. “And what may this humble servant show his fairest guest? Is there something you would most like to see?” Only she, Thranduil and Glorfindel remained with the Dwarf-King.

Nenni’s eyes lit up happily. “I would like to see the forges most of all.” Of all the things here she especially wondered if these were really like in the movies on Earth. Monstrous smelters and bellows and mecahnical devices of stupendous size, with which to craft metals. “To watch even for a few moments, such skilled smiths at work.”

Dáin looked at her as if he had not heard correctly. Thranduil guessed at his reaction and smiled. “I should have warned you, my wife is less interested in riches or finery. You will find her far more attentive at the crafting of weapons than jewelry.”

“With respect, Thranduil, that is not quite right,” she frowned. “I would be attentive at the crafting of either. It is just that I am for more absorbed in using weapons than wearing jewels. Necklaces and rings do not kill or orcs or trolls. At least, not the ordinary sort,” she frowned. There were exceptions to most rules, here in Ennor.

Dáin laughed. “Lass, there is thinking we can all get behind. You fight?”

“Oh, does she,” Glorfindel said drily. “We try not to anger her.”

“Ada, that is not fair!” Nenni protested. “I am not as bad as I used to be.”

“True,” the Elflord said, smiling merrily. “But it is the privilege of a father to occasionally tease his daughter.”

“I suppose, my Lord.”

“This way,” Dáin indicated, thinking that this visit would prove far more entertaining than he could have originally imagined. It already was, to be fair. “And your preferred weapon?” he asked politely. “Bow?”

“Swords,” she answered. “Just like my husbands’. He taught me.”

“I remember those. Quite impressive, that was, Thranduil.”

The King bowed his head at the compliment. “You were equally so, with your hammer.”

Dáin too now smiled at the nicety. “Come now, before long we will be sending each other flowers,” the dwarf teased, causing Nenni and Glorfindel to burst into laughter that they fought down quickly.

“Flowers are my job,” she pouted.

“Apparently,” Dáin replied, still in wonder at the gift she had given of the glowing golden blossoms. He had ordered these to be placed near his throne; to him they seemed right away as a harbinger of good fortune.
The forges did not disappoint. As she watched the expert smiths work on assorted objects of all description, an epiphany descended: Dwarves were to metal and stone like elves were to plants and animals. And then a few other thoughts came. She could name some elves who had obviously given themselves over to smithing and pursuits that were more the provenance of the children of Aulë. But had any dwarves ever made an earnest attempt to be more...elven? With a measure of sadness, her own answer occurred to her. They had not because they could not. Whether by intention or otherwise, the gift of Eru to their people was...time. Time, and a certain grace that drew them to the living parts of the natural world. No dwarf had ever been granted what would be necessary for them to seek out that which was the provenance of elves; a different kind of wisdom and oneness with Yavanna's creation. And yet both their races would disappear into obscurity, in the long stretches of time…

“How long did it take, to repair the damage from the dragon?” Glorfindel wished to know.

“Too long,” Dáin said in a voice heavy with ire. “Still not every trace of...that...has been erased. There are places in the lower levels that still do not qualify as pretty. But much of the first sixty years was needed, to set most of it to rights again. Most of the work was done before Balin departed for Moria. You’ve not had any word of him, have you?” he asked Thranduil.

Nenni felt a curtain lower over her mind, and knew whence it came. Though, it saved her the trouble of doing it herself. She felt glad the question had been asked of her husband, which saved her the necessity of lying. As it was, the need to withhold the information felt...crappy indeed.

“No,” Thranduil replied, surprised. “But I have also dwelt in near-total isolation until quite recently. The only thing I can offer is that I was recently at Imladris, and Lord Elrond made no mention of any contact with your people. Has he been gone a long time?”

“No just ‘he’, ‘they,’” Dáin said, troubled.

Glorfindel stepped in where his daughter could not. “I have lived long in Imladris, King Dáin, and was charged with its defense in my time there. I can say with certainly that we received no tidings of a dwarven company. I liked Balin a great deal.”

Nenni looked on her father dispassionately and with a measure of admiration. And regret. She knew that he was carefully choosing his words so as to still be speaking the truth. It was a very narrow path to walk. What seemed needed most of all was for the subject to change. While the thought of exploiting her gender was vaguely nauseating, in this instance it seemed not only prudent but wise. “How on earth do they know when the metals are hot enough to do as they wish?” she murmured obliviously, just loud enough to be heard and just softly enough that it did not come off as a blatant interruption. Her ruse succeeded flawlessly, for Dáin’s eyes beheld only a lovely and sweet-tempered female who seemed genuinely fascinated with the works of his people…

You have my gratitude, iellig, the Elflord said, knowing what she sought to do.

It is my fault that you know such hateful truths, Ada. I am sorry. I wish it could have been otherwise.

I insisted, and you obeyed me. I hardly see how that is your fault, Adonenniel. He laid a hand casually on her shoulder, as a simple gesture of parental affection.

Easy. I exist. A wan smile came over her face as she appeared to be struggling to understand Dáin’s
answers regarding metallurgy. When really, she felt badly for Balin. *I believe I genuinely would have liked him. It hurts, to know what must already have happened and not be able to say anything to his own kin. I do not like this part, very much.*

*Neither do I, but it is the price of this kind of foresight.*

There was no further discussion, on this. She squared her shoulders and renewed her interest in the explanations being given, trying to grasp it within the context of what little Elladan and Elrohir had been able to teach her. More and more questions followed, until just how many she had asked occurred to her. “Thank you, very much for indulging me to such an extent. I will stop now, before I am labeled an Official Pest. If it is not already too late for that.”

Dáin smiled and gave a merry bow. “What else interests the Elvenqueen, may I ask?”

Nenni smiled quite broadly now. “It is said that your people have great skill in the brewing of ales.”

The Dwarf King looked intently at her, and then Thranduil. “You did very well, laddie,” he said. “A lady of beauty and discernment.”

“Do not let her fool you, Dáin,” Thranduil admonished merrily. “She likes wine just as well, if not better.”

“Your wine, my King, yes. But a good ale rates higher than mediocre wine any day. Especially if there is extra malted barley, or perhaps something lovely like just the right fruits thrown into the mash. And then we could move onto spirits, but I do not know if anyone here has a distiller.”

“Spirits?” Dáin asked.

“Beverages with much higher alcohol content,” Nenni explained. “Capable of having more refined flavors and usually meant to be sipped instead of consumed in great measure.”

**

Their welcome feast saw Nenni doing her best to mentally scrape for all her massed knowledge about distillation. This was worsened by the fact that a helpful serving-dwarf kept continually trying to refill her ale mug (she was quite grateful to be able to make use of the excuse of her pregnancy to defer having to consume a small keg of it on her own, delicious though it was).

"It is like brewing beer but not," she tried to explain to Dáin, getting a small taste of the frustration she was doubtless in for with Erestor some weeks in the future. Why did her memory have to be so fragmented? Remembering general concepts was easy enough but she did not retain the wealth of detail necessary to really clarify matters to others. Often she had thought, hers was a passive memory. Only subjects to which a great deal of attention were paid or into which she had invested much time were well-retained.

*Try, iellig. Try to remain calm, not anxious. Do your best, and I will help if I can.*

*And what Glorfindel cannot help you with, I may be able to,* Thranduil added. *If you let me in I may be able to help you make sense of details you suspect may be lost or forgotten.*

*Well that would be handy.... "The first thing is to make a mash. I do not know all the proper words for how to call what is done in brewing here, but...you need a grain. Usually corn, or potatoes. Sometimes malted barley is added too; there are many kinds of distilled liquors ranging from fruit to just...drink to get oneself drunk. And then sugar is added, and yeast. I think honey and fruit is*
the only form of sugar really available here...and those are the most important ingredients, because liquor can be distilled from sugar and yeast alone. Yeast is what makes bread rise. Leavening. Please tell me I am making some kind of sense?"

The Dwarf King watched his elven guest with great interest and amusement, as she struggled to find words to explain the concepts, and finally took pity on her. "Lass, if I may. Tonight, enjoy yourself. I am completely curious about what you are trying to explain, and tomorrow will take you to where chalk and a slateboard will let you draw the devices of which you have spoken. I will have one or two of the ale masters come, and we will get to the bottom of it. Now. Something I would like to hear more of is that you are with child? I offer my congratulations, Thranduil. This must be a blessed time for you...our little ones are everything, are they not?"

Nenni smiled, instinctively placing her hand lower, to where she could still not feel a thing...but soon enough this would change.

"They are," agreed Thranduil, biting into mutton that was enviably delicious, served with roasted potatoes and fruits; some exotic specimens he had never tasted. Even the ale was worthy, though he still preferred wine. "I have not had a little one in a very long time," he said, looking at his wife with eyes shining with gratitude.

Dáin frowned, a little, knowing that elves married only once, and trying to work out where Thranduil's wife had been. In all the memory of his people in this region, the Elvenking had been alone, and with a son...

"You would like to know my story?" Thranduil asked softly of his host, seeing the curiosity and confusion. "I will tell it if you wish, but I warn you it is not the happiest tale."

**

After the feast, Nenni was escorted by Glorfindel to their assigned quarters while Thranduil and Dáin lingered before taking their discussion to more private spaces, where yet more ale flowed. Fortunately, elven imperviousness to mortal drink left him unconcerned about over-imbibing. He related with unfettered honesty what had befallen him, knowing that at the end of it Dáin would either understand him with some measure of compassion or think him a raving lunatic.

**

Nenni changed into the night clothes laid out for her by Tinivel, who had been shown where the King and Queen would rest as a matter of protocol. With some help from Glorfindel, she was soon warm and ready for sleep. "Thank you," was said sincerely, as she snuggled down tiredly into the bedcovers. "Please do not miss out on the chance for conversation on account of me. I will be fine."

"I know you will be, because I will help you to sleep and Thaliel will watch over you until your husband returns. I will return to Dáin and Thranduil."

Nodding, she felt disinclined to resist him. Her thoughts were in such a whirl from having seen and done so many new things today. It had been exciting and...happy. Taking his hand, and kissing it, she laid it on the side of her face and figured she would save him the trouble. He saw the gesture of acquiescence and smiled. "Good night, Adonnenniel," he whispered, knowing that she was already asleep before the sentiment could be finished. With a kiss to her forehead and a nod to Thaliel, he left to rejoin Thranduil. The Healer pulled her chair close now, taking Nenni's hand in her own and holding it. With partly closed eyes, she listened to her gwathel breathe peacefully, resting in her own way while the candles in the room flickered with the slight movements of air.
**Dwarves drink ale at breakfast?** Now this was not a thought she could have entertained...and yet, did not her own King drink wine in the morning? Sipping it, she found the taste to be maltier, a little sweeter than what they had been served last night. *Well, when in Rome...*

"Did ye sleep well, Lass?" Dáin asked affectionately, seeing that the Elvenqueen had been quiet thus far at his table. And what a nice table it was! Many sorts of breads and rolls, cheese, cold meats, some fruits, boiled small potatoes positively swimming in a thick and entirely appealing gravy...the Dwarf king’s table was not poor. And gold, gold caught the eye everywhere. Their plates, utensils and drinking bowls were all finely wrought of silver and gold, with far more of the latter than the former. The serving vessels and bowls were the same, except ornamented with jeweled motifs of Dwarven soldiers or runes...it was impressive, if one was into that sort of thing.

"I did, thank you," she beamed at him. "The child makes me tired very easily. Unfortunately. But I will be causing trouble again soon enough." A mischievous gleam twinkled in her eye. "And you? Did you also sleep well?" Her innocent and very real sincerity took Dáin by surprise. Had the reputation of Glorfindel not been held as being beyond reproach by all, he would have considered that Thranduil was feeding him all the sacks of manure in his stables, so difficult to accept was the tale the Elvenking told last night. But the Elflord assured that all of it was true, and stranger unmentioned things besides.

His eyes twinkled a little. "I am a Dwarf, lass. Sleeping well is what we do."

"Really?" Given that she knew next to nothing about their people, it would be easy enough to believe anything, but a part of her wondered if she was being teased.

"Really," Glorfindel confirmed, rescuing her. "The children of Aulë are known for their strength in all ways. That includes being able to rest soundly."

"It must also include skill at cooking," she complimented, "for this meal is delicious."

The Dwarf-King seemed quite enchanted with his guests.

"Oh, did you show our host how to play chess last night?" Nenni asked Thranduil with hope in her voice.

"I rather kept your man talking into the wee hours," Dáin intervened smoothly, seeing the expression of mild panic that Thranduil was trying to suppress. "Perhaps tonight?" he suggested.

"My daughter is trying to lead you astray, I will warn," Glorfindel teased. "This game was so innocently taught to me and now I am locked into an eternal competition with Thranduil."

"I would have thought a warrior would appreciate such a set of circumstances, Ada," she fired right back. "I know other games that are much simpler, and less prone to such outcomes. I will work on making some of those for you."

Dáin was now openly chuckling at this banter. He did not interact with many females beside his own wife, and it just so happened that she and his son were away visiting their kin in the Iron Hills just now. He would not be discussing that the dwarrowdam had not wished to meet the elves; among some of their people ancient prejudices ran deep. But the sum of his experiences yielded that he no longer shared that opinion.

Glorfindel tried unsuccessfully to glare at Nenni, who simply smirked while Thranduil pretended to not notice any of it. The meal was finished in blissful silence.
The remainder of the morning, they were told, they would be free to wander the city, and see what they would. A guide was to be assigned to them, one of the younger dwarves. "Gimli, son of Glóin, at your service," he introduced himself, looking not precisely thrilled to be saddled with this chore.

Nenni blinked in utter disbelief, until she remembered. "Adonnenniel, at you and yours." Seriously, what were the odds of this? Talk about the cart before the horse...there were about a million things she would like to ask this one...six years hence. And once again she felt the veil of Glorfindel's protection settle over her mind. Closing her eyes, she sighed.

"I am to show you what you wish to see," the dwarf mentioned, a little impatiently.

She tilted her head at him. "Would you show us the places you like best? What you take the most pride in? Surely there are many things like that in such a magnificent city, and I know so little. Perhaps you could start by telling me if the representations of your people, the images of dwarves carved into the stone...are they meant to be...only architectural? Do they represent particular dwarves who have done notable deeds? Please pretend I am as one of your smallest children, for that is how much I know. I am not originally from here," she said softly, with all the humility her voice could muster.

Staring at her a moment, with his face unreadable, he considered the question for a moment, and gave a curt nod. "Please follow me. The great statues are only partly architectural in purpose; you will notice that in many places they are utilized as columns that ensure the structural integrity of the mountain above us..."

And so it went. They were shown fabulous collections of gold and jewels, the conveyances for mining. They looked to see the mines themselves, descending into the depths, and some of what had been the hoard of Thror, restored after many years into some sort of order after the death of the dragon. They visited the jewel-smiths, too.

"Please, can you tell me, how do you know what to do with them? How does anyone know how to take a raw stone and make it into a faceted thing of beauty? Where do you even begin?" Nenni wanted to know. Thranduil and Glorfindel had remained studiously silent throughout this time. Thranduil, because he could sense the suspicion that may have been close to animosity in the dwarf leading them, and felt it best to simply listen. Glorfindel had different concerns. He knew how randomly....unfocused...his daughter's mind could become, and felt determined to oversee that no slips of the tongue were possible. Which was another way of saying, his attention was riveted on Nenni's words.

Gimli looked at her for some moments, vaguely wondering if this was some sort of elvish...trick, or humor. But as the sincerely questioning eyes of the Elvenqueen continued to hold his own, he cleared his throat. "Well," he began, "it begins with seeing. First there is looking at the uncut gem between one's fingers. Turning, considering, questioning...."

"To find the shape?" Nenni asked, hoping that she was not hopelessly off-base.

"Exactly!" the Dwarf said, a gleam coming into his eyes as his finger came up quickly in an exclamatory gesture.

"But..."

He waved his hand, silencing her. Involuntarily she flinched back a little, unprepared for his sudden transformation to this nearly poetic enthusiasm.
"But what shape?" he asked. "Round? Cat-eye? Oval? Emerald? Think of the possibilities. So many choices, and yet only one outcome...Patience, you see. Endless patience, is what is needed to do this work. I could teach you everything you need to know in a few hours, and yet a hundred years later you would still be discovering more nuances and refining your opinions."

"That makes more sense than you might guess," she offered cautiously, "but what do you actually do?"

"These (he made a sweeping gesture) are the faceting machines." Several of the jewel-smiths were occupied with these odd-looking...gizmos... before them. "The uncut gem is fixed with a special wax to this dowel, and then locked into place in the machine after its settings have been carefully configured. Height, angle, and index. Those are the three things that matter; the founding principles of gem-cutting. And then, as you can see, the smiths hold the armature down and move the gem against the grindstone, while the gauge tells them if the pressure applied is correct."

"Sounds like geometry, and then some," Nenni mumbled to herself more than anyone else...and found she was not wrong. A lengthy lecture ensued by which the mathematics of selecting the machine's settings were explained, and how the rest of it boiled down to the patience necessary to cut and look, cut and look, at the progress made with the stone. 'Crown' and 'pavilion' it turned out, were not merely royal ornaments or outdoor spaces, but also the terms used to describe different sections of the gem itself.

"Thank you," Gimli was told. "I would not have guessed that this was how it is accomplished."
Privately, she mused to herself that it was not really so different in tedium or artisanal skill than some of her plant-related obsessions...but while it might be fun to try this for fifteen minutes or so, this was not her interest. *I guess I'd make a lousy Fëanorian.*

Glorfindel coughed again to disguise his near-outburst at her mental comment, whereas Thranduil just smirked. Gimli eyed the Elflord, unaware of the silent exchange, and wondered if he had heard correctly that elves did not usually take ill.

"How did you think this was managed?" he asked, now curious himself.

Nenni laughed, blushing a little. "Please do not make fun of me too much. I imagined that the stone was held in a vise of some sort, and that a special...I don't know, hammer and chisel were used to chip away at it. Which now that I really think about it would be utterly ridiculous."

A low rumble of mirth erupted out of the Dwarf, whose humor was echoed in the grins of those standing (and working) nearby. Nenni bore this with good grace; how many times had she heard someone ask if the hens could lay eggs without a rooster, and had to keep from rolling her eyes? Nobody knew everything.

Shaking his head while he continued to chuckle, Gimli led them past obscene piles of gems, so vast that even the spectacle that was Thranduil's vault paled by comparison. The King himself had other reflections. Memories, of how much he might have envied all this at one time. Certainly, the attraction was still there. To an extent. But he found that he did not care like he used to, and he knew he could thank the tempering influence of his wife.

Suddenly Nenni thought of something else she very much would like to see. "Excuse me, Master Gimli, but...if it is something that is allowed...the famous Arkenstone? I have wondered what the king's jewel might look like? Surely it is very pretty?"

Thranduil pinched the bridge of his nose a little, trying to stifle a smile, while Gimli just seemed...confused.
"But you entered and were received at the throne of King Dáin?" he said, somewhat helplessly.

"Yes, but...what does that have to do with anything?" she asked softly, now feeling very awkward. The sense that she had said something wrong crept over her swiftly.

"Gimli," Glorfindel interceded, laying a hand on her shoulder, "Adonnenniel is with child, and has not had an easy time of it. This can cause a lady to perhaps not notice the things the rest of us might find more...obvious."

"What did I do?" the Queen asked, growing more anxious and embarrassed by the moment.

"Forgive me," Gimli said, bowing low, his demeanor softening. "I did not know, and I congratulate you on your joy. Follow me." He led them back up many levels, pausing to explain this detail or that along the way, until they emerged once again at the King's throne, where Dáin now sat. Bowing low before his Lord, who looked at them in curiosity, Gimli then turned and gestured toward the King, but pointed up. Lifting her eyes to the space above Dáin's seat, she saw the Arkenstone and blushed crimson.

"I am hopeless," she mumbled, wondering how by all of the Valar she could possibly have not seen this. Even as she knew the answer. *Simple, you great big dork. You never look up.* In the meantime, Gimli explained to his sovereign in hushed tones the reason for their visit. Dáin quirked an eyebrow at her and smiled. Rising, he released the mechanism that held the stone, allowing it to fall into his hand. And he brought it to her, displayed in his open palm. "That is very kind of you," Nenni whispered, as her eyes watched the pale light that seemed to emanate from the gem itself, and wondered how exactly that could be the case, for no gem on Earth had effulgence from within.

Dáin now moved a few feet over, into a shaft of sunlight, and the gem flared to life. Even Nenni had to gasp; for the radiance of the gem was like when the Valar had appeared before her. Surely this object of beauty was one of their mighty works? She remained in her place, her hand over her heart, appreciating the loveliness of the rainbow colors.

Thranduil could not resist but to move to her side, and slip his arm around his waist. *Brilliant though the gem is, I see greater beauty every moment I am with you, he said to her silently,* hugging her close.

*Flatterer,* she teased, but the compliment made her feel happy. And loved.

The Dwarf King returned to them, pleased that his guests showed proper appreciation for the Heart of the Mountain. "Thank you, for such generosity," Nenni offered, knowing that he had no need to do any of that. "I have never seen the like."

*****

Their short stay whirled by faster than would have been believed possible. Generous meals were eaten, scientific knowledge was freely given, and the highly contagious virus known as chess was shared. Their last evening there, she was accorded permission to walk where she wished in the dwarven realm, though Glorfindel as usual insisted on accompanying her. At times she vaguely wondered if he thought she would what, slip and fall on a pile of gold coins? And yet such was his way. Besides, she truly did not mind his company. Just because it seemed like such a novelty, they visited what now had been mentally entitled 'the bling room'.

The riches of the dwarves were...completely ridiculous, to her mind. Wandering through the aisles and stacks of treasure...sure, it was pretty. Really, really pretty. But none of it was edible or...anything actually useful, to her mind. But here, and on Earth, this was what everyone wanted.
Go figure. Did the dwarves ever get bored with it, or was it like flowers were to her? Maybe the subtleties were imperceptible, and this stuff did not all look alike to them; just as no two flowers were the same in her eyes. Beren sniffed at the occasional vase or goblet, but otherwise appeared beyond bored. There were no worthwhile smells here, and he had been told enough times that he was not allowed to pee on anything at all. The faint whiffs of dragon that still lingered made him feel occasionally hopeful of something to chase, but he knew fresh from stale.

"There's a little thing, before you leave tomorrow," they heard from behind them as they strolled through the aisleways just...taking it all in.

Nenni spun around to see Dáin, who appeared seemingly out of nowhere and smiled. "Is there anything I can do for you?" she asked sweetly, thinking he might want...something?

"No," he laughed, still quite taken with her ingenuous manners. "More the other way around. Last time your man was through here, you might say things were a little unsettled. Raw. Not entirely harmonious."

"I can only imagine, and...I am sorry." And she meant it; part of her could only guess at what a complete...asshole...Thranduil might have been, even as she cringed at the thought.

"Well, there was something he wanted and was smart enough not to ask for. But...time has passed. I don't abide with keeping a grudge for its own sake. He's either changed, or he's a good enough actor to fool me and..." Dáin looked Glorfindel up and down. "While I might not have put full faith in Thranduil's words even now, I respect yours without hesitation," he said to the Elflord. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw his blond head bow in acknowledgement and thanks. Opening his hands, he held out a necklace to Glorfindel. "Pretty sure this was for the lass, given how long it was, er, on order. It's more than time it returned where it belongs." He gestured to Glorfindel that he wished to see it on Nenni's neck.

"That is very pretty," she said, trying to appear enthusiastic. It wasn't a lie; this was a delicate, exquisite necklace of all diamonds that reminded her more than a little of snowflakes, or colors that could glint in the snows in winter time. "Thank you. This is very kind of you and I am certain he will appreciate it." Whatever it even was, since beyond the fact that this apparently mattered, Nenni had no idea what he was talking about. Glorfindel clasped it around her. Once there, the gems seemed to blaze forth with their own light.

Dáin blinked. "Didn't quite expect that. They must be glad to be home," he mused, holding out a small leather pouch tied securely closed with drawstrings. "If you would, give this to your man as well. A sign of goodwill between our two peoples, and moving forward from old troubles."

She bit her lip. "How many rules of protocol would I be breaking if I asked to kiss you on the cheek?"

Glorfindel cocked his eyebrow in complete amusement, whereas Dáin burst into laughter that echoed up to the gated entrance. "None, lass. I make the rules around here."

*****

Their parting was quiet, without fanfare. The two Kings reached a private agreement that henceforth a great deal of information would be shared, that would include observations about their mutual neighbors and...comings and goings from other regions. It brought a sense of wonder, and poignancy, for Nenni to part from Dáin. While nothing could be said for certain, she carried the sad knowledge that this would likely be the last time she would see him; his doom was not so far distant. Yet that did not change that coming here had been of great worth. For herself, she loved
this remarkable, resilient and utterly clever folk--the children of Aulë--and hoped they would prosper.

Outside Erebor, Thaliel and Tauriel had seen to everything; all was ready for their departure. In what felt like a blur, she sat astride Tálagor in front of Thranduil. Swiftly their entourage passed Dale, and then remained only the road home.

*****

{About ten days after}

"You are staring at it again," Nenni said to Thranduil. "I am beginning to feel mildly jealous." She stretched out on the stone bench, a very soft pillow behind her head, and a blanket over her feet and legs. "And I know I have said this at least a hundred times, but Valar, I am so glad to be back home."

Thranduil ignored the last part, because she had indeed said it at least that much. "Would it make you feel any better if I told you I am not staring at the necklace so much as what a colossal fool I was to care about it in the first place? Its beauty only comes from...you. Why did I imagine that having it without having you would...oh, what difference does it make?" he asked softly.

"Come here, please," she invited, extending a hand to him and moving her legs back to make room for him to sit. Charmingly, he wrapped his arms around her bent legs and rested his chin carefully on her knee. "It matters if it is still bothering you. Would you prefer it if I not wear them?" An instant fondness had developed for the gems, since their effulgence spread out so much that scattered colors of light appeared here and there in front of her, even in the shadows. Blinky stuff, and it was pretty. "I like them, but your peace of mind matters more to me."

"Could we try a day without them?" he pleaded. "I feel I need a little distance."

Nenni leaned far forward, and pulled her hair around her neck. "Off it goes!" came the humorous request. Capable fingers unclasped it, and immediately the gems seemed to dull in appearance. He rose and deposited the priceless piece in the flat box in which such things were stored; after her collection of gifts had grown past a certain point he insisted on this. While he did so, her hand slipped down again to her womb, where still nothing could be felt. Which seemed so disappointing, even though she was certain a time would come when she would give a great deal to feel that same nothing. She felt a kiss to the back of her neck.

"I think in another five weeks or so, you will be able to feel her inside of you," Thranduil said lovingly, moving his hand around to cover hers. "And I too am glad to be home again. With you," he nuzzled. "And even him." The staccato snores coming from their bed, where Beren seemed determine to make up for all the assorted discomforts of their journey, left little doubt about what the King referenced.

Smiling, a besotted glance took in the sleeping form of the great hound, who had just begun twitching and whuffing in his dreams. "I really do appreciate that we went, though. Dáin was not what I expected."

"I did not know you expected anything in particular," he grinned. "Would you tell me more?"

"I just mean that he was...fatherly, but not like Glorfindel. More like, a human grandfather kind of way. I could see that he would be truly awful to deal with when angered. But I felt like he...liked me. I didn't expect that. Honestly I was just hoping for polite interest."
"I think he did like you. No, I know he liked you, for him to have handed over those gems. No single gesture or person can heal the divisions that arose between our peoples, but you bridged an old divide, Adonneniel. For this I am both proud and grateful. We traveled there in hope and uncertainty and returned with a solid ally against what is to come. This will save lives, both elven and dwarven."

"And human?" she queried, her eyebrow raised.

"That remains to be seen, but enough information was shared, and new ties have been forged. Information will now travel regularly. I promised to inform him of our supplies for rations and other manner of preparations such as stores of medicine. He will keep a very close eye at the goings-on in Dale. And Thauriel herself will be appointed as a liaison to King Brand. We have a solid grasp of threats to which we were oblivious, prior to some months ago. Even Lady Penlor has her interest firmly fixed on Esgaroth. More was achieved than I could have imagined."

"So you are feeling...content?"

"Yes," Thranduil smiled. "Is that what you wanted to hear?"

"Not exactly."

"Oh?"

"I was rather hoping for a few additional parameters."

"Such as?"

"Lustful, comes to mind."

"I see." His voice dropped what seemed like a full octave, as fingertips traced their way up her throat. Lips followed. A thrill ran through her body. "I am supposed to meet with Legolas in twenty minutes. And Thaliel said you should rest."

"Since when do you need twenty minutes, and I cannot think of a finer way to bring on relaxation and sleepiness?"

"You have become rather ruthless in your exercise of diplomacy," he murmured, his erection already straining against his breeches.

Twenty minutes would have been absurd; they were done in five. The first minute was for the careful removal of clothing, whereas the second found itself used up by a talented tongue tormenting her cleft. With the third he penetrated his wife with excruciating slowness, holding her hips down so that she could not fill herself with him hurriedly as she wished. By minute four, he was fully sheathed but refused to move inside of her, preferring instead to kiss her soundly while she tried her hardest to writhe against him, laughing more than anything else at her failures. Only for the last minute, did he thrust into her furiously, egged on by her soft moans and exclamations. And still he teased, at one point stopping. "I think I am out of time, can we finish this later?"

"You're joking," came the answer.

"Yes, I am," he grinned, feeling it was probably deserved when she smacked him rather hard on his rounded buttock.

That brought an end to the banter. He claimed her mouth anew, and with tongues entwined he steadily pushed into her, relishing her rising heat. Fill me, he heard in his thought, which proved no
difficulty. His seed pulsed, in extra abundance for how many days since they had been able to indulge themselves. The sensation of liquid warmth delighted, and she twisted and sighed from the enjoyment of their climax; now her body was freed to push down against his length. "Never going to get tired of that," she murmured, suddenly completely sleepy. They had at least had the good sense to spread out a towel first; she felt thoroughly disinclined to move. With a kiss he withdrew, now needing to dress hurriedly. Uncaring, Nenni pulled a blanket over herself, relishing the slickness that flowed between her legs. In an instant she had fallen asleep.

Thranduil grinned, almost in disbelief of how easily she slept. "Home is wherever you are, meleth," he whispered, kissing her cheek softly. "I love you." Beren chose that moment to roll over in his sleep toward his mistress and snore again loudly. With a happy smile, he cleaned himself and dressed. Erebor had been lovely, but she was correct; the sight of many wonders could still not compare to the delights of home.

*****

Here ends The Road to Erebor, book four of Adonnenniel. Nenni’s adventures will continue in book five, Amaranthine.

Chapter End Notes

Dear Readers, thank you for sticking with me to the end of this surprisingly arduous writing excursion. I thought that it would be like writing their visit to Imladris...but what I did not realize was by comparison, JRRT left us so little to go on regarding Esgaroth, Dale, and Erebor itself by the time in which this story is set. That's when a writer needs to imagine a great many more story elements and...yeah. I've definitely said enough about the struggle involved with this book. I've waited awhile before releasing this last chapter, to give myself time to look at it repeatedly. What I did not want was for the ending to feel rushed but...the story is about the road TO Erebor, not the trip back home; all of the story was on the 'outward bound' side. And, the last day of 2017 also seems like a fitting date to complete it, symbolically. A few moments after I release this I will create the starter page for the fifth book "Amaranthine". Any wishing to do so can subscribe to that story, and when I begin to publish it you will receive email notifications. Expect it to be awhile; I doubt I will turn any of it loose until I can get many chapters into the writing of it. In the meantime, all of you have my heartfelt appreciation for being readers of this long ongoing tale, and I wish you all happiness and good health as we all begin 2018!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!