Home With the Fairies

by I_Mushi

Summary

We've all seen the horribly butchered and cliché girl-falls-into-Middle-Earth stories. So is it possible to make a semi-realistic one? Follow Maddie on her own adventure exploring Middle Earth--the opposite of a Tenth Walker.

Notes

I was inspired to write this because I do enjoy well-written LotR stories that involve OCs, including ones falling from our time, except that they're impossible to find. And you know what they say: if you can't find the story you want, you should write it.

The term "away with the fairies" means not facing reality and/or having unrealistic expectations of life. In essence, the average girl-falls-into-Middle-Earth story—which is what this story won't be.

Dates: Just to give you some reference, I created a timeline for Maddie (the main character) that corresponds with the canon timeline events. The date of her arrival in Middle Earth is April 12, 3017. Exactly one year before the Lord of the Rings events really begin to unfold.

To make a realistic girl-falls-into-M.E. story: Put her in the middle of nowhere, not conveniently close to Rivendell, Mirkwood, or handsome characters.

Disclaimer: I make no money from this work. Anything recognizable from The Lord of
the Rings belongs to J.R.R Tolkien. I also don't own Hershey.
I panicked.

Completely panicked.

I’ve had breakdowns before, but this was something else. I cried and screamed, I was suddenly so full of anger and energy I ran in circles, tripped and fell, yelled at the sky and myself, and basically went completely insane for about ten minutes. Afterwards, when I’d calmed down a little and didn’t quite feel like sprinting off blindly, I felt better. I’d worked out the initial craziness, and I felt like I could be logical again.

I was still fully dressed, not even groggy from sleep or a kidnapper’s drugs, and still holding my plastic grocery bag. I was in grasslands without any sign of a road of even tire tracks, and definitely no towns on the horizon, not even smoke. Luckily I seemed to be totally fine. Unharmed (except for the throbbing knees and hands, but that was my own fault when I had my meltdown), but totally alone.

I was either insane or the butt of a really tasteless joke.

I decided, as I did another full circle to check that I was indeed alone and in the middle of nowhere, to simply not think about how I’d gotten here. That’s what had gotten me worked up before when I’d realized I was suddenly standing in a field of grass instead of my apartment. I could pretend it was a bizarre camping trip, or a dream, or a movie, or something. I just… wouldn’t think about it until I was safely at home where I could lay down and think myself in circles properly. When things were normal and that twenty-twenty hindsight kicked in.

I took some nice deep breaths and with my heartbeat marginally slower, I was already beginning to feel much better. This could be okay. I could make it okay.

I had some food, water, and even though my cell phone had no service, I could definitely make this work.

I glanced about me one more time, uncomprehendingly. It was strange to stand somewhere so… un-bordered. There was a great sense of space, of endless possibilities both dangerous and wonderful. There was no one to judge you, and every direction was a different path. I was a little frightened by the emotions, the weight of the openness, and my heart fluttered with uncertainty and a little excitement.

I’d grown up in a typical suburb, and I’d been to national parks and camping before, but there was something… wilder about this place. It wasn’t restrained like a campground, or cordoned off and perfectly preserved like a national park. It just… was.

The land about me was fresh and beautiful—I’d never seen anything quite like it except in pictures—but wild and untamed. The fields rolled in gentle waves of green into the distance, the stalks brushing against my thighs they’d grown so high. Even through my sneakers I could feel the healthy springiness of the earth, almost taste the crispness of the clean air. If I turned my head to the right there were mountains, but they were a good distance away, and the sky was so clear I could see where the forest line ended and the snow began on them. A river lay directly in front of me, easily within walking distance if I could see its outline so well. There was almost no wildlife though, just grass and patches of wildflowers, the occasional tree dotting the distance. It was exquisitely beautiful, and though I found it marvelous, I was far more disturbed by the fact I was even here in the first place.
I knew I’d been hungry after work since I’d gotten lazy and only packed something simple for lunch, so I had made a quick stop at the store to pick up something. I remembered coming home, climbing the stairs up to my apartment, but then my memory got hazy. I must have gotten inside, because I didn’t have my purse or the other bags, and I’d even changed clothes because I wasn’t wearing my work outfit. But I couldn’t remember anything past my front door. Something had happened, of that I was certain, but whatever that profound event had been (and I was sure it had been profound, after all, I was here now), I couldn’t remember.

I shook my head and took another deep breath before starting to walk to the river. I pressed my mind to recall what had happened, the stairs, the maroon carpet of the hallway, my door with my apartment number on it, but still it slipped away from me. I let it go before I could get too stuck on it. Surely something would jog my memory soon enough. Things like this didn’t happen after all. People would be looking for me, my boss would worry, my friends would notice, surely someone would come for me.

I suddenly felt my throat choking again and realized I’d started to work myself up again. Swallowing uncomfortably, I firmly resolved to worry about what had happened once I had some plan in place at the least. There’s no use panicking, I reminded myself, it doesn’t solve anything.

The river I was walking towards was more of a stream really, I discovered as I approached. The width couldn’t be more than ten feet, and I could have waded across while only getting my knees wet I guessed. The water was so clear I could see the bottom. The banks were just dirt sloping downward and high enough to accommodate several more feet of it. On the whole it was pretty, but I had more important things on my mind.

The handles of the plastic bag were already beginning to dig into my palm. Carrying this thing around was going to be a pain. I put my pocket mirror, keys, and cell phone in it so my jean pockets didn’t bulge so much (when had I put those in my pocket? I couldn’t help wondering), and told myself to suck it up. It would only be for a couple of hours, at least until I got into a town.

Now a direction. Think logically, think logically… Water is vital to survival—even more than food—and I don’t have any, so it would be smart to stick to the river, right? And most towns are built on rivers, so likely this should lead to at least a farm or something. I felt more settled as I thought it through, step by step. I could be calm, and I could definitely make this work.

Which direction though? I could follow the current towards the far-off mountains or away from them. With the sun high above me, I couldn’t tell any cardinal directions, so the choice really came down to chance.

Well, I said I’d go with the flow. Might as well stick to that.

I headed in the direction the water moved, the stream on my left. I was walking towards the mountains now. I stayed close to the river, just far enough that the spray didn’t hit me; sure my sense of direction would fail me if I didn’t. I kept my eyes on the horizon, ready to spot buildings, power lines, anything to show someone else was out here. With few trees there were only a handful of birds, and though I saw the occasional butterfly, animal life was otherwise lacking. There was just the burbling of the water, my footsteps crunching on the grass, and the bumping of my plastic bag against my leg to keep me company.

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I walked for what must have been hours. Without service my phone had no time, so I couldn’t say exactly, but the sun was moving behind me, and my shadow stretched long before me. At least I knew I was heading east, as though that changed anything.
My legs were sore, my feet ached; I was sweating and perfectly miserable. I’d had to stop every couple of hours (well, I assumed since I couldn’t tell time) to sit and let my poor legs rest. Even when I was in a rhythm, eventually my hurting feet would talk me into plopping down and dipping them in the cold water.

I really wasn’t cut out for all this exercise, and walking all day was more than I’d done in years. My legs were going to be stiff and painful tomorrow, but there was nothing else I could do. I was incredibly glad I was wearing my sneakers because this would have been a lot worse in my work heels.

Relieving myself had been an embarrassing pain, and I was quite thankful to be alone on this adventure in that light. In the end, stripping my pants to my ankles to squat had been uncomfortable and difficult to do without unbalancing myself, and taking care not to soil my clothes was an equally hard task. There wasn’t even a tree to lean against or hide behind, so I was literally in plain view of everything, and I was totally embarrassed and finished up as quickly as I could.

The stream had not changed, the scenery was the same, and the mountains seemed no closer than before. At first when I got thirsty I resisted the urge to drink the water. I didn’t know how clean it was (at least it wasn’t visually polluted, but who knew what was in there), and I didn’t want to take my chances, but my dry throat quickly proved impossible to ignore. Finally, crouched on some low rocks beside the river, I cupped my hands and messily gulped down water, getting it all over my shirt and pants in the process.

It wasn’t the cleanest I’d ever drunken, far from it really, but it was cool in my mouth and quenched my thirst. After that it was much easier to take drinks, and I was steadily getting better and less sloppy at it. Still, I couldn’t guess at the miles I’d walked. At least I was getting exercise out of this impromptu adventure.

As the hours went by though I was beginning to get depressed. I didn’t seem to be making much progress and there were still no signs of civilization. My mind kept going back, strangely enough, to my unlocked front door, and what my boss would think when I didn’t show up tomorrow. How long did it take for them to report a missing person?

My stomach made itself known as the sky began to darken, and I realized then that my hours-long estimate was about to become a day. The idea of sleeping out in the open like this at night made me decidedly nervous, and I looked around helplessly for some sort of shelter. But none was to be had, because this was still the same open plain with the same river and the few trees scattered along the banks.

“The rest of the human race did this for thousands of years, you can do it too.” Hearing my own voice didn’t help my heart rate, but it was easier to direct myself out loud, almost pretending I was reading about it rather than actually experiencing it. I had been awhile since I’d read a book—too busy was my eternal excuse—but I still remembered the gist of typical adventure stories.

Without knowing how long I would be out here, I decided half my banana was going to be my ration. I would be hungry, but it was better to have something to eat than nothing at all.

In four mouthfuls it was gone, and I was regretfully wrapping it up again. I carefully put it back in the bag, making sure it wasn’t squished under the orange, before deciding this spot was as good as any random spot to sleep in. No matter where I went there wasn’t any cover. If the ground was softer somewhere else, I couldn’t tell, and I felt sure the roots of a tree, even if it was “cover”, would be painful to sleep on. The area about ten feet from the river was fairly smooth, and now that I’d stopped, the ache in my legs was growing more pronounced by the second. Lying down sounded wonderful.
Darkness covered the sky as I settled in for the night, keeping my bag close to my body so I wouldn’t lose it. I felt incredibly vulnerable without shelter, walls, or even a blanket. A fire was completely impossible. Not only did I not have the materials for it, but I’d also never started a fire from flint and tinder before.

It was so dark. It couldn’t have been that late in the evening; maybe getting around nine o’clock, and yet it was near pitch-black. No pollution. I couldn’t remember it ever being this dark outside, and it made me afraid.

I tried to relax without success, my heart throbbing faster than normal and my eyes wide open. Trying to take away my fear, I turned on to my back, wishing for my bed. The sky was dotted with thousands of stars, more than I’d ever seen in my lifetime, and the moon was incredibly bright. It was absolutely beautiful, and as my eyes roved over so many stars I had trouble taking in the enormity of the night sky. Though I tried to find some familiar constellation or the North Star, I was unable to.

I attributed it to my meager astrology lessons and didn’t let it bother me.

I was a little too cool with just my t-shirt and jeans on, and I wrapped my arms around me to stay warm. I thought longingly of my plaid blue comforter and pillow and drifting off to the distant sound of cars. Crickets chirped, some far away, others sounding almost in my ear, and I remained constantly alert, uncomfortably aware that I was lying on the ground open to be feasted upon by bugs or animals. My hair rose up on my arms as the mental images swamped me, but I shut them down when I reminded myself there was no where else to go. I could probably follow the river by moonlight, the water reflected well enough, but I needed the rest.

Closing my eyes didn’t help; they wouldn’t stay shut. Even when I squeezed them tight nothing would help. The ground was unbearably hard and unforgiving, my back ached, my hair was lying in God-knows-what, and I knew I would be sore and unhappy in the morning. Even if there was nothing to hear, the whisper of wind through the grass was like footsteps, and the gurgle of the water was like voices. It took me many hours to find sleep, and I woke before dawn.

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The second day of travel was much like the first. I was, predictably, unhappy to see that sleeping, even for a short while, had not caused the field and river to spontaneously disappear. I’d even dreamt, I remembered, so I nixed the dream explanation for the situation.

The grass under me was pressed flat to the ground, but everything around me was glittering and winking with dew like pearly Christmas lights strewn all about. I might have thought it beautiful, but I was covered in it and freezing. It hadn’t been enough to soak my clothes, but enough to get the hair up on my arms and to send periodic chills up and down my spine.

My eyes were itchy too, which was just the icing on this cake. I rubbed them irritably before realizing it was my contacts and that I’d slept in them. Frustrated, and completely without solution in the middle of nowhere, I took them out and threw them into the river out of annoyance. It was a lucky thing my vision wasn’t terrible.

I ate my other half of the banana for breakfast and sacrificed half my candy bar to my whining stomach before setting off, with not a little reluctance.

It was a grey dawn that greeted me as I trekked, blooming up almost directly in front of me from behind the edge of the mountains. The mountains, I noticed, were actually off-center from me, slightly to the north from my direction. In this lazy dawn I was uncomfortably cool in my t-shirt.
and constantly rubbed my arms to stay warm, switching the plastic bag from hand to hand as a red line was drawn along my palm from holding it too long.

The day passed by in utter boredom. With nothing to keep on my mind except visions of angry supervisors and frantic friends and family, I tried to hum songs, but my throat quickly grew tired. I tried to think about happier things from home, but it only reminded me that I was not home, so I quickly shifted trains of thought to wild guessing about where I was and how I’d gotten here.

I looked around this fairy tale landscape, taking in the endless horizon and the perfectly blue sky. There had to be an explanation, and it was out there to be found. There hadn’t been tire tracks where I was standing, and I didn’t even remember getting up off the ground. It was like I’d been teleported or something. But where in the world was I?

I dropped this train of thought before I could work myself up, deciding wild guessing wasn’t going to end up well either. I needed to remain calm and rational. I didn’t try to think about the consequences. Just considering these circumstances with the word “survival” in it had me thinking of starving to death, freezing to death, or being eaten by some humongous beast with slobbering, fang-packed jaws. All in all, I stopped thinking and instead started looking around again for even the slightest change.

The mountains were not markedly closer, but if they were a little larger it comforted me. The river beside me was subtly growing in strength and depth. The color was a darker blue, with hazy navy depths now, and it was much more audible. I daren’t try to wade across, though I could have probably done it and utterly drenched myself in the process. If it kept getting stronger though, I wouldn’t have that option anymore. Not that there was anything in particular on the other side so far as I could see.

Thinking of swimming reminded me of bathing, which was something I had to consider. I’d dipped my hands into the water to clean them before eating and to get the dirt out from under my nails, but I hadn’t bathed the rest of me. The water was ice cold here, and with no cover I would have to be quick. Even with absolutely no one around, I still felt uncomfortably exposed, and it was not something I relished if I were going to be nude. Bathing with my clothes on would be asking for pneumonia. At noon, I promised myself, I would pop into the water and make sure to get myself totally wet, then dive back out as quickly as I could. Without soap I couldn’t really wash, and without a towel I was going to have to let the sun dry me or pull on my only clothes and get them wet. It was that or go without bathing. And considering the sweat I was working up, I didn’t know how long I could forgo it.

I hadn’t even considered washing my clothes. I had nothing else to wear.

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I didn’t really need to bathe yet, I told myself. I can wait another day.

I eyed the river warily, the water rushing past, splashing cold droplets on me as I edged closer. I couldn’t help myself from looking in all directions around me, as though expecting someone to jump out of the ground as soon as I was naked.

I stood there for a couple more minutes before bowing to the inevitable. The cold of the water, the sense of vulnerability, my mounting despair as I continued to get nowhere, all of them conspired against me, and I bent and folded like paper.

It wasn’t like there was anyone to smell me, I told myself.

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On the third day things finally began to change.

The river, which had been growing steadily, was now quite a rushing force, loud and angry in the quiet. It was deep and cold, and I didn’t favor taking a bath in it anymore. With the current now, I would be swept away for sure. It already froze my throat and stomach when I gulped it down.

The landscape didn’t change much, except the mountains were slowly starting to move to face me, which could only mean I was curving north. The river was gently bent that way, around the base of a hill where it disappeared as far as I could tell. The sloping rise of the land lifted my heart. It was my first sign of real change, and the sharp joy it brought me was startling.

I’d taken everything that had happened in stride as far I could tell, not fighting it (at least not after the initial first few minutes) and just doing what I could in the situation, but now something was looking up—literally. Maybe the land scooped in a valley? If there was the river in the valley there had to be a town or something down there, right? There couldn’t be no people where I was, could there?

That was a scary thought.

And there was only worse to come. I was out of food.

Half a fruit was hardly a meal, but no food was something else. I was already used to my grumbling stomach complaining about having little in it, but now I had nothing. How long was it people could go without food? Fourteen days? Less than that? Water was the big kicker, but humans could last awhile without food, and water I had plenty.

Another bad thing: my cell phone was dead.

I kept the poor thing on as long as I could searching for service, but it never found any and eventually the battery died. Every text message I’d tried to send, every call I’d tried to make had never connected. I didn’t know what to do with my phone, now that it was dead weight.

In maybe an hour more—I really had no sense of time—I was upon the hill. Dusk was already sweeping over me, but I struggled up anyway, ignoring the coming darkness. I had to see what I could from the top.

Slogging up that thing was a near unbearable crime. My legs, used to the steady pace of walking on level ground now, stiffened and burned fire as I forced them to climb. The slope was sharper than it looked, and I was panting before I’d taken four steps up. I made it to the top, my cheeks red and my breathing labored. Atop it I stood like a king.

First I looked to the river. It flowed along the edge of the top of the hill, the north side, bending around it like a ribbon and flowing southward. I followed the line of it with my eyes, watching it go on below me. It looked like a long groove in the surrounding fields.

Slightly to the north, nestled in the foothills of the mountains, were lights.

Oh, I’d never seen anything as beautiful as those lights in my life! They were tiny and small, like stars upon the earth, and I could feel my chest constrict and my heart tighten painfully. I wanted to run over to them right now, bang on the first door I saw, ring their doorbell a thousand times, shout, anything. There were people, there was civilization, there was someone in this godforsaken place other than me!

I’d be home soon.

The homesickness, the fear, and the confusion, everything that I had been repressing in my fear
for survival descended on me all at once. I started to cry, and I don’t think I’d ever cried so hard in
my life. All my muscles were unwinding, the string inside me that had been pulled so tight had
been cut, and I just let go. No more straggling around the countryside, no more growling stomach,
no more bathroom breaks by squatting.

I stared at the lights until they were swimming in my vision and my tears finally stopped. I
couldn’t feel the chill of the night as I stood there, the wind lightly buffeting me. Finally,
composing myself I wiped my face with the bottom of my shirt.

I wanted nothing more than to rush down that hilltop and straight into the arms of those foothills,
but once I recovered from the suddenness and power of my reaction, I realized there was
something approaching me.

Below me on the hill was a dark shape, unclear in the pale light of the moon. It took tentative
steps, but even so I froze, aware that I couldn’t be more obvious or easier to spot than standing on
top of the only hill in the area. I wanted to call out, but my voice caught in my throat, and all I
could do was let it approach me and hope it was kind and not some animal ready to eat me.

The shadows on that face of the hill shifted as the wisps of cloud moved from the moon and
revealed the menacing shape to be…

…a sheep.

I could have cried again. My whole body suddenly relaxed, my shoulders sagging and muscles
nearly smarting as I let them go in one whoosh. The sheep completely ignored me, in favor of the
grass it was eating. I had to wonder, what was a lone sheep doing out here at night?

I didn’t care at the moment. Perhaps it was wild, or there was a flock over here, or this one had
wandered off. Whatever the case, the sheep reminded me that standing on a hill might draw
attention—what kind I didn’t know. If I was really out in the country like this, who knew what
other animals were about? Coyotes? Wolves were sheep’s naturally predators weren’t they? The
thought was enough to pull myself down the north side of the hill back towards the river to lie
down. I had as much trouble falling asleep as usual, not out of nervousness or fear, but out of
excitement. I would be home soon.
I was up before dawn and staring at the foothills where the lights had been. The sheep from last night was still with me, and I desperately hoped it was part of a domestic herd. One farmer, please…

Civilization proved to be farther than I anticipated though, and there was a pesky natural obstacle.

The river was directly between me and where the lights had been. The foothills were on the other side, and I couldn’t possible cross it here. The water was now lapping at the top of the banks and moving swiftly, not to mention it was freezing cold. It was something formidable, and I would probably swim to my death if I tried.

But then, where did the sheep come from?

I ran wildly back up the hill and looked around frantically for a house, more of the flock, a bridge, something.

Ah ha!

On my side of the river was the dusty and dark line of a road, unique from the green countryside around it, and it continued on south into the horizon. There must be a bridge somewhere along that road, because otherwise how would people get to the town with those lights?

Excited, I was down the side of the hill, slipping on the dew, and rushing to the eastern riverside before I could even catch my breath. The sheep didn’t follow me, and I didn’t care. Somebody had made that path and for a reason. There had to be a town, a house, someone nearby.
My stomach growled angrily, reminding me there was no food in it and I was starving. There was nothing I could do about it though, so I firmly told it to be quiet as I jogged over.

It took me longer than expected to find the bridge, but I was just happy to be on a rough dirt path that is hardly mattered. The bridge, when I finally reached it, was a primitive wooden one, arching up faintly and fairly wide, unimpressive but sturdy looking. The river here was at its thinnest though the current was still a little wild. On the other side of the water there was a wider dirt road winding away back in the direction I had come from.

What really caught me eye though was the flock.

A whole herd of sheep was meandering about like only sheep can just on the other side of the bridge. There had to be thirty of them, all together, and I frantically swiveled my head around for a shepherd or a sheepdog or something. The herd spotted me and several wandered over, but I had no food to offer them and they seemed to smell it. Or maybe it was just that I hadn’t bathed in four days.

Regardless, I pushed through them and headed east. The wide dirt road I’d seen from the hilltop was closer now, and I grew more excited. I hadn’t gotten far before I realized someone was heading towards me from that direction, the morning mist obscuring them to look like a sheep until they were hardly forty yards from me.

A person!

I sprinted to him as fast as I could; ready to throw my arms around him. As I drew closer I realized it was a boy, maybe twelve years old at most, and dressed in a very old-fashioned outfit. He had on what appeared to be a vest that might have been a tunic—I wasn’t entirely sure I knew exactly what a tunic was—frayed at the edges with hand-done stitching and a button-up, dirty white shirt underneath. He even wore leggings and what looked like soft boots that were caked in mud.

I didn’t question his outfit. If he was here, civilization was here.

“Hello! Thank goodness I’ve found you. I’ve been wandering for days following that river, and I’ve got no food and no service on my phone.”

I was friendly as could be, overexcited that I was, but his expression didn’t change, and I realized then he was giving me a very strange look, almost fearful.

“Excuse me, but do you have a phone I might use? Or can you direct me to the town?” I was nearly stumbling over my words, realizing that his blank expression was one of incomprehension even as I spoke. I could feel my heart drop into my stomach.

He opened his mouth to speak.

…it wasn’t English.

The language he did speak sounded very rough. The cadences were familiar to me, and some of the words, the way they were formed, were similar to English. Maybe it was Welsh? Or Gaelic? Some very strange accent of English?

Where had he come from? How far could I have possibly been moved from my home that people didn’t speak English? And he certainly looked Caucasian, so I couldn’t be that far off the mark.

Since I’d vetoed the dream explanation, I’d also rejected the TV show hidden-camera theory too, so he couldn’t be an actor. I’d been in the middle of a field. There wasn’t anywhere for a camera crew to hide, and I should know. I tried each night to find tall, thick enough grass or some kind of
cover to sleep in, but there was nothing. I’d never felt that alone or vulnerable before in my life. I had probably the only person for miles. I had to have been kidnapped, driven out here, carried into that field, and dumped there. I had to have.

So why didn’t this boy speak English? Surely he would recognize something.

“Hello?”

Nothing.

“Um… Coke? Do you like Coke? Coca Cola?”

He was totally blanked face, completely uncomprehending. I thought Coca Cola was universal.

“Starbucks? McDonald’s? America?”

Still nothing. Not even a flicker of recognition at America. What no-man’s land was I in?

He spoke up now, and I listened carefully, trying to deduce if it was some bizarre dialect of English that I might be able to catch a word or two of.

…Nope, still as incomprehensible as the first time.

He was asking a question, I could tell from the tone of voice, but about what I had no idea. My name? Where I was from?

It was going to be nearly impossible to communicate my problem to him, but maybe I could at least find out where I was. Why was he dressed like that? A Renaissance or medieval fair? Some sort of Amish-like culture wherever I was?

I must have still look confused, because he carefully waved his hand to encompass my full body.

I glanced down at my dirty, wrinkled, smelly attire. My white t-shirt had grass stains, my jeans were wrinkled and loose, and my sneakers were terribly scuffed and dirty. He didn’t look much better than I did, I couldn’t help thinking, smudged with dirt and unkempt hair, and he even smelled, though I could hardly talk.

We both just looked at it each other in silence. If he really didn’t understand any English, not even globally known words (which I wasn’t quite able to believe), how was I ever going to get help?

The sheep milled about, baaing to each other on occasion, like some bizarre replacement for the proverbial crickets.

Deciding it was going to have to be charades, I pointed to him and waved my hand to include the sheep, then moved to point at where I’d seen the lights. I made sure to look questioning about it.

He didn’t seem to quite get it, so I repeated it, using a “you” and “sheep” and adding the “baa” sound for extra measure. After another repetition he seemed to be catching on.

He pointed over to the hills I was indicating and said “Fornost”. “Fornost” must mean town, I thought happily, and I nodded enthusiastically. I pointed at myself then mimicked walking in place before pointing to the town, trying to indicate I was going there.

He didn’t smile, but for some reason pointed back east in the direction he came in. With fingers jabbing at both of us then east, I figured he wanted me to go with him back to his house.

Which was certainly fine by me, even if he didn’t speak any English and apparently dressed the
part of a twelfth century peasant. It was better than where I’d been, even if it didn’t look likely he had a bath from his appearance. My stomach rumbled loudly and I blushed, hoping he hadn’t heard that. He didn’t make any comment if he had, just turned back east and with a quick call to the sheep, began to walk.

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It turned out he wasn’t taking me to his house.

We left the sheep to wander as he headed east with me. We crested a nearly invisible ridge—as almost impossible to see with the slight mist on the horizon—and there, not a hundred yards away, was that dirt road I had spotted.

The boy took me right to the road and planted me on the nearest side of it, then pointed up the road to indicate where to walk. He repeated “Fornost” as he pointed, and I understood he meant the town was that way. I nodded and smiled beautifully at him. Even if I’d stumbled on to the most reclusive simple-living culture on the face of the planet, he was helping me, so brownie points in my book. He gave me a small smile back, and I could see his crooked yellow teeth, one of the top two was chipped.

I watched him scrabble back up the tiny ridge then started walking. I was half-skipping in the beginning, but quickly found I didn’t have the energy for it. In the end I stuck to just plain walking and made it to the edge of town by noon.

I came up that road until I saw houses bloom in the distance. Some were farmhouses away from the road, but not far in front of the main cluster of the town were about four grouped together alongside the thoroughfare. I sped up my pace to these houses, excitement giving me energy.

They were distinctly old-fashioned and had an air of being continuously fixed up rather than being replaced. There were no wires I could see or pipes of any kind. Only one building was two stories high, and it had a sign hanging from the door I couldn’t read. The characters might have been Romanized, some of the swirls and even one letter looked familiar, but I couldn’t make any of it out. Next to the sign was a hand-painted picture of some kind of black bird. Strange.

I really did feel like I’d walked into a medieval village. There were wooden carts, oxen and horses in stables by the houses and next to this big building. Everyone had gardens in front of their homes, and there weren’t even tire tracks on the ground, just hoof-prints and a couple thin grooves for the carts or maybe even carriages.

I was starting to think, after tapping on some of the aged wood fences and peering over a garden wall at a well-tended bunch of herbs and a positively ancient wooden bucket, that maybe I was closer on the mark with an Amish culture. Everything here was, well, used. And old.

I went nervously up to the doorway of the bird building, sensing it wasn’t a private home but more likely a business of some sort. I had no idea what to expect, no identification, and I could be easily taken advantage of here. But I also had no choice, so I steeled myself for whatever was to come.

There was an inner courtyard with a stable but no horses. The courtyard seemed swept and fairly clean, with a couple empty barrels and some homemade tools scattered around. It smelt strongly of manure and animals, and I wrinkled my nose. There was no response when I knocked on the cracked wooden door the first time, and again silence after a second. I peeked in the window on the ground floor, but it was so dirty and the glass so thick that I couldn’t see through it. Nervously, I gently pushed the door open, avoiding the rusty doorknob that would probably give me tetanus if I looked at it too long.
It wasn’t locked, thank goodness, but there also wasn’t anyone inside. Chairs and tables were strewn about, and the familiar shape of a bar counter was off on my right. The Black Bird, I dubbed it, was a regular English pub. Even in Medieval Town.

I called out for anyone, but there wasn’t a sound. The chairs and tables were washed, the floor was a little dusty but otherwise clean, and there were glasses and bottles of liquor by the counter. Someone had to live here, or at least work here. But where were they? The floorboards creaked as I walked over them, and I was starting to sweat from nervousness. What if this was an abandoned town? Would I be able to find food, clean water? “Hello?”

There was a step upstairs. The wooden ceiling groaned under someone’s weight, and I tried again, a mixture of relief and anxiety coursing through me at discovering I wasn’t alone. “Excuse me?”

I headed towards the rickety staircase, hoping I wasn’t going to be shot for trespassing before I could explain myself. Two scuffed shoes appeared at the top of the stairs, and I backed away so the wearer could come down the narrow staircase.

He had on a patched shirt rolled up to the elbows and another tunic/vest over it, along with a pair of pants that looked like riding breeches that went to mid-calf where his boots met them. He had washed out brown hair and a receding hairline, with wrinkly, rugged skin. He was quite muscular in a brawny way, with a beard and heavy brow that certainly cut an intimidating picture. In his hand was a knife, wickedly long, and I backed up instinctively. He was holding it out in front of him, but when he saw me he lowered it.

He asked a question in a guttural voice, which I didn’t understand, and I assumed it was the same language as the shepherd boy. He seemed to take stock of me then when I didn’t answer, and he blatantly stared. I took the image of him in too: a large-bellied man with a short beard smelling a little funny, in really medieval attire, staring down at me from the last step like I was an alien.

He shook off his shock faster than I did and repeated the same words. I gave him the exact same blank stare.

“Who are you?” I tried. He shook his head at me and gestured to my clothing like the shepherd had.

My heart fell.

Great, more people like that boy. How could a culture be so cut-off they wouldn’t recognize someone from outside them? They couldn’t be. Not in today’s world.

But then…what could explain this? If it wasn’t a dream, some bad hidden-camera show… No, it had to be a culture. I don’t know how they could not know, or where they existed, but there had to be someone here who knew something about the rest of the world.

Right?

I took a couple steps back from the man and sank into one of the chairs.

I didn’t really believe it, but I didn’t know what else to think. Was I insane? Lying in a hospital bed somewhere totally brain dead?

The man seemed to read my body language well enough, and put the knife down on a table by him. He then came forward and, in a gruff though surprisingly gentle voice, asked me one word. When I didn’t answer, he asked another, and then one more. Was he trying different languages? Why bother? I couldn’t help thinking hollowly. You’re probably just a hallucination, or crazier than I am.
When I didn’t respond, he put his hand to his stained apron over his chest and intoned, “Bryce.”

When he said it again, hand on his chest like that, I realized it was his name. “Bryce.” I repeated back, pointing at him.

When he indicated me, I put my hand to my own chest, “Maddie,” I murmured.

He repeated it back to me, before carefully gesturing at my whole body, then indicating upstairs. When I didn’t immediately respond, he indicated my clothing again, gently reaching out to touch a stain on one sleeve, before pointing upstairs again.

Maybe he had some kind of dress he could give me, or spare tunic and pants for me to wear. While it probably wouldn’t be clean—his clothing didn’t look like it had ever seen soap before—it wasn’t like my current clothes were cutting it either.

He led me upstairs and to one of the doors along there, and I understood that The Black Bird was also an inn. Inside the room he pointed at the bed for me to sit on, then left. I wondered if I was supposed to sleep or something, and though it was sure to be wonderfully softer than the ground, I wasn’t sleepy. I felt confused and a little angry, but not tired now.

I stood up to wander the room, looking at the roughly made furniture and even poking my head into the barren hall. There was only the bed and a simple wooden table in the room. Everything was made of wood and with only practicality in mind. It was probably hand-carved too, I thought as I fingered the rough edges. The window had a solid pane of thick glass, uneven and impossible to see out of, and no curtain. The sheets were scratchy, the mattress straw, and I thought for a moment I might have heard rats scratching in the walls. Truly medieval.

Bryce returned; I could hear him walking downstairs with another’s footsteps. I wondered if he might be bringing the headman or the watchman to see me, but when he opened the door it was a woman.

Now, I had thought burly Bryce had been frightening, but she was truly an intimidating figure. Large, broad hips, graying hair pulled back in a no-nonsense bun, a stern leathery face that spoke of years of a hard life and no rewards; she was a real matriarch. In her hands was a pile of cloth, and she clicked her tongue at me the way a bossy mother does, before saying something to Bryce. With a polite nod, Bryce ducked out of the room and it was just she and I.

Her name was Ysmay, I found out quickly as I stumbled over the word. Bryce had already told her my name, and she seemed to have no qualms about pushing me around to do whatever she wanted me to do since I didn’t understand verbal orders. She appeared total impatient with my lack of understanding, and I had not an ounce of leeway with her.

I quickly found myself shuffled around the room with a firm grip on my arm. She went to he bed and spread the dress she’s brought out along with a comb and other odds and ends, including what looked like a pair of old suede shoes. Everything was a hand-me-down I could tell from the patchwork and quality of the old material. It was tough stuff though, whatever it was made out of.

Ysmay shouted something downstairs and Bryce returned the call. She approached me and without warning reached out and touched my hair, then rubbing the fabric of my clothes between her fingers like a greedy merchant, lingering especially over the hemming of my shirt, before exclaiming something over my jeans.

I realized, as I stood there and let this woman examine my clothing, that she had never seen anything like it. What person on the planet hadn’t seen jeans and machine-done hemming? What
kind of backwater, primitive place am I in? I thought again.

I examined her face more closely as she studied the hem of my t-shirt. She was tan, deeply tan, and her hair was coarse and rough. Each finger was stained, wrinkled, and marked with small scars, and the pinky bent a little strangely, like it had been broken once and never set properly. Her teeth, tongue sticking out just the slightest bit, were yellow, missing, and crooked. She was even murmuring under her breath in that language.

It was all so real.

I wanted to snatch the clothing out of her hands all of a sudden—perhaps a vain attempt to pretend I wasn’t starting to think crazy things—but she seemed to be done looking at them and instead slapped my arm then pointed down to my shoes. Shocked at her rather abrasive demeanor even without language to communicate, I almost wanted to rebel on instinct. However, as soon as I caught her eye looking at me like she knew what I was thinking, I thought better of it.

She had me remove my shoes, shoes that she turned over and over, and my socks—she rubbed them too in her fingers—and put on the suede ones before trying to lead me out of the room. Before we left, I took out my cell phone, keys, pocket mirror, and my five dollars and a nickel, placing them on the table.

The floor was worn smooth, the shoes thin enough that I could feel the unevenness of the boards. How long would it take for wooden floors to become like that? The whole structure had to be made of wood, and I couldn’t help feeling a little antsy on what appeared to be such a precariously made building. How much architectural technology did they have here? How long had this place been standing for?

I was taken to the back of the building, which wasn’t so much a backyard as an open space behind the building. There was, literally, nothing but grasslands behind it going on and on into the horizon. And then on some more as far as I knew, considering how it looked. Where in the world was there this much open space? Especially unfarmed land?

Off to the side, as I looked around, I noticed a small shack that was taller than it was wide with a single hole on the door about eyelevel. After staring at it a moment, I suddenly realized it was an outhouse, and when Ysmay opened the door and showed me the hole in the floor I understood that was exactly what it was. Internally trying to swallow my disgust at the smell and appearance so as not to offend her, I backed away and politely shook my head. She shrugged.

Ysmay directed me over to a tin, circular tub full of water. Forgetting the outhouse completely, I squatted by it and dipped my hand into the water. Lukewarm, but I would take anything at this point. Seeing my smile, Ysmay said something to me, then pulled on the hem of my shirt.

I was a little afraid she might take it away from me to see how such even stitches were done, but when I didn’t immediately do something she pointed at the tub and then at my clothes. Was this tub for washing clothes only?

When I touched my own clothes and then pointed at the tub, she shook her head and pointed across the yard where I suddenly noticed the clothing lines and another bucket with some clothes hanging over the side.

Oh, she was going to wash my clothes while I bathed.

Smiling even though I felt a little stupider inside, I looked at her steadily for a good twenty seconds before realizing she wasn’t going anywhere. I shifted my weight, wondering if there was any good way to express my embarrassment at stripping down before a stranger outside, but after
looking at her expectant, if a little annoyed, expression, I decided that it wasn’t really possible. I glanced at the back of the building then automatically for Bryce, unable to stop myself from seeing some of the knotholes that almost looking like peepholes, before dragging my eyes away.

I pulled my shirt over my head, shuddering at the light wind that touched me. Ysmay took it almost right out of my hands to examine the stitching on it while I took my jeans off, unbuttoning and yanking them down my legs. The dirt and long dried sweat made it a little more difficult than usual, and I was careful not to rip them anymore. With just my undergarments on I was freezing and I carefully bounced on my bare feet and rubbed my thighs together in a vain attempt at modesty.

She made a demanding noise in the back of her throat, and I knew she was expecting my undergarments. Feeling incredibly self-conscious and more than aware of the complete lack of cover at the back of the building here, I slowly took them off. I regretfully passed both into her outstretched hand, and thankfully she didn’t examine them. I immediately got into the water.

I sunk into the bathtub as best as I could. I’d never taken a bath outdoors before, but now that I had the chance to relax I found I couldn’t. I could hear Bryce humming inside faintly even through the walls—clearly no insulation—and see Ysmay beginning to scrub my clothes clean in another basin a couple yards away. The sky was a clear blue now that the hazy mist of the morning was burned away, and the weather was still a little cool, but I imagined it might be the beginning of spring here. A little sparrow landed on the clothesline nearest to me, cocking its head and dancing about a bit.

None of this made me feel much better. I shifted in the tub and tried to find a comfortable position, but with a tub built only to fully wash a five-year old, it was supremely difficult.

I could feel something horrible welling up in my eyes as I tried to get comfortable. I began to switch positions again to find a way to submerse my whole body. My arms were starting to tremble and I very much wanted to cry, but I wanted even more to jump out of this tub and break it. This was horrible; everything was horrible. The tub was too small, the people didn’t or refused to speak my language, nothing made sense anymore.

I shifted around again, even turning over, the burning behind my eyes getting stronger as my arms and legs began to shake. I wanted to kick the tub, dump all the water on the ground, scream. Why was it too small? Why couldn’t I just fit? Why couldn’t one thing make sense here?

The upset inside me turned into anger, and I grew more and more frustrated at how everything was just wrong: the house, the tub, the river, the grass, the world. It was all just not working in my favor and what had I ever done to deserve this?

I started to cry. It quickly escalated into a full-out breakdown. Snot was coming out of my nose and my eyes were puffy and red, my whole body was shaking with emotion. I just cried and cried and cried. I gripped my thighs and dug my fingers into them, pushed my bare feet against the far side of the tub half-hoping I’d break it. Before I knew it Ysmay was right there saying something to me, brusque and curt and clearly annoyed.

I didn’t care what she said; it didn’t matter. I turned away from her as best as I could and wiped away the new tears at her coldness to my plight, but the tub was too small and she grabbed my shoulder and shoved the bar of soap at me.

Even the bar was terrible. It was full of minerals I couldn’t identify, didn’t really smell of anything in particular, and was rough to hold. It would hurt to rub this on my skin, but Ysmay shoved it in my face, and when I tried to push it back at her she very nearly made me eat it.
She angrily said something and boxed one of my ears. I’d only read about such a thing happening, and it hurt. It made my ears ring, and I clutched it while shouting at her about callous and cruel women, and couldn’t she see I was having a hard time of it? She didn’t look the least bit regretful though, if anything she looked satisfied, like she was scolding a child. I began to hiccup, working my way slowly back to relative calm as the pain registered more fully and the tears subsided while she watched me with a part smug, part compassionate expression on her face. When I finally looked up at her again, still a little reproach in my eyes though I knew she did it because I had been hysterical, let out a little hmph and stalked back to the clothes.

It took me a good ten minutes to fully calm down. My eyes were still threatening tears, and I didn’t feel anywhere near a hundred percent, but at least my total meltdown had been stopped in its’ tracks. I would have rather had a shoulder to cry own than a boxed ear though.

She could have been a little nicer about it, I thought moodily, then erased the thought. It was already working me back up. My ear still stung though.

It took me a while to lather up the soap, whether because I was feeling lethargic after my pity-party-turned-tantrum, or whether just because it was more difficult than anyone gave credit for it, I wasn’t sure. I used the same soap for my hair after realizing this was all I had, and though it didn’t feel clean to dunk my hair in my own dirty bath water, there was nothing for it. But by the time I was done, Ysmay was standing over me with her hands on her hips, clearly asking me what took so long.

The soap bubbles still floated around me a bit, but I was starting to shiver. Even if the weather was warming up, it was still too cold to be soaking wet and naked outside. When I stood, Ysmay handed me a threadbare towel, fraying on the edges like an old dishrag. I quickly wrapped it around myself, but when she kept looking I realized it was to dry off with. I rubbed myself down as best as possible, trying to avoid flashing more skin than possible, before wrapping it around me again while Ysmay rolled her eyes. In her hand was the dress she’d put on the bed earlier.

Without any undergarments she handed me the petticoat first. It had a vague line of support for the chest, but it hardly looked practical. Nervous, I glanced around before indicating my breasts, trying to ask her about. When she pointed to the thicker hem in the petticoat, I pointed over to where my old clothes were drying.

After a couple of tries, I realized she thought I wanted to wear those clothes again. She gave me a firm negative and shook the dress in her hands. When I went over there she tried to stop me, but I held the towel wrapped firmly around me and grabbed only my undergarments.

They weren’t dry at all, but I waved them out for a bit and rubbed them down with the end of the towel before deciding I could bear it. I pulled them on under her skeptical eyes with a lot of finagling of the towel (she was obviously highly skeptical of the scraps of cloth from the way she was looking at me), before taking the proffered petticoat and slipping that on. She tied it up in the back, and I started to get a little inkling of what it might feel like to be a fairy tale princess—of the Cinderella scullery-maid sort. I squashed the thought ruthlessly. I wasn’t going to be here long enough to give in to that kind of fanciful thinking.

The dress she offered was of a scratchy material that I knew immediately would be uncomfortable and itchy. Still, I pulled it over my head where it fell a little above my ankles. She tied it tightly up in the back and turned me so she could see.

The dress was a dull brown and rather drab, but it certainly made me blend in a lot better. The off-white sleeves were puffy, with a neckline around my collarbones. Ysmay nodded her head before directing me back inside the building.
Bryce looked up from the bar to the two of us, smiling at me for the first time. It was only a half-smile, and his teeth were horribly crooked I couldn’t help but notice, but I smiled back all the same.

Upstairs Ysmay gave me stockings and the shoes. They were simple slippers with a tough sole and actually quite comfortable, though the heel was a little ill fitting. Then she handed me a simple leather belt, which she tied around my waist, pulling it until it was quite snug, before buckling it and letting the extra material hang in front.

She then took the rope of my wet hair she had wrapped in the towel and deftly began to braid it. Now in one braid, it dropped between my shoulder blades, still a little wet but fine. She fingered my hair, and I noticed then that it was considerably shorter than hers. She had hair to her waist; mine was only a little past my shoulders.

Dressed finally, Ysmay gave me a partial smile too, one the people here seemed to frequently use, before suddenly leaning around me to the dresser.

My pocket mirror was a small metal one with a switch on the top like a pocket watch to open it. She exclaimed over the simple blue flower pressed on to the top, before turning it over to look at the smooth back. Here she cried out again, this time in awe I sensed, at her reflection. Her expression was genuine; I knew it immediately. She’d never seen her face that clearly before.

She stared for several moments before carefully putting the mirror back on the table, looking almost a little fearful. She recovered quickly though and started bustling around the room gathering up anything she’d left behind or was out of place. In those moments as she stared at herself though, I could imagine her as a teenage girl in some way wondering about her own beauty.

I felt like something was starting to make sense, even though I was definitely losing my mind.
The day was waning and night would be falling soon. After bathing and dressing, I’d been left on my own. I puttered around my room, then the hallway and the other rooms, and finally wandered downstairs to watch Bryce clean and prepare the bar for the crowd tonight. Now I was left in the main bar area alone, but I could see people moving about outside. I went to the window cautiously and looked out at the sea of medieval dresses and tunics, children, women and men, young and old, walking together with the children cavorting about. I realized it was people heading to a celebration; mothers clasping their children’s hands, men grouped together boisterously talking, all walking in the same direction.

It must have been why the town was so quiet earlier, and why no one was in the bar. They would come back later, but for now it was a night of celebration. Of what I had no idea, but a village-wide party indeed.

Bryce came down not long after the main crowds had passed. Ysmay had left me after I was dressed, no doubt to prepare herself too. He came down in a finer tunic than I’d seen him in earlier, freshly cleaned and his beard shorn close. He still reminded me a bit of a butcher, with his imposing frame and musculature, but when he offered me his arm, I realized he was taking me to the celebration.

I couldn’t help feeling a little excited and a lot nervous.

We left the bar and I noticed two things: one, my skin was paper-white compared to the darker complexion of Bryce, and two, in my new outfit I actually blended in fairly well. Still, people seemed to realize I wasn’t from here and stared at me, but I stared plenty back at them. Their faces were tough and worn, creased with hard work and tanned from the sun. I marveled at them silently, and wondered whether my world wasn’t missing something.
Bryce led me through the main street outside the village. I noticed the calluses on his palms, the
tough fingers and the roughness of his skin. He’d worked all his life, I thought, as I examined the
weathered lines across his forearm. My arm, in comparison, was a dainty, willowy thing that
would probably fall off if asked to do the same kinds of chores he probably did everyday. I was
white, spotted with a couple of freckles, and I bit my nails. But the skin was smooth, the fingers
rounded and soft, and I was a little awed at the stark difference between us.

We got to the main square with the last stragglers, and though I couldn’t see much I didn’t need to.
There was a fountain in the center that everyone was standing around. It was made of stone, with
only a simple spout for water. Garlands, flowers, and candles were everywhere, and there were a
number of market stands around the edges of the street. The smell of food wafted over to me, and
I realized that the meager bread Bryce had given me before was long gone. My stomach growled
at the smells, and I blushed with embarrassment. No one paid any heed though. They looked just
as hungry as I was.

Before we could eat though there was a speech.

Standing on the lip of the fountain was a man in a fine grey tunic with a black undershirt, slightly
balding but still with strong black hair only lined with grey. I deemed him the headman as he
launched into his speech. I didn’t have the faintest idea what he was talking about, and the crowd
wasn’t all that responsive either. I didn’t know if it was some kind of political speech or perhaps a
boring story. Bryce was paying serious attention, and mothers hushed their children.

When he was done, cheers erupted and the music began. The crowd dispersed among the stands,
buying and bargaining goods and sucking on treats. Bryce drew me to the fountain where some
children were playing and people were sitting. He indicated the stands of food and treats, and then
pointed back down the road towards The Black Bird. I nodded, not quite understanding what he
was saying but figuring I’d just head back on my own once I was done.

He turned then headed over to one of the nearest market stalls, picking up what seemed to be a
shish kabob of meat and veggies before heading back down to the pub. It would be busy tonight I
could guess.

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The lights were lit inside The Black Bird as I approached, and I could already hear the rowdy
voices of men and pints clinking. Someone started up a bar song and soon the deep and bearish
voices of others joined in. There was a lot of laughter, much of it drunken, and I hoped I’d be able
to slip by.

I got to the doorway and nervously pushed it open. At every table, on every wall, were men,
along with several women in low-cut, tight outfits (low-cut by medieval standards—they were
downright conservative by my own), standing about cheering and talking. Smoke filled the room
from people’s pipes, and the dank smell of alcohol and sweat permeated. I wrinkled my nose
before consciously relaxing it. I didn’t want to offend anyone, and there were already a number of
eyes on me.

Deciding cutting through the masses would be a bad idea, I realized my best bet was scooting by
the bar. Bryce was there, filling tankards and talking with the men. He must have seen me looking
though, because as soon as we made eye contact he waved me over with a hand motion.

I wove my way through the crowd on the edges, biting my lip when a man leaned in close, liquor
on his breath, and said something to me. Shaking my head at him, my hands trembling ever so
slightly, I managed to push my way to the bar where Bryce leaned over and offered me a glass of
some golden liquid. Politely shaking my head and smiling, he shrugged before pointing up. I felt
infinitely safer just standing by him in that crowded pub and on impulse I grabbed his big
calloused hand in mine and squeezed thanks before heading up.

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As soon as my head hit the pillow the lights and feasting tonight flooded back to me. Despite the
language barrier, one young man at a stand offered me some of the shish kabobs he was selling,
but when I tried to say I didn’t have any money, he waved his hand at me and gave it to me
anyway. Thanking him and even bobbing a curtsy as I had seen other women doing (I didn’t
mangle it too badly either, which was a pleasant surprise since I’d never done it before), I
thankfully ate. The food was delicious, made over an open fire that left a smoky flavor I liked. I
didn’t think I’d ever had such sweet, true meat and flavored vegetables. Some cold, clear water
from the fountain as the children were doing sated my thirst, and though I enjoyed the music and
merriment, I quickly tired.

I had taken a look around the real town here, but it was hard to see much more than the looming
shape of the buildings. With only scattered lighted torches to see by, it was hard to make much
detail out. I had wandered around after eating for a bit, and was even asked to dance (I think) by
two young men, but I was ready to turn in by that point and declined as best I could before
heading back.

My day had been very long, and I was glad to have a bed to sleep on. I was humming the dancing
tune, thinking of the happy faces, the laughing, screaming children, but even so thoughts of home
never strayed. It made me think of block parties, of birthday parties, of buying food from street
vendors at home. It reminded me of pleasant things and sad things, and I drifted off, lulled to sleep
by the song the people had danced to, and images of my friends from home dancing to it.

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Ysmay came to wake me, and the first thing I saw was her angrily indicating my clothing. It took
me a couple long moments to realize I had fallen asleep in the dress and now it was wrinkled. I
tried to smooth it out, but Ysmay was inconsolable. Eventually she gave up smoothing it out
herself, and after redoing my braid, she took me downstairs.

Bryce was cleaning up the bar, and from the looks of it, he’d be at it all day. Chairs and even a
table were overturned, tankards and pints were left everywhere, and the floor needed a good
moping. It smelled heavily of liquor and smoke despite the open door to help air it out. I was
amazed I’d slept through all the ruckus of the people down here.

I didn’t know what time it was until Ysmay opened the door to the outside and the morning sun
half-blinded me. I stumbled out and she clicked her tongue before almost dragging me down the
street towards town.

They’d let me sleep in, I realized uncomfortably. Ysmay was dressed nicely, but her hands were
unwashed and there was dirt under her fingernails. I remembered then that in the medieval ages
everything had to be done by hand. She’d probably been up since dawn. I sped up to walk with
her feeling ashamed. I had to find some way to repay her and Bryce’s kindness.

We entered the town and I took another look around, this time in the daylight. The streets were
still a mess from the festival, but it was quaint and nice overall. All the buildings were wooden,
many with thatched roofs. Only a handful were more than a story tall, and beyond the main square
they got shorter and dingier as far as I could tell.

This time more of the villagers seemed to know an outsider was here, and stood in their doorways
and on the streets to stare. Many at the market stands turned as we walked, and I could feel their
eyes roving over me. I felt irrationally self-conscious of the way I walked and held myself, like it wasn’t proper or normal. I felt…different from them. An outsider. Even if it was true, it wasn’t a good feeling to be singled out like that.

Ysmay led me around the fountain and down a side street. The buildings here looked more official and important, and then I realized they were also the only ones decorated. Garlands of flowers hung from the windows and they had curtains too. This had to be the wealthy section of town, and I was proven right at the house we stepped up to.

Ysmay fussied over my dress a little more, pushing my hands away when I tried to help. When she was satisfied she knocked on the door. It opened to reveal the headman who gave the speech last night. He didn’t look surprised to see us, but I was surprised to see him. My first thought was that if anyone knew about the world outside this enclave then it had to be a guy like headman. This could be my ticket home!

I smiled extra wide before noticing that Ysmay curtsied to him, and I quickly dropped one too. He nodded before letting us inside.

His house was two stories tall, with a kitchen and a parlor room (“living room” brought up images of television sets, and that couldn’t have been more wrong) on the ground floor. I only got a glimpse of the kitchen where a woman was working before we were herded into the parlor. Ysmay and I took seats on the stiff couch while he sat on a matching chair. The room, despite his obvious wealth, was markedly empty of decoration. He might be rich in comparison to the townspeople, but even I could tell that his wealth wasn’t all that encompassing.

Ysmay and the headman began to speak, and I soaked in the room and him. He was just as I remembered him from last night, though I could see his potbelly more now and the sweatiness of him in general. He also had a sly look about the eye that made me a little nervous, so I sat silently and tried to be polite without doing anything, keeping my hands in my lap, my ankles crossed, just like all those women in period pieces I’d seen. I really hoped he would be able to help me. I didn’t know how long I could go on pretending to live this way.

My attention wandered though, and when Ysmay said my name it took me a prolonged moment before I realized she had indicated for me to say something.

“Um… hello?”

My words came out like a question, and I quickly hid a wince, but the headman gave me a smile. I was still made distinctly uncomfortable by his presence, but I tried to smile naturally, wanting to be in the good graces of possibly the only person in town who could help me get home.

“Do you understand English? Hello?”

He shifted a little in his seat, and I couldn’t help noticing the sweat stains under the arms of his coarse tunic that were never quite washed out. He didn’t answer me though, just gave me another smile, this one a little weaker than the first. I could already feel the pit in my stomach, but I denied it a little longer.

“Coca Cola? Starbucks? …America?”

The pit became of lump of coal, and I had to physically resist slouching back into the seat, feeling the telltale prickling of oncoming tears behind my eyes. Great, now I was going to cry just because one important looking person who might be able to do something about this situation is absolutely useless. What was I, six?
I shut my eyes tightly, firmly telling myself that getting emotional was stupid, and reopened them to see him sparing Ysmay an annoyed look. Then he directed a question at me, giving me a rather earnest, if somewhat oily smile.

I didn’t understand at all what he was asking me, and I turned to Ysmay for a charade-translation. She, however, looked incredibly displeased and was beadily eyeing the headman who was still looking at me. I was about to smile awkwardly at him when Ysmay cut in and they started to argue.

I got the distinct impression that Ysmay didn’t like him and didn’t approve of something about him. Or maybe that was my own dislike talking, I couldn’t be sure. She was perfectly humble in manner, but there was a bite there that I picked up on. Whatever he said hadn’t made her happy, but I didn’t feel particularly bad that she was clearly chewing him out for it. I couldn’t help the small amount of childish resentment that he’d gotten my hopes up for nothing.

Their conversation continued on in that vein. He continued to repeat my name and pointed at me several times, his voice tightening. I could tell they were arguing, but I didn’t have the faintest idea what about, not to mention I was starting to get annoyed at being treated like I wasn’t there.

The conversation came to a rather abrupt, if anti-climatic end. We weren’t thrown out, though it probably would have gotten to that point if Ysmay had kept it up. Instead she unceremoniously stood and swept out of the room. I hesitated as I followed her, unsure if I should drop another curtsy, but the headman was still glaring at her retreating back, so I hurried to catch up to her.

Ysmay took up a brisk walk as we left the house and headed back for the main road. I trailed after her, having no idea what to do or say. She was in a foul mood, so I opted to try to be as invisible as possible until it blew over.

Upon returning to The Black Bird, Ysmay angrily starting talking to Bryce, her voice rising in volume. I wished I knew what she was saying, hating my ignorance of the language. Bryce’s thicker voice surged like a wave as he cut Ysmay and my thoughts off abruptly and softened again. Ysmay didn’t seem entirely recovered from her tirade, but it looked like Bryce had managed to quell some of the tide.

I took a seat as they spoke a little longer, Ysmay a little calmer this time, and I couldn’t help my mind revisiting that meeting with the headman. It had been about me, of course, I was the stranger here. Maybe they thought there was someone nearby who could speak my language? Or it could just be something boring like living arrangements too.

What if perhaps they were trying to figure out if I came from a neighboring village? That sounded fairly reasonable. That headman, for all his smarmy looks, didn’t look like he knew anything at all about the world that I came from. I felt strangely assured of this, though I didn’t know why.

He has no idea there’s a modern world out there.

That sounded bad even in my head. Again, the question always came back to how anyone could be that cut-off? Even the remotest parts of the world had seen technology, had the modern world seeping into them little by little. A whole people can’t just exist in utter seclusion—it just didn’t seem possible.

I began to wonder, because the train of thought inevitably went there, what if… what if I never went home?

Could I live in a place like this? Without plumbing (the outhouse was filthy), electricity, microwaveable food, the luxuries I was used to? And what would I do?
I turned that one over and over in my mind. I hadn't even considered what I would do now that I was at a town like this. I hadn't been able to think past food, shelter, and civilization. But now what? What good would a college degree do me here? Should I stay here and see if they can find me help or find someone else to go to?

And then I had an idea of what Ysmay and the headman had been talking about. If I stayed, I had to contribute to the community. But it was obvious to Ysmay and Bryce that I couldn’t communicate with them, and my culture was significantly different than theirs. I’d never done hard labor before as evidenced by my un-callused hands, and I didn’t have any skills that might be useful. I could analyze poetry, argue modern politics, and do calculus (if I could remember it), but I didn’t have any practical skills useful in an ancient culture. But would they send me away? Leave me on my own in this practically new world?

Bryce came around the counter and tapped me on the shoulder. I glanced up, and took in his weathered face, the kind eyes sunken in and a little bloodshot. I knew that it would be a risk to leave, but it would equally difficult to stay. They didn’t have much, but they’d still shared it.

Bryce didn’t let me think longer on it though. He pulled a canvas sack up in his hand and gave it to me. It was a rough material, but tough, and with something inside it. A gift?

I almost wanted to hand it back, knowing that their generosity was boundless and I had nothing to give them back. He motioned with his hands though, and I pulled the cord holding it together and opened the sack.

Inside were my clothes, folded and washed, my sneakers making it rather bulky looking, along with my keys, phone, money, and pocket mirror. The mirror was actually wrapped in my freshly washed t-shirt like it might break. Seeing this, I knew they were telling me I had to go (and that they thought my cheap pocket mirror was worth something), and I denied the feelings of abandonment that immediately hit me. I couldn’t live off them in good conscience, and they’d already given me so much. It wasn’t like I knew them either. They’d just been ridiculously helpful to a completely lost and bewildered girl who’d found them by accident. I’d only come here yesterday after all.

My eyes were starting to water, and I swallowed thickly to hold it back.

The headman had probably encouraged this, I thought glumly, and I couldn’t be mad at him because I couldn’t blame him. I needed to figure this stuff out, where I was, how I’d gotten here, and how I could get home, and that couldn’t be done in a small town like this.

I realized I was staring at my things, and I put the bag down before rising up and enveloping Bryce in my arms. He was too tall and too wide for a proper hug from me, but I hugged him with all my might, thanking him in the only way I could truly show it.

I pulled back and pulled out my keys from the bag. They were silver and shiny, no doubt of a finer make and metal than what they had here. I remembered Ysmay staring at the mirror in longing, but I knew I couldn’t part with that just yet—it might indeed be worth something if they had no real mirrors. So I pulled two keys off the ring, one for my parent’s backdoor, one for my apartment, and handed one to each. Keys were replaceable. Human kindness was not.

When Ysmay tried to give the key back to me I folded her hand around it and hugged her too. Bryce put his in the pocket of his apron, and I thanked them in English and bobbed a downright beautiful curtsy despite my messed up emotional state.

I went to the door, but Bryce pulled me back inside and held up one finger. I assumed he meant wait, but he led me farther inside and sat me at a table, pulling out a bowl from a cupboard and
ladling some soup in. Embarrassed, I realized I wasn’t leaving quite yet. I kept my nose in my soup as Ysmay laughed at me, though not in a hurtful way even if it was a little rough around the edges. She still fingered the key in her hand admiringly. It was small and shiny, rigged and molded in a way I knew they didn’t have here. Hopefully these two wouldn’t forget me.

I was fed warm soup and led upstairs where Ysmay stowed my dress and petticoat and made me turn in for bed. I pulled on my t-shirt, hoping the smell of my house, my detergent, and my world would never leave it, and knowing it already had.

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Ysmay woke me at dawn and helped me to dress. I insisted on wearing my socks and sneakers, and Ysmay fought me at first before relenting. It certainly made the bag easier to hold, since the suede shoes were much more flexible and lighter.

I washed up in a small pan of water, just splashing it on my face and a bit into my hair to help it stay flat. I had no way to brush my teeth, not even a spare cloth, so I made due with my fingers and decided I’d just have to live with it. I already had better dental hygiene than anyone else I’d met here.

Downstairs, Bryce was already up and cooking. The smell wafting from the makeshift kitchen behind the bar was delicious, but it was too early for my stomach to be hungry. If I had to guess it looked around five or six in the morning. The sky outside was still grey and foggy; the windows looking out on the courtyard were wet with dew. Still, I wasn’t going to turn down the only breakfast I was being offered. And who knew when I’d get another proper meal?

Bryce called out something and Ysmay responded before pushing me down into a seat. My bag was taken and put down by the door. Bryce then appeared with plates laden with food. This was clearly a feast in celebration of my leaving, and I smiled so hard at the two of them I thought my face might crack.

There was dark bread laid out and some kind of soup to dip it in. Bryce put out another dish that had some kind of meat on it. I assumed it was the medieval version of sausage. There was a block of cheese laid out too, which Ysmay began to cut a chunk off for us each. Then the drinks were poured.

The day before I had been quite surprised to find that an auburn-colored drink was the drink of choice. I had sniffed it as discreetly as possible and took a small sip, and confirmed that it was indeed some kind of alcohol. I imagined it was ale because that seemed like the drink of the medieval ages (at least in the movies), but I didn’t actually know. I guess alcohol before noon was acceptable—I wasn’t even going to consider an age limit.

Today it was the same drink, and I was still a little uneasy as I looked at the dark, frothy liquid, but I figured water probably wasn’t always the safest to drink, and it did keep you warm in the morning chill.

It seemed the typical breakfast was bread dipped in the ale. This morning was a special occasion though. The soup was a little watery, the taste a little dull, but the meat was smoky, though tougher than I expected, and I couldn’t pinpoint what kind. The cheese had a sharp taste, not entirely pleasant, and the ale was very strong, so I only took a handful of sips. Ysmay and Bryce talked between themselves and I politely listened with half an ear as I munched slowly. I think they may have noticed my unease with the food. I felt a little guilty at my pickiness, and so tried to eat more.

When we were done and Ysmay had cleared the plates away, Bryce produced a canteen, shaking
it to show it was full, and a couple small packages. These packages, I discovered, had food in
them. There was some cheese, a little bread, and two strips of dried meat. Ysmay came out of the
kitchen then and showed me half a dozen apples, which she stowed in the canvas bag. The other
rations were added in too, and the bag bulged oddly to accommodate.

I stood up awkwardly, not sure how to go about the goodbyes. I’d already given them the keys the
day before, so I decided it would just be hugs and words. I approached Bryce first, and this time
he was more prepared for the hug. He put his own lumbering arms around me, and I squeezed him
as tight as I could before letting go.

“Thank you, Bryce. I don’t know what I would have done without you and your generosity.
Thank you.”

He seemed to understand my meaning, for he nodded and told me something in his own language,
which I hoped reciprocated my words.

With Ysmay, it was like hugging a mother. She might look and act like a hard woman, but she
was soft to hold, and I could feel my eyes leaking as I clutched her a little longer. I wiped my eyes
as we released each other, and told her what I had told Bryce.

I resolutely shoved any thought of my own mother and father away as I left The Black Bird with
the canvas bag slung over my shoulder. I glanced back at them several times as I walked down the
road heading south, and I told myself it was going to be alright.

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The bag was deadweight on my shoulders, and I’d been shifting it restlessly to help my aching
back. I was holding on to it by the leather cord that held it together, and it was burning my palms.
I almost wanted to eat the food inside it just to lighten it, but I knew better than to use my rations
all at once.

The road was dusty and bleak. I’d left the grasslands far behind me in my walk. Bryce had told
me the night before, through charades, that it was a four-day walk. I was terrified inside as soon as
The Black Bird disappeared behind me. I was going to cross open country I didn’t know, without
a map of any kind, all by myself. Going God knows where too, since the only thing I was
searching for was any sign of civilization. I stifled my fear and tried to hum to the rhythm of my
steps to keep my mind off it.

As I walked that day I saw only a handful of people. I wondered if Fornost was the main town
around here, and there were smaller connected ones dotted about. And then I had to wonder again
how big this area was. How long would it take me to reach the edge of their land and back into
civilization?

All of the people I passed were heading towards the town, and I didn’t make eye contact with
them. They stared though, and probably because of my shoes. I was afraid they might stop me or
try to steal my things, so I kept walking and prayed no one would try anything.

The day was warm as I sat down for lunch. I ate an apple and cleaned off half the loaf of bread. I
was sitting on the side of the road, covered in a layer of dust. The dirt was like a haze in this heat,
and the sun beating down didn’t help. The road was quite large, easily wide enough for a wagon.
It must be a main thoroughfare, and I could only hope Bryce was sending me towards a more
populated place. I needed to find someone who might be able to help me.

I had tried to ask him and Ysmay what the place was called, but that was a difficult charade to do.
They had probably said it, but in sentences where I couldn’t tell any words apart so anything
could have been it.

I wiped the sweat from my brow with my sleeve as I thought about it, lamenting the thick material of the ankle-long dress. I pushed the sleeves up to my elbows and rocked to my feet before shouldering the canvas bag again. Four days on the road…

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That night was my hardest yet. I managed to find a spot farther from the road, near one of the few trees scattered about. I didn’t want to be too close, not wanting to get robbed by some passerby seeing an easy target, but I also didn’t want to lose sight of the road.

I’d laid down, tucked my canvas bag under my head and made sure the clothes were near the top so it wasn’t too hard, and stared out onto the road. When I closed my eyes, all I could see was my small apartment, my bedroom, the blanket strewn over the couch, my mother fussing over my kitchen when she came by, my father grumbling over my TV, and tears began to leak out of my shut eyes.

I wanted to go home. I wanted to hug my mom and never let go, sit on my father’s lap like I did when I was six. I wanted to smell gasoline and fast food and feel my heart jumping as the neighbors blared their music Saturday night. I wanted to eat potato chips and chocolate, greasy Chinese dumplings and pancakes. I didn’t want to walk everywhere until my feet were bleeding, I wanted to shower not bathe; I wanted a toilet. I wanted my world back, not the crappy, disgusting, filthy, horrible, wretched place that I was miserable in.

I curled into myself, head on the dirt, hair mussed up, my dress bunched up by my knees, arms on my face, and sobbed. It was the kind of ugly crying that gets choked in your throat and makes you hiccup and snort, where your nose is running and you have to keep sniffing or it’ll get worse, wiping your sleeve to dry your face and getting tears and snot on it like you’re five, and I just couldn’t stop. I didn’t want to be here anymore. I didn’t belong here and I’d never wanted to come in the first place. All I wanted to do was go home.

I cried good and long until finally my eyes dried. I was a mess, laying in the fetal position, exhausted completely by my total collapse of any calm I’d had. I drifted off there, dreaming about my home, my food, and my family.

--

That morning was terrible, as expected. My mouth tasted like cardboard and dust, my eyes were crusty and red, my sleeves had dried mucus on them, the dress itself was covered in dirt and horribly crinkled. I stiffly unrolled from my position and tried to pat down my hair and clothes, feeling just as bad as yesterday but not quite so prone to crying.

I’d had to relieve myself behind a tree, and the almost unbearable act started the waterworks again. This time I shoved away the idea of sinks and toilets and plumbing and instead did my best to wipe away the last couple of tears as I started walking.

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On the morning of the third day of travel, the dark clump to the west that I had spotted on the horizon the day before was finally coming into view. It was a forest, the kind that was only found in wildlife preservations in my time: thick, wild, alive. I could only see the fringe of it, being that it was so far from the road, but I wondered if I might have to cross through a forest at some point on my journey.
The thought made me shudder. As beautiful as I thought forests were, they were also the places where bandits haunted (according to the stories) and more animals lived. At least out on the open fields like this I could see something coming for miles.

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On the fourth day, hills began to form to the east, and the plains started to gently roll like long, low waves with trees bobbing on top. People began to populate the road too, and I started to become a little more cheery as laughing folk led donkey- and oxen-drawn wagons down the road. I changed my shoes after the first wagon came by, aware that I would draw a lot of attention with them on. Luckily, my sack was lighter since I’d been steadily eating the food, so the sneakers were easy to fit in.

The people themselves all dressed in the same medieval attire as Bryce and Ysmay. I wondered if they were sending me deeper into their lands. Maybe there was a central government I was moving towards? Someone who dealt with the authorities of Canada or America or wherever I was? I found it hard to believe I could be overseas, since I didn’t feel like I could have been unconscious that long. Still, the landscape here looked like North America or maybe Europe and those places were very populated. Surely someone could help me.

Considering my situation helped to pass the time, but I was disappointed though as I sat down to rest that night. I hadn’t reached the town. Bryce had said four days. Maybe I just walked slow or something.

I was in dire need of bath. The dirt from the trip was caked all over me. My hair was a complete mess. It had slipped out of its braid after the first night, and the leather thong wasn’t like a regular ponytail. It wasn’t elastic, but a string that I had to knot. I couldn’t seem to make it tie fast so my hair hung down in a scraggly mess that constantly got in my face and made my neck hot. I attempted to curl it around my fingers and make a bun that could hold itself up, but it was starting to get frizzy with all this heat. I didn’t want to waste my precious water, but on the fourth day I did sacrifice a bit to keep my hair down from the mess it was becoming and wiping my face, lamenting the whole time the lack of shampoo and conditioner here.

I dug through my bag and produced one apple, now going a little brown in one spot, and the meat. I hadn’t really considered the meat until the second day when I pulled them out. They were dried meat, and I honestly felt like an idiot when I wasn’t sure if they were raw or not. Was it like beef jerky? Did I just eat it like this? Or did I have to cook it?

In the end, I stuffed it back in. Maybe in town I could offer it for money since no one had given me any coins or currency of any kind.

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It only took another day to reach the town. I was very happy to see the dark spot on the horizon grow throughout the day until about mid-afternoon where I finally came upon it.

There was a great wall made of stone and wood that was nearly twice my height and thick as a tree trunk. The huge doors were open wide, and people were almost constantly moving in and out. Some carried vegetables, others wood stacks, all kinds of goods really, and I watched them for a moment before heading in myself.

The town was a bustling, sprawling, pigsty.

This is the medieval ages: the smell of drunkards, feces and urine, of horses and mules and other animals all mixed together. It was the butcher hanging his still-bleeding wares in the street raw, the
woman gossiping out of windows to each other and air-drying their laundry over the lane, men carrying swords at their hips and eyeing everyone they saw, and open sewers down the sides of the street. It was the tankards in the pub window and the pints in the other pub two doors down. It was in the retched filth lying in the gutters and alleys, the complete ignorance of hygiene or respect for other life, and the men passed out next to barrels of ale.

It was horrible and shocking. I’d never been somewhere so unclean, so completely un-modern. How could this be possible? War-torn Africa, remote islands, rural villages, even they couldn’t be this bad. Where was the Peace Corps? World Health Organization? What country would allow any citizen, even ones who were chose to live a more primitive life, live in this kind of muck? I was absolutely gob-smacked by the disgusting standards of living.

I must have gotten really lucky to hit a small village first and during a festival when things were cleaned up to make it nice. But here, this was probably every day life considering how people went along just ignoring the rotting garbage and the human waste.

I valiantly stopped myself from plugging my nose; aware that no one else seemed to notice the stench and that I would probably draw some strange looks if I did. There were a lot of people everywhere, and it was clearly market day from the number of women carrying bundles through the gate. I had to wonder what day of the week it was, but then realized it didn’t really matter.

This town was considerably bigger than Bryce’s. Most of the buildings were snug up against each other and two stories tall. Many of them were as nice as the headman’s house had been, with glass panels in the windows in a crosshatch pattern, fancy doorknobs, and pretty signs swinging from hinges above them.

There were several men prowling the street with swords at their hips that made my hands sweat. One of them eyed me unkindly, and I realized I must look a little strange standing there all by myself looking as scraggily as I did.

I jerked into action and started walking, but it hardly took me ten steps before I realized I didn’t even know where to begin. Now that I was here, in a busy town I didn’t even know the name of, I realized that I was completely out of my depth.

I had no money for a hotel room, if they even used coin money here or whether everyone just bartered. I knew no one here and couldn’t hope to communicate with anyone. How would I survive? What had Bryce and Ysmay been thinking? It was total luck I’d even met them in the first place, but this was a proper town, not an obscure village. People here were used to strangers from other places so I hardly stuck out.

Standing here on the street with everything I owned over my shoulder, I was acutely aware that I had no plan and nowhere to go. Luck. That was all I had, and it was the flimsiest thing I could rely on. My throat started to choke up and I began to feel panic building up inside me.

I started to walk, turning the corner at the intersection and heading down a random street, not paying any attention to where I was going. There were still swarming crowds here, so I walked faster as a prickling started behind my eyes, turning a couple more corners until I was hopelessly lost.

I could feel the pressure welling up and no doubt I was red in the face from holding it back. The area I was in was quiet, and I looked around quickly to make sure I wasn’t in some shady back alley. It looked to be a residential area, upper class residential in fact, considering everyone had shutters and fine carved fringe on the edge of their wooden houses. I sat down on a low wall and dropped my canvas bag at my feet. I put my head in my hands and started to cry.
It would be a lie to say I didn’t secretly hope someone would notice the poor soul sitting on a garden wall crying all by herself. No one came though, and I finally recovered enough to wipe my nose and dry my eyes with my sleeve—which would normally be gross if my clothes weren’t already ruined after the trip. I was probably quite a sight to behold.

I rubbed my face as I tried to think now that I’d regained some of my composure. I had the meat that I didn’t know how to eat. Should I dare to sell it? Except, I couldn’t understand what anyone said, so how did I expect to barter?

I supposed I could try to see if an innkeeper would accept the meat for a night’s stay. The pocket mirror was also a good try, though I’d probably get ripped off for it.

Frustrated, I put my head in my hands and tried to will away the tears again. All I seemed to do was cry here, and I couldn’t seem to stop myself when the tears started to threaten again.

I heard some shuffling not far from me, and I lifted my head, sniffling to keep the tears at bay. Down the road from me were two men. Dressed in dark outfits that were similar to Bryce’s, though of a finer cut and some kind of trimming as far as I could tell, they stood at the mouth of the street looking at me. Something about them made me a little nervous, but they didn’t look disheveled enough to be drunk.

One of them took a couple steps forward as I watched. He had dark curly hair in a low ponytail, and a long-sleeved tunic, light brown with black sleeves. His clothing was quite fine, and I supposed he might be handsome, with a wide mouth and rosy cheeks. His friend behind him followed him out as they walked towards me.

I probably should have backed up, or at least stood, but I didn’t move and they came to stand right before me. The first spoke to me gently, his voice mellow and soft. I had the distinct impression of a cat being persuaded to come out from under the bed. I shook my head to indicate a lack of understanding. He tried again, frowning now as I still shook my head.

“I don’t speak your language. I can’t understand a thing.”

He seemed to realize then why I was shaking my head, and he smiled before offering me his hand. His friend was smiling too, his teeth yellow. Hesitantly I took it, and he actually bowed to kiss it before helping me up.

I couldn’t help but blush at their chivalry, especially considering my hideous state, but when his friend tried to take my bag I quickly picked it up. The first only laughed. I felt a little miffed by it, but he lightly admonished his friend and smiled at me again.

He gestured for me to follow him. Unsure of where I was going, I pulled the bag to my chest and didn’t move. I wasn’t stupid enough to follow two strangers in some random town.

Realizing I wasn’t following, he smiled and beckoned again. I tried to look uneasy and shifted my feet, and he seemed to get it. He approached me slowly again. “Bromley,” he pointed at himself.

Warily, I considered making up a new name, but discarded it as the name really didn’t matter here—it’s not like they could look me up, they didn’t even have phonebooks let alone anything more advanced. He smiled then encouragingly at me, his face open. He seemed to genuinely want to help, and I couldn’t help letting my own small smile cross my face. Maybe I had more luck than I thought. “Maddie.”

“Maddie.” He smiled as he rolled it on his tongue.
He opened his arms wide around himself, indicating the entire town I assumed, and said “Bree.”

“Bromley. Bree.” He pointed again to himself and then to the whole town, and I realized he was saying he was from Bree. And that Bree was the name of the town.

No one had ever heard of my home here. At least I didn’t think so. But it couldn’t hurt to try. “Maddie. America.” I repeated his word order and motions at him in the hopes he might understand.

“Ameri…ca?” He said it like he was feeling out the word, and it was instantly clear he’d never heard of it.

Fumbling to make some sense of myself, I tried to explain. If they didn’t know about America the country, then maybe it might be better if he thought it was village or something. Now what was the word the shepherd boy had said again? “Furnace?”

No, that wasn’t right. Bromley was looking at me funny, and I knew he didn’t recognize it. “Furmost. Formost.”

I was struggling to find the right pronunciation for town when he suddenly said, “Fornost!”


I was quite proud until he looked confused. “Fornost. Bree.”

“Huh?” I managed elegantly. This was simple, at least to me. Bree was a town. America was a town (well, country, but it didn’t really matter right now). I repeated it and he was shaking his head even before I’d finished.

My confusion was palpable. Bromley tried unsuccessfully to make me understand whatever it was, but I didn’t get it at all. Through all the hand motions and talking, Bromley’s un-introduced friend suddenly squatted on the ground. Using a small rock, he made a circle and said “Fornost.” Then he drew a smaller circle some ways below it and said “Bree.”

Blinking, I stared at the miniature diagram for all of ten seconds before suddenly realizing that “Fornost” was the name of Bryce’s town, not the word for town. Which is why I wasn’t making any sense.

Crouching down I drew a line with an arrow tip pointing towards Bree from Fornost and said, “Maddie.”

Bromley smiled at me and offered me his hand again. I took it, and he helped me up. He then turned to his friend and said, “Hadley,” while pointing at him. I smiled for him and dropped a curtsey to them both. I wasn’t sure if that was right or not, but they didn’t say anything so I assumed I was in the clear.

Bromley said something and beckoned again, and this time I followed him through the winding paths back into the open market.

This was a different part of Bree than I’d seen, and it was quite loud. I stuck close to Bromley and Hadley as they weaved through the streets. I couldn’t help but stare at the wares though. There were bolts of cloth in all kinds of colors; some stands had a variety of weapons, from bows and arrows to swords and daggers. There were food stands and jewelry booths, someone offering cups of beer—probably a homemade brew—there were dishes and silverware, candles and perfumes, and all manner of things in between. Everyone was haggling at their top of their voices, and some people were bartering even as I spotted silver coins and jangling money pouches.
I noticed as I walked that there were a handful of curly-haired children in the crowd running through people’s legs and calling for attention from the vendors, even trading with them. One of them skipped by me, and I actually stopped walking when I realized he looked like a full-grown man, though he probably only stood just above my hip. These “children”, as I took a good look around and was able to catch sight of several more in a group, were actually proper adults, but had some kind of dwarfism that made them incredibly short, though they looked proportional enough, if a little fat.

I was very surprised and probably would have stood there gawking if Bromley hadn’t grabbed my hand and steered me out of the crowd. The sun was setting before us as we walked down this less-crowded street, though they were plenty of people. Here seemed to be more travelers though, and more merchants but it wasn’t quite as hectic. I saw a couple more of these little people, and I politely tried not to stare. Bromley hadn’t let go of my hand, though I tried to discreetly wiggle it free. While I appreciated his kindness it did make me uncomfortable.

I forgot about it though when he guided me up to a doorway and inside. Above the door swung a creaky sign with a white rearing horse on it.
Welcome to The Horse (The Prancing Pony)

Chapter Summary

Don’t forget about "Stranger Danger" in Middle Earth. But at least the innkeeper is nice.

Chapter Notes

Writer’s Note: There won’t be any major pairing in this story because that is not the focus of it. I’m a sucker normally for Legomance fics, but unfortunately there’s no way to do “realistic” and “modern-human/Arda-Elf” love without getting into really OC, non-canon territory, though I suppose a modern-human/Arda-human would be possible. Maybe. So for those of you looking solely for hunky-elf-love (and no plot most likely), this isn’t the right story.

Dates: Maddie arrives in Middle Earth on April 12, 3017. She comes to Bree on April 23, 3017. To help keep you straight, we’re still one year ahead of the events of The Lord of the Rings.

To make a realistic girl-falls-into-M.E. story: Prince Charming in shining armor on his white steed does not conveniently show up at the first sign of trouble.

The man behind the counter looked swamped with work. He had papers in his hands, shouting orders to people I couldn’t see, and looked about ready to pull his mustache out from stress.

Bromley tapped the bell on the table and the man turned to us. He immediately smiled genially, and I instantly liked him. He had an auburn mustache and beard with long sideburns, balding on the top, and a face prone to smiles. He was wearing an apron over his tunic, smudged with dirt, and he was a little round at the middle from what I could see. He asked a question of Bromley and the two began to talk.

I looked around the dimly lit room, recognizing the darkness of a pub off to my right. It was smoky in there, with crowds of men sitting at wooden tables or at the counter laughing, talking, and gesturing with their pints. There was a fire in the hearth and lots of cigars out, making the interior difficult to see.

The whole place was built with polished wood, and looked a lot cleaner and finer than the other buildings I had passed. I wasn’t sure if that was because it was new, or because Bromley was taking me somewhere upscale. As I looked around I noticed the wooden sign nailed to the front desk that had the same image of a white horse rearing on its hind legs. It looked vaguely familiar to me, and I had a sudden sense of déjà vu. Had I seen this before?

Shaking it off, I deemed this inn The Horse, just like The Black Bird.

The man behind the counter leaned towards me and asked me something, but I only smiled at him.
I hadn’t the faintest idea what he said, but I felt I could trust him somehow. He had a kindly face, a well-mannered disposition, and he reminded me vaguely of someone from home whose name I couldn’t place. He frowned though and tugged at his mustache when I didn’t respond, then moved around the counter. Confused, I turned to Bromley, but he and Hadley were already moving.

I scammed after them as he led us through a low hallway that had a curious round, bright-colored door at the end with the doorknob in the exact center. We turned before I could get a good look at it and went up the stairs. The second door on the right he pushed open and we entered.

It was a hotel room, finer than Bryce’s to be sure. It was long, with a fireplace and small seating area near the door and one bed in the corner by the window. There was a small table and a dresser on the other side of the bed, each with two candles on them for light. It was still afternoon, but The Horse was in shadow of the other buildings, so the room was dark.

I stepped into the room, and Bromley turned to me and indicated with a sweep of his arm that it was mine. I thanked him several times and curtsied to him, Hadley, and the innkeeper (I was getting awfully good at it by now).

The innkeeper stepped forward then and put a hand to his chest. He intoned, “Butterbur,” slowly, and I couldn’t help but smile because it sounded like butterbeer.

I put a hand to my chest and said, “Maddie.” He smiled at that, then reached over by the door to show me a string attached to a bell, talking as he did so. It was nice to have him explaining it to me, even if I couldn’t understand. I didn’t feel like I was deaf and mute. He mimicked ringing it and then pointed at himself, repeating his name, his face eager for me to understand, and I nodded fervently to show I did. Pleased, he then took my hand and began to lead me down the hallway.

At the end of the hall was an empty room roughly the size of my own. There was a low metal tub and a woman filling it with steaming water from a bucket. It was a bath! An honest-to-God bath! I turned to Butterbur excitedly, and he seemed almost embarrassed at my joy. He made a gesture at the bath before exiting with Bromley and Hadley on his heels, each waving a quick goodbye to me.

The woman who was filling the bath was all business. I’d barely said a word before her fingers were loosening the ties of my dress. I realized she was probably going to wash it while I bathed, like Ysmay had, so I helped her pull the dress off, followed by the petticoat.

My undergarments were gross, but I was afraid to get rid of them since no one seemed to use anything like them here. When the woman kept staring, I slipped them off and tossed them to the floor, stopping her when she went to reach for them. I think she assumed I was throwing them away, since she didn’t fight me.

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The bath was a blessing. I washed my hair, my body, my underwear and bra, and did it all over again. Twice. At one point the woman returned with my wet dress and brought me a new one. I didn’t know where it came from, since it wasn’t mine, but she kept talking as the laid it over the chair in the room and left.

I dried myself on the only towel in the room, a threadbare thing barely bigger than a hand towel, before pulling on the petticoat and dress. It was much nicer than the one Ysmay had given me, but I felt uneasy wearing it. Was it a gift? From Bromley and Hadley? Or was I supposed to return it once my own dress was dry?

I combed out my wet hair but didn’t have any way to tie it back. I left the bathing room once I was
decent and headed back to my own, my hair already starting to soak into the back of the dress, making me shiver. Night had not yet fallen, but the shadows were getting longer and there was a chill in the air. In my room, I stood there for a moment, staring out the window as carts led by donkeys went by and people shouted until the room across the street was flickering in candlelight.

Tomorrow I would start looking for anyone that might be able to help me, I thought. Maybe there had been other cases of people accidentally wandering here. Like hikers, or maybe even children. It would be hard to find out though, considering my non-existent language skills. Perhaps I could see if Butterbur knew anything. He must have all kinds of customers and if not, I could ask him or Bromley to point me in the direction of the local leader.

My stomach grumbled, and I tentatively touched it. I’d think about all the serious things after I’d eaten. I opened my bag almost unconsciously and reached in to finger my clothes, before giving in to the urge to raise them up my nose to smell them. I couldn’t stop myself from feeling a deep sense of disappointment that I couldn’t smell home on them.

Home… Here I was in a medieval inn and pub in a town called Bree. No one spoke English, I didn’t know how I’d gotten here, I didn’t know what day it was, or how I’d get home.

I felt my throat starting to constrict and my eyes water, and I shut them tightly and swallowed with difficulty. I was, admittedly, a real crybaby. I cried at the drop of a hat, and it felt like that’s all I’d been doing since I’d ended up here. I took some calming breaths to stave off the tears, and when I felt I’d gotten control of myself, I opened my eyes only to jump at the sudden knock on my door.

I opened it to find Bromley and Hadley looking a little more dressed up. I realized, self-consciously, that my hair was still a half-dry mess. They entered, and Hadley approached me with a small smile on his face. He even had a dimple.

I smiled awkwardly, unsure of what they wanted, when he reached for my hair. I almost flinched, but I realized he just wanted to tie it back with the thong that suddenly appeared in his hand. I let him finger-comb it quickly before he braided it and tied it back. Bromley was fingering my dress in approval, his hand skimming the bare skin of the back of my hand. I wanted to pull away, but felt it might be rude. Personal space bubbles were probably smaller here, and I didn’t want to be ungrateful for what they had given me.

When my hair was done, Bromley tugged a little on the sleeve of my dress, indicating we were leaving. Hadley beckoned me too, and they led me out of the room.

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We went down to the pub on the first floor. It was smoky and dark, with rowdy men already crowding the bar and the sound of clinking tankards and voices in the din. I was immediately uncomfortable being probably the only woman here, but Bromley and Hadley were perfectly at ease and led me to a table on the side of the room.

Butterbur came over just moments after we were seated with a large tray covered in food. My mouth began to water at the sight and smell of all that delicious cooking. I hadn’t eaten a real meal in almost a week, not since that breakfast at Bryce’s, which felt like a month ago.

Butterbur put the plates, cutlery, and napkins on the table before us before lifting each dish off the tray. I was utterly consumed by the sight of all that steaming hot food, and I’m fairly sure Bromley and Hadley were joking about it, if their jovial attitude was any indicator.

Once settled and Butterbur gone, Hadley poured the wine and Bromley began to point out various
foods, saying the names out loud. I repeated them dutifully, but knew I wouldn’t remember them by tomorrow. Still, it was awfully kind of him.

We ate warm bread slathered in butter, and a roast that was fresh off the fire and marinated in some kind of thick sauce. This was more to my taste than Bryce’s food, though the beans and potatoes had been cooked with an herb I didn’t recognize that had a powerful taste I wasn’t too fond of. There was wine all around and more fresh cheese, though a different kind than Bryce’s but still unfamiliar. The gravy was smooth on my tongue, the wine sweet, and I managed to enjoy myself.

I finished first and watched them chat until they too were full. Bromley and Hadley finished off the wine and sat and talked with tankards of some stronger stuff in front of them. I put the plates back on the tray and was about to put the utensils back on too when a little man came over and finished for me.

He reached about my hips in height and had a mop of curly russet hair on his head. I couldn’t help but stare for a second, and I noticed that he had no shoes on, but rather large hairy feet. I recoiled a little at the sight, but I tried to belatedly hide my reaction. My mother was likely rolling in her grave somewhere at how impolite that was. Could it be a genetic defect? Perhaps there was a lot of intermarriage here and a small gene pool? That was a pretty serious mutation though.

Feeling awkward for thinking like that, I went to reach to hand him the tray, but he lifted it easily from the table, and I noticed offhand his nimble little fingers and the clean short nails. He murmured something before turning and leaving with it over one shoulder. He looked strangely disproportional with the human-size tray in hand in a crowd of full-grown men.

I turned back to Bromley and Hadley and they were both watching me, their cheeks slightly flushed with drink. They must have seen my confused look, because Hadley said, “halfling,” and pointed obviously to where the small man was now carrying two pints of foaming beer to a table a little ways over.

“Half…ling?” Strange, I thought, and I turned back to glance thinking of the little man before turning back to them. I put my hand by my hip and repeated, “halfling?” before I realizing that was probably quite rude. Neither man seemed to care, but I still felt bad for doing it. I could hear my mother’s scolding voice inside my head, and I couldn’t help a quick glance around to see if any of these “halflings” had noticed.

Bromley nodded, and I smiled slightly. I was about to take my seat again when Bromley stood up, Hadley following suit.

I was about to ask where we were going, when Bromley put an arm around my waist and began to steer me out the dark pub and back into the lobby. He didn’t seem all that drunk, but I let his arm be, despite feeling a little uncomfortable. He didn’t smell particularly good and his breath stank of alcohol and the gravy from dinner.

I saw my room door as we reached the top of the staircase, but I didn’t know what room Bromley and Hadley were in. When we reached mine and I stopped, Bromley held on tight when I tried to remove myself from his embrace. He murmured something to Hadley, who opened the door (it only had a deadbolt, so I could only lock it when I was inside), and all three of us went in.

Hadley took a seat in the chair and lit both candles on the table before lighting his pipe. Bromley turned, his arm still around me. He had to have been a good head taller than I, and in the candlelight his smile looked a little sinister. I unconsciously tried to take a step back, but his arm held me still.
I couldn’t help the sudden paranoia of his actions because now he really did look threatening, leaning over me slightly, my face and body too close to his for comfort. I could feel his eyes on me, heavy, unwelcome. Hadley just sat smoking a pipe by the table, watching too, and when my eyes skipped to his, he looked almost feral in the candlelight.

I looked fearfully up into Bromley’s eyes, all of my instincts kicking in and alerting me to the predator in the room. Maybe I really should have had some sense when I followed two strangers.

He reached for me, and I flinched before I could help myself, imagining the worst in my head (rape, brutal murder, that sort of thing), but he only put his hand on my hair and began to smooth it down. I kept my eyes tightly shut as he petted my hair, afraid of what I might see. It didn’t matter though, because he began to coo and murmur words into my ear. The arm around my waist unwound slowly, but I was frozen in place, and he reached up to tilt my chin.

I opened my eyes slightly, hoping secretly that was all he wanted, but he was right there, looking down at me until his eyes deliberately slid from my face and to the top of my chest. I let off an embarrassing squeak, horrified that he was eyeing my breasts, even if I was totally covered. He gave a breathy laugh, the stench right into my face, and his hand on my waist slid down my back, his arm grazing the side of my chest, until he groped me.

Horrified, my eyes popped wide open and suddenly the images in my head were fast becoming true as he closed his eyes and leaned down.

He was going to rape me. He was going to pretend to be nice about it, but rape was rape. They had been so nice, bought me a room, taught me words, and now turned out be absolute scoundrels who expected me to pay up with the only thing I had—my body. I was absolutely terrified that this was even happening to me at all, and I froze, mind stuttering to a halt. I’d never been this close to real danger in my life.

His heavy breath reeked of alcohol, tobacco, and gravy. His lips pressed against mine, heavy, wet. Repulsed, I tried to pull away, but I quickly found my back at the wall, and he just chuckled against my lips, probing a bit with his sour tongue before fisting a hand in my hair to keep me still, his other hand grabbing a little harder. I tried to twist away, but he pulled on my hair, and I whimpered in pain as he pulled back.

His eyes opened, and in the dim light of the room, they looked almost yellow.

My only thought in that second was a fleeting prayer for help, and the moment the thought became coherent I got mad. What was I? A damsel in distress?

All the emotions other than total horror at the situation came clamoring to the forefront and suddenly I was angry. I was being sexually assaulted. With an audience. I didn’t have to take this!

Just as Bromley’s lips were about to touch mine again, I viciously shot my knee up and straight into his groin. He grunted and instantly went down, the hand that wasn’t clutching his crotch was still in my hair, and he dragged me down almost to my knees. I lost whatever composure I had as my ire vanished and the fear returned. Frantically I kicked him again to get him loose before I fell on top of him. He let go, but he ripped out a chunk of hair with it, and I shrieked in pain. I stumbled to the side from him, clutching my head where he’d probably made a bald spot, before seeing Hadley rise up now to join the fight.

I realized in the next second that two on one was bad, and my fight-or-flight instinct did a sharp one-eighty.

I almost fell over Bromley to get away as Hadley made a grab for my arm, but I managed to
stumble into the wall and grab the cord to ring the bell. I rang it hard as I could, getting two goods yanks in, before Bromley got one of my ankles in his sweaty grip and pulled, tripping me up and on to the floor.

He said something in a rough, deep voice that sent a shudder through me (I can only imagine what the equivalent word in English was), but I kicked out at him and connected with his face. I probably bruised my toes at the same time I hit him so hard in my panic. I scrambled up when he let go and back to my feet. This time Hadley was on me, but it was too late and I couldn’t escape.

Butterbur opened the door at that very second and caught sight of Hadley with his arms around my waist as he lifted me off the floor, flailing and struggling the whole way. I had several of his fingers in my grip and was prepared to bend them until they broke to get free, and he had a white-knuckled grip on my waist that was going to bruise. Bromley was lying in a heap; his nose was bleeding where I’d struck him, and I hoped viciously that I’d broken it.

Instantly the innkeeper’s face turned a strange shade of purple as he shouted at Bromley and Hadley. Hadley dropped me unceremoniously on the floor, and I slumped to hold my aching head and to make sure I hadn’t broken any toes when I smashed my soft shoe into Bromley’s face. I saw Hadley and Bromley stand up and stiffly collect their coats before storming out.

Two scuffed black boots came into my vision, as I lay there sprawled on the ground. Butterbur patted my shoulder before offering me a hand up. He surveyed the room, and I glanced around too to see the mess we’d made. The table and chairs were overturned, Bromley’s and Hadley’s pipes were on the floor, one broken in half, the carpet had been bunched into the corner, and the candle on the dresser had fallen—thankfully it had gone out. He started talking, whether to himself or me it didn’t really matter, probably complaining about the mess. I hung my head, but he patted me softly and said something quietly.

He guided me to the bed and sat me down, before going to collect the fallen candles. The pain in my head was already dulling to a distant throb, and other than a little bruising I was fairly okay, but when I tried to stand Butterbur shushed me and went to fix the table and chairs. As he did this he started talking to me again, his voice soothing, and it made me feel a little better as he relit the candles and righted the rug. He looked worriedly over me, and I recalled his the way he’d looked when I’d first come. He’d known Bromley and Hadley were up to no good.

My hands began to shake as the shock started to wear off, and I sat further back on the bed, clasping my hands in front of me in a white grip like that would stop the tremors. Seeing this, Butterbur came over and rubbed my back and spoke soft, comforting words as I tried to gather my thoughts into something coherent.

When I felt a little more in control, I went over to my bag to look for the meat. My mind focused solely on it, and I felt marginally better for a moment when I found it, thrusting it into Butterbur’s kindly face.

My hands were still shaking a bit, and I knew I would start crying soon, but I owed him so much. The innkeeper looked at the meat before trying to push it back to me, but I stubbornly held it out. Confused, he asked me several questions, so I offered them again to him before standing to drop a weak curtsey. My legs shook, and I promptly sat down again. Understanding seemed to dawn on him, and he nodded seriously, thanked me, and took the meat.

Putting them on the table, he turned back to me and indicated the bed. I nodded, feeling shaky and weak, and emotionally drained.

Nodding at me again while murmuring something under his breath, he stood up slowly from the floor and patted me on the shoulder again before heading out.
When the door shut, I sat still for perhaps ten seconds before the waterworks started. I buried my face in the pillow and just let my system clean itself out. When the sobs racking my body were gone, I undressed into my undergarments, pulled my old t-shirt over my head, blew out the candles, and fell asleep.

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The next morning I woke groggily. The blankets were a little scratchy on my bare legs, so I threw them off and rubbed my eyes. They were crusted and dry, probably swollen too from crying. The room was still fairly dark, and I scooted to the edge of the bed where the window was to get a look outside.

The floor was cold, and the window was chilly, but the day had already begun. People were outside leading horses, unpacking carts, and shopping for the morning’s groceries. I pulled a blanket from the bed and lingered by the window, watching people live out their normal lives in wonderment.

After a while I stood up and struggled with the first dress I’d been given. I laid it over the chair and surveyed it, but it was like a totally different dress than the one I’d started with. The ends were stained badly and the color had become several shades darker from all the dirt. The woman who had washed it had obviously tried her best, but the sweat-stains, dust and dirt would never come out without an industrial washer and a tub of detergent. The other dress I had been given I laid out on the bed, unsure if it was mine to keep. I regretfully put on my first dress, and spent a good ten minutes fumbling with the lacing. I gave up for the moment and spent probably the next hour finger combing my hair and then fighting with the stupid leather thong to tie it so it would stay.

There was a knock on the door, and I dropped my hair and gave up on the dress to answer it.

“Butterbur!”

He smiled at me and brought in a tray with a variety of food on it. Turning to look at me properly, he looked quite surprised, and I blushed as I realized the state of my lone dress. He made an exclamation over it, even reaching out to touch the cuff, and I helplessly wondered how to tell him it was my only one.

He indicated the one on the bed I’d been given yesterday, and I tried to tell him it wasn’t mine, just a temporary one. He looked confused when I kept indicating him and the dress, but he kept waving me away. Frustrated, I tried to mimic washing my hair, to tell him I’d been given it yesterday when I was bathing, but all he would do was say my name and point to the dress.

Eventually I gave up. If he was giving it to me, I wasn’t going to argue. I needed something else to wear desperately.

After that, he left, probably to tend to other customers, and I looked over the food, realizing belatedly it was lunch, and that Butterbur had let me sleep in and now eat in his inn despite the fact that I couldn’t pay for it, and he must have known that.

I deliberated on whether or not to eat, but my stomach won out. I could worry about the little voice of my mother in my head yelling about manners later. She wasn’t the one tromping around the countryside totally lost and unable to communicate. In fact, I put down the fork as I remembered, I wondered if she knew I was missing. My boss must have called the police when I didn’t show up for work or answer my phone after a couple days. My parents must be terrified. My mother frantic, probably watching the news like a hawk and making constant phone calls. My father’s poor health was likely suffering too because of the stress. I could only hope my sister was helping out and could hold the fort until I got home.
I let out a shuddering breath, squeezed my eyes shut and vowed to think of something else. The best thing I could do for everyone was to focus on getting home.

The bread was soft and warm, even when dipped in the sweet wine. It wasn’t quite as good as soda, hamburgers, french fries, ketchup, and all the other things I found myself missing from home, but it was all I had.

Cleaning up my lunch, I decided to change into the other dress since this one was such a mess anyway. Switching over, I again attempted to lace up the back, but still wasn’t able to. Could I go downstairs with it unlaced? Or was that like walking downstairs with your pants undone?

My eye caught the bell, and after a moment of contemplation over whether this would be weird or not, I went over and rang it. I listened at the door, and within a minute I heard feet hitting the stairs and then footsteps outside my door. With the sound of a polite knock, I opened it, realizing belatedly I hadn’t even considered if it would be Butterbur or another worker at the inn.

The old innkeeper was there though, and he smiled at my appearance, clearly appreciating the change of clothes. I smiled back at him without realizing it, before remembering my dilemma. Twisting slightly, I tugged the string on the back, indicating I couldn’t do it. Butterbur took it, after a second, and I turned around and let him lace it up to the top of my neck. When I turned back, I caught the redness of his cheeks under his beard.

He started talking, perhaps to hide his embarrassment, and produced a comb from somewhere in his apron. It was dirty, had scraggy, curly hairs in it, chipped in some places, and missing a few teeth, but I thanked him when he handed it to me, and pulled it through the wild mess on top of my head.

It was a painful process, and Butterbur watched and smiled heartedly as I struggled with my hair as noiselessly and quickly as possible. He gathered up my lunch and was about to leave when I managed to wrestle it together, and I called him back.

I shyly held out the leather thong, and he flashed me a wide grin before twirling his finger to tell me to turn around, and deftly braiding it and tying it up. I pulled out the hairs in the comb as he tied up my hair, and handed it back to him when he was done.

He didn’t take it though, ignoring it as he headed downstairs. I held the comb limply in my hand as I stood out there in the corridor. I had thought people who lived in times like these would live by the motto of “every man for himself”, survival of the fittest and all that, but everyone here was generous with what little they had. I couldn’t help wishing my world were a little more like that (though we could certainly do without the smell).

Smiling happily now when I carefully curled my fingers over the comb and headed back inside to finish my breakfast.

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I decided to head downstairs once I put the comb back into my pack. I needed to find out if someone could help me in my…situation, and Butterbur was my best bet. I was also hoping, selfishly, that he would let me stay a little longer until I found said help.

I made it downstairs, and lingered by the front desk. I was afraid to go near the pub. After my experience with Bromley and Hadley I had no desire for any other stranger’s company.

I wandered closer to the front desk in time to catch the innkeeper hurrying by. He spotted me and detoured to a stop before tilting his head. He asked me something, but then seemed to think about
it before waving his hand. I hadn’t the faintest idea what he meant.

Smiling though, I tried to see if I could make him understand what I wanted. I curtsied first, repeating the words ‘thank you’ several times. He didn’t seem to get it though, so I tried to think of another way to explain what I wanted. How did I ask for a room? Especially with no money? What did I have to trade?

I was thinking about it, Butterbur standing there before me, when a little man—pardon, halfling—entered with bucket of cups, and I had a brilliant idea.

I could work here! I’d clean rooms or do dishes or something to help out! That would hopefully repay for the room and meals, and of course for saving my life.

Pointing at the halfling, I mimicked washing things, pretending to do so on the front desk and the wall. Butterbur watched this with a strange look on his face. It was hard to tell if he got my meaning at all.

He seemed to snap back into action as a rough voice called from the pub area. He gave me two fingers and disappeared through the doorway behind the desk the halfling had come from. I waited by the desk, staying out of the way watching the people go by and trying to act natural about it. There were many kinds of people, some men with shaggy hair and travel-stained clothes, men in fur capes, and others gathering bags and supplies together as they left.

As I watched I saw a short but stout man walk by who probably reached just below my shoulder in height. He had a beard as thick and wide as my waist in a mess of curly hazel hair that reached his knees. In his beard were shiny beads woven in and gold and silver thread. He wore a long cape ringed with fur at the top, and a jeweled belt around his waist that glittered brilliantly with fancy gems. He looked rich, but his height was what baffled me.

He walked bow-legged, with a stride almost like he was marching, especially with the huge, heavy boots he was wearing. He was maybe only head taller than a halfling, though still significantly shorter than a man. I hadn’t the faintest idea what to make of him. Perhaps he was a different kind of halfling?

Or wait… a dwarf?

Well, why not? I wondered to myself. I’d already seen these halflings, so maybe their genetic defect was related to dwarfism. Even though the way this one was dressed seemed…odd. Out of place even. The way his outfit looked, he reminded me of a mythical dwarf, especially with the jewels and gold and silver he was wearing. For some reason I couldn’t shake that feeling off, even as he walked out of my sight.

Before I could think about it more, Butterbur came bustling out the door with a tray loaded with food. He didn’t spare me a glance before he disappeared into the smoky pub area.

I didn’t have to wait long before the busy innkeeper returned, and he looked a bit startled to see me standing there at first. His face was red and he looked terribly rushed, and I felt guilty for monopolizing his attention like this. My mother’s scolding voice came back.

He looked at me blankly for a moment, and I realized a second later he’d forgotten what I’d said. So I pantomimed washing again and he shook his head, waving his arms about strangely and saying something. I tried to mimic my actions again but he refused, cutting me off before I could do more.

I was getting frustrated. He didn’t seem to want to hear me out. He went into the kitchen before I
could do more, coming out a second later with a tray covered in soup bowls. I tried to say something, but he said something gruffly and swiftly moved past me. I let him go, feeling hurt by his actions.

I caught him again as he came back, and this time he looked annoyed.

Fear made my throat constrict. This was all I had. The only person I knew in Bree was Butterbur. I didn’t even know where to go if I couldn’t stay here. I think my panic became evident when I grabbed Butterbur’s arm this time, dangerously unbalancing the tray with empty beer cups in his hands.

He looked at me, and I knew this was probably my last chance.

Holding up seven fingers, I tried to explain. “Day. Seven days. One week. Light dark light dark light dark.” It was difficult to make a physical gesture for an abstract concept like time, but I tried. Butterbur put the tray down and also spoke, making hand gestures too, but he kept glancing at the pub and I knew he was rushing to help paying customers.

Money!

I ran around to the other side of the front desk, uncaring if I was allowed to even do that, and rifled through the drawers until I found what looked like silver coins. I pulled them out and showed him. Mimicking washing the table, a cup from the tray, I tried to explain that cleaning would be my way of paying him for seven nights.

It was sinking in. I could see some recognition there.

We were interrupted though when a band of merry gentlemen entered, demanding Butterbur’s attention. Standing awkwardly behind the desk, I stayed in the corner as Butterbur negotiated rooms and price with them. They handed over their money and Butterbur, though he looked particularly reluctant, waved me over.

Taking the tray he’d discarded in my hands, the innkeeper led me through a swinging door into the back room. It turned out to be a large kitchen area with a backdoor opened to the stable, two men working on cooking, a pile of trays stacked in the corner, and the food ready to be eaten being loaded on by the halfling.

Butterbur led me over to where the halfling was and crouched down to tap him on the shoulder. The little man turned around, looking surprised to see me, before the innkeeper interrupted. He pointed at him and said, “Nob.”

“Nob.” I repeated, curtsying quickly and looking down at the halfling while trying not to stare at his feet.

Butterbur continued to talk rapidly. I only caught my name to Nob and the two cooks, then with a last nod at me hurriedly left with a tray.

Confused, I turned to Nob, noticing the two chefs in the room were staring at me too. I shifted uncomfortably, not sure what I was supposed to be doing.

Nob waved me over to the door that led outside. In the yard there, amidst horses and donkeys, was a sort of old bathtub. I put down the tray of dirty cups when I saw several other piles of dirty dishware. Nob went straight over the tub, already full of water, and beckoned me over.

His hands were so small as he handled the man-size plate; I was still astonished at how nimble he was. And perfectly proportioned. You would think, I thought somewhat strangely, that he was
meant to be this size.

He moved quickly, putting all the leftover food into a large bowl on the ground (which stunk because every kind of food was mixed in), then dunked the plate in the water, which was actually fairly dirty, rubbed it down with a cloth full of holes, and put it on to another tray that was already stacked with plates.

Nob stood up and pointed at the tub, and I went over and crouched down since the tub itself was only about knee-high. Taking up another plate, I quickly washed it and added it to the growing pile. It wasn’t that sanitary, especially with no soap and dirty water, but better than nothing.

Nob suddenly appeared again, I hadn’t even heard him leave, dragging a low stool with him. It was just about the right height. Thanking him, he left again, and this time I got down to work.

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The work actually made me feel better. I felt like I was earning my way, and I got the chance to meet Bob, another halfling who worked with the horses in the stable. I wondered how many of them there were. When I filled a tray with clean dishes and brought it in to Nob, who loaded up trays and occasionally took them out, I got to meet the chefs. They were Hamond (the tall one) and Weldon (the one missing a front tooth). Both were quite nice, and offered me the chance to snack on whatever they were making. Butterbur came by fairly frequently, and he often popped a head out to say hello.

Around mid-afternoon things slowed down, and Hamond and Weldon traded off on doing the cooking, so they each came out to talk to me. I managed to learn basic greetings and was trying to learn some numbers when the rush started again.

When the evening meal was over and we’d all had our own dinners, Butterbur came by and motioned for me to come. My hands were wrinkled from the water, and with Butterbur’s help we tipped the whole tub over and watched the thirsty earth drink it in. The bowl of leftovers had been periodically emptied. It ended up as food for the stable animals, and I fed two of the stray cats that wandered by.

Back in my room, Butterbur lingered. He tugged on his mustache a bit, and I sensed he wanted to ask something. He didn’t say anything though, so I thought I’d start.

Except I couldn’t. No matter how I tried to phrase it, to gesture it, there was no way to ask if he knew anything about my home except with the words I’d used before. He didn’t recognize them when I tried, and we were left in silence again.

God, this was like a whole other world, I couldn’t help thinking. The thought had been bothering me all day whenever I got frustrated with words or didn’t understand something. I just couldn’t believe a place like this existed where I came from. It was getting harder and harder each day that I seemed to get further and further from my world.

Our silence went on too long, and Butterbur seemed to give me a rueful look, and I had a feeling we were both sensed we were at an impasse. He clearly knew I was totally ignorant to their entire lifestyle and culture and vice versa.

I smiled as an idea suddenly occurred to me. I was playing charades to communicate, but what about Pictionary?

I acted out the motions for writing, and Butterbur suddenly beamed at the idea and hurried out the door, no doubt to get a pen and some paper.
Smiling, I spun around in a circle once. Who knows how I’d draw what I wanted. Maybe if I started small I could work up to the bigger concept?

Butterbur knocked on the door, and I called for him to come in. He had with him a rolled up piece of paper, an inkbottle, and a quill.

I suppose I shouldn’t have been surprised at the offered supplies, so I thanked him before unrolling the paper. It turned out to be thicker, rougher, and much longer than a regular piece of paper, so I assumed it was parchment. I’d never used a quill before, but I had a general idea of how it worked.

I didn’t know what to draw now though. Words would be meaningless since I couldn’t read this world’s language and they couldn’t read mine. I sat for a couple moments, trying to puzzle it out.

What I wanted was help, but my ultimate goal was to get home.

Home… I could draw home.

My art skills were a third-grader’s, and using a quill would probably make it preschool level, but it was all I had. I uncapped the inkbottle and dipped the quill in, unsure how much ink to put on it or when to take it out.

Holding the parchment steady, I tentatively drew a straight line, wincing a little inside at the blotchiness of it and the way it thinned out by the end so it was more of a long black stain rather than a line.

Butterbur’s rough hands gently took my right one and corrected my position, tilting the quill at an angle. He lifted my hand until the point was almost hovering over the paper, and when I tried to bring it back down he pulled it back up. Understanding, I put very light pressure down as I dipped the quill again and drew another line.

Even just drawing four lines to make a square made my hand hurt from the uncomfortable angle and positioning to hold it. I was a little shaky, and it was still blotchy, but I figured it would just need practice.

I added a roof to my rudimentary house, a simple triangle on top, and then a chimney poking out of it. Butterbur laughed at my entirely too simplistic drawing, but I was sure he recognized it for what it was.

I drew a door then, adding two windows with panes. I then drew my parents and I next to the house as stick figures, two taller than me, and discovered that drawing circles while holding a quill is incredibly difficult. I had two ink splotches for eyes that were entirely accidental, and thin lines as one stick figure’s arms leaking across the paper. The hair alterations to differentiate gender were almost indistinguishable.

I sat back from my work of art, blowing on it lightly to dry the ink, and then turned it so Butterbur could look at it more fully.

He wrinkled his brow thoughtfully as he looked at it. I pointed to Butterbur and said what Bromley had said when I first met him. “Butterbur. Bree. Maddie. America.”

At the word “Bree” I opened my arms wide to encompass the whole town, then at “America” I tapped my finger against the parchment. Butterbur smiled sadly at me as he held the parchment. I knew then that he understood.

He put it back down, and I stared down at it. My smudged face next to a skeletal house slowly
began to blur. I felt like I was so far from home it was literally inconceivable. I wanted so badly to go home, and it was the only thing I could do.

I wrote the word “America” above it, pronouncing it slowly for Butterbur. He shook his head, looking every bit regretful to not knowing, and I shrugged, my heart heavy. I tried Europe, including several countries, but none of them he recognized. Frustrated, but more upset, I eventually sat back and murmured a thank you.

He stood up carefully and patted my back in a fatherly manner. Smiling genially he pointed at the bed, rolled up the parchment and placed it by my bag, collected the ink well and quill, and quietly left the room.

I stripped off the dress and laid it flat on the table so it wouldn’t wrinkle. Then I blew out the candles and crawled into bed, feeling more tired than I’d ever felt before.
Up and Out

Chapter Summary

Maddie leaves Bree, but it's not all sunshine and rainbows when traveling by yourself.

Chapter Notes

Writer’s Note: There is a reason I have deliberately left out an exact description of Maddie, and it is because I want her to be as universal as possible (and because it’s in first-person perspective and how often do you think about your “lovely brown hair just past shoulder-length”?). Unlike a Mary-Sue, Maddie can really be anybody—there’s no physical description, so you can imagine her to look like anyone. The only reason I’ve made her from America is because that’s the country I happen to be most familiar with.

To make a realistic girl-falls-into-M.E. story: The gritty details, no matter how gross or uncomfortable they make you feel, shouldn’t be avoided because of that. This is attempting to be realistic after all, and in the medieval times there wasn’t toilets and tampons.

For the next week I washed dishes, cups, and utensils, talked with Hamond and Weldon, and learned colors, numbers, and a random assortment of things. Unfortunately I had few verbs on hand, so I couldn’t really string together a sentence, but it was certainly useful when I needed to find something or wanted help. It definitely beat charades.

I got sick once while in Bree, probably from the food since there weren’t exactly food safely laws here. Other than an afternoon of puking and some very worried chefs and an innkeeper I recovered just fine. I was just glad it was food poisoning and something else. That I hadn’t contracted some terrible disease or an infection was probably a miracle.

When I wasn’t in the stable-yard, I had taken to wandering the town. Bree was actually rather large, a crossroads really, as I’d found out with another late-night talk with Butterbur where he drew me a general map of the town, and with all sorts of people in it. I noticed on my first day out that the hillsides above the main town were dotted with round doors like the one in the inn. When I asked the innkeeper about it he mentioned halflings, so I assumed those were their homes. Strange, but probably safe and warm.

Still, as I wandered I found nothing that could help me. Everyone went about their business, mostly ignoring me, and when I asked Butterbur about people who might know a way to help me, he had Nob take me to one man’s house who was, I suppose, the headman of a sorts. He was as useful as the one in Fornost.

While wandering I made sure to stay clear of the shady parts of town. I never saw Bromley or Hadley again, but I did get several uncomfortable looks on each outing from men. A woman
wandering alone was obviously less common here.

I guess it would have been too easy if the first town I got to had my answers.

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When I came downstairs on the third day and ate my breakfast, Hamond was sitting off to the side eating his. He grunted out a good morning that I reciprocated. As I finished up I sipped at the alcohol (it was still unpleasantly strong when I’d just woken) and looked over at him. This question had been bothering me.

“Hamond.” He looked up at me, and I smiled. “Maddie,” I said, then flapped my hand like it was a mouth, before listing off numbers and various words in English. “Maddie,” I repeated, “English.”

I repeated the action, emphasizing the name of the language, then looked to him. “Hamond, Weldon, Nob, Butterbur.” Then flapped my hand again and listed numbers in their language, and this time he laughed, full-bellied.

Not to be put-off since I knew I probably looked ridiculous, he intoned, “Westron. Hamond, Weldon, Nob, Butterbur,” then a new word, “Westron.” He then mimicked my hand movements and smiled widely at me.

I said the new word followed by “Westron”, and he nodded. I repeated the same using my name and “English”, and when he nodded I felt a thrill go through me. My new word meant, “speak”!

Maddie speaks Westron.

I wanted to learn the negative form of that too, so that I could tell people I didn’t speak Westron. I spoke my new sentence, but shook my head between “Maddie” and my new word, then tagged Westron on to the end.

Hamond laughed again before giving me my second new word, which must mean “no”. I put the whole thing together, and when he grinned at me (he had one black tooth—I was seriously becoming obsessed with people’s dental hygiene), I smiled back.

Maddie doesn’t speak Westron. (Or more likely, Maddie no speak Westron. I didn’t care much for the grammar at the moment.)

We got to work then, and it was a pleasant morning for it. Bob was patting down some of the new horses, and waved a greeting. He was so small he could actually stand under some of the biggest horses. He looked rather silly next to all the big animals, but I’d found he enjoyed their company.

I’d never been much of a horse person as a child; my sister had been the one crazy about them. Still, I helped Bob brush some down and even fed them from my hand. They were beautiful creatures, and I could appreciate why he liked them so much.

When the lunch rush was over and the lazy mid-afternoon began, I went back into the kitchen, preparing for a last walk about the town, when Butterbur came in and over to the stable door while waving at me to come. Curious, I followed him back out to the stable yard.

He led me to the far side of the stable yard and around the side of one of the stalls, not visible from where I normally washed dishes. A dark-clothed man was seated, legs crossed comfortably in the shadows of the building. Butterbur greeted him a little nervously, and I could see the way he wrung his hands behind his back. I was even more anxious as the innkeeper introduced me to him, picking up on Butterbur’s uncertainty.
“Trahern.” He introduced the man, and I looked at him more fully as I dropped a curtsy.

He had on a weather-stained black cape with a hood that was drawn up to hide his face. It threw his face in shadow so I could barely see his features. The way he had the hood reminded me sharply of a movie character, though I couldn’t think of which movie or who. I could see though that he had a graying beard and mustache, trimmed fairly neatly, but his eyes were in shadow. All his clothing seemed worn but comfortable, and patched up by hand. He had on tall boots, and a strange star-shaped clasp holding his cape together. At his hip was something shiny peeking from his cape. I couldn’t make it out though in the shadow.

In sum, he frightened me.

(I shoved down any sense of intrigue I felt at the man’s appearance. After Bromley and Hadley I didn’t want to involve myself with anymore shady characters if I could help it.)

I turned to Butterbur, trying to politely inquire what the hell he was thinking, but Trahern pushed down his hood. He was an older man, I noticed instantly, tough and getting on in years, though he looked to be in good shape considering his age. He was graying and kept his thinning hair long in a low ponytail. His eyes were bright, proud, and strong.

He spoke in a low, rasping voice, which I would have had difficulty making it out if I could have actually understood it. Butterbur said something more to him, and Trahern looked at me, scrutinizing. I met his hard brown eyes steadily, refusing to back down despite how nervous he made me. My heart fluttered up into my throat. This would not end up like another Bromley and Hadley; I was stronger than that.

He spoke again, in what I now recognized as Westron, to me, and I couldn’t help the mild giddiness that washed through me at the thought of using my newly acquired words. I stumbled over myself a bit, feeling shy in front of this stranger, but I still managed to tell him I didn’t speak Westron. Butterbur looked surprised and amused, and I couldn’t help smiling, feeling quite pleased with myself. Trahern didn’t look fazed.

This time he tried another language, the sounds different from Westron, but I shook my head, not recognizing it, and then one more without success. Looking at me curiously, he then spoke a quick sentence in a soft, lilting tongue.

I certainly didn’t recognize it; it sounded beautiful though.

Trahern asked me a question then in that language, and all I could do was smile sadly at him. I’d never heard anything like it, and that was a pity.

When Butterbur seemed to lean forward expectantly and the seated man sat silently staring at me, I realized I’d just been standing there. I shook my head quickly—both to say I didn’t understand and to clear my head. Butterbur looked disappointed, but Trahern continued on. He seemed to run out of languages after about three more, and he sat back on the chair and produced a pipe. He seemed to have no qualms about smoking right there in front of us, and he lit it and breathed in (I couldn’t help the stupid thought of how he’d lived that long smoking like that), exhaling as he looked at me.

I valiantly didn’t wrinkle my nose as the smoke went right in my face, and instead started to try my own languages.

I tried English first of course, not expecting much, and then French and Spanish. Neither got much of a response, which probably meant their language had no Latin base (which was strange, because it sounded like it might). I didn’t know much German, except for “hello” and “God bless
you”, but it was worth trying. I butchered Chinese (you never know), and even threw in a “Susquehanna” and “Cherokee” in the hopes that some Native American terminology had gotten through.

It hadn’t, and for every language I tried I got a blank look (or, well, no change in terms of Trahern). He surveyed me as I worked my way through the different languages and none of them he so much as responded to.

Now he was watching me with a strange look in his eye. I turned to Butterbur, but the innkeeper was watching the black-clad man.

He said something to Trahern, who still had that unnerving gaze on me. The grey-haired man finally turned to Butterbur after taking another long draw on the pipe, and stood. He said something more to him before offering me a nod and sweeping his gaze over me. Anyone else and it would have been invasive, but for him it was just a cursory look, like he was memorizing me, and then he walked away.

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Eight days after entering Bree, all my meager belongings were packed into my canvas bag and I stood outside The Horse, ready to go.

I was feeling quite insecure about leaving when I’d just been getting settled, but I had to go. I didn’t really have a plan, but I knew that I would overstay my welcome at The Horse if I stuck around much longer, and I was becoming increasingly convinced there weren’t any answers for me in Bree. I had to move on. Something in me was restless to leave.

I’d enjoyed my stay though, and had even managed to overcome my fear of the outhouse, which was considerably worse than the one in Fornost, perhaps because it got a lot more use since The Horse was a busy inn.

The night before I left I gave Butterbur my five-dollar bill. It was useless to me anyway. The innkeeper had exclaimed over the designs on the bill excitedly. I had held it up in candlelight inside to show him the secret pictures that could only be seen that way (this is much more difficult than in a regular light since I didn’t want to burn the bill, but we managed). He had been so wonderfully nice to me and so generous that I vowed if I got the chance I would come back and talk to him properly and especially to thank him for everything he’d done.

I said my goodbyes to Hamond, Weldon, Bob and Nob too. It was nice to have been able to make friends here.

After that meeting with Trahern, Butterbur had called him a “Ranger”. Even when he tried to explain it, I didn’t understand. I didn’t know why I’d spoken to him. Why had that man known so many languages? So many languages I didn’t know? What was that last one? Were they Native American languages? Some indigenous languages? Who was he? What was he? Some kind of guard? I hadn’t noticed a weapon, but would they use swords out here? I did see that…dwarf with an axe.

I was just confused. It bothered me something awful, like the answer was right in front of me and I just wasn’t seeing it.

This morning Butterbur (after triple-checking I was sure) managed to get me a ride with a merchant group traveling to a town four days away. I was going to go with them, and the innkeeper had drawn me a crude map with a line for a road, a mountain beside it with some trees, and some larger mountains farther east. The town we were going to was called Leurbost, and was
apparently on the edge of their known world.

It wasn’t very far; I couldn’t help but think as I looked at the map in my hand now. On the back was the picture of my house and me. I made sure to roll it up carefully before sticking it in my bag. Four days by walking was how far? I didn’t know, but it felt too far for this to be real. The world was getting smaller and smaller every day, the newspapers all said. The only unclaimed land was the North and South poles, and I hadn’t seen a single piece of ice yet.

I was starting to despair. Where was I? How far would I have to go to find someone who could help me? How far was home from here?

I was afraid I might have to go further than the map showed, and unfortunately Butterbur couldn’t provide me with much information about that. He’d used all kinds of words I didn’t know, and I was getting increasingly nervous. Did the road go on past Leurbost? If it did, where did it go?

I feared that was what I was going to find out.

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The trip was supposed to be four days. Butterbur gave me an extra satchel full of food, including gifts from Hamond and Weldon. There were almost a dozen apples, two loaves of bread, and several other kinds of fruits and food I couldn’t name. There was no meat, and I was a little grateful for that because it would just be extra weight on my back.

I think Butterbur knew I wasn’t going to stay at Leurbost too long, which was why he’d stuffed my bag full of food and gave me two water skeins. I’d even been given a bedroll and new pack to replace the old canvas bag. The ridiculous amount of generosity never failed to surprise me, and I felt humbled by it all. I really had nothing to give them back.

The merchant caravan left at dawn. I’d had my last breakfast and goodbyes with the innkeeper and the kitchen staff, then gone out to meet the group I would be traveling with. I was allowed to ride in one of the wagons with some barrels of hay and a couple of the wives of the merchants. Two donkeys pulled the cart, and the way it shook and swayed from side to side as we started off made me think of old hayrides around Halloween at home. I stuffed the thought back where it came from.

The other women were a sufficient enough distraction that I couldn’t get too caught up in my thoughts. The wagon wasn’t covered, so the women shouted to the men walking beside the two carts and chatted amongst themselves, all while we slowly baked under the sun. I would be sun burnt by the end of this, and I was almost glad all this clothing covered everything but my face and neck. Several of the women tried to talk to me for a while, but my limited vocabulary made it difficult.

The road was a populated one and quite wide. It was dusty and long, winding away into the horizon, surrounded by trees and low hills. People led carts and mules back towards Bree, walked together in groups or riding. I didn’t see any more halflings, though I saw another group of those dwarves from before. I couldn’t help staring when all six of them were together. Several had axes bigger than my head on their waist, and their outfits spoke of wealth with gold trim and precious jewels. The tallest one probably reached my chin. I tried not to rationalize where they’d come from or why they looked like that. It just made my head hurt, and I was tired. Tired of the trip, of the confusion, of everything.

The caravan stopped for meals on the side of the road, just beyond the bushes rimming the edge, and we got down to stretch and eat. I thankfully didn’t have to use too many of my rations because the people of the caravan shared with me. They were friendly people, and quite curious.
Many of them asked me my name and then many more questions that I didn’t understand.

I was perfectly mortified though, when we stopped for dinner and I had to relieve myself. I had no idea how to ask, or whether I should just leave the clearing and take care of it the way I’d been doing it when I was on my own. I was horrified at the thought that someone would stop me though, especially a man, so I held out until the pressure became unbearable.

I spotted one woman by the edge of the clearing who was standing quietly with a hand on her swollen belly. She was by herself and on the edge, which was exactly what I’d been hoping for.

I approached her slowly, and she smiled at me before waving me closer. She looked tired and maybe a little pale, but still happy. I hoped she’d be discreet and nice about my question, because I might really have to just slip off if she couldn’t help.

Keeping my back to the company, I pressed my hand to my lower belly and tried not to dance on the spot like a four-year old. She misunderstood though when she put her hand on her pregnant stomach, and then took my hand in hers to let me touch it.

As sweet as the gesture was, it wasn’t what I meant. I thought about it while my hand rested on the swell of her belly, and decided that pressing against my bladder with my hand wasn’t going to help. What if she thought I was pregnant? What a mess that would make!

I needed to use words. I thanked her in Westron before looking at the ground shyly before back up at her. She had an open expression on her face, and I couldn’t help feeling a little relieved by it. “Water.”

She tilted her head at me, and pointed back at the campsite, but I shook my head. “Maddie,” indicating myself, “water,” then gestured towards the trees of the forest.

I pressed against my lower stomach and said, “Water,” again, hoping she didn’t take that the wrong way.

She didn’t hide the smile and little bit of laughter, but then glanced back at the campsite before leading me a little ways into the forest.

We wandered around for a bit, keeping close enough that we could see the rough light of the campfire and hear distantly the murmurs of voices, but far enough that we couldn’t be seen or heard. Eventually she pointed out a low tree, with branches spread out that provided some sort of incredibly limited cover.

This was my medieval bathroom stall. Thanking her awkwardly, she patted me on the shoulder softly before heading back towards camp.

It was distinctly uncomfortable, and a far cry from hygienic, but I did it. I wondered vaguely if they had any kind of leaf they used as toilet paper, but considering the conditions I’d been in, and the fact that every leaf looked the same out here, I seriously doubted it.

Another day passed without incident, and the road quieted until we were the only ones on it. I became even more thankful I was traveling with a group, as it would have been a little creepy on my own. The women had warmed up to me some more, and now taught me a variety of words. I learned a lot of words like “mountain” and “donkey”, along with “comb” and other more feminine words.

I did notice after the third day that no one had bathed since Bree. I hoped I could get a bath in their
town, Leurbost, before I moved on. I felt dirty, bathing so infrequently and with my hair greasy
and limp, and I desperately wanted to change my dress. None of the women had changed outfits
except for the pregnant woman (and she hadn’t bathed either). I guessed the idea of bathing
wasn’t very popular here.

I wanted to cringe as I thought of the dirt, mud, and unknown gook under my nails, in my hair and
all over me, but I didn’t. In fact, I glanced down at my nails; I was surprised they hadn’t grown
longer. I hadn’t cut them, but it seemed they’d stayed short on their own. Maybe the rougher
lifestyle I was suddenly living was keeping them short?

By the third day I had mastered the art of sleeping outside. Having the open sky above me, only a
thin mat, a rough blanket (courtesy of the wives), and a hard bag for a pillow wasn’t growing on
me so much as I was becoming accustomed to it.

On the fourth day we reached Leurbost. It was about Fornost’s size, with wooden buildings,
laundry strung up over the street, and the animals stabled right next to the houses. The merchant
caravan was greeted enthusiastically, people hugging and laughing and talking constantly. I
couldn’t help feeling a bit left out, which was silly and I knew it.

I wandered around Leurbost for most of the day, checking out the two pubs in town, the little
paddocks where people put their livestock, and the little homes. It really was another Fornost,
except there were more trees around it. I refilled both my water skeins from the local well, though
it took me the better part of an hour to haul the water up from the bottom twice.

Without any money and my language skills still far from usable for bargaining, I ended up
walking away from both inns (that were also the pubs, that was a trend clearly). I was too shy to
ask for a night in someone’s home, feeling uncomfortably aware of my “outsider” status. I ended
up finding myself a nice little niche off the main road just outside the town.

They didn’t have a guard or wall like in Bree, so I made sure to stay a good way from the town so
I wasn’t spotted. I didn’t want them thinking I was a thief or something. I settled under a tree and
rolled on to my back to look at the sky through the branches. I could see, just a couple feet from
me, the bud of a blossom, and then the stars so far away.

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Leurbost was too small to offer me any help, and so after examining my very crude map, I
changed my shoes, pulled on the dress from Fornost that was already travel-worn, and headed
back up the road from the town to the main one. I fondly dubbed it “the highway”.

I walked along it by myself, sticking to one side and keeping up a steady pace. I had to have legs
of steel by now from all this walking, and was probably in better shape than I’d ever been before.
Still, if I got home I didn’t think I’d ever go camping again.

I couldn’t lie and say it wasn’t a little frightening being on my own again, but nowhere near as bad
as those first days had been. It wasn’t the same feeling of independence as, say, driving a car, but
there was a certain freedom to it. And I didn’t have to answer to anyone—not even a government
— I tried to remind myself, and how many people back home could say that?

It was poor comfort, but better than none.

It wasn’t until the second day out from Leurbost that I came across a rather large, imposing hill. It
lay on my left as I walked, and I took a good look at the ruins on top of it, including a number of
stones that looked like archways, or perhaps had been pillars to a roof of some kind. I thought of
the Parthenon in Greece, except round, and not white. The stones were all broken and scattered,
and it was clearly an old, abandoned place.

My eyes lingered on it, and I had the sudden thought about going up there to have a look around the area, knowing somehow it was the tallest place around. But then, as I stared harder, I started to feel unaccountably uncomfortable, even frightened of it, and I kept my distance.

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Almost another four days passed without seeing a soul. I was getting quite good at rationing my food. Despite that small luck, my dress had several rips in it from snagging on branches and rocks at night, and I’d scraped my knee and hands when I’d tripped. I didn’t change out of it though, not knowing how long I might be traveling and figuring it was better to completely ruin one dress than to rough up both of them.

I’d also managed to get sunburned. It was, I suppose, inevitable. I had no moisturizer and nothing to soothe it with, so I did my best to ignore the peeling on my nose and cheeks and fight the urge to scratch it, thankful suddenly that my hair was down to protect my ears and neck and that the dress covered a lot of skin.

The worst thing about this, worse than the sunburn, the dress, the limited food, was the loneliness. I had felt like a mute without the ability to talk to someone in Bree, but I would take a companion who didn’t understand a word I said rather than be all on my own.

The gathering clouds in the sky only worsened my mood.

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For another two days there was little change in scenery, though the weather went sour. It rained down on me, and I desperately sought shelter under the trees at the edge of the forest. I didn’t want to waste food and energy by waiting out the storm, so under the cover of the trees I kept walking, making sure to keep my eye on the road. My bag ended up soaked through (what I would give for plastic!), I was completely drenched and now muddy, but at least I got to refill my water skeins.

It rained through the night and I had a poor time sleeping when I was wet and cold. The morning had a lovely drizzle that kept up almost all day. I was lucky I hadn’t fallen sick the night before, most likely because the weather was getting warmer, but I didn’t know how long that luck might last for. Still, the rain made the washed out colors of the forest bold and brilliant. It was beautiful; I’d never seen anything like it.

I still passed no one as I walked, and thankfully my food had managed to last so far. The apples were browning and what was left of the bread was stale and starting to mold from the rainwater, but my stomach was hardening to it. I’d found some strawberries the day before and eaten those as a meal instead of my food. I had hoped to find more, but I didn’t want to go too far into the brush and trees by the road. The forest frightened me, and I was afraid of getting lost.

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It was the thirteenth day of travel from Bree, and the weather remained overcast and threatening rain. I sniffled a bit, but otherwise had escaped a cold. Around the early afternoon—it was harder to tell the position of the sun through the thick clouds—the road sloped upwards in an incline, and I struggled up it. After walking on essentially flat land for weeks, my legs cried out against the change. I made it up there though, and as I stood there at the crest of the hill, I looked forward and saw a river and a wooden bridge over it. Beyond that there looked to be a thick forest and then the great looming mountains on my little map.
The view was spectacular, and I took a moment to just soak it in. I didn’t think about the hows and whys of a place where vistas like this were unbroken by suburbs and cities. I didn’t think about the aches in my muscles and the cramps in my stomach. I could only marvel at the greenery, the mountains, the glimmering of the river, and think I can’t believe I’m in such a beautiful place.

I could feel the smile on my face, and I had the sudden urge to just run to the river—run and not look back, run as fast and hard as I could.

I didn’t think; I just acted. I rushed down the hill and almost tripped myself up again, though this time I managed to stumble without falling. My pack bounced against my back as I ran, the sudden rush of adrenaline in me letting loose a giddy laugh.

The river was hardly a hundred feet from me, so I dropped my pack on the ground, lifted up my skirt, and sprinted to it.

The wind ripped my skirt up higher, pushed my tangled, dirty hair out of my face, and drew a shriek of laughter from me. I ran full speed, non-stop, my feet hitting the ground hard as I ran, cheeks flushed. The sun came out, and I felt real euphoria.

I couldn’t stop smiling even as I panted as I came to a stop by the edge of the water, seeing the roaring torrent before me rush past, dragging branches as tall as I was with it. I put my hands on my knees and caught my breath before going back to retrieve my bag. I didn’t know what had come over me, but I was glad I’d run. I’d never felt quite so free and careless as then, and it took a strange weight off my shoulders.

Wherever this place was, it was certainly magical.

I ended up spending the night on the other side of the bridge under the cover of the thicker, lower-hanging trees. The water glowed in the moonlight like breakers on the shore of the ocean, and I rather liked knowing the bridge was there right by me. It reminded me that there had to be people nearby if they’d built it.

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I almost didn’t want to leave the riverside, but the road kept going on. I spent almost an hour filling my canteens, the river moving by so fast I had been afraid to get too close and be swept away.

I had to be careful with water, since it could be dangerously unclean and therefore carrying all sorts of terrible things. Normally people here seemed to drink ale or beer, rather than plain water. I imagined if I boiled it I’d be fine, but since I only theoretically knew how to start a fire from scratch that was moot point. River water, moving quite fast and in an area without pollution, was going to have to be my best bet. With a little luck, I wouldn’t contract a horrible disease.

This was the first day of what would be the beginning of rather terrible series of events.

It started with my first bathroom break of the day. I discovered I was on my period when I saw my soiled underwear. I ended up having to rip the sleeves of the dress I was wearing, which is far more difficult than the make it look in the movies—I had to use my teeth and rocks, and got some rug burns on my hands from all the pulling—and make those into pads. It was distinctly uncomfortable, but I was already very low on food and had cut my meals down to two a day in order to save up. I couldn’t afford to stay in one place and wait it out. This also meant that my only pair of modern underwear was stained, and it would probably never wash out. I was too far from the river to even wet it, and without soap it wasn’t worth wasting my drinking water to rinse it. In the end, I’d had to toss it, and that felt like one more step away from home and another big
one here. The medieval version of underwear I’d been given in Fornost (Ysmay had stuffed it into my bag and I had ignored its existence until now) was flowery, ill fitting, and scratchy. I was not looking forward to a future of them.

The second thing that happened was the wood. What had been a rather nice smattering of trees along the road that allowed plenty of light through with little undergrowth had rather suddenly, if sneakily, changed into an overgrown, dark, thick, forest. There were bushes and trees teeming everywhere, spilling over the road to throw it in shadow. Thankfully the highway was still quite wide, and split the forest nicely. It didn’t frighten me too much during the day, but that night was like my first couple of nights in this world: spent awake and terrified.

The second day was without incident until night began to fall. I had begun to notice my sleeping schedule had changed, how when darkness fell I grew tired, and I woke early and wide awake with the morning light. I would have thought, in another world, another time, that falling asleep at six or seven at night was ridiculous, and waking up at maybe four or five in the morning even more absurd.

Not any more though. I wondered how much I’d changed since I’d been here. How long had I been here? I counted back the days, but it was difficult when days and days of travel just started to blend together. I estimated, roughly, that I’d been here almost a month. Which was amazing, I couldn’t help thinking.

With the oncoming evening, and lost in my counting of days, I probably missed the first warning signs. Before I’d realized it, there was the sound of growling and something snapped a twig. I froze on the spot, my heart stopping in my chest.

Instinct told me I’d been an idiot to imagine something like this wasn’t going to happen. I was in a forest, in the middle of untamed wildlife without any sign of civilization for probably for miles and miles, considering how far I’d walked. Being dinner for a bear or a wolf wasn’t that big a stretch of the imagination.

Of course, the images that accompanied that thought—me broken, bleeding, being eaten alive—was enough to set the adrenaline going, and I was running before I’d put a coherent thought together.

I couldn’t hear anything behind me, but it hardly mattered. They had to be wolves, a pack of them my imagination gleefully supplied, and I couldn’t help the desperate scream that escaped me as I ran full-tilt down the road.

I couldn’t think, couldn’t breathe. My heart beat wildly, my legs flew under me, my pack rattled and shook against me, my hair was in my face, my mouth, my eyes. I swore there were noises behind me growing louder with every step, the heat of their breath was on my ankles, and I somehow picked up more speed, careening dangerously just in time to see a tree’s low branches jutted out across the road.

Some of humanity’s latent survival instinct must have kicked in, because I latched on to the branch and swung up, using all the adrenaline I had. I scrambled up on it, out of reach of the wolves. I wasn’t fast enough though, and something—claws, fangs, I had no idea—caught my sneaker, and I cried out in more fear than any pain. It ripped my skirt and took my sock and sneaker with it, and I screamed again.

I pulled my leg up fast and jerked back on the branch until I was against the trunk.

There was nothing on the ground below me that I could see, but I could hear heavy panting breaths and quiet steps on the ground. Real fear made my breathing shallow and sharp and my
heart was lodged in my throat.

I could hardly rip my eyes away from the ground where they searched desperately for signs of my attackers, but eventually looked up into the rest of the tree. There was another branch just a little above me and to the side; wider and sturdier than the one I was balanced on. I stood carefully, my footing uneven with only one shoe and the tree scratching against my bare sole.

There were some trees around where I grew up, but none that had been particularly suitable for climbing. Thus, I’d never really climbed a proper tree before, so my attempt was a mess. I got both hands on the other branch, and with a lot of kicking and grunting I pulled myself up. My bag was loose though and not tied tightly enough. One apple and one of my canteens feel to splatter on the ground, but nothing came out of the bushes to get it.

Panting and more frightened than I’d ever been before, I scrabbled up there and clung to the trunk, unable to relax at all. I couldn’t hear the footsteps or breathing anymore, but fear kept me in place. I could barely think past the thought that I’d almost been dinner, that *something* could have eaten me. I sat stock-still almost all of the night, unable to eat, unable to even breathe properly, just thanking God for my ridiculous luck.
All Beholders Eye this Beauty

Chapter Summary

Maddie hears voices in the forest and meets a different kind of wolf.

Chapter Notes

Writer’s Note: I read a story where a modern girl met an elf for the first time (I think it was a Glorfindel/OC story, but I could be wrong) and was terrified by their perfection and inhumaness. Though I won’t go quite that far, I’ve incorporated a little of that idea. If anyone knows that story, please PM me or leave the name in a review so I can offer the proper credit.

To make a realistic girl-falls-into-M.E. story: Humans are afraid of what they do not understand. Tolkien Elves do not exist in the real world—their every trait is fantastical (in the storybook sense): inhuman beauty, speed and grace, immortality, wisdom. Therefore, fear and awe are the most likely reactions a modern human would have to meeting a Tolkien Elf.

I was back on the path again after some more tears, scrounging up my chewed on canteen, the remains of my shoe (there were, literally, just pieces left), and managing to break off a decent size branch from a tree.

I hadn’t gotten down until dawn had long since come and the day had really begun. I hadn’t been able to pry myself off that branch until I was positive the animals had left me alone.

Still, I remained so terrified that something would come back that, though stiff, sore, and without a wink of sleep, I was still moving.

The branch I held in both of my hands like a sword was plucked free of leaves and roughly the size of a baseball bat, though thicker than one. It was heavy, but I wasn’t willing to give up my weapon if it wore me down a little. Sure, it might not be too much good against a wolf’s claws and teeth or a bear’s sheer size, but at least I’d hit the bastard pretty damn hard before he took me down.

The petrifying incident last night had really opened my eyes and gotten the adrenaline going. I had scrabbled down that tree, switched into the shoes Ysmay had given me despite being a little stiff from getting wet in the rain earlier, and was speed walking for another half hour before my endurance began to give. Still, I kept up a fairly quick pace in the hopes of getting free of this forest as soon as possible.

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It was at the end of this day, the fifteenth if I’d kept all the numbers straight, that I came across a very shallow river.
There were trees along the banks shadowing the river as twilight descended, but it didn’t look nearly as intimidating here as it had all along the way. The water glittered in the fading light, so clear the rocks and even small fish were visible. I filled my lone canteen and washed my face and hands, wetting my hair too in a vain attempt to get some of the dirt and debris of travel out of it, before I starting hunting for a tree.

I hadn’t meant to wait this long to find one since it was getting dark now, afraid another animal might try for some fresh meat, but I’d heard the water and couldn’t help myself from heading towards it. It was like a strange beacon of hope. At least in the movies, passing through water killed your scent, which meant dogs couldn’t track you. That was the line of my thinking as I waded through the water, holding my dress up with one hand to at least spare it from being utterly soaked, my shoes in the other.

Who knew if it was true, at least it made me feel better.

On the other bank I exhaled slowly before putting my shoes back on and starting checking out the trees. Sure, I hadn’t slept in the last one, but hopefully a perch up high would save me from predators below. This wasn’t a jungle after all, I didn’t think there were panthers or other carnivores that could get me up there.

I ended up dismally without a tree when full darkness settled. The trees on this side were getting thicker around the base and much older, so there were no low-hanging branches for me to fumble up. I finally curled up in the roots of large tree after rubbing the too-sweet smell of one of the bushes’ leaves all over myself to hopefully hide my scent. I hadn’t the faintest idea if it worked, but I figured it was better to be safe than sorry.

I didn’t sleep well that night, but I survived it.

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The next morning I soaked the bloodstained cloths I’d used in the river and tied them around the straps of my sack. They wouldn’t dry very well, but I had no other way to carry them. Ripping some new ones from my already shortened sleeves (the bottom of the dress was filthy otherwise I would have used that), I was ready to go.

My stomach growled angrily in its hunger. Half a rotting apple and some water was not an adequate breakfast. The image of cheeseburger chased through my mind, and I swallowed dry. It was physically painful, but I had no control of my imagination.

I spent the whole day like that, torturing myself with images of tacos and pancakes, toasted bagels and cream cheese, peanut butter and jelly, and macaroni and cheese. I thought about my mother’s home cooked meals and my dad at the barbecue. I remembered that boyfriend who could only make grilled cheese and my own chicken noodle soup from scratch. It was one of the worst days of my trip yet, and I cried on several occasions from sheer homesickness. I could feel it with every day that passed by and I moved deeper and deeper into this world: I’d never go home.

The next day my period finally ended. All the exercise and stress I’d been through the past month had made it the fastest and most pain-free one I’d ever had. But I’d take menstrual cramps any day at home over this bizarre, never-ending journey wherever I was.

My feet were starting to kill me too, and I’d noticed calluses were beginning to build up—not pretty. These suede shoes I’d been given had very thin soles and we’re clearly not made for this kind of trekking. I’d also abandoned my tree branch-bat since nothing had come after me since. It was just too heavy too carry with me, though I was now far more careful about my surroundings.
That night I found a tree I could sleep in. I ended up on the ground though when I turned over and nearly fell off for the third time. It was uncomfortable, and after noticing the giant spider resting further up the tree I gave up and got down. I decided humans were too far evolved from monkeys to ever pull off sleeping in tree well.

It was the eighteenth day when the dirt road began to turn into a dirt path, getting thinner and windier as it led me down and down, though I could hardly see the slope of the land. The trees pressed closer all around until I was weaving around them, barely keeping track of my feet. Sunlight glimmered between the trees highlighting the vivid greens of the moss and the darker viridian of the plants underfoot; patches of wildflowers and blooming bushes of sweet smelling flowers dotted the landscape. The trees themselves were overgrown with ivy and mold, old and wizened trunks wide enough for five people to hold hands around.

After a lunch of blueberries, my last piece of apple, and water, I got lost. I suppose it was inevitable, but the path seemed to just disappear under my feet, and I ended up wandering around tree trunks so wide I lost complete sense of direction when I came around to the other side.

I started to get nervous then, realizing I was out of food and it would be getting dark soon. I tried to find the path again, but I didn’t know when I had lost it and nothing looked familiar. I didn’t know which direction I was facing and I couldn’t even see the mountains through all the trees. Starting to feel that familiar panic again, I stopped to collect myself, leaning against a tree. When I put my bare hand against the rough bark I could all of a sudden feel the forest. Alive. Warm. And so old.

It was just a flash of sensation, of ancient life, stretching up up up, breezes and sunlight and birds, and then it was gone. I was left standing with my hand against a giant, old tree. I thought for a moment I’d lost my mind.

I tried to touch the tree again, and then another one beside it just to check, but both were just normal trees. I looked at my hand, not really sure what was going on, when I heard it. It sounded like giggling.

It wasn’t a child’s laugh, but there was a lighthearted innocence to it that I couldn’t explain any other way. It was above me in the trees, though no leaves rustled and I hadn’t heard anyone else.

I stepped away from the tree, spinning in a circle looking up at those green boughs straining my ears.

I started to hear voices, some sounding far away and some very close, murmuring or singing so softly I couldn’t make out words. The giggles bounced from tree to tree followed by whispers and snippets of song.

At first I didn’t know what to think, but my mind jumped to those old myths, with mischievous forest sprites or sirens leading unwary adventurers to their deaths. But when the voices began to drift off to the right, fading almost completely before reviving, I plunged into the forest after them, too afraid to lose this chance.

Chance at what I didn’t know.

The voices led me along through the forest, completely out of sight and just barely within hearing range, and I trotted along behind them like a lost puppy. I would later wonder where my sense of self-preservation had gone to, and then be reminded that I’d been using it for this whole demented adventure, and it had apparently run dry.

The voices rather abruptly began to move more quickly, sing-songing words and giggling more
and more, and I raced after to keep up. I ended up in a clearing though, turning in every direction, straining to hear the laughter, the song, anything. There was nothing though, nothing but chirping birds and rustling trees.

I thought I’d gone insane. I’d hallucinated voices; I was probably hallucinating this entire adventure. I was going to die in the most beautiful forest in whatever world I was in—if I wasn’t actually strapped down in a mental asylum right now—and no one would ever know. I was so depressed with myself all of a sudden that I sat down on the ground and promptly bruised my behind doing so.

I’d sat on a rock. And not just any rock. It was a white, oval shaped stone, which was preceded and followed by more of the same stones. In a path.

I started to laugh, hysterically even, and it took several minutes to regain control, aware now that I wasn’t alone and I hadn’t hallucinated those voices; they led me to a path. Except, which direction did I go in now?

I was at an impasse. When led to the middle of a pathway, how did the characters of books or movies know which way went the right way, and which one didn’t? How did they know one didn’t lead to certain death or back the way they came? How was I supposed to know?

Depressed now, I stood up again slowly, turned a full circle, and then looked up at the sky. I could just see the tops of the mountains to the west just over the trees (I had to be on a ridge since I could see them, but it was hard to tell in a forest), which meant the path ran north to south. That didn’t really help me since the road I’d been following before ran east to west and it had mysteriously vanished.

Fantastic, I couldn’t help thinking sarcastically. I had a path, but where did it go? Where did the voices go? And where had them come from?

I half expected a bird to flutter down on to the path and show me the way, or for the voices to come back, but God certainly didn’t leave me a sign as I stood there. Then again, I’d already had pretty amazing luck all things considered, so I probably shouldn’t press it.

I struck out north for no particular reason. I figured if all else failed, I might die here and wake up back home. Like a dream.

I didn’t believe it for a second though.

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The path wound through the trees, sometimes overgrown with moss, sometimes half-buried, and often stones were missing. I was careful to keep my eyes on it instead of the beautiful landscape for fear I’d lose the path again. I was aware the voices were likely watching me, whatever they were, but I couldn’t bring myself to be bothered by it. I was tired, sore, hungry, and very, very lost. Magical voices in trees were the least of my worries.

In all my carefulness to keep track of the path I didn’t pay enough attention to my surroundings. It was a miracle I even saw him before I walked into him.

Dressed in dark, weather-stained clothes, his unshaven beard starting to grow out, long hair shaggy and falling out of its ponytail, the man looked completely out of place: the wolf in Little Red Riding Hood’s forest.

It was him, I realized after a second of just staring. The traveler Butterbur had introduced me to and I’d briefly spoken to. What the hell was he doing out here?
We were literally two stepping-stones apart, and I couldn’t have been more surprised. I couldn’t recall his name for the life of me, but I certainly remembered him. We’d attempted to find a common language and failed. And that had been that.

Or not, I guess.

My silence (and stunned face I imagine) was probably what prompted him to speak after an awkward moment.

“Trahern.”

Right. Trahern. That was his name. I remembered now.

“Maddie,” I said. “Maddie and Trahern speak Bree.”

My voice was rough from disuse, and I had to clear my throat after speaking. It hadn’t occurred to me that I hadn’t opened my mouth to do more than scream in eighteen days. Two and a half weeks.

Oh my God.

I think I swayed on the spot, I can’t quite remember. Trahern’s face became a little blurry as the blood rushed to my head and my vision became clouded with black. I leaned over on my knees to steady myself, waiting for the darkness to ebb and my equilibrium to come back. I felt like I was going to puke.

When I was able to let go of my knees and straighten, I realized Trahern was standing bare inches away from me, blatantly ignoring my personal space. I might have made a comment if what was in his hand hadn’t distracted me:

It was the biggest, shiniest, most beautiful red apple I’d ever seen.

He offered it to me, and I did my best not to snatch it out of his hands like a greedy urchin. He didn’t stick around to watch me hold myself back from my growling stomach as I try to be a civilized as possible while devouring the thing. Trahern turned, ponytail swishing to the side, then said, “Come.”

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I would have never thought, when I lived at home, that I could ever go without the simple luxuries of the modern world: mattresses, toilets, clocks, hand sanitizer (that was a big one in this dirty, dirty world).

It caused me to wonder how we’d ever gotten to the point where all the things we had in the world weren’t found or made by us, and that we didn’t even know the first thing about how to recreate it. Here, as Trahern whittled a stick into a sharp point so he could spear some of the dried meat he had (which smelled divine by the way), I’d never given half a thought to how to prepare meat right from the animal. I’d only ever worked with processed, packaged meat. And I didn’t even know how to whittle.

I felt immensely stupid for never entertaining these thoughts before.

I’d followed behind Trahern as he weaved his way through the forest, following the trail I had been on at a brisk pace. He walked with one step in front of the other in a straight line, making almost no noise at all as he moved. I trundled behind him like a cart full of cans, tripping and
stumbling and breathing like a wheezing, dying horse. The apple had done me a world of good, but I was still exhausted and my momentum had disappeared with his appearance.

He did indeed carry a weapon, a sword in fact, I noticed offhand at first. It was in a sheath, long and thin, with a shiny end that rested above his hip. He also wore a smaller scabbard on the other hip, and yet another one, even smaller, attached to his boot. I didn’t know why he needed so many, or what he used them for, especially the sword. Could you kill a bear with a sword? I suppose so, but it seemed strange to me somehow. Swords were weapons for war, not for killing animals.

The thought of a war, here, where people used swords, and probably bows and arrows, and those dwarves with axes, made me a little sick inside. I was having enough trouble dealing with outhouses, let alone stuff like that.

We eventually stopped for the night in a small grove off to the side, the trees seemingly naturally parting to create a circle. I could see a small ring of rocks and the blackened patch of earth that was a telltale sign of a campfire. Had Trahern just been here? Or what about those voices? I didn’t tell him about the voices that night, worried that wasn’t normal or a bad sign. What if they were dangerous? Or what if they weren’t real and I really had hallucinated them? I decided to keep my mouth shut just in case, and Trahern didn’t seem inclined to speak either.

That night we ate the unseasoned meat right off the bone. It was difficult to eat that way, especially since the meat was tough from being dried. It wasn’t particularly tasty either, but it filled my stomach more than anything I’d eaten in a week. I wondered vaguely what animal I was eating, but decided I probably didn’t want to know. Especially since Trahern had most likely caught it and prepared it himself just days ago.

When we finished eating and buried the bones I wasn’t sure if I should sleep immediately or if he wanted to explain himself or something. For several long moments nothing happened. Trahern just sat there against a tree not too far from the fire, staring at it darkly.

In the end I pulled my tough blanket out of my bag and sleeping mat. I laid down on it, pulling my blanket up to my chin and curling my legs in. Trahern was a brooding shadow across the fire from me, not even his eyes could be seen in the glow from the flames. He looked dangerous sitting like that, like he was laying in wait for something.

Actually, now that the thought occurred to me, I hadn’t even considered Trahern might not be helping me. He could be leading me somewhere to kill me or rape me or something. I peeked over at him, but he hadn’t moved at all.

I was probably being an idiot for just going along with him without even asking why, but what else could I do? I had no food, limited water, and was completely and totally lost.

I could feel my mind still going. My body was tired, worn out with all the stress and travel, but I couldn’t stop thinking. I turned over on to my back, moving my eyes away from the dancing fire.

The sky was magnificent again, as it had been always since I’d come here. Not even the lights of Bree put it out. So many stars, twinkling, jeweled dots on a black canvas, even if I could only see a patch of it because of the tree-cover. I’d only ever seen pictures that looked like this, but it was different to really see that never-ending blackness spotted with light.

I remembered on my first night here how I’d looked up at the sky and hadn’t been able to find a single familiar constellation. I looked now, straining my eyes to find a pattern I knew. The Big
Dipper was probably the only one I could recognize, maybe Orion’s Belt, but I didn’t see any that looked remotely familiar.

I turned over on to my side and stared into the trees instead.

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I was shaken awake the next morning by a dark, dirty face and a calloused hand. Groggily I gathered up my blanket, attempted and failed to fold the camp-roll correctly, and ate some of the cold meat from last night Trahern thrust into my hands.

No longer did I entertain thoughts of flies, dirt, or hygiene when I ate. In another place and another time, the thought of eating meat that had been speared on a stick in the ground all night would have repulsed me, but I ate it without comment, glad to have something in my stomach.

As we started walking, the cool morning air began to wake me up, and I posed a question to Trahern: “Trahern,” I murmured softly, feeling ridiculously shy for some reason.

He turned his head back slightly but otherwise didn’t respond.

“Where…?” I didn’t know how to say ‘going’, or any other useful words right now. It was incredibly frustrating as I stomped along behind him thinking of all the useless words I knew. Comb, donkey, quill…

“Imladris,” He said without looking at me.

“Im…la…dris,” I sounded out, rolling the word on my tongue. It was easier than it sounded, and I repeated it several times. It felt vaguely familiar.

“Rivendell,” he added.

“Rivendell.” That one was even easier to say and even more familiar. Imladris. Rivendell. I wondered if they were the same place, or two different ones, and I wondered why I thought I’d heard them before.

I didn’t know how to ask, and Trahern hardly seemed interesting in talking to me. I wanted to ask him why he was doing this, why he was helping me. I wanted to know who he was, how he spoke those languages (even if I’d forgotten his name, I hadn’t forgotten that fact), and everything else that was bothering me. And I wanted to ask myself why the hell I hadn’t learned from my previous mistake with those two bastards and stayed on my own.

I already knew the answer to that one though: because I was lost; because I had nowhere to go; because I was lonely.

The walk continued on in silence for most of the day, with only sporadic words about bathroom breaks (which was mortifying to ask for, but Trahern didn’t look like he cared either way). I repeated the names of the places several times in a questioning way, but Trahern never said anything more about it. I tried to ask why he was in the forest and why he was helping me, but I wasn’t sure if he didn’t understand my question or was just faking ignorance.

As we walked the gentle slopes I had been heading down became steeper until there were almost steps cut into the earth in some places. A stone slab poked out of the earth and began to form a wall on our left as we moved forward, eventually blocking the mountains entirely from view.

It was perhaps a couple hours after lunch the ground became much steeper, and I figured we must have been descending into a valley. When I asked at lunch, Trahern said Rivendell was not far,
and soon we would see it.

It was the middle of the afternoon when the ground flattened again and the trees pressed closer. That was when I began to hear whispers.

At first I thought it had to be the leaves rustling, or maybe birds, but as the sound continued to swell I realized it was indeed those same mysterious voices from the day before. I moved to catch up with Trahern who at first glance was as stoic as ever, and I feared it was hallucinating, before I realized his head was cocked to the side, the better to hear them.

I was about to ask him what the voices were when they all suddenly burst into song.

It might have been mocking, it could have been derogatory, or about meatloaf for all I knew, but it sounded like it was about the most beautiful things in the world. I couldn’t tell what language it was, though I guessed it was the one Trahern had spoken because the Ranger seemed to understand them if the frown on his face was anything to go by. Somehow he managed to look annoyed even as the voices broke into stunning harmony, and all I could think was how could you be upset listening to something to beautiful? I wondered if they were his people, briefly, but quickly decided that couldn’t be. There was something…different about the voices. No one could sound that beautiful.

It was a short verse, and when the song ended I could feel a powerful disappointment well up inside me. I’d never heard anything so clear and alive before, and it was like all the colors in the forest had dimmed when the music stopped.

That was when I realized I’d stopped walking to listen. Trahern was standing about twenty feet away from me watching as I hurried to catch up. He looked vaguely annoyed and muttered something under his breath, but I wasn’t paying attention.

Maybe I was crazy, but after seeing the Halflings and the dwarves, what if…?

No, that was crazy-talk, I told myself. Mythical creatures like elves and forest sprites didn’t exist. Sure, I didn’t have a rational explanation for how or why I was here, or where or what here was, but there’s a point where you cross the line of reason and that thought was really toeing it.

“What is…? That…” I waved my arms at the trees, trying to ask what that was. I wanted to know who or what made such beautiful songs, why they were singing, what the song had been about, but I had no words for my questions. We continued on in silence, Trahern never turning back even as my eyes roved the area around us looking for the source.

Trahern didn’t speak or even react when the whispering started up again a little later. More giggling followed and snatches of tune but nothing like before. Looking ahead, I could see the tree line disappear and the blue of the sky out beyond the last row of trees. It seemed we were coming to a hill or maybe a cliff, and the path turned aside to lead us down.

The giggling had all but stopped as we got closer to the tree line, but I could still hear voices talking, murmuring to each other, calling from the trees around us. I was so focused on listening to the voices that I jumped when a voice rang out, demanding and yet clear like a note of song. Trahern simply stopped and called out a short reply in another language.

Then there was a flurry of movement above us. The trees seemed to come alive, the leaves rustling and the branches swaying and the giggling started up again. I glanced around us warily but could see nothing, and I swear the laughter intensified at my useless actions.

Affronted at that thought, I instead focused on earnestly listening to such melodious, lighthearted,
unnatural laughter. That was the word. Unnatural.

Just as I mouthed the word to myself, sensing the rightness of it, someone dropped from the trees just a little ahead of us, landing in complete silence.

He was tall, taller than Trahern, which meant a good foot taller than me. His hair was blond—blindingly golden might be more appropriate though than just plain blonde—and he had striking features even from a distance, though I was unable to make out any detail without my long-lost contacts.

He wore calm earthy colors of brown and green, the clothing cleanly cut and stitched together neatly in a distinct contrast to Trahern’s and mine. There was a bow and quiver on his back, and I could not hear him pass over the soft grass and dirt of the forest floor. That registered somewhere in me, and I think my heart rate started to fly.

He moved towards us with such inhuman grace that I was nearly struck dumb. His body moved like it was one long line, elegant and smooth, flowing from step to step. I can’t remember what I was thinking, my hands growing cold and my lips white, all I can recall from that first meeting was a strange preternatural sense of both awe and fear.

When he reached us his chin was equal with Trahern’s eyes, and my eyes were on the middle of his chest before slipping up to his face. I rocked a bit on my feet then, suddenly feeling another rush of blood to the head, this one much stronger than before though. His face became a light with black-clouded edges, and I could feel a light tremor start along my spine and extend all the way down to my toes. I couldn’t think as my vision refocused, still caught on his face.

I dared not call him handsome, for he had strange, exotic features, and the way they came together was so perfect it was painful. Though in all appearances a man, there was something terribly different about him. High cheeks bones in sharp relief, sensual lips, glowing white skin so smooth and even you couldn’t see the pores, eyes ancient and wise, and yet a young body, lean and tall, great and terrible all at once…

It was… it was unnatural. So unnatural that I could feel myself recoiling, staring at him, and the first waves of an exceptional kind of terror rush through me. He was… inhuman.

I knew, somewhere in my mind, that I was going into shock, that my body was seizing up, but my whole vision was obscured by his unnatural features.

I fainted.
A Lost Wanderer

Chapter Summary

She's made it to Rivendell and discovered the Elves are something else. At least Bilbo Baggins is there to keep her company.

Chapter Notes

Writer's Note: I would like reader's opinions on whether or not to save Boromir. I can go either way, so I'm leaving it up to you. Comment or message me if you feel particularly strongly either way.

Dates: Maddie arrived April 12, 3017. She reaches Rivendell on May 24, 3017.

To make a realistic girl-falls-into-M.E. story: Just because she is the main character of your story, does not naturally mean everything else revolves around her. Even though she happens to be in an unfortunate situation, it doesn't mean all the important canon characters are suddenly her best friends.

Disclaimer: I make no money from this work. Anything recognizable from The Lord of the Rings belongs to J.R.R Tolkien and affiliates.

When I awoke I thought I was lying on air.

It was actually a bed, I discovered soon as all grogginess had faded, and probably the most beautiful and comfortable bed I'd even been on.

It had soft, cream sheets and the finest down pillows (I assumed they were down, but your guess is as good as mine). It had a wooden frame with a headboard with a weaving, swirling design. The sheets had simple embroidery on them, and smelled of something clean and sweet.

I was laying on a bed that took up most of the small room. There were windows as tall and wide as myself without glass, and I could hear the sounds of birds and smell the flowers on the breeze. There were elaborate carvings in the wood that framed the room: ivy, flowers, lettering of some language I didn't recognize, and small animals. The actual walls of the room were decorated with hanging metal and carved wood designs, and the shelves had small knickknacks and pottery on them. There was a small dresser and vanity off to the side built of beautiful old-fashioned white wood, also hand-carved. The ceiling was strangely curved, the highest point at the center like a bell tower, with elaborately decorated beams holding it up. Everything was so exquisite, detailed and fine, that it left a very different impression than that of Bree or Fornost. It was much…softer, almost rustic and earthy, but there was an elegance that didn't speak of "country house" so much as… I fumbled for the words, but whatever was on the tip of my tongue didn't come.

I sighed and snuggled down into the soft pillows and zillion-thread-count sheets before resigning myself to getting up. The sun was too bright to sleep through anymore.
As I slid out of the bed and put my bare feet on the smooth wooden floor, I found that my traveling clothes were gone, and I was instead dressed in what looked like a thin white shift. I rubbed the fabric between two fingers, but could not identify it. Not silk, but not cotton. Tougher than it looked, but had that shiny quality of expensive material. I also unwittingly noticed that my medieval underwear and the strip of cloth I'd stuck on it for hygiene's sake was still on, but my bra was conspicuously missing.

I explored the room for a couple minutes, noting that my pack was over in the corner and there was a chamber pot peeking out from under the bed (no more outhouses, thank god, Bree's was a breeding nest of disease). I ended up picking up and touching various objects, fascinated by the minute decorations carved into them and the feel. Everything looked very fine, the vases of a kind of china and the books all hand-written and handmade, some even with pictures of flowers and trees.

When I turned my attention to the windows, I was looking out at perhaps the most beautiful corner of the world.

It was a garden with a small stone path winding through, almost hidden under flowers and grass. Vines crept up the trees on the edges, blossoms were falling all over the path and each other, and tree boughs hung down shading grassy spots. The gentle breeze brought the sweet scent of innumerable flowers, and petals scattered the ground. I could faintly hear the burble of a stream, but could not see it from the room.

I had barely gotten a chance to look at the garden when there was a gentle knock on the door. I turned just in time to see a thin woman step into the room carrying a garment in her hands. She was another one of those…people, like the one Trahern and I had met. She was inhumanly beautiful, his face flawless with beautiful green eyes, both striking and strange features, and her skin giving off a slight glow. I couldn't help the odd feeling in my stomach as I looked at her, and I wasn't sure if it was just my stomach or something else.

I flicked my eyes away instead as she approached.

She murmured something softly, quietly, the way one does to a frightened animal, and I looked up again because I could not help it. She looked so human and yet so not, so unfamiliar, that I could only marvel.

There was nothing like her at home, and I didn't know what to make of it.

She repeated the words again, but I didn't know them. When I didn't respond, she spoke in Westron instead. "Good morning."

I tried to smile then, but I think it came out funny. I still wasn't fully aware of myself. "Good morning," I repeated back unsteadily.

She laid out the lavender dress she was holding on the bed. It was the same kind of dress I had received from Ysmay so long ago, but much finer. That thought reminded me that I had another dress I hadn't worn since Bree, and that the one I'd traveled almost a month in was probably destroyed beyond saving. I didn't know where that one had gone.

I considered taking my Bree dress out to wear, but I knew just by looking at the beautiful lavender one, that my coarse brown one was rather pathetic compared to it.

I felt instant guilt at that thought. Butterbur had given me that dress. It was as uncomfortable as the one Ysmay had given me though, and the purple one laid out looked almost modernly made, with
such precise stitching and such soft material. The color reminded me a little of the dress I’d warn to prom ages ago, and I swallowed that thought. That would lead down a road I wasn't sure I could handle right now.

With some deliberation, I left my own dress from Butterbur in my bag. I would have many chances to wear it; I didn't doubt that.

The woman finished smoothing out the lines in the fabric before turning back to me almost expectantly. She moved so gracefully that I felt awkward and heavy next to her. Standing there in my shift and bare feet, I thought again of my coarse dress in my bag compared to the fresh one laid out on the bed and realized I wanted nothing more in that moment than a hot bath to wash away the grime of travel and maybe to reminisce a bit on my mother zipping me into that prom dress.

I opened my mouth to tell the beautiful woman this, when I realized I actually didn't feel that dirty. I gently touched my face with the tips of my fingers, expecting to feel caked on dirt and dust, but instead touched smooth skin. My hair was also not a limp, tangled mess. Had someone washed me when I was out cold?

The thought made me feel more than a little uncomfortable. I didn't even know what kind of… creature these people were. Something mythical? Fairies? Elves? Nymphs?

For some reason, it didn't sound as ridiculous to me as it should have.

I was about to ask when the woman spoke again. "My name is Arasinya," she said first, then repeated her name, "Arasinya," and gently put a hand to her chest, right above her heart.

Sidetracked, but still trying to be polite, I mimicked the gesture and said my own name, "Maddie", before attempting hers. "Aras-inya? Arasin-ya? Ara-sin-ya?" It took several tries before I managed to get my tongue around it. Even then I could tell it still wasn't coming out quite right. I probably had a terrible accent.

She laughed then, a light, tinkling laugh that I recognized instantly. Her people were in the trees, with the giggling not-child's laughter that was so sweet and innocent. I had trouble imagining someone like her crouched in a tree laughing at the bumbling human. She looked too ethereal, so above that sort of behavior. Perhaps I'd heard wrong.

"Arasinya," she repeated it again. I wondered, as she moved away to fuss with something, if she was a servant here, where here was exactly, and what I was supposed to do.

I would like that bath and maybe some food before all of that though.

"Arasinya," she turned, "Bath…please," I asked softly, feeling embarrassed for no discernable reason. Arasinya only nodded though and picked up some soft slippers like she was wearing from the floor and handed them to me. They were the same purple of the dress, and seemed to be made of a kind of velvet material with a little hint of lace that made it look elegant too. They were beautiful, and were hopefully far more comfortable than the shoes I'd been wearing since my sneaker's demise. One full shoe and the remains of the other were still in the forest somewhere.

Arasinya led me down the hallway, where half of it was more doorways that seemed to lead into similar guest rooms, the other open to another part of the garden, though we appeared to be a floor above the ground. I peered down curiously, but again didn't see anybody. I wondered where everyone was. Perhaps there weren't many guests? Or I was in a much quieter section of the town? Was this even a town? Which reminded me… "Arasinya?" The woman patiently turned to look at me as I pointed at the ground, hoping she would understand the gesture, "Rivendell?"
"Rivendell," she confirmed on a smile. I noticed her smile was white and straight, and I couldn't help wondering if the concept of brushing ones teeth existed here, or if that was just a natural trait of her… species? Race?

I wanted to ask, but at that moment we turned off the hallway and walked down a neat set of curving stairs that had an intricate design carved into the handrail that caught my attention. When I looked away from what appeared to be a story about four children and a magical tree I was standing in the garden. Here the halls weren't really halls anymore, but winding stairs and pathways that led around rooms built snuggled into nature. It seemed like no tree had been uprooted to make room and this town/village was built seamlessly with the forest. I saw ivy growing up pillars and walls, flowers poking into windows and bushes brushing the sides of the walkway. Everything had been built in and around the environment.

We continued on like this until we left the buildings behind in favor of a quiet wooded area filled with birdcalls and small scampering animals. It was all very much alive, the colors of the plants and flowers very vivid, and the scent of the earth strong and fresh. The ground was a kind of soft moss that felt rather like a thick carpet to walk upon.

Eventually I tried again. "Arasinya?"

She turned again to look at me as I tried to ask what had been bothering me this whole time: "You… I am…" I fumbled with words to phrase it.

She paused as we approached the bank of a quiet stream where the flowing water naturally pooled, which had clearly been set aside for bathing, and turned to give me her full attention. Trying again to explain, I waved my hand to encompass myself. "I am…" I frowned. Why did no one teach me the word for human?

She looked confused, so with a frustrated sigh I gave up. If Trahern was here (and I sincerely hoped so, as he was the only person I knew, even if I'd known him for a total of about three days), then maybe I could ask him.

Arasinya smiled softly, sympathetically, before turning back to the river. She produced a light pink bar of soap and set it down by the bank before heading closer to the water.

She slipped her shoes off and pushed back her fine mahogany-colored hair with her hands before lifting her skirts. Wadding into the water, she beckoned to me, a smile dancing around her mouth. Carefully I toed off the velvet shoes and lifted up my slip before following her in. The bottom of the river was soft with silt, and I squeezed my toes in it, reminded of days spent at the beach, standing thigh-high in the ocean, toes digging into that silky wet sand. I swallowed down memories of friends and family vacations and focused instead on Arasinya.

She pointed down the river where, beyond the small waterfall at the foot of this pool, it continued on until it vanished out of sight. Beyond the edge of the water and trees I could just make out the shapes of more buildings around the trees, with their fairy-tale spiral tops. Everything appeared to be made out of a white wood or stone down there, and I saw, just barely off to the side, a much larger waterfall streaming down the cliff-face.

"Rivendell," Arasinya said, with not a little pride in her voice.

I was completely in awe as I looked out beyond to see this side of the valley unfolding before my eyes. I had seen it on our walk over to the bathing pool. It was a great valley, split down the middle by a grand and powerful river. Rivendell was on the west side, facing the river and the mountains.
There was a bridge crossing the divide, and a grand staircase, and numerous small rooms and gazebos dotted everywhere, all connected by a maze of hallways, gardens, and short paths. It was more like a compound than a town, since most everything seemed to be connected to each other. I wasn't sure what to make of it. It was so different than any human city.

"Rivendell," I said, struggling for the other town name Trahern had gave me, before it suddenly rolled out of my mouth, "Imladris."

Arasinya's smile widened, "Rivendell is Westron; Imladris is Elvish."

I got the gist of it, and I smiled back. I think I'd known that.

Arasinya hummed a song as she began to wade back out of the water, and I regretfully turned away from the view.

Looking back at her, I realized she had pushed her hair away behind her ears, and they were pointed.

I traced the shape with my eyes, noticing how the top of the lobe gracefully narrowed into a point, higher than the top of my ear, and obviously unlike my own. I gathered my skirt into one hand and almost unconsciously traced the lobe of my right ear from top to bottom, sensing the decidedly round shape of it.

She was an Elf. Elves had pointed ears. Fairies had wings. Nymphs… well, I wasn't sure I quite knew what a nymph was.

Arasinya turned, and she giggled when she saw me with my hand on my own ear.

I blushed and dropped my hand, and she trilled a laugh. "Maddie, I am an Elf," she answered, speaking slowly for me, in response to my actions.

"Elf," I repeated. I couldn't help noticing that the word itself sounded quite like the English word, if a little elongated in syllables. "I am…?"

"Man," she responded.

"Man," I said slowly, and marveled at how it sounded almost exactly like 'man' in English. Were Westron and English related? It wasn't the first time that had occurred to me, though it was a frightening thought too.

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Dressed, my hair done up with a white flower in it courtesy of Arasinya, she showed me to a small table set up a couple of rooms down from mine. It must have been a communal eating area, but I think we were late for dinner since dusk had already fallen. I must have fainted the day before, then fallen asleep and slept through the night and well into the day.

I could just barely remember what had happened before I'd passed out. Trahern had been standing slightly in front and to the side of me, the voices had been giggling and talking the trees, and that Elf. He'd freaked me out so bad I couldn't even remember what he looked like or why I'd reacted like that. Disgruntled by that, I wrote off the whole experience as a result of exhaustion and a sudden mental breakdown. I wasn't even going to pretend this was possible in the real world, so I was either having some kind of lucid hallucination or… or what I didn't know.

The pathway that wandered by our eating room had a little more traffic going through it, and I had the chance to watch many Elves pass by as I ate.
Arasinya joined me for the meal, which consisted of a clearly vegetarian diet. There were all manner of fruits and vegetables put together, a cool soup as the main dish, and some kind of spiced wine for a drink. The wine was a little shocker on my first sip. Even the water Arasinya offered me once she realized I wasn't too fond of the wine had a muted taste to it—kind of like flavored water.

I mostly watched the Elves walk by though or admired the garden in the candlelight, and Arasinya seemed content in the silence. The people here were all very beautiful, but my eyes never lingered on their features for long, still sensing that strange edge to them. I noticed the woman's flowing gowns, the different style from the human women, and the lighter colors they all wore. I also noticed that most of the Elves were blonde, with a fairly large smattering of brunettes. There was little variation in color though, with blonde's being truly blonde and not dirty blonde or strawberry blonde, and I realized now, that no matter where I had been, I had yet to see a redhead.

Some of the Elves' skin was glowing slightly in the falling darkness while others simply had that very smooth, clear skin of airbrushed models. They all had high cheekbones, proud jaws and noses, and almost identically shaped ears.

It might have been like a human looking at a flock of sheep and thinking each one identical, but I felt there was a certain homogeneity that I didn't see in the human race. No one had facial hair, no one had haircuts shorter than mid-back, not even the men, no one was overweight, or huskier built, no one was particularly short or particularly tall, they all really looked quite alike. It made me think about how varied my own race was.

The light fair at dinner settled nicely with a stomach that had been eating stale slices of bread and rotting apples for the last two weeks or so. I didn't feel tired at all when Arasinya asked, so she showed me around the general area.

We were in a guest wing of sorts, set actually higher than the entrance of Rivendell. The place was spread out on three levels of ground from what I could tell. The lowest level was still very high up, actually on a side of the valley that looked down upon the river, which Arasinya told me was called the Bruinen.

Wandering around, I saw many important looking rooms full of books, papers, and giant tapestries and paintings of battles and wars. Statues were littered about everywhere, many of Elves, but also some of men, often in regal attire or wearing armor.

Arasinya bowed slightly to several Elves as we passed them, and I mimicked her actions after a second. I think it amused her, but I didn't know why.

As the evening settled in and the stars began to appear, the rooms and halls were lit by candlelight, glowing softly from afar. Murmuring voices were soft like babbling creeks, and I grew sleepy as we walked. Arasinya took my hand and led me back to my room, lighting the candelabra standing beside the bed before wishing me a good night.

That night my mind turned over and over my theories. The first one had been the dream, which had failed spectacularly, then the TV show theory, that too didn't hold up long, and lastly the "enclave culture" one that I couldn't even pretend I was clinging to anymore.

So what was this? Was I insane? Wasn't that a catch-22 if I knew I was insane?

Was it… magic?

That was, I admitted after several long moments of staring at the ceiling thinking am I really about
There were no Elves in my world. There was no place like this. This was like a fairy tale, a dream, a storybook, a movie. It was anything but real, but I was here. This felt almost realer than home.

I cried that night. I cried because I knew now that home was inconceivably far away; I cried because I couldn't pretend anymore; and I cried because I was lost, alone, and so afraid.

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The next handful of days passed much the same way as the first, and I suffered through them with the strange lethargy of a ghost. Arasinya noticed this of course (you'd have to be blind not to), and she therefore took an active role in introducing me to all sorts of new things, and so I began to slowly recover. Still, I had a sense that I had no direction, no aim. The strings of "home" and "hope" had, like a puppet, held me up, and now they'd been cut.

Arasinya took me to the stables to ride, where I admitted I'd never ridden a horse (somehow, pony rides at the park didn't seem to count). She seemed quite shocked by this, and I imagined, as I looked at all the tack lined up and the proud, beautiful horses, that in the medieval times that would be exceedingly weird.

We also visited the library, or at least what looked like the main library, which was very grand. Though it didn't immediately evoke that sense of a library—no dark wood paneling, looming rows of bookshelves, or even the solemn silence—it was very beautiful nonetheless. Many Elves were here, reading or conversing softly. It was designed in light-colored woods with big airy balconies and plenty of nooks and crannies.

Arasinya showed me a map that had Rivendell on it while we were there. I wasn't surprised to learn that I was in a land called "Arda"—I knew now this whole place was another world, though it didn't help my depression to stare proof in the face. When I asked, she pointed out Bree to me, and I gawked at how far I'd walked on that map. I wish I knew how many miles I'd walked, but I doubted I'd ever know. Who knows how they measured distance here?

I couldn't read anything on the maps. It all looked at first glance familiar, with forests and mountains and rivers, but there was no place on my world with this landscape. My eyes drifted over the paper until they settled on the bottom right corner where three mountain ranges came together to form what almost looked like three sides of a box, separating a kingdom from the nearby one—Gondor according to Arasinya. I didn't ask what that kingdom behind the mountains was. Even the way the name looked invoked a kind of dread in my stomach. I didn't know why.

As more days went by, I started to really relax and began to appreciate the atmosphere and beauty of Rivendell again. Here I didn't need a point, a goal to move towards, I realized. The Elves didn't seem to have one. Often they just did as they pleased, which mainly seemed to mean enjoying life, nature, and beauty. I had good food, a soft bed, a friend, and every day in Rivendell seemed brighter than the last, the flowers ever-blooming, the air always fresh, the grass always springy under my feet. There were all kinds of interesting niches and paintings to discover, places to explore as a fledgling equestrian, and I never felt bored.

I also got the chance to hear the Elves sing, and it was a life-changing experience. I cried and laughed and felt the strangest urges to dance and sing myself. Though I never understood what they sang about, the powerful emotions rolled through me regardless. I never tired of hearing them sing. Sometimes at dinner they would sing, or I would wander into the garden and hear groups of Elves humming and spontaneously singing as they went about their day. Everyone was polite and kind, my language skills were steadily improving, there was always plenty to do, and I began to feel at peace.
Home still lingered in the back of my mind, but I was finding that I did not want to leave Rivendell; what the Elves had here was more precious, beautiful, and cherished than anything at home. The thought of going back to the city I lived in before—the dirty streets, the rude citizens, the everyday dramas and stress—made an ever-greater part of me recoil.

I was even getting comfortable with the Elves. The first meetings had been terribly awkward. They intimidated me, the way they carried themselves, their ethereal grace and beauty. It felt like, in some strange sense, what talking to an angel might be like. They didn't seem to have the same concerns, thoughts, or worries I did. They all seemed so wise, and noble, infallible. I had been in total awe with each new one I had the chance to meet. They all seemed very gracious and especially patient as I stumbled my way through the most basic of sentences.

Eventually they no longer intimidated me into a stuttering mess but only a painfully shy human. I even scrounged up the courage to approach some of the Elleths, as I learned female Elves were called. In general, I still felt like a smudge upon existence while they were in the vicinity, but they were all very polite and often tried to make conversation and make me feel comfortable, which I deeply appreciated.

Still, I was having trouble reconciling these creatures with the giggling sprites in the forest. Were they two different races? When I finally asked Arasinya, one of the Elleths in hearing range—which was quite far, those pointed ears increased their hearing tenfold—laughed that tinkling little laugh I remembered in the forest. She came over and told me it wasn't often that guests made their way here on their own, and the guards were merely playing.

I still couldn't quite make the images meet, since "playful" wasn't something I had seen here often, but perhaps I simply didn't know them well enough. Either that or guard duty was infinitely more boring than I imagined.

In Rivendell, time didn't seem to flow properly. The summer—for apparently it had been spring and not fully summer—lasted far longer than it ever had at home, or maybe it just felt that way. I felt like everything moved more slowly here, like time just paused for the Elves.

And, as I found out, in a way it does.

It wasn't until I met up with Trahern, nearly a month after arriving, that he would enlighten me as to why the Elves were...well, the way they were. The Elves were immortal; or rather, they lived on indefinitely, and could only be killed through violence or heartbreak. I wasn't shocked when he told me though. In fact, I think I had already known it. After all, in all the stories Elves were immortal, and their wisdom and their manner bespoke of thousands of years of practice and knowledge.

After meeting Trahern and speaking to him briefly about the Elves' culture and history, I felt more acutely aware than ever of my humanity. My...imperfections seemed more obvious, and despite all the light conversation with the Elves even Arasinya wasn't what I could consider a real friend. I knew little about her personally, even though I saw her quite often. There was a distance, perhaps by her duty as my guide and to make me feel more comfortable, or maybe more realistically, the difference in age and culture. Perhaps friendships for the Elves grew over decades—they certainly had the time.

All of these thoughts seemed to remind me that in this community I was a welcome guest, but not a member, and I started to feel it.

I took to hanging around Trahern—though he did not make great company. He was curt, often busy and constantly smoking. When he eventually left Rivendell to do Ranger duties, whatever
that meant, I felt at loose ends, and took to horseback riding to avoid the feeling.

Not two weeks after seeing Trahern, Arasinya seemed to have caught on, and asked if I might like to meet the Halfling living here. I was quite excited at this chance, since the two Halflings at The Horse had been quite nice to get know, not to mention it would be a welcome break from the Elves. I felt guilty even thinking it, but I knew it was true. While they Elves were wonderful, I always spent my time with them hyperconscious of myself. It was slowly beginning to stress me out.

Arasinya took me down to the lowest level of Rivendell, an entirely different area from where I usually roamed, and left me there, saying the Halfling would be around the gardens. This is an exceptionally unclear direction in Rivendell where “gardens” could mean pretty much any area that didn't have a floor—and even that might be up for interpretation. I ended up wandering for quite awhile, including finding some kind of gathering place for butterflies, a statue of an Elf boy reading, and a small hidden pond beside a weeping willow with brightly colored fish in it. When I finally found him, he was seated on a small bench by a burbling brook, reading a book that was so much bigger than his hands that it looked almost ridiculous.

His name was Bilbo Baggins.

The first thing I learned was that he preferred to be called a hobbit, since "Halfling" was a term used by Men, and hobbits didn't find it very flattering. I felt embarrassed at my ignorance, but he didn't seem to mind. He told me that he was a very old hobbit, over the age of one hundred actually, and he had gone on many adventures. It was at first tough to understand his Westron as he had an accent I was unfamiliar with, but over the course of several weeks I became accustomed to it, he was more than happy to help me practice my Westron with him.

He told me about his home, the Shire, and about the adventures he'd gone on. Many sounded like tall tales from home, with dragons, bands of dwarves, trolls, and treasure. I loved hearing his stories because he was an excellent storyteller, and he often read me excerpts from books he was reading. While his tales seemed farfetched, I was constantly reminded that here, Elves and dwarves were real, so why couldn't dragons be too?

It was through Bilbo that I learned the basics of reading Westron. In a library not far from his room, he took me through the alphabet, helping me to slowly spell the letters. Some resembled English ones (which would irk me constantly whenever I thought about it), but it was often difficult to write them neatly with the quill. I began to really pick it up with his help.

Bilbo and I got along quite well but I didn't want to bother him too often with my presence. Still, I had a strange urge to visit him whenever I could. There was something… familiar about him. Perhaps it was just being the only two in Rivendell not of the Elven race that made me feel that way.

He attended meals on the lower level and brought me to some. I had not realized the levels were significant, but apparently the lowest level of Rivendell was reserved for, if you will, the VIPs. The Elven Lords often ate here, along with some of the most beautiful Elleths I'd ever seen, and Bilbo commanded a certain respect among even them. I didn't quite know why, but it didn't seem to matter, so I let the nagging question rest. When I went to the gardens and various spots where he took his many meals, he could be found conversing with Elves in their native tongue sharing stories or even singing sometimes. I was often asked to sing at dinners, even on the lower level once, but I routinely turned down the offer, both embarrassed in the presence of the ethereal Elven singers, and because I was completely tone-deaf.

Perhaps the conversation I best remember with Bilbo was one about our homes. He spoke frequently of the Shire, and his love for his home country always sent a shot of homesickness
through me. He loved his home deeply, but had explained that adventure fostered a yearning to explore that was equally strong. That first time he asked me about my home, I found I couldn't stop from talking.

I told him about my apartment, the couch I'd gotten off Ebay that a previous boyfriend had stained with coffee, and I'd had to cover with a hideous blanket my great-aunt had given me. I still loved that couch because it sagged just right, and the blanket had grown on me like a particularly ugly animal you couldn't get rid of. I told him about my favorite foods, the park I used to walk through every day to get to the bus stop, my parents' home, with the yellow-tiled kitchen and the mismatched magnets all over the refrigerator.

I talked about cities, about schools, about restaurants, friends, computers, all the things I didn't have anymore. The things I might never see again.

I spoke so passionately about home that I lost myself so much in the imagined scents, sights, and feel of it that I hadn't even realized I'd slipped into English. I found myself staring off into the garden behind him, my eyes watering, wanting so badly to just be back in my bed at home. Bilbo, his face so tender and wise, asked me why I had left.

And I'd told him.

In all my limited Westron, I was finally able to explain my sudden appearance: about the grassy plain I'd just sort of appeared in, the fear, the confusion. I told him I didn't know where my home was here, or how to get back. I told him everything: about Fornost, Bree, wandering hopelessly lost on the path to the mountains. It was a broken explanation, but it was more than I'd ever been able to say.

I told him I knew I was very far away, because there were no Elves, no hobbits, and no dwarves where I came from. I told him my home was very different than this world, and that I was so lost and so far I feared and knew deep inside that I would probably never see it again.

Bilbo listened to me without saying a word, letting me go on until my voice was hoarse and the tears I'd been crying were gone. He hugged me then, his arms just long enough to go around my waist, though his head didn't quite reach my collarbone even while sitting. He let me wash out my system of all the homesickness I'd been bottling up and denying. Cathartic was too light a word for the experience.

Following my reminiscence of home, I continued my routine in Rivendell, but I seemed to be plagued with moments of striking similarity between Earth and Arda. There were the language similarities in writing and speaking, the human cultures that mirrored the medieval times, the mythical elves and dwarves (okay, hobbits were totally unique as far as I knew), and that nagging sense sometimes that something was familiar when it couldn't possibly be.

It was days, perhaps weeks later that I found myself in the library. Rivendell had many small libraries scattered about, the one near Bilbo was a small one with a collection of Westron books, while many others were full of Elvish books of history, biographies, and the like. This one was solely for maps. With a little help from an Elf hanging around, I procured about three-dozen maps of just about every bit of the known world. I was determined to find one kingdom, one feature at the least, that I recognized. There had to be some connection between Arda and home.

It took me hours.

The maps weren't in English, obviously, and only one of them was in Westron (and it was only a small area, as opposed to the whole continent), which made the going slow. Not only that, every place-name was different than my modern ones, so I had to go from memory of what geographical
features of the world I knew. It was a painful process, because other than American geography I was completely unaware of foreign topography.

Arda looked almost like Pangaea according to its cartographers, and there was no knowledge of any land beyond its borders. The sea was where it ended, often with the vague line of "Valinor" written off on the side (I had Elves consistently passing by who were happy to read words for me). I assumed "Valinor" meant "the unknown" or something like that. I found the Shire, Bilbo's home, and located Bree and Rivendell again too.

Everything else was completely unrecognizable. There was a desert far to the south that was unmarked except for the name of the area, to the north above Rivendell it ended in foothills and then mountains until more blank space, and the east was also frustratingly blank. The only map that included any specific detail was one that marked caves—I found out those were troll holes and goblin caves all to the north of Rivendell. Discovering mythical creatures in this land was becoming commonplace.

My other problem was size. How big was Arda? It took up the whole map obviously, but considering how far I'd walked in roughly a month (straight shot from Bree to Rivendell give or take), it couldn't be as big as home. Which left me stuck.

Eventually, lunch rolled around and passed as I poured over detailed maps of mountains, forests, and even a marsh.

Nothing.

Disappointed, I shoved the papers away from me. What was I going to do? There wasn't a familiar shape on any map, nothing that even vaguely resembled any landmass on my planet.

I frowned down at another useless map in my hands, deciding enough was enough. Maybe there was something other than physical landscape that was related to home, I didn't know, but this wasn't getting me answers.

I was just rolling one of the maps up when another Elf approached me.

He was one of the older Elves, with a silver circuit resting on his forehead. He had a serene, wise face and a kind of presence that was made of rippling, gentle power. We'd been introduced once, but never spoken beyond that. He was sometimes at dinner when I attended with Bilbo, but he intimidated me despite a generally friendly countenance.

"Lord Elrond," I said mumbled politely, with a tinge of confusion and a fair bit of nerves. Unlike many Elves' names, I had immediately remembered his, and it was fairly easy to pronounce. According to Arasinya, he was the leader of Rivendell. (Which begged the question of the Elven government. I still didn't understand if there was a government of any kind in the first place, or if Lord Elrond was more like a chief and in charge because he was the eldest member here. It was these kind of abstract questions I could find no answer to.)

"Lady Maddie," he responded, his voice kind. I snapped back to attention.

When I stood waiting for him to say more, he instead gently unrolled the main map of Arda I had been putting away, straightening it out on the desk.

"Your home is not here?" He asked. I often got the sense that I was a child with him, and this might have irritated me if it weren't true. Bilbo said that he had been alive since the First Age, and we were in the Third Age now. Granted, I didn't know how long an age was, but I assumed it was somewhere near the couple-hundred-years mark.
"No, it is not," I responded, and I think some of my resignation slipped out in my voice.

He stepped away for a moment and returned with a blank piece of parchment and a quill and inkbottle. "Here,"

I took them carefully from his hands.

"Draw a map of your home."

A map of my home? He wanted me to make a map of America? When I hesitated too long, he pulled over another map, one of Rivendell this time. "This is my home," he indicated, "Now show me yours."

I laid the parchment flat, and dipped the quill into the ink slowly, contemplating. How would I draw it? As I looked at the map of Arda, I noticed that no kingdom had boundaries. Gondor was made up of cities, and there was just the word "Gondor" to indicate the entire area. But Rohan was a different kingdom. And Rivendell was just a city by itself. How could I draw America to fit into their understanding?

I couldn't. America wasn't a kingdom on a continent of many. It was the size of a continent. And we had distinct boundaries. As I looked at Gondor again, I had an idea.

Barely touching the quill to the page, I began to draw a version of America the people of Arda could understand—I hoped.

Lord Elrond folded up the other maps as I worked, busying himself around me. I didn't think about why he was here, or how he knew my problem. The Elves often seemed to know just what I needed before even I did.

When I was done with my map, I sat back to admire it.

My hometown was a dot on the page with the name next to it. I made sure not to draw real lines, but added in major cities like New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles as points of reference. Everything was much closer than it really was, but it didn't really matter. I drew in some mountains between Chicago and LA then added in the oceans and vague forests and mountains to the north as a natural boundary between America and Canada. A desert and some more ocean to the south separated the rest of the country from South America. It was a rough approximation, but it was home.

Lord Elrond took the map and examined it as though it were a great historical book, tracing lines between places, the line of river for the Mississippi, the Great Lakes, the Rocky Mountains, and then the oceans on either side.

Beckoning to me, he led me to a large table where the map of Arda was laid flat with fancy little swan and bird paperweights holding each corner down. Elrond took my map and shifted it about the landscape, looking to see if any features resembled a distant land. Nothing did though, and his face revealed no emotion, but I wondered if he was curious about it. No one here had really prodded me to explain myself, though Bilbo had agreed to tell some of the Elves my story. Lord Elrond must have known it, but I appreciated that he tried to help me.

"May I keep this?" he asked, and I nodded, helping to roll up the main Arda map. I let him take it, since the only picture I didn't want to part with was the one I'd drawn for Butterbur of home. I still kept it in my bag, carefully rolled up, a precious memory.
Man – ran

Elf – edhel (pronounced: ethel)

(Note: I could not find a Westron translation for the word "Elf" so I am using the Sindarin word, assuming people who speak Westron also use that word—we do this in English too for words not found in our own language. Example: fiancé)

(Note: All translations are between Westron and English—it's simply not realistic for Maddie to learn Elvish as Westron is the "Common Tongue" and would be much more useful, particularly since she is human.)

All Westron translations are courtesy of a Google doc. If you're curious message me.

All Elvish translations and names are found at arwen-undomiel.com
Misty Mountain High

Chapter Summary

It takes five weeks to walk from Rivendell to Lothlórien and Maddie's Elf companion isn't a big talker.

Chapter Notes

Dates: Maddie leaves Rivendell August 24, 3017 and arrives in Lothlórien September 28, 3017. We are still one year before the events of The Lord of the Rings.

To make a realistic girl-falls-into-M.E. story: In the modern day, it's hard to find lessons on how to use a war bow or wield a medieval sword. Girls who fall into Middle Earth, therefore, are more likely to have taken piano lessons and played soccer than learned the outdated arts of war.

Disclaimer: I make no money from this work. Anything recognizable from The Lord of the Rings belongs to J.R.R Tolkien and affiliates. I do not own Facebook.

The bathing areas in Rivendell were probably the most peaceful place I'd ever been in. The water was perfectly clear, the rocks on the sides worn smooth, the bottom soft with sediment, and the trees around it were alive with bird calls, gentle breezes, and warm sunshine. It was the perfect place to think—almost as good as a hot shower.

I had come here to think clearly, but in the end it wasn't helping. I loved Rivendell. I loved the graceful architecture, the natural environment, the sense of peace and wellbeing, the food, the people; everything about it was perfect.

But still, there was something wrong. After the map episode with Lord Elrond, I began to feel unsettled. It had been almost a week since then, but I still couldn't push it from my mind. Even though I hadn't learned anything new, even though I hadn't really been expecting to find any answers, it still triggered some indescribable emotion inside me. It took me days to figure out what it was.

Anxiousness.

I was anxious to leave, anxious to explore this "correlation", this nagging feeling I was having. There was an answer for how and why I was here, I could feel it now more surely than I ever had before. I wasn't pretending to understand anymore. I was starting to think Rivendell had nothing more for me, and I found that as the days passed I began to grow almost annoyed. Time wasn't moving. Everything just existed here so slowly that I kept drifting too far ahead.

Arasinya could sit in the library and read all day, nonstop. I had to get up and move, walk around, talk to people. I got restless now when I stayed with the Elves, all the more reminded that I was not like them. They didn't seem to understand my fidgety moods probably because they'd never
felt anything like it, and instead took it all in stride. It frustrated me even more when I thought about it, knowing that they probably saw it as a phase, just a small passage of time in an eternity, when it was my life.

I was human. I lived in a whirlwind existence. I'd grown up in a land of fast-paced change, of constant motion, and here in Bree and Fornost the people were always moving too.

But the Elves didn't. They literally had forever.

It was driving me crazy.

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Rivendell wasn't like Bree. I couldn't just slip out, and I owed myself to the Elves collectively because they provided me food, a room to sleep in, three beautiful dresses, and a place to stay when I was lost. I felt like I needed to ask permission to leave. Everyone in Rivendell was very close, coming together I assumed because there were few members of their race, and because they lived in what seemed like a large, sprawling house rather than a town.

When I realized what this sensation was, I knew immediately why I'd been putting off telling anyone that I wanted to go. I was afraid of being told I couldn't leave, or more likely, that they would be insulted if I tried to go, especially since I had no way to repay their kindness.

Ironically, as my dilemma reached its crescendo, I ran into Trahern again. He'd been gone on Ranger business for a long time, and I was more relieved than I expected to see him.

"Trahern!" I said happily, and he greeted me with a polite nod. I might have been miffed if I hadn't known this was typical of him by now. "I want to speak you," I said, hands clasped behind my back nervously. I had no idea what he would say to my declaration, but I was afraid he would try to discourage me.

We walked over to a low stone patio past a statue of a woman with a vaguely Roman looking toga holding a broken sword on a table, and into a small garden at the end.

I took a deep breath to calm my nerves as Trahern stared at me expectantly.

"I wish to leave."

"To where?" He asked after a pause. His facial expression didn't change, but I had the distinct feeling that I'd surprised him.

"I need to go home." I didn't want to make it too complicated by saying that I was actually finding a reason, than a method, and then going home. The goal was still the same either way.

"Where is your home?"

"Um…I don't know. Home is…far. Far away. I wish to go home." It was hard to be persuasive when my fluency was still very shaky. "I must… find a way to there. To home."

"How will you find it?"

I think I confused him. We circled the topic several more times, but I had no way to eloquently say I didn't really have any idea what I was doing without compromising my ability to leave. Still, anything was starting to look better than sitting here waiting for something to happen.

Trahern seemed to see my determination—or my desperation—and gave in, though I could sense
a kind of reluctance. He probably imagined me blundering around in the wilderness and running into bandits or carnivorous animals. I'd been pretty lucky so far, and I was willing to try my luck again.

I consulted Bilbo on the matter too once I breached it with Trahern, and he understood far better than Arasinya did when I mentioned it to her. She had asked me to wait, that maybe answers would come here, but she didn't seem to understand why I didn't want to wait. Bilbo told me Rivendell was a wonderful place, one of the best, but that when adventure called to the blood, it couldn't be denied. It wasn't quite my meaning, but perhaps he did know what he was talking about.

At Bilbo and Arasinya's urging, I went to Lord Elrond with Arasinya to tell him. I was very much afraid of his reaction, especially since I had no idea what to expect. Would he be offended? Refuse to let me go?

We met him in his study; a large room with a handsome desk littered with scrolls and books, with a bright window overlooking the Bruinen and the main bridge to Rivendell. Lord Elrond stood expectantly behind his desk as we entered.

"I understand your desire to return to your homeland," he said after I explained what I wanted. I was nervous, but relieved at those words.

"Yes."

"Yet you do not know how exactly to get there," he pointed out not unkindly.

"No," I admitted, worried this was hurting my case. "I will... I will search. Maybe if I find books, or people who know my home, then I will understand."

I couldn't say if he looked skeptical or not, Elves were fairly expressionless creatures compared to humans. His eyebrow did twitch slightly though, and I felt my throat start to choke up a bit with nerves.

"You may of course leave to search for your home. However, winter is almost here. It will be too cold to travel south, and you will need companions. I have messengers who will leave in the spring, you may travel with them then."

I couldn't imagine staying here for much longer. Summer was waning, but it wasn't yet fall. That would mean at least six months before those messengers would go.

I hated to argue, especially with someone like Lord Elrond. He was what I imagined a king was like: noble, wise, regal, and powerful. It was an intimidating mixture, and I never wanted to be on his bad side.

"I have to go now. Time..." I didn't know how to say 'time is running out', and I twisted my hands in front of me as I scrambled for words. "I have no time," I modified. It didn't sound right, and I think I just made the matter a lot hairier than it actually was from the slight wrinkling of his eyebrows.

"No time? One winter more and you can search in fair weather for your home."

My nerves made my temper shorter, and those words irritated me more than they should have. Something about them was condescending to me. What did an Elf know about squeezing everything life had into eighty short years?

"No. I have to go. South. To Gondor. I can go alone."
I had been thinking about it, and Gondor was clearly the biggest kingdom in Arda, and it was a human kingdom. Surely a place like that might have something for me?

I hoped having a clear destination would help persuade him I could leave. Lord Elrond, though he had looked contemplative before, now just looked like a father who wasn't getting it through his child's thick skull.

I was pretty stubbornly sure I could make the trip. I'd been doing pretty well on my own, and I wasn't a complete novice anymore. However, Lord Elrond didn't seem to agree.

"I cannot let you go alone."

"I made it here," I said immediately, then instantly almost wanted to take that back. It probably wasn't the best example since I'd fainted right on the threshold.

Arasinya finally entered the conversation. I'd almost forgotten she was there I'd been so fixated on getting my way with Lord Elrond while still trying to defer to his authority.

"The lands to the south are far away, and it would take longer to reach them than from Bree to Rivendell. You must travel with someone, for there are creatures out there too."

_Creatures._ After an explanation that essentially meant "animals", I understood. They were afraid that I couldn't protect myself from wolves or other predators. Understandable, but it wasn't going to stop me.

"No, I'm still going."

I imagined Lord Elrond might look tired at that, but he looked the same as always. He gave in eventually when my insistence was clear. In the end he said he had no control over me, but only recommended what he thought was best. It did the trick to make me feel guilty, but the thought of spending another six months here—no matter how beautiful and wonderful it was—stopped me before I said anything.

When I met him again several days later he told me an Elf would be accompanying me. I was so grateful for his support I actually hugged him, which I think startled him. He didn't hug me back, and I initially felt a little hurt by it. I knew it was just because Elves didn't seem to touch or show affection openly like that, but I hadn't realized how much I'd missed the contact.

I was to be traveling with an Elf who actually did not come from Rivendell. I secretly hoped he came from somewhere near Gondor, but Arasinya explained that he lived in a forest called Lothlórien, where more Elves lived, and it was roughly halfway between here and my intended destination. This prospect did not excite me at all as I didn't really want to travel from one Elven establishment to another.

According to maps I was shown the week before we were to leave, Lothlórien was north of the human kingdoms, and to reach it we'd have to cross the mountain range that split Arda in half. They were called the Misty Mountains, and I was nervous about what that trek meant.

I met Erynion two days before departure. He was fairly typical as Elves go, with long blond hair held back from his face with two braids that met in the back, blue eyes, and the characteristic noble face. He was on the taller side for Elves, so I didn't quite reach his shoulder, and he was quite slender, his hips possibly narrower than mine.

When we met it was a little awkward because he didn't seem inclined to do much talking. There was something different about him from the Elves I'd met in Rivendell, and I assumed it was
because he came from a different Elven home. For some reason I felt sure they were different, perhaps because of the way he was...stiffer towards me. The colors he dressed in were also different, and something about the way he held himself. Regardless, he told me it would take roughly a month, taking into account weather, distance, and speed. I had the disquieting feeling he was implying I was slowing him down (which I undoubtedly was), but he moved swiftly on to say that we would make it there safely, and I was free to move on if I so chose. I wasn't sure what to make of it.

I didn't see him again for the next two days as I prepared. I was given a new bag, with my bedroll tied on top of it, and a small pot attached to the outside. My chewed on canteen was replaced, and that too was connected to the outside. It almost looked like a modern hiking backpack. Sort of.

Arasinya gave me some warmer clothes, including a thick cloak and tough boots. I wanted to ask for some pants like the men wore, but the Rivendell Elves wore long robes or dresses. Erynion had been sporting leggings under a long tunic, and some of the guards did, but I never saw an Elleth wearing them. I supposed I'd just have to live with it, or find some on my own.

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I never did find those breeches. In fact, half of the things in Rivendell I couldn't find even though I'd poked around a lot. Who made the clothing? Who washed my clothing? (And when did they take it?) Who lit the lamps when night fell? Who cleared the dishes away from dinner? The Elves were just one giant mystery.

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Erynion and I left on a warm summer day. It was hard to believe we would be heading up to the mountains, where some of the highest peaks had snow all year round. Arasinya said her goodbyes in my room the day before. I wanted to hug her for helping me, but I felt awkward for doing so. After that hug with Elrond, I was acutely aware of how much more "touchy-feely" I was than the Elves, even if I didn't do it to them often.

She held my hand in her own soft one, and smiled at me full of happiness and friendship. It was just as good.

I did get to share a long, sentimental goodbye, including a tight hug, from Bilbo later in the day. He was the one I was most upset to leave. We had grown to be friends during my stay, and I would miss his stories. Part of me felt like I was walking away from something important, but I resolutely shoved it aside. Bilbo was the only person in this world who I'd shared this much with, so it was expected to feel that way.

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No one saw us off, which might have been depressing if I wasn't so eager to go, and it hadn't been an hour before dawn. I had been secretly hoping we might be able to ride horses, since I'd gotten pretty good while I was here, but Erynion was all packed up to go when I reached the main entrance of Rivendell, and there wasn't a horse in sight.

We set off, heading towards the looming mountains just visible over the ridge of the valley. Lord Elrond had shown me our route: we'd go through the High Pass, the closest pass through the mountains, then cross the Anduin, a huge river that ran parallel to the mountain range, and head south along it; we'd cross back over the river to get to Lothlórien.

Those first two days traveling with Erynion were awkward. He didn't talk at all, and did all the cooking, leading, and scouting. I just lagged behind him, following whatever he did and trying to
make myself inconspicuous (which is difficult when there's only two of you). I got the chance though to really see the Elves in action.

He was, as expected, better at everything than me. He walked in absolute silence, never got out of breath, never broke a sweat, never tripped, shifted his bag on his shoulders to ease the discomfort, or fidgeted, everything that reminded me of how human I was. When we made camp it took him only minutes to find the right branches and kindle for a fire, and moments to clear a spot to settle in. He worked so quickly and efficiently it was clear he didn't need me at all. I couldn't help feeling hurt that he wasn't interested at all in talking or showing me anything, but I sucked it up and resolved to make the most of it. I'd asked for this after all.

On the third day, we left the wood of Rivendell behind and started out on a flat plain of dried grass and dirt. After three days of almost unbroken silence I finally cracked and spoke up.

"Erynion," he didn't even turn to look at me, but there was no way his super-sensitive hearing didn't hear me. "Why are you going home?"

He was always a good ten feet in front of me, probably taking it at a leisurely pace, which for me was a good walk.

There was a long moment of silence where I thought he would just ignore me, or that he somehow hadn't heard, but he spoke, not even facing me. Luckily he raised his voice and the wind was in my favor so I was able to hear him.

"Because it is my home."

Well, duh, I couldn't help thinking to myself. He was being extremely unhelpful.

"Lothlórien and Rivendell are…the same?" I was trying to say "similar", but I didn't know the word for it or how to indicate a relationship between two objects or places.

This time he cocked his head slightly, and I wondered if the mild wind brushing stiff grasses on my ankles was interfering with his hearing. I'd learned quickly in Rivendell how sensitive their ears could be. I was probably even slightly paranoid about it.

"No. Lothlórien is very different."

"I don't understand."

He still didn't turn around, but he spoke with a tinge of annoyance. "Lothlórien is not the same."

I decided it would be better to stop pester ing him there. At least I knew we didn't have to do this whole month-long trek in silence.

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The hike to the foothills of the mountains was like a casual stroll, and the foothills themselves were like a healthy walk compared to the mountain path.

My boots were better than the old suede ones I'd walked to Rivendell in, but they still had nothing on modern shoes. I had a blister on the bottom of my toe and on the back of both heels, the traction was good but the support was non-existent, so it was a trial. Not only that, but Erynion, in soft shoes that looked like slippers, was fine.

The scenery wasn't beautiful either. The Misty Mountains were craggy and harsh, all grey stone and dry packed dirt. The path wound up the mountainside, moving in sudden steep upturns and
sharp switchbacks that left me sweaty, exhausted, and unhappy. All the breaks didn't endear me to Erynion either, who clearly didn't need them. He leapt from rock to rock like a deer, or perhaps a mountain goat, totally unbothered.

Sleep was also troublesome. There were only so many open areas large enough for one person to lie down (because Erynion didn't need as much sleep as I did, I discovered), and the ground was uneven and very uncomfortable. I had difficulty sleeping, no matter my exhaustion. It didn't help that the temperature dropped sharply as we went up in altitude, which meant I was sweaty, but stripping wool layers meant I was cold. It was a no-win situation as far as I was concerned.

Despite the issues that plagued this part of the trip—all stemming from me—I still managed to talk to Erynion some, and he opened up a bit. He told me he was a messenger for Lothlórien, and he told me a little about his home. It was also called the "Golden Wood" for the golden-leafed trees there, and there were many more Elves there than in Rivendell, which was rather small as Elven homes go apparently.

I also asked him about the bow he carried on his back. He was an archer apparently, as were many other Elves—I assumed it was because of their eyesight being so superior to a human's. The bow was almost as tall as I was, and curved very finely, with beautiful engravings on the ends. It was a pale wooden color, and I was curious to know what it was made out of, including the string. Did they use horsehair like on violins?

The quiver was also a curiosity. Equally decorated, the feathers on the arrows were a yellow color I didn't recognize. Erynion didn't let me touch either piece, but he didn't seem to mind my asking questions about it. He was clearly proud of his skill in archery.

Sharing in his interest in archery seemed to be the spark for more conversation, and for the first time ever he asked me a question over the campfire that night.

"Did you enjoy Elvish music?"

"What? Music?" I was so surprised by Erynion speaking up of his own volition that I almost missed the chance to answer. It had been four days of me posing intermittent questions and him giving me short answers, so I was caught off guard by Erynion's attempt at small talk. "I loved Elvish music. It is beautiful. I laughed and cried."

He nodded, poking the fire with a stick but didn't say more.

"Do you play music?" I asked, not wanting to lose the conversation. Elves seemed to have flutes, harps, fiddles and lyres. So far as I had seen there were no brass instruments, and I had noticed the absence of drums in Rivendell. In Bree and Fornost I had mostly heard flutes, fiddles and percussion.

"All Elves play music or sing," he answered, then looked up at me. We made brief eye contact, his eyes a fine, pale blue color I hadn't noticed before. He indicated me before looking back at the fire.

"Um…” I swallowed, feeling inexplicably nervous for a moment. "I played piano."

"Piano?"

I doubted pianos existed in Arda, but it was a nice thought. My parents put me through lessons as a child, and while I stopped as a teenager I'd always enjoyed playing a little on the piano at my parent's home. It was something I was surprised to find myself missing in Rivendell. I would have liked to share some classical piano music with the Elves; I'm sure they would have liked it.
"It is very big instrument with... black and white..." How do you say keys in Westron? I mimicked playing the piano on the ground, but Erynion only shook his head.

"We do not have these in Arda."

After that we lapsed into silence. I dreamed that night of playing the piano in a concert for all the people I had left behind: my friends, family, coworkers, and neighbors. I played, they clapped and cheered, but when I finished they disappeared.

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It took us a week to reach the top of the pass from Rivendell, and looking back at where we'd come from, I could barely make out a thing. There was, as expected, a fog this high up, where the Misty Mountains got their name, and it set a chill in my bones I would not be rid off until we'd left the mountains behind.

The pass was a terrible hike, and I was sore, unhappy, and woke up with a head cold that made my skull feel three times its size. Getting sick was the last thing I needed on this trip. Why, on the only trip where I have a companion who is clearly much more capable than I, do I get sick?

The pass itself afforded a dry, protected area to rest, so we took an extra long break up there. I passed out basically after sipping some tea Erynion made, so I have no idea what he did. Presumably the same thing he does when I'm asleep (or trying to sleep when I'm laying on a ground that feels like cobblestone): stare at the stars, the mountains, or off into the distance. I had yet to actually catch him sleeping. He was usually spacing out if I ever stirred in the night.

The hike down was, if possible, more unpleasant. My head cold was still there but a little better, so I just felt congested and grumpy. I'd never really gone "hiking-hiking" either, so I wasn't prepared for how hard going back down the mountain would be.

The path was the same as the way up, so mostly loose rock and hard, dusty dirt. I walked with my toes shoved all the way to the front of my boots, and by the time we hit some level area, my knees, shins, and toes were killing me. Erynion was again springing around rocks, so he was perfectly fine, but I was in some serious pain.

We rested that night on the foothills and left at daybreak for the river, with me thankfully feeling a lot better. I wasn't sure how the head cold had cleared up so quickly, but I wasn't going to look a gift horse in the mouth. Erynion told me it would be six days if we picked up some speed before we reached the river. If the land promised to be flatter, I could probably do it.

And we did.

In six days Erynion and I followed a "road" that cut through wilderness, lightly forested areas, and occasionally open plane. The land could be shockingly diverse, and at times hideously boring. We had, thankfully, no ill encounters, though I did have the unpleasant chance to see exactly how an animal is prepared for cooking.

It was on the third night from the pass, when the weather was starting to cool off and the nights were chilly, that Erynion brought back a hare from wherever he'd gone when we'd stopped.

I had managed to be extremely lucky when it came to avoiding exactly how game was prepared. The only other time I'd eaten meat in the wilderness was with Trahern, and that was a leftover from some other meal he'd eaten. This was an experience I was not particularly excited about.

The rabbit was dead, completely limp as Erynion held it dangling by its ears. I could already make out the smell of dried blood mingled with the distinct scent of a wild animal, and it was starting to
make me sick. I tried not to watch, but there wasn't much else to look at, and when Erynion realized my obvious discomfort, the upward curve of his lips told me he was amused. Bastard.

Pulling out a sharp, small knife, he quickly examined the blade, then in one swift move cut through the soft neck, decapitating it.

My stomach immediately dry-heaved. I thought Erynion might have laughed, but I wasn't sure since I wasn't really paying that much attention. Even with my eyes shut and my stomach rolling over itself threateningly as the vision replayed behind my eyes, I could hear what the Elf was doing. The knife was quite sharp, but there was the clear sound of steel meeting something hard—bone, my imagination helpfully supplied.

When I peeked again, the world had stopped spinning until I saw the rabbit's feet on the ground. This time my stomach successfully came up, and I darted into the bushes off to the side of our camp to empty it.

Shaky, vision still blurring a little but thankfully my stomach somewhat calmer, I came back and sat down again. I wasn't sure what Erynion was doing now, and I was certain I didn't want to know, but eventually I opened my eyes again. In a pile off to the side were the remains that he had cut off, the skin and fur, and what were most likely the internal organs on top. The rabbit itself was skewered on two sticks and being cooked over the fire. It was, unfortunately for me, perfectly recognizable, and therefore caused my stomach to rebel again.

I wasn't sure if I'd be able to eat it, especially since I'd now had an intimate encounter with what happened to the carcass before it was edible. Erynion turned from where he was burying the remains and made some comment, but I wasn't listening. My stomach was acting up again at the sight of the pile of innards.

In the end the rabbit was cooked, seasoned, and speared on sticks for us to eat while the rest was salted and packed away. After summoning all my courage, keeping my eyes shut, and trying to pretend this was a veggie burger and not meat literally fresh off the bone, I managed to eat. I think I impressed Erynion a little because the rabbit managed to stay down (and frankly, wasn't half bad in retrospect).

When I'd managed to eat all that I could, I saw that he too had polished off his piece. Clearly he had no qualms about it.

While in Rivendell I hadn't eaten much meat. The Elves were, as far as I had seen, mainly vegetarians. What meals I had that did have meat were taken with Bilbo on our own, and he clearly enjoyed carnivore fare as much as I did.

I decided, now that I was feeling more stable and Erynion looked prepared for another night doing whatever he did, I would ask.

"In Rivendell they don't eat meat?"

Erynion glanced up from where he was sitting and feeding the fire.

"Elves only eat meat when in the wilds," he said.

"Oh," I said after an awkward moment of silence. He didn't elaborate, and I didn't ask for more.

Two days after this I got my first bath of the trip.

Erynion looked pristine in comparison to my stinky, sweaty self, but even I could tell the travel was a bit of strain. Contrary to what I had first assumed in Rivendell—that Elves repelled dirt, bad
hair days, and wrinkled clothes—they actually did get those things if left in the wild long enough.

I got the first bath, and even though I had no soap or anything, it felt wonderful to take a dip in small stream running near our path. It was a little awkward undressing in the wilderness, especially when my only companion was male and if something happened he'd get an eyeful. The water was cold too, and I didn't have a towel.

Still, a bath is a bath.

I thoroughly rubbed my body down, and then ran the water through my hair fifteen hundred times in the hopes of getting some of the grit and dirt from the mountain dust out, before finally drying off with my dress from Fornost that was probably better off as a rag anyway, and pulled on my old clothes, though I made sure to soak the ends and sleeves of the dress to at least clean it a little bit.

I hadn't changed in almost a week, since it wasn't really worth it with all the travel. Plus, as before I planned to utterly ruin one outfit so I still had others later on. The clothing the Elves had given me was of a human style, but finer in quality and make, but most importantly I could put on the dress by myself since the lacing was in the front not the back. I still brought the dresses I'd picked up before Rivendell with me just in case, but they remained at the bottom of my bag.

About midmorning of the sixth day from the pass, almost two weeks from starting out, we reached the Anduin River.

It wasn't particularly wide here, hence the bridge that had been built, but Arasinya had told me that there were few areas that you could cross the river, because as it traveled further south it got stronger, wider, and much more powerful.

When we made the crossing over the wooden bridge, I had the sudden urge for a camera. It would have been a magnificent shot no matter where you took it: mountains behind me in one direction, endless river and plains in two, and the edge of a forest in the last.

I had the sudden, bizarre thought of posting the picture to Facebook and what my caption would say: "Hardcore backpacking in Arda." It was so absurd I had to laugh.

Erynion did not share my humor though, because he crossed quickly and was staring at the ground when I caught up to him.

For the next eleven days, we would walk south, following the river. The Anduin made a fair number of twists and turns as it winded away towards Gondor, and so the road probably added on miles and days to our trek. When I asked Erynion about a more direct route, he said something about the "shadow of the mountain" and did not say more.

This part of the trek was rather boring. Erynion was a good companion in terms of wilderness know-how, but he didn't entertain well, and so much of it I spent sweating and walking, and sometimes looking about the landscape, though it all looked relatively the same. My endurance was clearly top-notch by now. I remembered those first three days before I'd found Fornost; taking breaks every couple of hours as my legs started to give in. I'd been sore for that entire first month.

Now I'd climbed a mountain, probably walked more than a hundred miles, and was in the best shape of my life. I guess there had to be an upside somewhere in all this mess.

Four days from the river crossing, I began to notice footprints on the ground. They were pretty faint, but there were a lot of them all heading in the same direction as us. A herd of something from the looks of it.
When we took a break for lunch, and Erynion was cooking up some of that rabbit meat (I still felt a little ill whenever I recalled the…funeral for it), I wandered off to where those tracks were.

They were toeless, was the first thing I noticed. Hooves then? Even I could tell they weren't hooves though. I'd never been hunting in my life, let alone examined the tracks of any animal that wasn't dog prints in cement, so I hadn't the faintest idea what I was looking at. Still, there were a lot of them, and many were roughly the size of my foot. They had no toes, no hoof clefts, just perfectly rounded feet. Like boots, but without tread.

I put my foot into one, just to compare sizes, and suddenly Erynion was right there in front of me. For some reason I felt unaccountably scared for a second. His expression was rather fierce.

"Yrch."

"Yrch?" I repeated automatically. What kind of animal was that?

He shook his head, blonde hair fluttering all around him, and I forgot the strange footprints for a second when I had sudden déjà vu of blonde hair whipping around like that. What the hell?

Then it was gone, and Erynion was staring at me funny.

"Sorry, yrch?"

"Orcs."

"Orcs…" The word seemed familiar. Had someone taught me it before? I looked down at the tracks again, unable to tell if the animal had two feet or four, or how big it might be, or anything really.

I looked back up at Erynion for an explanation. "I don't know 'orcs'."

The Elf's expression didn't change, but I was pretty sure he was frustrated.

"Orcs are not nice. Be watchful." With that optimistic comment he walked back to camp, and I stared down again at my foot standing in a print a little wider but just as long as it.

"Orcs…"

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We made it to a major point in the river, eleven days from crossing over it, and took our dinner there.

The Anduin by now was a roaring tide of raw power. I bet the hydroelectricity you could generate would fuel a large city.

We were actually on a set of bluffs above the river, looking down on the torrent. It glowed in the moonlight, the small rapids frothing white while the rest glittered with the reflection of the stars. The moon here was so bright and round that it lit up open plains like this so even I, who didn't have freaky Elvish sight, could see fairly well. There was a tributary river that connected somewhere around here too apparently, called the Gladden according to Erynion.

The orc tracks that had paralleled our journey so far were still there, and they were starting to make me nervous. I found myself sometimes waking up in the middle of the night to strange noises, and Erynion would be alert and awake.
We also made fewer fires the further south we went. Around the mountains we didn't have many, but after leaving them and crossing the Anduin Erynion allowed more of them. Now we hadn't had one in five days.

On the first days of the trip, really the first two weeks, we ate primarily rations. Things like apples and bread that were perishable. Then we switched to some of the dried meat that were getting heavy to carry, and now Erynion magically pulled out *lembas* just as I was starting to worry we'd have to gut more rabbits to get by.

*Lembas* looked a little like shortbread wrapped in a leaf. I wasn't initially that interested, since it looked something like a bizarre, large cracker, but one bite and I immediately took back my first impression.

It wasn't particularly soft, but the flavor was surprisingly fresh and strong. It didn't taste like anything I'd eaten before, maybe buttery, a little sweet, but I felt rejuvenated from the walk with just one bite. Typically I ate less than a third of a *lembas* for a meal, Erynion doing the same, but I felt no inclination for more than that. It was strange. I wasn't full, but I wasn't hungry either.

In the days that followed that stop by the tributary river, Erynion began to lead us off the path. At first this made me a little uncomfortable. Almost all the traveling I had done was on a path, and I trusted them implicitly, since back in America wandering away from a road was asking for danger or at the least getting lost. However, when I asked Erynion he told me this was the only way. He didn't seem bothered at all to leave the road, and I wondered if roads didn't connect many places at all.

Like Rivendell. I still had no idea how I got there.

I also noticed that we were leaving the orc tracks behind. It made Erynion a little less paranoid, which consequently made me a little more relaxed too.

It was eight more days of *lembas* (discounting a couple days of a small animal that I politely excused myself from seeing the demise of), mildly chilly nights, and plodding through high grass and scattered woodland by the river that we arrived at another crossing of the Anduin.

This was a ford, where the water slowed down and became shallow enough that we could cross. Shallow and slow being relative though. The water was ice cold and moving quite fast, rising to my knees in some spots, so while Erynion practically walked on top of it, I slogged through. Soaking wet and thoroughly exhausted, Erynion set up camp for the night.

"Dawn of the second day we will arrive at Lothlórien."

"Awesome," I muttered as I flopped onto the ground, pulling off my wet boots and socks. The dress I had tied higher up (much to Erynion's shock; clearly showing my knees was practically like flashing him), so only the bottom was wet. Still, it wasn't going to be good when the sun fell and it started to get cooler.

It was late summer, or perhaps early autumn now, and so the weather was starting to be tinged with winter's chill. Erynion started a fire, for which I was grateful, and we ate the last of whatever that animal was, cooked over the fire with a little seasoning, and slept soundly.

Erynion was right. By noon the next day I could make out a golden blur on the edge of the horizon.

Erynion had told me, in those short stints where he deigned to actually speak, that the trees' leaves turned golden in autumn. Apparently it was a sight to see, and I was actually quite interested in it
When he'd said golden, I assumed it was the kind of burnished gold of autumn leaves at home, and that this particular kind of tree—mallorn, as he called it—had leaves that turned that color. But when we came upon the wood at dawn of the second day, it was quite clear in the daylight that the leaves weren't bronze colored at all, but a brilliant, vivid gold.

At mid-morning we reached the outskirts, and I stood in awe at the very edge of the forest. These trees were quite large, though I'd seen bigger in the wood around Rivendell. The trunks were a strange silver-grey and very smooth. They were almost warm to touch, and I was very careful when I reached out to feel it. Erynion's eyes were on me, but I completely ignored him in favor of tilting my head back to look at the boughs, several at least two or three stories high, that were littered with golden leaves. Only the outer ones touched by the sun were gold, the ones closest to the ground and trunks were still a dark green, but the contrast was beautiful.

Mallorn trees. There was nothing like them anywhere else in the world, Erynion had told me, they only grew here. I felt a deep reverence within me as I stared up into the treetops, my hand resting lightly on the trunk. I could almost, if I closed my eyes, feel the tree alive beneath my hand. Just like in Rivendell, I remembered suddenly. I'd felt something like that there too.

For once Erynion didn't seem inclined to rush me. His people probably had many legends and stories about the trees, and I sensed that he too was proud and awed by them.

As I took my hand away from the tree and let my eyes return to our path, I felt strangely like I'd seen these trees before. Why was that? I couldn't help thinking. These didn't exist at home, I was sure of that, and Erynion said this is the only forest with them. How could they be familiar?

It was that stupid "connection" again. Something that tied Arda and my home together. What was it?
Chapter Summary

Maddie leaves behind the Golden Wood and reaches Rohan. The horses might smell, but at least the captain of the patrol is pretty cute.

Chapter Notes

Writer's Note: Just to clarify, realistically speaking the amount of luck Maddie has had is unlikely, not to mention the fact that she's survived this far intact, but there wouldn't be much of a story if she died before she made it to Rivendell. My goal is simply to make a girl fall into Middle Earth and not be a Mary-Sue, canon-killer, or frankly, a complete cliché. Hence the reason why she isn't aware of Lord of the Rings initially. Are the hints that might change obvious enough?

Dates: Maddie leaves Lothlórien September 30, 3017. Frodo leaves Bag End (in the book, not the movie) one year from now, on September 23, 3018.

To make a realistic girl-falls-into-ME story: Chivalry isn't dead yet, but that also means gender roles are pretty strict. Not every woman can pull an Éowyn and still land the guy.

Disclaimer: I make no money from this work. Anything recognizable from The Lord of the Rings belongs to J.R.R Tolkien and affiliates. I also don't own Harry Potter.

UPDATE: I am torn about whether or not to save Boromir (indirectly saved by Maddie--she's certainly not going to being killing orcs anytime soon). I can go either way, so I want reader's opinions. Please comment or message me to let me know what you think.

The path through the Golden Wood was long and windy, and often very thin. Erynion knew exactly where he was going though. This was the most relaxed I'd ever seen him. Though he'd probably never say it, I could tell he was glad to be home.

We walked for several hours; the sun was harder to distinguish through the branches of the trees, full of golden and deep green leaves. I didn't mind the slower pace, since there was mossy undergrowth full of flowers and interesting plants, occasional animals including deer at one point, to look at.

It was when Erynion stopped ostensibly for lunch that I was scared by yet another Elf. At least this time I didn't pass out.

One moment I was pulling my pack around to get to my canteen, and the next there were four Elves all around us. I jumped, and my backpack banged into me causing a loud noise in the still of the forest. The Elves didn't say a word, though I felt their combined stares. There was something
distinctly more hostile about it than when I'd been in Rivendell. No one was giggling, first and foremost.

Erynion was obviously one of their number considering he was dressed almost identically, and I recognized his serious expression on the other Elves' faces. They all had bows and arrows, and these guards had wicked looking knives strapped to their belts. Their hair was intricately braided and otherwise left loose, though of course it didn't look the slightest bit tangled. I never quite figured out how Erynion's hair managed to stay so neat looking despite the wind and sleeping on the ground. Mine was rat's nest even after that bath.

The Elves spoke to each other for a short while, and I felt quite intimidated and more than a little nervous when the conversation turned to me. They all glanced over at me, and there was some discussion in Elvish I couldn't understand. I wanted to speak up and defend myself from whatever they were talking about, but somehow with five Elves against me I couldn't seem to get my voice to work.

And then it was over. Less than five minutes after their sudden appearance everyone was moving. Three of the Elves returned to the trees, climbing the trunks so quickly and soundlessly I almost thought they'd flown up there. Erynion and the last one, probably a leader or captain of some kind, continued to speak.

I tried to locate the Elves in the trees, but if they were still there they were completely invisible. By the time I started counting leaves on one branch, I had a feeling Erynion was just catching up with friend and not concerned with me anymore. Maybe they'd determined I wasn't worth worrying about?

Finally though the conversation ceased and the new Elf turned to me. This Elf, his keen grey eyes settling on me, looked considerably more imposing than I liked. I had grown much more accustomed to Elves while in Rivendell, but there was something about maintaining direct eye contact that still bothered me sometimes.

"To where do you walk?"

It was such a strange way to phrase the question that I didn't initially understand him, and it didn't help that his sharp stare was making me nervous.

"What?"

Erynion was standing behind the other Elf and not helping at all. He wasn't really paying attention, but was instead looking up into the trees, maybe looking at the other invisible Elves up there. He was totally useless.

"Where is your destination?"

I didn't catch anything but the first word. "Where?" I stumbled then abruptly spit out the rest of the phrase. "I go to Gondor."

He turned back to Erynion, and they talked some more while I looked on curiously. Now that this mysterious Elf had turned away from me, I could see his bow and quiver were decorated like Erynion's with what looked like words. Maybe for luck or engraving his name? Unlike my companion though, he wore boots over his leggings with the top of a knife peeking out rather than the slippers Erynion favored.

Abruptly the Elf I had just spoken to made a bird call. One of the Elves jumped down from a tree (it could have been one of the ones from before or a totally new one, I couldn't tell the difference),
and spoke quickly to the leader. He promptly turned around to face me.

"You are welcome to sleep here tonight. By morning we will take you to the other side of the wood so you may continue you're journey."

He didn't so much as blink as he delivered the statement, and he definitely didn't wait for my response or to check if I understood. Instead he nodded once to Erynion and leapt into the trees.

"This way," Erynion said, leading me off the path and to a small clearing a short walk away. The ground here was mossy and there was already an extra blanket and a canteen sitting beside a rock. "Tonight you will stay here. Tomorrow at dawn an Elf will come and take you to where you may continue on to Gondor."

It was clear from his manner and the way he spoke he was not staying here tonight, nor was he going on with me. I couldn't help feeling a little disappointed and a little sad at our parting, but there wasn't much I could say. He'd led me here safely and quickly, without fuss or trouble, and that was all Elrond had asked of him.

"Thank you, Erynion." I bowed to him as I'd seen other Elves do, unsure of how else to express my gratitude, and he inclined his head.

"You will be safe so long as you are in this wood."

At that he disappeared around a tree and was gone.

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That night was as comfortable as I'd ever had outside. The moss on the ground made for soft bedding, and the gentle sway of the trees and rustle of the wind lulled me to sleep. I didn't feel in danger in this forest, even if the Elves were snooty.

In the morning I was just sitting up when an Elf popped out of nowhere and briskly informed me we were leaving. He handed me an apple and some bread as I scrambled to put my things together. I yanked my bag on to my back noticing it was heavier than expected. I could also tell my second canteen was full too when I shook it. It was just like Elves to sneakily in the night bring me food and provisions. It was probably when the Elves in Rivendell took my clothes to be washed too, I thought suspiciously. Either that or Elves in Arda lived in harmony with House Elves and someone failed to tell me.

The Elf ignored me until the moment I tugged my bootlaces tight. He immediately headed off and I traipsed after him in the morning dew. The path we took through the forest was as slim as the one in, enough that I could probably have wandered off it and not noticed. If there was an Elvish settlement somewhere in this forest, I certainly saw no sign of it as we walked. Perhaps it was high up in the trees, invisible like those Elves yesterday.

In the morning light, the forest was truly glorious. The sunbeams reflected through the golden leaves gave everything a shimmering hue that made this feel more like a fairy tale than any of my experiences before. I wasn't bored at all as I took in the calm beauty of the forest, the gentle breezes rustling the golden trees, the soothing sound of water far off, and the calls of animals. The Elf in front of me was as much as part of the nature as the trees, and I think in that moment I understood better why the Elves were the way they were. They were strongly tied to nature, whereas humans had long abandoned it.

In maybe two or three hours we made it to the other side of the forest. The Elf leading me, who hadn't offered up his name, or in fact any conversation at all, finally stopped as soon as grassy
plains were visible beyond the tree line. There was an awkward moment as we stood there where I realized this was goodbye. Even if they hadn't been sociable, these Elves had let me stay the night safely in their forest. I thanked him best as I could and with a nod of acknowledgement, he jumped back into a tree and disappeared.

I finished the walk down the path on my own, soaking in the splendor of this forest one last time. Even if the Elves living here weren't the nicest to strangers, nothing could detract from the glory of those sun-painted boughs. I hoped I might see it again.

At the edge of the forest I tore my eyes away from the silver tree trunks and surveyed the land beyond. Without a guide now it was up to me, my sense of direction and burgeoning wilderness skills to make it to Gondor. It would be my farthest trek yet, and probably my hardest, but at least this time I knew where I was going and had done my best to memorize the maps I'd seen. I knew there were villages and towns south of the forest, but a direct path wouldn't cross through any of them. Ideally I needed to head almost directly south, crossing two rivers to reach a mountain range called the White Mountains. There was supposed to be a path there running east to west that would take me to the capital of Gondor: Minas Tirith.

Giving one more look up at the trees, I patted the bark of the nearest one and set off.

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The land here, far as I could tell from the maps I'd looked at in Rivendell, didn't really belong to anyone. There was another forest I'd been warned of entering, but other than that it was occasional grassy plains, some rocky foothills, and a lot of lightly wooded areas. Nothing particularly exciting.

It took me a week to cut an almost straight southerly pass through the land. It was a boring journey, made even more so by the fact that I was alone. Having a companion, even one that didn't talk like Erynion, had been comforting. Now the silence that had once been thoughtful, comfortable even, was truly empty. I wished I had a dog or something to keep me company.

Sometimes, since I was walking alone, I would sing songs from home. My homesickness wasn't as strong anymore, probably because I'd been here so long, but that didn't mean I didn't miss home. I sang any song I could think of, from children's music to the bawdiest hip-hop. It felt good to remind myself of things from my world, things no one here would understand.

One benefit to traveling alone at least was that I didn't have to worry about fitting in to the culture. The first day out I pulled on my jeans under my dress, tied up the skirt into a knot on the side, and skipped for a good fifteen minutes. It felt wonderful.

The nights were thankfully not that cold yet, despite winter coming on, and I had my blanket and luckily the pants and dresses. Wrapped up in enough layers I was fine, and the warm sun during the day along with all the walking meant I didn't feel the chill too much. A fire would have been nice, but Erynion had never taught me how to start one, and I'd been too much of a coward to ask.

In those first days after the Golden Wood I was worried about getting lost since there was no road, but I could at least tell direction by the sun because I was heading directly south. As the days went by and nothing went wrong I stopped second guessing myself, and eventually started to relax.

That would all change though after I waded through what I was pretty sure was the Limlight River. I had to take off my jeans because it would take hours for them to dry, and this was a lucky break as it turned out. Not too far past the water, the rock formations that scattered the land became more heavily concentrated, culminating in a ridge. A group of soldiers were already there, and they definitely weren't expecting me anymore than I was expecting them.
In my defense I didn't mean to scare them, and they were scouts, so weren't they supposed to know I was there?

I was coming from an awkward angle (who knew there was an easy way and a hard way to get up that hill?), and somehow they didn't see or hear me. I, being upwind and behind gigantic boulders, didn't hear them either.

I struggled up the rocky hillside, and came around the corner of a rock that reminded me vaguely of a particularly weathered Mount Rushmore, when I was suddenly almost directly next to the leader of the little group standing on the top of the ridge. He jumped, I screamed, and there was the movie-classic *shing* of swords being pulled out of scabbards.

"It is a woman!" The man standing by me cried out, and the ten men who'd whipped out weapons hastily put them back while I managed to start breathing again.

As I took a look at the group standing spread across the uneven rocks, I recognized immediately that they had to be some kind of soldiers. Each was wearing a helmet decorated in silver on the top with a golden colored part around the eyes. Most wore a kind of leather armor, complete with arm guards, pauldrons and leg guards that covered them nearly head to toe. They all had swords and several of the men were armed with bows and arrows.

Just below them, where the grassy plains began to stretch for endless miles, there were roughly a dozen horses all saddled up. I knew, almost instinctively, these were horsemen and not just the cavalry.

"My lady, may I ask why you wander so far?"

I blinked and turned my attention back to the soldier beside me, who looked roughly middle-aged, with dirty blonde hair and thin facial hair. I tried to put on my best smile for him and not show my nervousness. Even months after that incident back in Bree, I was still strongly reminded that there were plenty of the dishonorable sort around.

"I'm going to Gondor. Where are you from?"

"We are Rohirrim," he said, indicating the men below us on the rocky ledges who were all staring at me.

I had a sudden uncomfortable realization of why: I was a random woman wandering around the wilderness by herself. I wasn't even surprised by my luck of running into people in totally uninhabited places anymore. Something was keeping me alive here, because otherwise I'd have been dead outside Bree months ago.

"We are scouts," he said, and though I didn't know what the last word was, I nodded my head anyway. "Where are your companions?"

There was a pregnant pause. I was pretty sure as I traveled farther with Erynion, that Lord Elrond had thought I would stay in Lothlórien, or at least those Elves would have a messenger or someone who could accompany me further. I don't think anyone really expected me to willingly continue my journey alone.

"I…I lost them." I looked down as I spoke, unsure of what more to say. I wasn't sure how much information to trust with these soldiers, but I could hardly lie and say my companions were right behind me.

"A woman must not travel alone in these parts! It is not safe here," He said immediately. "Come,
we’ll take you to Rohan where perhaps your companions are also heading."

I wanted to ask what he meant by "not safe here", but before I could there was a hand on my elbow leading me down the rocky ridge. Some of the other men gathered around to introduce themselves, while others began to pack up their horses and mount them. Clearly the party was ready to leave.

"My lady," the leader said. "I am Fastred. Let me offer you my horse to ride."

Fastred let out a whistle and a beautiful bay came trotting over. He was much bigger than any horse I'd ridden in Rivendell, and the way he continued to twitch and move made me nervous. The Elves’ horses were very calm and seemed to have some kind of intuitive connection with their caretakers. I hadn't been around many other horses, and this one looked rather intimidating.

Fastred mounted up so smoothly it was obvious he was an accomplished horseman. He offered me a hand, and another man helped give me a lift up.

When I'd ridden with the Elves, I had been taught sidesaddle. The Elleths that I'd seen rode astride though, but when I'd asked to learn that way Arasinya and the trainer had laughed. They told me all human women rode sidesaddle. Put off by it, I asked several more times while I was there, but they continued to refuse. Sadly, I was expected here to ride sidesaddle too. While it was a perfectly fine way to ride, I found it uncomfortable after long periods and less stable than riding astride.

With a fair bit of help and some awkward managing of my skirt I was seated as comfortably as possible on the horse. I put my hands on Fastred's waist to keep steady, trying to ignore the slight smell that came off him. I hadn't bathed since before the Golden Wood, so I didn't exactly smell like a princess either.

"Hold on, my lady," was all he said, and then we were off.

I'd managed to get up to a canter a couple of times on the horses in Rivendell, so I was somewhat familiar with the pace, but it was different as a passenger and a lot more frightening when the raw power of the horse seemed double that of the mares I had ridden before. In Rivendell we rode through the forest and small meadows, but here it was flatlands, allowing for greater speed. The wind whipped my hair around me, catching it in my mouth, my eyes, and in the collar of my dress. The men riding all around us were quite close, enough that I held on to Fastred a little tighter for fear of slipping off and being caught under the hooves.

The plains themselves were beautiful in their own way. The grass was very tall in some places, rolling in waves almost like the ocean. Most of the time though, it was dry brush and hay-colored grass that went on to the horizon. The snorting and heavy breathing of the horses, the beating of their hooves, and the clanking of the men's armor made talking impossible, so I daydreamed most of the day away.

Lunch was a very brief affair. The men dismounted and stretched, wandering around the plains munching on rations while the horses rested and grazed. Fastred offered me some of his food, but I ate some of my leftover bread instead for fear of being too great a burden. I was able to explain during that short lunch break that I didn't speak much Westron, but Fastred told me he wished to ask more questions later. A man called out something just minutes after everyone had dismounted, and Fastred rounded up the men to get back on their horses.

That night the men camped out on the open plain. The horses grazed nearby, offering a kind of perimeter of protection. Some of the men put up tents, but most seemed to just roll out a bedroll and claim a spot to sleep. Fastred helped me down from the horse, and my legs and butt were sore
from all the riding. As least by riding sidesaddle I avoided walking bowlegged later, though I was stiff.

I was guided to sit by one of the fires, twisting my hands in my lap and nervously curling my skirt under my knees. I was acutely aware of the stares of all the men as they settled for the night. I was the only woman, and it made me very uncomfortable.

"Here," Fastred set a plate down in my hands and said something more I didn't understand. He sat beside me and dug straight into his dinner.

Hungry and thankful for a fire that allowed for warm food, I ate everything on my plate and sipped the drink being passed around, which was, unsurprisingly, some kind of ale. When I had finished eating and set my bowl down, Fastred set his down too, wiped his face and beard on the back of his sleeve, and turned to me.

"My lady, where are you from?" Fastred was polite as ever and spoke slowly for me, despite his obvious curiosity. The men standing around though fell suspiciously silent.

"Rivendell," I said, and from the looks of surprise on their faces I was immediately unsure if I'd made a mistake.

"That is an Elven house!" Someone cried. The other men nodded, and some of the men around the fire even looked angry or afraid.

Fastred asked another question and things quieted down again: "From Rivendell? Do Men now live there among Elves?"

I caught the gist of the question, but I didn't know how to answer it. "No, no Men. I went to Rivendell for…help. Now I go to Gondor."

"Ah," said Fastred, and one of the other men scooted closer and leaned forward. Other than the crackling of the fire and the snuffling of some of the horses there was little noise in the camp.

"What happened to your companions?" The other soldier asked, and I could hear the low murmurs about Rivendell slowly grow silent.

Uh oh.

"Um…" I had no idea what to tell them. Should I be honest and say I was traveling alone? Or lie and say we got separated? The only thing I'd thought to tell them all day was my plan to get to Gondor. That was a massive oversight clearly.

"Orcs?" Asked another, and someone shushed him. I perked up though. Orcs… Erynion had said that about those strange tracks by the river. What was that?

"What is orcs?"

There were gasps all around, and some men even laughed. Most of what they said I couldn't understand until finally someone else came up behind Fastred. "They're monsters. Cruel beasts."

"…Beasts? I do not know this word." I was confused and embarrassed by my lacking language skills, but the men couldn't seem to explain it to me without using that same word. Frustrated, I waved my hands at them, and Fastred interrupted.

"My lady, if you have never seen an orc then you are blessed." I didn't catch the last bit, but there were murmurs all around as Fastred kept talking. "How many were you traveling with?"
The specific questions made me nervous, and I unconsciously started to wring my hands in the folds of my skirt. It was obvious they expected me to be traveling with a party, and I was afraid of what would happen if I told them the truth. Would they try to take me with them? Would they take advantage of me?

"Um… four, sir." I had no idea if that was a reasonable number, but Fastred didn't look surprised, so I breathed out.

"All Men, miss?"

"Yes," I nodded. These people obviously weren't keen on Elves if the reaction to mentioning Rivendell was anything to go by.

"Hm…" he said, looking into the fire for a moment while whispered conversations went on around us. "Were you attacked?"

I swallowed, worried about digging deeper into this lie. "No, they…” I trailed off, having no idea what I was going to say.

I was lucky though, because Fastred spoke up before I needed to come up with something. "Were they paid? Mercenaries can't be trusted." There were grunts of agreement from all around, and I understood these soldiers considered mercenaries to be dishonorable.

"Uh… paid yes. Pass through Lothlorien and then… not there."

It was true. Sort of.

The men gasped again though, and there were dark mutters. "I have heard stories," one man said to me, "of a witch in that wood. The folk there will slay you before you can take three steps into that forest."

There seemed to be similar comments all around, though I couldn't understand anything else. These men seemed genuinely afraid of the Golden Wood, which I didn't quite understand. The Elves there may not have been kind, but I didn't imagine they would shoot first without good reason. The story of the witch seemed more understandable though. The Elves did have a certain kind of…magic to them.

I let them think what they wanted though, not sure if I could articulate an argument or if I even should. The men seemed to accept my explanation for why I was alone without further comment, for which I was thankful.

Finally Fastred stopped talking with one of the other men and turned back to me. "Come, tell me, how did you plan to go to Gondor? The road is east of the river; did you plan to pass through Rohan or take the path over the Entwash?" He spoke so quickly I missed most of the grammar of the sentence, but when I heard the last word 'Entwash' I immediately smiled and nodded.

"Entwash!"

He smiled too, though it had a decidedly grim touch to it. "I hope you had warriors with you, for the way there can be dangerous."

Unfortunately, and probably quite telling about the times of this world, I knew words like "warrior" and "dangerous".

Not knowing what to say I nodded, and then was cut off by a yawn.
"Ah!" Fastred said again, "Sleep now, my lady, and we will wake you at dawn. We meet the rest of the company tomorrow."

I pulled out my bedroll as the other men in the camp began to set up for the night. It felt strange to sleep among so many people after weeks of traveling alone or only with Erynion, who didn't even seem to sleep. I could pretend for a second, that it was my friends beside me and not strangers.

At dawn I was sore and grumpy. My bedroll hadn't protected me from the pointy rock I'd been sleeping on, so I had a crick in my neck and my legs were still sore from riding for hours. I wasn't looking forward to getting back on the horse.

I did though, with a little swearing under my breath and help from the men, and we rode on to a little past noon when I began to see on the horizon a dark shape.

Initially I didn't give it a second thought, assuming it might be a cluster of trees or a rocky ledge or something, but as we approached it quickly proved to be the "company" (I was picking up all sorts of useful army words) Fastred had spoken of.

We hailed them from some ways away, and as we cantered closer the numbers just continued to swell. I thought Fastred's unit of a dozen was a good-sized group, but there had to have been thirty or so riders there.

Coming upon them, Fastred dismounted and put his hand on the shoulder of what had to be the captain of this group. I could tell from the crazy long blonde hair on his helmet that made it look vaguely Roman.

I was, admittedly not paying much attention because the captain had just pulled off his helmet. He was younger than I expected and very handsome—in a roguish sort of way. I was just thinking that when abruptly Fastred pulled his horse forward some, and I almost came unbalanced at the sudden movement.

There was laughter from the men, and I could feel my cheeks flame in embarrassment.

"This is Miss Maddie, she has been separated from her companions and is traveling to Gondor."

I sort of gave a half wave at him, still seated rather precariously on the horse without Fastred to hold on to. The saddle was not made for two people or someone sitting sidesaddle, so it was a careful balancing act. Fastred talked some more with the captain but I couldn't understand a word of it. I had thought my Westron was improving while with the Elves, but clearly these guys spoke a lot faster than the Elves did because I wasn't picking up anything.

Eventually the two men stopped talking and the captain came closer to the horse to offer me a hand. Even more embarrassed now that he was helping me down, I slipped off the horse, doing my best to preserve my modesty with the dress.

Honestly, the first chance I got I was going to find some of those pants the men wore.

"I have a rider who can take you on to Edoras if you so like," he said, still holding my hand as I brushed off my skirt with the other.

"Ed'ras?" I asked, taking my hand from his awkwardly. This chivalry business was catching me off guard.

He seemed surprised by what I'd said, and Fastred said something that I didn't understand one
word of, but I figured he'd just told him my Westron sucked.

"E-do-ras," he said more slowly, and I blinked.

"Edoras. What is Edoras?" I could feel the combined stares of roughly forty men, not to mention even their horses seemed offended somehow.

"It is the seat of the King of Rohan," the captain said, and I immediately repeated "Rohan!" I knew what Rohan was, though he still seemed a little miffed that I hadn't recognized Edoras.

"Do they call Edoras something else in Elvish?" He asked as he led me over to the camp the men had set up. There were tents, several fires going, and a lot of armor dumped all over the place. The smell of horses, iron and sweat hung in the air. I guess it was to be expected of an army.

"Uh… I don't know. I don't speak Elvish."

"But Fastred said you came from Rivendell," he pointed out, and I fingered the edge of my sleeve as I thought.

"I left there to go to Gondor, but it is not my home," I admitted, hoping he wouldn't ask me where home was.

"And what do they speak in your land?"

We came to a stop by a tent that had little tassels on the edges, marking it to be the captain's, I guessed. The captain pulled back the tent flap and indicated me to go inside.

"Um… we speak English. It is like Westron." Frustratingly so actually.

"I see," was all he said before pointing out to me the bedroll, washbowl, and some books. It was plainer than I expected, but cozy. I tried to say no to taking his tent—since it was the captain's and everything—but I couldn't really argue the idea of sharing when showing my knees would offend them. Not to mention he kept saying it would hurt his honor to allow a woman to sleep outdoors when a tent was available. Clearly chivalry was rampant in these days. I'd always thought the stories exaggerated it.

The rest of the waning day followed in much the same way. I repeatedly didn't know what was being said and seemed to not know vitally important things to these people (mostly things about horses).

Fastred stuck around with me, making sure everyone was polite around the woman and acting as a buffer against the fifty-odd men indiscreetly staring at me. He ended up teaching me a number of basic horse words, including things like saddle, bridle, and horseshoe. I had no idea how useful these words would be, but it seemed to please him to teach me. The captain, whose name was Éomer, even joined us briefly at one point and told me the horses of Rohan were very famous and were the very best horses in Arda. I could barely tell a pony from a horse but I made sure to exclaim over the size and beauty of the horses. This seemed to please the men.

That evening when things had settled at the camp, the captain personally made sure I was comfortable in the tent and had eaten. I don't know why, but it never occurred to me that he was anything less than completely trustworthy and honorable. It might have just been because he was the first truly handsome man I'd seen in months. Sure, the Elves were beautiful, but there's some quality of "look but don't touch" to their beauty. Rugged wasn't really my type either, but there was something nice, even strangely nostalgic, to ogle a good-looking man. It felt like I didn't have the time to do silly things like that anymore. Every day was about surviving and figuring out what the hell was going on.
At daybreak the whole company was a flurry of action as they prepared to head out. I had a cold breakfast of leftovers and one of my apples. Just as I was packing up Éomer appeared.

"I have arranged for someone to go with you to the Entwash, south of Rauros. These times are dangerous, and I would not have a woman travel alone. Are you sure you do not wish to go to Edoras?"

Éomer and I had discussed this at length last night. Though Edoras was tempting, I had made plans to go to Gondor, and seeing as that was the major nation for Men it felt right. Still, I was a little uncomfortable about taking one of his warriors away from him because he had told me they were a patrol (that had been a difficult word to explain, but we managed somehow).

Éomer had his helmet tucked under his arm, the long white-blond hair streaming around it. He was again in full armor, and I had to wonder how his horse managed to gallop carrying so much weight. They were probably bred specifically to do that, which made sense given how much bigger these horses were than the ones in Rivendell.

"Good morning," I replied, busy rolling my bedroll as tight as I could. Squatting on the ground to do this was drawing more looks than I was comfortable with, but what did they expect me to do? The Elves were far more polite in that sense, but after being around this group of soldiers for a couple days, I was much more curious about the culture of the race of Men in this world. Was it connected somehow to my own?

"I am still going to the Entwash. Thank you for a companion," I said sincerely. I really appreciated all he'd done for me. Even though we'd only met yesterday, I felt that Éomer was a man of his word and of honor. If he was already a captain at his young age, he could probably be something even more in the years to come.

He nodded, and I was glad he wasn't going to press the point again. It hadn't been easy persuading him to let me skip Edoras and go straight to Gondor. Lord Elrond hadn't been as obstinate. Luckily, with Éomer I could fake not understanding his words if I didn't have an argument for his point. I think I mostly just frustrated him, but I got my way, and he threw his hands up and muttered something I didn't understand. I could guess it translated to "stubborn woman" though.

"This is Baiard," he said, interrupting my thoughts, "He will accompany you to the Entwash where hopefully you're companions will be. If not, I encourage you to come to Edoras, where you will be able to find others to take you to Gondor." The pointed look he gave me clearly said he remembered last night's discussion as well.

Baiard was a young man, probably early twenties, with dirty blond hair just past his chin. His leather armor looked worn and not quite as fitted, probably handed down from his father, and he still had the boyish look I didn't see on any of the others men's faces. He was probably a fresh recruit to the army by my guess.

"Hello," I said politely, dropping a curtsy while he responded in kind.

"Baiard was injured in our last skirmish," Éomer said, clapping a hand on his shoulder. I shook my head, my now universal sign for "what?"

"He was hurt," Éomer modified. I knew what that meant, and some of the guilt at taking away one of his men eased. They probably wanted to keep him out of the fight if he were injured.

There was some more talk, and then within the hour I was sitting up on Baiard's horse, Arundel,
who sported a fine brown coat and a pretty white spot above his eyes. I didn't know much about horses, but I could tell this one was an older horse, which suited me just fine since he didn't seem quite as twitchy as Fastred's.

I said my goodbyes to Éomer and Fastred, thanking them several times for all they'd done. Éomer waved it off, putting on his helmet I think to hide his blush. Fastred was more cordial, and wished me a safe trip.

Baiard set Arundel off at a trot, and I gave a last wave before turning forward.

"How long to get to Entwash?" I asked Baiard, who hadn't said much since I met him. I had a feeling he was a little shy, especially since I was a woman.

"About a week," he replied, and I could see how his ears turned a little pink as I put my hands more securely on his waist.

Trying to defuse some of his embarrassment, I shrugged and said lightly, "All right then," and left it at that.
Danse Macabre

Chapter Summary

Swords leave nasty wounds, and there's no hospitals in Middle Earth.

Chapter Notes

Dates: Maddie leaves Rivendell August 24th and arrives in Minas Tirith October 23rd. We are now roughly six months before the beginnings of The Fellowship of the Ring.

To make a realistic girl-falls-into-ME story: Without modern hygiene, in a land riddled with war and disease, death is commonplace. To insulate one person from it is impossible. She'll have to deal with it eventually.

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When Baiard and I broke for lunch, I decided to ask him something I'd been thinking about. Since it was just the two of us I really wanted to ditch the sidesaddle thing.

"Baiard…" He turned from where he was pulling things out of his pack to look at me. Arundel, his horse, was grazing a little ways away.

"Can I…" How did I put this? "Ride like you?"

His forehead scrunched up, as he looked confused. "Pardon?" He asked uncertainly.

"Ride like…" Ugh, for all that I'd learned in Westron, some things were still hard to explain. Why did I never seem to need the things I'd learned? "…Like a man?"

He looked so perplexed by this that I decided to broach the topic again when we started riding after the meal. Maybe if I just got on the horse and sat the way everyone else did, that would explain it far better than me trying to word it out.

In the end I thoroughly embarrassed Baiard, but got my way. Yes, my dress scandalously rode up above my knees, but I was far more comfortable this way. Sitting sidesaddle had never felt quite as stable or as comfortable when I was on the back end of the saddle. This way at least I fit better and didn't have to balance myself quite so much.

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That evening, as Baiard was pulling the saddle and bridal off Arundel so he could graze more comfortably, I noticed the side of his shirt was bloodied.
"Baiard! Your shirt!"

Alarmed, he lowered his arms from where he'd been reaching to unhook the bridle, and touched where the blood was.

"My wound…" he murmured, and even I knew what he was talking about.

I took his arm and pulled him over to the saddlebags. I had some gauze-like wraps for wounds in my bag, and I bet he had something else for injuries in his stuff.

I started to paw through my bag and found what I was looking for. Pulling it out, I motioned for him to lift his shirt.

Baiard's blush as he complied would have made me smile if the wound didn't look so bad.

I was no doctor, but even I could tell it wasn't good. A sword had probably sliced him, and the line of the cut was oozing blood slowly. It didn't look infected, but sometimes that wasn't always obvious until it was severe. I had the gauze-thing, but we needed to clean him off and disinfect it.

"Something to clean with?" I asked, and Baiard hissed as he touched the wound lightly with two fingers. I almost slapped at his hand, afraid he might do more damage.

"Water," he replied.

Water? Unless the water was boiled here it wasn't very clean, and that would only rinse it; we needed disinfectant. Germs would get in there otherwise. Shouldn't he be stitched up or something? I really didn't know enough about medicine to judge, but the cut looked nasty. Hopefully it was shallow?

"Clean?" I tried again.

"Water," he repeated, and I gave him a skeptical look. Obviously we didn't have any modern antiseptic out here, but what about alcohol? At least in the movies a dash of rum or whatever worked.

"Ale?" I asked, the ever-popular drink for everything. He shook his head. Of course the one time when I could have actually used it neither of us had any, or even anything remotely alcoholic.

I tried to get boiled water to drink when I could, but it simply wasn't practical. Traveling over long distances when water could be scarce, boiling every drop I drank was impossible. Since I'd only gotten sick from it once, and thankfully it had been nothing more serious than a morning of vomiting, my stomach had probably hardened to whatever there was in the local water. I just had to hope that since Baiard was from here, his body was tough enough to take it.

I wetted some of the wrap I had been given for wounds, aware that it also probably wasn't exactly hygienic, and began to wipe away the blood.

Thankfully, after a full ten minutes of work the cut was completely clotted. With some awkward handling, we managed to wrap the cloth around his chest and knot it in place. Hopefully that would hold, and he'd be okay.

--

The days went by quickly with Baiard. Small mountains (in comparison to the Misty Mountains I had crossed before) became visible on our left—to the west of us as Baiard corrected. He had loosened up as I practiced my Westron on him, and he told me lots of things about Rohan. The
most interesting to me though was that they didn't actually speak Westron, but their own language. No wonder I hadn't been able to make anything out with the company.

He told me about the King, beloved by the people, and how proud they were of their horses (though I had guessed as much). He even admitted there might be a girl back home, and I tried not to tease him too much about her. He did ask me if I was betrothed—which took a bit of explaining before I understood—but I just shook my head. There hadn't been anyone, and I didn't want to think about how long I'd been gone.

Baiard also told me stories about his brothers and their family, the things they had seen and places he had been. I found it refreshing just to be able to talk to someone like this. With the Elves it had been difficult. Something about them just didn't inspire simple, mundane conversation, let alone personal anecdotes.

While traveling with Baiard too, I managed to get him to teach me some basic survival skills I had sorely needed before. Because of Erynion's general unwillingness to communicate or deal with me more than necessary, I hadn't really felt confident enough to ask him if he would let me help him set up camp. The very fact that I was so exhausted after the day's trek and had trouble understanding him had probably tested Erynion's patience already.

With Baiard though, things were different. With some encouragement he taught me the basics of setting up a fire and how to make sure the blaze was kept alight. Though I never managed to make a spark during those lessons, I at least knew the premise.

The same went for simple things, including how to whittle sticks into sharp points to spear meat, how to salt it thoroughly and pack it away, how to boil water and how to clean up camp in the morning.

All of this made me feel better and more self-assured. I wasn't quite so helpless anymore, and Baiard and I got to know each other quite well. I had missed the companionship.

Every night I would help set up the fire and occasionally, if I remembered and wasn't too tired, checked his bandages. He claimed the wound was fine, but the first days after we left the army it bled sluggishly, probably because of the movements of the horse. Thankfully though it stopped, and I hoped that meant it was finally healing.

The plains made for some pretty dull scenery so we entertained each other with stories. At first this was difficult for me since anything from my world wouldn't make any sense to him, but I quickly found my footing in, of all places, fairy tales. Knights and damsels in distress fit in just fine here. Baiard seemed to enjoy these, and I asked him after a retelling of *Sleeping Beauty*, if he'd ever used his sword before like in the stories. It hung from the horse, unused since we had no need of it.

"I've killed an Orc before with the sword, but I'm still training."

"Orc…" I repeated. I'd been hearing this word over and over again since leaving Rivendell, and now I hoped Baiard could tell me what exactly it was.

"What is a Orc, Baiard?"

"An Orc?" He actually tried to twist in his seat to look at me but stopped, likely because it pulled his wound. "You've never seen an Orc?"

"No. Maybe. I do not know what it is."

"An Orc is…" He seemed to fumble for words I could understand to describe it. "An Orc is a…"
animal. It walks like a man but… looks different. Evil. It has green, brown, orange, yellow skin.” I wrinkled my nose at what he said, mildly confused. Skin, not fur.

"Some… wear jewelry." The doubtful tone of voice told me this wasn't a direct translation. Baiard often had to curb his vocabulary for words I didn't know, and sometimes the results were quite strange.

"Like… a necklace?" I almost wanted to laugh, unsure of what he meant.

"No, no," Baiard corrected, "Like earrings. In ears. And nose. And face."

"Piercings!" His confused look since I'd spoken in English made me want to laugh, and my mental image of these animals wasn't helping. Man-like animals with facial piercings and orange skin. Was he exaggerating their image because they were so feared? It certainly seemed that way.

I clarified the English for him when he continued to look confused. "Holes in body to put jewelry in." Even though he couldn't see what I was doing, I touched my ear where the holes were. Would they close up eventually since I had no earrings here?

"Orcs are very ugly. They have sharp teeth and wield swords and scimitars," Baiard continued on after a moment, and his seriousness told me he didn't take the matter lightly. Still, I thought there had to be some exaggeration on his part. The only image in my head I could come up with was some kind of demon, complete with fangs, sallow skin, red eyes… and crazy piercings.

I guess it was fantastical though. I mean they did have dwarves and Elves after all, so I guess it wouldn't be too farfetched to assume some kind of monster existed here too.

I kept asking questions about these "demons", curious despite myself. Orcs apparently ran around in groups roaming the countryside, eating people for sport. They didn't have villages or anything, but just seemed to terrorize and kill for no reason. That didn't make much sense to me since no animal acted like that. I felt like Baiard might be exaggerating the peril—they probably only attacked when people invaded their territory or something.

It was that night, while watching the meat cook, that I remembered Baiard mentioning Orcs wielding swords. If that were true, then that would make them at least more intelligent than the average animal, since utilizing tools was part of what set the human race apart eons ago.

Then I recalled the footprints Erynion and I had seen, and how they'd resembled my own boot prints—rounded without defined toes. If they used weapons, then who's to say they didn't wear clothing? That just enforced the idea that they were smarter than animals again.

I played with the idea of asking Baiard about all this, but I realized that he'd only told me that they were essentially a roving band of ugly murderers, and I thought with sudden clarity that he might be biased. He admitted himself that they looked different—different colored skin, and a culture that possibly advocated facial piercings. They could be a native people, not yet technologically at the medieval age. That could make him prejudiced.

Oh, I had been so naïve.

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With conversations and storytelling my vocabulary increased tenfold. Baiard was a pretty patient teacher, and more than willing to explain words I didn't understand.

We were just a day away from the road heading south, according to Baiard, when I began to notice him drifting off in the middle of my retelling of Disney's Beauty and the Beast. Since I
normally faced his back, it wasn't until he began to tilt dangerously in the saddle that I noticed his flushed face.

"Baiard? Baiard?" He wasn't responding when I spoke, and I thought with a terrible dread of his wound. After wrapping it that first day I'd checked it several times, but considering his condition it looked like it had become infected. This was bad.

I managed to rein the horse in and slide Baiard off his back without jostling him too badly. As I pulled him down I could clearly see the high flush on his cheeks and forehead indicating a fever. Desperate, I laid him on the ground and riffled through the saddlebags for anything to help.

Without modern medicine there wasn't a lot I could do. He had some herbs in his bag, but I certainly didn't recognize them, and they could have been just spices for the food for all I knew. In my own bag all I had was the last piece of the cloth used to wrap wounds, which was of no use.

Deciding to deal with a cure after I checked him over, I pulled up Baiard's shirt and lifted the protective wrapping to see the damage.

The slice followed the lower ribs and curved slightly towards his stomach, maybe a little longer than the length of a finger. It had looked clean when I'd wiped it off days before, and there hadn't been blood in a while, but as I feared it hadn't been disinfected properly.

Peeling the old bandages off, I could tell immediately I was right by the angry color of the wound. At least nothing was coming out of it. Yet. Still, the sides of the cut were reddened, and the flush on Baiard's face wasn't good.

We were in the middle of the wilderness, and I had a sick man and no modern medicine. I didn't know much about traditional or old-fashioned healing, but I guessed I'd have to put high school biology to use.

Even though it was only a little after noon, I took the bridle off the horse and set up camp, feeling eternally grateful I had gotten Baiard to teach me.

Pulling out the bedrolls and blankets, I set Baiard up to be as warm as possible, draping every piece of clothing we had over him. I had to rely on his body's ability to fight off the infection, because I really didn't know how much more I would be able to help.

Setting up as I'd been taught, I picked stones from the surrounding area and made a ring of them for the fire, clearing away the dry grass around the circle so that it wouldn't catch and spread, then gathered it as kindle. Even though I'd never managed a spark with the flint Baiard had, I had to try now. If he got too cold during the night, that could spell his death.

I paused at that thought. The likelihood of him dying from the infection was actually pretty high. What would I do then? He'd be… dead.

I shuddered, and quickly went in search of sturdier kindle. I needed something to keep my mind from the thought. I had to do whatever I could to help him. He wasn't there yet.

Dry grass was my tinder, but I needed something better to maintain the fire with and to keep it hot. As he'd shown me, I went hunting for stalks of grass that were quite thick lying about on the plains and gathered as many as I could hold. These would essentially replace my firewood, since there weren't many trees here.

Putting it all together, I pulled out his flint—a stone and a piece of metal I essentially just hit together and prayed—and started to strike them at an angle.
The idea of course was to cause a spark by friction, but it proved fruitless for the first fifteen minutes. My arms ached from the constant movement, and my hands were blackened and roughened by the stone. I was truly afraid I wouldn't be able to do this, and Baiard would die from exposure and illness, but when that first spark finally caught, I let out a whoop, my heart lifted, and I quickly leaned down to blow gently, encouraging it to spread.

I got lucky on my second try, and managed to get a fire going. I couldn't be happy about my achievement though for long. Baiard was still dangerously ill. He was starting to sweat, no doubt because I had him under every piece of cloth we had between us, and he was flushed with fever. He seemed to be sleeping fitfully, and I immediately shifted him as close to the fire as I dared.

Peeling aside the blankets and lifting his shirt, I again looked at the wound causing this, noticing that it seemed to have become swollen. Poking it experimentally, Baiard's gasp and attempt to wiggle away told me he was in pain too.

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I sat back on me heels, covering him again with the blankets and rewrapping the wound in new fabric. I didn't know what to do. I didn't know anything about medicine, and other than the fever as a natural way of fighting it off, I couldn't think of any remedies I was capable of.

I pulled my knees up to my chin and wrapped my arms around them; terrified Baiard might be dying. What could I do?

I tried to think of any treatment for injuries that didn't involve hospital trips and antibiotics, but nothing came to mind that was even plausible.

Stitches? Maggots? Cauterize it? I shuddered at the last two. Not only could I not stand bugs nor did I know where to find maggots, but I may as well stab him with his own sword for all the good either remedy might do. It might even kill him faster.

I started to rock myself, straining my brain for anything. Penicillin? It was made of mold after all. Did we have anything moldy? What would I do, scrap the mold off and stick it on his wound? Make him eat it? I'd probably do more damage that way too.

It was Baiard's groan that startled me out of my quickly growing hysteria, and I scrambled over to him. Wetting a piece of cloth, I dabbed it in our precious water, and put it on his forehead, slowly wiping away the sweat. Realizing I had the chance to boil clean water, I put the single pot he had on the fire, using two sticks to hold it up as he'd shown me before, and filled it with water from his canteen, using the small traveling frying pan to cover the top.

When it finally boiled, after what felt like a short lifetime, I tried to get him to drink a little, but it was hard to keep him hydrated when he wasn't really conscious, and I feared his stomach would reject it if I gave him too much. There was nothing more I could do but try to help him overcome the fever on his own.

That night was perhaps the most painful I had ever had.

Baiard's fever never let up, the wound began to pus, and he alternated between chills that made his teeth chatter, and feverish attempts to throw the blankets off.

I kept washing the wound and hoping and praying he might pull through.

By morning, Baiard was worse than ever, and he vomited up the water I tried to get him to drink. Before my eyes I saw him grow weaker, the fever raging higher, and he never regained consciousness that night.

It was past dawn as I rewetted the cloth on his forehead, that I realized his skin was no longer as
I wanted to believe the fever had finally broken, but my mind knew better. His skin had an unnatural pallor to it, his mouth open without movement. He wasn't breathing, and his heart had stopped, so the blood wasn't circulating anymore.

My whole body began to shake as I cradled a dead man's head in my lap, wondering how in the span of less than a day Baiard had fallen so fast.

I started to cry again, as I hadn't done in weeks since Rivendell. How could I have let this happen? What good was all my knowledge? How could whatever magic had brought me here let an innocent man die like this? In the middle of nowhere with a stupid girl who didn't know anything to help him. Where no one would know he was dead except me, and heavens knew I had no idea how to get to Rohan to tell anyone.

What did I do now? I thought brokenly. It must have been hours since I'd started crying, but when I looked at the sky the sun had hardly moved.

I had to keep going, I didn't know what else to do. But what about Baiard?

Could I...bury him?

I gently put his head down, searching around the horse and the bags for anything I could dig with. Only his sword was long enough, and with the tough grass and dirt and no shovel-shaped tool at hand, burying him wasn't a realistic prospect. Cremation was also impossible. There was no way I could make a fire hot enough or burn long enough to do that. Nor did I think I could bear to watch it.

I sat down on the ground again, looking at the lump of blankets and the short brown hair of my newest—and now late—friend. There was no way I'd be able to take him on with me. I couldn't carry him, not even on the horse. And what would I do, carrying a... body with me to Gondor?

In the end, amidst tears, sniffles, and a snuffling horse who seemed to understand his master was gone, I covered Baiard's body in as much grass and dirt as I could gather. As I stood over him, I thought to myself how short a time I'd known him, and how short his life was. Would I die as cruelly as he?

"Baiard," I began, and the horse's neck hid my choked cry. "...You were wonderful. You... you showed me friendship and- and trust, and I want to say that I will think of you often." I paused to gather myself, my voice hoarse from crying. "I'll try to find your family to tell them." The last was a whisper. I had no idea if I'd ever be able to fulfill it, but if I ever came this way again, I'd at least find Éomer and tell him.

After the emotional trials of the morning, it was noon by the time I left Baiard's body, marked by a ring of stones at his head, and continued southwards toward the road.

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It took me about a day and a half to get to the road, and I was sorely depressed through it all. Even the horse seemed to trot slower than usual.

The road curved from the mountains southwest, and I was lucky Baiard and I had been so close to it, otherwise I might have been lost. My heart really wasn't into doing anything, and I spent my time lethargically sitting on the horse, thinking all manner of morbid and sad thoughts. My own fragility was chief among them. Baiard had been taken down in a day by infection. This world was dangerous, and not just in conventional, sword-wielding ways. Would I become a casualty?
The days stretched on, and the nights were lonely. The first three nights I didn't even try to make a fire, just collapsed on my bedroll and fell asleep, but by the fourth night on the road I rustled up a fire and settled by it, letting it heat me from the outside in.

The horse's spirits seemed to be raised about mid-afternoon the next day; and I realized about two hours later why. The Entwash, the river that marked the southern border of Rohan and where the main road to Gondor was, was ahead of us. I could hear it long before I could make out the sparkling light of the water in the waning sun.

Even though night fell I urged Arundel closer until we were nearly at the ford. Thankful to get a drink, he trundled off the moment I dismounted, and I followed hoping to refill the skeins. Baiard's… illness had taxed our water. Or rather, my water, I thought sadly.

The water here at the ford wasn't too deep, and I could barely make out the shapes of rocks worn smooth in the growing darkness. I filled the canteens with the cold water, washed my hands and feet and wetted my hair, wishing for a bath. I hadn't had one since before Lothlórien, I realized, and the annoying grunginess of that week or so before meeting up with Éomer and co. had long since become the norm.

I couldn't muster up the energy to really be disgusted.

I settled in for that night a stone's throw from the river, and the next morning tentatively led Arundel through the water. I wasn't sure exactly how deep it was, and I didn't feel comfortable riding Arundel when I couldn't guide him well, so we made slow but steady progress across.

The ford was extremely wide, since no doubt this was a major river, and at some parts I sunk down to my thighs. I was freezing from the waist down when I finally reached the other side with Arundel, who other than a little water at the knees, and a couple stumbles, was fine.

The road here was clearly well worn and went a further ways south before splitting off and meeting the mountain road that headed to Minas Tirith, the capital of Gondor.

I checked my packs on the horse, looking at the food I had. I wasn't sure how long it would take me, but I estimated I had enough for maybe ten days travel. The maps in Rivendell weren't exactly precise, but Minas Tirith, the closest city this way, was at the end of a mountain range moving east to west. If I followed the road west, it should take me all the way there.

Hopefully they'll be some traffic on the way, I couldn't help thinking. It was certainly lonely traveling all by myself again.

In the following days things were quiet. I would murmur sometimes to the horse, but after the days of chatting and stories with Baiard it was hard to summon up words. Arundel and I made our way slowly into Gondor's territory. The huge mountain range was south of us, looming enough to block out the sun long before dusk. A couple of the tallest ones already had snow on them, even though it was still autumn. I realized as I thought this that I'd been here in Arda nearly half a year now. It was a sobering thought.

I was careful to ration my food, and lucky Arundel just ate the plentiful grass, and within a week’s time I began to see my first traffic on the road since… well, not even traveling from Rivendell to Lothlórien had I seen anyone else on the road.

It turned out to be a group of dwarves, just like the ones I'd seen so long ago in Bree. They didn't say a word as I went by, and I was too chicken to greet them. It lightened my heart to see others
though after more than ten days since striking out alone.

Three days after seeing the dwarves, I spotted a group of five men on foot in the distance.

If there was any upside to living in the wilderness like this, it was that my instincts were far shaper than they'd ever been before. The moment I saw those guys coming towards me, I knew they were trouble. They looked like a gang, armed and rough-skinned with a kind of arrogant swagger that immediately made me nervous.

I spurred Arundel into a trot, hoping to get by them with the speed of the horse, but as I drew closer they quickly formed a ring, jeering nosily at me, all dirty faces and unwashed clothes. I was terrified, because this time there was no kindly innkeeper to save me.

I didn't dare get down from the horse, and when one approached from the side reaching for the saddlebags I took my foot out of the stirrup and kicked out at him.

"Stay back!" I yelled in Westron, holding the reins with a white-knuckled grip.

"Aw, come now Lassie, don't be like that," one teased, his yellow eyes focused greedily on me, and I was infinitely thankful to be wearing my jeans. Even if the pants would be considered lewdly tight for a woman, bare legs from a hitched-up skirt would be far worse.

"Stay back or my horse will kick you!" I tried to muster up my courage, but when one man drew a short knife Arundel began to backtrack nervously, his eyeballs rolling in his head. I didn't have the presence of mind to calm him, but his continued backwards movements jarred something next to my right leg.

Baiard's sword!

After everything with Baiard's illness, I'd forgotten it was strapped to Arundel. Reaching back blindly with my hand, not wanting to take my eyes off the men who were slowly circling Arundel, making him prance nervously in place, I grasped the handle and yanked in one motion.

Arundel bucked and skittered back faster, but I gripped him tighter round the sides and brandished the sword like in the movies. Except normally when characters brandished weapons, they actually knew how to use them.

"Try me now!" I yelled in English.

My intimidation factor didn't work at all, since I was clearly a novice, and the men laughed, one even lunging at me playfully with his own sword.

"Come on pretty girl, how about your bags for your life?"

I swung down with the sword at one guy who got too close, but I was right-handed and he was on my left side, so it was awkward enough of a swing that I nearly unbalanced myself. Arundel, who probably could sense my own fear, not to mention see out of the corner of his eye me swinging something sharp, took that moment to do the smart thing: run.

He bolted, and thankfully my terror at being attacked by those men kept me seated on the horse, my legs paralyzed in a tight grip. Arundel's quick movement though caused me to drop the sword, but it was the last thing on my mind.

I held on as Arundel galloped full speed down the road towards Minas Tirith, and my heart raced twice as fast. That had been close. It was lucky, almost too lucky, but I didn't dare think beyond that.
We bolted down the road together for I don't know how long, before Arundel eventually tired. I kept checking back to see if I could spot the men, but I never caught sight of them in the distance. My palms still sweated at the thought though. Making camp that night was torturous, and I forwent a fire out of fear those men would come back—or new, luckier ones would appear.

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Minas Tirith was truly a huge city, because even though I was still days out from it, tamed grasslands and grazing animals became commonplace beside the road, and I started to see people, houses, and most importantly, patrols.

The bandits had never reappeared thankfully, and as the clearly cultivated land emerged around me I grew less and less afraid. I was completely intact, I reminded myself, and that was now two groups of men I had successfully escaped from unscathed—one with Butterbur's help, one all on my own (unless you counted Arundel).

As I got further into the farmlands, I saw people working in the fields, oxen pulling plows, and small clusters of buildings denoting communities. It was refreshing after nearly—oh my goodness, nearly two months of constant travel. If I'd been walking I would have stopped dead.

I hadn't realized I'd been on the road that long. Nearly a month to Lothlórien with Erynion, and then another month from there to the outskirts of Minas Tirith. I supposed, looking back, it made perfect sense, but all the days had blended together, and since the travel was so unpredictable I'd been taking it one day at a time.

I saw one group of guards patrolling on horses that day, and I slept easier that night. I was mildly thankful though that they didn't stop me either, and that I'd had the presence of mind the day before to change out of my jeans and return to riding sidesaddle. I didn't want to draw undue attention to myself. Though the guards were acting something like the police, I hadn't forgotten that soldiers didn't have the best reputations from this era.

That night I probably could have found an inn, but I realized that I didn't know if I had enough money, nor how much the money was worth, so I figured camping for another night wouldn't hurt anyone. I was nervous someone, namely a guard, would tell me to move off, so I didn't start a fire, but all the same I slept on the edge of a field undisturbed. Arundel even got to nose up another horse, which made me wonder if technically speaking I had stolen him. He might belong to Baiard's family or the Rohan cavalry or something, and I had just taken him out of the kingdom and into another. Was that like crossing state lines?

I ended up restlessly thinking about that before I finally fell asleep.

That morning I ate a little more than I had before, given that I was so close to Minas Tirith, and began to search around Baiard's bag for something resembling money.

I hadn't really touched his things other than to take out food, because somehow it had felt like I was invading his privacy. However, I needed this, and I admitted to myself in my head that Baiard was dead, and he didn't need it now. I firmly pushed back my thoughts the night before about stolen horses and whether that counted as stolen saddlebags. There was simply nothing I could do now and I could hardly turn back to Rohan. I would just have to make do and if there ever came a reckoning deal with it.

Other than a couple odds and ends, some kind of cream that I didn't know the purpose of, and dried herbs, there wasn't much in the saddlebags. I found at the bottom though a small pouch with a handful of silver coins, all clearly handmade. Some had a shield and some had a horse depicted on them, with letters in a circle around it I couldn't make out. I didn't know if this was Rohirric
money (the horse led me to think so though), so would it be accepted in Gondor? I didn't know how much they were worth, or what I could buy with them, but money was money. If I'd lost it or didn't have any, I would have had to bargain with goods, and since I didn't know the value of anything that was an even more dangerous prospect.

The rest of that day was spent trotting towards Minas Tirith and pondering the relationship between the kingdoms of Rohan and Gondor. Were they allies? Economically related? Was there fierce competition between them or were they friends?

By the early evening I came around the edge of the hill and could suddenly see the city. Minas Tirith was truly a sight to behold, and even that night I could tell it was an impressive sight. There were glittering lights far up into the mountain down at ground level there were swarms of fires where people and villages had gathered in the shadow of the city. In the morning though, as I finished the last stretch of this two-month journey, I was filled with the image Minas Tirith, the White City, cut into the mountains.

Built something like a cake, there were spiraling levels of white stone, and imposing white walls that had to be several stories tall. Even from a distance I marveled at the genius that went into building this, and felt a strange swell of pride for the human race. Had I really been with the Elves that long?

The rest of the trip was fairly quick, and I think Arundel sensed my uplifted mood, because we made good time and by noon had reached the outer walls.

The white stone walls were very smooth, the bricklaying lines almost invisible. I was amazed at how clear the color was, especially above the heights where people and earth could reach. It looked almost like marble. I was one of many who gawped at the heights and at the huge wooden gates that opened to the city. I couldn't imagine how much that reinforced wood must weight.

Eventually I had to stop gaping and join the swath of people making their way inside. It was hard to steer Arundel through them, so I ended up dismounting and leading him in. The guards on either side of the doorway were rather intimidating, but no one gave me a second look amidst the crowd.

As soon as I left the jostle of the people and stood on a street in Minas Tirith—the capital of the human world as far as my understanding went—I felt overwhelmed.

What was I going to do now?
Chapter Summary

Maddie gets a job and meets a certain wizard, and something about this is eerily familiar...

Chapter Notes

Writer's Note: I actually wrote this entire chapter in a day after seeing The Hobbit. Can I just fangirl for a moment over the sheer awesomeness that was that movie? Anyway, the last scene in this chapter gave me a lot of trouble so let me know what you think.

Dates: Maddie arrives in Minas Tirith on October 23, 3017. It's unclear when Gandalf comes to Gondor, but we know it's in the new year.

To make a realistic girl-falls-into-ME story: We can't all be moochers forever. Elves and kings may be generous, but for common-folk a job is a necessity.

UPDATE: I am torn about whether or not to save Boromir (indirectly saved by Maddie--she's certainly not going to being killing orcs anytime soon). I can go either way, so I want reader's opinions. Please comment or message me to let me know what you think.

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Minas Tirith was more than a little intimidating. It had been a long time since I'd been anywhere remotely like a city, and the hustle and bustle of all the people, pushing and shoving, yelling and arguing, was overwhelming. I let the crowd pull me and Arundel forward until farther in the people dispersed. Standing there on a cobblestone road in a white-stone city full to the brim with people, it seemed to hit me. I was in Gondor, the biggest human kingdom in Arda. Now what was I going to do?

Arundel didn't look particularly frightened by the crowds, but he did bob his head, tugging on the reins in my hand and reminding me I didn't know what to do with him. Did I need to put him in a stable? Did that cost anything? What if someone stole him? My hands flexed on the leather and I pulled in a steadying breath. Before making any decisions I should take a look around, see what the capital is like. Who knows, maybe my luck would pull through.

I started to walk parallel to the outer wall on one of the many windy streets dotted with stores and stalls. Many of the side streets were quieter, with small wooden and stone houses built in a myriad of places, wherever they would fit. Women hung clothing out to dry from balconies, children played in the streets, and men argued and bartered while they worked. The marketplaces were even more chaotic than Bree's, with so much color and so many people it was easy to get
swallowed up. I was a little fearful of taking a horse through it, but on the major roads carts and riders pushed through the crowds uncaringly, so I quickly found there was little to worry about.

Minas Tirith was shaped in something like a semicircle, and in the center was a jutting cliff. There were huge tunnels on each of the seven layers of the city that cut through the very stone. I crossed under it twice as I wandered.

I don't really know what I hoped to accomplish by drifting around taking in the sights. It would be nightfall eventually and this wasn't the wilderness, I couldn't just sit down somewhere and sleep through the night.

As I led Arundel down a quiet street I could feel the panic I had been stifling all day coming back with a vengeance, and I forced myself to stop walking and take a couple deep breaths. Panicking wasn't going to solve anything. I needed to think.

I pushed a breath out and slowly walked over to a small bench by a grassy patch in a small courtyard off the side of a residential street. Arundel followed good-naturedly and started to graze. I patted his neck aimlessly, thinking.

What was I looking for? That was really the most important thing. I'd come to Gondor only really thinking of reaching the human kingdom. After the time with the Elves and the disorganized towns around Bree, I had been looking for…what? Clues to connect humans here with humans where I'm from?

No, that wasn't right. I was just curious about that. What I really wanted to know was how to get home. Anything else was superfluous. Lord Elrond hadn't been able to help, so I'd set my sights on Gondor. The kingdom had a long history and immense influence and power. Surely if there was magic—and I firmly believed magic was what brought me to Arda after all the fairy tale creatures I had run into—then Gondor would be the next logical place to look. Bilbo had spoken of wizards, as had other tales. Maybe there were wizards here, like a group of them, or even a school or something. I should ask around, see if anyone knew anything.

But what about Arundel? I tangled my fingers in the horse's mane regretfully thinking my best bet was to sell him. I had no idea what he was worth, or if I could even barter with my limited speaking ability, but there was no way I could care for him, and I didn't plan to leave Gondor anytime soon. I had just spent the last two months traveling from Rivendell to Minas Tirith, and I needed a rest.

Mind made up, I sought out a stable that looked like they might buy horses. It meant braving some of the thickest crowds in the main streets because all the stables were by the front gate. I carefully guided Arundel through the throng, the scents of meat, perfumes, and livestock in the air. There were carts covered in bright bolts of cloth and carts full of pigs. There were stands with cooked food and stands of vegetables, and there were storefronts decorated with swords, shields, and weapons of all kinds. People were yelling, shoving and bartering at the top of their voices. It was ten times as crowded as the market in Bree, and this was only one street. I saw lots of humans and handfuls of dwarves though no Elves.

The first likely stable I saw had a man out front chewing on some kind of pipe. He made me feel quite uncomfortable, the way his eyes roamed the people walking by, and when he caught my eye I ducked my head, afraid, and walked by him without glancing back.

Dusk began to fall though, and I began to get really nervous. I didn't know how long I'd been wandering, but I realized I was going to have to stop procrastinating and simply stop at the next likely place.
Around the corner from a series of tailors was a smaller stable that had a woman out front. There were three stalls and a tiny dirt paddock where she was brushing down a horse. Steeling myself, I shouldered the saddlebags and walked deliberately towards her, tapping at the gate to get her attention.

"Come to stable that one?" She asked as she came over, sizing me and Arundel up.

"Not stable, sell please." I said, aiming for confident though I don't think I hit the mark. Her brown eyes narrowed as she took in my garb, and I felt quite nervous. She was better dressed than I, but it wasn't anything particularly fancy. While not as tough looking as Ysmay in Fornost had been, she still had the air of hardened city folk.

"Selling a Rohirric horse, eh?" I knew Rohan was famous for its horses because the soldiers had told me that a half-dozen times, but I wasn't sure if that meant it was rare to sell them outside Rohan or it just meant the horses were highly valued. I held my ground as she walked around Arundel, patting a hand on his flank and checking his hooves. I didn't know the first thing about horses, but I thought he didn't look too bad.

"Bit thin and old, but big. War horse? What's a girl like you doing with one?" She peered at me from the other side of Arundel's neck, her chapped lips tightly pursed.

I had thought of a story just for this sort of scenario, and I was very thankful for that now. "My brother died. I come to Gondor and this is his horse. I not have much money so…"

The women grunted but didn't say more, taking Arundel by the bridal and checking his teeth like an expert. She was gentle with the animal despite her gruff demeanor.

"Don't speak much Westron in Rohan? Or you steal this horse?"

I jerked at her mention of stealing before sputtering a reply. "Not steal! I'm from… far north of… of Edoras. But has horses."

"Why did ya' come to Gondor?"

"Looking for… old man." I didn't actually know the word for magic and I couldn't remember the one for wizard. Bilbo had known a wizard in his stories, and Arasinya had shared stories of a wizard named Mithrandir, but I didn't know if they were true or if this wizard were still alive. With Elves it was hard to guess. I just went for the standard description and hoped she didn't pry beyond that.

The women grumped and I tried to look honest, but I was dirty, tired, and more than a little frightened.

"Fifty silvers."

I exhaled, relief flooding through me. She was willing to buy.

I wasn't particularly good at bartering, but I knew better than to take the first price quoted to me. Still, I didn't know what fifty silvers meant. Would that amount cover a room for the night, or for a month?

Glancing at Arundel, I patted the saddle and bridal. "Saddle too," I added, in case it wasn't clear. And here I'd thought all those horse-related words Fastred had taught me might be useless. There was no point in me keeping the gear, so if I could bundle it into the price that would be best.

The woman frowned, but it looked like she was thinking rather than annoyed. "All the tack?"

"Seventy-five," I tried, crossing my fingers where they were wrapped around the reins, hoping I wasn't saying something perfectly ridiculous.

She sucked on her cheek for a moment, looking Arundel over again. "Sixty-eight and no more."

"Yes," I agreed. I wasn't going to push my luck, and I was more relieved she had even upped her price. I waited as she went inside the building adjacent to the stable and pulled Arundel down for a hug. The old horse had been good to me. I only hoped I wasn't breaking some Rohirric law by selling him; it's not like Baiard had willed him to me, and I was already unsure if I'd technically stolen him. None of this seemed particularly legal, but I didn't know what else to do. I saw the woman come back out with a small brown bag in her hand. She counted out the coins in front of me and we traded the bag and the reins. She led Arundel to the stable with a nod of her head, and I left feeling heavy-hearted.

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I don't know how I got through the next week, and it's hard to remember that I literally came into Minas Tirith without even the faintest idea how I was going to survive. My reliance on sheer luck was going to get me into serious trouble one day—I'd already come out unscathed with Bromley and Hadley, then with Baiard, and those robbers on the road. Surely I would learn that one day it would run out.

It wouldn't be in Gondor though.

Somehow over the course of the next four days I managed to get a room in a small inn with the help of a little old man on the street who told me I walked by him three times aimlessly before he helped me, and learned with finality there was no organization of wizards. The innkeeper, a fat, disinterested middle aged man with breadcrumbs or ale always in his beard, could only tell me there was one famous wizard he had heard of, the Grey Wizard, aptly named for his long grey beard and robes. Where that wizard was though, he didn't know. His exact words were "he travels with lords", which told me my chances of meeting him were slim. Neither he nor anyone else had heard of this Mithrandir either. I wasn't sure if I was mispronouncing the name or if the Elves had told me a story from another age and the wizard was long dead.

After three days of languishing in the streets listening to news and gossip, all with the fading hope I'd find any help in Gondor, I found my luck had not, in fact, run dry.

I had been walking down one of the main streets, staying to the side to avoid the horses and carts, when I spotted a little girl sitting on the side of the road holding her ankle.

She was wearing a plain brown dress, the bottom dirty from running through the mud. I didn't see any other children around, and her face was stained with tears. What caught my eye was her hair. She had head of brown curls held back by a floppy red ribbon, and it reminded me sharply of one of my childhood friends, Elise. There were dozens of pictures of us as children, her curls wild after playing or barely tamed if her mother got to her. I had been jealous as a child of Elise's curls and had played with her hair all the time—often tangling it up more than our play already had.

I wondered what Elise was doing now. Did she marry that guy she'd been dating, Michael or Matthew or something? We'd grown apart with age, but still caught up on occasion, and I'd thought she was pretty serious about him. My thoughts drifted to Christmas when I'd last spoken to her, and I couldn't help wondering who had told her I was missing. Through mutual friends? My parents to her parents? Or worse, the rounds of town gossip?
When the little girl stood up and limped a bit forward I realized she was hurt enough that walking caused her pain. No one so much as glanced at her, but her image overlapped with Elise, hair all in snarls, and I found myself approaching her.

"Are you okay?" I asked. She looked up warily at first from where she was again sitting on the ground, but I supposed my appearance wasn't particularly frightening because she was willing to talk.

"I fell and now my ankle hurts."

"Can you go home?" I didn't want to scare her, but she looked like she might need the help, and I didn't have anything else to do.

"I think I have to wait for it to stop hurting," she murmured, shaking her head. Her curls bounced a bit, and again I thought of Elise.

"Let me help you, okay?" I felt quite nervous for some reason, but the little girl was far more trusting than was probably healthy. She nodded, offering me a small smile, and held her arms out to be picked up.

"How old are you?" I asked, once I'd settled her on my hip. She wasn't that light and bigger than any child I had carried, but she clung to me like all children do.

"Six," she answered, resting her cheek on my arm.

"And what's your name?"

"Adelaide," she told me, smiling a bit. Her teeth were still fairly white, none missing yet, and I couldn't help smiling back. Her little hands pulled the braid of my hair around to the front where she played with the ends. My hair was a rat's nest and very long. The soap at the inn was much more abrasive than I was used to, so my hair looked worse than ever. I kept it back in a braid—I had mastered the art of tying the leather thong in Bree—and tried not to think about it. Elise's tangled hair as a child, was positively beautiful compared to my hair now.

Adelaide kept talking as she guided me to her father's shop, telling me about her friends she'd been playing with. She seemed good-spirited despite her fall and very friendly.

Her father was a barber, I discovered, which might explain her interest in my hair. I could just barely read some of the sign on the door. When I walked in a man who couldn't be ten years older than me with a finely trimmed mustache and beard was leaning over a customer holding a small hand mirror. He turned and I could tell he was surprised when he saw us.

"Adelaide! Who's this?" He looked a bit suspicious, but I introduced myself, and Adelaide cheerfully piped up with "she carried me home because my ankle hurts!"

He warmed up after that, especially when I tried to put Adelaide down and her ankle, now starting to show signs of swelling, nearly gave out under her. Rylan, her father, quickly took her with ease and set her down in a chair in the back room.

"Let me just finish with the last man and then we'll talk!" He said as he hurried back out to the front.

The back room was a narrow kitchen, with a handful of pots and pans hanging from the ceiling and piled next to a wood stove. An eclectic collection of handmade plates in various sizes and states of cleanliness were stacked on one of the counters. Adelaide fidgeted in her chair at the small table impatiently, so I sat down next to her and touched her ankle, already able to feel some
of the swelling.

"Is it bad?" she asked.

"I don't know," I told her. After my experience with Baiard I was reluctant to say more. What kind of treatments did they have here for sprained or even broken ankles? Could they set bones? I didn't know what people did in the medieval ages for that sort of thing.

Luckily I didn't have to think on it long. Rylan came back and Adelaide and I told him what happened. He seemed quite grateful, and told me people in the city were not always so kind.

After checking on his daughter and deciding the injury wasn't too bad, Rylan offered to help me if there was anything he could do. Before I could politely decline Adelaide threw her two cents in. "Papa cuts hair! Can you cut Maddie's hair Papa?" It seemed even little Adelaide knew a thing or two about hair and could tell mine was in dire need of a proper wash and about six months overdue for a cut.

"Of course, of course!" Rylan whisked me to the front and sat me down in a chair facing a painting of a street in Minas Tirith—no mirrors here. Adelaide insisted on sitting next to me to watch, and she helped her father to unravel my hair from the braid. The little girl was surprisingly gentle as she helped comb it out using water and a little unscented oil to help ease the knots. Before long Rylan was snipping away the messy ends and cleaning it up.

When he was finished I felt refreshed and my hair significantly neater than it had been in a long time. I hadn't had it cut since Ysmay had done a bit way back in Fornost.

Adelaide beamed and enthusiastically offered to braid it again, and Rylan helped to make sure it wasn't a complete mess. When they were finished they handed me the small hand mirror I had seen earlier and I exclaimed over how much better it looked to Adelaide's delight.

It was after this first meeting with Rylan and Adelaide that things took a turn for the better.

I shared with Rylan some of my troubles, namely that I didn't know what to do since I had hit dead-ends everywhere. He was sympathetic but unable to help with my search for a wizard anymore than others I had spoken to. I was also afraid I would run out of money for the inn and food eventually.

Then, two days later, Adelaide found me on the street, followed by three other children, her friends as I learned. She told me her mother had news for me. She led me back to her family's shop. There Rylan was waiting, and he explained that his wife, Merewald, might have found an available job if I was interested. He knew I didn't have any long-term plans, but Minas Tirith was a good city, and safe, he stressed.

Merewald worked as a maid in one of the lord's homes, and had learned one of the lord's in the area was looking for more hired help. Rylan had thought of me, so Merewald had agreed to take me to meet the supervisor the next day. As long as I could clean, follow orders, and keep my head down I'd have the job.

I felt a bit overwhelmed by the generosity—he had found me a job—and very grateful, but also torn. It was true I didn't know what I was going to do past Gondor, and a job was as good a place to start as any, but I had spent nearly the last year chasing vague hopes of going home. A job meant something permanent; it would be admitting I had given up on returning home. Did I want that? I didn't know, but I also didn't know where else I could go to search for answers. I had sold Arundel, so short of bartering my way on a caravan or walking, leaving the city would be difficult.
In the end I couldn't turn down such a lucky offer. So, bright and early the next day I headed out to meet Merewald. I contemplated briefly wearing the lavender dress the Elves had given me, the one I'd worn that first day, but discarded it quickly. It was a beautiful dress, and I feared it would stick out terribly. Instead I made due with one of the other dresses they had given me which were much more human in style, patting my hair down as best as possible and washing up extra. I spared a thought for the make-up I used to wear. I had seen some wealthier women wearing make-up, but for the rest of the people in Minas Tirith it didn't seem very common.

I had never met Merewald before, but she was a sweet-faced woman with hair like her daughter's. We met at dawn, and she helped me fix my hair up, passed me a piece of bread to eat before I could refuse, and trotted off quickly.

I had only explored the lowest level of the city, where the lower class lived. There were markets, shops, and plenty of stands, and in the back streets there were numerous houses all built shoulder to shoulder. As Merewald led me higher though, shops became nicer and fewer in between, the streets less crowded and the walkways and gardens neater.

On each level there appeared to be one main gate, and one main road that crisscrossed the length of Minas Tirith, so there was no straight line to the seventh level. It meant arduous work as we climbed to the fourth level of the city, the stairs very steep in some places. I couldn't imagine Merewald making this trek every day, but she must. The woman had to have legs of steel. Even after all my tromping around the world, I was beginning to feel winded with all the stairs we climbed.

In many areas on the higher levels the walkway was fairly narrow, just wide enough for maybe two horses if they stood shoulder-to-shoulder. The walls in places were sheer as the cliff, with windows built high above, and balconies sitting precariously overhead.

We were not the only people walking around this early, and in fact it was busier than I expected. There were young boys—stable hands and squires Merewald explained—along with other servants, some of whom the older woman greeted. We passed several patrols of soldiers, and even more excitedly a formal contingent of them, complete with a lord.

When they passed, Merewald and I had to press against a garden wall to make way for their fine horses, nearly a dozen in total. They came clip clopping down the cobblestone street, the guards dressed in very fine armor with long cloaks draped across the backs of their steeds. We could hear the jangle of the metal and see the gleam of the sunlight on the pommels of their swords.

In the center of the group was a handsome man with wavy light brown hair, and a short, well-trimmed beard. On his leather chest plate was an image of a white tree with seven stars. He had both a sword and a bow and quiver on him, and I could tell from just the look of his clothes he was very well off. Merewald gasped and curtseyed as he passed, and I quickly followed suit. He and his guards paid no mind, and I watched as the group trotted off.

"Who was that, Merewald?"

"Lord Faramir, second son of Denethor II, Steward of Gondor."

Even I knew that Gondor had no king. I had learned as much wandering around asking about wizards. The Steward was the ruler in all but name of Gondor. That meant Lord Faramir had to be one of the most powerful people in the kingdom.

We moved on after that, and eventually Merewald led me to a house on the end of a small road. The door was ornate wood and metal, decorated with some kind of elaborate bird, and the windows next to the door had the same design. Like most houses on the upper levels, it appeared
to be built into the cliff face, and designed tall and thin and likely very deep. There was a balcony far above us with a hanging trellis of vines.

"We'll not use the front door, that's for the lords and guests. Come round the side through the garden."

Merewald led me away from the front and through a side garden a short way down the street. It looked like a kitchen garden, with sprawling herbs and vegetables all around.

"Do you work here, Merewald?"

"No, but I have worked with Everlid before. She is a strong woman, but fair."

Inside the back door was the kitchen, already quite busy. I saw two men cooking breakfast and two women talking near a kitchen fire. Merewald called a greeting and an older woman with long graying hair pulled back from her bony face came over.

"Everlid, this is Maddie. She is new to Gondor, and a friend."

Everlid gave me a once over, then took one of my hands and examined the fingers and palm. "Household servant before?" She indicated the softness of my hands, which starkly contrasted her tough, weathered ones.

Actually, I'd worked in administration mostly with databases and paperwork, but household cleaning wasn't too far off the mark.

I nodded, and she hummed. "You'll be making beds, taking laundry, and cleaning up for the lord and his family. If you know how to cook, then I expect you to help in the kitchen. Are you living with a husband?"

"N-no," I stammered out, trying to remember what'd she said because she'd spoken so quickly. My Westron was improving everyday, but Everlid spoke briskly and I was afraid to mess this up.

"Then there's a room here with two other women you can have." Everlid turned back to Merewald and they talked a little more about her family and work before Merewald had to leave. I said goodbye and she promised to pass on a goodbye to Adelaide. I promised to visit when I got the chance.

I adjusted fairly quickly to the new job, which was a small blessing because Everlid was a hard taskmaster. I shadowed her and two other maidservants for three days, learning the ropes and routines of the household. There were a total of nine servants working here: two cooks, three maids including myself, one woman who was something like a governess, two menservants, and of course Everlid.

We worked in the home of Lord Kinsey, who was a member of what was called the King's court, but was really more like the Steward's court. He held some fairly important positions and had apparently married up—I wasn't sure if this was said with derision or simply stating fact. Several servants had told me this though, so for some reason it was apparently relevant.

He lived in the house with his wife and three children, two sons and a daughter, and a revolving door of guests whose names and positions I forgot almost as soon as I learned. One of Lord Kinsey's sons was already an adult by Gondorian standards, and I saw him very rarely. The younger boy was around twelve years old, and frequently running about outside, playing games with the neighborhood children and swinging around a small wooden sword. I picked up after him
sometimes, but mostly he was minded by a manservant, Heaton, who reminded me in appearances of Professor Snape from Harry Potter, if a medieval version. Heaton thankfully did not share his personality.

Lord Kinsey's daughter was a year younger than her brother, and often trailed after him in his games. She occasionally came into the kitchen looking for food, but usually the governess, who was tutoring her in things like sewing and manners, shooed her out. She was somewhat spoiled and a little demanding of the servants. I had on more than one occasion been asked to sneak her cake and sweets from the kitchen despite the fact that Everlid was very clear about taking food meant for the Kinsey's table. We servants would eat leftovers and had our own smaller meals. Other than run-ins with the children, I interacted little with family though. As Everlid was quick to remind me, servants were not meant to be seen.

My main duties were making beds, collecting laundry, and clearing up after meals. Otherwise myself and the two other maidservants spent time cleaning the endless hallways and stairs, beating out the rugs, dusting around the priceless furniture and art, and helping the cooks. I even on the odd occasion ran errands for the lord.

For the next four months I worked in peace. I befriended my fellow servants, including the two other maids who I lived with in the servant's quarters of the house. We shared a small room with four beds and two wardrobes. It was a tight fit between the dresses, shoes and knickknacks. I was strongly reminded of dorm rooms from college. My fellow maidservants and roommates were both young, unmarried women hoping for good husbands.

Clarimond was a bit heavier set and enjoyed telling me about the soldiers who used to pass through her home village somewhere southwest of Minas Tirith, butting up against the mountains. She wanted to marry one of those soldiers, but her father had put his foot down. Gondor apparently waged a constant war against incursions of orcs from "The Black Lands", which both girls were unwilling to say more about. (I assumed it was the orc’s homeland.) Her father didn’t want her to be a young widow like many soldier’s wives had become, and despite her complaints she admitted to eyeing a manservant who worked another house down the way.

Oriolda was from the city, her family shoemakers, and she was less chatty than Clarimond but no less prone to town gossip. Because she was the third daughter and her eldest brother now had two children of his own, there wasn’t enough room in the family home for everyone, so she had left—I had the feeling it was more like "pushed out" though. She had started working for the lord hoping to maybe save some money for her dreams of a fancy wedding. She loved nothing more than wistfully fingering Lady Kinsey's dresses as we collected them for wash.

When asked, I had told Clarimond and Oriolda I was from a small village far north and west of Edoras in Rohan like I had told Rylan before. I was drilled on the details of my family, so I made up a mother and father who worked on a farm and a deceased brother named Baiard. I was afraid lying would come back to bite me, but my real parent's jobs didn't exactly exist in medieval Arda, so my options were limited. I also did not tell them I was looking for a wizard; this job meant that quest was abandoned. I only told them I came to Gondor looking for a better life, and both girls assured me I was already moving up in the world just by leaving the farm.

I did not tell them the truth, not even half of it, because I quickly learned that my extensive travels in Arda were quite exceptional. These girls had never traveled beyond a couple days ride from Minas Tirith, and only to other Gondorian cities. Having traveled from Fornost to Minas Tirith, I had crossed more kingdoms and gone farther distances than most people in Gondor ever would. Even Rohan was considered quite exotic to Clarimond and Oriolda.

Most especially though, I did not tell them I had met Elves and traveled with one, or that I had passed through the Golden Wood. I was glad I had been cautious about what to share, because I
had not quite realized just how rare it was to meet Elves, let alone be allowed to stay with them. I knew there were no Elves in Minas Tirith, but I assumed Elves simply didn't travel like humans or the seemingly nomadic dwarves. I only realized how rare my experience was when Everlid shared a story over a late night pot of tea with the servants.

Everlid used to work at a higher lord’s home before he fell out of favor with the Steward. She had gone to the court to help dress his wife for a fancy dinner when she overheard the most beautiful singing she had ever heard in her life. It had been Elves, a small group sitting in the palace gardens, and in all her years she had never forgotten the sound of their voices. She told us they glowed, wore spun silver and gold, and it made her weep to see and hear them.

I had swallowed and remembered my own tears, the sorrows and joys evoked by the songs of the Elves in Rivendell. I thought there was nothing more beautiful than their voices. It was hard to reconcile my life in Minas Tirith with the one I had in Rivendell. I had spent everyday at leisure, riding with Arasinya, bathing in the rich soaps the Elves made, and listening to Bilbo's stories. Here I spent days sweeping and collecting laundry and avoiding the people I worked for.

Despite this I wasn't unhappy. It was nice to have work to do, and I had friends and stability that I had been sorely lacking before. For all the leisure of Rivendell I would have likely grown tired of it eventually, but at least deflecting requests for candied pears before bed by Lord Kinsey's daughter kept me somewhat occupied.

I was paid eight silvers a month and was careful to be frugal with the money. The money I had gotten selling Arundel was on the lower end for a horse I found out much later, which probably meant I had been a little ripped off, but made a nice sum to have for emergencies. While I didn't quite have "holidays", every week the servants would trade off who would run errands for the family, things like ordering cloth, ink and paper, and meat. On the days I got to go out, I was given extra time to make some personal purchases. Merewald helped me to buy a couple new dresses with Adelaide's input.

I worked to stay in touch with Adelaide, Merewald, and Rylan as they were pretty much the only people I knew in the city besides my coworkers. As a thank you gift for all they had done, the first day I got paid I went out and bought them some lovely raisin bread from one of the nice bakeries on the upper-levels. Merewald was embarrassed but pleased when I was able to present it to her as she returned home that evening. I tried to catch her on her way home at least once a week to catch up.

Fall became winter, and the days grew shorter. The new year arrived with small celebrations around the city. A light snowfall followed not long after, and I was thankful to have a job that didn't often require me to go out much because it was bitterly cold. All of us servants stayed in the kitchen whenever we could because the cooking fires kept it quite a bit warmer than any other room in the house. The nights were achingly cold too in these stone homes, and I, Clarimond and Oriolda took to huddling together under the blankets in bed to stay warm.

During the day I wore extra stockings and gloves. I now had five dresses, including two that were thicker than my others to help keep warm in the winter. The dress I had received from Butterbur was barely holding on, and the one from Ysmay was long gone. Clarimond and Oriolda helped me to fix it up to make it last. Clarimond teased me for the state of the dress, but she and Oriolda knew a lot more about sewing than I did, particularly Oriolda who had some experience with embroidery on shoes while working for her family.

I kept the Elvish dress hidden though, because I had been right to think it would stick out. I would sometimes return cleaned dresses to Lady Kinsey's wardrobe, and that first time I couldn't help noticing how my Elvish one would not fit in with even these fine dresses. Some were very smooth silk, others heavier velvet, and all with finely sewn borders and lace trimming done in colors
deeper and more beautiful than any I had been able to afford. The Elvish dress though was made of a material I did not see in Lady's Kinsey's wardrobe nor her daughter's, and the stitching was even finer than I first thought. On the edges of the sleeves and bottom there were almost invisible patterns of ivy leaves and flowers in classic Elvish design, and the seams were nearly invisible. Therefore I hid it away in my bag at the bottom of the wardrobe in the servant's quarters and kept it for a special occasion should I ever need it.

Despite settling in to life in the White City, it always sat at the back of my mind the eternal question of my existence here. I had a job, food, and a warm place to live. It was stable, and I had no reason to think that would change, but I couldn't help the strange urges to leave sometimes, often precluded by seeing road-weary travelers on the lower levels or hearing the tales shared or sometimes even sung by the servants in the evenings. I also could not stop the creeping sense of boredom. My life had become a routine, and I found myself having trouble imaging how I had lived everyday back at my office desk. How dull that job had been!

The mysteries of Arda were still very much around me, and sometimes I had strange thoughts that reminded me that I still had a lot of unanswered questions. I often would pause on the walkways on the fourth level overlooking all of lower Minas Tirith, staring out at the truly spectacular view of the plains outside. There were farms and forests, and in the far off distance mountains, and I would think to myself, 'I have never seen anything quite as beautiful'. Of course, I thought the same thing often in Arda; Rivendell from the bathing glen, Lothlórien's golden trees, the Anduin River juxtaposed with the Misty Mountains behind it, they were only a handful in the truly glorious vistas I had been privy to.

But the view from Minas Tirith also gave me strange senses of déjà vu, and it wasn't just the first time. Sometimes I'd glance at the view as I walked by on errands and be struck by strange thoughts of armies and orcs, banners in the wind and the beating of thousands of boots running across the burning fields. I thought the stories Heaton would sing after a lot of drink some nights were getting to me. Either that, or Bilbo's words about the call of adventure to the blood were truer than I knew.

There was also something oddly familiar about the story of the fallen king and his line, and why the steward now led the kingdom. When one of the cooks shared it with me I remembered wondering if there was a similar story in European history, or perhaps an old tale, because there was no other reason for it to be so recognizable to me.

As so many things seemed fated to be, a quiet life in Gondor was not in the cards. If it was luck or something greater I didn't know, but I accidentally stumbled upon the very thing I had come to Gondor looking for: the Grey Wizard.

On the sixth level of Minas Tirith there was a great library. Typically most people would never visit it, because most of the common folk were illiterate or could only read Westron, and many of the books in the library were written in ancient tongues or donated by the Elves eons ago.

I went there to pass a message on to Heaton, the manservant who oversaw the day-to-day care of the lord's second son. The little lord was at tutoring at the moment, so while on errands for the kitchen I had been asked to go and pass the note.

It was my first time on the sixth level, and the guards at the gate required me to show them the note with the seal of the household before I could pass. Here the homes were not so tightly squeezed together, but were more spread out like small, gated mansions, with large, geometrical gardens and fancy stone gates and sculptures in front.
A guardsman escorted me to the library. At first I thought he must have been lost because he led me to an inconspicuous door off in a back alley, but it was indeed the entrance to the library. Inside, the ceiling was incredibly high and there were shelves of hand-bound books and even more shelves of scrolls. The air was musty with dust and the strong scent of ink and paper. There were a handful of men reading and copying the scrolls in the center of the room. One of them was able to tell me where to find Heaton, who was standing outside a small room back in the winding corridors waiting for the boy’s lesson to be finished. I passed him the note and started back the way I had come to finish my errands.

I must have gotten lost though, because I eventually rounded a corner, still nowhere near the bookshelves, when I spotted a tall man in long, ragged grey robes with long grey hair hanging down his back.

I don't know how I guessed it, but every instinct I had lit up immediately. *The Grey Wizard!*

I hurried down the corridor without thinking and spotted him turning the corner on another hallway. The cat and mouse chase lasted two more hallways before I turned a corner and he was standing right there as though he were waiting for me. I stumbled back after nearly crashing into him, and he seemed vaguely amused, if tired.

"I do believe we haven't met before," he rumbled, and I felt rather like all my layers were being peeled back as he stared at me.

"Um…I am Maddie," I offered and even managed a curtsey, suddenly completely unsure of what I was doing. In my first days in Minas Tirith I had scoured the lower levels for word on the Grey Wizard and then by total accident, when I had stopped looking for him, he appeared.

Wait, was this even the man I was looking for?

"Are you the Grey Wizard?" I tentatively asked, and he nodded, one bushy eyebrow lifting up.

"Miss Maddie, if you have a note or some such I suggest you pass it on. I am quite busy you see, and haven't the time to chat."

While he sounded grandfatherly and certainly looked it, there was steel in his tired voice. Fumbling and suddenly quite embarrassed, I realized I needed to get my story out quickly.

"I have been looking for you. I came to Arda by magic and I want to go home—"

"By magic, you say?"

"Yes," I said quite earnestly, "I very suddenly came to grasslands outside Fornost—it is a town north of Bree."

"Yes, yes, I know where. You say suddenly?"

"Yes, suddenly," I was going to say more but he quieted me with a wave of his hand.

He seemed to mull over my words before beckoning me to follow him. "And where are you from?" he asked as we walked. He had a brisk stride for such a man of advanced age, and I had to rush a bit to keep up.

"America," I supplied quickly.

"Hm…”
He didn't say more than that as he led me to a small study littered with scrolls. A tall, pointy blue hat sat askew on top of a veritable pile of papers, all written in languages I could not read. The Grey Wizard gestured for me to sit and I shifted a mug and a pile of very old, likely delicate parchment on to the cluttered table before sitting. My hands were shaking and I resisted the urge to sit on them in my nervousness.

"I'm afraid I'm quite busy at the moment, so tell me quickly what has happened. Just the barest of details if you please."

I told him the story as briefly as possible, starting from Fornost, taking him through Rivendell and Lothlórien and then to Gondor.

He seemed to think on it for some time, face grim. "I sense no magic about you, nor any great purpose. It is curious that you should find me now, but long have you been here in Middle Earth."

I could feel my heart start to sink already, the graveness of his words already telling me I would be hearing disappointment.

"I would advise you to seek out Saruman, but there are greater things afoot I fear, and the White Wizard is not easily reached. Did you speak of this to Lord Elrond? He is wise, and his counsel is not to be ignored."

He spoke quite formally, so he was somewhat difficult to understand, but I caught names, including another wizard, and Lord Elrond. The thought of leaving on another goose chase sent dual feelings of dread and excitement. My boring life as a maidservant could end, but it might mean another long trek across the countryside. Why was nothing ever conveniently nearby?

"I told Lord Elrond, but he could not help."

"And he let you come to Gondor?" He asked.

"Yes," I held back the word 'reluctantly' but I wasn't quite sure why.

He chewed on that for a moment before asking me more. "Do you have any notable skills? Perhaps in combat or knowledge of magic?"

I shook my head. "I am a maidservant in Lord Kinsey's home."

"And is your home far from Middle Earth?" His bushy eyebrows were scrunched together in thought.

"In America there are no Elves, dwarves or wizards. I never heard of Arda before. I think it may be… in another world." I winced at the phrasing, but there was really no other way to put it. Arda couldn't possibly be on the same planet as America. It had to be another dimension or something suitably fantastical.

"Another world, you say? There are many uncharted lands, could you be from one of them?"

"No no," I interjected immediately. "America is much more… we have more… science! We have gone everywhere. We have maps of everything. Arda is not…” I felt the sense of desperation well up in me, and I had to clamp down the urge to keep babbling until he believed me.

He fumbled for something in his pocket, but after producing a pipe he frowned. "Forgot I have none," he mumbled. He put the pipe away and gave me another searching look. "Hm. yes. I will think on this, but perhaps it is best that you remain here. There may be other explanations beyond magic that brought you here. Middle Earth is a place of great mystery."
I couldn't hide my frown at his words. It sounded like a cop-out to me.

"As I said, greater things are afoot. I do not know if you are involved, but it seems unlikely at this time."

I wasn't sure what 'afoot' meant, but I understood that he had greater priorities than helping me. I blinked rapidly for a moment but managed to hold back the sudden sting of tears. It hurt something awful to hear that the Grey Wizard wouldn't be able to help. He had mentioned the White Wizard, but was I really going to leave a safe job and comforts to take to the road again on a flimsy piece of advice? What if the White Wizard gave me the same non-answer? What would I do then?

I don't think I hid how close I was to tears well because the Grey Wizard reached out and patted me on the shoulder.

"Come now, you have done quite well given all that has passed. Take strength from that," he said kindly, the grandfatherly façade back in full force. "Not many could make the journey from Bree to Gondor unscathed. It sounds as though you have had some adventures," he hummed to himself and chuckled a little. "Perhaps you met him in Rivendell; a friend of mine, a hobbit by the name of Bilbo Baggins? He happens to be working on a book about some adventures of his own."

The Grey Wizard smiled behind his beard and despite the tension in my throat that was holding the tears back, I couldn't help the flicker of a smile at the thought of the lovely old hobbit Bilbo.

"Yes, I spoke with Bilbo often in Rivendell. He told me some of his stories." Then a thought occurred to me, "Are you the wizard he said he traveled with to the Lonely Mountain?"

The Grey Wizard really smiled then, and I could see the affection he had for Bilbo in his eyes. "Yes I am. Gandalf the Grey," he said, tipping his head in greeting.

I blinked, feeling that annoying sense of familiarity strike again. Gandalf… Bilbo must have mentioned him by name, because no one else I'd met knew it. That had to be it.

"Do you know if he plans to travel again? Bilbo always did like a good adventure," Gandalf said with good humor.

"No," I said, shaking my head and pursing my lips, "He said he was too old."

"Ah, yes," Gandalf's mood seemed to darken again, and I sensed his thoughts were turning to another place. "Well, I may be seeing Bilbo again soon."

"Oh?" While I had willingly left Rivendell I did miss Bilbo. We had said goodbye, but I didn't imagine I would see him ever again. At a moment like this, when all my hopes were sitting crumpled at my feet, I could have used a friend like Bilbo. "Could you… could you perhaps tell him hello from me? He was good friend to me in Rivendell."

"Of course, my dear," the wizard's grandfatherly mood appeared again, all signs of darker thoughts gone in a moment. "Has he finished that book of his?"

"No, Bilbo was still working on it when I left. There were voices down the corridor that reminded me I was on the clock and had other errands to run before returning home. Still, I lingered, not quite able to pull away.

Gandalf laughed a bit under his breath. "At this rate Frodo will never see that book." The wizard waved his hand at me and said something more, but I did not hear the words.
Frodo…

Something was trying to turn over in my mind; that name was ringing a bell. Why was it familiar? Had Bilbo ever mentioned it?

Frodo… lives…?

Frodo… Bilbo…

Bilbo Baggins…

FRODO BAGGINS.


And…

…The Ring.

Suddenly it all clicked. All the déjà vu, the weird feelings, the way the words rolled off my tongue. I knew all these place names, I knew all these people! From Butterbur to Elrond to Faramir I knew them. I knew the story, of Frodo and the ring, traveling with the Fellowship, across Middle Earth to Mordor, the armies, the battles, and the orcs!

How could I have forgotten? Was this magic at work? Why leave me ignorant? How could I have forgotten *The Lord of the Rings*?

I couldn't remember leaving the study or saying goodbye to Gandalf. I felt like the hallway was only half-real, and maybe it was. My mind was full of images from the movies overlapping with my imagination. Filling in the back-story of all the people I had met and places I had been that I had somehow forgotten. I hadn't seen those movies in years. I hadn't read the books in even longer. *Books... God, I'm in a book.* I thought I might have laughed, but instead I stumbled to my knees, feeling like I couldn't breathe.

I looked up and I found myself in an unfamiliar hallway with arching windows overlooking the quiet streets of the sixth level. Without conscious thought I labored to my feet and moved to stand at the window, staring vacantly down at the city.

*Minas Tirith. I'm standing in Minas Tirith. The White City.*

*Where the crownless again shall be king.*

I'm in *The Lord of the Rings.*
Just Around the Riverbend

Chapter Summary

A year goes by and the war is starting. Maddie makes a decision but it doesn't quite turn out how she plans. Things are starting to go sideways.

Chapter Notes

Writer's Note: Canonically there is the "Stewards Reckoning" used by most Westron-speakers to measure passing time. For the sake of my sanity, I am using the twelve-month calendar we are all familiar with instead.

IMPORTANT: I am torn about whether or not to save Boromir (indirectly saved by Maddie--she's certainly not going to being killing orcs anytime soon). I can go either way, so I want reader's opinions. Please comment or message me to let me know what you think.

To make a realistic girl-falls-into-ME story: Homesickness is perfectly natural. Remember, she can't hop on a plane to go home, and there are no stores with familiar foods, movies, or other things from her home. She is the only thing from her world—that can be very lonely.

Disclaimer: I make no money from this work. Anything recognizable from The Lord of the Rings belongs to J.R.R Tolkien and affiliates. I also don't own Harry Potter.

Clarimond and Oriolda found me after supper facedown on my bed. I'd managed to fall asleep, but I'd had strange dreams of rabbit holes, towers with eyes, and movie theaters, so it had been a restless nap. I must have looked a real mess though because both girls immediately came rushing over to me.

"Are you alright Maddie? Shelton said you looked terrible when you came back." I barely remembered waving off the cook when I returned from talking to Gandalf. I'd been such a wreck I hadn't even though to finish my errands; Everlid must be livid.

Clarimond sat on the bed next to me as I sat up and grabbed one of my hands in her chubby fingers, drawing my thoughts away from my humiliating breakdown. "What happened?"

Oriolda took up position on my other side, her hand slipping into my free one. She too looked at me earnestly, concern written into both of their faces. I had no idea what to tell them, and I felt too drained to come up with a decent lie.

"I don't want to talk about it," I said, but didn't let go of their hands.

Clarimond squeezed my fingers. "It is a man?" she asked. "Bancroft has been eyeing you, you know," she tacked on after a moment, trying to be reassuring even as she missed the mark by a mile.
I managed a weak chuckle for the girls at Clarimond's typical response. She was prone to being smitten with a man one week then spurning him the next. She'd let the poor manservant down the street court her for a spell before she became bored. Clarimond was rather put off that Oriolda and I, both of marriageable age, seemed less interested. (It was a good thing I was rather young looking too, because Clarimond and Oriolda both insisted if a girl didn't marry by twenty-four she was an old maid—in which case I was dangerously close to becoming the equivalent of a Middle Earth cat lady.)

"No, not a man. I... learned something sad," I tried.

"Your family?" Oriolda asked softly. It made the most sense, given how few ties I had in this world. My family was no more lost to me than they were yesterday, but it was still an impossible distance—one I just understood better now.

I didn't know what to say but it suddenly didn't feel real. This was all just too crazy, too impossible. My hands were trembling, and I felt dizzy. When Oriolda put her arm around me I turned and hugged her without thought, needing to ground myself. Immediately she hugged me back, and Clarimond joined from the other side until I was squished between both girls. I started to cry again, but all I could think of was how warm and soft they were, how they smelled of the smoke of the candles they lit through the house at nightfall, and how earnestly they were helping me. These girls were real; they weren't characters in a book, they were my friends.

When I'd finally calmed down Oriolda got up and retrieved a washcloth, helping to wipe my face clean of the dried tears. Clarimond disappeared for a moment, coming back from the kitchen with a heel of soft bread and a bowl of warm pumpkin soup. As I ate the girls asked me what I planned to do.

"Will you go back?" Oriolda asked eventually, worrying her bottom lip. She had never traveled more than a day's trip from Minas Tirith and likely the thought of such a journey scared her.

I scrapped the bottom of my bowl with the last bite of bread morosely. "There's nothing there," I said, not that there ever had been. I didn't know if I would leave Minas Tirith, but I didn't think it would be for Rohan.

Before I realized it both girls were hugging me again, extra tight this time. When they finally let go Oriolda took the empty bowl away, and Clarimond fussed until I took off my dress and shift and pulled on the nightgown I wore to sleep. Both girls gave me one more hug and Oriolda a kiss to the top of my head. Then I slipped under the covers and Clarimond sat on the bed, drawing her socked feet under her. To my surprise she started to pet my messy hair. It was such a motherly thing to do I had a jolt of longing for my own mother, the familiar scent of her shampoo, the round of her waist as I hugged her, the same reading glasses sliding down her nose. It had been a long time since my mother had tucked me in to bed, but in that moment I wanted it more than anything.

A few more tears escaped, and Clarimond brushed them away as she began to hum. I realized as my eyes drooped, that she was going to sing me to sleep. I only understood bits and pieces, about sailing and sand and children laughing, but Clarimond's sweet voice washed over me and I drifted off.

--

Over the next three days everyone was careful to walk on eggshells around me with the exception of Everlid. Oriolda has confided in me, when I first started working for Lord Kinsey, that Everlid's tough-love approach came from a life full of hard loss. From what I understood nearly all of Everlid's family was gone—and not in pleasant circumstances.
"The best way to bounce back from these things—" the resilient supervisor told me the morning after Clarimond and Oriolda put me to bed and told all the servants my family had died in an orc raid, "—is to find your routine. Keep busy and you won't feel the pain as bad."

I wasn't sure at first if I agreed, but I did find that keeping busy helped to take my mind off my predicament. At night though, laying in bed with Clarimond and Oriolda on either side of me for warmth, I found it difficult to sleep with the perpetual circle of thoughts.

Why was I here? That was the main one. Followed by, what am I supposed to do? Help the Fellowship? Warn them? What could I possibly do? Would I mess with the future if I involved myself?

A terrible thought would always occur to me then: what if I made it worse? The Fellowship had been successful before, so what if my meddling caused Frodo to fail in his quest?

This was what paralyzed me. I always thought of Baiard. If I hadn't run into Fastred in Rohan, then I would have never met Éomer and left with Baiard. Baiard would have been with the company, people with at least some field training in medicine. They might have been able to get him to Edoras if they'd seen the signs. He might have lived. How much of his death was my fault?

But then I would remember the trials of the characters in the books, the fights, the losses, and the deaths. Frodo's struggle was highlighted in a trilogy of books and movies. Could I ease that? Could I save him some of the pain? Could I save Boromir who died? What about the battles? Could they and all the death they brought be avoided? How obligated was I to try?

I found myself struggling all night weighing how much help or harm I could do. Whenever I decided one way or the other, the inevitable question of how sent me back to the main problem: should I?

Needless to say, I didn't get much sleep.

--

"Maddie, the drawing room please."

"Yes, Everlid," I replied, leaving Oriolda in the bedroom and heading downstairs to likely wipe down the table and close the curtains. Everlid followed me into the room though and shut the door. I turned to the older woman, confused.

"You're not sleeping," she stated bluntly. Everlid was not one for pleasantries, and even though it had only been a couple days since I had met Gandalf I was far from my usual self. The cooks had been slipping me extra food, and Clarimond and Oriolda had been particularly attentive to me. I hadn't cried since, but I couldn't turn my brain off and everyone had noticed.

"I… I have a lot on my mind," I hedged.

"Mourning is healthy," Everlid said as the silence persisted and I got more frantic to come up with something. I had to physical stop myself from wringing my hands. "Worrying is not. If you're
worried you could have done something," at this she paused and tilted her chin to stare me down, "then know there's likely nothing you could have done."

Strong words, and not particularly comforting ones. I still thought someone could have saved Baiard. And I thought I was right to worry—if I could change Baiard's fate, I might very well change Frodo's, and those consequences would be much more devastating.

She crossed her arms and frowned at my continued silence. "Whatever you're worrying about, out with it. Funeral? Family property? Leaving Minas Tirith?"

"No, no, I..." Fumbling, I smoothed my skirt and resisted the urge to pull out one of the dining room table chairs and sit down. The drawing room was for formal dinners, and I knew Everlid had picked it for privacy, not comfort.

The older woman didn't say anything, just watched me unblinkingly.

"I... might be able to help someone. But I worry it will... hurt them," I blurted out. I couldn't make eye contact, and I didn't like the downturn of her lips. This probably confused her as it didn't seem related to my fake family's death, but to her credit she didn't ask.

"Kindness sometimes hurts," she said after a pause. (Case in point: Everlid.) "If it can help them a lot, then you may hurt them more if don't."

"But what if it doesn't help? What if I only make it worse? A lot of people could be hurt," I said in a rush. I could tell from the deepening wrinkle in her brow she was confused.

"Your village?"

"Um..." was all I could say. How about all the people of Middle Earth?

"I cannot presume to help you work through this," she told me when I was clearly reluctant to say more. "But I need you to not fold dresses and put them in stocking drawers, Maddie." At this I felt my cheeks heat and I immediately looked at my toes. I didn't know Everlid had found out about that. I was lucky Clarimond caught the mistake before Lady Kinsey did. The Lady would not have been pleased with creases in her fine velvet gowns.

"If this is something trivial," Everlid continued, "then it's not worth this worry or your distraction in your work." I could feel the sharp look she gave me, but my eyes were still firmly rooted on my feet. "If it is something serious, then you may owe it to yourself to try."

I nodded, still embarrassed but also digesting her words. The matter of the Ring was obviously not trivial, but did I owe it to Frodo and the Fellowship to try to ease the burden? Did I owe it to Boromir to try and save him? Or rather, as Everlid put it, did I owe it to myself to try? Could I go home and live with myself knowing that I may have prevented the pain of all these people? That I may have prevented unnecessary death?

Boromir had been seduced by the Ring, I remembered that much, but he'd been a good man. And Frodo was changed by the quest, I knew. He'd asked for adventure and gotten more than his fair share out of it. But how could I make this easier for Frodo? And how could I, a woman with no training in war and only a rough memory of the event, save Boromir from death by orc?

Everlid cut off my thoughts before I could work myself into another circle of "hows" and "what-ifs". I knew tonight, as she shooed me out of the room with another strict warning to get my head on straight, that I would be still be thinking in circles.
I found myself making a classic pros and cons list alongside ideas of how to broach helping the Fellowship just two days after talking with Everlid. She, at least, had convinced me that I needed to hunker down and make a decision.

"What's that 'chur drawin'?" Shelton asked, looking over from where he was chopping up a tomato for the roast duck tonight. Lord Kinsey and his second son had gone hunting and came back with a two ducks. Seeing the limp bodies and the broken necks made me shudder as I remembered Erynion's preparation of that rabbit. It felt like a lifetime ago when I was with the Elves. I didn't really regret coming to Minas Tirith, but it would have simplified things if I'd never left Rivendell in the first place—even if it would have been boring.

I glanced up from the old piece of parchment where I had jotted down another idea in the con list —"could be mistaken for spy"—when the cook spoke up.

"Oh, just notes," I said. He shrugged and went back to work, and I stuffed the parchment in my pocket, put the old quill back in the inkwell and hurried off to get the clean sheets.

That night though Everlid paid a visit to the room where us three maidservants slept.

"I hear you can write," she said as a greeting. Clarimond looked over at me surprised, still holding a pile of dresses she'd been sorting through.

"Oh! Um… only a little," I replied. I had forgotten that a rural farmer's girl shouldn't be able to read or write. Shelton must have told her. Sometimes he was a worse gossip than Clarimond and Oriolda.

"Can you read Westron?" Everlid asked.

"Yes, slowly," I said, confused as to why this was relevant.

Everlid didn't seem to blink as she stared at me. "Heaton's the only one who can read well, but he doesn't have a lot of time for errands. If I give you a list, think you can go to market and pick it up?"

I curled my fingers in my dress where I was sitting on the bed nervously. "I can try," I told her, and Everlid nodded.

"I'll get Heaton to write a list tomorrow." She left just as quickly as she came, and Oriolda squealed the moment the door shut.

"You can read! You lucky thing! You get to run all the long errands now!"

"How did you learn to read?" Clarimond asked, sitting down next to me. She didn't seem suspicious, just curious, for which I was thankful.

"An old man taught me," I improvised. Thinking of Bilbo just reminded me of all the woes that came with meeting Gandalf. "I'm not very good though," I added quickly. Neither girl could read; Oriolda told me that her older brothers could though. They had to be able to manage the accounts at her family's shop. For her and her sisters however, they was not as lucky.

The next day Everlid presented me with a neatly written list of things to get from the markets. Most of it was food that needed deliveries arranged, but there were also cloth types and sizes for the family seamstress on the third level, a letter for a silversmith regarding some heirloom, and the name of a book the Lord's eldest son had requested from the only bookstore on the fourth level.
I was terribly nervous as she handed the list to me, instructing me to pay attention to the errands—I got a mildly disapproving look just to remind me of the dresses-in-the-drawers incident—and to come back if I had any trouble.

I left the house and headed down the street until I was out of sight. Then I sat down on a stone bench in a hidden alcove and made sure I knew where I needed to go and calculating how much time it should take me. If I was careful and quick I might be able to ask around for Gandalf. Hopefully he wasn't always at the library because I had no excuse to go to the sixth level.

It took me some moments to figure out what kind of cloth I needed to purchase, and even though I could read the title of the book I couldn't understand what it meant. *The Intricacies of the Defense of the Southern Hold in the Second Battle of Fort Lebennin*—from what I could understand it sounded terribly boring. The letter for the silversmith was about changing the gem in one of Lady Kinsey's necklaces, likely to match a dress for some ball.

I finished the food deliveries fairly quickly, since I had arranged some of those before, but asking around the first level didn't lead me to any word on Gandalf. Neither did the silversmith, who held me there for an extra fifteen minutes while he complained about traveling dwarves stealing his business. It was such an absurdly typical *Middle Earth* complaint I let him grumble for a bit before he told me when the necklace would be ready.

The bookshop was my last stop.

I had liked reading before, but my capacity for Westron was too limited for any of the flowery language of Middle Earth. I could barely understand most songs, let alone these books about war. This bookshop had hand-copied books and scrolls, from the looks of it mostly poetry and history. I wasn't even sure they had fiction in this world, unless greatly exaggerated history counted. Still, the shopkeeper was kind enough to get the book for me rather than letting me wander around the shelves slowly sounding out the titles.

"Fine young man was eyeing this book day before last," the owner told me as he pulled the heavy book down from the shelf and handed it to me before stepping off the footstool he'd pulled over. "Beats me why young men are jumping to read about old battle strategy."

I tried to shift the book under my arm because I had a block of cheese and some fancy sausage wrapped in brown paper already in my hands. Unfortunately I didn't have a good enough grip and the book fell open—and out of it a letter stamped with red wax.

"Hah!" The shopkeeper cried before I could even make a horrified noise as my clumsiness. These books were a lot more precious and much rarer than in the modern day. "I'd bet you three gold coins that's a love letter right there. Probably had a servant slip it in the book. Kids getting more clever these days."

He stooped and picked up the letter before sticking it back in the book with a wink. Then he went to the front counter and wrapped it up, helping me to balance the cheese and sausage on the book. I wished fiercely in that moment for that plastic bag I'd stuck under a rock someone west of Fornost.

"You wouldn't happen to know," I asked as the shopkeeper walked me to the door, "if Gandalf the Grey is around?"

"Ah, the wizard is it? He came by the shop 'bout two weeks ago. Looking for something specific."

"I'm hoping to find him," I told him.
The owner rubbed his ruddy beard looking thoughtful. "'Fraid I haven't seen him since then. If he were around the pubs I'd know," the man almost had the grace to look sheepish. "Sorry miss."

"That's alright, thank you." I said my goodbyes and walked back to the house. I had expected as much, but I still felt a little disappointed. I needed to talk to Gandalf and get his perspective. If there was anyone who might know what to do with the foreknowledge I had—and someone who was capable of doing something with it—then it was Gandalf.

--

*I know about—*

I frowned at the piece of parchment, wishing someone would hurry up and invent pencils and erasers in Middle Earth. I had to sneak some parchment from Lord Kinsey's desk while cleaning today, so I didn't have any extra for mistakes. The piece of paper was also awkwardly long and thus had been rolled up so it curled constantly, making the writing process unwieldy. It didn't help that my handwriting was atrocious, and I was mostly sounding out words because no one had taught me to spell.

Bilbo had mainly been trying to teach me to recognize letters, not write them, so I was working letter by letter to write this note to Gandalf. I had snuck a book from the elder son's room (another dusty one titled *The Origins and Mythology of the White Tree of Gondor*, which had also likely been used for amorous letter sharing purposes rather than reading), so I could figure out how to write each letter. It was a painstaking process.

--*Arda from a book.*

I figured saying I knew about the Ring right at the start was not a good way to begin the letter. That would sound… hostile. This sounded well… just as crazy, but not quite so threatening.

*Frodo will go on a kwest.*

I added an arrow and the word "dangerous" as an afterthought.

I thought long and hard about what to say next. What was most important to tell Gandalf? How much should I tell him here? How could I make him believe me?

*I know how it will end.*

That would stop the old wizard short for sure.

*Frodo has the one.*

Hopefully Gandalf would know what I meant. I didn't think it wise to actually write "the Ring". This wasn't exactly discreet, but it was better than nothing, and I certainly couldn't leave the ring out.

"What are you working on?" Oriolda asked as she came into our quarters, some of the younger son's jackets in her hands. She had a better hand at sewing than Clarimond or I (I could just about sew a button, but that was it), so she was often asked to do minor mending.

"Um… it's a letter. For a friend," I said quickly. I knew she couldn't read, but I didn't want people to be asking questions either.

"Oh a boy?" She asked immediately, putting down her thread and needle to wink at me. I should have seen that one coming.
When I blushed and tried to argue, "It's not-"

"Clarimond will be so excited!" Oriolda interjected, totally bypassing my protests, "What does he do?"

"There's no boy!" I said, maybe too forcefully because she gave me a quick frown and a huff.

"Fine. Keep your secrets then, but Clarimond can sniff out a crush like a hunting dog." She said grumpily and turned back to her sewing, and I, after a pause, went back to the letter, trying in vain to flatten out the curling paper.

It had been almost a week since I'd seen Gandalf, and I was getting more and more anxious to speak with him. I had decided, after a lot of agonizing and second-guessing, that it would be cowardly of me to not even try to stem some of the inevitable deaths the War of the Ring would cause. There's no way I could go home—or go on living in Middle Earth, I thought depressingly—knowing that some of it could have been avoided. Most especially Boromir, even if I had no idea how to stop that.

Unfortunately, I had no direct connection to the Fellowship, and I wasn't even sure when the Fellowship would be formed. Since Gandalf was in Minas Tirith (well, hopefully he was still here, I wasn't entirely sure), that at least meant I had time. Gandalf was the key and the only one who could maybe set these things in motion, so I needed to talk to him—or worse case scenario, get this letter to him somehow.

Frodo will go to—

Ugh, how do you spell Rivendell?

--Rivedel.

Well, hopefully Gandalf would be able to understand the letter even though I spelled like a six-year-old.

He will be hurt by black—

I couldn't remember what the black Dementor things were called. I just knew they rode black horses, were undead, and had stabbed Frodo.

--solders.

Well, they had swords, so they were like soldiers, right?

I want to help save—

Wait. Should I tell Gandalf about Boromir's death? What if Gandalf decided not to send Boromir on the quest then? How would that change things? If I changed too much at once, then what would my foreknowledge be worth?

Afraid, I held the quill over the paper without writing anything. The ink dripped, leaving two splotches next to the word "save" that looked rather ominous.

--people.

It wasn't the best way to phrase it, but crossing out the line would only make it look worse. If I could talk to Gandalf then I could clarify, but this way at least I implied someone would die. Maybe he would take precautions, I wasn't sure. In fact, as I read over the letter, I should probably
rewrite it more neatly and maybe without the last line. I didn't want to scare anyone with predictions of doom—that could be a surefire way to change things.

The door opened again to admit Clarimond, her sleeves rolled up and the ends wet, likely from scrubbing. The life of a maidservant wasn't glamorous, and we spent as much time scrubbing tables and washing dishes as we did making beds and folding laundry. I would kill for a vacuum. (At least we didn't have to scrub floors; the scullery maids who came once a week did that. We were slightly higher on the ladder than them.)

"Maddie's got herself a suitor!" Oriolda said excitedly, and I knew I wasn't going to be able to finish the letter by the glint in Clarimond's eye. I stuffed the parchment in my dress pocket and capped the ink and quill quickly.

"Well Maddie, who is he? Where did you meet him? What are you writing to him?" The girl asked excitedly.

"Love notes are so romantic!" Oriolda piped in. While the shoemaker's daughter was often too shy to pursue any man, it didn't stop her from giggling jealously over Clarimond's stories and dreaming up her own.

Clarimond, meanwhile, looked thrilled, almost to the point of devious.

For the next half hour I tried to argue it wasn't a love note, but when I admitted it was to a man—albeit one who was older than dirt—Clarimond refused to believe my denials. Eventually, seeing the hurt looks on their faces that I was "keeping this secret from them" I realized I'd have to give them something.

"It's not a lover," I said clearly, and Clarimond gave me a disapproving frown. "He is a friend who can maybe help me."

"How did you meet him?" Oriolda asked quickly.

"Um… on errands. He is very… helpful."

Clarimond gave me a sly look then. "And is he handsome?" She asked.

"No, he is old," I said immediately, and I was taken aback when neither girl looked particularly put off.

"Is he wealthy at least?" Clarimond asked, and it was my turn to frown.

"I don't know."

"You should find out," Oriolda advised, and Clarimond added to that: "Old men often want beautiful wives for children. And if he has money then you won't have to work so hard. Your parents would be proud for such a match!"

The younger girl realized suddenly that she had mentioned my parents, and I guess my face must have reflected my shock. I was more surprised that it might be considered acceptable for a woman in her early twenties to marry an "older" man—older in my mind being fifties or sixties—for money, or well, baby-making, rather than any vague attraction. I guess I had known historically that happened, but it was bizarre to imagine it happening to myself.

Luckily, both girls mistook my expression as stricken by being reminded of the "recent death" of my parents. I waved off their apologies and after some careful looks to judge how emotional I was we picked up the conversation.
"Love notes are romantic though," Clarimond said, belatedly agreeing with Oriolda. Oriolda hummed, and both girls agreed aloud that they would love to get notes from an admirer—ignoring the fact that neither would be able to read them. Clarimond looked thoughtful while Oriolda looked dreamy.

Luckily that was the end of my interrogation about the letter as the dinner bell rung and all three of us had to run.

--

Just three days after writing that letter I found myself with another list sent out to the marketplace. I had to return to the silversmith among other food related chores. Lord Kinsey was hosting some kind of dinner party for a holiday and preparations had thrown the whole household into chaos. I hadn't gotten a spare moment to even touch my letter to Gandalf what with all the sheet-washing, rug-beating, and frantic dusting we were all doing.

As it turned out, it was lucky enough that I carried the letter with me everywhere—hoping both for a spare moment to work on it and for fear someone who could read would find it.

I was down on the lowest level of the city at the silversmith's shop waiting as he wrapped up Lady Kinsey's necklace, now sporting a large, bold purple stone in the center (it was tacky in my opinion, but my opinion didn't matter). As I looked around bored, I spotted a pointy blue hat a head above the rest of the crowd.

I barely said thank you to the silversmith before taking the precious package straight out of his hands, tucking it under one arm and immediately breaking into the crowd so I could catch up with the errant wizard.

It was almost impossible to see, as everyone here was taller than I was, but luckily Gandalf's characteristic blue hat stuck out. Even so, he was moving quickly and I was only able to just follow until he paused at a stable.

"Gandalf!" I called, and the tall wizard turned and looked in visible surprise at my appearance as I stumbled out of the crowd.

"Miss Maddie, you look rather flustered," he said, bushy eyebrows raised up, the blue of his eyes matching the color of his hat. "I'm afraid I haven't much time to talk as I'm in quite a rush, so do be quick about it."

Nodding hurriedly, I didn't even stop to think about the stable hand that had come up to Gandalf until the wizard turned from me to talk to him briefly. Anxious, I waited until Gandalf had made arrangements for a dawn pick-up of his horse—and I realized this was a luckier break than I knew if he was leaving Gondor tomorrow—before he turned back to me.

"There's something very important I have to tell you," I said.

"Well go on," he coaxed.

"It's a rather long story, but I know about Middle Earth now. When you said Frodo before I remembered!" I said, feeling slightly out of breath for a moment. Gandalf, however, looked rather nonplussed.

"I'm afraid I don't understand. You 'remember' Middle Earth? Maddie, I do believe you are in Middle Earth," he said with a chuckle.
"No, no, you see—"

I was cut off before I could explain when a soldier came riding up in full armor, the clicking of the metal and the hooves on the stone barely audible above the dull roar of the street. He wore silver plate armor with a helmet that tapered to a point at the top. Unlike the generic soldiers I saw everyday standing guard, he had some kind of fancy engraving on his helmet that made it look like a set of wings coming down each cheek. I didn't have much chance to look more though as he pulled up his huge steed right next to Gandalf.

"My lord, the Steward requests your presence at his table. He wishes to speak with you as soon as possible."

"Understood," Gandalf said, and he sounded tired all of a sudden. The soldier didn't wait, but turned his horse smartly and trotted off, cutting a path straight through the crowd like they weren't even there.

"I'm afraid," Gandalf said, turning to me with an apologetic look, "that I must go. One does not deny the Steward if he can help it."

"Wait!" I fumbled, realizing my chance to explain in person was gone. "Let me give you a letter then."

Gandalf waited, stooped on his staff, as I unceremoniously dropped Lady Kinsey's expensive wrapped necklace on the dusty ground and dug the letter out of my pocket. At least I'd thought to sign it, even if I hadn't finished it, but it was better than nothing.

"Here," I said, holding out the crumbled paper to him, "please read this. It's very important."

I tried to stress the importance, but Gandalf only took the parchment, folded it twice more, and slipped it into a pocket.

"I promise I will, Maddie," he said, and his eyes were smiling despite how weary he looked. I wondered in that moment how much it must have taken out of him to deal with the Ring and the ensuing war. I realized I hadn't thought of Gandalf's suffering through this journey at all, so focused as I had been on Frodo and the others. He had deliberately sent Frodo—and by extension Sam—into grave peril without knowing if they would survive. In fact, he knew better than most what Frodo would face.

I didn't have time to think more though, because Gandalf gathered up his robes and with a nod and a goodbye disappeared back into the crowd, only his hat visible, and even then not for long.

I sighed. There was an unsettled feeling in the pit of my stomach.

--

Over the next two and a half months I strained for any word on the war, councils, and anything else even vaguely related to the story. While most of it was rubbish, there were a couple nuggets.

The first had been a month after I had given Gandalf my letter. The bookstore owner I had become friendly with after picking up and dropping off more books—all with love letters in them, as we discovered—was able to share with me some of the dark rumors. At first he had been reluctant to "taint my ears" with pessimistic mutterings, but I persevered in convincing him of my interest. (This may have come with a lie or two, of which I was unfortunately growing more adept at telling.)

The only thing he told me that caught my attention though was a rumor of "Black Riders". I was
sure these were the Dementor-things that would attack Frodo. Apparently soldiers in their drinks spoke of terrified townspeople and hooded and cloaked riders searching for something.

\textit{Shire…Baggins…}

I remembered well this part of the story.

I didn't know how long it would take them to reach the Shire, but that meant the story was unfolding. I thought long and hard about what this meant for me. Should I leave Minas Tirith?

Of the places I could go, Rivendell was the most logical. The Council would be happening there, and I knew all the players would be gathered together. There was no better place for me to go.

However, I could also go to Lothlórien. Galadriel was also magically powerful and had some ability to read the future or minds or something. She could very likely offer insight too, and at least with her I could delay tackling how much to tell the Fellowship.

As the weather warmed and flowers began to bud, I broached the subject of leaving Gondor to Clarimond and Oriolda, pitching it as a plea to return to my homeland because of the deaths of my parents.

Clarimond and Oriolda, the little snitches, told Everlid, who \textit{strongly} advised me not to go. And by strongly, I mean she very nearly forbade me. If she had that ability I'm sure she would have.

"I know you've heard the rumors, Maddie, don't play deaf girl. Beasts unseen for years roam the roads, and the Steward sends more and more soldiers out each day. These are not times for travel."

She sounded about as concerned as Everlid ever did, and that convinced me more than anything else that the road was not as safe as it had been when I traveled it before. It reminded me of Baiard's infection—suddenly, and inexplicably, everything goes bad. That was the way the war sounded.

Rylan confirmed Everlid's words when I visited him on the first level while running errands. He shooed Adelaide out of the room on the premise of getting more tea so she would not have to hear such things: "There are dark rumors of Rohan now. The king is ill, and orcs are seen across the plains. I would not go Maddie. Minas Tirith is the safest place you can be."

And so I waited.

Through April, May and well into June, all I heard were stories of larger orc attacks, Rohan weakening, and greater and greater danger on the roads. Orcs were pressing on Gondor from the east and smoke was burning in Mordor where there hadn't been before. While Minas Tirith still felt like a cocoon of safety, it was a shrinking one.

At the end of June some of the worst news yet came. Osgiliath, the ancient capital of Gondor east of Minas Tirith, was attacked in the largest battle yet. The whole city gasped.

The survivors were few, though they included the Steward's sons—when the name Boromir came up I very nearly jumped—but both had returned to Minas Tirith. East Osgiliath was lost, which according to battle strategy, the bookstore owner told me, was very bad. I didn't understand the details, but I knew what it meant overall: the war was beginning.

I yearned again to leave, and the feeling doubled when word came of Lord Boromir's departure. Rylan told me people hadn't even realized the lord had left until the men in his unit were informed. He had gone alone on orders from his father, for what purpose remained a mystery.
I knew of course. Boromir was going to the Council. Time was starting to run out.

--

"Maddie?" Clarimond called from upstairs, and I grunted as I lugged the pile of clothing up with me. It was laundry day, and I had just collected all of Lady Kinsey and her daughter's dresses, slips, and odds and ends from the cleaning ladies down by the wash pools at one corner of the level. While I was thankful I didn't have to do the backbreaking work of hand-washing all these dresses, stockings and petticoats, it was still heavy to carry them back.

"Yes?" I asked breathlessly as I dropped the woven basket on the floor. If Everlid were here she would have tutted at me, but as it was only Clarimond, and the other girl just giggled.

"Did you ever hear back from that man you gave that love letter to?" She picked up a handful of petticoats and began to hang them in the wardrobe. I was glad as a poor servant I only ever had to wear one at a time for propriety. Petticoats were very hot, especially in the humid summer in Gondor, and the wealthy ladies would sometimes wear two or three to give them extra fluff. It didn't help that deodorant hadn't been invented yet—no one smelled good, no matter how many perfumes they wore. I had taken to rubbing bath soaps on my pulse points when I could, anything to hide the smell.

"No," I said, handing her Lady Kinsey's dresses one-by-one to be hung in the wardrobe, "He left Minas Tirith."

"A soldier?" Clarimond asked, and I was suspicious by how interested she looked. She even paused in hanging the dresses to look at me.

"Um… not really," I told her. When I kept looking at her, she pinked a bit and hung the last dress before rushing over to the chest of drawers to put the stockings away.

"Clarimond?" I asked, after the silence continued. I didn't even bother pretending to straighten things in the room.

"Well… I may have met a soldier a couple days ago," she whispered, her cheeks turning a little red to my surprise. Little made Clarimond blush unless it was Everlid's scolding. She must be quite taken with this guy.

"But you absolutely can't tell Everlid!" she hissed at me when I opened my mouth, "You know how she is!"

I didn't actually know how Everlid would react, but Clarimond seemed genuinely upset at the idea of our supervisor finding out.

"Okay, I won't tell her, I promise."

"You promise? Good," the other girl exhaled, closing the stocking drawer. "Will you… Maddie, you are my friend, and well…"

It was uncharacteristic of Clarimond to stumble over her words, so I moved forward and grasped her hand. "What is it Clarimond?"

"Will you write a letter for me? To give to him? I know it's a lot of work," she added quickly, "but you go out a lot for chores and I would really like to give him something."

She looked at me with such pleading eyes I already knew I would say yes, even if I thought it was a horrible idea. My handwriting alone would send him running.
"I'm very bad at writing, Clarimond," I told her, but she held my fingers when I tried to pull my hand away.

"Well you're better than I am," she said half-jokingly. Then with a sigh, "He's quite handsome, and smart, and I know he is fond of tales. His family is an old Gondorian one—and though not that wealthy that's worth something here. He's usually on guard duty before lunch by the barracks down off the stairs to the third level."

I couldn't help raising an eyebrow and giving her a wry smile. "You certainly seem to know a lot about him," I teased.

"Oh hush you!" She giggled and lightly smacked me. I laughed back and we both let go of each other to cover our mouths lest Everlid come up to investigate.

"Will you though?" Clarimond asked as I hoisted the laundry basket up so we could go to the Kinsey daughter's room to put away the rest of the clean clothes.

"I will try Clarimond, but do not expect anything beautiful!" She hugged me regardless and we went back to our chores.

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Later that week I was carrying Clarimond's carefully worded letter down to the guard barracks on the third level. I was awfully nervous about this, but Clarimond was so thankful and so excited I could hardly back out now.

The note was typical of the medieval ages I supposed, with a lot of flowery language, metaphors, and so on. It took me the better part of two evenings to write it as Clarimond dictated, but at the very least I was rapidly improving my writing ability. I was also careful to try and spell words correctly. Most boys from non-farmer families could read, so I was careful not to let her be judged too badly for poor work even if the letter was being dictated.

Apparently a fair number of letters were dictated because quillwork took so long to do nicely. Most of Lord Kinsey's letters were written once quickly when he dictated them, then rewritten very neatly with all appropriate signage and such. Oriolda shared this with me as Clarimond tried to get me to include some poorly done poetry. A pretty face she may be, a poet she was not, given Oriolda and mine's reactions to her heartfelt attempts.

When the letter was finished Clarimond revealed some blue wax from Heaton's desk that we used to seal the letter.

And now here I was, the very next day slowly walking down a windy, white stone staircase in a back corner of the third level. I was trying very hard not to be nervous even as the sound of clashing steel and manly grunts from the practicing soldiers grew louder with every step.

Eventually the staircase widened and opened into a large courtyard with several buildings and a number of men milling about. To the left were almost a dozen soldiers lined up with bows as tall as they were. The rhythmic thunk of the arrows hitting targets could just be heard over the din of sword practice. Others appeared to be cleaning weaponry or armor or just relaxing with friends.

"Can I help you, Miss?" said a voice to my right. Just a couple steps away from where the stairs met ground level were the two guards on duty.

"Um… I'm looking for Amrúngil," I replied, and the man who had spoken said, "That's me."
I couldn't make out much of his features because of his helmet, but I could see a neatly trimmed black beard and mustache. He was holding an impressive wooden pike with a lethal looking spear on the end and was decked out in silver-colored armor with a raised tree depicted on the front. My first thought was wow, followed by he must be dying in this heat.

I curtsied just to be polite before presenting the letter. "I'm Maddie. You know of my friend Clarimond? I have a letter from her."

Some of the intimidation of the moment faded away when his fellow guard laughed and Amrúngil's face turned a bit red under his helmet as he accepted the letter.

"This that lass you shared stories of last night?" the other guard chuckled, and I smiled as Amrúngil thanked me embarrassedly.

"It's no problem," I reassured him.

I was about to turn to go when he said, "Wait! Please come back the next time you can, and I will have an answer waiting."

The other guard laughed so hard his armor clanked as he worked to stay upright. I couldn't help laughing either as Amrúngil reaching over and smacked his friend with the butt of his spear. Clarimond would be over the moon.

--

For the next month and a half things were relatively peaceful. I continued to pass notes between Amrúngil and Clarimond, and Clarimond continued to swoon over everything he wrote, even as I read increasingly cheesy poetry, silly metaphors about summer days, stars, and sharpened swords. (Oriolda and I thought the last one was innuendo, and even though Clarimond dismissed us, I still firmly believe there was some second meaning behind it.)

Despite how much Clarimond liked to gush, word did not reach Everlid, and she kept her rapturous praise of Amrúngil's fancy words to the confines of our room. I wasn't sure what she thought Everlid could do if she found out about Amrúngil, but Oriolda only said with the war, marrying a soldier wasn't a great prospect.

That didn't stop one of the soldiers at the barracks from giving me flowers amidst much hooting and catcalling. I was as embarrassed as the poor guy, but equally flattered. I was a little disappointed when his regiment was sent out the very next week, but Amrúngil promised to tell him I looked sad when I got the news. Then I was the one being laughed at.

Still, this silliness between Amrúngil and Clarimond kept my mind off other darker things. The word of the war continued to sour and my chances of leaving Minas Tirith safely grew ever thinner. I was concerned about what I was missing in relation to the Fellowship, but I wasn't quite daring enough to brave orcs on the road just yet—and Rivendell was a two-month journey at least.

"Maddie, can you bring the bowl of grapes?" Oriolda called as she prepared the dining room for supper. There was a new centerpiece she was putting together with elegant swans, crab apples and dark green leaves in honor of the new month of September.

Carrying the bowl full of bright, juicy green grapes I had to resist the urge to steal one when no one was looking. Everlid was very clear about taking food meant for the Lord's family—especially food about to be put on the table.

"It looks good, Oriolda," I told her, admiring the arrangement of leaves she was setting up in a large glass vase. I put the bowl of grapes down on the side table and was helping put down the
silverware with Everlid when there were three solid knocks on the great front door.

Guests were quite common in the household, so no one thought much of it until Heaton's audible, "My Lord Captain Faramir, son of our Lord Steward Denethor II, please be welcome."

Everyone froze, and Everlid's wrinkled face had never looked so shocked. She took one look at the cutlery in her hand and immediately flew to the chest in the corner where the finest family silver was. Silently beckoning me to help her, I ran over as Oriolda scurried to the kitchens to warn the other servants.

We could hear Lord Kinsey greet Lord Faramir, no doubt with a flurry of bowing and a lot of titles, as we swapped out the dishes and utensils for the finest the Kinsey's had. Lady Kinsey popped her head in for the barest of seconds and gave a sharp nod to Everlid.

"My Lord, if there is anything I can do for you, you need only name it…” Lord Kinsey was saying. Everlid vanished into the kitchen and returned in record time with a tea tray and biscuits Shelton must have whipped out of some cupboard. I took extra care with the napkins and place ware and added another place at the table for the lord. My hands were shaking and I tried to be as quiet as possible as I set down each piece. Faramir was Boromir's brother, and I knew he had an important part to play later in the story—mostly in the war, though I couldn't remember the details. It was nerve-wracking to think he was in the next room.

"No, that's quite alright," said an unfamiliar voice, Faramir's by my guess, as I took the last plate down from the glass cupboard. "I am looking for someone, a servant. A young woman by the name of Maddie."
It was a miracle I didn't shatter the plate, but I did fumble it, very nearly drop it, and ended up cracking the edge on the table. The noise was impossibly loud in the shocked silence that had followed Lord Faramir's words.

My mind was a jumble of what this could mean. I didn't even have the presence of mind to put down the plate, so shocked I was. When the dining room door opened and Lord Kinsey beckoned me I walked right out still holding it.

Numb, in my messy servant's apron and holding a cracked plate, I approached the group in the front hall—not even in the sitting room, which made me nervous. Standing just a couple steps inside were Lord Faramir and two finely dressed soldiers, one with a hand resting on the pommel of his sword, the other with a lethal looking mace in his belt.

Faramir was quite tall, with golden brown hair that hung in unruly waves to his shoulders. He had a scruff of a beard and bright blue eyes. He didn't wear the heavy platemail of the soldiers behind him, but a leather carapace and a fine, fur-trimmed cloak. The leather had the same silver tree with seven stars I had seen him wear in that brief moment with Merewald ages ago. He had a kind face
despite the obvious military bearing, though I still felt a bit like I'd been brought to the headsman's block, especially as I spied the sword on his belt. He gave me a calm once over, and I found myself gripping the cracked plate and cursing myself ten times over for not leaving it in the other room. I must have looked twice the fool as Lord Kinsey introduced me.

"This is Maddie, a maidservant in our household for almost a year now." When I didn't move, the thin Lord gave me a small nudge and I curtsied. I could feel my heart hammering against my ribs, and I'm sure my face was bright red from embarrassment and shock. I glanced very quickly round the room, but there wasn't so much as a side table to put the plate on.

"I would like to ask you a couple questions, Miss Maddie," Faramir said, and with an abrupt gesture Lord Kinsey directed Lord Faramir into the drawing room. I could only imagine the looks on the family's faces as Lord Kinsey firmly walked me over. Faramir made only a cursory glance around the stiffness of the formal room before turning around and nodding to Lord Kinsey. The drawing room doors closed behind us and we were suddenly, achingly, alone. He didn't sit, and neither did I.

I was clenching my hands on the plate in a bid to hide how much they were shaking. I felt hot all over and a million scenarios were running through my mind. Had Gandalf told someone? Or a messenger been sent from Rivendell? Was the Council already happening? Was I being arrested because of Arundel and Baiard? I couldn't think of any reason beyond Gandalf's intervention to bring Faramir to my doorstep, but it had been seven months without word and anything could have happened.

Faramir offered me a half-smile, and I was barely able to respond the same. "C-can I help you, sir?" I tried not to too obviously shift and bring attention to the plate.

"I'm hoping you can," he answered, his voice soft, and his eyes flicked to the plate much to my horror. His lips curled a bit in what might have been amusement, but I was unfortunately already so red you couldn't tell my further embarrassment. "You are familiar with Gandalf, are you not?"

I thought for one fleeting second of lying, but scrapped it just as quickly. If was one thing to lie to a bookstore owner or another maidservant about silly details, it was another to lie to someone as important as Lord Faramir—not just important in Gondor but also in the story.

I nodded, and he continued. "He was staying with me for several weeks around the new year. I found this only recently." From his pocket he produced the overlong sheet of parchment with my familiar, blotchy writing on it. It was the note to Gandalf I'd written trying to help the Fellowship.

I felt the bottom drop out of my stomach, and I was lucky the plate was so solid because otherwise it would have shattered at the tightness of my grip. He'd left it in Minas Tirith! Did he even read it? What if I was too late? What if the Fellowship was already leaving and all my warnings were useless? Was I meant to just be a bystander to the same events?

I must have looked rather shaky because Faramir clasped my elbow and encouraged me to sit down on the uncomfortable couch. Gently but firmly he pried the broken plate from me and set it on the tea table. Without anything to hold on to my hands shook terribly. He talked me into a couple deep breaths, still holding the letter out. I could just see my messy "I want to help save people" and suddenly swallowing was painful.

"You wrote this then?" Faramir asked gently, his hand still holding my elbow like I might fall from the seat. I could barely sense him next to me though. I'd spent the last seven months keeping my ear to the ground for even the slightest word on the war and the Fellowship. I'd set myself on helping the Fellowship; that was the reason I was in Middle Earth I'd thought. To have all my hopes of helping devastated like this felt like the world had been pulled out from under me.
Again.

I managed a nod, and before he could say more I found my voice. "Yes, yes, I wrote this." I reached for the letter and he let me take it, though it shook like a fine wind ran through it in my hands. As I reread it I winced at both my handwriting and spelling. I had improved immensely from all the love letters I'd been writing for Clarimond.

Gandalf,

I know about Arda from a book.
Frodo will go on a kwest.
I know how it will end.
Frodo has the one.
Frodo will go to Rivedel.
He will be hurt by black solders.
I want to help save people.

Maddie

"Did he read it?" I asked, turning to look at Faramir, the color of his eyes startling in his tan face.

"I don't know," he said, shifting slightly away from me, as I seemed to have regained some of my bearings. "It was left at his desk. He did leave in a rush however, and I asked his things not be touched in case he returned. I have not heard from him in many months."

I could only hope as I looked down at the desperate letter, that Gandalf had read it and memorized it. As events unfolded would he remember it? But wait, if Faramir hadn't come to find me because of Gandalf, then why was he here?

"M'lord, why are you looking for me?"

"I was hoping you could explain that to me," he said, gesturing at the letter in my tight grip. Surprised, I mutely looked back at it. Surely it just sounded like a crazy person's writings. Even with my minimal explanation to Gandalf it probably made very little sense. And yet here was Lord Faramir at my door asking for details.

I looked back at him and he was watching me with careful eyes. It was easy to forget in his presence that he was a soldier. He looked and spoke more like a gentleman than a man of war, but something about the way he looked at me reminded me that men followed his orders.

"Gandalf was researching many things while he was here; many he would not speak of," Faramir said after a pause. "He left this on his desk inside a book of traveler's tales. Gandalf is not one to be so messy without a purpose nor is he forgetful." Faramir was giving me some kind of look I could not decipher, and feeling both intimidated and suddenly tired I looked back at the letter.

"Such talk, I fear, will take some time," he continued on heedlessly. "Tomorrow morning I request your audience in my study. I will tell the guards of your coming." It was phrased nicely but it was a clear order. I let him take back the letter and he offered his hand to help me up.

"You are quite alright?" He asked when I still didn't say anything.

"Oh! Um, yes, there is simply a lot on my mind. This is… unexpected." In fact I felt like I needed a good long nap and maybe a stiff drink even though it was barely noon. This was a little overwhelming, and I didn't really want to leave the quiet of the room and deal with everyone outside those doors.
It couldn't be helped though, and Lord Faramir escorted me out of the drawing room. In any other situation I might have been amused at the air of expectancy of the Kinsey's still standing in the foyer. Even Lord Faramir's soldiers looked curious; this was probably an equally strange visit for them. I could imagine all the servants with the exception of Everlid crowding the kitchen door in the hopes to hear something. The household hadn't had this much excitement since that well-bred lady had come to see Lord Kinsey's eldest son. (She hadn't been interested in marriage; Lord Kinsey was too minor a noble for her, Clarimond had sniffed.)

"Lord Kinsey, I ask that you release Miss Maddie of her duties tomorrow as I have requested her presence." I was sure if I strained my ears I would be able to hear the whispering that broke out in the servant's quarters with that statement. I could feel my stomach knot itself in worry. How on earth was I going to explain this? Farm girls from Rohan don't attract attention from the Steward's son, and Faramir wasn't giving an explanation either.

"Thank you for your kindness and hospitality, Lord Kinsey. It is most appreciated." With some bowing, curtseyng, and a head dip from Faramir, he and his soldiers left. The moment the front door shut all pretences of politeness vanished, and Lord Kinsey gave me a sharp, suspicious look.

"What did Lord Faramir want, Maddie?" He asked, and I noticed that he didn't bother to move this to another room.

"He had a question," I said, wringing my hands before I noticed I was doing it and stopped. I realized I'd also left the broken plate in the other room. That would not endear me either. "I met Gandalf on my errands, and I guess he told Lord Faramir about me and well…" I trailed off, and Lord Kinsey, with his lined face and grey-peppered hair, frowned, the skepticism perfectly obvious in his expression.

"I'll not have disgraceful gossip be brought upon this family. If I hear further of this then steps will have to be taken," he said ominously. He didn't say it out loud, but I understood perfectly: I'd be fired if gossip got out.

With his dismissive wave and under the whole family's eyes, I walked back to the kitchen and straight past the stares of all the servants, my hands clenched in fists at my sides, shaking for an entirely new reason. I went out the back door and into the kitchen garden, unable to smell the cloying herbs and rich earth beneath my anger.

Lord Kinsey thought I had gone and slept with Faramir! And he had every reason to because Faramir had been so tight-lipped about his reasons, going so far as to talk in the drawing room without a single guard there. He had to know that I would be expected to explain if he did not, and the word of a servant—a young, female servant no less—against the assumptions of some foggy old Lord would end badly, and not in my favor!

I felt such hot anger well up in me at the look Lord Kinsey had given me and at the unfairness of it all. Even in the modern day, a man who sleeps with a lot of women gets patted on the back, but a woman who sleeps around is labeled a whore. No one gave Faramir so much as a second look, whether because of his rank or his junk, but I might be out of a job and a good reputation with just the omission of one clarifying sentence.

I breathed in and out nosily, resisting the perfectly irrational urge to run into the street, find Faramir and his group and tell him to clean this mess up or else, Lordship and fancy bloodlines be damned.

I knew somewhere in me this anger was an attempt to get past the overwhelming fear that Faramir's visit and message had brought, but I couldn't see past the red haze yet. It was unfortunate for Oriolda that she came out when she did.
"Maddie…" she said tentatively, and I whirled around, skirt whipping at the ripe tomatoes and tearing on the thorns of the blackberry bush.

"Not now! I'm trying not to- to-" I let out a wordless sound of annoyance that I at least managed to temper so it wasn't quite a yell and more of a growl. I didn't even know the Westron word for strangle, but I would definitely learn it before tomorrow. I would figure out what to say to Faramir about traveling into books and predicting the future after I figured out how to tell him to set Lord Kinsey straight.

Oriolda looked so surprised her mouth had dropped open. After a beat she left in a flurry of skirts back to the kitchen, likely to tell the others I had temporarily been replaced by a dragon.

I stomped around the garden for a good ten minutes slowly cooling off. I picked some of the blackberries and ate them as a petty revenge for the pestering and questions I was going to be fielding when I went back inside from the staff. Hopefully Everlid would stem some of the tide, but if she gave me that disapproving look and assumed the worst too then I might have to practice my speech to Faramir on her first.

Too soon it seemed my temper had receded, and I realized I was going to have to face them inside. I couldn't stay in the garden all day, and I'd already been here too long. I also really needed to skip to the most important part: what was I going to tell Faramir?

But first, what was I going to tell my coworkers?

Shelton, Oriolda, Heaton and Everlid were in the kitchen when I opened the door. Clarimond and the others were likely doing their chores as fast as humanly possible so they wouldn't miss any of the good stuff.

"What happened?" Oriolda cried, looking at me askance and a little hurt. Shelton had stopped his chopping, and Heaton and Everlid made no pretence of looking anywhere else.

I exhaled steadily and made sure I had my story straight.

"Lord Faramir hosted Gandalf the Grey when he was in Minas Tirith. Gandalf is the one who told me about my family." Oriolda gasped dramatically, and Shelton squinted at me from behind the cutting block. The governess came in and stopped dead in the doorway.

"If you remember I wrote a letter to him. Lord Faramir found it and wanted to ask me about Gandalf."

When it was obvious I wasn't giving more detail than that without being asked, I was peppered with questions about what Faramir said, what the letter said, and why I was going to see Lord Faramir tomorrow. I told them Faramir only wanted details on my talk with Gandalf—which I stressed was only once—and if I knew where the wizard was now. Clarimond came in and stopped dead in the doorway.

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When it was obvious I wasn't giving more detail than that without being asked, I was peppered with questions about what Faramir said, what the letter said, and why I was going to see Lord Faramir tomorrow. I told them Faramir only wanted details on my talk with Gandalf—which I stressed was only once—and if I knew where the wizard was now. Clarimond came in halfway through and demanded that she be caught up. I was quick to knock the twinkle from her eye though when she asked about the Steward's son.

"This is the first time I have ever met Lord Faramir and I'll thank you not to assume anything tomorrow!" I said smartly, hoping to head off any more gossip. Everlid harrumphed, but it was directed at Clarimond not me. I was thankful the matronly servant had not jumped to the same conclusion as Lord Kinsey and his family did.

Clarimond hid the look of disappointment but not before I'd seen it. It would have been a dream come true for her to spend a night with such a high-ranking lord. I was not as amused.
Eventually Everlid cleared the room of all the nosy servants who did not absolutely have to be there and set everyone back to work. I was sent to the garden to pick plants and help clean the kitchen after, likely in a bid to keep me from the Kinsey's sight. I was immensely thankful for this.

Out in the garden I trimmed back vines and picked blackberries, strawberries and tomatoes, along with some of the herbs to be dried for later. I'd never been much into gardening before, and I'd killed houseplants, but I'd grown to enjoy this simple work while in Minas Tirith. (I'd told everyone my family grew wheat and corn and had horses and we traded for everything else, which was why I wasn't familiar with vegetable gardens. It would have been pretty suspicious for a farmer's daughter to be so lost in a kitchen garden.)

As I filled my basket, I thought past my anger to the opportunity I had here. My first meeting with Gandalf had been…well, it wasn't a shining moment for me. And the second had been almost too late. If I told Faramir the truth, would he believe me? How could I prove it to him?

I would need to know about the Council. Surely if Boromir had reached Rivendell then word would have come to Gondor?

Should I tell Faramir about the Ring? I couldn't remember if he'd ever encountered it, but I knew it tempted all people but most especially Men, if my memory of Boromir served. Would it be folly then to risk Faramir knowing? But I couldn't tell him the truth about the Fellowship without telling him about the Ring.

If I did tell him about the Ring, then what about Boromir? As his brother and an important figure in Gondor, Faramir was in a unique position to do something about Boromir's death. He could send soldiers north to where Boromir died—although as I thought about it I realized I didn't know where that was, only that it was someone along the big river south of Lothlórien. Or he could send soldiers ahead of the Fellowship to Isengard, where those big orcs had come from. I remember they'd stolen Merry and Pippin to bring to Saruman.

I chewed on a mint leaf, which didn't taste much like toothpaste but reminded me of it, and thought hard about this dilemma. The more I thought on it though, the more I realized that Boromir's death was incredibly complicated.

That event was when a lot of things collided: Saruman's super-orcs attacked, kidnapping Merry and Pippin; Boromir died; Aragorn, Legolas, and Gimli ran across Rohan hunting the missing hobbits; Frodo and Sam, meanwhile, split off from the Fellowship and went to Mordor.

I chewed on my leaf until I realized I was gnawing on nothing. It was imperative the Fellowship split—I was sure of this. Frodo and Sam together with that slimy little creature whose name I couldn't remember had to travel to Mordor. The whole Fellowship was too big a group, and Aragorn did some important stuff in Gondor that I couldn't recall but I knew involved a bunch of battles.

If there were soldiers near where the Fellowship was attacked, Frodo and Sam might not get away. And if soldiers attacked Isengard first, then the Fellowship might not be attacked at all. Which would save Boromir yes, but would Frodo and Sam leave? What if only Frodo left? I didn't think he could successfully destroy the Ring without Sam. The attack by the super-orcs was what allowed the Fellowship to split, so did that mean it had to happen?

I ended up going through three mint leaves and eating far too many strawberries as I weighed my options. None of them looked good. The situation of Boromir's death was too delicate, and it was the catalyst for so much that I was afraid to mess with it at all. But then how could I save Boromir?
I had to go back in eventually, but I was no closer to an answer than before. For now, I decided as I swept up onionskins, peach pits and the green tops of tomatoes in the kitchen, I would not tell Faramir about Boromir. I would tell him everything else and then… maybe I could get a message to Gandalf. Or even go to Rivendell or Lothlórien myself.

Despite the shock of the morning I started to feel better by the evening. I'd spent pretty much all day hashing out my options, and the idea of having another's opinion—and someone who seemed as levelheaded as Faramir—made me feel a lot better. It also helped to not have someone as helpless as I. If something needed to be done, surely the son of the Steward would be able to do it.

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The next morning was an awkward affair.

I was angry with Clarimond and Oriolda, who had whispered to me last night as we lay abed, that I could tell them anything and they would never tell. Then Clarimond had rolled over to face me and whispered, "So, did you spend the night with him?"

I very nearly hit her. In the end I held back the urge to kick her in the shin and instead rolled over and refused to talk to her. Oriolda tried to barter a truce in the morning, but I was not happy. This was the kind of gossip Lord Kinsey was referring to—and if Clarimond caused me to lose my good job than I had plenty of reason to be angry with her.

There was even more whispering as I ate breakfast, much to my frustration. I didn't know how to head it off though, and I was worried I'd only make it worse if I started snapping at everyone. So in the end I ate in record time.

Clarimond, in a misguided attempt to apologize I think, offered to plait my hair nicely. I didn't want to give the impression this was some kind of booty call, so I refused and went with a messy bun (without elastics I found it pretty much impossible to do a neat bun) and wore one of my cleaner dresses. Faramir might be a fancy lord, but I was still feeling a bit of yesterday's anger and didn't care to doll myself up for this.

I managed to escape the household without further incident and slipped out through the kitchen garden. You couldn't pay me to be spotted by Lord Kinsey on my way out.

I only knew that Faramir lived on the top level of Minas Tirith, so I trekked up the windy walkways, taking my time to look at the hanging flowers in late bloom on windowsills and balconies and eying the fine detailing on these wealthy people's doors. The sky was a clear, solid blue stretching into forever. Most of the walls I walked past were too high to look over, but sometimes I could see the tops of the mountains, not yet capped with snow.

As I climbed higher I came to a small terrace with an unobstructed view of the fields and lands around Minas Tirith. Truly no picture or movie can do justice to breathing in the bracing air that blows right off the fields. The colors of the ground and sky were bright against each other, and the people on the levels below just ants from these heights. I felt inexplicably homesick, but not for the modern day. No, I was homesick for sleeping under the stars, walking all day in the fresh air, tromping through field and forest and hills. I wanted to walk through waist-high grass, fumble over roots and bramble, wash my hands and face in rivers of melted snow. I found myself missing all the travel I'd done. When had that happened?

Eventually I pulled myself away from remembrances and kept walking until I reached the entrance to the sixth level at the top of a grand staircase. The guards standing there in their heavy mail demanded a seal of my business.
"I-I have a meeting with Lord Faramir," I told them nervously, the thought that Faramir had forgotten to tell the guards skipping through my mind. Wouldn't that just be a lovely mess to my day? There was some shifting among the guards before someone stepped out of the guard booth, and I was relieved when he called, "Miss Maddie?"

He looked to be another soldier, but not like the ones in Minas Tirith. He was dressed in similar garb to Lord Faramir yesterday. He wore the same leather tunic with supple leather boots instead of the steel the soldiers wore, and leather bracers and shin guards. He also had a navy blue cloak with some significant weather stains on it, and a bow on his back. The other soldiers stepped aside as he approached.

"This your charge?" one asked, and he nodded.

"Come. I'm to escort you to Lord Faramir." He had shorter, dark brown hair and a clean-shaven face with a scar that tracked from his temple into his hairline. Unfortunately he wasn't inclined to talk much to me beyond explaining he was one of the Rangers of Ithilien under Captain Faramir. I didn't remember these southern Rangers, but I nodded along and filed that away.

He led me through the sixth level and up to a huge stone archway that was reminiscent of a cathedral without the stained glass. I gaped, but he ushered me through, then up a huge stone flight of stairs. Then we moved off the wider main road and up several smaller staircases that eventually took us up above the high walls and the tightly packed buildings. I felt a little dizzy as I looked past the walls on the staircase and saw nothing but land and sky.

The staircase came out into a garden that felt incredibly open to me after months of living in the shadow of the other levels. Behind the buildings there was no more mountain, no more white stone; we had reached the very peak of Minas Tirith. There was nothing but blue, blue sky above.

The garden itself was very neat, with none of the tangles and overflowing boxes of the gardens in the city. The hedgerows were carefully trimmed, the colors of the flowerbeds perfectly accenting one another in patterns, and designated grassy spots built in geometric designs. It was a different kind of garden, more modern, much to my surprise.

The unnamed ranger walked me into a covered hallway and around some corners until I was in a pillared hall with one set of grand, double oak doors that had a star motif on it. He knocked, and after a garbled reply that I assume was a welcome, he pushed open the doors to reveal a large, if cozy study. It was made of the same ubiquitous white stone of the city, but the ceiling was incredibly high. There were decorative weapons and shields on the walls alongside bookshelves loaded with scrolls and thick, leather-bound toms. There was a fireplace with cushioned chairs by the fire, and a cabinet in the corner I would bet gold had liquor in it. A fine wooden desk piled with parchment dominated the room, and behind it was a balcony with a stunning view of the hills and fields beyond Minas Tirith that stretched all the way to the horizon.

Lord Faramir sat behind the desk, his leather bracers and gloves tossed carelessly to the side and his sleeves rolled up. Seeing him sitting behind a pile of paperwork reminded me very suddenly of my job at home. That was me always behind a pile of paperwork. A part of me—one that was growing louder the longer I stayed in Middle Earth—didn't want to return to a life like that.

"Miss Maddie," Faramir said, standing up from the desk and moving towards the fireplace where there were two large chairs upholstered in a fine pine green color. He encouraged me to sit and dismissed the ranger who escorted me before coming over. "Is there anything you'd like to drink, eat?"

"No, no thank you," I said, my stomach twisted into knots at the thought of food. I had thought the Kinsey's were quite well off, but there were all the little signs of wealth in this room that they
did not have. The carpet beneath my feet was so plush I could feel it through my shoes, and the mantle had several paintings, including one that looked to have gold filigree in the frame. There were crystal vases in some bookshelves, along with hand-carved wooden ornaments and a very fancy jeweled box above the fireplace. Faramir himself didn’t wear much that looked expensive, but the fur trimming on the cloak hanging on the back of his chair and the inside of his gloves gave it away.

I felt quite small in this study, and incredibly awkward when I realized there was again no guards or buffers between us. While I suppose it was wiser not to have listening ears, it just reminded me of Lord Kinsey’s assumptions.

Faramir brought over a mug of what smelled like tea from his desk and sat in the chair opposite me, sinking into the seat. I, in contrast, sat on the edge of mine, distinctly uncomfortable.

"Lord Faramir-"

"How long have you-"

We both broke off awkwardly, and Faramir waved his hand to me and put the mug down on the table to give me his full attention.

"Um… Lord Faramir, yesterday… well, Lord Kinsey, he…” This was terribly embarrassing, and Faramir’s unwavering stare was making me increasingly self-conscious.

"There is a problem with Lord Kinsey?” he asked.

"Not a problem really, but he… I believe yesterday he may think something untrue about you and I and—"

"Ah," he said, leaning back with a frown, and I thankfully didn’t have to say more. "I see. I apologize; I did not even consider this. You see, I have been looking for you for nearly a month now."

"A month?” I said in surprise, but Faramir paid no mind.

"I will send a letter on with you when you return correcting this. If Lord Kinsey continues to give you problems, then we can discuss it further."

I was surprised by how quickly he acquiesced and how understanding he was. I had been worried there would be an embarrassing explanation before I could get a response like this.

"Th-thank you."

"It is my fault," the lord said, offering me a rueful smile. "I did not even consider how our meeting might be perceived."

I smiled back, and some of the awkward tension dissipated.

"As I said, I have been looking for you for a month now." I nodded at him, and he fixed his gaze on me. "I have been kept busy by the forces of Mordor—you are aware of this right?” I nodded again. "But I finally had the chance to look into the Grey Wizard’s room and found that letter. I must say, something about it caught my eye and my curiosity." His gaze turned curious for a moment before continuing. "I sent some of my men to ask for word on a ‘Maddie’ and eventually one spoke to a guardsman at the barracks by the fourth level gate. You have a suitor there, I believe?”
I shook my head quickly. "No, Amrûngil is a suitor of my fellow maidservant. I only pass the letters on."

"I see," Faramir said. Then he stood up and went to his desk, retrieving the letter I had written and sitting back down. He laid it on the side table in front of our chairs.

"I believe Gandalf left this for a reason—though it may be too late given how long it laid untouched. Still, I wish to know what you mean by it. How have you 'come to know Arda', and what do you mean by 'you know how it will end'?"

He looked at me, gentle but searching, and I was suddenly glad I had decided to share with him the full story. I hardly remembered Faramir from the books or the movies, but I knew he was meant to be softer than his brother. He seemed intelligent, thoughtful, and kind even as a soldier.

Exhaling with a mix of relief and hesitation, I scooted back in my seat and fumbled with my hands for a moment. "It is a very long story, but I should like to tell it if you have the time."

Faramir smiled, leaning back from the table. He looked painfully handsome in that moment, with the sunlight behind him from the balcony, his blue eyes bright with interest. I flushed at the thought and tried to school my features back into some neutrality.

"I am at your disposal, Miss Maddie. I would very much like to hear this tale."

"You will not believe me," I warned him, remembering Gandalf and the letter. If he believed me, he would not have left it, right?

"Middle Earth is full of many strange things," Faramir told me, "and there is magic still. I would hear your story first before making any conclusions."

I nodded, knowing that was all I could ask for.

"Well, before I explain the letter, there is much to say. It's… well it's strange. I came to Arda in the far north, outside a small town called Fornost."

Faramir looked curious again. "Fornost? The Númenórean city?"

I blinked at him, confused. "Númenórean? City? It is a small village of farmers."

"Fornost in the histories was a great city, and the last to fall to the Witch-king of Angmar."

I was totally baffled. I didn't know what or who Númenórean or this Witch-king was, but Fornost had been tiny. If it had been some great city then either someone leveled it or we were talking about two different places.

"I don't know this Witch-king or your Fornost. The town I went to was called Fornost, but it was very small. I saw no city."

Faramir looked thoughtful at that. "Perhaps the Men there call it Fornost because it lies near the ruins? Though it is a cursed place I had heard tale of."

I shrugged, not really caring whether that little town was called Fornost or not. Gandalf hadn't mentioned any ancient Fornost city, and I told Faramir as much. The Steward's son looked at the carpet contemplatively before encouraging me to go on.

"I appeared three days west of this small town and was very confused. You see, I am not from Arda. There are no elves, dwarves, or hobbits in my home. There is no Gondor or Rohan or
Lothlórien. It is very different from here."

I began to explain to Faramir my appearance by magic, and my struggles with the language as I traveled first to the town-maybe-called-Fornost and then to Bree. I also shared with him, despite much bemusement on his part, how Middle Earth was not real—how we knew what all the lands of the world looked like and Middle Earth was not there. As I talked, he proved to be very interested in life in my world, but I was careful not to say much about it and outright refused to talk about the details.

"It is too complicated to tell you. You would not understand," I told him after he asked what the largest kingdom in my homeland was.

"Surely if you live in a world of only Men then I should be able to understand much of it?"

"It is a world of Men, but many things have changed. We have…" I frowned, thinking, and we both frowned at each other until Faramir bit off a laugh.

"I'm afraid I don't understand, Miss Maddie. Can you not try?"

I sighed, thinking. I cast my eyes around the room and they landed on the elaborate weapons and shields on the wall. "I have an example. We don't fight with swords. Or shields."

He looked over at the ornamentation on the wall too before looking back at me. "Then what do you fight with?"

Shaking my head and realizing I hadn't thought this example through, I said, "We fight with deadly things…they are not like swords. No one in Middle Earth has created them yet." I thought of war in our world, with high-powered rifles, missiles launched from hundreds of miles away, and nuclear bombs. War was not pretty with swords and bows either, but I was sure guns had only worsened it.

He looked surprised and fascinated, yet I shot him a hard look when he asked for more detail. "This is not the story I'm telling. My world is very different."

Faramir nodded after a beat, and he looked mildly amused at my sternness. He seemed to respect my unwillingness to talk about it though, and did not bring up guns again.

"I met Trahern in Bree. He is a Ranger, but not a Gondor Ranger, a northern Ranger," I explained, and Faramir nodded.

"They are said to be of Númenórean descent, the Men of the North."

I thought about asking what exactly Númenórean meant, but I was fairly sure it had something to do with Aragorn's lineage as King, and it was easier to just focus on the story. I continued, telling Faramir about meeting Trahern again in the forest outside Rivendell after two weeks of travel (it was easy to remember, after a moment of thought, how miserable I had been for much of that, and the homesickness for travel lessened). Faramir was particularly interested in the Elves and Rivendell, and I realized then he had never met one.

"The last Elves to come to Minas Tirith were before mine brother's birth. As the shadow has fallen on Gondor fewer and fewer travelers come. I have always desired to meet the fair Elves," he told me, his expression a little wistful.

"Yes," I agreed, "the Elves are fair. But they are strange, and hard to look upon," I shared with him. Bilbo hadn't felt this way, and I wondered if Faramir would. Was it only because I was not from Arda that I found Elves a little frightening, or was it the race of Men?
I told him about my months in Rivendell, and about meeting Bilbo. He didn't know what a hobbit was, but he jerked when I told him Men called them "Halflings".

"A Halfling! They go unmentioned in the histories of Gondor, but there is one in Rivendell?"

I didn't know why he was so interested, but I nodded along. "Yes, Bilbo Baggins. He is a very old hobbit. But he told me they prefer to be called hobbits rather than Halflings. Bilbo told me hobbits think Men are two times too big!"

I smiled, remembering Bilbo's good-natured grumbles about giants lumbering about. He had been quite amused when I shared a heavily abbreviated (because I had forgotten most of the story) version of *Gulliver's Travels*, in particular Lilliput and the giant's kingdom whose name I couldn't remember. He was entertained by my descriptions of people twelve times too small and twelve times too big.

Faramir seemed to think on Bilbo, but when I asked about it, he told me it was a tale for later and encouraged me to go on.

I kept talking, leading Faramir through my travels from Rivendell with Erynion all the way until Rohan. That was when I realized I would have to tell him about Baiard, and I felt a little awkward because I may have unintentionally broken the law and would then be admitting it to a lord.

"You said Captain Êomer sent you with one of his men to the Entwash?" Faramir prompted after I was silent too long.

"Um… yes!" I said hurriedly, embarrassed. "Yes, Êomer sent me with Baiard, a young soldier. Baiard had been injured in an orc attack. We traveled together only a few days before… Baiard fell ill."

Faramir stood up after a pause and moved to take the kettle from the low fire and poured it into a second cup, adding a couple leaves from a pouch. I let them seep as he came back and pressed it into my hands.

"The young soldier died?" He asked gently.

"Yes." Even though it had been nearly a year since his death, it had changed my outlook a lot on Middle Earth. I didn't think I would ever forget the night spent worrying in front of the fire, heaping blankets and trickling water down Baiard's throat, hoping and praying he would pull through. That helplessness had been deeply unsettling.

"His wound was infected," I explained, "And one night he came down with a fever and did not wake. By morning he had… passed. I… I did not know what to do, so I prayed for him and left him there. Then I came to Minas Tirith."

Faramir asked for more detail about my travel after Baiard's death, but thankfully did not pry about the young soldier and did not mention the horse or saddlebags that I took.

Eventually we moved past that, and I explained about getting my job at the Kinsey's household, and much to Faramir's interest told him a little bit about my pencil-pusher job before.

"So all women can read and write in your homeland?"

"Yes," I said, not wanting to get into any detail, "Bilbo taught me a little of Westron, but I have practiced much since I wrote this," I said, touching the rolled up corner of the parchment. "This is very bad," I admitted, a touch of pink in my cheeks.
Faramir chuckled, and I couldn't help frowning a bit. "I apologize," he said sincerely when he realized I didn't appreciate the laughter.

"No problem," I waved him off, not really offended, and he chuckled again. At my questioning look, he said, "I have never heard someone say 'no problem' after an apology."

"Oh! Um... sorry! In my home this is a common answer," I explained, feeling flustered a bit. I hadn't realized that as my language improved I would essentially "import" English terms and phrasing into Westron. No one had told me before that I said anything strange.

"No problem," Faramir responded with a smirk that made me laugh a little.

I shared with him then my meeting with Gandalf and how I suddenly remembered Middle Earth. This he was most fascinated by, particularly because I hadn't mentioned any of my foreknowledge before.

"Why did the name 'Frodo Baggins' break the spell?" He asked, moving to lean his elbows on his knees.

"I don't know, but Frodo is a famous name in my home."

"This is the same Frodo as in the letter?" Faramir asked, and I nodded. He leaned forward in his chair and unrolled the letter, flattened the corners under some books and a glass paperweight in the shape of an elephant. As I looked at it though, I realized it had four tusks instead of two, which was strange, and I picked it up to look at it further.

"It is a mûmak," Faramir said, "a great beast said to be used by the Haradrim in battle. No one in Gondor has ever seen one though."

I turned it over, admiring the work even as I marveled at the shape. "We have an animal like this called an 'elephant'. Except, it does not have this many..." I pointed at the tusks, unsure what they were called in Westron.

Faramir smiled, that interested light in his eyes again, and he told me the word before going on, "Truly? Are they as big as mûmakil are said to be? Some have said them to be a hundred feet tall."

"No no, not that big. But they are the biggest animals in the world. Except maybe the whale," I said, trying to remember which one was bigger. As Faramir opened his mouth, likely to ask about whales and elephants some more, I interrupted him, "But never mind that. Maybe you will see one of these... mume..."

"Mûmak," Faramir said with a smile. "Do you know this just as you know how it will end?"

I knew with this comment we were getting into the heart of the discussion, and so it was with good timing that a bell started to ring somewhere in the building. I looked up sharply, and Faramir was already rising from his chair.

"It is lunch time, and I think that calls for a break. Would you care to join me on the balcony for the meal?" He offered his hand, and I took it, amazed at how much more relaxed I was with him now. I'd been so nervous before, but now I only felt ravenously hungry. My meager breakfast had been forgotten.

The balcony of the study overlooked the mountains behind Minas Tirith and the view was breathtaking. Faramir opened the door and let the servants in to set up while he took our mugs to the table and he pulled out a chair for me. It had been a long while since I'd had such a fine meal.
—in fact, the last one I could remember like this was in Rivendell with Bilbo and Arasinya.

Faramir did not immediately sit at the table, but left the room and came back with two more rangers, talking over a map. I only heard bits and pieces about patrols, orc movements, and scouts. The rest of it was lost in army terminology I didn't know, so I ended up awkwardly sitting at the table until Faramir dismissed them and came over.

The lunch included marinated duck drizzled in a honey sauce, warm bread with a crusty outside and thick cream to dip it in. There were vegetables in a cold soup, and a fine wine on the table that quite delighted my taste buds. It had been so long since I'd drunk anything other than ale and tea.

We ate mostly in silence, as Faramir seemed to be thinking, whether about what I told him or the rangers I wasn't sure, and I was focusing on my table manners since I was sharing the table with a lord. The food was delightful and gone too soon, even though I felt full to bursting. I rested quietly with my drink as Faramir simultaneously ate and read a scroll a messenger had delivered. I enjoyed the peace and quiet here without the clamor of the lower levels.

"There is some Ranger matters I must attend to, Miss Maddie," Faramir said after he put down his knife and fork and took up the scroll. He indicated it with an almost regretful expression on his face, but I wasn't too disappointed. I had spent all morning talking, and now that I was full of good food I wouldn't mind a break and maybe a nap.

"We have not even begun to discuss the letter, but your tale was fascinating," he said, almost as an apology. I sat up a bit, worrying he maybe did not want to hear the rest after all. "I still wish to hear how you tie this to the letter. At the very least you have my attention."

"I understand if you do not believe me," I said slowly, chewing on my words, "But I will try to explain as best I can, and maybe you will trust me. I only hope Gandalf did," I said, thinking on the letter he'd left behind.

Faramir gave me that half-smile again. "Tales of world traveling are fantastical, I must admit. But if Gandalf believed you then I will have to think on this." I nodded, realizing he didn't mean we would finish this today but another time. I felt a bit of dread hit me as I realized I would have to return to the Kinsey's.

"I will summon you when I have the time, if that is alright?" He smiled at me across the table, and I found my lips quirking up of their own accord.

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Instead of going straight back to the Kinsey household, I loitered on the fifth level at that same terrace where I had felt that initial wave of travel homesickness. I was sure to be questioned thoroughly by the servants, and I wasn't relishing the idea of handing Lord Kinsey the sealed letter from Faramir explaining our discussion was purely academic. I was skeptical of how much that would change his opinion of me, even if Lord Faramir had signed and sealed it. It might not have mattered if the Steward himself delivered it—it might just condemn me more; as if I had Lord Faramir wrapped around my finger.

Still, I couldn't hide in the garden all day, and I slowly made my way back to the house, each step heavier than the last. When I eventually reached the kitchen garden I had to pause and take a deep breath hinted with fresh soil and vegetables before I mustered up the courage to go inside.

Of course Shelton was there with the other cook, and in a voice just a hair too loud said, "Maddie! You've returned from the esteemed lord."
Clarimond and Oriolda must have been upstairs otherwise they would have likely burst into the kitchen, but Everlid swept in quickly followed by Heaton. She scrutinized me for a moment before speaking.

"Weren't sure when you'd be coming back, but Lord Kinsey's said you're to have no duties today."

Everlid didn't ask any questions, but that wasn't surprising. In absence of the gossipy maidservants though Shelton was the first to ask.

"Well, how did it go? What did Lord Faramir want?"

"It was as I said," I told him, wondering how many times I was going to have to say this. "He only had questions about Gandalf and was quite busy with his Ranger work." I fudged the truth a bit by telling them I'd spent more time waiting than talking. Everlid shooed the others out after a handful more questions, luckily not any I could get angry about.

"Wait Everlid, I have a letter for Lord Kinsey from Lord Faramir." I handed her the sealed envelope, and she eyed it with distaste.

"You won't be talking to Lord Faramir again, will you?" She asked, holding the letter between worn fingers.

"He said he may have more questions for me," I admitted, putting my hands behind my back so I wouldn't wring them. "I don't know when though," I added.

She harrumphed, and I wondered why she was annoyed. I didn't get the chance to ask though as Clarimond and Oriolda bustled in, rags and brooms in hand. The moment I was spotted they made a beeline for me, and Everlid disappeared out into the main rooms.

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That night I slept fitfully, my mind churning over Faramir's reactions, what he must be thinking, and what to do from now on. I was almost disappointed Clarimond and Oriolda hadn't stayed up all night interrogating me on Faramir's clothes, the fineness of the room we were in, and all manner of detail I hadn't bothered to think about. They whispered about how he and his brother were unmarried, making them the most sought after bachelors in all of Gondor. Those comments made me remember vaguely that Faramir would marry, though I couldn't remember to who or whether Clarimond's giggling had made me imagine it.

For the next week there was tension between the servants and I, and most especially from the Kinsey family, but it lessened as I worked the same as before. I rarely saw any of the lord's family as it was, but I made a point to clean as quickly and quietly as possible and focus on parts of the house they visited rarely so I would avoid seeing them.

Everlid told me that Lord Kinsey had read the letter from Lord Faramir, but my brief run-ins with Lady Kinsey confirmed my fears. The letter did little to change their outlook on me, even if they believed there had been nothing sexual between Faramir and I. Heaton, surprisingly, was the one to whisper to me as I cleaned the upstairs reading room, that the Kinsey's felt it was most improper for someone of such low birth to be even talking with the son of the Steward. It was the hierarchical difference that rankled more than me personally. I had a sinking feeling in my gut this was how Everlid felt too.

Just as things were beginning to slip back into normality, a messenger from Faramir arrived, reviving the tension in the household. No one had thought I would be summoned again so soon,
and Lady Kinsey, who received the letter, looked down her nose at me when she told me the news.

"Lord Faramir expects the presence of Miss Maddie on the morrow, and formally requests that she be absolved of all duties for that day," she read from the missive, her overly painted mouth forming a small sneer that vanished just as quickly. "Should this inconvenience Lord Kinsey's household, Lord Faramir requests Lord Kinsey inform him of such and he will see to reparations."

The rest of that day was painfully awkward, with the whole staff whispering amongst themselves as to why Lord Faramir needed to see me again about Gandalf—their skepticism tangible. It didn't help that Clarimond was cooing about peasants and princes to Oriolda within earshot of the other servants.

Everlid wasn't as supportive either; her frown seemed to be a permanent thing whenever she looked at me. I started to feel ostracized by my fellow servants, and it was hard to sleep that night as I both dreaded and looked forward to talking to Faramir. In the grand scheme of things, the opinions of a handful of household servants were nothing, but it was hard to remember that when Oriolda and Clarimond shot me envious looks as we dressed for bed. I didn't want to worry about their petty thoughts, but it still hurt that my friends would push me aside like this.

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The next day was overcast, clouds swollen heavy with rain. I ate a fast breakfast, ignoring the murmurs of the other servants around me. I could hear the rain outside splattering the windows and cobblestone streets, and I ducked into the cupboard in the kitchen after a moment. There was an oiled cloak there that repelled some water (didn't beat modern raincoats, but at least I wouldn't be soaking wet, just lightly drenched) that I used for errands, so I shook it out and pulled it on over the dress Butterbur had given me, now stitched up neatly courtesy of Clarimond and Oriolda.

I resolutely ignored my frustration with their childishness and the gossip mongering of the other servants.

I hurried out with a muffled goodbye to Shelton, who only eyed me over the counter as he mixed together something. I was glad to be gone from the household, but I was in no real rush to reach Faramir. The rain was coming down quite hard now, and I quickly found the hood of the cloak to be very inadequate. While my shoulders and torso were fine, my legs were quickly drenched to the knee. Even though it was a bit chilly when I was so wet, I still couldn't bring myself to hurry on to the uppermost level. The sooner I got there, the sooner our talk would be done, and the sooner I'd be back at the Kinsey's.

While the city didn't smell too great in the rain, there was something beautiful about the snowy stones in this weather. They were particularly vivid when I passed homes and businesses with vines wound around their trellises. Like heavy ropes with leaves and flowers, they hung down to the ground; the colors of the blooms and the verdant vines were absolutely beautiful when pressed against the stone. I snagged a couple blossoms on my way up, lamenting that I didn't know how to make a crown of them.

When I reached the same checkpoint at the entrance to the sixth level another ranger was already waiting for me. His oil-slicked cloak looked a lot sturdier than mine; by this point in my dallying I was quite wet, and most especially my feet. I had the boots the Elves had given me, and tough as they were, they were still not sealed completely from the rain.

I must have looked quite bedraggled, because the ranger's eyebrows shot up when I introduced myself, but he led me back the same route through the sixth level and up until we were in the same geometric garden as before.
The clouds were a fascinating array of grey, but my escort pulled me away from looking out across the plains at the expanse of the storm, grumbling about wet feet. He walked me to the door of Faramir’s study before we both seemed to realize my appearance wasn’t quite worthy of the Steward’s son.

"Your coat, miss," the ranger said gruffly, and I unhooked the simple clasp and after a pause handed it to him. He shook it out before giving me a once over. The cloak had saved me from the worst of the rain, but I was still quite wet, and my shoes were leaving a growing puddle of water beneath me. My hair was also messy and soaked where it had been exposed to the storm; the hood had done little to protect it.

"Wait a moment," the ranger said, walking briskly down the hall and returning a moment later with a servant and a towel. I rubbed down my hair a bit and squeezed the ends to get some of the water out, but from about the knee down my dress was a lost cause, not to mention my boots.

The ranger and servant looked like they were trying to figure out a way to spare Lord Faramir from seeing his guest so wet, but the lord must have known we were there and got fed up with waiting. He opened the door, taking in the fussing servant, the exasperated ranger, and I.

"You look a bit wet, Miss Maddie," he said after a beat, smiling at the state of my dress. After all the tension at the Kinsey’s it was a relief to be treated more normally.

"There's a bit of rain, m'lord," I replied, then immediately felt embarrassed at how casual I was.

Faramir waved away the servant and ranger though, saying, "A little water matters not to me. Come inside, warm your feet by the fire. We have a long discussion ahead of us. Thank you, Baramond, for retrieving her."

The ranger bowed and left as the servant scuttled off, my soaking cloak in her hands. I just caught the look she shot me over her shoulder, and I almost groaned aloud at the thought of the rumors. If I were lucky this wouldn't leave the palace.

I settled in the same chair as before and, after insistence from Faramir and some awkward refusals from me, put my bare feet up near the fire. My boots rested on the stone floor to the side of the fireplace in a, likely vain, attempt to dry them out. The weather was still fairly warm, but it was mid-September and the rain brought cooler temperatures with it.

There were a kind of wooden shutter pulled down over the windows to the balcony, and the patter of rain on them was soothing. The room was stuffier though, but I didn't much mind. Faramir seemed not to care either, and shrugged off my apologies about the upholstering on this chair with my wet clothes.

"We may be interrupted at times by my rangers, but I do wish to hear the rest of this story."

I nodded, just happy he’d made the time. This time the letter was sitting tucked away on the mantle, and he pulled it down and spread it out again, using the same mûmak paperweight as before. He tapped the first line as he spoke, "What is this about a book?"

I leaned forward in the chair and started to explain. "In my homeland, there are… five books. They are about the history of Middle Earth and two adventures. Do you know that mountain east of Mirkwood? With dwarves? The first is about saving that mountain from a dragon."

Faramir looked at me with rapt attention. I could barely remember reading The Hobbit, but what I pieced together from memory and Bilbo's stories was enough for now.
"Erebor," Faramir supplied, "and the tale of the defeat of Smaug. Aye, I know of it. Who was this historian who wrote it?"

"Well," I shifted, wondering how to put this, "no one believed it was true. Arda is not a real place in my world." I had explained this before to Faramir, so he only nodded along. "So everyone believes it is made-up—fantasy. Middle Earth, elves, dwarves, and killing dragons. But the story is said to be written by Bilbo, and Bilbo was working on his book about the adventure when I met him, so I think it is the same book. Do you remember the hobbit before? In Rivendell?"

"Yes, of course."

"That was his story. The next three books are... well they are called The Lord of the Rings." This pronouncement was not met with quite the reaction I expected. Faramir looked nonplussed, and for a moment I was worried he didn't know about the rings of power.

"What lord is this? The story of the rings given to the great kings many an age ago?"

"Yes! Well no, it is about only one ring," I said, and that got a reaction.

"Isildur's Bane," Faramir murmured, his eyes far away and his expression grave.

Neither of those words was familiar to me though. "I don't understand."

Faramir paused to look me in the eye. "You say this is three books detailing a story of the One Ring?"

"Yes," I said, feeling confused.

"The Ring forged by Sauron?" He continued, and I nodded again. He seemed to gather himself before speaking. "Isildur's Bane is what we call the Ring of Power in Gondor. Isildur was a king of Gondor long ago. He fought in the War of the Last Alliance and slew Sauron with a broken sword." As Faramir spoke I could see the opening sequences of the first movie in surprising clarity: a huge battle in Mordor; Elves and Men fighting together; and then with the shattered sword Isildur killing Sauron. "He took the Ring for his own, but when Isildur was killed it was lost."

Yes, I remembered this story now. "I understand. This is the same ring."

"And what tale of the Ring of Power is recorded in these books?" There was a strange look in Faramir's eye, and I wasn't sure how to interpret it. I wasn't afraid though.

"That is the tale I will tell you—and one that is happening now." Faramir stared me down for a moment, his blue eyes narrowed in concentration, as he seemed to read my face.

"The Ring was long said to be lost for millennia. It has returned from the histories?"

"Yes, a creature found it, and took it to the Misty Mountains. Bilbo, on his quest to the Lonely Mountain, found it."

Faramir looked like he had a million more questions from there, but a knock on the heavy door interrupted us. Faramir stood as a ranger came in, and they put their heads together to whisper for a moment before Faramir issued some orders. "Be careful, and do not take unnecessary risks. You know the land better than they do—use this to your advantage."

I had no idea what they were talking about, but the ranger left with a nod and a polite bow, and Faramir returned to his seat. "Apologies, Miss Maddie, but it seems there are always orcs."
"No worries," I told him, and his mouth quirked at my English-ism.

I tapped the letter to return us to the discussion. "I have read these books, this is how I know of Arda."

"You are sure these books are correct?" Faramir asked skeptically, and I could only bite my lip.

"We must hope so, because the ending is good. If the books are wrong…"

"I understand," the lord said quickly, waving his hand. "And this quest? It is the story in these three books?" Faramir asked, pointing to my horribly misspelled word.

"Yes, this quest is the story. There will be, or was, a big meeting in Rivendell. Dwarves, Elves, hobbits, and Lord Boromir will be there. They will decide to send nine people from each race to take the Ring to Mordor."

"Boromir will be there?" Faramir said sounding surprised, his eyebrows up.

"Yes," I said, baffled. "He left for Rivendell months ago in the summer. He will be at the Council."

Faramir's face morphed into a smile, but there was some strange light in his eyes. "So you do know what you are talking about."

I realized then that I had been tricked. Obviously as Boromir's brother Faramir knew about the other's mission; he had just wanted to see if I did.

I sighed and Faramir reached over like he might pat my hand before rethinking it. "Our father sent Boromir to Rivendell seeking answers. We both had a dream of a poem that mentions both Isildur's Bane and a Halfling."

I had totally forgotten about the reason for Boromir's leaving, but as Faramir said it I did recall it.

"Yes, there will be a quest to destroy the One Ring, and Frodo," at this I pointed at his name on the letter, "will be that Halfling."

"Why a Halfling?"

"Hobbit," I correctly absently. "Hobbits are… resistant to the Ring. It is very powerful," I tried to explain. Faramir didn't seem pleased with the answer, but he nodded anyway when I waved my hands and told him Gandalf knew better than I.

"Do you know if Boromir has reached Rivendell?" I asked. I didn't know when the Council of Elrond was, but I could only hope Boromir would send word of his arrival to Gondor, or at least that he had joined the Fellowship. Or was that secret? I couldn't recall.

"No word has reached us of him, though my brother is strong," Faramir said. "If you say he is at this council, then I have no reason to fear for him in the wilds, now do I?" There was something sly about that statement, and I knew he was questioning my foreknowledge. Which was fair, really, given I had no proof. Until events lined up with what I said, no one would believe me.

Choosing to set those thoughts aside for now, I explained to Faramir further about the Ring and how it could only be destroyed in the volcano in Mordor (or "mountain with fire inside" because somehow I had neglected to learn the word for volcano in Westron). I told him too about how the Fellowship was made of nine members from all the races to help him do this. When I told him Boromir would join them a myriad of emotions flittered across Faramir's face.
"My brother would be an excellent choice for such a quest, but it is also a mission with no good end. You say the Ring will be destroyed, but what of the members?"

I felt something catch in my throat, the earnest worry and love in Faramir's eyes for his brother overwhelming. Unbidden, I remembered Baiard's still body, and briefly my mind turned to his family. Did the Rohirrim ever find him?

"The Nine Walkers, they... there are many battles. It is a long journey and..."

Faramir's body language changed into hard lines at my fumbling answer, and I was suddenly reminded that this scholarly man was really a soldier even if he wore no armor today. "This is what you mean by saving people," he stated, referring to the last line of my letter.

"...Yes," I said softly, nervous and intimidated all over again.

He sighed, running his hands through his hair, and I felt a coil wrap around my heart as he looked at me with a penetrating stare. "Can my brother be saved?"

I knew it was pointless to lie, so I didn't try. "I will try to save him."

"Let me help. I can send men to aid them, and my rangers are discreet. I have resources I could call upon to help send them safely on to Mordor. What happens in that cursed place though..."

He seemed to realize the enormity of the quest in that moment, and he stared into the low fire, his mind obviously running through scenario after scenario. I couldn't imagine what he must be thinking, knowing his brother would be chosen to go on this suicide mission.

"I promise you, Faramir, I will do everything I can to help the Nine Walkers—" I was careful not to specify that only Boromir would die "—but it is... delicate. Please let me finish explaining and then we can talk about armies and soldiers. And please... Boromir is important. I fear if he does not go on this quest then it will fail."

He looked at me searchingly, not as a lord, or a soldier, but as a brother. I swallowed dry, thinking of my own family. "But you will seek to help him? If it is within your power you will do it?"

Nothing about that was begging; it was exacting.

"I promise Faramir," I said, ignoring the lingering doubt about my conviction to this. "If I am able then I will. I only ask in return that you tell me before doing anything to change this."

"I will hold you to that," he said grimly, and stood abruptly to retrieve the kettle from the fire and make tea. I gave him the moment to regroup because I needed it too. I had not intended for him to find out about Boromir, and I was unsure how to make this work.

"Tell me about Frodo," he said as he sat back down, offering me the second cup. I blew on the tea to cool it and started to give him a shortened version of Frodo's journey to Rivendell. When I explained the "black soldiers" I had written of, Faramir's face darkened.

"Ringwraiths," he said in what might have been a snarl on another man. "Fell beasts they are, foes unleashed from Mordor. Rumor of their passing came to us, but no man could go before them. You say this Aragorn fought them?"

I wasn't entirely sure how much of Weathertop I remembered from the movie versus the book, but I knew Ringwraiths—that's what they were called!—could be killed. Hadn't Eowyn and one of the hobbits killed one?
"Yes, and they can be killed. Just... it's not easy, and their weapons are very dangerous. Frodo was stabbed and only Lord Elrond was able to save him."

Another ranger interrupted us again with a pile of scrolls. There was some brief talk of Osgiliath and orcs, but I felt a lot more went unsaid because of my presence.

When Faramir returned I went into more detail about the forming of the Fellowship, as we'd gotten distracted by mention of Boromir before. "There is one elf, Legolas from Mirkwood, and a dwarf, Gimli, and Lord Boromir. And then there is Gandalf and four hobbits, and the last is Aragorn."

"On what basis did Lord Elrond choose to send four hobbits? Would it not be wiser to send more able warriors? And this man Aragorn, he is important," Faramir said shrewdly, and in that moment I regretted his intelligence.

I wasn't sure how to broach Aragorn's lineage, but it seemed like there was nothing for it. It's hardly like I could keep it a secret now if I intended to finish the story. It would be quite the omission if I failed to mention that Gondor would have a King.

"Aragorn is a Northern ranger." I began, "like Trahern, who I told you about. He is... well, he will be King of Gondor."

Faramir was a lot steadier than I was, because I probably would have dropped the mug of hot tea all over my lap if I'd been in his position. As it was, he looked at me both startled and suspicious. "He is Isildur's heir?"

"Yes," I agreed, realizing also that phrasing was why the name Isildur was so familiar to me. "There is some poem about it and the broken sword."

"He is a good man?" Faramir asked after a long pause, and I was thankful he was so even-tempered because I wasn't sure how someone in line to basically rule Gondor would feel about being usurped by some guy from the north. Faramir's esteem in my eyes went up a few notches.

"One of the best," I confirmed. "He is an old friend of Gandalf's too," I added, just to sweeten it. Faramir looked caught somewhere between thoughtful and broody, so eventually I kept talking.

"As for the four hobbits," I said in a horrible transition, but thankfully one that Faramir followed without comment, "I don't know why Lord Elrond agreed to send them. Elves... know things sometimes." It was a totally lame answer, but Elven wisdom was hard to argue with.

After sipping more of the herbal tea, I continued on with the story of the Fellowship, including their trek down into Moria. I told Faramir about Gandalf's fall and that fire-shadow demon—and the lord only seemed slightly more comforted when I told him Gandalf would be resurrected. Then I continued on to Lothlórien and the Lady of the Wood, which sparked questions about her and the Lothlórien Elves I couldn't answer. I was almost out of tea by this time, and I was thankful for the respite from talking as lunch was called.

"It seems I have quite a bit to think on. But there is much more to the story?"

Now that Faramir knew about Boromir's death I wasn't sure how to approach the splitting of the Fellowship. I also couldn't remember as much detail of the other books, as all the battles started to get jumbled together, and that might be problematic.

"There is more but... I do not remember as much, and it is very complicated."

I eyed the food the servants had set on the far table, my belly grumbling, but Faramir was still
talking, and I didn't want to be rude and start before him.

He glanced at the desk piled with scrolls and maps and seemed to visibly deflate. At my look, he chanced a half-smile. "I am Captain of the Ithilien Rangers, and while this means I go out with my men often, it also means I must read all the missives and reports. It is tiring work, and I much prefer a blade in my hand and an orc on the end."

I nodded understandingly, probably more than he knew given my previous job at home (though the part about blades and orcs I couldn't relate to). Day in and day out of paperwork would make anyone go batty.

Thankfully Faramir moved to the table and pulled out my chair before sitting down too. I waited until he started before digging into my food. Today I was able to enjoy a savory pot roast with warm potatoes drizzled in oil with rosemary and sage. The smell wafting from the food was enough to make my mouth water. There was more crusty bread, this time with raisins in it, and more sweet wine that paired wonderfully with the buttery vegetables and meat. I managed to hold back inappropriate noises of pleasure, but it was a close thing.

"Do you find your work at the Kinsey's rewarding?" Faramir asked as I dipped my bread in the juices of the meat on my plate, wondering if he would notice if I snuck some of the delicious bread in my pack.

"Hm? Oh! Um… not really. Cleaning is… well it pays the…” They didn't really have "bills” in Middle Earth, so my phrasing was poor and I hadn't really thought through my answer, but Faramir seemed to understand because he chuckled a bit.

"What would you do if you could do anything?"

I tore my bread slowly as I thought about that. In Middle Earth I really had no idea. There were a million answers I could give back at home, but here?

"I don't know," I finally settled, frowning. "There is not much choice here for women." Most women I saw here either worked as maids or manned storefronts alongside husbands. The medieval ages wasn't known for its gender equality.

"Yes, but a family is important right?"

"Yes, of course," I frowned further then, feeling suspicious of where this was going. "Women can do many things though, and in my homeland they can do all the jobs a man can do. They can work and own homes and are perfectly respectable even if they do not marry or have children,” I emphasized, and when Faramir laughed I was startled.

"I meant no offense," he said, cutting into his piece of the roast. "I can tell how different your world is, and I have no doubt of women's worth."

I blushed at my outburst, jumping to conclusions like that.

After a couple more bites he spoke up again. "Did Lord Kinsey receive my letter?"

"Yes," I said shortly, chewing on a bite of asparagus a little more than necessary to avoid further comment. I didn't want to think about the Kinsey family's expressions when I returned tonight. And if Faramir wanted to finish this talk in a third meeting then that would just be twisting the knife.

The lord must have sensed something was off though, because he put down his knife and fork. "All is well? If they are not forgiving of this incursion of mine I can step in," he offered, and I
shook my head quickly.

"No, no, it's no concern of yours. Let me worry about it."

Faramir's eyebrow shot up, and I realized belatedly I'd admitted to there being a problem and worrying about it. I picked up my wine glass and fervently hoped this was stronger stuff than last time.

Faramir gave me a look when I took a bigger sip than was probably polite, but didn't say more as we went back to eating. My cheeks were red, but not from the alcohol.

After lunch was eaten and servants arrived to clear away the plates, Faramir again explained he had ranger duties to attend to, and told me he would summon me again when he could.

"I fear I may be leaving soon on patrol, however, so it may be many weeks."

"That's quite alright," I said, not sure what the feeling in my stomach was. "Your duties are more important."

"Try to stay dry on your return," he said as a farewell. I said my goodbyes too, before another ranger came to accompany me to the sixth level again. The rain was still coming down, though lighter than the previous downpour, but neither my cloak nor my boots had the time to dry completely so I quickly had wet feet again.

After I left the ranger at the sixth level gate I slowly headed back to the Kinsey's, turning over the conversation in my mind. I had a lot of thinking to do regarding the Fellowship's journey and Boromir's death. I also started to wonder about leaving Minas Tirith and where I might go. It would have to wait until Faramir and I talked again, but by then it would be autumn, and the roads were still unsafe. At least the Council of Elrond hadn't happened yet—or Boromir hadn't sent a message. The impending Council felt like the start of the countdown, but to what I didn't know.
(Not) Over the River but Through the Woods

Chapter Summary

Maddie leaves Minas Tirith but runs into some trouble on the way. Middle Earth may not have knights, but at least someone on a steed saves her.

Chapter Notes

Writer's Note: I apologize if the last chapter was a little boring; the conversation with Faramir wasn't meant to be nearly as long but it got away from me. I'd also like to note that Maddie is an unreliable narrator. What she assumes others to think is not necessarily true, and there are details she misses or doesn't understand that are happening around her. So be a bit skeptical of her perspective of conversations and other people's actions. Is Faramir buying her story, or is that her projecting what she wants? I've also included a little hint of a character you'll be seeing later—you might recognize him if you've seen The Hobbit.

Lastly, some readers have noted Maddie's (possibly overly) reticent outlook on changing things. I ask you to take to heart Lady Galadriel's words: "The quest stands upon the edge of a knife. Stray but a little and it will fail."

Dates: The Council of Elrond is October 25, 3018, and Maddie leaves Minas Tirith October 29th. However, the Fellowship does not leave Rivendell until December 25th.

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Three weeks went by at a snail's pace, and for me the Kinsey household fluctuated between agony and tentative neutrality. My errands were significantly reduced, and I was given most of my duties in the kitchen and gardens where I was least likely to be a bother to the lord's family. Clarimond and Oriolda were almost back to normal, though conversations were still rather stilted. Both girls seemed torn between envy and anger that I was conversing with the son of the Steward.

Though I understood on a basic level the household's disdain for me and my "uppity" ways—talking to a lord of such esteem when I had no lineage to speak of—it was still hard for me to grasp their anger. Why did it even matter to them? It's not like it affected them at all!

It was frustrating and disheartening to see how the other servants were more aloof with me, and I felt they were taking cues from the family and from Everlid, who had only marginally relaxed when two weeks had gone by without word from Lord Faramir. I didn't tell her that he and I were going to meet again.

I cleaned, swept, dusted, picked fruit, weeded and went about my chores, and if I avoided eye contact with my coworkers and spoke only when necessary than that was my own business. I was
just lucky to still have the job, though I had a nasty suspicion Lord Kinsey was afraid I would complain to Lord Faramir if he fired me.

This tension in the household though made my wanderlust grow. Every time I did manage to leave the house my eyes inevitably went beyond the walls of Minas Tirith. I dreamed sometimes of walking through trees and plains, and I knew it was only a matter of time.

And then the summons came.

The same as before, a message was delivered by a soldier into Lady Kinsey's hands. She took one look at the seal and pursed her bright red lips and called me out of the dining area where I had been—ironically—setting up for lunch just like the first time Lord Faramir came. At least I didn't have a plate in my hands this time.

Once word spread throughout the household that I was meeting with Lord Faramir again, it was like one step forward and a hundred steps back. Everlid scowled, Clarimond and Oriolda immediately broke into a flurry of whispers, and I overheard more than a few distasteful comments. It wasn't the first time I'd heard the servants saying those kinds of things about me, and I knew it wouldn't be the last.

Unsurprisingly, I dreamt that night of running down to the first level of Minas Tirith and sprinting right out the front gate, not stopping until the White City was the size of my thumb.

The next morning I left with bread stuffed in my mouth, a couple stolen blackberries from the garden, and no goodbye. It was terribly cloudy as I wound up to the sixth level, deliberately taking as much time as I could. I'd had three weeks to work out my story, and I knew what I needed to say. I also knew what I had to convince Faramir of: I needed to leave for Rivendell, and I was hoping he would go with me.

I knew he had duties here, and given how hard he worked I couldn't imagine it would be easy to leave, but he would be invaluable on the road and planning ahead. I intended to appeal to his sense of brotherly love, his interest in Elves, and hopefully, his ability to see the big picture.

We met the same as before, and he looked tired but happy to see me. "Miss Maddie, please come in and have a seat. I'm afraid I have an appointment after lunch but I hope you can finish the story today."

I was ushered in, handed a cup of tea, and Faramir took his usual seat. I couldn't fail to notice how many more scrolls were on his desk this time, and the weariness around his eyes. My mind flitted to the war; he had to be on the front lines given his rank.

"Is everything alright?"

"Yes, yes," he waved my concern away with a half-smile. "I much prefer patrols, but it means I have to review everything I missed: all the reports from other military commanders; meetings with the Steward; troop movements and other news."

I noticed how distantly he referred to his father, and I wondered if that was for formality with me or another reason. I couldn't remember much of Faramir's relationship with his father, but I had thought them to be close. I remembered him being upset when Faramir was thought dead… and then he was lit on fire? I just remembered a lot of drama.

I didn't pursue it though, since it was hardly my place, and instead dove right into the story.

I had, after much thought, decided to omit the details of Boromir's death. As much as I trusted Faramir I wasn't sure how objective he could be in regards to his brother. Let him think Boromir
dies in a great battle between armies—if he could do something to stop or minimize those battles than that could save thousands of lives. I would worry (agonize/struggle/wrestle) with saving Boromir.

"The Nine Walkers take boats from the Elves and go south on the Anduin. Then while they are resting on land they are attacked by giant orcs. There is a lot of fighting, and the orcs kidnap two of the hobbits. Frodo and Sam escape into the river and cross to the other side."

"The eastern shore of the Anduin is nothing but wasteland and bogs," Faramir said, his brow crinkled. "And why would they go alone?"

"The fighting," I reminded him, but I was careful not to make eye contact, instead sipping my tea. I didn't want to tell Faramir about Boromir's weakness with the Ring. I felt like that might anger him. "While Frodo and Sam ran, the rest of the Nine killed most of the giants orcs. But the two other hobbits—Merry and Pippin—were kidnapped by some of the giant orcs. When the rest realized the two hobbits were taken they chased them across Rohan."

Faramir had some trouble keeping the hobbits straight, but I managed to explain the attack and consequences without mentioning Boromir's end. I called that a win.

"Where on the plains would the orcs hide from the sun?" Faramir interrupted, and I stopped short.

"What?"

"The sun. Orcs despise daylight," he said, and I actually had to pause for a moment. I had no idea that was true.

"Oh," I just said, and repeated it once more. "Oh… I don't know." I could feel Faramir's sharp gaze on me.

That killed some of my momentum, but I moved past the orcs and told Faramir about Aragorn leading the Fellowship across the plains on a wild goose chase. I shared how Merry and Pippin met the walking trees—Faramir cocked an eyebrow at that, but I couldn't really explain them any better. Then I told him how Gandalf returned in Fangorn Forest, which Faramir asked a dozen questions about.

"I don't know how," I said, a little exasperated at all the questions I couldn't answer, "Gandalf is a wizard. Magic?"

"Why did he return as Gandalf the White? Saruman the White is still alive, is he not?"

This forced me to explain that Saruman was evil, which much to my surprise was met with great skepticism. Faramir, it seemed, had a lot of respect for wizards if his opinion of Gandalf was anything to go by, and he didn't much like hearing that Saruman was an unsavory character. "Saruman the White is a member of the White Council," he told me, sounding almost personally offended, and I was taken aback by his tone. "My own father has sought his council before. His power and knowledge are legend. Gandalf too holds him in the highest regard." He frowned at me, putting down his mug while I felt liked I'd been unhorsed. This resistance wasn't expected. Faramir hadn't so much as blinked at the idea of hobbits toting around magically evil rings and Balrogs. He'd even been totally straight-faced with me despite my assertions of being from a different world. And yet Saruman turning evil was beyond his belief?

"Saruman becomes…" How do say corrupted? "Different. Bad. Because of Sauron. He makes orcs in Isengard. He becomes evil. He even trapped Gandalf," I said, but I felt like my earnestness was putting him off more by the look on his face.
"When?"

He sounded so cool that I crossed my arms and managed not to make a frustrated huff. I couldn't remember when that had happened, but I remembered Gandalf sitting on the top of that pointy tower and flying away on a giant Eagle.

"I don't remember, but I promise it is true."

Faramir seemed to read something else in my exasperation. "I can believe some of this story—the Ring, the Nine Walkers—because some of what you have said is true. Boromir did go to Rivendell, and that dream spoke of Halflings and doom, but there seems to be more to this story than you know what to do with."

I looked at him confused, sitting up slightly in my seat from where I was slouching. That hadn't sounded good. "What do you mean?"

"Finish your tale, if you would, and then we might speak of this."

I narrowed my eyes at him without realizing it, before my expression cleared. Saruman's evil was pushing the limits of what Faramir would believe, but I had to convince him. I needed him to come with me to the Council of Elrond, and I needed his help.

"Well… after the trees destroy Saruman's tower, Aragorn, Gandalf and the rest go to Edoras."

I told him about the sick king of Rohan, and how Gandalf fixed him—I didn't tell him the king was sick because of Saruman because that wouldn't have been well received clearly—and then about that big battle at a castle.

This took quite a bit of explaining. "It is a giant battle. There is this castle with tall walls," I used my hands to sort of emphasize, though I actually had barely any idea what I was talking about. "And the Rohirrim were inside. The super-orcs attacked—"

"Super-orcs?" Faramir said, and he looked like he was smothering a laugh.

"Yes, the giant orcs. The same ones who took Merry and Pippin. They're… super big and super strong. More than other orcs… I think."

Faramir nodded along like he was humoring my bizarreness, and some of the strain from our disagreement about Saruman bled away.

I barely remembered the battle I was describing except for lots of rain and fighting and that shot of Legolas riding a board down some steps while shooting arrows—I was pretty sure that was the same battle, and I was also pretty sure that hadn't happened in the book.

After stressing the importance of that battle, I explained how Gandalf rode to Minas Tirith and met with the Steward. Faramir was quiet through this part, as I told him about the Rohirrim and Aragorn joining later, and the big battle in front of Minas Tirith.

He had some logistical questions, but otherwise sat silently as I switched to Frodo and Sam's journey, describing that gross little creature they traveled with.

"You met them too, I'm pretty sure," I told him, swirling the dregs of tea in my cup. Faramir sat up a bit from where we'd both been steadily slouching. "I think there was a battle or something, and you let them go."

"This is all you remember?" He asked, his look a tad sharp.
"It's easy to mix up all the battles. And it's been a long time since I read the books. They are very long and complicated," I defended, but Faramir seemed to only be half-listening, looking away.

"It will be lunch soon; finish, if you can."

I felt rushed by his attitude today, but I tried to get to the end quickly.

"Frodo and Sam climbed into this cave in the mountains around Mordor. They fought a giant spider," I shuddered a bit, remembering this part better. I hated spiders, and I never forgot reading about the wicked spiders in Mirkwood—that's one place I would definitely be avoiding—and the spider Frodo and Sam fought.

"Cirith Ungol?" Faramir asked, and I could only shrug.

"I do not remember the name." I tried to remember, but it had honestly been years, and the last movie had always been too serious for me to really enjoy.

"It is said there is a great beast in Cirith Ungol that bars all passage. Perhaps it is this spider you speak of?"

I honestly had no idea, but I agreed with him and he chewed on that as I hit the climactic end.

"Aragorn takes his army—not many, but an army—to the Black Gates. Frodo and Sam are almost at the mountain, and Aragorn tries to help by starting fighting. I think it is to draw all the orcs away from Mount Doom so the hobbits can sneak in. They get inside and there is a fight over the fire. The Ring is very powerful, you see, and after many months Frodo doesn't want to let it go. But the little creature with them fights with Frodo and takes the Ring, but falls into the fire."

As far as storytelling goes, I was a resounding failure. Faramir almost looked bored, so I skipped right ahead to Frodo waking up in Minas Tirith. I was only able to tell him that with the Ring destroyed Sauron died and the orcs ran away or something (or Aragorn and the army killed them all, I wasn't really sure).

He peppered me with questions about the armies and battles, about how long Aragorn had to fight before Frodo destroyed the Ring. I unfortunately couldn't answer most of the questions, but I tried. In the end though I was left emphasizing one thing:

"All these parts work together: The Nine has to break up; Rohan has to survive the battle; Gondor has to survive the battle on the plains—"

"Pelennor Fields," Faramir added, and I shot him a dirty look for interrupting what was possibly the most important part of all these talks we'd had.

"-Pelennor Fields; and Aragorn has to go to the Black Gates and distract Sauron. If any of those are different I think the whole thing will be different—and then, well, Sauron wins."

This was the sum of all my foreknowledge, of all the thinking I had done since meeting Gandalf and Faramir. These key events had to fall into place. What I wanted to do was to avoid the smaller skirmishes and to come out of these major battles with more survivors. I wanted everyone in the Fellowship to keep hope even if telling them the story would not be wise. And I wanted Boromir to see the end of the journey.

I told Faramir some of my goals, but he didn't look nearly as enamored as I had hoped. "It is always admirable to want to save lives, but I am unsure how you hope to achieve this," he said, and I deflated some.
"What do you think should be done?" I asked. "I know it is a tall order, but perhaps if the Elves can be persuaded to help, and if Gondor helps Rohan then—"

"Tall order?"

"Oh," I blushed, another one of those English-isms. "I mean, it will not be easy, but I want to try."

Faramir settled back in his chair, looking at the letter I had so innocently written before with a long stare. "I would need much thought on this matter. There are many questions I still have, loose ends you see."

He looked at me then, and I remembered suddenly his comments before, his skepticism of Saruman the Evil.

"You do not believe me." I might have been madder if the thought hadn't made me so glum. I knew it was crazy—certainly I had wrestled with the idea of my own insanity when I'd realized where I was.

"It is a tale," Faramir seemed to agree, but didn't say more. He didn't really need to though, now did he? The Lord of the Rings was a storybook, filled with drama, heroes, adventures, and more magic than you could shake a sword at. Of course it sounded absurd when told as seriously but brokenly as I had. All while I tried to convince him it was real—and happening right now.

"Why did you ask me to finish it if you did not believe it?" For one fleeting moment I thought it might be for laughs, but the story certainly wasn't funny, nor did I think I was a particularly amusing nutcase. That also seemed wildly out of character for the equitable Faramir.

"I still believe Gandalf left that letter there for a reason, and I wanted to hear what you had to say." I wondered if he regretted that a bit, given how long it had taken. "All the things you wish to change are all near the end of your story. It is interesting that you have yet to really become involved in the events."

He had a point, I knew, as I looked down at my lap and folded hands, rubbing the wrinkles in the skin. They weren't calloused, but they weren't as soft as before. Even the little scrubbing and gardening I had done for the last year had changed my hands. I didn't even think anymore about the dirt under my fingernails.

"I find it curious," he continued, his voice gentling until I looked up and met those clear blue eyes, "that you did not know of these books until you reached Gondor. You met all these people, traveled to all these places, walking ignorant. And now, you are far from the beginnings of the journey. What does that mean?"

I looked at him helplessly. He had defined in such simplicity all my worries and fears. Why was I here and not in Rivendell? What had driven me so far south? Why hadn't I remembered any of The Lord of the Rings until Gandalf was one foot out the door? Why did this world seem to conspire against me?

I felt like crying again, but I stifled the choking in my throat and stared hard at the carpet until I was sure there was no chance of tears.

"I don't know," I said, looking back up at him, "I really don't know. Maybe I'm not supposed to help. Maybe I'm not here for any reason at all. I don't know why I came so long before the Council of Elrond; I don't know why I felt this urge to come to Gondor. I don't understand the magic that has brought me to Middle Earth and made me forget the truth for so long. I don't understand any of it."
My eyes were back on my lap, and I heard the rustle of his clothes as Faramir stood up and put his hand on my shoulder. "I want to help but I'm scared," I admitted, and I buried my face in my hands, taking a couple deep breaths to help fight the urge to cry. I had done plenty of crying in Middle Earth, and I didn't want to do anymore, especially not in front of Faramir.

He put his other hand on my other shoulder and crouched in front of me. His thumbs rubbed circles as he waited patiently for me to collect myself.

"I cannot say I believe it all," he started when I finally put my hands back in my lap, though I still didn't make eye contact, "but I am glad you told me. Perhaps you are meant to wait here until the Nine Walkers come to you, or perhaps, like the rest of us, some things are not meant to be known."

"Yes," I murmured, agreeing absently. "What will you do though?"

"I will think, analyze, and make a logical conclusion. This is the basis of any good strategy," he said, that half-smile quirking up again. I knew he was trying to cheer me up some. "I will try to understand what Gandalf meant by leaving the letter. And if you are right... if the Ring is coming and there is a war with the Great enemy ahead of us... then the Nine Walkers has an informed ally."

I couldn't tell you how relieved it made me feel to know that Faramir would even think of believing me. His skepticism had hit me deeply, and to know that he would help—especially as the proof accumulated—took a great pressure off my shoulders. I hadn't realized how stressed it had made me feel knowing that I might be the only person who would know and be willing to do anything.

I smiled at him, and he smiled back, his hands slipping off my shoulders. "We have a saying in my homeland," I said, my voice thankfully not as thick as it had been before, "Where there is a will, there is a way."

Faramir stood from his crouch, his smile still on his face. "That is a good saying. I should think if you shared it with the Nine Walkers it might bring them some cheer."

My smile might have gotten bigger, though I'm not sure how. Even if he was probably only saying it for my benefit, I could still feel that thrum of relief deep inside. Somebody was on my side.

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Despite how happy I walked out of it, this conversation with Faramir would not fix anything really. In fact, I didn't even realize until I was standing at the kitchen door fighting the smile on my face (I did not need the servants to assume the worst by the skip in my step) that I'd totally forgotten to tell him about my plans to go to Rivendell.

While he hadn't said anything about meeting again, I decided to assume that once he had thought things through he would contact me. Even if it were only to say he wanted to wait for more proof, I would take that time to convince him about going to Rivendell. While I only felt the stirrings of the urge to leave it was nothing like before—I wasn't ready to walk out the front gate just yet.

That urge did double though as I vacillated between misery and burning anger dealing with my fellow servants. There were several snide remarks about my "dalliances" with high lords I overheard, among other unkind comments. My mother had certainly taught me not to snark back, but it was sometimes a close thing.
Shelton was rather vocal in saying how suspicious he found it that a farm girl from Rohan got set up in a good lord's household. I was more disappointed that Everlid, who knew perfectly well that Merewald had gotten me the job under respectable circumstances, hadn't said a word. Surely her opinion of me couldn't have become that low?

It all came to a head though two weeks after my last meeting with Faramir. Everlid was standing in the kitchen, hands on her hips, frowning over a paper on the table. I had just come from the servant's quarters where the buckets and mops were, and hadn't yet been spied by Shelton and Everlid.

"There's errands to be run, Shelton, but Lord Kinsey has Heaton out with the young master for lessons."

"Well 'ya can't send that Maddie," he said with an audible scoff, and I felt my hand clench tightly around the mop handle.

"No, this whole business with the Lord is most unbecoming," Everlid said. "I don't know what the Steward's son is thinking, but if she had any sense she'd put her foot down for the sake of her reputation. And the stories out of the palace!" Everlid sounded downright indignant, and not because of the slander against me but because of my seeming lack of common sense!

"Don't think she's foolin' no one with her talks of the Grey Wizard. Where a man finds his pleasure is his business, but she oughtin' have a little decency and go discreet like about it," Shelton added in, and Everlid's silence to his misogyny was the last straw.

"How dare you say that?" I said sharply, stepping out from the shadowed doorway I'd been standing in. "I can't believe you would think so low of me Shelton! And especially you Everlid! I didn't ask for this, and if you had any decency you'd take my word over a pile of horseshit gossip. There is nothing going on between Lord Faramir and I." I was breathing hard and had a grip on the mop like I might swing it if either so much as twitched.

"I know he's some hoity-toity lord and I'm just a maidservant, but that doesn't excuse your talk! I won't be insulted by being called some blatant whore!" I spat that out, seething over Shelton's implication that if I'd been subtle about my visits with Faramir things would have been okay. As though it was my fault at all that the man had knocked on the front door and announced to the whole family he wanted to speak to me.

I dropped the mop and bucket, spilling water on the floor and my shoes, before marching back down the hall to the servant's quarters. There was nothing that was going to keep me here anymore. I couldn't believe the hubris and ridiculous assertions of these people! It didn't matter where a man finds his pleasure? My reputation but not his?

I pulled my pack out and threw in the handful of loose possessions I had around the room, violently stuffing the dresses and the whole lot together. I took my money pouch from under my mattress and stuffed it into the pocket of my dress and furiously wiped my face of the angry tears. Then I headed back down the hall to the kitchen and back door.

Unsurprisingly, my outburst had drawn Clarimond and Oriolda downstairs, and the governess was there too. Everyone seemed to freeze at the sight of me with my pack on my shoulder. The expressions of surprise on all of their faces, like I could possibly react any differently to their disparaging gossip, just made me angry all over again.

"If you all think so low of me and would spread such lies then you are terrible friends! I don't have to stay and listen to you talk behind my back." With that parting shot I went out the backdoor and through the kitchen garden out onto the street. To my surprise Clarimond followed after me.
"Wait, Maddie!"

I turned around, pursing my lips at the maid. "I never thought you'd dallied with him, you know," she said. "Not really."

"You still said awful things, Clarimond," I snapped at her. "Friends don't act like that. And I can't stay here any longer."

Clarimond had the courtesy to look shamefaced. She was not a particularly bright girl, nor an overly kind one, but she wasn't without a heart, and I think she and Oriolda underestimated how upset they and the rest of the staff had made me.

"What will you do?"

"I'm leaving Minas Tirith." And I planned to. I would need to get supplies, and possibly a horse if I could afford it, but I was going to Rivendell. I would try to get a message to Faramir, but I knew in that moment I was leaving with or without him. I needed to get out of Gondor.

"To where? It's not safe!"

"Rohan," I said, though it was a lie. Clarimond worried her lower lip but to her credit didn't try to dissuade me further.

"Can you forgive me?" she asked tentatively.

"I won't hold a grudge, but you hurt me Clarimond. You and Oriolda and the rest." I wasn't going to be a softy about this, I thought resolutely. "I'm not happy with you, but I won't be angry if we meet again." I left without seeing her reaction.

I went down to the first level, and sought out Rylan, who was more than a little surprised to see me show up at his shop with my full pack over my shoulder. "Miss Maddie!" he said in surprise, and Adelaide appeared in the back doorway with a grin. "What are you doing here? And with all your things?"

"I'm leaving Rylan. But I was hoping you knew a good inn and a place to get food and such for the trip."

"But the roads—"

"I don't care. I am leaving one way or another."

He nodded slowly, and Adelaide looked shocked. "Will you come back?" the little girl asked, running over to me.

I petted her curls and smiled a little for her, foul mood not totally erased just yet. "I think so."

Rylan recommended a place to stay called the Silver-Laden Duck. It was a good, clean establishment, but perhaps because of the name or just some twist, the week I stayed overlapped with some dwarven visitors. They were a noisy bunch and excellent entertainment that helped to distract me from the Kinsey's (I got a formal message from them confirming I left of my own free will) and the wait until I left for Rivendell.

There was a pub on the first floor much like the Prancing Pony in Bree, and that first night the proprietor gave me a seat on the nearside of the bar where the pipe-smoke was the thinnest. Throughout dinner I and the other humans were treated to rowdy renditions of songs and loud discussion of gems, metals, mining, and other such things I knew almost nothing about by the
dwarven customers. I wasn't the only one who looked a bit overwhelmed by the company.

"Erebor has the finest sapphire mines you'll ever see, mark my words laddie!" Yelled one of the dwarves, his long black beard in one thick, complicated looking braid that hung over his heavy belly.

Another dwarf across the room with an interesting braided top-knot hollered back, "The Iron Hills is where you'll find the finest of smithin' metals for that fancy armor 'ya wearing. Erebor's got naught in that." There was a mutual uproar among the dwarves as they ribbed each other good-naturedly as the drink flowed.

"Oh please, do go on!" Called one dwarf, standing up on his chair, a pint in hand, giving the other half of the room an exaggerated bow. His grey-streaked hair was in a unique three-point shape (how did it stay up?) interlaced with beads and braids that complimented his fine purple cloak. "I should think, being the most knowledgeable about this among present company—" there was a bout of laughter at what I guessed was an inside joke— "that my sweet home has you beat. The Iron Hills may be rich in ores, but the most valuable of dwarven work comes from Erebor!"

The argument continued on as I finished my meal and headed upstairs, glad for the din of the pub. It would be harder to reflect on my day if all I could hear was strains of a song about the mountain-king's return.

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Rylan had been able to help a bit, and the rest I managed on my own. Either way, I still managed to gather together some basic provisions, including food, a new blanket, a small knife—at his insistence, not mine—among other things.

Like with Clarimond, I had told the barber I was returning to Rohan, which was only partially true. In one of the shops I visited to purchase a proper, rainproof cloak there was a map of the main routes in much of southern Arda displayed on the wall. After consulting the map and the owner, I decided to take a different route than before. The Gap of Rohan was west past Edoras, and after crossing the Misty Mountains the route turned north, and one branch looked to continue in the direction of Rivendell. That sounded like a far better way than the pathless wandering I had suffered south of Lothlórien.

Rylan had informed the innkeeper of my plans, and the man had helped secure a spot for me on a trade caravan for a few extra coins. My scrimping and saving had paid off, as my money purse had been able to stretch for all the new purchases. The caravan had a number of Rohirrim people on it, including families, and there were several wagons to ride in if one didn't mind sitting amidst barrels of apples, pumpkins, and grain.

I had to wait a week before it left though, and throughout it I grew increasingly antsy, snapping at Rylan and shopkeepers before apologizing for my abnormal moodiness. I didn't know what was wrong with me, but just two days after leaving the Kinsey household it seemed my patience had completely evaporated.

Despite my sour mood though, everyone was insistent that the caravan was a far safer way to reach Edoras. There were three wagons, three families with children, and a number of men who did trade with Minas Tirith. There were even two guards hired to help protect the caravan—though I wasn't sure what two men with swords would be able to do if we ran into trouble.

Finally though, preparations complete, bag packed, I walked out the front gates of Minas Tirith. There were farms and stables outside the walls, but past them there was nothing to the horizon. The sky seemed a hundred times bigger than it did inside the city. I felt my heart swell and the
anxious ball in my stomach loosen. I was on my way.

We left on a windy day, the wagons creaking and swaying on the road, the people joyful and looking forward to escaping the encroaching of Mordor. Rohan seemed so removed from those troubles, even though I knew better.

When we'd gone a decent distance down the road I looked back at the White City, blinded a bit by the sun's reflection off the white stone. I didn't feel sad to leave it behind; it was the same as Rivendell. I was more eager to see new lands and reach my destination.

I thought briefly of Lord Faramir, my eyes barely able to make out the spike of the tower on the top of the city. I had managed to find a ranger and give him a letter for the Steward's son, but the man had told me the captain was gone on patrol and wouldn't be back for some time. I'd thought about asking Faramir to follow me, but I didn't think he would. I was disappointed, but I also knew I couldn't wait any longer. The Council would be soon, and I needed to be there.

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The days went by quicker than I thought, which was pleasant. I befriended one of the younger mothers and ended up helping to babysit the children. I hadn't been that great with kids before, but I'd had some practice with Adelaide and Lord Kinsey's spoiled daughter. The children ranged in age from two years old to twelve, and were excitable and more energetic than anyone else on the trip. The traders were kind enough, and the two hired guards spent time playing dice and card games with the men. It was companionable on the road.

We were following the Great West Road that wound north of the White Mountains of Gondor. It was the same road I had ridden before with Arundel ages ago. Most of it was empty land, sometimes dusty, sometimes grassland, with the occasional farm or small village dotting the landscape. The caravan planned to follow the road straight to Edoras where the traders and families were going. I would go on from Edoras and follow the highway over the Fords of Isen and up the Old South Road. It would take me dangerously close to Isengard, but I was banking on no one's interest in a lone traveler—hopefully a rider, if I could get a horse.

We'd been on the road for over a week when we pulled off to the side for the night, the wagons walling us in against the road. Nightfall was fast approaching, and we broke out the rations, started a fire, and cheerily ate and talked. We were traveling quite close to the mountains now, surrounded by trees in the lower foothills, but the road was still very wide with deep ruts from wagons, and was said to be well guarded by the Rohirrim and Gondorian armies alike.

After dinner, some members shared stories of old kings in the mountains, ghosts and ancient people. The men enjoying scaring the children a little while their mothers comforted them with reassurances that the dead did indeed rest. I sat off to the side, experiencing powerful déjà vu. It was that same niggling feeling I'd gotten before, before I'd remembered Middle Earth. Ghost kings… had I forgotten something? Surely I'd remember if there was a ghost army…

In the end I couldn't recall, but it did give me a horrible sinking feeling that I'd failed to remember something important. I could only hope when I reached Rivendell I could sit Gandalf down for a nice long chat (after I interrogated him about why he left the letter in Minas Tirith).

The guards and a handful of the traders alternated night watches, while the rest of us curled up in the wagons or on the ground for the night. I cuddled on the seats of the wagon full of apples with an eight-year old girl with bright red hair who I had become quite attached to. As the temperature plummeted, especially at night, we had all taken to sleeping closer together for warmth. I was glad I'd splurged on a nicer blanket.
I don't know how long I slept before the shaking of the wagon woke me. I thought for one sleepy moment someone was just getting up to go to the bathroom when I realized I could hear the sound of crying and yells from the camp.

I was wide-awake in moments, and my whole body froze up. I tried to move as slowly as possible, lifting my head to peek over the side rail of the uncovered wagon to see what was happening. What I glimpsed was enough to stop my heart.

The campfire had banked low, but it was still bright enough for me to make out the form of one of the traders lying facedown in the dirt. A pool of blood had welled up under his face and chest, and I could see a man standing just outside the ring of light with a blade in hand. Only the two guards had swords, and I was sure this man wasn't one of them.

"Maddie, what's happening?" the little redheaded girl whispered, and I hushed her, my heartbeat so strong and loud I could feel it against my ribs. I knew without looking the rest of the wagon was awake and just as terrified. We all knew what was happening: this was a bandit attack or worse.

"Hush, Sinnie," I breathed, not daring to move. The sounds from the camp changed from the sinister rustling of the trees and movement of cloth to the sounds of clashing steel. Someone was fighting, but I didn't dare check to see what was going on. I knew the worst had happened to the brave guard though, when we heard the unmistakable squelch of a blade being pulled out of something soft and wet.

I closed my eyes, saying a fast prayer to any deity at all, pulling little Sinnie further into my chest, like that might spare her the horror.

That seemed to be the last of the resistance. There were the sounds of men's voices, deep and grumbling in a language I'd never heard before, and the clatter of mail and boots in the dirt. I don't think anyone drew a breath until a dark, bearded face appeared at the foot of the wagon.

I couldn't make out any detail in such low light, but the man was wearing some kind of fur throw over his shoulders and dark clothing, and his hair was wild and curly around his head. He growled something to another of the men and someone handed him a torch, which he lifted above us. I could see under his left eye he had a tattoo of three lines like the scratch of a tiger.

Before I knew it, the man had taken one giant paw and grabbed my hair, hauling me out of the wagon as I yelped, stinging pain bringing tears to my eyes. When he let go I reacted without a thought, lashing my hand out and smacking the man across the chin.

My ears rang when his fist met my cheek, pain exploding on the side of my face. I'd never been punched in my life, and I fell back to the ground in a heap, hand hovering over what would likely be an impressive bruise and trying to stop from crying.

The man spat something I couldn't understand before summarily forcing the others out too. Sinnie burst into tears when she saw my face, and the other women helped me up and hustled me away from the wagons. They told me I had a small cut across my cheek bleeding sluggishly, but I'd very likely have a shiner by morning. I held my tender face as everyone quickly gathered together.

Most of the savage men were now rooting through the barrels and boxes in the wagons, calling to each other in that gruff, heavy tongue.

We pulled the kids into the center of our circle, and mothers covered their children's eyes from what remained of the two guards and the two traders who'd been awake. I wished I had someone to cover my eyes too when I saw what had become of them. It seemed the two on watch had their throats cut in the night, but the two others had fought, and the mess of blood on the ground where
one man had been gutted was unmistakable.

Murmurs began in the caravan group, whispers of "Dunmen" and "Wildmen", and mothers pulled their children closer. I couldn't have let go of Sinnie's hand if I tried. I had never heard of Dunmen, but seeing the crazed way they rifled through all the barrels, stuffing apples into saddlebags, pockets, and even their mouths like chipmunks, I could see why they were called Wildmen.

They were dressed in obviously stolen armor, including unmatched bits and pieces of leather and plate mail, and some had furs draped across their shoulders and hips. They were all armed with axes and swords and several with bows and arrows. A handful of the men were ignoring the scavenging and poking at some of us women, but thankfully the lure of the hired guards' armor proved too much, and they stooped down to thieve it right off their still-warm bodies.

By dawn, we'd been standing there for hours under guard while the Wildmen gathered together the oxen and carts. I couldn't pretend I wasn't hoping they'd just leave us here without provisions in the cold, but that was impossible. Several men came into the clearing on horses, wielding rusted axes and wearing torn, blemished leather. They gathered around us, pushing some on the outside with their dirty boots.

"Go! Walk!" They shouted, like we were stubborn donkeys. The fifteen or so of us stumbled and started to move off the road and into the forest, the Wildmen prodding anyone in range with their steel if we didn't move quickly enough.

This would set the tone for the weeks to come. The children cried pitifully, but too much noise drew the ire of the Dunlendings, so often everyone was holding one sniveling child even as we struggled to keep up. There seemed to be a hidden path in the mountains just barely wide enough for the wagons, though sometimes we had to push and pull the clumsy carts when the wheels got stuck in ruts. The Wildmen seemed to have no sense of rationing either, so we were tossed scraps and sometimes ordered to make a kind of bland traveler's bread from the flour that had been in the caravan. We ate that for days on end it seemed, through wet and dry weather. All of our stomachs grumbled with hunger, but complaining was not tolerated at all; the Dunen liked to remind us we were expendable, though thankfully they hadn't proven it yet. The only reason I could think of for why they kept us was to turn us into slaves.

Any kind of thinking like this always made me hunch down in fear. And that was the least of it. This old dress from Butterbur was in tatters from all the hiking and dusty travel, but I was rather lucky for its shapelessness and the ugly bruise on my face gifted to me by that Wildman. No one had given me a second glance, but two of the other women weren't so lucky.

I had no idea what route we were taking, but it certainly wasn't the road to Edoras. We were climbing into the mountains, the trees getting taller and thinner, the wind turning icy. It seemed we traveled very slowly, and the road wound on, sometimes lost, sometimes found, and snaking around constantly, though the Wildmen seemed to know where they were going. Any time I wasn't thinking about this predicament my mind would focus on Rivendell. Was this further proof I wasn't suppose to leave Minas Tirith? What would happen to me now if I were forced into slavery by this Dunlendings?

The only thing I could be thankful for was that I'd told Faramir the whole story. At least someone besides me knew.

To distract myself from worries I couldn't change and even more dangerous thoughts of making a break for it—no one had dared yet, but it had been whispered about—I would tell stories to the children. When one of the wagons was emptied of provisions the Dunmen finally let some of us ride in it, likely because of how much it slowed them down to have all the children walking. The
wagon was quickly given to the kids, with room enough for one or two adults if we got tired. I would hold Sinnie's hand and talk to her as I walked alongside the uncovered wagon, trying to keep her spirits up as much as mine.

"Where are we going?" she would ask, her dirty hand clutching my fingers. She was doing her best to be brave, and it was breaking my heart. "Who are these men?"

"I don't know Sinnie," I would tell her, and she would look so miserable I would try to come up with another story. Sometimes I told her about elves and other fantasy creatures, ("A centaur is the torso and head of a man with the body of a horse!") and other times recalling stories from home ("Have I told you about a boy who finds a magic lamp?"). With each passing day though, I felt more and more the distance between me and Rivendell and the looming of the Fellowship. How soon after the Council would they leave? A day? A week? If I could escape, could I still catch them before they left?

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I don't know how long we traveled with those forty-odd Dunlendings, but the days all blended together. The swelling on my face died down and eventually the bruising turned ugly yellow and green before fading away. By that point though I was so dirty and my hair such a mess you almost couldn't tell. We had only been allowed to bath once in an ice-cold stream, but the Wildmen insisted on watching, leering at us women. When we realized we would have a voyeuristic audience we had unanimously forgone the bath. No one wanted to invite any more pain than had already been inflicted.

Finally, after so many long days and long nights, we reached a ridge where it seemed the mountains ended. Ahead of us were plains as far as the eye could see and a distant river. It looked like Rohan, and I felt my heart lift a little at the thought. Maybe we hadn't strayed too far.

The Wildmen stopped for a fast lunch and an argument, because it seemed when they weren't eating or sleeping they were fighting, and I listened in to the talk of some of the others from the caravan.

"Seems to me that there's the Adorn," one man said, nodding to the valley below the foothills where the glittering line of a river was barely visible.

"Looks to be," another said, squinting down at it. "We're not too far then, just in the mountains."

There wasn't much more chatter after that, but I tried desperately to remember the River Adorn, and if I'd seen it on any map.

"Where is the Adorn?" I whispered to one of the woman a couple hours later, when the nearest of our ever-present guards had gone off into the trees for a moment. The Dunmen weren't particularly watchful, and thankfully not particularly violent towards us, but they had horsemen and bows and seemed to know the land well, so no one had taken advantage yet.

"It's a river south of the Gap of Rohan," she whispered back, resolutely not looking at me.

I glanced around furtively, but the guard was still gone. "Then where are we?"

"In the White Mountains south of Edoras," she explained.

One of the traders drifted back, suddenly walking just a step ahead of us. "If they're taking us to Dunland, then they have to cross the Isen. There's only one place to do that near here—at the Fords."
The conversation was cut off by the return of the guard, but I was much relieved to hear we were near Rohan and near the Fords of Isen. Slavery in Dunland wasn't on my to-do list, but I held out hope something would change.

The other members of the caravan seemed to be in better spirits too as we descended the mountains and entered the plains. The Dunmen had abandoned the wagons along the trail, and now they left the last one behind them in the foothills, pushing us now to hurry. The children were tired and cold as the chill wind swept across the grasslands, but we were jabbed by scabbards and boots if we stumbled or slowed. The Wildmen were all strung tight; watches were now three men at night, there were no fires, and any loud noise at all was reprimanded harshly.

There was much talk among us captives in quiet, spare moments, of Rohirrim patrols, the shadow of Isengard over the Gap of Rohan, and other such talk of rescue. Others also whispered at how strange it was for the Dunlendings to be so far into Rohan territory, really almost on the border of Gondor. They were known to raid south of the White Mountains, but whatever had driven them to the Great West Road we didn't know. They said it was a big risk, especially taking people not just goods—Rohirrim patrols were very unforgiving of slavers.

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I couldn't say how far we were to the Isen, but we had turned north several days ago, and I felt surer and surer we were making for the Fords. It was with some luck too that I was right, and at the Fords of Isen, as though waiting for us, was an Éored.

The Dunmen's scouts saw them first, long before we knew what was happening, but it became clear as panic swept through the Wildmen something was coming, and our progress was abruptly halted. In the distance there was some kind of dark cloud that had first glance looked like an outcropping of rocks. It became obvious though, given the flatness of these plains and the reactions of the Dunmen that the cloud was anything but.

The argument was fierce even as the few Dunlendings on horseback turned our whole group around. No one could understand what was happening or what they were saying, but suddenly one of the mounted Dunmen raised his axe and brought it down on one of the trader's heads.

I wish I hadn't turned when I did; I wish I hadn't seen it. It was nothing like the movies, nothing like any book could describe. That moment when the blade met his flesh and cracked through the skull had been seared behind my eyes.

Chaos broke out; the Dunmen appeared to be cutting their losses—literally. Mothers scooped up children, somebody started screaming before it was abruptly cut off, and I saw people fighting and others running. There was blood on the ground but I didn't know whose, and when I looked up one of the women had been speared through. I couldn't think, couldn't breathe, my only thought was to get away. I took off running and managed to duck around the front of a horse, breaking out of the cluster of Dunmen. I bolted blindly for the dust cloud ahead, and I didn't even realize I had Sinnie by the hand until I heard her incoherently screaming in Rohirric.

I was running as fast as I could, half-dragging Sinnie behind me, before I suddenly fell, blinding pain in my left arm. My fall pulled down Sinnie, and we both collapsed in the high grass. I couldn't fight the scream when I went down hard on my left side, releasing Sinnie's hand and rolling quickly over.

The little girl began to cry, babbling in Rohirric. When I saw the damage I saw what frightened her: sticking out of my left bicep, gone clean through, was a brown-tipped arrow.

I felt numb, like there wasn't enough blood in my head, as I stared at the grisly wound. Blood was
dripping down my arm and into the grass, and there was a pounding noise growing louder and louder. I thought it might be my heart, but I wasn't sure.

I don't remember the details, but Sinnie must have stood up because she was yelling again and crying, and then there were horses all around, galloping by. The sound of the hooves was so fierce I moved to clap my hands over my ears, but the moment I twitched my left arm I felt the startling pain and I think I yelled.

Then there was a rider on the ground, and he was shaking my right shoulder and looking at the arrow. His voice seemed to fade in and out before he tapped my cheek in a mild slap. It was fortunate he did it on the same side as that tiger-striped man's punch though, because for some reason that stinging pain of the still tender skin snapped me out of my daze.

He was saying something to me in Rohirric, but I couldn't understand. Then Sinnie came over and put her little arms around my middle, and the man pushed her face into my chest as he took my left arm in his hand. He seemed to realize I didn't speak Rohirric, because all he said in Westron was: "Don't look."

I squeezed my eyes shut and buried my face in Sinnie's messy red hair. She was still crying but more softly now and I started to cry too. There was the snapping sound of the shaft of the arrow, and then without any warning the red-hot burn as pulled the arrow out, and I screamed. My whole arm throbbed with my pulse as he quickly set to wrapping it, and I only dared to look when he had tied it off.

"Better now?" he said, but all I could feel was the lancing pain in my arm. The arrow was nowhere to be found, and I was glad. The blood seeping into the makeshift bandage was making me rather light-headed as the Rohirrim soldier helped me stand. Sinnie refused to let go of my waist, which made it more difficult.

I could see behind the soldier a massive crowd of horses and men, most dismounted now. It seemed the fighting was over, if there had been much, given that the horsemen seemed to outnumber the Dunlendings by about ten to one.

Eventually Sinnie, our savior, and I straggled over to the crowd. Among the fifteen members of the caravan, just seven were left. Sinnie finally let go of me to be embraced by her crying mother, who looked like she was on the verge of a breakdown. Of the survivors, two were seriously injured, and the others were bruised or banged up. The riders of Rohan had saved us.

I stumbled to a halt and sunk down next to Sinnie and her mother, feeling nothing but absolute exhaustion and aching pain. I hadn't been sitting long—though I may have dozed off a bit—before someone came through yelling orders. There was a flurry of action, and then I was surprised when someone crouched down in front of me saying my name.

"Maddie? Miss Maddie?"

I looked up and focused on a surprisingly familiar face, "Éomer!"

"You were hurt," he said slowly, indicating my arm, "I'm sorry you were with those Wildmen. They are savage men from the south." Still speaking slowly, he seemed to rethink his words. "I mean- they are bad men."

I laughed, I honestly laughed at Éomer's efforts to speak slowly and simply so I could understand. And I laughed because my arm still hurt like someone had left a red poker in it and because we were saved after weeks of marching with the Dunmen. "I have lived in Minas Tirith for a year, Captain Éomer, I understand Westron well now."
I stopped laughing though as it shook my arm too much, and Éomer was already clicking his tongue like he was calling a horse, except a field medic came over. "Check her arm and make sure it's clean. She's in shock."

I grabbed his sleeve before he could walk away. "Thank you, Éomer, for saving us. I can't believe you remember me." The horror of the kidnapping was still strong, as was the pain, but I was thinking clearly enough to know that Éomer and his Rohirrim had saved our lives.

"There is no thanks necessary when it comes to stopping their depravities," he said, and I nodded tiredly only half-understanding. "And it is not many lasses we meet in the Wold who talk of Elves and do not speak Common," he added teasingly.

I couldn't smile as the medic had just poked the wound making me hiss. Éomer got up to call out more orders, and I was subjected to the medic as he rubbed ointment on the injury—both sides, as the arrow had punched straight through the meat of my arm—before rewrapping it in another white cloth.

I knew there would be a lot to think about and process, among them Éomer’s future in the story (I was chummy with the future king of Rohan) and my travel plans to Rivendell. But for tonight, after a short ride with Fastred, who I was too tired to properly be delighted to see, I basically collapsed on the borrowed bedroll and fell into a blissfully dreamless sleep.
I might have had restful sleep that first night after being rescued, but for the next week I was
plagued with nightmares. I would wake in the night thinking I was still walking beside the wagon,
and the shadows of the horses grazing on the plains would remind me of the Wildmen staring
down at us. I would often hear Sinnie and the other children crying through the night. It was not
an easy time.

I didn't have the worst of it though. One of the severely wounded survivors had died of infection
—I certainly hadn't forgotten Baiard—and those of us who lived had nightmares and even
flashbacks in the weeks that followed. On the way to Edoras though, I did learn that we'd still
been luckier than anyone had any right to be.

"These were not Dunmen," Fastred told me that first night, as he walked me over to where the
possessions taken from our captors had been piled. The other members of the caravan and I had
been asked to go through them to find what was ours. Sinnie's two brothers, one younger and one older, were both
gone, and her mother clung to the little girl as though she too might disappear.

"Not Dunmen?" I confirmed, and the Rohirrim nodded. His beard and mustache were shabbier
than I remembered, but he was still cheerful. He'd become the go-between for the survivors and
most of the soldiers because he already knew me. With a hundred and twenty men the Rohirrim
camp was huge, and there were far too many people to keep track of.

"No, these were men from the south, Drúwaith Iaur. We think they were going to Isengard."
I’d never heard of the place he spoke of, but I wasn’t surprised they had been taking us to Isengard. I didn’t know how long it took Saruman to breed those super-orcs, nor to turn Isengard into a war machine, but it seemed it had already begun. Why he would need women and children as slaves I didn’t know though.

"That is why they were so far from Dunland then," I mused. "Then we are even luckier that you saved us." I overturned some bags I didn’t recognize before finally spotting my familiar dark green canvas. The relief I felt when I picked it up startled me. The elves in Rivendell had given it to me, and it had been with me ever since.

"Yes, your luck is astounding," Fastred was saying as I opened the pack and realized it had been mostly emptied. Unsurprisingly the food was all gone, as were the skeins, the new waterproof cloak and a couple other odds and ends. At the bottom though still sat my jeans and t-shirt, and I hesitantly touched them, the fabric almost foreign after more than a year of coarsely woven cloth. It had been a very long time since I’d looked at the few things I had left from home. I didn’t pull any of the things out, but just touching a part of my old life sent a sudden wave of homesickness over me; it had been a long time since I’d given any real thought to home.

I wiped my wet eyes, and Fastred politely looked away. "What were you saying?" I asked once I’d collected myself, moving the jeans and t-shirt back over all the other mementos of home. Now wasn’t the time to get sappy. The other survivors were also moving away, and it seemed the pile of things hadn’t shrunk at all. Most of us didn’t really have the heart to go through it; the memories of the original owners were too fresh.

"Ah, your luck. Wandering in the Wold you managed to find us, and now again as captive of these rogue Drúedain. And you say you were left unhurt?"

"Yes, some were… hurt, but most of us were left alone. I was very lucky. One of the men…” I touched the side of my face, but the damage had long since healed. "I had a terrible bruise, but that was the worst of it."

Fastred’s face shifted from anger to deep discomfort and then settled on grim, and he took a moment to speak. "That's not… normal of the Wildmen, or so I have heard."

From his hesitancy I could already guess at his meaning and shuddered. The violence I had seen at our abduction and escape had been plenty for me. My absurd luck had followed me from Fornost to Minas Tirith and now to the Ford of Isen—I wasn’t going to ask why.

(I did believe though that my luck was connected to the magic that had brought me here. I wanted to believe, sometimes so strongly it hurt, that some power wanted me to live for a purpose—hopefully like the ones I had outlined to Faramir. If that power didn’t want me to get too banged up in the process, than I had no complaints.)

"It is also quite the twist that you would run into this Éored," Fastred said with a little more cheer.

"Why?” I asked, though I had to agree my odds of meeting the same Éored twice couldn’t be that high. How many Éored were there?

"Normally Captain Éomer leads patrols in the Eastemnet, but we are covering this area as two Éored switch. We are only here for two days before returning to Edoras."

I was surprised to hear that and didn’t really know what to make of it. Still, I was glad for the familiar faces.

Speaking of the soldiers, I could appreciate now how much Éomer's men respected him. Before I
had been rather overwhelmed, but now it was almost a relief to focus on something other than the pain in my arm and the traumatized faces of my fellow captives. The blond captain was an honest and dedicated man to his company, and they in turn clearly admired him, even ones like Fastred who seemed much older. He had spoken nothing but praise for him when I picked his brain about it.

"Captain Êomer is the Third Marshal of the Mark," Fastred told me when I asked him for more detail about the group, "and this is his Éored. Some are bannermen to his household and respond to his call to arms, others lifetime soldiers. I have ridden with Captain Êomer for nearly ten years, though he has long surpassed me in rank." Fastred laughed at this, his soup bowl shaking. "He is a great leader of Men, just, wise, and fiercely loyal, and I am honored to serve under him. The King has recognized this, even though he is young for a Marshal."

He sobered some at the mention of the king, and I knew why. Deciding not to press though since it would end happily (well… for a little while), I tried to keep the conversation going. "How many Éored are there? How many marshals?"

"There are three Marshals, one for each part of the Mark. In times long past there were a hundred Éored; when they come together it is called Éoherë, though this has not happened since even my grandfather's time."

I tried to imagine what twelve thousand mounted soldiers must look like, but I could only imagine the deafening sound of their gallop. I wonder if they called an Éoherë when Rohan went to battle at that castle. Or was that not an Éoherë because it was purely defensive? Either way Rohan also fought in the Battle of the Pelennor Fields and surely that called all their men together then.

"Maybe you will see an Éoherë," I said thoughtlessly, and Fastred frowned.

"I should hope there would not be a reason for the Mark to go to such lengths in war. It is bad enough the rumors that come out of Isengard, and the mounting attacks by Wildmen and orcs."

"Yes, of course," I agreed immediately, feeling chastised. These were lives at stake, not pawns. I should have remembered that given what I'd just been through.

That next night Êomer himself appeared with two water skeins, a bedroll, a blanket, and the same waterproof cloak I had bought back in Minas Tirith. I gasped when he handed the things to me, especially the cloak I had thought stolen by the Wildmen. "We will be returning to Edoras," he explained as he put them down beside me. "You'll need these on the trip."

I hadn't seen much of Êomer during the day, as his captain's duties had him riding up and down the line of horsemen at all times. He looked pretty much the same as I remembered, though maybe a bit more tired too. It might have been the war or just the firelight, I couldn't tell.

"How is your wound?" he asked, coming to sit next to me. I couldn't help noticing the glances we received from the survivors sitting a couple yards away, and I had to stifle a groan. If this was going to be another Lord Fararmir situation I was going to scream.

"It is stiff, but healing," I said, which was true. It still hurt to move my arm, and the jostling of the horse as we rode didn't help. I had been rather panicked at the idea of infection setting in like Baiard, but whatever ointment the medic had applied seemed to be working, and I was careful about keeping the wound clean and protected. I had plans to get some before I left Edoras, just in case.

"Good, good," Êomer said, and he looked rather uncomfortable sitting on the ground, still in most of his armor. The helmet with that tail of hair was nowhere to be seen at least. "I must ask you
something, though I know it is poor timing on my part."

My heart stopped, and I knew with certainty he meant Baiard. I hadn't forgotten about the young Rohirrim I had so briefly traveled with. I had been dreading this conversation, and the guilt weighed heavy in my heart.

"Young Baiard's body was recovered two days ride from the Entwash by a patrol. His wound had festered, they told me."

I nodded, not chancing to look at Éomer. When the silence lasted though, I realized I would have to explain.

"We were riding when he fell ill," I swallowed, starting to pull up the dry grass beside my feet before remembering scoldings as a child and stopping. "I tried to help him, but we had no medicine and his fever just got worse. He could barely drink water, and I didn't know what to do."

Éomer hadn't moved, and I still wasn't looking at him, but his voice was a little less gruff. "These are the dangers all soldiers must face. I am sorry to hear of it."

I bowed my head, wondering if I should say more. I felt cold, and not because of the brisk night wind.

"He was young and earnest, but a good lad. He was returned to Edoras, and I am glad you made it safely to Gondor." He stood up to leave, moving like all his bones ached him, and I felt a brief bit of panic in my throat.

"Éomer, wait! I— I have a confession." It had been weighing on me all my time in Minas Tirith and especially now. I couldn't let him walk away without telling. "I... I took Arundel to Minas Tirith. It... I do not know if that was right, but I was afraid to leave the horse and he did save my life. But in Minas Tirith... I fear I have done something very wrong..."

Éomer crouched down and waited patiently without expression until I finished. "When I reached Minas Tirith I could not afford to keep him, and I did not plan to leave for some time. So I... I sold him," I said in a small voice, shame welling up inside me. I hadn't known how difficult it would be to say these words to Éomer until I was sitting under his stare. When I glanced up to gauge his reaction, he looked so stern around the mouth that I felt cold dread pool in my stomach.

He was Baiard's captain and one of the three Marshals in Rohan—very likely he could pass judgment on me right here.

"Horses are the lifeblood of Rohan," he started, and my stomach felt even heavier, like it was full of stones, "so I cannot say what you did was right, even given the circumstances." He sighed, pulling his thick fingers through his hair, but it was so tangled he didn't get past the crown of his head and he gave up.

"If you were Eorlingas you would know that we are proud of our horses. When you reached the borders of Gondor, by rights you should have sent him back. But," and he tapped my shoulder with his knuckle to make sure I was paying attention, "you did not know this, and it is clear selling Arundel did not settle well with you." I was still uncomfortably nervous despite his words; I was waiting for the other shoe to drop. "When we reach Edoras," he said slowly, and it was obvious he was thinking, "I would ask that you help care for the horses there. It is not the easiest work, but it will teach you the deep connection the Eorlingas have to our steeds."

I exhaled a little noisier than I expected, feeling a churning sense of relief and anxiety in me. Tending to the horses would be a small thing, and under any other circumstances I would be happy to comply with Éomer's request, but the Fellowship was still a heavy cloud in my thoughts.
I had lost a lot of time straggling through the mountains with the Wildmen, and I was fairly sure by this point I had missed the Council of Elrond and may very well have missed the Fellowship's departure.

"I cannot linger long in Edoras," I said slowly, wondering if I should say more to Éomer then decided to think on it later, "But I will do this."

"Good," he said, clapping his hand on my shoulder before pulling it away hastily, as though he'd forgotten momentarily I wasn't one of his men. "Though these are not good times for travel, as you have well learned."

I winced at the reminder, and he muttered something in Rohirric that sounded like a curse. "I did not mean that—it came out poorly. What I meant is," he sighed and scrubbed his face, and I couldn't help feeling a bit of amusement at awkward Éomer. "I would not recommend leaving. There is war brewing."

"There is," I agreed, "And that is why I must go on."

"To the elves again?" he asked, and I heard a sudden gasp from next to us. Sinnie had crept closer in the dark and must have overheard him. Éomer turned in surprise too.

I wasn't sure what to say, or whether to lie or not, but it hardly seemed to matter as Sinnie breathed out, "You have met elves?"

I wasn't quick enough to answer, but Éomer stepped in with an indulging smile directed at the little girl. "Yes, and when I met her last she had been traveling in the company of them."

"What?" I sputtered. I certainly hadn't told any of them that. I remembered making up something about lost companions and then the conversation had been diverted by mention of orcs.

Éomer was outright grinning now though. "Some of the men may be more gullible, but there are no settlements of Men north of the Wold, not on this side of the Anduin. You came from that yellow wood, and the elves left you to the tender mercies of Fastred. I can't imagine you could have walked the distance from that forest to the Wold without running into trouble." He laughed at my shocked expression, seeming happy to get one over me.

I could not say I was thrilled by his assumption, and I was curious that he believed I would have met trouble on my way (because I certainly didn't, that was the most boring part of my travels I think), but Sinnie's expression was awed. "You traveled with elves? What are they like? Do they really glow?"

Her mother, who looked harried, jogged over and saved me from having to explain myself. "Don't you run off, Sinnie. I want you by the fire where I can see you," she said, and I glanced away at the reminder of our trials. I couldn't blame her mother for wanting to keep her daughter close.

"Am I right?" Éomer asked when Sinnie and her mother were back by the fire. "Yes," he said before I could answer, "Or perhaps the answer is different. You are like the gāst widsith."

"What?" I asked. I didn't speak any Rohirric and that had sounded garbled to me.

"Are you a spirit?" he asked suddenly, and I just gaped at him.

"Do you mean am I dead?"

"Yes," and he seemed to stifle at laugh at my appalled tone. "We have a story in the Riddermark of a… wanderer. A dead wanderer who forever travels. You seem to always be going places and
you rarely meet trouble."

"I should think the Wildmen was trouble enough," I hissed, aware of the caravan members sitting only a couple yards away. Éomer looked a bit uncomfortable as he remembered what circumstances had brought us together.

"Yes, but I'm sure you've heard the whispers of the men," he said, "That so many of you escaped intact—or well," he amended quickly, "without serious injuries. These Drúedain were kinder to you than I've ever seen before."

"Well I doubt they'd be so kind if they thought I was dead," I said, but there was no heat in it. It was rather funny, now that Éomer said it, and it only confirmed a string of unexplainable luck.
"Tell me about this traveler."

"There's isn't much of a story. It's just a ghost wanderer who cannot find rest and forever travels." Éomer looked at me and laughed. "I don't put much stock in it. You seem quite solid to me," he joked, finally standing up and stretching.

"Yes well, I worked as maidservant in Minas Tirith for a year, so I hardly think I could be a ghost traveler," I said smiling, and Éomer smirked back before murmuring a good night and walking away.

I woke up that night with an image that made my stomach hurl. Instead of that trader it was Baiard standing beside the Wildman on his horse. It was the Wildman with the three tattooed claw marks on his face that lifted the first axe. He brought it down on Baiard's head, and all I could do was stand in horror not even scream, as Baiard crumpled the way that trader had, blood and brain everywhere.

After my dinner was in the brush, I sat up the rest of the night stoking the fire, feeling the arrow wound throb. All the humor of the chat about ghost wanderers with Éomer was gone. Now I wondered if I had died in the modern world and my memory was kind enough to let me forget. Was this an afterlife of sorts? All the time I spent wondering and worrying about my anxious parents, my concerned friends and coworkers, what if they'd mourned and gone on?

Would I be able to go home then?

It was several days' travel to Edoras, and I had fitful nights of sleep and the odd doze while riding a borrowed horse, though Fastred rode beside me most of the way and made sure I didn't fall off. As we got closer to the city we saw more and more farmsteads, small villages, and herds of cattle and horses. It cheered everyone up to see the signs of life. One trader and his son left the group when we passed near his home village, everyone wishing him well. The rest looked forward to returning to their homes too. I could only look forward to a couple days of horse-care before leaving again.

The city of Edoras was visible from miles away. We crested a hilltop and suddenly it appeared, a rocky spiral of hills with scattered houses and halls built on top. From such a great distance it looked like a model, unreal. Spread out in the valley were a handful more farms and villages, though around the base of the city was empty grasslands. The scene was picturesque, framed by white-capped mountains in the distance.

"Edoras is our one great city. The people of Rohan love the land and their horses; they could not bear to live as the men of Gondor do," Fastred said, turning slightly in the saddle to look at me.
"It's amazing," I said, breathless at the sight. It was easy to forget sometimes what a magnificent world Middle Earth was, but I remembered then as I looked down on that valley. Mountains sat behind the hilltop of Edoras, smoke curling in the wind, and the rolling plains stretched into infinity beyond it. How many fans of Tolkien's works would pay to be here like I was? How much would I miss it when I was gone?

It took the rest of the day to reach the gates of the city, and the Éored was hailed at every opportunity it seemed. Éomer had donned the longhaired helmet again, and he looked quite regal as we cantered up to the massive wooden walls built around the base of the hill. At the top I could just see the great hall of the king and the roofs of the nearby homes. It wasn't as large as I'd imagined, but imposing nonetheless.

Most of the horsemen didn't go inside, but I was told to join up with the caravan members. I dismounted, handed the reins to Fastred and said my goodbyes before heading over to the group. It was too late for travel today, but everyone looked relieved to be somewhere safe. Sinnie grabbed my hand when I approached, smiling almost as wide as when I told her about the Elves.

"My village is a day's ride to the mountains," she told me, pointing to the white peaks in the distance. Aptly named, in winter the White Mountains had snowfall far down their sides, almost into the foothills.

We didn't get to say more than that before the wooden gates opened and the lot of us was ushered inside. "You've been given rooms for the night at a local inn, but then those of you from other villages are encouraged to go home. We're well into winter now," the lightly armored guard informed us, and many of the traders nodded in agreement. I touched the coin purse in the pocket of my dress, wondering if I could afford both a room at the inn for a couple nights and a horse, not to mention provisions before I left. It seemed folly to try and travel without a ride, but given what Éomer said about the Rohirrim and their horses, it might be more difficult to buy one than I originally anticipated.

As we were steered to the inn and settled down with a warm plate of meat and vegetables roasted in a tangy sauce, I decided to tackle it later. I also had to see what Éomer had meant by caring for the horses. If that were a paying job that would help quite a bit.

Lucky for me, Éomer was good on his word, and the next day a stable hand came to the inn asking for me. I had to ask him to wait for just a moment because Sinnie would be heading out at noon with her mother, and I didn't know if I would be back in time to see her off.

"Will you stay in Edoras?" the little girl asked, her face looking dangerously blotchy when she told me she was leaving. "Mama and I come in the spring to sell from the farms."

I petted her red curls and sighed, "No, not for long. You will forget me long before the spring."

She shook her head and gave me a fierce hug, and her mother smiled weakly at me. She didn't seem at all recovered from our ordeal, and not likely to anytime soon. I couldn't really blame her. Her husband had lost a hand in the attack defending himself, and their two sons had died. It would be a long time before a woman could be all right from that, if ever.

I managed to get Sinnie to let go without making a promise I couldn't keep, before I said my goodbyes to the others and hurried out to meet the stable hand, who gave me a bold smile. "Miss, I'm Dallin and a groom up at one o' tha stables. Marshal Éomer himself came by and said you was int'rested in helping with the horses. Said to teach you a bit 'bout 'em."

He had an accent that I had to decipher, but seemed nice enough at first glance. He had to be a little younger than me, with two cracked teeth and ruddy cheeks. He had a smiling face, and his
blond hair, dry and dirty, was pulled back showing a silver piercing in one ear.

"Nice to meet you Dallin," I replied, curtsying much to his amusement. "Please, call me Maddie. Captain Éomer asked me to help with the horses, and I'd be much obliged if you could teach me. I'm afraid I don't plan to stay long, but I'd like to help with anything for as long as I'm here."

"Well I don't know where a pretty lady like you has to go," he said with a cheeky grin, "but I do hope you'll stick 'round." He was a flatterer clearly, as he winked at me before motioning me to follow him. "As least you got some sturdy boots, Miss Maddie. You're goin' ta need those."

He hadn't been kidding about the boots, and neither had Éomer about how it wouldn't be easy work. I don't know what Éomer told the groom and his two stable hands, but over the next week I learned the ins and outs of grooming horses, mucked out stables, carried sacks of feed and buckets of water (once my arm was more healed), and got nearly knocked over more than once by the big horses. It was the very opposite of the kind of work I'd done in Minas Tirith, and I could only imagine the horror-stuck faces of Clarimond and Oriolda if they should ever see me.

In the stable we cared for noblemen's horses, mostly visitors to the king. The majority were coursers, a kind of warhorse like Fastred's. There was one destrier, which was considered the finest type of warhorse. Despite having ridden several horses now I still couldn't claim a lot of familiarity with them, and this horse was particularly intimidating. His shoulders were taller than my head, and the muscles in his powerful back and hindquarters would quiver whenever he stood still for too long, like he ached to be galloping down enemies. It didn't help how the horse would snort and stamp impatiently as the groom tended to him. I remembered being frightened by Fastred's skittish charger, and that horse had nothing on this big, dark brown one.

Dallin had laughed himself sick when he asked me to help him by leading the horse out of the stall so he could clean it. He put a simple rope bridle on the destrier, but I had trouble mustering the gumption to get close enough to clip the lead until Dallin patted the horse's thick neck and encouraged his head down for me.

"Thunor might be big, but he won't bite if you go slow. Fine horses like these are well trained. Ya don't have to do much more than click your tongue to get 'em going."

I hadn't yet managed to reproduce the clicking sound it seemed every Rohirrim baby could do, but a small tug on the lead and the big destrier followed me out docilely. While I wouldn't ever call a horse like that tame, I was pleased when he just ignored me when I tentatively patted his big flank, tail flicking at the flies. He was beautiful, especially in the sunlight with his gleaming coat. He let me brush my fingers through his mane, imagining braiding it with ribbons like a parade horse, and up over his massive shoulders. I didn't always like the work, and sometimes I felt as tired as I had climbing the Misty Mountains with Erynion, but moments like this couldn't be bought.

I wasn't sure how long Éomer had thought I should work with the horses, but Dallin had taken a shine to me, or perhaps he just liked working with a woman he could flirt endlessly with and wouldn't hit him—well, not yet, but he was harmless so far—but I stayed on that first week without so much as a peep from the groom.

On the seventh day I was practicing brushing down a pretty mare with fine palomino coloration—the gentlest horse in the stable—when the head groom came into the yard. He was a middle-aged man whose lips always seemed downturned despite his even moods. I didn't have as much interaction with him as I did with Dallin and the other stable hand, as he mostly exercised the horses and negotiated with the nobles.

"For a week's hard work," was all he said, handing me a small brown coin purse. I hadn't been sure if I would be paid or not, given that this was technically some kind of punishment, but he
only patted the palomino on the hindquarters, brushing his hand gently over the hair. "Think you understand a bit about Eorlingas and horses now?"

"P-pardon?" I asked, before realizing that he must know about Éomer's orders. I was relieved he hadn't told the stable hands, even as I felt my cheeks heat up. "Oh, um, they are amazing creatures. Beautiful, strong, intelligent," I murmured, admiring the color of this horse in particular.

He pulled a sugar cube out of his pocket, coaxing the head of the horse to turn to him in the large stall, patting her neck as she gently took the treat from the palm of his hand.

"They are," he agreed. "You're not half-bad with them, and don't mind the work," he said, nodding a bit to the corner where the rake was. Mucking out stalls was unpleasant, and the smell was ferocious sometimes, but I didn't mind too much doing it. It kept my hands busy and my body warm as the winter chill had settled in Edoras, and I thought of Éomer and Baiard often enough as I worked that I wasn't going to stop.

"There are worse things," I said with a smile, and he just nodded, still solemn.

"Aye, there is."

I wasn't sure if he was thinking of his own experiences or if Éomer had told him about mine, but either way we lapsed into silence.

"Dallin told me you got plans to leave. When you aimin' to go?"

"Well, I've gathered together a bag and provisions, but it's supposed to rain tomorrow, so if that clears then as soon as the next day." I felt a bit bad for not exploring more of Edoras or meeting more people, but the city itself was rather gloomy with the state of the king, and quite small. All the other members of the caravan were gone or back to their homes, and I had the Fellowship hanging over my head. I'd started to wonder if I should simply try to meet them instead of seeking out someone wiser. I might be able to catch them before they went through Moria, but what if I missed them? It might be better to go to Lothlórien and get the help of Lady Galadriel. Would the elves let me into the Golden Wood this time?

"I meant to ask too if it would be possible to get a horse. Only to take me to the edge of Rohan," I added. If that was one thing I understood now, it was that taking a horse from Rohan was a big cultural deal. Typically horses only left Rohan if they were gifts or brought with their owners.

The head groom chewed on his tongue for a moment. "I know plenty of stables with horses they can lend, but you might not be able to leave the city. Wormtongue," he said the name like it left a bad taste in his mouth, "is said to have ordered the guards to bar the gates for the winter. Only some traders and guards are let through."

"What?" I said, startled. It could be months before they opened! I might as well wait for the Fellowship here if I got trapped behind the walls. But that would mean missing the attack where Boromir was killed.

"Mm," the groom said, rubbing the velvety forehead of the palomino, "Bad business it is. Not a proper horselord that one."

I wasn't sure what he meant by that, but the name Wormtongue certainly rang a bell. He was Saruman's lackey poisoning the king. I leaned against the horse trying to figure out my next step.

"I need to leave, it's urgent," I told him. He only looked at me with something like pity in his expression.
"You might have to convince a guard or two if you plan to leave or beg permission of the king. 'Til you figure it out, I'm short a stable hand if you want to stay on for a bit. Won't get any new workers 'til the gates open in the spring." That was more than generous, and I thanked him absently, already making plans to find Éomer if he was still in the city. He was a Marshal; he'd definitely be able to get me clearance to leave.

Finding Éomer wasn't the problem, but finding time to talk to him was. He seemed to constantly be busy, marching around Meduseld where I couldn't go, or talking to soldiers and messengers when he wasn't there. It was a frustrating two days of work and stalking until I ran into Fastred.

"Ah, Miss Maddie, I see you've been keeping busy," he said when he spotted me on the street. Fastred made a show of looking over my dirty dress and dust-covered boots. I planned to throw out this dress before I left. I had been able to scrub the others, but this one was quickly falling apart. A good hand washing and beating would probably destroy it.

"I care for horses," I explained when he asked, and he seemed surprised, but I waved away any request for details. "I need to talk to Captain Éomer, do you know when he is free?"

"Captain Éomer? His duties to the Éored and the king keep him quite busy. The Riddermark hasn't seen this much activity in a long time."

I sighed a little harder than necessary, and Fastred looked amused. "It is so important?" he asked.

"Very."

"I can pass a message on if you like," he offered, and I immediately perked up.

"Would you? Éomer knows I am planning to leave, but the gates have been barred. I went down two days ago to check, and the guard said I need a special permit to leave. Could you ask Éomer if maybe he can help me?"

Fastred looked surprised, but after I pressed him and maybe pouted a little, he promised to pass on the message. It wasn't the most mature way to get help, but it worked.

Two days later I was carrying empty feed buckets across the yard when the clattering of a horse sounded through. We had two open stalls, so I figured it was another customer and didn't pay much attention, but then someone was calling my name.

"Are you Maddie?"

I froze up, recalling Faramir's sudden appearance at the Kinsey's. Dallin ran out just a moment later to take the horse and stopped short in surprise.

On a fine grey-dappled horse was a woman with long wavy blonde hair. She dismounted smoothly and didn't even bother to hand Dallin the reins before striding right over to me. She was wearing a long brown dress belted at the waist with billowing sleeves. Her hair was only loosely held back but hung all the way down her back.

"Miss Maddie?" she asked, and I nodded, putting down the feed buckets awkwardly. "I'm Éowyn, Éomer's sister."

I already knew who she was, but my brain didn't quite seem to catch up with my tongue. "Don't those sleeves get in the way?"

I wanted to smack myself, but she started laughing. I could only imagine how red my face was,
and I tried to correct myself by curtsying and apologizing, but Éowyn just shook her head at me and lifted both arms to show me the sleeves. They were so long they went nearly to her knees.

"Yes, that they do," she smiled, dimples appearing in her cheeks, and I could see the resemblance immediately between brother and sister. "Éomer sent me with a message. He's been sent out again on duty, but he asked me to help you get an exit permit from our uncle. He told me you were gást widsith and must be allowed to leave."

I couldn't help a mock scowl when she said that phrase. "If that means the ghost wanderer then I hope the hair on that helmet of his gets tangled in a knot."

She laughed again before gesturing at the buckets. "Let me help you, and you can tell me where it is you're going. Did you really travel with elves?"

Dallin, who had been trying to inconspicuously eavesdrop, finally spoke up. "No, no Lady Éowyn, leave those chores for us. You go 'head and talk and I'll- I'll take care 'o it."

"That's quite alright," she said, turning those dimples on him, and he turned bright red. The flirtatious boy I had come to know looked star struck, and I couldn't help smiling cheekily at him a bit too though he hardly seemed to notice. "I take care of my own horse, so I'm well acquainted with this side of the stable." With that, she picked one of the feed buckets and motioned me to the do the same.

That day I think I gained my first real friend in Middle Earth. Éowyn stuck around longer than expected, and we bonded over shared work (nobody likes mucking stables but its infinitely more fun with a friend), stories of travel (she'd been to Minas Tirith once and longed to see more of the world), and most especially the ridiculousness of dresses.

"I couldn't have been older than sixteen when I was rushing down a corridor and caught the sleeve of my fine green dress in a door. It ripped all the way up to my shoulder!" She said, and I laughed as we lugged piles of hay to lay down in the freshly cleaned stall.

"One of the servants," she explained, dropping the pile on the ground before retrieving the rake, "had opened the door just at the time I went by. It got caught in the hinge and before I knew it I'd torn it beyond repair. Mother laughed herself sick," she said with a fond smile.

The head groom came out a bit later and seemed only a little surprised the niece of the king was hauling around hay. He shooed Dallin to the other side of the yard and called to us, "Lady Éowyn, I'd be much obliged if you could walk Thunor a bit."

I showed Éowyn to the destrier, who she didn't seemed fazed by in the least. I, on the other hand, still tended to give him a fairly wide berth. "A fine horse this one. Do you know which noble he belongs to?"

"I can hardly remember the horse's names," I admitted, and she laughed. "These names are different than in my home. And many are in Rohirric, which I don't speak."

She nodded, fondly looking over the big horse. "His name means thunder; he is a true warhorse. My Meara, Windfola, is as a good a steed as this one," she brushed along the white spot on Thunor's forehead before slipping the bridle over his head like a pro. "I would be a warrior if I could," she admitted, handling the terrifying destrier with an enviable ease as she led him out of the stable, "and ride Windfola to battle as my brother does Firefoot."

"I'm not sure I could stomach it, but I fear the war will bring us all to battle," I said, following her out. I was mostly thinking of Boromir and what I might have to do to save him. The idea that I
might have to give up my life for his was jumping to mind more often, along with my promise to Faramir to do all that I was able.

"I tell my brother this, but he is displeased by it. He does not know I have been training in secret," she said, beckoning me up to the other side of his head.

"You will have to teach me a thing or two, as I might need it," that was a bit sobering, so I quickly added, "But I'm sure you will strike down an orc or two someday." More like a Ringwraith, but I feared if I told Éowyn any detail about the future she might become too reckless. I didn't know her well, but she seemed as loyal to a fault as her brother, but without the outlet of the army for her rash bravery.

"Éomer told me of the savage men," she said softly, and she ducked under Thunor's neck so she could look at me, "I'm sorry you were there."

I nodded, focusing on my fingers in Thunor's mane a little more than necessary. Since reaching Edoras I'd only had a one or two nightmares about it, but it was still fairly fresh. "I'm just glad Éomer was there. He and his Éored saved us."

"That he did," she said with a smile.

She stayed long enough to feed and groom Thunor, who preened like the arrogant horse he was. As she was leaving she turned Windfola back to me and paused. "I will try to bring up the matter of the permit with my uncle and his… advisor as soon as possible," she promised. "I know it is important to you. I have also promised to dine with my uncle and court members tonight, but mayhap tomorrow if you are free we can share the meal?"

I smiled widely at her, thrilled she wanted to hang out again. "I'd love to mi'lady," I said jokingly, complete with curtsey, since we'd dispensed with formality so quickly, and she laughed and trotted off. I couldn't stop smiling the rest of the day.

After that Éowyn and I saw each other as frequently as we could. I learned quickly that her connection to the king and her proclivities for running off and practicing the sword left her somewhat isolated from the other women in court. For my part, she was less like any of the other women I had met in Middle Earth. Clarimond and Oriolda were less free spoken and much more focused on their immediate futures and potential husbands. Ideas of travel, adventure, anything more exotic than a new kind of fabric was outside their interest. With Éowyn she wanted to hear everything.

That first dinner I told her about my travels, even telling her I wasn't from anywhere in Middle Earth but much farther away. I let Éowyn draw her own conclusions about where I came from rather than tell her it was by magic. I did get a lot of jokes about the ghost wanderer, but she was fascinated when I told her women could be in the army in my homeland.

"So they are equal to men?" she asked, her voice a mix between wonder and doubt.

"Yes. A woman can fight with a sword just as well as a man when both are trained, right? It is no more instinctive to men than it is to women."

"Are men not inherently more… aggressive? Women are considered the more sensitive," she pointed out.

"We have a saying in my homeland: 'Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned.'"

"What is hell?"
Once Éowyn understood the basic idea and the meaning behind the saying she laid back in the hay looking thoughtful. After the first week at the inn, the head groom offered me a cot above one of the stables. It smelt of horse and straw, and the bed was thinly padded with an equally thin blanket, but it was free. I had no plans to stay long so it was perfect. Now Éowyn and I sat up here chatting like I used to with roommates and friends. It was easy to forget the cold weather outside and the state of the war in that moment.

"Middle Earth must be very different for you," she said, and it was true. Explaining hell, I’d learned more about concepts of afterlife here, and more importantly that there was no distinction between the good and the wicked after death. The Rohirrim didn’t seem to have any religious belief at all, beyond a vague respect for The Hunter, or Béma, as Éowyn called him.

"It is," I said, and Éowyn must have reacted to the sadness in my voice because she sat up suddenly.

"Do you have nothing from your homeland? When I was in Minas Tirith, I longed sometimes for Rohan and its comforts. My brother gave me a locket with two horses on it to help ease this. I will show it to you next I wear it," she promised.

I chewed my lip before pulling my bag out from under the cot. "I have some things… but they would be strange to you."

Éowyn beckoned me closer, and we sat together as I opened the bag.

My fingers touched first my jeans, the worn denim having seen more wear than I’d ever thought they could survive. I pulled them out reverently, my hands touching the seams, the zipper, and the button with the brand’s name on it, though it had nearly worn off. Éowyn’s fingers—rousher than any Gondorian lady’s—reached out to touch the fabric gingerly.

"I have never seen anything like this," she admitted.

I had no idea what denim was made from or how to make it, but it was certainly a modern invention, not something Middle Earth would have. "Women can wear trousers just as men do," I explained. "This kind, called denim, is the most popular."

After a couple moments to examine them, I folded the pants and tucked them away, lamenting the stains along the seat and the bottoms. Nothing except for industrial washing machines was going to get that out—and even then it was probably too late. My t-shirt was similarly stained, and there were a couple small holes forming in it from the wear, so I left it where it was.

I kept digging to the bottom of the travel bag, my hands closing around the mirror, coin, and the empty key ring. I remembered giving Bryce and Ysmay the key to my apartment and the key to my parent’s home, and it seemed an age since I’d stumbled into maybe-not-Fornost. I’d also given the five-dollar bill I’d had to Butterbur, and I smiled as I remembered showing him the details of the bill.

"I gave away some of the things," I told her, "to people that helped me when I was lost. But I still have some."

I still had the nickel. It had English on it, and the face of a long-dead president. Coins here were not as identical as machine-made ones since they were very likely hammered out by hand, but they were similar. Gondorian coins had the seven stars on them and a crown on the other side. Rohirrim coins had—not surprisingly—two rearing horses on theirs.

I pulled out the nickel and handed it to Éowyn, who immediately got up to inspect it in the light of
the lantern. I had freaked out a bit when the groom handed me candles and the lantern because I was living in a barn full of hay. I'd taken to putting the lantern in the farthest corner from the hay and only lighting it if I really needed to.

"It's a coin from my homeland. This is... an old king," I explained, since the concept of elections and presidents hadn't quite reached Middle Earth yet, or at least not that I knew of.

"It is so detailed! It looks like dwarven work," she exclaimed. "And the words are so tiny."

I let her examine every inch of the coin and translated some of the English before I pulled out the pocket mirror. It was a tiny thing, still shiny somehow after all the miles it had traveled, though the cheap pattern on the front was missing some of the plastic colors. I popped it open on the clasp and was startled to see my reflection so clearly.

I looked... different. So different. My face was hollower than I remembered, the cheekbones more stark. My skin was darker too; without my desk job I saw a lot more sunlight. It had been more than a year since I'd worn make-up, but surprisingly my skin looked all right. What caught my attention the most were my eyes though. They looked brighter, the color bolder than I recalled. I wasn't sure if that was because the last time I'd seen my reflection was in a foggy mirror at the Kinsey home, or if Middle Earth was changing me.

My eyes lingered longer too on the state of my hair, which didn't have the body it quite had before, but had survived regardless. I ran my fingers through experimentally, but couldn't remember what it had felt like before.

When I looked over, Éowyn was watching me. "A tiny reflecting glass," she murmured. "And a beautiful one. Was it a courting gift?"

I traded the mirror for the nickel as she came back over so she could look at it. "No, no, it was quite cheap actually. It's just been a long time since I've seen myself that clearly."

"I do not care for primping much either," she said, only briefly looking at her reflection before examining the design on top. "The other ladies though, I'm surprised they ever ride their horses for fear of ruining their hair."

"I knew plenty of girls like that," I agreed, and the topic smoothly moved to silly peers, including some of my previous coworkers in Minas Tirith. I deliberately let the conversation drift from home to more comfortable areas, as my hand was still inside my bag. In its grip were the last two things, though I didn't bring them out: the picture I had drawn Butterbur of home, and my cell phone.

Even though I couldn't see it, my hands still remembered what it felt like to hold the piece of technology, marveling a little at the plastic that fit in the palm of my hand. I had totally forgotten that I still had it, even though the battery had been dead for over a year. It was the single most modern thing I had, and something told me not to share it, that this was one thing that belonged to me alone.

It was funny how awkward it felt to hold it again, my thumbs rubbing against the keys. I felt clumsy holding it—it had been so long since I'd handled anything like it. With a wistful smile I let go of it and accepted the mirror, putting all the things back into the bag.

"This is all you have of your home?" Éowyn asked kindly.

"Yes, but I hope I'll go back one day. Not for a little while yet though."

"I'm sorry I could not help more with my uncle. His advisor... Uncle has been unwell, and I fear Rohan is but a shadow of itself. I should like to show you its beauty when things are better."
I grabbed her hand and squeezed, "It will get better, I promise."

Éowyn had indeed brought my request before her uncle, but from what she told me Wormtongue had flatly denied it, despite Éowyn's arguments. He was suspicious of a foreigner, and didn't want me loose in Rohan—which we both thought was a poor excuse.

Still, it left me with a bit of a problem. "I only hope it will get better for you. We'll find a way for you to leave, if you really must go."

"I really must," was all I could say.

A couple more weeks went by without any luck, and I had taken to wandering around Edoras when I wasn't working or with Éowyn. I didn't have a sword, but she did explain to me the basics of knife work, and these sessions, covertly behind one of the stables when no one was around, helped take the edge off. Sometimes I imagined stabbing that tattooed Wildman with the small knife Éowyn lent me, sometimes the orcs that attacked Boromir. If only it were that simply.

Still, I seemed to always feel anxious, with a constant thrum of worry inside me at the thought of the Fellowship. Not much word reached Edoras of happenings outside the Riddermark, and obviously word of the Fellowship would be secret, but I talked to Éowyn about the goings-on anyway. She seemed to sense my anxiety and my restlessness, and coaxed me to talk to her about it. I couldn't tell her the truth, but I did press upon her that I had a time limit and would be traveling to Lothlórien as soon as I found a way to leave. Éowyn immediately wanted to come.

"Two traveling together is safer than one, and I should very much like to meet elves."

"You have a place here Éowyn, and Rohan needs you. Think of your uncle." My pleas sounded trite to my own ears, but mention of her uncle seemed to subdue Éowyn some.

"Are you sure? I am of almost no help here, and maybe the Elves have some cure for him that we do not."

"I think it best to wait here Éowyn. Things are coming to a head, as we say, and you'll be needed."

"You sound very sure," she said with a slight smile, though she still looked disappointed.

"That's because I am." I told her, smiling back. Éowyn was strong-willed, and I knew there were great things in her future. I felt surer now that she and Faramir married in the story. His even temperament would help moderate her fire—and they'd be quite the power couple.

"Then if you must leave, we shall simply have to find another way." Éowyn already looked like she had an idea.

"Well? What is it?" I asked impatiently when she didn't share.

"How strongly do you feel about breaking the law?"

Not long before the plan was to be set in motion I had a terrible dream.

The Wildmen were riding all around me, and I was running to keep up. I could hear a child crying, maybe Sinnie, but I couldn't be sure. It was black all around me, but I was moving toward a fire in the distance.
The grasslands vanished but the riders rode on, the shoes of the horses clattering on stone instead of grass, and I realized we were no longer outside but inside a great cavern. The air was cold and stale, and suddenly I felt frantic with fear. I couldn't see my own hand before my face and couldn't sense the walls or ceiling; I'd never felt so blind. I tripped and fell to the ground in a heap, but then the sound of pounding drums started, quick and booming, shaking the very floors.

I stood up and started to run again, though I didn't know why, and I could hear the drums and the horses' hooves chasing me. The pounding sped up as did my feet, and I kept running until the blackness gave way to flame at the end of a massive hall.

_Drums... in the deep._

I careened around a pillar the width of a car and kept running, heading straight for the only light in this terrifying tunnel. There was iron and the hideous stench of something rotten in the air, and I could taste smoke with every labored breath I drew. As I ran I suddenly realized the ground on either side of my path was falling away.

Petrified that I would fall into the abyss, I collapsed forward and gripped both sides of the narrow stone bridge that was the only bit of floor left. I could barely breathe, gasping in the too-hot air, and in the next heartbeat I looked up and felt fire on my face.

_They are coming..._

It was Gandalf, sweaty, dirty, his wild mane of grey hair singed and blackened in places. I was on the broken bridge, the other side from the Fellowship, but it was only a split-second before I wasn't seeing that scene at all. I wasn't on the bridge any longer but on the ground of a cave, and Gandalf was still there but the Fellowship was gone.

The Grey Wizard had his sword and staff in hand, parrying strikes of a flaming whip launched by some creature I could barely see, sometimes flame, sometimes darkness, without real form, always changing. There was the terrible noise of the whip cracking and the fire of the monster burning, and still Gandalf pressed on.

When I blinked, I was back on the cot in the stable, and for one horrible moment I thought the barn was on fire. Then I blinked and it was just blackness again. The overwhelming scent of animals and hay was the only proof I wasn't trapped in Moria with Gandalf and the Balrog.

The day after my dream I pushed Éowyn to go through with the plan. I couldn't wait any longer. If that dream was true, then more time had passed than I'd thought. The Fellowship was through Moria and would be reaching the Golden Wood any day now. I needed to go.

Two nights after I dreamt of Gandalf's battle with the Balrog, I was hiding just inside the stable door waiting for Éowyn to appear.

There was a half moon in the sky and the air was icy cold with the late January wind. I had bundled up as much as possible, packed my bag and left a short note for the head groom. I couldn't say I felt guilty at leaving so suddenly though, or even for the rather unorthodox method, because the anxiety of the Fellowship's journey seemed to be almost too much to bear.

Finally Éowyn appeared at the front of the yard, beckoning me to follow her. I darted across the yard as quietly as I could, wearing my jeans for the first time in a year. The sensation of pants had been strange after a year of dresses, but pleasant nonetheless.

"Ready?" she whispered, excitement lacing her voice. I could feel the adrenaline pounding too,
and it was all I could do not to grin giddily.

"Yes, yes, there won't be any guards?"

"No, I checked. And it's the lowest point on the wall. With Windfola's help we should be able to
boost you right over."

Éowyn had deliberately left Windfola on the other side of Edoras near the wall to graze. We snuck
around behind buildings and through back gardens, avoiding the streets where the occasional
guard patrolled. The night was dead silent as we snuck through most of Edoras it seemed. It felt to
me like we couldn't move fast enough.

"It is a clear night," Éowyn murmured when we'd reached a less populated part of the city where
the wall on the hill was at it's lowest. Windfola seemed to know we had come and trotted over,
nudging Éowyn with her snout in greeting. "It will make this easier, and hopefully no one will see
you and pursue."

I nodded, feeling the adrenaline cresting again, and I patted the horse with a bit of a tremble in my
fingers. Luckily the low point in the wall was at a bit of dip, so at first glance we wouldn't be seen.

"Alright, mount up," Éowyn said, offering me her hand to help. Windfola was wearing only a
loose saddle, which Éowyn tightened before helping me up. "Okay, slide forward until your right
against the pommel," she instructed, and then smoothly mounted up behind me. She slipped her
feet into the stirrups and encouraged me to wiggle until I could get one foot on the saddle.

"Will Windfola be alright?" I asked nervously. The horse was standing very still, which was a
credit to her Mearas heritage according to Éowyn. Mearas were the finest breed of horses in
Middle Earth (though the Rohirrim might be biased, I wasn't sure), and intelligent enough that
Windfola seemed to know what was going on.

"Don't worry, she's tough. Now get your foot up and try to stand." Éowyn scooted back and I
managed to get one leg under me. With one hand against the wooden wall and another tightly
gripping Éowyn's, I was precariously standing on the front of the saddle of the horse. I only
prayed Windfola didn't shift her weight as I might pitch back and break my neck.

"I can't do this for long Éowyn," I said, my voice higher pitched than normal and tinged with fear.
I didn't dare look for guards or at anything more than the wall in front of me. If I stretched I could
reach the top.

"Okay, relax, now put one foot on my shoulder and I'll boost you."

My hand was sweaty in her grip, but I was thankful she didn't let go. Tonight Éowyn was wearing
some kind of leather vest likely belonging to a soldier, and she waved off my concern. "Hurry, we
don't want anyone to catch us!"

I gripped the wall as best as I could and tried to keep my balance as I slowly lifted one boot,
planting it on her nearest shoulder. "That's it, you'll be okay. Just get your hand on the top," she
encouraged.

With a bit of a hop I managed to get one hand around the pointed wood at the top of the wall. I
didn't dare leave too much of my weight on poor Éowyn, so I quickly let go of her hand and made
a grab. With both hands on the top of the wall, it was only a matter of strength to haul myself until
I could get a leg up. This was why Éowyn had told me to wear the jeans. Doing this in a dress
would have been a nightmare.

"You did it!" she crowed, now sitting more relaxed on Windfola, who was shuffling in place now
that she could move. I was sitting astride the wall of Edoras, feeling hot and sweaty like it was mid-summer and my hands shaking terribly. Thank goodness for the adrenaline, otherwise I might have swayed when I looked down the other side.

"How will I get down?" I cried as loudly as I dared. Even by starlight and moonlight it was too dark to make out the distance, but the ground looked awfully far away.

Éowyn whistled between her teeth, not too loud though I still whipped around to check for guards. On the free side of the wall I saw a horse trot up, almost too dark to make out.

"He's not a Mearas, but I had a feeling you might need a proper horse on your travels," she said, and I thought in the darkness I could just make out something sly about her smile up at me. "If you can get a foot on the saddle you should be able to slide right into the seat," Éowyn said to me as matter-of-factly as if I'd asked her to pass the salt.

I shot her the most askance look I could, but it was probably too dark to see it. After mustering up all my guts—and knowing that I certainly couldn't stay on the wall forever—I gingerly hooked the other leg over the top of the wall and lowered myself until I was dangling by my hands.

"Éowyn!" I said, and I could just hear her respond. "If I see you again, we will have words!"

She laughed as I cursed and fumbled with my foot towards the horse until I felt first the mane and then blessedly the pommel.

"Come here pony," I hissed, urging the horse closer.

"He is far too big to be a pony," Éowyn called back, and I could hear her laughter.

She made that clicking noise with her tongue and the horse shifted close enough that I could straddle him a bit. "Will he startle if I drop down?" I asked, terrified the horse would throw me.

"The horses of Rohan are too well trained," Éowyn said, sounding proud, from the other side of the wall. "You should know that; that's Thunor."

"What?" I yelped, but my grip was starting to loosen with my sweaty palms, and I knew I was going to have to do this now.

Breathing hard, I let out a shaky breath, made sure with my boots I could feel both sides of Thunor's saddle—no wonder the horse was tall enough for me to reach!—and let go. The breath whooshed out of me and it knocked my spine a bit to be seated so suddenly. The destrier snorted and stamped, but otherwise didn't react much to my sudden weight. I patted his neck hesitantly and tried to regain my bearings. That had been a terrifying two-foot drop on to a terrifying horse.

"Did you steal this horse? I'm already breaking enough laws as it is!" I finally said when I didn't think I would stutter, lamenting that I couldn't yell. Stealing a horse was tantamount to murder to the Rohirrim, and Thunor wasn't exactly a plow pony. If I thought selling Arundel was bad, I couldn't imagine how pissed Éomer would be if he could see me on a stolen destrier.

"I'll cover for you," she assured me. "I checked yesterday, and he doesn't actually have an owner at the moment. He's a spare warhorse, really. And gást widsith should have a proper steed!" She joked.

I wasn't sure if I should believe her or not, but I supposed in for a penny in for a pound. It was too late to switch horses anyway, and if I was charging into battle for Boromir at least I had a horse that wouldn't shy—though the thought was frightening.
"You won't get in trouble?"

"Don't worry," was all she said about it.

"I won't get in trouble?" I had to ask, but she didn't seem to hear me, which wasn't comforting.

"Just send him back when you've reached the border," she continued. "He knows his way. Now you'd best get moving. There will be patrols, but if you hurry and stay away from any shapes on the horizon you should be fine. If you head north you'll hit the Entwash eventually, and just follow it north until you find a ford. There are several, though be careful of patrols."

I thanked her, fumbling for some last words. She had been too good to me, easily my best friend in Middle Earth. I wish I'd thought to say my goodbyes before clambering over the wall.

"Éowyn!"

"Hm?"

"When Gandalf comes, do not stop him! He will help your uncle. And you'll have your chance at battle, just not in Rohan!"

Before I could regret my decision to share that, I nudged Thunor forward, and he immediately took off at a canter that had me jerking in my seat. I'd never ridden a horse so huge, and the sheer power as he strode over the ground was rather heady.

I didn't know what direction we were heading in, but when I looked back I could just make out the dark peaks of the mountains against the deep twilight of the night sky. Edoras and Meduseld at the top twinkled with the handful of torches still lit, but it grew ever smaller as I rode off. I had my pack on my back, two saddlebags of food, and one very big horse. Now I just had to get to Lothlórien before the Fellowship left.
It's Off to Work I Go (Heigh-Ho!)

Chapter Summary

Maddie has some company on the road--after a fight. But will she reach Lothlórien in time?

Chapter Notes

Writer's Note: There's some back and forth about the plural of the word "dwarf"—Tolkien is said to prefer the word "dwarrows" but many of us are used to "dwarves", so I've ended up using this interchangeably. When Maddie speaks to the dwarves though, she uses the proper plural form "dwarrows".

I'm also facing the conundrum of capitalization. Is "dwarf" a species name like "human", or a race name like "Asian"? After consulting the internet, I've opted to go with capitalization for generalizations about the race (ex: "The Dwarves love gems.") and when speaking about individuals to not capitalize (ex: "But these dwarves did not.").

And I am so sorry for the cliffhanger. The next chapter is already in the works, but there is just so much to tackle that chapter that it would have been too unwieldy in one post. I also, admittedly, wanted to finish this chapter off. I'm not overly pleased with my interpretation of the dwarves. Despite how many times I've watched and read The Hobbit and how much Hobbit fanfiction I've devoured (a truly frightening amount), I don't feel like I've nailed them down. Any feedback would be much appreciated.

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I rode at a hard canter all night and maintained a trot well into morning, trying to keep up a fair speed but not overtax Thunor. It had been absolutely freezing with the icy January wind hitting me straight in the face, and I spent much of the ride with my face half buried in Thunor's mane, wishing I'd worn at least two more dresses and maybe invested in a fur coat.

There hadn't been any sign of pursuit, but I knew with morning the groom would find me missing, all my things gone, a vague note apologizing, and possibly a stolen war horse depending on what story Éowyn had spun. I needed to at least keep moving, but I was more concerned that I didn't know where I was. I couldn't navigate by the stars, so I'd mostly been riding blind that night. I was also starting to get tired, the adrenaline fading with the dawn light.

I finally pulled Thunor to a stop on a ridge and stood up in the stirrups, looking down at the river some thirty feet below, roaring by. It was so wide I could only make out the far side because of the tree coverage, still a bit hazy in the morning. I shuddered imagining how cold the water must be.
"Thunor," I murmured worriedly, sitting back in the saddle. "If that's the Snowbourn then we're in trouble."

Éowyn had gone over the route with me a dozen times. The Snowbourn was the river that bisected the Entwash, coming down from the White Mountains not far from Edoras. It slowed down and widened around the city, which made it easy to cross even at night. I had thought I'd crossed it, we'd definitely waded through some water, but there was no way this river below me could be the Entwash. Thunor wasn't that fast and the water wasn't heading in the right direction, which meant I'd crossed some other minor river and was still on the southern side of the Snowbourn. I checked the position of the sun just to be sure, but no, it was definitely rising in the east still, and I was definitely pointed north, straight at a river.

I had planned to be on the north side of the Snowbourn so I could cross the Entwash on the plains. There were more fords on that side, and that route would have cut a diagonal line through much of Rohan, saving me a lot of time.

Thunor shook his proud head when I rubbed his neck, mostly to soothe myself. We'd long escaped the shadow of the mountains by the time the sun rose. I could still see the peaks from here though, so we still had a ways to go before I thought we'd be clear of pursuit. At that thought, I spurred Thunor into a gentle walk, following the river away from Edoras. I wanted to make sure this wasn't just a curve of the Entwash, but as far as the eye could see the river continued on due north.

It would probably be a waste of time to follow every bend of the river until the Snowbourn hit the Entwash, and I'd still have the issue of fords. Trying to cross the Snowbourn would mean backtracking towards Edoras and risking capture by guards, who would very likely know I'd gone missing by now. I'd also probably cross through a village or two, and a lone female rider on a destrier was likely to draw attention. I could also go to the Great West Road and follow the same road I'd taken to Gondor with Arundel, but that was also miles out of my way back south.

I already knew what I was going to do, and I looked at the sun to orient myself again. I was going to strike out into the wilderness and head straight east with a northerly bend. I'd hit the Entwash eventually, and if I were lucky I would cut down on days of travel the other routes would add. Once I hit the major river, I could follow it east until I reached somewhere to cross.

I hoped this wasn't my stupidest idea yet as I tapped Thunor's sides and set off.

It wasn't my stupidest, but my luck also seemed to have become precarious after leaving Minas Tirith. The area between the White Mountains and the Entwash was lightly forested, with gentle hills and the occasional rock jutting out, all dotted with thickets of trees and brush.

Thunor had been excellent, moving fast and smooth and not wandering off when I dismounted to eat. I quickly got over my fear of him when he proved to be generally good-natured. He even sniffed at my hair that first day when I took out the bread I still had—then the grumpy thing wouldn't stop bumping into me with his head and knee until I gave over half my piece. He let me rub his head and talk to him, and he even ate the bread out of my hand without nipping off fingers like I'd always feared.

However, he still had an attitude, not to mention his size, which made mounting up the first couple of times a trial.

"Hold still," I told him in English, tossing the reins over the top of his head where they caught on his ear. The horse was just too damn tall, and I had to jump to slip them off his ears. He flicked them in annoyance and took two steps forward just as I tried to put my foot in the stirrup.
"Thunor!" He stopped, and I grabbed the pommel and the back of the saddle and shot him a glare. He didn't twitch as I put my foot in the stirrup and with a great pull managed to get high enough up to swing my leg over the top of his back. My boot did catch his hindquarters though, and he sidestepped, which nearly unbalanced me before I sat heavily in the saddle.

It was, altogether, embarrassing, but I didn't have the luxury of a block to help me gain some height, and thankfully there was no one around to see me make a fool of myself with a horse that was too smart for its own good.

"Just for that, the first chance I get I'll put pink ribbons in your mane and everyone will think you're a mare," I promised him.

Three days after leaving the Snowbourn and heading east, we crossed a shallow valley moving at a brisk trot. I had been half-dozing in the saddle when Thunor suddenly snorted and picked up speed. I cursed and pulled on the reins to slow him, but he resisted my direction. Then I heard what Thunor must have heard first: a howl.

My head snapped around, and the sound echoed off the rocks, only to be followed by two more howls. These weren't mournful sounds though; they were a call, summoning other wolves. I felt my stomach lurch and my hands start to get sweaty on the reins, remembering my dead sprint in the forest before Rivendell and my near miss with that animal.

I urged Thunor into a faster canter, head whipping around as I tried to gauge where the howls were coming from. I could feel the muscles in the horse's stomach and back quiver beneath me, and I reached out with one hand to pat his flank in an attempt to calm him. "Don't worry, you're at least five times bigger than any wolf," I assured him breathlessly—but really, I was assuring myself.

I heard another howl, this time much closer, and looked over at one of the stony outcroppings above the valley. On top of the stones were three wolves, although they were too far to make out any detail. Thunor and I were in full view of them, and we seemed to realize it at the same moment. One of the wolves jumped off the rocks and started to move down the hill, and I could feel the rapid beat of my heart start to do double-time. As it approached it seemed to get bigger and heavier set, looking closer to the size of a bear than a wolf.

Frightened now at the creature's approach and feeling surer this was some Middle Earth monster-wolf and not your garden-variety, I squeezed Thunor's sides hard and he immediately transitioned into a gallop. The sheer power as we flew across the ground would have been exhilarating if my hands weren't shaking from fear. Thunor was powerful and fast, the experience different than galloping with Arundel. Arundel had been more lithe and older, his gait less smooth. Thunor was all energy and gravity, thundering across the grass, the wind whipping his mane back. I leaned forward like a jockey, lifting off the saddle and letting him take control.

I chanced a glance back and saw the beasts loping behind us, though it seemed we were faster. The valley began to slope gently up and then evened out into a more open area away from the rocks, and Thunor seemed to really take off, galloping hard across the grassland. My hair had fallen loose and was wild in the wind, my heart racing to the beat of the hooves. When I dared to look back again I didn't see the wolves anymore, only grass and trees and open sky.

I couldn't help the grin that split my face, feeling the power of the horse beneath me, the snap of the air as we raced on the plains. I laughed, the rush of adrenaline and fear like giddy fire in my veins. Yet another near miss; I felt high with the thrill.
We galloped maybe another mile more before I slowed Thunor down, checking behind us every few minutes to make sure we hadn't been followed. I pushed Thunor to keep up a moderate pace until it was nearly dark, and I found a copse of trees to sleep in that looked moderately safer than the open grass. When I finally dismounted the first thing I did was put my arms around Thunor's neck and hug him, and he huffed into my hair. Bless Éowyn for choosing this horse and not letting me walk away with a pony.

I loosened the saddle so it wouldn't chafe overnight and treated him to more bread. I tied the reins to a low branch and ate my own cold dinner. I had made some fires before, but now I was too exhausted and too afraid to try tonight. I was only able to doze, and every sound in the darkness was like the crunch of branches under wolf paws.

The next day Thunor and I rode east again. It was quite overcast, which at least meant the sun wouldn't be in my eyes all morning, but it also meant it was harder to judge its position. I was also afraid it would rain and wasn't looking forward to being cold and wet.

Not long before lunch I could make out distant shapes on the horizon. The land had begun to flatten out but the trees still blocked most of the view. When I finally broke from the tree line I spotted shadows on the horizon in single-file, and I had to bring Thunor to a stop as I tried to figure out what to do. Should I try to gallop around them, turning north in a wide arc to avoid them? Or would they give chase? I could guess it wasn't a Rohirrim patrol because they were too few in number, but it was probably too much of a risk to approach.

Opting to go around, I steered Thunor north, cantering parallel to the group, keeping a fair distance just in case. While I thought wistfully of some company, I knew I had my priorities. I gave half a thought to warning them about the wolves I'd seen, but I decided not to chance any meeting with strangers.

It seemed to be going well, and I could just make out a line of riders on horseback. They were moving fairly briskly in the same direction as me it seemed, but Thunor easily overtook them. I glanced back several times to check if we'd put enough distance between us to turn back east when howls sounded out across the plains.

Thunor turned of his own accord, slowing down to a brisker trot, ears flickering nervously. I turned my head frantically, recognizing the same howls from yesterday—it seemed we had been followed.

The grass was just tall enough to hide the wolves, but Thunor jerked against his reins and started to turn back south. Looking around anxiously, my eyes finally saw what he had seen: the movement in the grass, like lions stalking prey, maybe fifty yards away to the east.

It was too big to be a wolf, far too big, with meaty shoulders and thick, patched brown fur. I felt hot all over, and my legs squeezed Thunor's sides as though I might fall off the horse. Thunor was certainly bigger, but that wolf looked absolutely vicious, and they hunted in packs.

I'd seen as much as I ever wanted of those wolves. I kicked my heels in and Thunor took off like a shot, galloping harder than before. I was panting as hard as the horse, throwing looks back whenever I dared, but all I could see was the bending of the grass like snakes slithering through, and I knew we were being followed.

When I looked forward again I realized a second later we'd be upon the travelers. I fervently hoped they weren't a trader's caravan like mine from Minas Tirith. If so, it would be a slaughter—and I was leading the beasts straight to them.

It was too late to change course though. As we thundered by them I shouted frantically, "Wolves!
They were dwarves, I registered in the two seconds it took Thunor to pass them by, and when I looked back some had jumped down from the horses, weapons ready. I curved Thunor in a wide arc east, eyes focused on the dwarves, all dismounted now, and made a split-second decision. Instead of continuing east and leaving the entire fight, I turned Thunor back to the caravan where three wolves were snarling and lunging at the dwarves. They held their ground though, some wielding almost ridiculously huge weapons. I saw one dwarf dodge a lunge and quick as lightning bring the head of his warhammer down in a blow that looked to shake the earth. The wolf's entire front was crushed into the ground, and even from a distance I could see bright red blood painting the head of the weapon. The wolf didn't rise again.

By the time I approached at a trot the wolves were down, and one dwarf's axe was buried deep in the throat of the nearest one. The dwarves were gathered around the carcasses, their ponies scattered but visible.

I slowed Thunor to a walk and carefully drew near. I wasn't sure how welcome I'd be, but I wanted to make sure they were all right. "Are you okay?" I called.

"No thanks to you!" One of them yelled, and I saw most of them turn towards me. They were all heavily armored, as was the custom of the dwarves I'd seen, with furred coats and mail underneath. Most of them seemed to be in matching cloaks, a dark grey color trimmed with silvery-brown fur. All of them had impressive beards, mostly in dark shades though there was one blond head amongst them.

"I'm really very sorry," I said as I dismounted, feeling very timid. I already had a couple inches on them, and it would be quite rude to sit on the massive horse while talking to them, especially since I'd just put them in danger. "I had simply meant to go around you, but then the wolves appeared and I had to come back this way."

There were grumbles and some muttering in another guttural language. Then without a word or signal the group broke up, not sparing me another look. Five dwarves went to retrieve the horses, and three more went over to deal with the wolves. I didn't look long because the sight was rather gruesome, but those beasts were not like any wolves I'd ever seen—well, seen on television—and I stuck close to Thunor just in case one twitched. Their snouts were very heavy, with thick jaws and fangs that seemed to almost over-pack their mouths. Their fur was matted with blood and scars, their paws as large as dinner plates. The massive knot of their shoulders was almost comically big and definitely unnatural.

"Never seen a warg before lass?" One dwarf asked, approaching with a friendly smile. He had brown hair shot through with silver and arranged in two braids that stuck out from the sides of his head. His mustache drooped long, but coupled with his naturally upturned lips he looked like he was always smiling. He wore a fine leather coat embroidered with geometric designs and inlaid with some kind of silver thread. Despite the finery of his clothes he wore a simple, battered hat.

"No, never before. They're quite…" I looked away when one dwarf pulled his axe out of the warg's corpse, the crunch and scrap of metal against bone was jarring and more than a little sickening.

"Nasty brutes huh?" He said conversationally. "They'll rip you to pieces if they get the chance. Jaws like those, I've seen them tear straight through armor and carry off limbs." He was still smiling cheerfully at me, thumbs tucked in a belt studded with yellow gems and silver. I felt a little nauseous.

"Yes well, I'm very glad you were able to get them. And I'm very sorry for leading them to you."
Several of the dwarves came back with the horses, which turned out to actually be ponies. They looked rather silly mounting up, especially when many of them were bristling with weapons. The few dwarves I'd seen had always appeared very planted to me, with a wide stance and very stout bodies, always low to the ground. They looked rather strange up on a pony, and I imagined with all their gear, armor, and heavy weaponry they had to weigh quite a bit. In fact, at closer glance, they appeared to be riding small draft horses.

"Oh that's alright. Looks like they were waiting for us anyway, you just flushed 'em out," he said, waving off my apology. He had several rings on his fingers, one flashing brilliant white silver, the others inlaid with jewels. They weren't kidding about the wealth of the Dwarves it seemed. One of the rubies looked to be almost the size of my thumb.

"So what's a lass like you doin' out here?" He asked. The other dwarves were starting to mumble, and we were getting some looks.

"Uh… traveling north," I hedged. Even I remembered the hostility between Elves and Dwarves.

"Ah, as are we," he said. "Now lass, it doesn't look like you're suited for war."

"I have a knife, but my horse is fast," I defended even though he was right. Compared to the armor on these guys, I had about the same defense as a kitten. Éowyn had slipped the knife she had taught me to use into my saddlebags, but it was only as long as my forearm, and I only had a very basic knowledge of how to use it. I hadn't even thought to take it out when the mutant-wolves appeared. Now that it would have made a great difference—those creature's fangs were about as long as my blade.

"Who's this, Bofur?" called another of the dwarves, and I had to do a double take when I recognized him from the inn in Minas Tirith.

"Ah," Bofur chuckled, "Didn't get 'yur name."

"Oh! I'm Maddie," I swept a quick curtsey, inadvertently pulling down Thunor's head because of my grip on the reins. The horse snorted and yanked me back up, causing me to stumble a bit. The dwarves laughed and I flushed, glad the high collar of these medieval dresses hid most of the color. "I'm really very sorry for the wo- wargs," I added, because another apology couldn't hurt.

This dwarf had his graying hair and beard in three points, all done up with elaborate braids. It made the dwarf next to him look very plain. He was a bit stouter than the first, with a tool belt ringed in silver and a very fine, chunky gold necklace with an emerald the size of a walnut. I'd never seen a gem that big before.

"Nori," he said, hanging back a bit and looking over both Thunor and I with a critical eye. "Seems a strange place to find a woman."

"Says she's traveling north," the first dwarf told him. "I'm Bofur by the way, nice to meet you," he said, taking his hat off and bowing, waving it twice at his knees. I had no idea how to respond to that, so I curtsied again, this time making sure to keep only a loose hold on Thunor's reins. The horse was ignoring the proceedings and munching on the grass.

"May I ask where you are going?" I asked, striving for politeness. I didn't really know why I wasn't just saying goodbye and mounting back up, but Bofur was still smiling and Nori looked intrigued. The other dwarves were gathered in a loose half-circle on their horses and watching carefully.

"Erebor," Bofur said proudly, "One of the greatest Dwarf kingdoms. Best one if you ask me." He
winked.

"Oh I've heard of Erebor!" I exclaimed, and the other dwarves visibly puffed up at that. Some had drawn their ponies closer, and I realized only Bofur and Nori didn't have the matching cloaks. The way the others circled round the pair made them look like a guard of some sort.

"Only good things I hope," Bofur joked.

"Of course! I met a hobbit named Bilbo Baggins that helped defeat the dragon to reclaim the mountain."

"Bilbo!" "Really?" Bofur and Nori both cried at the same time, and I took a step back. Thunor was still munching and nudged me with his head when I knocked into him.

"Well then where did you meet him?" Nori asked, and I was obliged to explain that I had traveled down from Rivendell to Gondor. There was some grumbling about elves from the guards, but otherwise no comment.

"How did he look?" Bofur asked eagerly, and at my confused expression he outright laughed. "We were part of the Company that took back Erebor. Spent many a month on the road with that hobbit," he said fondly.

Even Nori cracked a smile. "Quite the fusspot that one."

I had no idea what 'fusspot' translated to, but I wasn't entirely sure it was a compliment given the laughter from both dwarves. Still, Bilbo had spoken very highly of his companions, and I could barely even bring myself to be surprised that of all the dwarves I would run into it would be some of Bilbo's company. Wargs notwithstanding, my luck hadn't completely run out it seemed.

"He's quite elderly, but in good spirits," I told them. After that the two dwarves—well, Bofur really—were insistent that I at least ride the rest of the day with them because they wanted to hear about Bilbo. There was also a chance there were more wargs about, as Nori pointed out, and when I admitted I'd seen three wargs the day before the dwarves were even more insistent.

"Rumor is Isengard has gone foul," Nori said as we mounted up, "and that's where the wargs are coming from."

"It's true," I said, "Saruman has become corrupted." Thunor thankfully didn't embarrass me further by being uncooperative, but he also seemed to have no interest in the dwarves' ponies. I wasn't sure if this was normal horse behavior or if Thunor was just as painfully arrogant as I imagined.

"Are you leaving the south to escape the evil? If so you may be disappointed," Bofur warned.

"I am… meeting someone farther north. But I will likely return to Minas Tirith." I wasn't sure where the future would take me, but given the events of the story all the action would be in Gondor soon. I still hoped to catch the Fellowship and Galadriel in Lothlórien first though. I was in desperate need of some guidance.

"And why are you traveling to Erebor? The only dwarves on the road I have seen are trading caravans."

"Dwarrows, actually," Bofur corrected.

"Pardon?"

"One Dwarf, two Dwarrows. Men never seem to get that right," he said good-naturedly.
"Oh, my apologies," I said, chastised. "Bilbo told me something similar about hobbits and halflings."

Bofur laughed. "Yes, I remember a lecture about that. Especially since Thorin called him 'the halfling' more often than not."

Nori was smiling too, and it made his face a bit kinder and less fox-like. He had more lines on his face than Bofur, and a fine paper-thin white scar that ran from eyebrow to the bottom of his chin that curved with his lips. "We're on a diplomatic trip, mostly for trade and news," Nori explained. "There's been bad tidings from all over, including a dark visitor to Erebor."

"Yes," Bofur said a touch more grimly, "So I'm afraid we're traveling with much haste."

"I'm in a bit of rush myself," I told them, but thankfully managed to dodge the why by bringing up Bilbo again.

It was a bit awkward at first riding Thunor with them, since it put me much higher up than the dwarves on their ponies, but we kept up a steady pace after lunch, and it was quickly forgotten in the wake of the story of the three trolls. Bofur's version of the events was a lot more heroic than Bilbo's.

Nori added bits and pieces to the story, but he let Bofur do most of the retelling. While Nori was a bit more subdued, Bofur seemed go-lucky and merry, especially when I told him Bilbo was writing a book about their adventure.

"Is he now! I'll have to see if I can't get a copy of that. Ori would have loved it," he mused.

Nori rode to the front very suddenly after that comment, and Bofur sighed when I looked at him questioningly. "Ori was Nori's brother and among our number, but he went with Balin to Moria."

I had a sudden image of Gimli bowed over a dusty tomb, wailing. That expedition had ended very badly, if my spotty memory served. "I'm very sorry," I said.

"That's quite all right, lass. We'll find out one day what became of them I imagine." He was trying to sound cheerful, but it was pretty clear from the low tone of his voice he could guess what happened. "My family line's from there you know," he said a little brighter.

"Did you live there?"

"Oh goodness no, lass," he said with a laugh, and one of the dwarf guards behind us snorted. The guards had yet to say anything to me, but they stuck close to their charges. They were surprisingly easy to forget about despite the sheer number of weapons they were packing. "Khazad-dûm's been lost for a long time—Moria, in the Common Tongue." He twisted the shiny silver ring on his right middle finger, seemingly lost in thought.

"I'm sure it'll be reclaimed one day," I said, but I really had no idea if that was true.

"That's sweet of you to say," Bofur said, looking into the distance ahead of us, eyes still seeing things not there.

"Well, you did take back Erebor from a dragon," I said, feeling strangely like I should comfort him. "With the Balrog gone it's just orcs right?"

There was no response for a moment, and I looked over to see Bofur staring at me, his expression guarded. The dwarf guard on his other side shifted closer, and I felt a sudden wave of anxiety. Dwarves were secretive, I knew that, and it seemed from Bofur's reaction the Balrog was not
"Did the elves tell you of Durin's Bane?" Bofur asked, his voice lower and rougher than before.

"Durin's Bane?" I breathed, though I could already guess. The people of Middle Earth certainly did like giving dramatic names to things—particularly with the word 'bane'.

"Beast of shadow and fire," he went on, his hands clenching then unclenching the reins. The silver ring glinted in the sunlight. "Older and more dreadful, and infinitely harder to kill than a dragon."

"Oh, um, yes," I said, brain whirling into overdrive. "In Rivendell, Bilbo told me the story of an elf there who killed one once."

It wasn't the best cover, and I'm sure no dwarf wanted to hear about an elf doing what they could not do—Bilbo had told me about the stubbornness of dwarves, especially when it came to elves. But I crossed my fingers anyway, unable to tell if Bofur had noticed my slip-up about the Balrog being slain. If I had my timing right, Gandalf had only achieved that a couple weeks ago.

When he mumbled something not in Westron, I tried to think of another topic to distract from the Balrog. My gaze landed on the bright silver ring he continued to twirl. "What is that made of?"

"Mithril," Bofur said after another moment where he seemed to contemplate me. The guard behind him at least seemed to relax. I couldn't though, because there was something in Bofur's look that made me fearful he'd noticed my wording about the Balrog. I felt a knot form in my throat and swallowed around it. "Only mined in Moria," he added.

"It's very beautiful," I offered tentatively.

"Yes, that it is."

There was another pregnant pause and then thankfully Nori broke the awkwardness. "You're slowing us all down miner!"

Bofur spurred his horse and called up to him, and I did the same to Thunor, quickly pulling up to the rest of the group. Nori was talking with one of the guards, but he dropped back to be on my other side. I felt a big caged in, especially with the guards all around, but didn't say anything about it.

"So you are a miner?" I tried, hoping to restore some of the joviality of before.

"Used to be to make ends meet, but now I'm a fulltime toymaker," Bofur said, and thankfully that turned the conversation around. Bofur was happy to talk about his craft that he shared with his brother, who was manning the storefront while Bofur was gone. One guard, Orfrik, chipped in about his family's metal working, making molds for the forges. Nori was a silversmith "among other things", which was all either of the dwarrows would say about it. Nori's sly smile made me nervous, especially when my knife magically appeared in his hands when the conversation started to flag.

"How did you-"

"It's rather loose in your bag, you ought to be careful," he scolded me, even as he unsheathed it and ran his finger down the flat side of the blade. "This is a poorly made weapon; an apprentice dwarf could do better. Look at the quality," he complained, even making a tutting noise with his tongue.
Bofur joked, "You sound like Dori when you do that," and Nori shot him an annoyed look. He continued to play with the blade though, testing the weight and swishing it through the air even as we cantered on the horses.

"Well it's all I've got, so please give it back," I said, trying not to sound frustrated.

Nori ignored me though, even daring to run his thumb on the blade edge and scoffing when it didn't break his calluses. Annoyed that he wouldn't give it back, I finally reached for the blade. The dwarf grinned at me and without even looking tossed the blade over my head. I shrieked and ducked, pulling on the reins as I went to cover my head, making Thunor snort and jerk. Bofur caught the knife easily though, and I could hear the guards snickering. I glared at the nearest one, but he just started to laugh behind his huge black beard. Nori was sniggering too.

"Aye, Men do make awful weapons," was Bofur's comment, and that started a game where the two dwarves would toss the knife over my head to each other, unerringly able to catch it despite the speed we were moving at. They did this all while telling me about the terrible quality of steelwork from such-and-such place, and how a dwarf child could do better. Initially I was offended on behalf of Men and Éowyn, but my annoyance was what the two were aiming for. They only stopped when I spurred Thunor ahead and ignored all their jibs and games, a trick I'd learned from years of babysitting. It probably said something that the technique that worked on small children worked on two grown dwarrows.

When the sun began to dip we stopped and set up camp. All through dinner I heard the dwarves' side of the party at Bag End, which they claimed proved what a 'fusspot' Bilbo was. Nori and Bofur even sang a bit of a song about breaking all of Bilbo's cups and plates, which made me sympathize with the poor hobbit. Antics like the monkey-in-the-middle game with my knife were apparently commonplace with these dwarves.

After a filling dinner of stew and a Dwarvish kind of hard bread—though Bofur told me at least three times that his brother Bombur was a far better cook—we all settled down for sleep. Within the circle of the camp I pulled out my bedroll and blanket and pulled them close to the fire for warmth. Bofur pulled his not too far from me and as he laid them out he spoke. "So lassie, who'll you be meeting?"

"Ah… a brother of a friend. I promised to help him."

"Mm hm," Bofur said, and I got the feeling he didn't believe me. He glanced over at Nori, who was sitting on his bedroll wrapped up in his blankets; his eyes were bright in the firelight and fixed on me.

"I'll be out of your hair tomorrow, really," I said, sensing there was something going unsaid between them. I thought maybe they were trying to politely encourage me to leave. While I couldn't help feeling a bit disappointed, even if I had been teased most of the day, I had to admit that it was foolish to feel that way. I had to reach Lothlórien and the Fellowship, and that was a bag of worms I did not want to open.

"Our of our hair?" Bofur actually reached up to tug on one of his braids, and I couldn't help giggling a bit.

"It's a saying. It means I won't be any more bother to you."

"Now it's no trouble really," Bofur said calmly, sitting down cross-legged on his bedroll. He pulled something out of his bag and a sharp blade, about the size of a paring knife. "These parts are dangerous, as you've seen, and we couldn't in good conscience let you go on your own."
Nori nodded, stirring a bit, and I pulled my blanket around me tighter, feeling again that sense of being surrounded, but this time with words.

"Wargs aren't the worst of what's out there," Nori added after a couple moments of silence, broken only by the crackle of the fire and the quiet scraping of Bofur's whittling.

"Aye. If you walk into an ambush orcs'll do terrible things to you before you die," Bofur said knowingly, not looking up from his work. I had to close my eyes when I remembered the way one of the women in the caravan was pulled into the trees by those savage men come nightfall. I'd climbed into the wagon and cuddled Sinnie to my chest, wishing I could be as innocent as the children in that moment.

I nodded, throat tight. Bofur looked a bit concerned, but I straightened and said as firmly as I could, "I'll be okay."

"That knife o' yours won't cut bread, let alone a warg's tough hide," Nori interjected.

"Lassie, it's for our peace of mind as much as your's," Bofur said more calmly. "If you're a friend of Bilbo's I'd feel wrong to let you wander these plains alone. You can leave when you go to meet your friend, but stick with us 'til then."

"I don't want to be a burden and—"

"We're not Men," Nori interrupted, shooting Bofur a look. "You're safe with us, but I don't want to stumble on your body out on the plains."

"Nori's right, the world is getting darker. And we're moving quick enough that you won't be late, right?"

Bofur leaned over and offered what he'd been working on: a small, wooden horse neatly carved. The tail and mane were swept up in an invisible wind, seeming almost to move when I held it up before the flickering flames. He'd done this in just the time we'd been sitting?

"This is beautiful," I murmured, briefly distracted from the argument.

"I did say I was a toymaker," Bofur said with a wink. "It's a rough thing, but it's something."

"You're manipulating me," I accused half-heartedly.

"S'not like you could leave anyway," Nori threw in. "You wouldn't make it past the guards." The dwarf laid down on his bedroll, acting like the conversation was done. Similarly, Bofur put away his whittling tools and shook out his blanket, pulling the flaps of his hat down over his ears to keep out the cold.

"What if I want to leave?" I asked, the wooden horse clutched tightly in my hands.

"Not makin' you lassie," Bofur said, lying down. "But I wouldn't turn down the offer."

Thus, for the next two weeks I traveled with Bofur, Nori, and their guards. Besides Bofur and Nori, the only dwarves that spoke to me on the rare occasion were Orfrik and Urfrik, two brothers who were protégés of Nori—though for some reason this sparked laughter from them and annoyed grunts from everybody else. I had the feeling there was some inside joke I wasn't privy to.

I spent most of the days either riding and daydreaming, especially when the pounding of the
hooves was too loud for conversation, or chatting with Bofur and Nori. They shared with me the highlights of the road to Smaug, and talked frequently about Erebor and its splendor. The dwarrows seemed to have never-ending compliments about the mountain, mostly relating to treasure and gems. I learned an astonishing amount about jewels, fine metals, and how to recognize quality craftsmanship from crap. (The gist of the lesson was if it's Dwarven made, it's better quality than anything else. Elvish smith work was grudgingly accepted as better than Men's, but apparently nothing could outdo Dwarven work.)

We crossed the Entwash in a week's time, and it took a bit of cajoling before the dwarves convinced me the river was indeed shallow enough here to ford. It didn't look it, but they were right, the water went up to the ponies' bellies and Thunor's knees. I had wanted to dismount Thunor for fear my weight would drag him under, but Bofur laughed out loud when I told him this. My fears were unfounded, and no one was dragged under, even though the dwarves on their ponies had to weigh three times as much as me. Nori had looked impossibly smug for the next two hours.

That night Bofur tried to teach me how to use a whetstone to sharpen my knife. The stone itself was a rectangular piece, about the thickness of my finger. Bofur held my knife at an angle, broad fingers holding the flat of the blade and the handle with familiarity. Then he scrapped it down in one smooth movement. The sound was terrible as it rasped on the metal, and I visibly flinched.

"Cheap steel, that's what makes the noise," he said, and Nori smothered a chuckle as I winced again when he made the next pass. "So you see the angle. Now be careful not to take your fingers off. Just keep yer hand steady."

"Don't worry, that blade won't cut her for a while yet," Nori added, and Orfrik next to him guffawed.

Bofur demonstrated the grip and angle, showing me how much pressure to put on. By the time I had the correct hold on the knife all the guards had crept closer to watch. Bofur waved his hand at them dismissively when I heard some whispered bets. "Don't mind them. Now focus on edge of the blade. Drag it down the stone, then start again. Don't be afraid of the knife."

My first attempts were fumbled; I didn't press down hard enough for fear of the noise it would make and the blade skittered off the stone in my loose grip. Then I pressed too hard and the blade made a horrible sound that made my teeth ache, and I dropped both knife and whetstone. There was plenty of laughter, but Nori kicked one guy who said something in the Dwarvish language, and Bofur took my hand in his leather grip and did the motions with me again until I was surer.

By the time I got it down—very tentatively—money had exchanged hands, there had been much amusement at my struggle, and I was ready to throw the whetstone into the grass. The process, while important, was mostly just frustrating for me. In the end I'd only managed three passes in a row at the right angle before messing up, and that had only been the coarser side of the stone. Nori had finished the job for me and handed me the sheathed knife when he was done.

"It's still cheap steel, but at least its sharp. Might last you two or three stabs. Now these," and he pulled out two knives tucked into his belt, "are proper Dwarven steel."

I knew almost nothing about steel, so I couldn't really tell the difference in quality, but the Dwarven-made knives had a smoother sheen to them, and the curve of the blade more elegant. The handles were made of a heavy looking gold engraved in a braided pattern.

This conversation turned into a show-and-tell game between the dwarves, everyone pulling incredibly detailed weapons out from their packs and boots, arguing about craftsmanship and which weapon-smith in Erebor was the best. From the sound of the debate this was a common
enough dispute, and I only half-listened, relaxing in the safety of the company of dwarves, my belly full and the fire hot. The night wind was fresh with the sharpness of winter even as the season waned, and the stars were bold and bright tonight.

There were a lot of moments like this with the dwarrows—and most of them devolved into an argument of some sort. They taught me the vitally important distinction between a battleaxe and a war axe (one is two-handed, the other one-handed, and I doubted I would have the strength to wield either), and argued then about which was better to fight with. They also taught me how to recognize gems by color (they had an extraordinary variety of jewels amongst the dozen of them), and then had to argue about which was the best gem for what purpose—and exhaustive debate.

Given the secretive nature of the Dwarves, for all that I learned about them most of it was gleaned by observation. I was too embarrassed to make a cultural gaffe, so I never pushed when the dwarves were unwilling to talk.

"How long does it take you to do all your braids?" I asked Nori one morning, a couple days out from the Entwash. I had been idly braiding Thunor's mane, though he kept shaking his head and loosening them the moment I let go. It was really too bad I didn't have any pink ribbons. Most days the dwarves didn't bother fixing their braids, but on occasion they would untangle some of them and re-braid them. Given the intricacy of everyone's braids, I assumed they had some importance.

Nori looked rather surprised by the question, his eyebrows up. "As long as it takes."

I was more tentative later when I asked why Bofur chose his simple braids, but he laughed heartedly. "We don't choose 'em lassie," he said, but he wouldn't expand beyond that.

It was maybe two days later when the pleasant journey came to an abrupt end. We were miles north of the Entwash riding through open plains just a short way from the edge of a wood when the first three blasts echoed on the wind. At the sound I pulled Thunor short, a foggy memory stirring of woods and a horn cleaved in two.

"What is it, lassie?" Bofur called. The company had stopped a little ways ahead of me, and I was about to answer when the horn sounded again. Three short blasts. An urgent call for help.

"Boromir," I whispered. But it couldn't be. It couldn't be happening yet.

I looked wildly around the plains like an army might appear to explain the horn, but no, we were the only ones for miles. I'd never had a plan for this moment and it was too late now. I felt jumpy and hot and cold all at once. Ever since that first conversation with Gandalf I'd been building to this. My stomach was in knots, the muscles in my legs and arms spasming, and I felt like a coil pulled too tight.

I spurred Thunor to a trot, then a canter, passing right by Bofur, Nori, and the guards.

The dwarves followed on their ponies calling out to me:

"Where are you going?"

"What was that?"

"Lass, what're you doing?"

"I have to go!" I yelled, then turned in my saddle to look at them. The fire in my veins settled just for a moment. We'd only traveled for a short while together, and it wouldn't be fair to them to drag them into this, but… me and my little knife—no matter how sharp—wouldn't do much good
against those super-orcs.

"There are big orcs where Boromir is," I shouted back, only slowing marginally as their steeds started to gallop to keep up. Bofur tried to ask me something but I shook my head and plowed on. "Gimli is with them too! If you want to help ready your axes and charge!"

Then the fire was back and the world narrowed into the land ahead of me. I didn't know where Boromir was, I didn't know what I would do, but nothing was stopping me from trying. I kicked my heels into Thunor and pushed him into a hard gallop, outpacing the dwarves' and their ponies in a second.

We flew across the plains and into the wood, and I guided Thunor around the trees as fast as I dared. He seemed lighter on his feet than ever, his turns smooth, and I wondered if he could feel the moment like I could. I felt surer than I ever had before; more than leaving Rivendell, more right than my conviction to Gandalf and Faramir. Nothing felt realer than this moment, and I knew I would never forget the minutes to follow. Beneath the rhythmic pounding of the hooves and the rush of the wind as we raced around the trees, there was the distant clash of steel on steel.
Thunor and I galloped into the middle of the battle.

It was chaos; orcs built like linebackers and taller than men held wicked looking weapons made of some kind of black steel. They clattered in their armor that almost seemed melded with their skin, and the ground seemed to shake beneath their boots as they ran, though it might have been just me shaking on the horse. They were all running in the same direction through the trees, but some had already fallen to the ground face first.

The closest orcs surged towards me, but luckily Thunor was very maneuverable and easily able to outrun them. I drew my knife in a surprisingly steady hand just in case. I spurred the destrier on for a short distance, following the direction of the orcs, when I heard a call in a clear, Elven voice.

"Flee, flee!" he cried, but I shook my head and turned Thunor towards him, cupping a hand around my mouth as we cantered forward

"Where is Boromir? We have to find Boromir!"

Despite the grunts and general din of the orcs all around, there was no way those sharp Elven ears hadn't heard me. Legolas didn't spare a moment for confusion, but dashed off the rock and away, moving more agile than I'd ever seen. I looked back and saw the charging forces of the orcs, and I dug my heels into Thunor's sides and galloped after him.

Then without warning I saw the elf running right at Thunor and me through the trees on a clear collision course. "What are you—"

Lithe and nimble, he jumped straight from the ground on to a moving horse—a galloping horse. He slipped right in behind me, as though he'd practiced this move a thousand times (and maybe he had) and grabbed the reins from my shocked fingers.
"This is no time for questions; we must protect the halflings," he said, voice right in my ear. I couldn't bring myself to be embarrassed, still feeling surprised and afraid as we thundered through the forest, much faster than I had dared to go.

I felt the ludicrous urge to correct his use of "halflings", but controlled myself. Legolas was an infinitely more skilled horseman than I, and he quickly directed Thunor to the sounds of steel on steel and what had to be a dwarf hollering in Dwarvish, neatly avoiding all the orcs in between.

"Think you can take a dwarf, do you!" A redheaded dwarf with a squat, thick helmet and heavily engraved armor swung his axe in a deadly arc, giving the closest orc an uppercut that sliced collarbone to ear and the one next to him across the throat. Blood spurted, and I felt my stomach tighten with nausea, but the fight continued on and the dead orcs were quickly forgotten in the wake of battle.

Legolas jumped off Thunor as suddenly as he had jumped on, the fleeting warmth at my back gone fast enough that I twisted in the seat. Behind me were more orcs, charging through the forest, scimitars raised. Ahead, Legolas and Gimli had taken care of the orcs in the immediate area, but it looked like another wave was coming.

The elf called something in Elvish and Thunor jerked to attention, then the archer was off and Gimli was swearing and running after, calling back a hurried "this way lass!"

I gave half a second's thought to dwarves' penchant for calling me lass, before I kicked my heels in and Thunor took off. It was a haze of orcs, yelling in Dwarvish and Common, the twang of the bow as Legolas fired while jogging, all while I tried not to run down the Fellowship members.

Between one heartbeat and the next I spied up ahead a particularly big orc not running like the others, but walking with a calm precision. I'd yet to see a single orc with a quiver or bow, but this one had his already drawn and was pulling up another arrow.

I raised my knife and cantered Thunor forward, the only thought in my mind of Boromir lying against a tree, pierced with black-feathered arrows.

I didn't have to think, I didn't even breathe. When it raised that huge ebony bow up and unhurriedly notched one of those black-tipped arrows, my knife went straight for the bowstring.

And then we were thundering by and the orc's weapon was useless, the bowstring cut smooth as butter. Just as the wave of satisfaction hit me, I saw in the next moment Boromir in the clearing the orc had been shooting at, struggling to stand with an arrow already in his shoulder. I pulled Thunor up short, the horse stamping and nearly rearing, but I didn't even notice as I almost fell out of the saddle to get down. The big orc with the bow was rushing Boromir now with his sword, but the Gondorian had his own steel up, ready to hold him off. The sharp tang of blood, sweat and metal was heavy in the air, as I stood frozen on the edge of the clearing when the two collided. The sound of metal scraping against metal was harsh, and it had to be painful as Boromir resisted the force of the orc, all while using the same arm that had an arrow through the shoulder.

The blades slid along one another and then with a deft twist Boromir broke the hold, the orc stumbling back on the uneven ground, and my trance similarly shattered as Thunor whinnied high-pitched behind me.

Orcs were approaching, and one had already reached the clearing. I spotted it charging Boromir from behind, and the heat of the moment eclipsed my fear.

Éowyn's lessons hadn't taken into account an orc twice my size or wielding a sword as long as my leg, but I had a sharp knife and no sense it seemed. Without a second thought I tackled the new
orc around the middle, my sharp knife going for the gut. It skittered off the armor, but I'd surprised
the orc and managed to get a second hit right in the side where the armpit is—a common weak
point in armor I was going to kiss Nori for mentioning.

The orc got its bearings quickly though, and I was tossed through the air to hit the ground heavily,
the wind knocked out of me. I could see the orc stagger up, probably more pissed than hurt, but
there was definitely blood dribbling down its side, which sent a bolt of fierce pride through me.

While my blow didn't kill him, the arrow through the throat did, this one yellow and green
feathered. The orc choked, hand going to where the arrow was embedded, and looked down at
me, its yellow eyes still angry, like it didn't know fear even when blood bubbled up and around
the wooden shaft. Then it toppled backwards and fell with an audible thump on the leaves, giving
one final shudder.

My eyes were fixed to the corpse for only a minute before the sound of war cries in guttural voices
drifted over from a distance. I recognized the voices of the dwarves, and looked over wildly to see
one of the dwarf guards from my companions knocking the legs out from under an orc and
slamming the head of his axe into its skull. It was a testament to my state of shock that I didn't so
much as flinch at the violence of it. There were more dwarf guards behind him, but I didn't see
Nori or Bofur. They had to be there though, and I felt a rush of relief that made my fingers tingle
when I thought of how they'd followed me.

I was still sprawled on the ground gripping my knife with white knuckles when I looked over to
see Boromir thrust his sword home in the big black orc, wrenching the blade up through the chest
cavity just for extra measure. When he pulled it free, entrails slipped out and pooled on the ground
as the big orc collapsed in a heap.

Sound seemed to vanish into a vacuum as Boromir turned around and looked straight at me, his
face bloodied and bruised, and clearly radiating surprise before it morphed into anger. The sound
of fighting bled away, the yelling and screaming, the running. I could hear the crunch of Boromir's
footsteps on the leaves as he took several steps towards me, his panting breath and mine, and then
when his hand reached up for the arrow still lodged in his shoulder all sound snapped back and
suddenly I was overwhelmed.

Three things happened in that moment: Aragorn burst into the clearing, one of Nori's knives
whizzed by me, the whistle of it cutting through the air above me, and Boromir dropped to his
knees.

Then there was the dull thud of the knife connecting with an orc behind me, and Gimli and
Legolas were suddenly fighting the next wave of orcs. I stood up and shakily and looked behind
me, seeing one of Nori's fine, dwarven knives with the gold engraving buried hilt-deep in the eye
socket of an orc. Looking away, I didn't get two steps before I heard the labored breathing of
another orc behind me—like there was an endless amount ready to replace the fallen. I whipped
around, knife out, and the thing swung its scimitar in a wide arc up before bringing it down in a
straight line for my head.

It was like the Matrix—everything in slow motion courtesy of the likely lethal amounts of
adrenaline in my system. I dodged to the side of the orc and almost tripped down the hill around
its side. The beast couldn't turn quickly enough though, and I had one glorious moment at its
exposed back. The armor was too thick though, remembering the jarring of my hand against the
plate mail before. In the next second the orc turned to me, arms raised up again, and that same
sweet spot I'd hit before exposed.

I slammed my knife into its side with both hands, feeling warm blood run down my knuckles, and
the thing let out a garbled grunt before smashing the hilt of its blade into my back. The blow felt
like it broke my spine, and I wrenched my knife out as I listed to the side, gasping for breath like my lungs had been crushed. My blade was covered in black blood, and my back was going to be a giant bruise, but when I looked up at that orc, all I saw was a challenge.

I may not have ever fought in a war before, or even taken a self-defense class, but I'd seen plenty of action movies in my life. The smaller guy was perfectly capable of winning with a bit of cleverness and quick reflexes.

I backed up to create some space and give me a chance to recover from the blow, even as the fire in my veins temporarily covered the pain. The orc charged me this time, arms down and scimitar aimed for my belly, and I didn't bother to deflect but jumped to the side again and twisting around the orc's back. While the front of the orc's legs were protected by metal, the backs—especially the back of the knee—were not. I kicked hard as I could with my Elven boots, and with the advantage of the slope the orc tripped forward.

My next blow was the last. I slammed my knife down into the exposed back of its neck, the soft flesh giving way in moments. The blade went at least four inches deep, blood spurting on to my fisted hands at the force of the blow; then the orc gave one great tremor before falling dead.

"Two cracked ribs," I heard the ranger say, leaning over Boromir and putting some kind of paste on the wound on his shoulder while Legolas and Gimli hovered. I slowly climbed back up the hill to the clearing where the Fellowship, Nori, and one dwarf guard had gathered. The other dwarves were nowhere to be seen.

Legolas looked up at my entrance, and Nori looked up a beat later, spotting me too.

"What were you thinkin'?" he yelled, rushing over. "You hurt? You're shaking! Where's your knife?"

My hands were trembling and the world looked a bit foggy on the edges. Then without warning I leaned over and retched all over my boots. My mouth felt sticky and gross, my limbs like they were made of stone, and I almost had to stop myself from just giving in to this sudden wave of exhaustion and sitting down in my own vomit. All the adrenaline, all the rush of the fight had left me shaken and cold.

Nori grabbed me by the shoulders and guided me to sit a little ways from the contents of my stomach. He touched my face and arms, checking over for injuries while I watched, feeling like I had temporarily left my body. I felt a bit like I'd taken a blow to the head, but I couldn't remember if I did. Nori checked my eyes just in case, but didn't mention a concussion. My hands were caked in drying black blood and there were rivulets all down my forearms. My shirt was stained with it too, and I had little cuts and abrasions all over. My back felt like a rhino had stepped on it.

"I killed it," I told him, though I couldn't tell you why those were the first words out of my mouth.

"Well done," Nori said, though he didn't sound particularly proud or happy. "It looks like it nearly killed you too." He patted my shoulder though, and I think he was just more concerned that I killed anything at all. I felt weirdly pleased and still slightly sick at the thought.

The dwarf guard came over then, holding out my knife like an offering. He'd wiped the blade down at least, so it wasn't covered in orc blood anymore. "Straight through the back of the neck. Who taught you that?" he asked.

"Sylvester Stallone," I mumbled, a kind of delirium making me laugh at my own joke. I sobered up in the next moment though when Aragorn stepped back from Boromir and helped the other
man stand. "Is Boromir okay? Where's Thunor?"

I'd spoken louder than intended, and suddenly everyone was staring. The four remaining members of the Fellowship were gazing at me baffled—Gimli and Boromir—and calculating—Aragorn. Legolas was watching me with an expression I couldn't read, petting Thunor's nose, and I felt myself deflate slightly at the sight of the horse. Thank goodness he'd survived this mess.

"We have not had the pleasure to meet yet, mi'lady," Boromir said suddenly, "and yet it seems you know me." He looked worse for wear, but very much alive. His clothes were trampled stained and now bloodstained, his cape all ragged at the bottom. There was a makeshift bandage on his shoulder and his unbuttoned tunic showed another around his ribs.

"And Gimli," Nori added suddenly, and I remembered my moment of insanity, calling the dwarves to fight for Gimli. The dwarf in question looked, if possible, even more confused and a tad angry because of it.

I stuffed down the ridiculous impulse to wave at the Fellowship, still feeling a bit drugged, but not quite that loony. "I'm Maddie," I said, and something in Aragorn's expression changed. There was an awkward moment as I tried to figure out where to even start my explanation, but thankfully Aragorn stepped in.

"Gandalf shared the letter of a woman with prescience of the quest, but he was skeptical of your role," he said, voice carrying despite how softly he spoke. "Your foreknowledge was proven too late to summon you."

"I can hardly blame you," I said after a moment of thinking. "I was skeptical too. But Boromir's here so I've done my bit." I half expected myself to fade away or pop back into my apartment at home, but the forest persisted, and I could feel the crack of the dried blood on my hands as I flexed my fingers. The acrid smell of it would be burned into my memory for a long time.

"Pardon?" Boromir said.

"I promised Faramir I would help you," I said instead of explaining, and thankfully was interrupted by the entrance of Bofur and the rest of the party. Counting the dwarves, I was thankful to see there were no casualties. I'm not sure how I could have lived with myself after putting them in deliberate danger twice if one of them had died.

"Helping these folks means throwing yourself into a battle?" Bofur exclaimed, his bloody mattock in hand. He jogged closer and gently held my chin in one hand. "Her eyes are dilated," he said, but I couldn't tell to whom.

There was some talk then, but I felt another wave of tiredness hit me. Then a loud exclamation: "The halfings, we must save them!"

It was Boromir, and then Gimli was loudly interjecting with something. I couldn't quite follow on the conversation because Bofur had wetted a dirty handkerchief and tried to wipe some of the blood off my hands. There was so much though that his handkerchief was quickly stained red and yet more black blood was in the cracks and crevasses of my hands. I didn't have the right mindset to resist the ridiculous urge to rub my hands together and murmur, "out damn spot!"

"We must follow the Uruk-hai," Aragorn said, his calm voice cutting through the wood. "But we will have to follow on foot and two cracked ribs would be dangerous to run on."

"You cannot mean to leave me here!" Boromir declared. "I have much to make up for," he said more softly.
"You must be healed first, and we will need the strength of Gondor is we wish to give this quest a chance. There is no one better than you that could do this," Aragorn encouraged, putting a hand on Boromir's shoulder.

I couldn't hear the rest of what was said, but was instead distracted by Gimli's reunion with Bofur and Nori. It seemed they knew each other from Erebor. "Gimli, this here's Maddie," Bofur introduced, and I smiled as well as I could given the circumstances. "Met 'er after a run-in with wargs. She knows Bilbo," he added. Then Bofur waved his hat at the redheaded dwarf, as though there was anyone else he could be talking about. "This is Gimli, son of Glóin. His father was a member on the quest to defeat Smaug," Bofur explained, and I nodded along.

"And where do you go now, lassie?" Gimli asked, a bit gruffly but kindly enough. It was hard to tell he was younger than Bofur and Nori given all the lines on the dwarves' faces; the only obvious difference was the bright color of his hair.

"I suppose Minas Tirith where the fighting will be." I hadn't quite thought my words through, because Gimli laughed heartedly and the other dwarves snickered. 

"Now that you've had a taste for battle you want more!"

"No, no," I raised my hands up in a placating gesture, and the sight of all that black blood still crusted on my knuckles made my stomach heave again. I'd rather not get into the grit of battle again if I could help it. "I was going to Lothlórien for guidance, but now…"

"You mean to go to the Lady of the Wood!" Gimli bellowed, drawing the attention of the other three members of the Fellowship.

"The Golden Wood is several days north by a fast horse," Aragorn said, his tone sounded thoughtful. He wasn't dressed in any great armor, only dark, weather-stained clothes and with several days' beard growth, but he still managed to look authoritative in our midst. Something about his stance reminded me of Elrond for a moment. "The Elves would be able to quicken your healing, Boromir," Aragorn said before turning back to me. "And if you seek to return south then that is a boon."

"I promised Faramir that I would help Boromir if I were able, and I am definitely able to do that," I said.

There was more discussion of logistics, and the Fellowship whispered together for a moment, likely about Frodo and Sam, but I sat, mind blissfully blank.

When the talk was over I was stirred to stand by Legolas' approach with Thunor. "This is a strong horse," the elf said, patting Thunor's thick neck, the horse nudging Legolas playfully like he was a kitten and not a destrier. "If you treat him well he will be loyal to you."

"Isn't it so with all animals?" I asked, accepting the reins back. I wondered if I should feel jealous of Thunor's obvious affection for Legolas, but Elves had ways with animals I couldn't comprehend.

"Very true," the elf replied with a smile.

Then he called out in Elvish and made some whistling sound that drew four ponies out of the trees. Bofur, Nori and company started to gather them together from where they'd scattered in the fighting. Nori was giving Legolas a very suspicious look, but Bofur seemed a bit friendlier.

"Been well, Prince Legolas?" he asked as he walked by. Unfortunately I couldn't ask how Bofur knew the elf as Boromir came over then, only walking a little gingerly despite his injuries.
"How come you by a warhorse?" he asked, reaching up to rub the white spot on Thunor's forehead. The destrier remained quite calm, and I wasn't sure if that was because of Legolas' influence or because he liked Boromir. Why did he only stamp and shake when I was around?

"Perks of being a ghost wanderer," I said with a smile. Up close Boromir's resemblance to his brother was much more obvious. They had the same nose, the same curve of the lips, and when Boromir's eyebrows furrowed it reminded of me of Faramir's thoughtful face. "You look like your brother," I blurted out then blushed.

Boromir looked surprised at the comment. "You must tell me as we ride how you came to know him."

"Sure," I said, face still a bit hot.

When Aragorn moved in front of me to offer me a leg up, I realized he, as a Man, would likely expect me to ride sidesaddle. I rode astride whenever I could, usually when Men, who seemed to be offended if I flashed my ankles, did not accompany me. (The dwarves hadn't cared a lick.) Something about sitting sidesaddle in front of Boromir—a true soldier with a bearing that Baiard had distinctly lacked—reminded me too much of stories of the damsel in distress saved by the knight and riding off into the sunset. This time the damsel saved the knight, thank you very much.

With that thought in mind, I was very deliberate when I nodded to Aragorn but went around him and stuck my foot in the stirrup and mounted up without help, swinging my leg over like I wasn't wearing a skirt at all. (Secretly, it took me about six tries to perfect that.) The Fellowship looked amused at my moxie, even Boromir, who I thought might be the most uncomfortable with this.

"I dislike sidesaddle," was all I said to Boromir's questioning look, and Bofur and Nori snorted from where they too were mounting up. My long skirt coupled with my calf-high boots meant you couldn't see much skin anyway.

With a bit of grudgingly accepted help from Aragorn thanks to Boromir's cracked ribs, he mounted up on the destrier behind me. The moment he was seated I felt wired, incredibly aware of Boromir at my back. He smelled of leather, earth, and musk, and when he carefully rested his hands on my waist, I swore I could feel the heat of his palms through the layers of wool.

We made some quick goodbyes, and Aragorn wished us the best of speed. "I wish there was more time for questions, but I fear with every moment the distance grows too great," the ranger said in reference to the Uruk-hai.

I wasn't sure if he was fishing for information on the future or just commenting, but given that I probably wouldn't be seeing the Fellowship again until the very end of their journey—even if Boromir wanted to go to Helm's Deep there was no way I was going near another battle—it couldn't hurt to say something. At least that was my thinking.

"Don't lose hope," I said, winking at Legolas.

Aragorn, Legolas, and Gimli would track the Uruk-hai, while Boromir and I hurried to Lothlórien for Elvish magical healing. Afterwards we'd head back south, either meeting the Fellowship at Edoras or put up at Minas Tirith. I couldn't read Boromir well enough to tell if he was disappointed or upset that he was separated from the rest of the Fellowship. He did seem pleased at the idea of returning to his homeland though.

Bofur and Nori came over on their ponies after the three other members of the Fellowship left to gather their supplies from the river. The dwarves still needed to find two ponies before they could
leave, and their route would not take them through the Golden Wood. I wished them all the best and—with me gone—safer travels. They did the same, and Bofur opened his mouth with a mischievous look on his face only to get an elbow in the ribs courtesy of Nori. "Not in front of a lady, you lout," Nori hissed none too quietly.

I felt a bit awkward as I kicked Thunor's sides, aware of Boromir's legs just behind mine, but then we were off, and we left the corpses of the orcs behind alongside the original story of the Fellowship.
A Butterfly Spreads its Wings

Chapter Summary

From the battlefield to the Elves to Edoras, Maddie and Boromir cover a lot of ground—and Maddie reunites with old friends.

Chapter Notes

Writer's Note: As I mentioned, I never planned to write any romance into this story. The focus was more on exploring Middle Earth. Still, reviewers have speculated about pairings for Maddie, including Faramir, Éomer, an OC man, and Boromir. What are people's thoughts on this? Romance, no romance? I'm open to ideas.

All population and army size estimates are heavily based in guesswork. I consulted the Internet and many forum discussions, and some numbers thrown around set the population of Minas Tirith around 50,000 and the total population of Gondor somewhere between one and three million. Rohan would be significantly smaller, well under one million. These are based on medieval estimates of similar places and time periods and what few numbers Tolkien gives us. I also have very limited knowledge of the military, and especially medieval military, so feel free to correct me if you see any discrepancies.

Edit: Maddie says she doesn’t know if Boromir is married; however, Oriolda and Clarimond whispered to her awhile back about the two most wanted bachelors in Gondor: Boromir and Faramir.

Disclaimer: I make no money from this work. Anything recognizable from The Lord of the Rings belongs to J.R.R Tolkien and affiliates. I also don't own Facebook.

Thunor's pace wasn't the smoothest because we were riding up and down the slopes of the forest while weaving around the trees. I was worried it would aggravate Boromir's injuries, and my back was already throbbing something fierce. Still, we wanted to escape the main area of the attack in case there were stragglers, and the sooner we reached the Elves the better for both our health.

"Are you okay?"

"I am fine," Boromir said tightly in response to my question, his breath brushing the top of my ear. He didn't particularly sound it, but I was familiar enough with men's pride not to push. We rode on a bit more without saying anything until Boromir broke the silence. "Tell me about this horse of yours."

I was thankful he started with an easy topic. "Firstly, you must promise to never tell Éomer or any Rohirrim what I did," I began.

As I told him about climbing the walls of Edoras with Éowyn and stealing the horse, I wasn't sure
how much attention Boromir was paying or even how well he could hear me over the hooves and the wind. I think it was the right story for the moment though, helping to recall something fun and light-hearted rather than the darkness of the battle and the future. Boromir seemed like the type to brood.

As the sun began to get lower, Boromir pointed to a small grouping of rocks at the top of a hill that would offer a bit more cover than the trees for the night. I slowed Thunor to a walk, tactfully ignoring the soundless sigh from behind me as the jostling of the horse lessened. Men and their pride.

Once we'd set up camp and left Thunor to graze, Boromir cooked the leftover fish the Fellowship had caught, and I felt my thoughts start to inevitably turn back to the battle. Across from me Boromir similarly stared heavily into the flames. The fire cracked and snapped between us, and the darkness seemed heavier than any night before.

My hands looked reddish in the firelight; shadows between my fingers were like the black blood they’d been covered in. I could still see the eyes of the orc, burning just as bright with anger and hatred, not an ounce of fear despite the arrow in its throat. All the blood, all the gore…

I scrubbed my face with my hands to get the image out, then wrenched them away like they were burned.

"Was this your first battle?" Boromir asked, deliberately staring down the fish and not me. I wondered how many battles he had been in. He was a lifelong soldier if I remembered correctly. Did he have this reaction too, or was he desensitized to it because of experience or the age he lived in? I'd never even seen a corpse in person before I'd seen Baiard's. We cropped grisly photos, blurred out images in the news, and covered the dead as soon as we were able. Not here though. It was all too common. My hand came up unconsciously to touch my arm where the arrow had gone through.

"I was kidnapped by savage men," I blurted out, then immediately ducked my head. Why had I said that?

Boromir looked uncomfortable, and he didn't say more. After a little thought, I plowed on. "The Rohirrim saved us. This time… this was the first time I ever…” I felt that warning burn in my throat as it threatened to close up, and I swallowed back the tears. "I know they don't feel guilt, but orcs are still living things."

Boromir turned the fish over after a beat. "You are truly a gentlewoman to say such a thing."

"There are no orcs in my homeland. Evil is not so black and white." I was glad now it was so straightforward here. It felt a little less like murder, even if it had been in self-defense. Boromir's brow furrowed, but he didn't say more. It seemed he was much more reticent than his brother, but I was glad for it because I didn't know what else to say and didn't particularly want to think about it.

I didn't know how he knew the food was done, but by the time he finally pulled the fish off the fire and set one in my bowl my mouth was watering. The smell of fresh river fish cooked in its own juices and sprinkled with salt made my empty stomach rumble. If only we had some lemon, I thought, but immediately squashed it.

We both ate in silence, not addressing the renewed awkwardness. When finished by some unspoken command we started to prepare for bed, even though I didn't feel tired and Boromir didn't look likely to fall asleep soon either. Once the bedrolls and blankets were laid out and bowls put away, I settled under the blanket but didn't lie down. Boromir prodded the fire from his seat on
his bedroll, and I watched glassy-eyed.

"So you have the ability of foresight," he said suddenly, his deep voice almost lost in the night.

"No, I cannot tell the future. But the story is written down, and I know that."

He shifted some of the wood a bit more, the flames faltering to lessen the light, but the embers still burned bright orange and yellow like miniature setting suns. "Is there reason to hope?" he finally asked, and his voice was flat, like he didn't dare to put any optimism or fear into those words.

"There is reason to hope," I said, firmer than I expected. "I told Faramir this too: where this is a will, there is a way."

"I hope that is true then." He still looked quite grave, but I imagined he was digesting my admission coupled with whatever Gandalf had told the Council. I had a lot to think on too, so I let the conversation lapse. While I had majorly changed things by saving Boromir, the story of the Fellowship was still progressing as before and that gave me confidence I hadn't nudged the story too far off the brink. I could only hope my luck would hold.

"You lived in Minas Tirith," Boromir said the next day, phrasing it more as a statement than a question.

"Yes, for a year."

"What did you think of the White City?"

Boromir still rode behind me, but at some point he'd taken the reins from my hands. I'd been stiff as a board when he moved his arms further around me, but he just directed Thunor around the side of a hill where it was smoother, and I let him take it from there. I might be half the horseman of everyone I'd met if someone gave me five more years to practice. After a couple hours of this I'd managed to relax and basically sat back and enjoyed the ride. Or well, I would have, if any pressure on the likely magnificent bruise on my back didn't cause flares of pain.

It would also have been awkward to lean back into Boromir because I didn't quite know how to act around him. Saving him had been this objective and the idea behind my existence in Middle Earth, and now that I'd done it… now that he was here and real and very much alive, I floundered. Boromir was a man before anything else, flesh and bone, with flaws and personality. It seemed silly, but I'd almost forgotten he was a person behind the mask of the Gondorian Man of the Fellowship, Faramir's Brother, and the One to Save.

He had refused help with his bandages this morning, and had only applied some more of Aragorn's paste to his shoulder wound. His ribs were still tightly wrapped, but seeing the dressings reminded me of Baiard, and I felt a pit of fear open up in my stomach at the thought of Boromir dying out here on the plains of infection. At least in the story he'd died glorious in battle. What a horrible ending for such a man!

"Miss Maddie?" he asked, and I realized I'd completely spaced out. I hadn't slept well, thanks to more nightmares of those orcs and those feral eyes. To Boromir's credit he hadn't said a word about my restless night. I wasn't sure he'd slept either. When I'd peeked over at him after waking in the night he'd been staring up at the stars not unlike Erynion had. Unless he could sleep with his eyes open—and I was halfway convinced Erynion could—something was keeping him up too.

"It is a beautiful city," I finally responded, wondering what to say. I didn't want to offend him, but I had mixed feelings about Minas Tirith. After the subtle harassment over my not-relationship with
Faramir, I wasn't sure what going back would entail. "It is lively, and the people proud."

I think Boromir sensed some of my reluctance to be more detailed than that. "Did you prefer another place in your travels?"

"Prefer? I'm not sure. I visited Bree in the north, but I don't really want to go there again." Bromley and Hadley were nothing compared to the orcs and the savage men I'd met, but they'd left a bad taste in Bree, even with all of Butterbur's kindness. "I stayed in Rivendell for a time too. It is very beautiful and peaceful, but I don't think I could spend much time with the Elves."

"Aye," he agreed, "the Elves are… different. Graceful and fair folk to be sure, but Men are different than them." He spoke a bit darkly, and I wondered suddenly if he had felt as awkward with them as I did. Bilbo had never mentioned any discomfort with the Elves, and Dwarves probably didn't spend enough time with them to be anything more than irritated, but Boromir was of the race of Men. (Aragorn was the exception to every rule.)

"I found it hard to look upon them," I confessed. "Their beauty was…" I didn't know the Westron word for inhuman, but I remembered looking into the face of that first Elven guard and seeing something too fey to be real. It made the rest of the world look dull and ugly—and it made me feel uncomfortable and strange. If that was what it was like to look upon the face of an angel, I wasn't sure I wanted to see heaven.

"It is unnatural," he said, and I turned slightly in the seat to look at him. His beard was looking a bit raggedy, his long hair a knotted mess and his brow furrowed a bit.

"I don't know that word. What does it mean?"

"It means… beyond nature. Different from nature." Boromir looked thoughtful, but also a bit annoyed, and I wasn't sure if it was at my question or because of his answer.

"Ah, thank you," I said quickly, "I understand."

As we rode the landscape remained much the same; lightly wooded with occasional breaks for rocky plains, though none so rolling as the Eastenmet where I'd been before. There'd been a bit of rain in the morning, wetting us both and sending a chill down my spine, but it had cleared up by dawn. Still, the weather looked a bit threatening, and I could only hope we were riding from the clouds.

"Why did you come to Gondor?" Boromir asked a little later on. It seemed like he'd been chewing on it from the tone of his voice. "You were safe in Rivendell."

"I was bored in Rivendell," I replied, looking back just a little to see his lips curve up. "I felt drawn to leave, and Gondor is the Realm of Men."

Boromir didn't say anything in reply, only adjusted his grip on the reins.

"I also… there is magic in this world, and I thought I might find my answers there. And I did." The last part I said under my breath, the words escaping in the sounds of the hooves.

"Gondor is fighting the dark forces that threaten this world, but we have been without hope for too long." There was a heavy pause, like he was building to something. "The people of Gondor are stalwart and brave, and they alone hold the tide against Mordor's forces. If you know the purpose of the Fellowship then know that I too believe in its rightness. But Gondor is failing; its strength flags as the onslaught of orcs and evil things continues without end." There was such passion behind his words I was rather shocked as they tumbled out. Where had he been hiding all this feeling?
"Your prescience… it could be the hope we seek—the answer to our fears; the courage that needs be renewed. If you know the outcome of this venture then I would hope you would share it," he said, volume rising a bit with the fervor in his voice, and I had a glimpse of the man whose loyalty to his homeland was unbreakable and inspired the same in his men. "Gondor is the Realm of Men as you say. It can be your home as it is to so many others. Would you help protect it with your foreknowledge? Tell me the way of the battle so that we might withstand Mordor and overcome?"

He spoke in such earnest and with such power behind his words I was rather awestruck. The stoic, burdened soldier I had first met melted away to show his heart—and it lied squarely with Gondor.

I had to take several moments to even remember what he'd asked. "You asked me before to tell you how I met your brother Faramir. Well, I met him when I shared my knowledge of this quest and the future with him. There will be battles," I warned, "and the darkest hour is before the dawn as we say, but Gondor will survive."

After that, I spent most of the day talking about my discussion with Faramir. Boromir had lived through most of it, and heard Frodo's story to Rivendell in greater detail at the Council, but I at least was able to contribute with the castle-battle-in-Rohan (I really needed to remember the name) and the Battle of Pelennor Fields. Boromir—who I would have described as reserved in the nicest way possible—actually asked more questions then his brother. He peppered me with questions about the timeline, details about the opposing armies, who fell and where. Unfortunately I didn't know most of the details, but I tried my hardest to recall what I did.

"Rohan survives the castle-battle barely, but I think most of their army falls in the Pelennor Fields. And I know Gondor wins it, but I think it is only just."

"We will need to fortify the gates and walls, load more barrels with oil and double the number of catapults…" Boromir murmured, mostly talking to himself as I didn't understand most of those words. It sounded mostly like army and war talk.

"And what of my father?" he asked at last, after I told him about the march to the Black Gates and the seemingly hopeless fight there. (Even I remembered the point of that battle was to buy Frodo time rather than win.) I had rather been dreading talk of the Steward and Aragorn. I wasn't sure where Boromir's relationship with Aragorn stood. Given the man's deep pride and loyalty to Gondor, it had to be difficult to accept a Ranger of the North as his king when he could be seen as a usurper—especially as Boromir was in line to be Steward, which was for all intents and purposes the kingship.

"As I said, the details become blurry. But…” I hesitated, debating what to say. I really didn't remember the specifics, but I also didn't remember the current Steward reining after Frodo's success. "I know there is a fire. Atop Minas Tirith."

My words sounded like a death knell. Though Boromir didn't show any visible reaction, he did slow Thunor to a walk, and after a moment began to fish in the saddlebags.

"Boromir…” I turned, not really knowing what I could say but feeling like I should comfort him even though his father was still alive now as far as I knew. I know I managed to avoid this conversation with Faramir because I brought up Aragorn, but Boromir's loyalty to his father seemed to run deeper. For one, he called him 'father' not 'the Steward' as Faramir did.

The Gondorian thrust something wrapped in a leaf into my hands. "Lembas bread," he said a bit roughly. "Elvish food. Will keep you full with a few bites."
"Um, thank you." I remembered eating this before with Erynion, and accepted the food for what it was—a distraction from the conversation.

It was two more days before we reached the southernmost edge of Lothlórien. Boromir knew the area better than I, and he had explained the forest hugged the edges of the Great River (the Westron name for the Anduin, which was apparently the Elvish name, though I hadn't known that) further south than the main part of the wood. We aimed to at least get under the yellow trees, because it would take another two days to reach the main forest, and Boromir was clearly eager to get back into the fight.

It was slow going too because Boromir's ribs were starting to really bother him. We'd had to alternate Thunor between a rolling canter and a walk because trotting caused Boromir to bounce too much and aggravate his injuries. He'd finally allowed me to help him with the bandages, but there wasn't much either of us could do for cracked ribs. The arrow wound looked okay at least, which was a small blessing. Boromir let me apply the cream I'd picked up in Edoras for wounds, which went a long way towards making me feel better. If it had even rudimentary disinfecting properties I was happy.

I couldn't see my back, and given where the hit was—high up between the shoulder blades—I didn't ask Boromir to check. As far as I knew there was no blood though, only a hideous bruise, and I hadn't had any trouble with breathing or anything. I wouldn't have minded some ice for it, but I was pretty sure the only place I'd find snow would be on top of a mountain.

Regardless, we managed to see the hazy blur of golden leaves on the horizon by mid-morning of the fourth day since the attack, and within a couple of hours the forest was clearly visible. The land had changed to a soft carpet of grass over time, the sporadic woods left behind us. The Anduin was a dull roar in the background, only a couple hundred yards to our right.

As we drew up to the edge of the forest, I leaned far off the horse to touch the nearest trunk of the famed mallorn trees just as I had before. This time though I didn't feel that pulse of life, just the strangely smooth silver bark under my hand, warmed by the sun.

"You said you had been here before," Boromir said, looking around a bit warily.

"I only stayed one night, and not in the homes of the Elves."

"It 'tis a place of peace, but also one of strange magics," Boromir replied, and no more was said.

We dismounted and walked beside Thunor for a short time, listening to the trill of birds (though I did wonder if some of those calls were from elves), the rustle of wind in the treetops, and the distant murmur of water. There wasn't any path, but the deeper we went into the wood the safer I began to feel. Boromir had been right to say this was a place of magic; I think all the places of Elves were.

Boromir stopped short ahead of me, and I walked into his back before realizing it.

"Why do you return, Boromir son of Denethor—" that was the Steward's name!—"and where is the rest of your company?"

"They have gone on ahead," Boromir straightened and replied, voice strong, and I imagined it was the same voice he used to order his troops. "Aragorn bid me return in search of healing, for we are in much haste. Uruk-hai from Isengard attacked us at Amon Hen."

You couldn't tell from Boromir's stance he was injured, but I only hoped his ramrod-straight back
wasn't exasperating his breathing. Sometimes I'd feel him hunching behind me to change the angle of his breath, and the severity of his injuries would hit me all over again.

There were some murmurs from the elves ahead of us, and I stepped out from behind Boromir's back. After a look around—and a second one to double-check because they all had similar hair and clothing styles—I was about 95% sure Erynion was not among them.

And then another elf melted out from behind a tree next to me, and when I looked over I had to take another moment to be sure. "Erynion?"

The same elf I had traveled across the Misty Mountains with was standing right there, looking identical to before down to his ridiculous slippers. I hadn't understood the magnitude of our journey before, nor how lucky we'd been to cross the mountains without incident, but I could appreciate now that he'd likely done a lot during that trip I hadn't been aware of. It was good to see him again.

"Gi suilon," Erynion said, nodding his head at me. "You are well?"

"A little bruised, but alive," I said, feeling a bit smug at my command of Westron now. I remembered many a halting conversation with this elf as I struggled to articulate anything. Unfortunately, he was too good as hiding his expressions to look surprised. This ruined my thrill a bit.

"Rest here in peace. We will return soon," said one of the other elves. Then Erynion beckoned and we followed him deeper into the woods. The sun was beginning to set, and it shrouded the trees in a fine golden glow that turned the silver-grey trunks burnt orange and hazy yellow. The air smelled a bit sweet, as though the chill of winter didn't quite reach this haven of the Elves.

"How have you been?" I asked Erynion, wondering if he would be anymore talkative now that I could understand him.

"I have been well."

"Have you met Boromir?" Turning to the Gondorian I gestured at the elf's back. "I traveled from Rivendell to Lothlórien with Erynion." Boromir only nodded, looking a little surly as he led Thunor down the path.

"I stayed in Minas Tirith for a year," I tried again after a longer pause. Neither of them even pretended to join the conversation, and the frustrating elf only nodded, blond head bobbing just once. When I turned to Boromir he was looking into the distance, brow furrowed again with a frown on his face.

Frustrated at both men's refusal to speak, I rolled my eyes and followed behind Erynion silently.

The elf showed us to a clearing not unlike the one I'd stayed at before. There was a bag of food already set there, along with two canteens of water and a fire pit with kindling already piled.

"There is a small stream where you can bathe," he said, gesturing into the forest. "If you should like, fresh meat can be brought to you." Erynion gave me a sly look, and it didn't take more than a heartbeat to remember the rabbit he'd—

"That would be good," Boromir said before I could interject about how completely unnecessary it was to butcher wild animals anywhere near me.

"Rest, and I will return." Then Erynion walked back through the trees and like a ghost vanished behind the next trunk. I watched him go feeling disgruntled by how anticlimactic our reunion had
been and his jibe.

I stared after him for a moment before turning to Boromir. "I'm going to take a bath. Tell me if he comes back with an animal. If it is not already cooked I will wait by the stream."

Boromir looked confused as I gathered my things up, rather hoping Erynion was still close enough to hear my grumblings about Elves and their terrible sense of humor.

The next day was a flurry of activity in the morning. We got a visit from Haldir, an elf Boromir recognized, Erynion again, though he just hung around not saying anything, and two Elvish healers. Haldir talked to Boromir about orc sightings while he was poked and prodded by the healers. They gave him some kind of poultice for his arrow wound and some kind of medicine to drink, and he looked distinctly uncomfortable at the attention. I had a feeling he was the kind of guy who avoided the doctor until somebody dragged him.

For my part, I had the awkward experience of shucking the top of my dress under a cloak so the healer could see my back. Boromir shot me a look when I admitted I'd been hit pretty hard by one of the orcs.

"How bad is it?" I asked from where I was facedown on a blanket. The healer was very gently applying some kind of cool salve on my back that began to ease the tight muscles. The area it was spread on felt as large as my hand and was going pleasantly numb.

"It has fine color," Erynion commented unhelpfully. Sometimes I wondered if he did it deliberately or if he was really like this.

Boromir eventually was allowed to sit back after being thoroughly tended to, and when he looked over I heard him audibly hiss. "You have a bruise bigger than an orc's fist!"

"Is it still black and blue?" When I craned my head to see him, the man's cheeks were a bit ruddy. I realized belatedly he was able to see my whole bare back thanks to the healer's work. I had to wait for the salve to dry before I could pull my dress back up.

"Indeed, a mottling of color." He wasn't looking at me as he spoke though, and I had to hide a smile at his embarrassment. A tough soldier and proud captain he may be, but I had not expected any shyness. It actually looked a bit strange on him, that such a broad, strong man should be reduced to fluster.

"I don't understand." Boromir had a tendency to use fancy language—a mark of his upbringing I imagine—but it sometimes made him difficult to understand.

"Blue and purple," he amended.

"I carry my war wound with pride," I teased, trying to make him feel a bit better and make this moment a little less awkward. I didn't know how Elves felt about nudity, but Erynion seemed totally blasé about this. Either that or he was faking it. You could never tell with Elves.

"It is a lucky thing it will not scar," he said more seriously.

"But then I lack proof I was ever in the battle," I jokingly protested. "No one will believe that I, Madeline Greene, fought and killed Uruk-hai." I smiled brightly, enjoying the light banter about such dark events. I was still having trouble staying asleep some nights, so it was nice to look at the fight a little differently.

"I swear to vouch for you, milady, should anyone question," Boromir said solemnly, but when I
shifted in place to see him better his lips were quirked up even as he very studiously looked at the
forest and not me.

Eventually the salve dried and the elf healer helped me to lace up my dress and shift again, and
then finally I dropped the cloak, my back feeling better than ever. The elves left then; off to do
whatever they did I suppose, and left the two of us mortals with a lot of downtime. "How are your
ribs, Boromir?"

"They are fine, only in need of rest that I cannot take."

"Do you plan to leave so soon?"

"You are welcome to stay as long as you like, but the war is not yet won. Gondor needs me." He
spoke very seriously, not a laugh line on his face. It was clear his duty was very important to him,
and he was right in that we'd probably need as much time as possible to prepare for the battles
with Mordor.

"The Fellowship needs you too," I reminded him, though I part of me said loudly they had still
succeeded without him. I immediately shoved the thought into the back of my head. That was not
a good way to look at this.

Thunor, who had been grazing on the sweet grass behind me, snuffled at my closed fist on the
ground, making me jump and breaking the solemn atmosphere. I petted Thunor's velvety nose and
the horse gently whickered. A little dark part of me was pleased Thunor was being affectionate
with me. He had seemed to prefer Legolas (though I guess I could put that down to Elf-magic)
and Boromir.

"I will go with you," I told him after letting Thunor steal some of the remains of my bread from
breakfast. "Technically I have broken Rohirrim law again by taking a borrowed horse out of
Rohan without permission. If we meet Éomer, you must pretend to be more severely injured, so he
may not be quite so angry." Boromir actually laughed at that, though it was quiet and quick.

"The Rohirrim lent me a fine steed to reach Rivendell, though I had to abandon it as I neared the
valley. I can only hope it made it back safely and I too did not break some Rohirrim law." Thunor
shook his head and his mane whacked me in the face. I didn't push his head away though, just
reached to pat his smooth neck. His coat gleamed like someone had brushed him down. I ran my
fingers through his mane thoughtfully.

"If it was anything like Thunor, then it was probably too smart for its own good. I wonder if the
Elves have any ribbons I can braid into his hair."

We stayed one more day in the Golden Wood at the healer's insistence. They gave Boromir more
of that draught and a bag of herbs he should mix with boiled water to drink every night. It would
speed up his healing they said. I was given the salve treatment one more time, but as it was only a
bruise, and I didn't need more than time to heal.

The river stream was a bit chilly to bathe in, but I bathed twice in two days, which Boromir shook
his head at, and I lectured him about the importance of personal hygiene. The phrase "cleanliness
is next to godliness" didn't quite translate.

Still, Boromir took advantage too, washing away the grime, trimming his beard and combing out
his snarly hair. When not playing the burly, dirty traveler, Boromir was actually quite handsome. I
wondered how old he was. I would have guessed forty, but given how differently people aged
here—hadn't Aragorn lived to like, 150 or something?—I didn't really know.
The Elves washed our clothing and filled our packs again with dried meats, traveler's bread (but not lembas, apparently that was special), cheese, and a number of other foods. They treated Thunor especially kindly, spoiling the arrogant destrier rotten. If he were expecting any sugar cubes from me on the road he'd be disappointed.

On the morning of the third day Erynion led us away from our campsite, the sun only just rising. He looked as perfect as ever, and Boromir seemed quite awake too despite the early hour. Boromir was an early riser I'd learned after being nudged awake on the road every day; for me, a lifetime of morning grumpiness couldn't be changed that quickly. As we reached the edge of the wood, Erynion slowed to a stop and indicated the rest of the way.

"There are tidings I must share with you. Isengard has been taken, and there is rumor that Onodrim—Ents in the Common Tongue—are the ones who besieged it."

Boromir looked at me as Erynion relayed this, something in his expression new to me and maybe a bit wary. "What?" I asked.

"You said there would be walking and talking trees at Isengard," he pointed out.

"Is that what Erynion said?" I hadn't understood his use of Elvish or his translation, and unfortunately had gotten too much into the practice of ignoring what I didn't understand. No one in Minas Tirith wanted to be harassed for definitions for everything they said.

"Ents are one of the most ancient of races, thought to be long lost. They were shepherds and protectors of the forests in the form of great trees. It is said they were given words by the Elves," Erynion said.

"Talking and walking trees," I summed up. Boromir managed to stifle a snort.

"There are also tidings of Rohan. A great battle was fought at the Hornburg."

"Helm's Deep! A great fortress!" Boromir said, and he looked at me again, this time with something like awe. "It seems you were right on more than one count. I can only hope they won the battle."

"A battle with the Rohirrim? Was it at a castle?" I hadn't felt quite this lost in a conversation in a long time. Maybe I could get Boromir to teach me more relevant war vocabulary as we traveled.

"Helm's Deep—a fortress, which is rather like a castle," Boromir clarified.

"They should have won, though closely," I said, and Erynion was also giving me a strange look, which I ignored. It was petty, but I considered it revenge for him bringing a hare back that first night and leaving the skin of the poor thing right next to my bag. Boromir had looked very amused when I urged him to stick it behind a tree where I at least didn't have to see it.

Erynion said his goodbyes after that, and Boromir and I walked the last short leg to the edge of the forest.

"I think… it may be best if you ride behind me. Though I know it is your horse—"

"You are the better rider of us," I interrupted, squishing any upset feelings. "If your ribs are able to, then you should ride first." It was stupid to be jealous of a horse's affections, especially since Thunor wasn't mine, I reminded myself firmly.

Boromir nodded and mounted up considerably more smoothly than he had before. He gave me a hand up, and I slid into the saddle behind him. His clothes and hair smelled faintly of flowers,
which would no doubt embarrass him if I mentioned it. Underneath it though was the scent of leather and the wax he used to shine his sword.

"If we are quick, we should reach Edoras in less than a week. I can only hope Aragorn and the Fellowship are there too."

"I don't think Aragorn goes back to Edoras," I told him as we rode off, "But either way we should go there to find out what has become of the Rohirrim."

"I thought you were sure of the future?"

"I have no doubt the Rohirrim won the battle," I said quickly because it was true. As far as Aragorn and the rest of the Fellowship nothing had changed with the non-death of Boromir. Bringing the Gondorian to Edoras would be the first ripple in the story. "But in case you did not believe stories of walking trees—"

"Ents," Boromir corrected.

"—and the battle at the castle—"

"Fortress."

"—this will be all the proof you need. And then you can tell Faramir because he didn't believe me either." I gave Boromir a dirty look, but he couldn't see it.

"I should have thought to send him a letter by way of the Elves," he said, and his voice was a bit lower and harder to hear.

"When we reach Edoras you can do just that," I replied. "Or maybe we'll make straight away for Minas Tirith and you can tell him in person." That seemed to lift Boromir's spirits a bit. "Why don't you tell me about Faramir? As his brother you ought to know some good stories you can share." I didn't want to tell Boromir fairytales while on horseback riding through Rohan—it smacked too much of Baiard.

And thus we wiled away the day with stories of friends and family. I eventually caved and told Boromir the story of Erynion and the rabbit, which he commented was in poor taste—only for him to laugh at his own pun.

We kept up a solid pace across the plains of Rohan. Rocks and dry brush gave way to grasslands and then slowly the occasional fields. We got stuck in one rain shower, and Boromir insisted on trading his Elvish cloak (which of course was waterproof) for mine (which was less so) until the downpour stopped. Along the way he taught me the best ways to prepare the dried meat and how to make a kind of traveler's bread from flour and water baked over the fire. It could have benefitted from some butter or jam, but it was a welcome break from slowly hardening bread and cheese and the same meat day in and day out.

Finally on the fifth day from Lothlórien we could see the crown of Edoras, Meduseld, rising in the distance. In the sunlight the roof glinted like it was made of gold. I hoped Éowyn would be in the city.

As we crested the top of the valley we saw there was a massive army camp sitting all around Edoras. There were numerous tents for the men and paddocks for the horses, and the smoke of at least a hundred cook fires. I had to peer around Boromir's shoulder (I wasn't quite tall enough to see over it while seated) and it took my breath away.
"Rohan has amassed most of its army it seems."

"Is it an Éoherë?" It looked like thousands were gathered outside the city. Fastred had told me an Éoherë would have been made up of twelve thousand men all on horseback, but I had no idea what that number of people looked like—how many people could fit into a sports stadium? Fifty thousand? Looking at it that way, I supposed this could be twelve thousand.

"Not quite I think, but perhaps more are coming. Rohan has not mustered such a force in many an age."

"Well this is as good as time as any." Boromir glanced over his shoulder to give me a funny look. Sometimes my attempts to translate English phrasing into Westron came out strange. "Well, how many do you think are down there?"

"Perhaps ten thousand. Gondor's force is many times larger than this, though it is not all gathered together. We are spread thin across our borders and we fight many more battles than the Rohirrim."

"How many people are in Gondor?"

"It would be impossible to say," Boromir replied. Apparently the census hadn't been invented yet. The population couldn't have been that large though I rationalized. Minas Tirith was very crowded by Middle Earth standards, but that was only in some districts, and the size of the city itself, while larger than any other I'd been to here, didn't really compare to any modern city I knew. After all, you could walk from the highest level in Gondor to the lowest level in two or three hours. It would take most of a day if not more to walk the length of most cities in my world.

"How many men are in Gondor's army?"

"One could not count them all. Minas Tirith has guards and a standing army, but we have a navy, cavalry, the Rangers of Ithilien, and standing forces in Osgiliath and other cities. In the south there are many more, especially in the ports. Do you ask how many fight now or how many could be mustered?"

Clearly the answer was too complicated for me, so I diverted the question. "In my homeland we count how many people there are." I remembered hearing about how the Earth had almost reached seven billion people, or maybe just passed it. In Europe alone there had to be somewhere around a billion people given how crowded it was. But how populous was it in medieval times?

"How many people live in your land?" he asked.

"A couple..." I had to think for a moment how to translate the numbers. "A couple hundred million I think."

Boromir laughed, this time much louder and longer than I'd heard before. It made him sound younger. "You jest with me. You would have to have fields the size of Gondor to feed that many. Your kingdom would be the size of Arda." He was still chuckling as he spoke. "I think you mean a couple hundred thousand, Lady Maddie. I think Gondor has more than this, given we have many cities almost of size with Minas Tirith."

I decided not to correct him, because a population of a hundred million people would be beyond imagining for a man of this world. I didn't think there were even ten million people in all of Middle Earth given the sheer amount of empty space I'd traveled through.

Then we were galloping down into the valley, and slowly we could hear the sounds of the army camp: the voices of men shouting and laughing, the banging of forges as they repaired armor and
weapons, the stamp and huff of thousands of horses. As we approached the outskirts of the camp three riders hailed us and rode over, spears in one hand and shields in the other.

"Ho!" They called, and then shouted something more in Rohirric.

"I am Boromir, son of Denethor II, Steward of Gondor. I come seeking my companions, a Man, a dwarf, and an elf." Boromir called when they were within speaking distance.

There was a flurry of conversation in Rohirric and then the leader with a slightly more elaborate tail on his spear spoke. "Give us the names of your companions that we might prove your relation."

"Aragorn, son of Arathorn of the North, Gimli son of Glóin, of Erebor, and Legolas son of Thranduil, Prince of Mirkwood. We are to believe they aided in a battle at the Hornburg."

"Indeed they did," said another man riding up to join them. I craned around Boromir to see the group better and some gave me strange looks but no one asked about me. "You come at a dangerous time Lord Boromir, and I hope the strength of Gondor avails us. We are riding to Minas Tirith on the morrow, for word of orcs marching on the cities and moving west has come to us."

"Lord Cenric, son of Cenhelm. Long has it been since we last met."

I had almost no idea what was going on because everyone was speaking in particularly archaic language now. It seemed Boromir knew one of these riders, one with fancier mail and plated armor on his destrier. He had a graying beard and a bucking horse on his shield like the rodeo.

"Strange it is to meet you here, Lord Boromir. I did not fight by your companions, but three thousand of our men were assaulted at Helm's Deep. They withstood the attack at great losses. King Théoden and Gandalf went to Isengard and there captured Saruman. We go now to the aid of Gondor."

Boromir questioned him quite a bit on the battle and the whereabouts of Gandalf and Aragorn. Cenric could only say Gandalf had left for Gondor in a hurry—which I'd forgotten. I was pretty sure he'd taken one of the hobbits, but couldn't remember why. As for Aragorn, he had ridden off right after the battle at Helm's Deep to go rouse some army that owed a debt to his people.

"He goes to the Stone of Erech to summon the army of the Dead Men of Dunharrow with the Grey Company," Lord Cenric said as we trotted through the camp.

"Dead men! There is a ghost army!" I exclaimed, remembering suddenly that bit of information I'd forgotten to tell Faramir. When Boromir turned to me almost expectantly all I could really say was, "Aragorn fights with an army of ghosts. Against ships I think."

"Ships? If he reaches the Stone of Erech safely then all the ports of Gondor are near." Boromir's look turned thoughtful, so I turned to Lord Cenric to ask about this army of dead men.

"They are men who broke an oath to King Isildur many an age ago and can only be summoned to battle again by Isildur's Heir, or so the tale goes. If this is true, then Aragorn is heir to the throne of Gondor," Lord Cenric explained. He looked like he was about to ask who I was but Boromir shifted and renewed the conversation.

"Aye, he is. Tell me of this host that approaches the White City."

They spoke of battle, defenses, and strategy, and I tuned them out and instead took in the flurry of the camp as we advanced on Edoras while musing on Gandalf's abrupt departure. There were men
everywhere, polishing their equipment, gambling with dice and cards, and practicing their swordplay. The organization of the camp was quite impressive given the sheer number of people here.

Finally we came to the gates of Edoras, though this one was at the back of the Golden Hall. Lord Cenric led us up the winding streets and around the hill to Meduseld on horseback, people scattering in our wake.

Eventually we had to dismount though, and Lord Cenric jumped down and immediately offered me a hand. Boromir followed, and the Rohirrim bowed to me while still holding my hand. I didn't know if it would be rude to slip it out or not, but thankfully Boromir stepped in.

"This is Lady Maddie," he introduced. "She is a friend of Gandalf's, and will be going on with me to Minas Tirith."

"It is an honor, Lady Maddie," Lord Cenric said, bowing again and finally letting go of my hand. I was a bit flustered by his manner and curtseyed quickly to cover it.

"There's no need for formality, really."

We would have said more, but another group of men on horses pulled up behind us, and Lord Cenric ushered us up the steps and inside the great hall.

Meduseld was very rustic, with a high vaulted ceiling and ornately decorated wooden beams to hold it up. Along the walls were tall tapestries of men and horses in battle led by someone in a crown. There were banners hanging from the ceiling, almost all with some kind of horse motif, and long tables and benches on the edges of the room packed with men and covered with drink and food. There looked to be roast boar and duck, potatoes and soups and vegetables, and many open kegs of ale. My mouth started to water, and I hoped we'd be eating some of that soon. At the far end of the hall on a raised dais was a throne where the king was seated.

Lord Cenric briskly walked to the front, Boromir and I on his heels. "King Théoden, I bring before you Lord Boromir of Gondor and Lady Maddie."

Boromir bowed and I immediately dropped a deep curtsey, hoping that was polite enough for a king. I kept my eyes downcast just in case. In the glimpses I got, Théoden looked like a well-aged man with graying blonde hair, but with tired lines in his face. However, he looked invigorated when Boromir repeated his request for word on the other members of the Fellowship.

"Yes, of course, Aragorn told us we might be seeing you. Sit, Lord Boromir and friend, and tell me all you know."

There wasn't much to tell that Aragorn hadn't said already, though Boromir was careful with what he said about the quest. Théoden had much to tell us about Saruman, Gandalf (now the White, not the Grey, as I had told Boromir, which earned me another assessing look) the Battle of the Hornburg, and Aragorn. He told us about the Grey Company of Rangers of the North that joined Aragorn, along with Elrond's two sons. I hadn't remembered any of this part at all, and I wondered with a jolt if Trahern was among those thirty Rangers here. Wouldn't it be amusing to see him again!

"And I met these Halflings, two small folk, who traveled with Ents— Ents! — to Isengard! It is as though all the people of storybooks come to life." Théoden seemed rather amused by this, and Boromir looked particularly eager for word on the hobbits.

"How were they? You say they were part of the siege of Isengard?"
"Indeed," King Théoden replied. "But one of them is here, Meriadoc Brandybuck, and you can ask him to tell you the story. He is my squire, and swore fealty to me."

I was surprised and pleased to hear Merry was in Edoras—which I really should have known, but luckily Boromir seemed to have temporarily forgotten about me—but I couldn't match the Gondorian's relief and enthusiasm at the news. "I will call for him," the king said, "I think he was at the armorer last I heard. I'm sure he will be glad to see you."

The topic eventually moved to Minas Tirith and the war there, and for a time I mostly drifted in and out of the conversation. I watched the men around us drink and sing, even dance at one point, and admired the fine stitching on the king's clothing, including tiny golden horseshoes woven into the hem of his tunic.

"It was your brother who sent tidings, even before Gandalf and your Fellowship arrived. He warned the strength of Rohan would be needed against the might of Isengard." Théoden sighed, and he looked world-weary. "Would that I had heeded him sooner. In a bid to protect our womenfolk and children, we withdrew to Helm's Deep. I called the muster of Rohan at the last moment, when it seemed clear Saruman knew where we headed, and for that reason alone do I have so many men prepared to come when we returned from the Hornburg. Still, at Helm's Deep we suffered great casualties."

Théoden relayed the highlights of the battle, but even with my newly expanded military vocabulary courtesy of long boring rides with Boromir, I still had trouble following all the terminology. I did pick up on one thing though: the Uruk-hai had apparently blown a hole in the fortress wall using a steel keg filled with black powder that was lit on fire—it sounded to me like gunpowder. I resolved to remember to tell Boromir later that wet gunpowder wouldn't explode in case Mordor also used it.

When the king finally finished he looked expectantly at Boromir. "At dawn tomorrow we march for Minas Tirith. Will you be joining us, Lord Boromir?"

"I would be honored to, my Lord," Boromir began, and there was a deference to his posture and tone I had never seen before. It was easy to forget sometimes that he must have had a lot of training dealing with court manners given he would be the future Steward of Gondor. "However, we are pressed for time, and I should desire to reach Minas Tirith as soon as possible to help ready the defenses."

"Understandable," Théoden said, waving his hand to a serving woman and calling for wine. "We will give you a swift steed to see you on your way with the best wishes of Rohan. May we fight alongside on the battlefield!"

The woman poured three cups of wine and King Théoden held his up for a toast. "You are welcome to stay with the women safely here, Lady Maddie," the king said to me after we all drank, addressing me for the first time. "My niece Éowyn would be pleased to have a new companion, and the Halfling will be staying too."

"I'm afraid I really should go with Boromir," I said a bit nervously, holding my wine cup with both hands. The taste was very strong, and I'd swallowed a bit more than anticipated because of it. "I may be needed in Minas Tirith."

"Yes, she and Gandalf have much to speak about." I was thankful for Boromir's tactfulness and defense.

"Ah, there is something I should tell you about Gandalf—" Théoden began, but then someone was calling for him from a side door.
"Uncle! Éomer has just returned and—Maddie!" I stood up at the same time Éowyn stopped short behind the throne.

"Éowyn!"

I immediately rushed over and hugged her, and she looked startled before laughing and hugging me back. "It is so very good to see you, Maddie! You are well then?" She smiled widely at me, and I smiled back. I was just as happy to see her too. There hadn't been anyone in Middle Earth I'd missed until Éowyn.

"I see you already know my niece then," Théoden said, looking amusedly between us.

"Maddie passed through Edoras very briefly before going north," Éowyn explained. "Did you make it to the Elves?"

"Yes, and I picked up Boromir on the way." I indicated the Gondorian and introductions were made.

"You must tell me of your travels later! Will you be going to Gondor?"

"Éowyn will be remaining here," King Théoden said firmly, giving his niece a look that said they'd discussed this at length before. "The battlefield is no place for her."

Éowyn looked about to retort, before she held her tongue and turned to me. "Yes, I'm going to Gondor. I told you of Lord Faramir, and I must confer with him along with Gandalf."

"Yes, Gandalf," Éowyn said, and her look turned curious. "I actually wanted to ask you about him and what you told me before—"

Thankfully Éowyn was cut off before I could realize what she was talking about by the approach of Éomer. "My King, there are two hundred more men from the West who will arrive by evenfall. Men are breaking down the camps, and we will be ready to march by dawn."

"Good. We'll have ten thousand strong to fight the forces of Mordor. This is better than I could have hoped," Théoden replied.

Éomer nodded to his sister and then when he saw me a startled smile spread across his face. "If it isn't Miss Maddie! I had heard of your disappearance from Edoras some weeks ago. Some gást widsith magic I wonder?" He winked though, and I looked over at Éowyn to see her shooting her brother a warning look. I wondered how much of the truth he knew. Did he know about Thunor? I would have to find out from Éowyn how she'd explained that.

"Gást widsith?" King Théoden asked, and Éomer was obliged to explain how we had met twice on the plains of Rohan by sheer luck, and he had named me ghost wanderer much to my chagrin. Then the king was pulled away to talk to some of his advisors, all with rather impressive beards and sideburns, which seemed to be a thing amongst Men.

Éomer led us over to a small table and brushed aside some maps while calling for dinner. Two women came over and laid out four bowls of a thick mutton stew and a plate of black bread and butter. There was also ale and the sour wine that was popular in Rohan.

Éomer and Boromir had never met, but it seemed Éomer had met Faramir at some point, so they chatted a bit about Boromir's brother. "It was he who sent word for us to prepare. He could not commit forces in our defense from Isengard but warned us to be wary. I think without that warning this force would be half its size."
I sat back with a buttered piece of bread and wondered if Faramir's warning was because of what I'd told him. Just the thought of it sent a warm feeling through me. If there were more men on the battlefield, the fight might turn faster in our favor. Then again, it also meant more people would be in danger's way.

"Maddie," Éowyn said, reaching over to pat my hand to get my attention. Boromir and Éomer were talking cavalry strategy in fortress defense or something. "I wanted to ask you about some of your final words to me. About Gandalf."

"Ah, right."

"You told me not to stop him, that he would help my uncle. How did you know this? He came weeks later." She had put down her spoon to give me her full attention.

"It's rather complicated, but I can… well, it's a kind of magic." I looked over at Boromir, anxious to know if he thought I should tell anyone else. I was worried the more people I told about my foreknowledge the more likely things would be bungled.

"Elvish magic? Or was my brother not far off with talk of gást widsith?"

Éomer's head turned at that. "Are there stories of ghost wanderers in Gondor, too, Boromir?"

"There are tales of them luring men into the Noman-lands and the Dead Marshes. There are others of wandering soldiers on the road who tell stories of battles fought a thousand years before." He looked over at me and I shrugged my shoulders.

"I have already told Éomer I am not dead and could not be a ghost wanderer."

"In the tales in Rohan the wanderer does not know they are dead," the marshal reminded me with a cheeky smile.

"A Catch-22 then." I was greeted with blank faces. "Sorry, that's an English thing."

Éomer shook his head but didn't ask about it. "How did you meet Miss Maddie, Lord Boromir? Was she wandering the plains again?"

I was tempted to hit Éomer for that obvious dig like I might one of my friends at home, but remembered at the last second that would probably be inappropriate by the standards of Middle Earth.

"It was during an Uruk-hai attack," Boromir said, and Éomer's eyebrows shot up. "She rode in on a war horse and attacked an Uruk-hai behind me with nothing but a dirk." Éowyn looked quite impressed and I flushed, not sure if I was pleased or embarrassed by Boromir's retelling. Frankly, it had been an incredibly foolish thing to do, and I really believed the only reason I survived that fight was because the dwarves interrupted the attack, and Legolas had a good enough eye to shoot that first orc in the throat.

I got a flash of its face again: yellow, angry eyes and froth and blood around its mouth. I shook my head to rid myself of the image.

"Considering you are here and seemingly unharmed, your luck seems to have held—either that or this magic of yours," Éomer said to me, giving me an appraising look. "Forgive me, but was it a company of Uruk-hai with the white hand marking their armor?"

I remembered suddenly that Éomer had met Aragorn, Gimli and Legolas on the plains, and it had been his Éored that had killed the Uruk-hai that kidnapped Merry and Pippin. "It was the same
company Aragorn was chasing. Boromir is part of their company."

Éomer looked over surprised, but Boromir spoke first to the horse-lord. "You met Aragorn?"

Then explanations were made about Boromir's connection to the Fellowship and the Battle at Helm's Deep. I was a bit confused because I’d been under the impression Éomer had been banished—hadn't Gandalf brought him to rescue the trapped forces at the fortress?—but no, some guy named Erkenbrand had done that. But then we came back to the same point.

"How did you know I had met them on the plains if you were traveling north with Lord Boromir at the time?"

"The same way I knew Gandalf would be coming to Edoras," I said, looking at Éowyn and Éomer both. Then I sighed and glanced at Boromir to judge what he thought of telling them, but he just sipped his wine and shrugged. "I have some foresight into the events of this war."

"What?" Both siblings said, but I waved my hand at them to give me a moment to explain.

"It's very complicated, and I don't know all the details." I refused to explain it further, since it would involve the Ring, which was best kept secret. "Basically, I have some idea of everything going on around the war. Not all of it, mind you," I reminded them, especially Boromir because he had seemed particularly put off by my lack of detail. There was no one more irritated by it than myself though.

"What can you tell us, Lady Maddie? Anything at all?" Éomer asked looking eager, and his change of title didn't go unnoticed. "I may have underestimated your magic to say you are only gást widsith."

"If you call me a witch I won't tell you anything," I warned. Boromir laughed aloud and Éowyn grinned. "There's not much I can tell you, except that there will be a massive battle in the Pelennor Fields outside Minas Tirith. Rohan's part is important, so come as quickly as you can."

This was true enough, and I didn't think it would matter much to tell them that. They would already be coming quickly, and the sooner the better I figured.

"What of Aragorn?" Éowyn asked, and Éomer glanced at over at her, brows pinched.

"He joins the battle, but later I think."

"He must be gathering forces in the south," Boromir said, and I nodded though I couldn't actually remember any of the specifics. I'd entirely forgotten the ghost army after all.

"It is not in vain then, that we fight?" Éomer asked more gravely this time.

"There has been no hope in these lands for a long time," Éowyn concurred, looking at me marveled.

"If there were no hope here you wouldn't be fighting. You'd lay down, give up, and die," I reminded her, now well practiced in delivering lines like this one. Boromir had been particularly hardheaded about the hopelessness in Gondor as we rode to Edoras. It seemed the man had survived on the stubborn refusal to die as anything less than a soldier on the battlefield, and the indignation of being attacked on his own lands. I had to keep telling him that there was no way Gondor could have such a huge army if no one had any optimism that things would change.

The bowls and plates were cleared away and more ale was brought out, while singing began in one corner of the room. A fiddle joined in and men started to stamp their feet to the tune. I yawned
wondering about sleeping arrangements. Would Boromir and I camp out with the army? When would I get to sleep in a bed again? "When will we leave, Boromir?"

"When the army goes we will too, though a column as long as this will be slower than two on horseback. If we are quick and have fresh horses we should reach Minas Tirith in a matter of days."

"Fresh horses can be arranged easily," Éomer put in, but I shook my head quickly.

"If it's alright, I'd like to keep Thunor. Not permanently!" I quickly added looking at Éomer again. "Just… I like him and he is a good horse." Éomer grinned at me, and he suddenly looked more boyish than I'd ever seen him.

"And now you really do know the bond between horseman and steed." He thumped his mug on the table and insisted I drink to it, which we all did. Éowyn was also grinning around her cup.

"If we must celebrate it, then maybe somebody has some ribbons around here. Preferably pink ones. I've been meaning to braid some into Thunor's hair." Éowyn actually laughed hard enough she had to put down her mug.

"Éomer as a child did that once to the old mare we learned to ride on. Do you remember Hunig brother?"

Éomer groaned, but Éowyn wasn't done yet. She spoke around choked laughter. "He did such a poor job father had to cut out chunks of her mane because of all the knots. It was a lucky thing she was such a sweet horse or she might have bit you for it!"

We all laughed at that, and that started a round of stories about the various horses the three of them had ridden.

"When did you first ride, Maddie?" Éowyn asked, working on her second ale. I was starting to feel pleasantly warm, not used to imbibing this much in a long time.

"In Rivendell. In my homeland we don't really use horses except for sport." There were gasps at this.

"How do you travel quickly? No other animal that can be ridden is nearly as fast as a horse," said Éomer.

"Um… a kind of wagon." Weren't cars once called horseless carriages? Éomer, Boromir and Éowyn looked confused by this and likely to ask a lot more questions I wouldn't be able to answer. "I can't really explain, but it is a little like a carriage. Anyway, the Elves taught me to ride." Luckily that sidetracked the conversation to Elvish horses, and Éomer told us how Legolas had removed all the tack from the horse he'd been lent and rode bareback like a pro. I tried to explain some of their weird affinity for animals, and Boromir did too, but it was kind of one of those "see it to believe it" things.

We didn't talk much longer before suddenly Boromir was standing up at the table, his face breaking out into a huge grin. "Merry!"

Then someone barely the height of the table was there, and Boromir crouched down to hug him, almost hiding him completely from sight. At first all I could see was a flop of golden-brown curls. Finally the Gondorian pulled away, still smiling so wide it had to hurt, and there was a hobbit dressed in breeches and tunic marked with a galloping white horse, Rohan's sigil.

"Pippin and I feared the worst, Boromir. You can't know how happy I am to see you! He'll be
right angry he missed this!"

"You look as though you've grown, Master Hobbit," he said fondly, one big hand on the hobbit's shoulder.

"Aye, Entwater," he said, with a bright smile, flashing white teeth at us.

Boromir made some quick introductions, and much to my embarrassment mentioned my jump into the battle. "I think if Maddie had not come galloping up with some fierce dwarves the results might have been different." He had no idea.

"Well then, it's a pleasure to meet you, Lady Maddie." I shook the hobbit's offered hand, very aware of how my grip swallowed his. I was glad I was sitting because it made the height difference a bit less awkward.

"And it's a pleasure to meet you too, Master Merry."

Then Boromir excused himself and left with Merry to catch up. They made quite the pair, the tall, sturdy figure Boromir cut next to the childlike Merry.

"Is Pippin gone with Gandalf?" I asked Éomer then, and he looked surprised and then rueful.

"That is supposed to be a secret, but clearly you already know." He raised an eyebrow, and I all I said was "magic" and he snorted. "He touched one of the lost Seeing-stones." Here is voice dropped lower so as to fall under the general din of the room. Éowyn leaned forward too, and I wondered if she had known this. "I do not know what he saw, but whatever it was it made Gandalf fearful. They left on Shadowfax as soon as they were able. They may yet already be in Gondor."

More things I'd forgotten. The Seeing-stones… it vaguely brought up the image of a large sphere, maybe the size of a bowling ball, swirling with black and purple clouds. Pippin touching it had caught the notice of the Eye, if I was recalling that correctly. That was why Gandalf spirited him away.

I finished my mug of ale quickly, deciding it was time to turn in, especially with all I had to think about. I wondered if Boromir would tell Merry of me, and if we'd get the chance to talk. "Well," I said, standing up and stretching for extra measure, "if we are getting up at daybreak I plan to get as much sleep as I can."

"I'll have rooms prepared for Lord Boromir and have someone let him know," Éowyn said standing up too and looking over to me. "Things are very crowded here in Edoras before the army leaves. You are welcome to stay with me in my rooms, if that is to your liking."

"We call them sleepovers in my homeland," I told her after I said goodnight to Éomer, who went to join more of the men at another table.

"Then we shall have a sleepover."

"At a proper sleepover we stay up late talking and then sleep late into the morning. Unfortunately someone will have to wake me at dawn." I pouted a bit at the thought. At least I would get to sleep in a proper bed for one night. The moment this war was over I was going to sleep in until noon for a week.

"There is one more thing I wanted to ask you," Éowyn said as she led me through several winding corridors and up a flight of stairs before opening a door into a bedroom. It was fairly modest, but there was a thick green and gold quilt on a bed big enough for three, and a fire crackling in the
hearth. A small bookshelf with some books and knickknacks was along one wall with a tapestry of a horse that might be her Mearas. On the other there was a window to the starry night, the fires of the camp below very bright in the darkness.

"Of course," I said, looking around until she offered to help unlace the back of my dress.

"You said one more thing to me before you left. After you spoke of Gandalf."

I honestly couldn't recall it and I told her so, as I loosened the tie in my hair and stepped away. It now flowed to nearly mid-back, longer than I'd had it since I was in middle school. It didn't compare to Éowyn's golden tresses that fell almost to her hips. I didn't know how she managed to keep it as fine as she did. Mine was constantly a tangle mess. I put my travel-worn dress on a chair and changed into a cleaner shift before huddling closer to the fire to keep warm with my brush.

"You told me I would have my chance at battle, but not in Rohan," she said, sounding a bit muffled as she changed into a nightgown. I remembered now and had to wonder what I was thinking to shout what I did. When she turned back and tutted over the knots in my hair I realized that she was only a little taller than me. Both of us unadorned and in simple clothes made us seem much plainer and more girlish, despite being far from giggling thirteen year olds.

"I plan to follow my uncle and brother to Gondor," she continued. "I will not be left out of the fighting, not to protect my homeland and innocent people."

"I know," I told her, because I did, sitting down on the edge of the bed once I'd gotten the worst of the snarls out. The fire helped keep the room a bit warm, though it was still March and there was a chill in the night air.

"Have you seen that?" she asked eagerly.

"Yes, you will fight in Gondor. But your enemies will not die easily." I felt like some kind of bizarre fortuneteller the way Éowyn grasped my hands suddenly and almost looked like she would drop to her knees in front of me.

"This is what I have always wanted. I do not want to waste away like some old maid without a story of glory to tell."

"And I think you will have a good story Éowyn, just as long as you promise to survive it! Éomer will have guessed you told me, and you can bet your brother will be furious if you get hurt out there." I was teasing even though there was truth in it, and she smiled softly.

"He worries too much, but I suppose that's part of being a brother." I hummed, and she moved to sit next to me on the bed. "I stole away last night some old armor and men's clothes. I plan to hide among the soldiers and join the battle."

I think I had known that Éowyn would dress as a man to get to Gondor, but I'd forgotten. I quickly shoved down my rising annoyance at all these details I only remembered at the last moment.

_Merry!

"King Théoden said Merry would be staying here too," I said carefully. Hadn't he helped to bring down that Ringwraith? Or was I remembering this wrong?

"Yes. Uncle worries because he is so small, and hobbits are not warriors. I'm not sure the battlefield is a good place for him."
I raised my eyebrows and looked at Éowyn skeptically. "Isn't that what your uncle said about you?"

Her cheeks pinked the slightest bit at that, though it was hard to tell in the dark. "Are you saying I should take him with me?"

"Maybe," I said, giving a moment to think if I was being too obvious in my direction. Merry had gotten to the battlefield before, so surely he would do so again. Or would Boromir convince him not to go? I hadn't even considered that. "Not that you should force him, but all the Fellowship will be in Gondor."

"Perhaps you should take him with you then. Thunor is definitely big enough for you both, and Éomer will find a new steed for Lord Boromir." I frowned, not likely Éowyn's logical solution. If Merry went with me he might not end up near the Ringwraith on the battlefield, and that wouldn't do at all. But then… what if Boromir took him with us?

"He is the king's squire right? Then he should stay with the army, don't you think?"

Éowyn gave me an assessing look, and I tried to look guileless. "Oh just come out with it! What have you seen in the future?"

Apparently I sucked at roundabout persuasion. "He needs to be on the battlefield, I'm sure of it." My memory of the battle wasn't clear, but I was growing more certain as we spoke that both Merry and Éowyn together would take down that Ringwraith. Éowyn looked thoughtful. "You are sure? Then I will talk to him tomorrow and see what he thinks."

"And I will make sure Boromir does not take him with us." Now that I'd thought of it, it did seem likely Boromir would try to bring him to Gondor, especially if Merry was asking to go. Would the Gondorian be as easily persuaded as Éowyn though? More likely I'd have to tell him about the Ringwraith, and I'm sure he wouldn't be pleased to hear a woman and a hobbit would have to be on the battlefield to kill it.

"All right, then it's set," I said finally. "But you must promise me you will be very careful! You are my best friend in Middle Earth, Éowyn, though we haven't known each other long. Please don't fall on the battlefield."

I knew she didn't die in the original story, but with how things might change I wasn't sure anymore. I had known all along that any attempt to alter events would make my foreknowledge less and less useful. However, it didn't really hit home until I was holding the hands of someone I cared for about to go to war. I squeezed them tighter, trying to convey some of this emotion. She squeezed back before reluctantly letting go.

"Come, it's cold and we have to wake early. I must see you, my uncle and my brother off, talk to Merry and then sneak back to don the armor."

We slipped into the big bed, and I was thankful for the two thick quilts on it. The Golden Hall's stone walls didn't hold heat very well. Between the warmth of the bed and the two of us it would be quite cozy though.

"Do you even know how to put it on?" I whispered.

"Hush you," she murmured back, but I could hear the smile in her voice. This really did feel like a teenage sleepover. "You wouldn't be of much help anyway. Not unless you've helped Lord Boromir in and out of his armor." She added slyly, and unlike with Éomer I didn't stop myself
"You know perfectly well it's not like that." I was terribly tempted to bring up Faramir, but couldn't think of a good way to without either sounding like I was interested, or giving away too much of her future. "And how do you know so much about armor, Maiden Éowyn?" I teased.

She sputtered something about childhood play and we both laughed into the pillows.

"May I confide in you something?" she asked, and I nodded my head and turned over to face her. I couldn't remember the last time I'd laid in bed sharing secrets with a friend. All my closest friends at home were far away—we'd communicated more by Facebook than in person. This connection here, this precious night with Éowyn, and earlier the dinner with Boromir and Éomer, was something I hadn't realized I'd lost. "You said you have met Aragorn."

Ah, I had a feeling I knew where this was going. "Only very briefly."

"He is very… brave. And quite handsome. But… there is another."

"Arwen," I whispered, and I could just make out Éowyn's big grey eyes in the flickering light.

"Will they be together?"

This conversation was one of those I wished I could avoid. It easily ranked up there with Boromir asking about his father, and Faramir asking about his brother's chances of survival.

"If we win this war, everyone will be happy," I said after some thought. Best to be diplomatic about it.

Éowyn frowned at me, and she knew I was deliberately evading a straight answer. She sighed, looking disappointed but not heartbroken. "He does reunite with her."

I winced, and nodded.

"I knew his heart was taken even as I met him, but I hoped." She sighed into the blankets and I reached over and gave her a one-armed hug. At least she hadn't been led on, I thought, as we settled back down, and while she was upset she wasn't crying so it had likely been just a crush. And if things went smoothly she'd have Faramir. Hopefully I wouldn't have to stick my nose into that.

"In my homeland, courtship is a bit different," I told her, deciding it was time to share something that would hopefully bring her out of her melancholy. Plus, what was a sleepover without some juicy stories? "I… was courted? I courted? There was this man named Cliff I was with for almost a year, and he was one giant mistake," I started.

Éowyn sat up further on her pillow so she wouldn't fall asleep. "A year? And you did not wed?"

"It's a little different, as I said. You court, sometimes for a year, sometimes longer or shorter, and sometimes people get married and sometimes they realize it isn't right. Cliff was definitely not right." I snorted, remembering that redhead boyfriend with a mix of fondness and disgust.

Éowyn looked rather morbidly fascinated by this description of dating. "For one, he spilled coffee—it's a drink and it stains badly—all over my couch. That was on the third date. You could say that was the high point."

"I told her about Cliff, and she told me about Aragorn and another boy long ago she'd dreamt of wedding. We whispered for a long time, sharing stories and secrets, hopes for the future and dreams from the past. For that night I felt like everything would work out so long as there were
moments like these. Eventually though we settled down, nestled in the thick blankets with the embers of the fire the last light in the room, and went to sleep.
One if by Land, Two if by Sea

Chapter Summary

Horses, armies, and orcs oh my!

Chapter Notes

Writer's Note: I accidentally wrote a Boromir/OC oneshot while brooding on Maddie's romantic options. If you're interested you can find it on my profile. Also, speaking of pairings, there is a bit of fanservice that snuck into this chapter, so let me know if you think the chemistry works or not. Nothing is set in stone.

Dates: The Battle at Helm's Deep is on March 3rd, and Maddie and Boromir reach Edoras on the night of the 7th. The Rohirrim army leaves to assist Gondor on the 9th — here is our first major variation from canon. In the books, they leave on the 10th.

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Éowyn woke me at an ungodly hour and shoved me into a bathhouse tub for a quick wash before we would hit the road. I complained bitterly about how the sun hadn't even risen yet, but Éowyn was as unforgiving as Ysmay had been back in Fornost. At least she didn't box my ears. Ysmay and Bryce must have thought I was completely mad straggling into Fornost like that. I wondered what had become of them since I'd left.

When we returned to Éowyn rooms, she refused outright to let me wear the same dirty dress I'd been wearing for most of my travels since leaving Edoras the first time. I pulled out one of the other dresses at her insistence, and she helped lace up the back and pull everything to rights.

"You know, I think you would look very beautiful in one of my dresses," she commented as she plaited my hair for me in one long braid down my back.

"I'd drag the sleeves through all my food."

"Well, if you're going to be eating with such lords as the Steward of Gondor's sons you had best practice your table manners," she said with a carefree laugh. I found I couldn't respond because she was right; I would be coming to Minas Tirith in a very different way than before. Instead of being anonymous, I would literally be riding in the front gate next to one of the most powerful men in the city if not the kingdom.

It was Boromir I tried to remind myself unsuccessfully. Yes he's a member of the Fellowship, a Captain of Gondor and son of the Steward and all that. But he's also that guy who blushed when the elves made me lower my dress, and the one who teased me about my fake love-hate relationship with Thunor and thought my idea of braiding his mane was ridiculous. He wasn't that scary, and we'd banished most of the awkwardness of those first days to Lothlórien by the time we
reached Edoras.

Eventually Éowyn was dressed in a lovely burnished gold gown in the same style as her others, and I had pulled on some old riding breeches she gave me to wear under my dress. "At least the skirt is wide," she commented when I had shouldered my pack with all my worldly possessions. "You won't have to ride sidesaddle."

"How will you ride in a dress like that?" I asked, noting the tapering of the skirt. There was no way she'd be able to sit astride without it bunching up to her waist.

"Sidesaddle," she said ruefully. If there was one downside to leaving Rohan, it was that women here weren't always expected to ride sidesaddle like in Gondor. In Minas Tirith at least, only peasant woman working in fields rode astride, according to Clarimond. The Rohirrim were more practical about it—only for appearances did Éowyn dress this finely today. The rest of the time she wore much looser skirts with breeches underneath for modesty.

We left Éowyn's chambers after that and found a quick breakfast in the hall with a smattering of men and servants. It seemed everyone was running around trying in a rush to gather supplies, don armor and weapons, and eat all at the same time.

"Where's Éomer and Boromir?" I asked Éowyn, looking for them around the hall. I couldn't see either amid the chaos.

"Éomer is probably with uncle preparing. He has to work closely with the king now," Éowyn replied, dipping a piece of buttered bread into some kind of frothy egg mix. Sprinkled with a bit of pepper it was delicious.

"Didn't he always?" I twisted around in my seat when I thought I caught a glimpse of Boromir's decorated red sleeves, but it was just another man's shield. Maybe the early bird Boromir had already gotten up and eaten. I still felt groggy, but the energy of the room was making it hard to stay sleepy.

"He did some, but now with Théodred…" Éowyn's face tightened with sadness, but I didn't quite know why.

"Who is Théodred?"

"My cousin; King Théoden's son. He died in battle not long before the Hornburg." It looked like a raw wound, so I stopped prying and pushed the bowl of eggs towards her. I guess I did remember vaguely a funeral, but I hadn't realized the king's son had died. I had just assumed Théoden didn't have children, hence his nephew's ascension to the throne.

We ate quietly after that, and after bringing our plates over to some women collecting dishes in the corner Éowyn said she had to run. She needed to catch up with some of the women to help organize things for the leaving army. She promised to say goodbye before we left, and I went off in search of Boromir. I didn't find the Gondorian as I wandered around the Golden Hall, but when I went outside I did find Merry, the hobbit.

"Ah, Miss Maddie was it? Everyone's a bit busy, eh?" He was standing on the porch of Meduseld looking out at the snow-capped mountains smoking a long, thin pipe. He wore a dark colored, weather stained jacket and a pale yellow vest underneath, and his feet were bare as was typical of hobbits. He offered me a taste of his pipe, but I politely refused.

"You'd think they were all going somewhere," I joked, feeling surprisingly at ease with the hobbit. Something about the soft folk made it easier to act naturally than with Men; I felt less judged.
"You haven't seen Boromir, have you?"

"No, not this morning." He took another puff, and I found myself unwilling to leave, even though I knew the army would be moving out soon. "He told me about you."

"What did he say?" I tried to sound neutral, but I felt a flutter of nervousness inside me. Pippin had been the silly one, I knew, and Frodo the serious with Sam the loyal—Merry was the clever one.

"That you might know a thing or two that could be helpful." He gave me a look over his pipe that spoke volumes, and I sighed gustily before moving to sit on the edge of the stone ledge, feet dangling over the side. There was just the rocky hillside beneath Meduseld here, and the expanse of the plains far below us. With our backs to the flurry of soldiers and servants coming and going, it had the illusion of privacy.

"How much did he tell you?"

"A fair bit. I hope you can tell me the rest yourself on the way to Minas Tirith." Oh God, I realized I'd forgotten I would need to talk to Boromir about that. Or well, I could tell Merry too.

"You're coming with us?" The hobbit nodded, puffing out an impressive smoke ring in a nearly perfect circle. "I think… maybe you shouldn't." I was terrible at this, and I had to physically resist the urge to bury my face in my hands and moan aloud. It was as bad as with Éowyn. I didn't know why I bothered trying to be subtle about it when I would just have to spit out the whole story anyway.

Merry's eyes scrunched together and he looked worried but also stubborn. "Pippin's there, and Gandalf too. I'd be ashamed if all my friends went to war and I stayed behind."

"It's not that you shouldn't go to Gondor, it's that… well, you shouldn't go with us." I was quick to keep talking lest Merry take that the wrong way and become offended. "You know Éowyn, right? Niece of the king?" He nodded. "Well she's supposed to stay here too, but well… she doesn't follow rules very well." (Understatement. Who's idea had it been to climb over the walls of Edoras?)

I stared at him for a good few seconds, trying to convey the meaning under the words. Merry started to smile, bright eyes keen and obviously following along. "Maybe I should go with her. Help her just in case," he said slowly, testing to see if he read me right, and I nodded along, a smile threatening to break across my face.

"Exactly. I've already told her it might be a good idea to have a friend with her." At this I gave him a knowing look, and he couldn't stop the grin as he pulled his pipe out of his mouth and tapped it on the ground.

"Aye, and will that friend be of use to his king?" Merry finished cleaning the excess from his pipe and was looking at me with sincere trust behind the mischief. It felt a bit like a punch to the gut because I knew Théoden had died in the books. What could I say?

"You never know." He looked confused, but when he opened his mouth I hummed and shook my head. "If you see Boromir, tell him, and I'll do the same."

"I don't think he'll be happy with this," Merry warned, tucking his pipe away into a small satchel at his side.

"Let me handle it." I spoke with more confidence than I had and rather hoped Boromir was above picking up Merry and plopping him down on his horse.
"Do you know anything about Pippin?" Merry asked as I stood up, thinking to keep looking for Boromir or at least find Éomer or Thunor.

"He should be in Gondor now with Gandalf."

"Will I see him again? Pip's a bit…” He made some kind of flippant motion I didn't understand. He was clearly trying to joke about his worries, but it was apparent it was a shadow on his mind.

"You'll see him again." Merry looked so relieved by this that I felt my own smile start to slip. I had never felt the weight of the responsibility of the future as much as I did walking away from Merry. The Ringwraith, Éowyn, Théoden… so many tiny parts that could go wrong.

I found Thunor after checking two nearby stables, and he whickered in greeting and bumped his nose against my face. I couldn't help the pleased smile that simple act of affection brought. I was also thankful he didn't have a wet nose like a dog, but his breath could have use a mint or twenty.

While I'd gotten plenty used to the smell of horses after traveling for weeks on one, it was a bit overwhelming in the stable. Every stall was full, as was the paddock, and the stench of manure, straw, and horsehair was enough to make my eyes water. With a lot of help from the stable hand because of the height of Thunor's withers, I got all the tack back on him and led him out into the fresh air—well, the slightly less horsey air outside the barn.

"I hope you had a good rest and lots of food," I told him as I led him into the streets where there was a steady stream of people and soldiers heading out of the gates. "I have a feeling we'll be in a hurry from now on."

The river of people and horses wound through Edoras, and I stuck close to Thunor in the grey morning. Most of those we passed looked fairly sleepy given the hour. As we headed through the gates I spotted Fastred standing by his chestnut-colored charger on a rise, calling to men about troop placements. He didn't have any of the heavy armor on everyone else was wearing, but instead a rather formal looking tunic with the white horse of Rohan and an equally fine dark red cape.

"Fastred!" I waved my hand, but he didn't see me. I pushed through the crowd, thankful for Thunor's bulk that made most people give way, and climbed up the side of the hill.

"Lady Maddie?" The Rohirrim looked very surprised but he broke out into a smile. "You turn up in the strangest of places. I'd heard you left Edoras."

"Éomer keeps telling me that. And I did leave, but I came back. And now I'm leaving again. Do you know where Éomer is? Or Boromir?"

"Lord Boromir? I saw him earlier over there." He waved his hand to encompass pretty much half the army camp, and I gave him a flat look. "But that was maybe an hour ago. Captain Éomer is with the king."

"Where is that?"

"Where the banner is." This time he pointed out southeast of the city. There were a number of flags waving in the wind, but even in the low light I could see the biggest of them. All I could tell was it was black with a white shape on it—undoubtedly the same horse covering Fastred's chest. If I had my long-lost contacts I could have seen it better, but it was far too late for that.

"Thank you," I told him, and started to head in that direction. "Good luck in battle!" I really did hope he survived. I was fairly sure Éomer and Éowyn would live, but it was impossible to know
with Fastred. It was a frightening prospect.

"Wait, wait! Are you going to battle?" He looked incredulous when I turned back.

"No, no, of course not. But I am going to Gondor with Boromir."

"You are?"

"Yes!" I called back, already heading down the small hill with Thunor behind me. Suddenly Fastred ran up, weapons jingling in their sheaths, and grabbed my shoulder to stop me.

"I am Rohan's representative when Lord Boromir goes to Gondor. It seems we will be traveling together."

"Really?" I hadn't known anyone else would join Boromir and I on our rushed ride to Minas Tirith, but that had been rather shortsighted of me. Of course Rohan would want to send someone ahead, if only to act as a diplomat.

"Indeed. I will be joining you later, and I hope to hear more of your tales." With that he hurried back up the hill to continue yelling orders. I walked away wondering if Éomer had chosen Fastred deliberately or if it were just chance.

No, Éomer would totally do that.

"Do you see these, Thunor?" I said, holding my cupped hands out so the horse might look. I could see Boromir shake his head out of the corner of my eye, but I thought he might be struggling not to smile. "These are beautiful, pink ribbons for your hair."

Indeed they were. I hadn't made it to Théoden's flag, but I found Boromir on the way talking to a Rohirrim soldier with very detailed armor and another of those crazy helmets with the Roman-style hair like Éomer had. Did that mark him as a Marshal? I was going to ask, but the maybe-Marshall walked away, and Boromir came up to me and pulled a pouch out of his pocket. "Éowyn found these this morning and asked me to give them to you," he'd said without a greeting, and dropped the pouch into my hand before walking over to a fine bay not quite as big as Thunor but leaner and sleeker—it must have been the horse Éomer had found for him.

I'd been very surprised and pleased by the unexpected present despite the brusque gift giving, and when I opened the little bag I'd gasped. "Ribbons! And pink ones no less!"

He turned at my almost-squeal and looked at me with what might have been fond exasperation. "Tell me you are not decorating your destrier as you would a pony."

"I am indeed," I replied then turned to show Thunor the gift. "You're going to look like a parade horse with these," I informed the big steed. "Bless Éowyn for—not food Thunor!" I quickly pulled my hands back from his snuffling nose before he could see how the ribbons tasted. Boromir chuckled from behind me. "If you're just going to laugh then help me," I chastised. "I don't know how to braid the ribbons into his hair."

"Mane," Boromir corrected, moving closer. "Are you not a lady? I thought this was the province of women."

I shot him a dirty look. "Women of Gondor maybe. I haven't worn a ribbon in my hair since I was five." I started to braid some of Thunor's black locks, and when I reached the end I pinched it and held out one ribbon to Boromir expectantly.
"Is it impolite to ask a woman's years in your homeland?" he asked, stepping up beside me and concentrating on the bow so the ribbon wouldn't twist.

"Do you mean age?" He nodded, concentrating harder on the knot likely so he wouldn't have to look at me. "Usually when a women is an adult." His fingers fumbled, and I snickered under my breath. "I'm twenty-five. Is it... impolite to ask you the same question?"

He finished the bow and I started on another braid next to it. "I am forty-one years." I hadn't been far off the mark, but I was surprised to know that he was still unmarried at that age, especially since women married so young here. Maybe that was normal though. He watched me finish this one and tied another bow on the end. When I stepped back to admire the two ribbons so far I was proud to say it really did look quite good—and most importantly, quite feminine.

Boromir seemed to realize that too. "You do know he is a stallion, right?"

"Yes of course. That's why I asked for pink."

Boromir looked like he didn't quite know how to respond to that, but helped me braid the rest of Thunor's mane without comment. He had big, thick fingers that made wider braids than my own, so the result was a mishmash of different sizes. Thunor would shake his head quite a bit, flipping the plaits around, but I made sure to knot the bows extra tight just to be sure they didn't slip out. We finished at the middle of the mane, fingers bumping as we made the last two. Boromir tied them off since he could make a neater bow than I could.

"I hope we see Éomer before we set off. I can't wait to see his reaction to this." The horse-lord hadn't met Thunor yet, so I don't think he would quite realize the effect of the pink ribbons until he saw a giant destrier with them in his mane. "Too bad I didn't think to do his tail," I mused when we were done. I had one ribbon left, but I didn't think it wise to get behind Thunor to braid it.

Boromir wasn't looking at Thunor but at me. "You have known Éomer long?" he asked.

I petted Thunor's neck absentmindedly. "No, not really. I've actually only met him a couple times and not for long. I think he thinks me a little crazy because every time we meet it's after something strange."

Boromir looked like he was going to ask about the strange things when I turned around and realized his horse also had a beautiful black mane that I could put that last ribbon in. I held it out and gave him my best pleading look.

"If you think I will let you adorn my war horse with ribbons than you do not know me well," he said, but he was smiling behind his beard. He wasn't the same kind of handsome as his brother, especially since he tended towards grim expressions, but the smile transformed his whole face. I bit my lip and firmly pushed that thought aside. Talking about boyfriends with Éowyn last night was reminding me how long I'd been without, that was all. I'd been surrounded by men since leaving Edoras—it was natural.

I patted Thunor on the shoulder and admired the braids again as a distraction. "Look at how impressive Thunor is." Unfortunately, the horse took that moment to violent shake his head and huff, as though to dislodge the ribbons. Once upon a time I would have jerked away for fear of his bite, but now I just laughed. "He loves them."

Boromir chuckled, and then the king's entourage approached and his attention was drawn away. Feeling a bit devious after our banter, I spied a loose strap on his saddle, and without a second thought tied the last ribbon into a bow there. Ha! Manly Boromir riding with a pink ribbon on his saddle.
"You're off then?" King Théoden asked. His white horse was garbed in steel, and the king wore plated armor with inlaid gold that looked more ceremonial than battle-worthy. Then again I knew almost nothing about armor so I shouldn't really judge. Boromir nodded the affirmative, holding the bridle of his horse loosely. I tried to grab Thunor's and missed when the horse nodded his head up and down. Thankfully no one seemed to notice. "My only advice to you is to stick to the roads, though even they are not as safe as they once were. I pray you have a swift and eventless journey."

We both thanked the king, Boromir with a look of duty on his face, and me with one that might have been regret. I wasn't sure if Théoden would survive, and I feared this would be the last time either of us would see him. He rode off with his guards and advisors, and I wondered if I should tell Éomer about Théoden's chances. Would that put Éomer at risk though, trying to save his uncle? Would Éomer forgive me if I didn't warn him? I tried to banish the image of Éomer yelling at me, but it was difficult.

I turned away from the backs of King Théoden's group and tried to mount up. However, Thunor had decided to be the asshole he'd been when I first met him. Just as I got my foot into the stirrup his shifted two steps forward, and I had to do an awkward hop so I wouldn't fall. I almost hopped right into Boromir, which would have just solidified my embarrassment. As it was, I was bright red as I pulled my foot free from the saddle and shot Thunor a dark look.

"This is exactly why you've got those ribbons, you silly horse."

I adamantly refused to look at Boromir next to me for fear of further humiliation, but when I grasped the pommel of the saddle to try mounting up again Thunor shifted his weight once more. Before I could snap at him though Boromir had taken a firm hold on his bridle with one hand. "Spirited, isn't he?"

My cheeks were still marked with bright spots of red, so I only nodded. Boromir let go of the bridle and patted Thunor's quivering shoulders, murmuring something I couldn't hear in the destrier's ear. "Let me help you up. Grasp his mane," he instructed, and I took a fistful of braids nervously.

"Won't this hurt him?"

"It will hurt him more if the saddle turns while you mount from the ground. Now lift one foot." I did so cautiously, and he took a hold of my calf and foot—never had I been so thankful for Éowyn's riding breeches worn under my dress—and boosted me up into the saddle. It was a smoother mount than I'd done since riding Arundel, and I smiled down and thanked Boromir again when I was seated. Boromir only grunted and mounted up his own charger.

Luckily, that was when Éomer rode up on his destrier, dappled grey the same as Éowyn's, and I wondered if the horses were related. He laughed boisterously when he caught sight of Thunor. "When Éowyn said she procured a horse for you I didn't think she meant such a fine steed! And you have adorned him in pink ribbons!" Éowyn pulled up behind him on Windfola, and she too laughed.

"This is partly Éowyn's fault," I had to say now that she was here, "because she failed to tell me she'd found for me such an arrogant horse. It did not help that the Elves gave him apples every time he turned his doe eyes on them." Boromir snorted at that too and confirmed it.

"Aye, I suppose we're lucky to have left the Golden Wood with him."

"The only reason we did is because he's so dark. Elves prefer lighter colored horses."
It was good to joke like this before we left. I wanted pleasant memories of the two Rohirrim siblings just in case something terrible happened. I didn't know with how things changed if Théoden would still fall and what would become of Éowyn on the battlefield. In fact…

"Éowyn, come here so I can give you a hug," I said, and she trotted Windfola forward until we were side by side and could reach our arms around each other. "You are still going?" I whispered.

"Yes, and Merry will ride with me."

"Good, and be careful!" I released her then and we shared a conspiratorial grin. I glanced over fast enough to see Éomer's look of suspicion before it disappeared.

"Keep her safe, Lord Boromir, and I hope your horses carry you quickly to Gondor. Fastred, my second captain, will be joining you at the head of the column." Then Éomer turned to me and added with a smile: "May we have even a fraction of your luck on the battlefield."

I quickly trotted over to him before he could leave and said in a low tone: "Watch out for your uncle."

Immediately his face melted into worry, and he opened his mouth to speak, but I steered Thunor back to Boromir before he could. Éomer gave me one last look, then dug his heels in and cantered off after the king without another word.

"Be safe too, both of you," Éowyn said, ignorant of what had happened. Boromir was looking after Éomer though before his eyes flicked to me.

"You as well, milady," Boromir replied. With one last smile for us both, she rode back down the line in the direction of Edoras, no doubt to pick up Merry and put on the stolen armor.

"It is unkind to burden him before battle," Boromir said. I hadn't told the Gondorian about Théoden's potential death, but I supposed he'd guessed the nature of my words to Éomer.

"I hadn't thought of it until now." Boromir looked inquisitive, but I shook my head and thought of something cheeky to say: "I shouldn't burden you before battle."

He still frowned a bit but it lightened the moment, which was what I was aiming for. And then he opened his mouth. "Come, we must find Merry and then we'll be off."

He turned his horse as though to go back to Edoras but I quickly reached for the reins. He turned sharply when my hands brushed his. "Wait! There's something I have to tell you." I glanced around, and though the camp was buzzing with activity most people were saddled up and the tents put away. The sun had risen as we'd said our goodbyes, and it looked like already the army was marching in the distance.

"What is it?"

"Merry isn't coming with us."

"What do you mean?" he said, hands tightening on the reins.

"I'll tell you later when there are fewer people about."

"Tell me now, for I would not leave Merry behind. Not when Pippin and all the Fellowship are in Gondor. We spoke of it at length last night, and he does not wish to be parted from them." I had a feeling Boromir was speaking for both Merry and himself. It sounded like they both felt a bit abandoned when the Fellowship moved forward without them. We'd be catching up soon though.
"I know, and he is going. I just don't want to risk the King or Éomer hearing this." Boromir frowned but didn't budge. I tried to get Thunor walking to persuade him to follow, but he caught my reins in one hand.

"Tell me now."

I sighed and took one more look around. No one was paying us any mind, and most were moving off in small groups. Speaking low, I tried to explain quickly. "Éowyn is sneaking into the battle, and Merry is going with her."

As expected Boromir did not look pleased by this at all. "The battlefield is no place for a woman and a hobbit!" He didn't raise his voice but I felt myself shrink a bit at his sharp tone.

"I know that! It's just... there is an enemy there and—"

"That only a woman and a hobbit can defeat?" He was being sarcastic, but it cut me unexpectedly.

"Women can be as good soldiers as men!"

"Yes, if they had the same training as all the men you see here. Lady Éowyn may be a shieldmaiden, but a blooded warrior she is not." He hadn't let go of Thunor's reins and he looked fierce. Feeling like I was losing control of the conversation I grabbed his hand and tried to pry his grip off. He was a lot stronger than I so it was a futile attempt, but he understood the action and let go. I released a breath to calm my temper.

"Fine, yes there is an enemy they are meant to defeat: a Ringwraith. I know it sounds perfectly mad but I promise you it is true!"

He flexed his hands on the reins of his horse and surprisingly seemed to smother his anger for the moment. "You are sure it is a Ringwraith? A Nazgûl?"

"Yes, I'm sure. It looks like a Dementor, riding a dragon wearing a black cloak."

Boromir ignored the Harry Potter reference he didn't understand, only exhaled and seemed to gather himself. "When word of the Enemy moving on the borders of the Black Lands first came to us, our scholars hunted through all the lore we had. The Nazgûl are his servants, and what few writings we had I read. I wasn't sure where he was going with this, but I watched him carefully. He looked out across the distance where the army marched, remembering. "There is a prophecy about the Witch-king of Angmar, the Lord of the Nazgûl: not by the hand of man shall he fall. We all thought this to mean he could not be killed."

"But Éowyn and Merry are not men," I finished, feeling a great wave of relief crash over me. I had been right to stop Merry from joining us to Minas Tirith. Only he and Éowyn could do this.

Boromir did not look happy though. "I could not think of a more dangerous foe on the battlefield short of the Dark Lord himself. Tell me they will triumph." I knew he was thinking of Merry, and I wondered if he worried about Éowyn too. Wouldn't it be strange if she ended up with this brother and not the other!

"In the original story they did, but with each thing that changes it may be different."

"The future is not certain," he concluded. I nodded, biting my lip. My greatest advantage was my foreknowledge, but it might also prove to be my greatest weakness. If I advised them to the wrong path because of previous changes, it could be devastating.

Boromir stared intensely at me for a moment, and I had to fight the urge to break eye contact.
When finally he let up he spoke. "You have not led us astray thus far, and you were right about
the Ents, the Halflings, and the Battle of the Hornburg. I will trust you in this." It looked like the
words physically pained him to say, but my heart couldn’t help but soar. This gruff, proud man
was putting his faith in the war in me—and with that thought my heart plummeted. Heaven forbid
I mess up.

I brooded on that as Boromir led us quickly by the plodding line of soldiers. My heart felt like a
stone in my chest when I thought of all the lives at stake. If Boromir consulted me on battle
strategy, those men in the line of fire were almost literally put there by me.

How could anyone entrust that much responsibility to me? I remembered balking when I headed a
small research project at my job, and the worse thing that could have happened there was missing
a deadline. There was a lot more on the line than the disappointment of my boss—Boromir or
Faramir's disappointment might be too much to bear, and that didn't even count the casualties.

"How do you do it?" I blurted out to Boromir. The head of the column was before us, King
Théoden's banners waving as the strong winds of the plains caught them. I spotted Fastred there
now with a bow slung on his back. He was talking with Éomer who was sporting his Roman
helmet. "How do you lead men into battle knowing they will die?"

Boromir looked surprised by my question, but he must have read some of the panic in my face
because he regarded it seriously. "You do it because you must. Men will die, aye, but others will
live. It is the job of the commander to lead your men from the strongest position with the most
preparation. But there is always sacrifice."

A part of me wished he'd softened the blow, but the rest of me started to breathe again. No one
was perfect I had to remind myself, all you can ask is someone will forgive you when a mistake
happens.

We rode on then, passing by King Théoden and Éomer with a wave, and Fastred cantered up and
fell in on Boromir's other side. We hoped to reach Minas Tirith in four days if we moved quickly.
That would give me a lot of time to brood on the impending war.

It was a hard ride to Minas Tirith from Edoras, so we rode long and fast through the day, only
slowing to give the horses time to catch their breath and time for us to eat.

We moved too fast for conversation as we rode for the most part, and Boromir wasn't prone to idle
talk either. He would speak up if asked questions or to share stories, but otherwise things were
silent from his end.

I had ridden with Fastred twice now, and he had proven to be quite friendly. He was also
noticeably chattier than Boromir, almost on par with Bofur. Whenever we slowed he had some
comment to make, usually about an impending storm from the looks of the weather, or stories to
tell about his family. As I learned over the course of the first day, he had a three-year old son and a
wife who worked as a seamstress in a small village outside Edoras. I also learned his horse was
sired by his previous horse, and a lot more about the horse's family lineage than I cared about. I
was pleased to see Boromir didn't look any more interested as Fastred talked over our cold dinner.

When the Rohirrim wandered off for a moment, I had to giggle into my bread and butter over the
ridiculousness of the conversation. (That's right, we had butter. I knew I'd been traveling too long
if that was exciting to me.) If I didn't know better I'd say Fastred was nervous traveling with us.

"He is almost as bad as Gimli. Never have I heard someone talk so long about gems and mining as
I have that dwarf," Boromir said looking amused, if bored.
"As least he speaks. Erynion said perhaps ten words to me in the month or so it took us to reach
Lothlórien. I thought I might have gone deaf."

"Aye, Elves are certainly quiet, aren't they? And share a strange sense of humor."

"Oh?" That sounded like a story.

"Legolas and Gimli had many a moment on our journey," he reminisced to the fire and didn't say
more.

"You'll see them again," I said encouragingly. "I should like to get to know Legolas better. That
way I can compare Elves from all the woods."

"And what of the Harbor Elves?"

"What Elves?"

Fastred wandered back over at that moment and sat back down on the ground, interrupting the
conversation. "Elves? Did I tell you I met a group of elves when Captain Éomer and Lord
Aragorn were traveling to Dunharrow?"

"What were a group of elves doing out here?" I wondered aloud, and Boromir looked away from
his dried meat in interest.

"Part of the so-called Grey Company," Fastred said smartly. "Lord Aragorn left Dunharrow with
them, nearly sixty strong. Included a number of Elves from Rivendell and that yellow wood. Most
of it was made up of Men of the North though."

I didn't remember anything about this Grey Company, but talk of Northern Rangers reminded me
of one in particular—yet another uncommunicative companion. "Did you meet any of the Men? I
knew one named Trahern." It was a long shot, but it didn't hurt to ask.

"Nay, I did not speak to any milady. They were stern men, hardened by war of some kind I know
not," Fastred said apologetically. "How did you meet this Man?"

There wasn't much to say about my experience with Trahern. We'd spoken only a handful of
times, and I knew nothing about him except his name. I did have a lot of questions for him though
if we ever met again.

"Is it common for you to travel such distances alone, milady?" Fastred inquired, and I noted his
use of the title again. Was there something special about it or was he just being more polite in the
presence of Boromir? I had finally broken Boromir from calling me that all the time, though he did
insist on using 'Miss' before my name. I'd dropped the 'Lord' ages ago.

I wasn't sure how to answer that question, so I opted to go around it. "I've had many traveling
companions, including Erynion, an elf, and a group of dwarves." I thought fondly of Bofur and
Nori's bickering and joking. I still had Bofur's carved horse in my bag. "There was also Baiard
and the caravan, and now Boromir." Banishing the darker memories of my other human
companions I smiled cheekily at the Gondorian. "Boromir has been the best though."

It was meant to be joking, since obviously I would say such before him, but perhaps it was the
firelight that made Boromir's cheeks look a bit red. "I can say quite safely I'm glad to be ahead of
an elf who leaves you animal skins."

It did the trick and I laughed, and then we had to share the tale of Erynion and the two rabbits with
Fastred.
The rest of our dinner went by easier with empty talk of traveling companions and their quirks. Boromir told us about one of the men in his company who snored like the roar of an oliphaunt when he was on his back, so the men on watch would always kick him over, and Fastred shared about a soldier who would sleepwalk and wander the camp, waking men he stepped on. I didn't have much to contribute for funny stories, but I did tell them about Bofur and Nori's attempt to teach me how to use a whetstone.

We set up a watch that night, and I was insistent that I be included in the rotation. I got stuck with the early morning watch because I didn't know how to judge time by the stars the way Fastred and Boromir did. "When we are not racing to battle I will teach you," Boromir promised.

"You will have to teach me the stars first. They are different than my homeland." For some reason he looked sad at that admission, though it was hard to tell by the dying fire. I couldn't be exactly sure, but of the two constellations I might have been able to recognize—the Big Dipper and Orion's Belt—I could find neither. I wondered if that meant Middle Earth existed on another planet entirely.

I dreamt that night of all the people who had traveled with me: Trahern, reserved and patient, Erynion, stoic and dutiful, Fastred, thoughtful and curious, Baiard, shy but helpful, Sinnie, sweet and cheerful, Bofur and Nori, friendly and clever in turn, and Boromir, proud and stern. They all marched beside me as orcs from Mordor ran at us, and one by one they were cut down. It was not a restful night.

Fastred woke me at some godforsaken hour of night, and I had to sit silently in the dark on watch trying not to imagine every rustle of the wind on the grass was the footsteps of an orc. I mostly watched the men sleep, wondering what they were dreaming of.

Even though I didn't like early mornings, and certainly not being woken at three a.m. to sit on watch even if I asked for it, the blood-red sunrise was a sight to see. Boromir stirred at the faint light, but as morning broke the light didn't get much brighter. The skies were cloudy the likes of which I'd never seen, like some industrial smog on an overcast day coupled with tornado clouds.

Boromir had looked particularly worried by this. "This is not natural weather," he told me as he helped me up on Thunor; it had become routine between us now. "Clouds like this do not arise naturally."

"What do you think it is then? Magic?"

"Some device of the Enemy." And he would say no more about it.

We had only ridden for perhaps an hour under those clouds when Fastred spotted a horseman in the distance. He was coming our way, and as he approached we could see he bore a black flag with a silver image on it.

"The flag of Gondor!" Boromir cried, and he spurred his horse forward as he called to the man.

Fastred and I caught up to them just as they came to a stop next to each other, horses whuffing. "Captain Boromir! What luck it brings to see you on the plains on the eve of battle. Are you going to Minas Tirith?"

"Indeed I am, Hirgon. Tell me all your tidings!"

Hirgon looked quite like Boromir, with the same long wavy hair, though darker, and bearded chin with stout cheekbones and a wide face. He even had grey eyes the same as the brothers. I wondered if he was related to Boromir and Faramir but didn't get the chance to ask.
"Your lord father, the Steward, sends the Red Arrow to his allies in Gondor." Both Fastred and Boromir gasped at this.

"I don't understand," I said, but was ignored.

"These clouds are foreboding, and it seems the Enemy marches to us tens of thousands of orcs strong." There was more talk of troop movements and the preparations of the city. It seemed Faramir had been shoring up defenses, including the outer wall of the city and the catapults even before this ominous cloud had been spotted. "However, orcs have been seen burning out the small folk not far north of the Great West Road. Be careful Lord Boromir!"

The two men both looked concerned over this. Even with Fastred and Boromir's skill with the sword, we could be outnumbered easily. "We will have to trust in the flight of Rohan's horses," Boromir eventually said.

Hirgon talked for a bit more, though there was no word of Aragorn. However, Gandalf and a hobbit were also known in the city, and apparently Pippin was causing quite a ruckus. "They are saying he is the Prince of the Halflings," Hirgon told us, and Boromir actually threw his head back and laughed.

"Pippin is no prince, though he may eat like one. I know him well, and am glad to hear of his safety. Would that Merry could know of it."

"Your father will be glad to see your return. With war on the horizon he needs his best captains."

"Aye, and he has Faramir to tide him over. Should I worry that my position has been taken by my brother?" Both laughed at that, and I had to smile at the obvious regard between Boromir and Faramir. I thought with a pang of my own younger sister, brown messy curls and paint always on her fingers. She had wanted to be a graphic designer or an artist and persisted even though our mother was tentative to support her dreams. It had been two years... she must have graduated college now. What was she doing with her life?

I missed most of the conversation in the middle while thinking of her, but eventually Fastred was brought in. "Rohan's army comes to the aid of Gondor in honor of our friendship of old," he declared to Hirgon, who looked relieved by this.

"The muster of Rohan was called even before the towers were lit," Fastred admitted, and this was news to Boromir and I. "Lord Faramir sent us a letter warning us that times were dark and we might prepare. He could not have known of the threat of Isengard, but because of this the Third Marshal of the Riddermark and nephew of the king, Lord Éomer, summoned a thousand men to Edoras. With these men and the city guard we went on to Helm's Deep."

Boromir was looking straight at me, and my cheeks blossomed bright pink. I had been the one to warn Faramir, and he in turn warned the Rohirrim. If this gave them more men at Helm's Deep, then the warm feeling that sent through my whole being was well justified.

"We were attacked on our way to the Hornburg with all the women and children," Fastred continued quickly, taking a quick look at Boromir and I. "When we were set upon by wargs Théoden King sent the summons for all the men to ride to Edoras. Let them wait there in case Saruman struck the city, he said. And now," he shifted in the saddle to sit a little taller, "at the lighting of the beacons we stand ready to aid Gondor."

Hirgon was grinning. "This is finer news than I could have hoped for. May you and Lord Boromir
and the lady ride safely on."

"And you as well, brother," Boromir said. The messenger gave us a nod of the head and kicked his heels in, taking off quickly across the plains.

"He is your brother?" I burst out the moment Hirgon was gone.

"Nay, Hirgon is not of my blood," Boromir said laughing at my shocked expression. "But he is son of one of the high lords. They too have Númenórean blood."

Now I had to ask, and during lunch on horseback Boromir gave me a very brief overview of Númenor and the line of Kings. His brother, he claimed, had more of the Númenórean blood than he did, and it showed in his bearing. "Faramir is more scholarly," he told me over bread and cheese. "And he is swifter and keener of blade."

"And you are stronger and harder of blade. And more… hands-on." That was a direct translation from English, but clearly it didn't work because Fastred coughed into his water skein spitting it out over the back of his horse's head. "What? It is true. Faramir may seem gentler, but Boromir is more the soldier. I don't see how that is related to Númenor." Boromir also looked flabbergasted, and I started to get nervous that I had said something worse than I thought. "Did I use the wrong word? In my language this makes sense. I did not mean to offend, I only meant that Boromir is bigger and well… more like a soldier. Dammit, how do you say 'physical' in Westron? Not that Faramir is not—a soldier I mean—only that he is a different kind than Boromir… oh just stop laughing and forget I spoke."

Fastred was hunched over his drink trying to stifle guffaws for my benefit, and Boromir looked like it was taking all his willpower to keep his expression blank, but his eyes were dancing. I was bright red by this time and couldn't have looked away from my lunch if I had tried. I couldn't believe what a disaster one comment had caused.

"I do not believe the lady holds your brother in as high esteem," Fastred managed to choke out when he'd recovered from his fit.

"That's not true!" I yelped, overcome to defend my opinion of Faramir. "I respect both Faramir and Boromir. There is no favorite!"

Boromir eyes were still full of mirth when he replied. "I appreciate that you think highly of my brother and I and enjoy our company. After all, you had not chosen mine."

"That isn't true either," I argued, suddenly worried Boromir felt I didn't like him. He was very friendly underneath a curt exterior, and his pride and loyalty had only grown on me in time. If nothing, I felt deep admiration for a man who shouldered so much. "I did not have to leave Lothlórien. Erynion would have made sure I was safe."

"And full of rabbit, I reckon," he joked, but his smile was wide and genuine, and he looked pleased that I had said as much.

"Yes, and no doubt he would have found other ways to tease me. No, I chose to leave with you and absolutely do not regret it."

Fastred was noticeably silent at this exchange, spurring his horse a bit more forward of us.

"Your words are too kind, milady."

"Oh pish-posh," I said, and another smile crept up on Boromir's face at my obvious use of English. "I'm saying it as it is." My comments seemed to sneak up on me though, and I flushed at
my frankness. Boromir seemed to sense the need for space too and rode up alongside Fastred, giving me a moment to collect myself. "Way to shove your foot in your mouth and embarrass yourself, Maddie," I muttered in English.

It was two more long days of riding and early mornings before Boromir said we would be able to see Minas Tirith soon. Conversation had stayed within boring topics (there are only so many times one can comment on the frightening clouds), and I picked at Boromir and Fastred's brains for the histories of Gondor and Rohan for lack of anything else to discuss—and to avoid talk of my homeland, which Fastred was very curious about.

I had hoped my luck or chance would keep us safe on our way, but it must have really run out because at evenfall of the fourth day from Edoras we were attacked. I didn't notice anything at first, but Boromir fell back to ride beside me yelling "hurry, ride fast!" That was when the first whistle of arrows could be heard, though they fell short of us.

"Orcs!" Fastred yelled, and I dug my heels into Thunor's sides. His strides were longer than Fastred's chestnut horse, and I was quickly catching up to the Rohirrim. "We must try to lose them before nightfall!" Fastred called, and his words were hard to make out in the wind.

Boromir wasn't moving quite as fast as us, and he kept looking back at the orcs. We were certainly outpacing them, but if we stopped for the night they would catch up. "These are scouts!" he called to us. "String your bow, Fastred!"

Boromir was slowing to a canter and in one clean motion had drawn his sword. "Keep riding Maddie, we will catch up!"

"Are you kidding?" I yelled back, but it was in English and he didn't seem to hear me, already falling back out of range. Fastred was turning his horse back towards the orcs, bow in hand. I felt useless and angry in that moment, and determinedly turned Thunor to follow after Fastred. I was no warrior, but I wasn't going to run away either. I drew my knife.

Boromir was already cantering at the orcs, and Fastred was right behind him. The first arrow hit the thigh of the fastest orc and it went down hard, the second shot taking out the one behind it. There looked to be about ten orcs, but the light was failing quickly and the orcs were all dark-skinned in dark mail. With a roar Boromir crashed into their group, sword coming down in a bright arc and swiping the head right off the first one he hit. Fastred was cantering a circle around the orcs, firing arrows into the dozen of them while Boromir wheeled around and charged again.

I watched the fighting with a frantic kind of horror clawing up inside me. Any lucky strike would bring Boromir down, or at the very least seriously injure him. I couldn't risk such a thing, but the malevolent eyes of that orc, the arrow in its throat, stared back at me, and I found myself frozen.

Then Fastred yelled in pain, leaning over the side of his horse where I couldn't see. My thoughts jumped to Baiard, and my fear of the Uruk-hai was pushed aside; Fastred would not be the second Rohirrim I knew to die.

I kicked Thunor's sides from where we had stopped to watch and galloped straight towards the nearest orc on the outskirts of the group. Its back was to me, so my strike to its armored head took it by surprise. My hand shook with the force, but more importantly the cheap steel helmet had split with the strength of the blow. When I looked back the orc was facedown unmoving.

Glancing wildly over the group I saw that Boromir had now jumped down from his horse and was engaging the last four orcs directly. He was a whirlwind of controlled strength as sliced one orc across the stomach and then redirected the momentum to deliver a second strike to the chest. An
orc behind him was struggling to rise, and I turned Thunor around and aimed for him, my dirk singing as it nearly sliced through the arm holding the scimitar aloft, wrenching my shoulder and biting deep into the meat of the orc's forearm.

Boromir stabbed the beast facing him, parrying its last desperate blow to take its head off in a two-handed swing, then turned and struck the orc I had amputated in the throat with the edge of his shield. He was left standing amidst a dozen orc carcasses panting, sword and shield in hand looking like a warrior king of legend.

Fastred let out a groan from where he was still seated on his horse, which was stepping anxiously back and forth. Boromir shot me a look that promised a lecture later, but the greater concern was Fastred.

Without really thinking about it, I dismounted and dug through my saddlebag for the ointment and bandages. All I could see in flashes was Baiard, listing on the horse and feverish on the ground. If Fastred died of an infection Éomer would never forgive me. Forget ghost traveler's luck—more like a curse on the Rohirrim should they ever meet me.

I pushed away the dark thoughts and quickly ran over to Boromir, who had encouraged Fastred to sit up straight on the horse and was looking at his leg. That's when I realized there was feathered wood sticking out of—was that his knee?

I must have said it out loud, because Boromir looked over at me and immediately held his hand out. "Your knife."

I handed it over mutely, unable to tear my eyes away from the grisly sight. "It's not his knee, thank the Valar for that." He cut away the pants leg to expose the full wound. Boromir was right; it wasn't in the knee, for which Fastred was very lucky, but it was high up on his calf and near the bone. "We cannot remove it, not like this," Boromir was muttering. "Ale! Bring me the ale!"

I jerked at the order and ran over to the other side of Fastred's horse and quickly pulled the ale out of his saddlebags, giving it to Boromir. He doused the wound quickly, and snapped the feathered end of the arrow off. There was still a solid four inches sticking out, and the arrowhead itself seemed to be embedded in the leg. Fastred cried out at the sting of the alcohol, but when it was done he flopped over the top of his horse's head and took a few deep breaths.

"We must hurry on," Boromir said, whistling to bring Thunor and his horse over. "Fastred will need the attentions of a healer." He grabbed Thunor by the reins and beckoned me over, but I couldn't seem to get my legs to respond, and I couldn't understand why. I couldn't feel my legs I suddenly realized, and I almost hysterically started to pat them down to make sure I still had them. I felt my throat constrict at that horrible thought, and I started to feel a burning pressure in the center of my chest. I gasped for air, hand flying to my heart-

"Maddie! Maddie!"

Boromir's rough hands were on my face, tilting my head up. His hands felt warm against my clammy skin. "Look at me. Take a deep breath." He breathed in with me and exhaled, and we repeated it again until I felt some of the cloud that had fallen over my mind clear. I hadn't even seen him move I'd been so close to a panic attack. His face was set with determination, and he was giving me a stern look, telling me to get myself together. I had never been so thankful to have someone in charge as I was now, especially as my perfectly fine legs seemed to turn to jelly. "Listen to me Maddie. Fastred will be fine for a little while, but we need to get to Minas Tirith. I will tie Fastred's horse to mine, but you must make sure he does not fall. Do you understand?"

I nodded, but that wasn't enough. "Tell me you understand."
"I—I understand."

He pressed his water skein into my hand and made sure I drank from it before he was satisfied. My hands shook terribly, and I felt like I might be sick the same as before. The bile stayed down though, and Boromir walked me to Thunor with one hand around my waist to steady my shaking legs.

"Hold on to Thunor," he instructed, and as before he boosted me into the saddle. "Promise me you will not become a shieldmaiden," he said, as he made sure I had a good grip on the reins and my feet in the stirrups.

"I think two orcs is enough for me." It was weak, but Boromir looked relieved I had said anything at all. A sudden thought struck me as he turned away, and I blindly reached out and grabbed his shoulder. "You're not hurt?" He looked blankly at me, and I realized I'd spoken in English. "I mean, you're not hurt?"

"I am fine. These were scouts, and not well-armored," he said, and I think he was trying to be comforting, but I remembered how my knife had gone through one of their helms and I felt a bit green. "Soon we will be within the patrol routes of the city and all will be well." He patted my hand and quickly mounted up on his horse, then trotted over to Fastred's and tied the reins together.

I followed behind him and came up on Fastred's other side. The Rohirrim looked sweaty and pained, but he was still conscious. Seeing the toll of the injury on his face and the distance we still had to go, I didn't regret jumping into the battle when I did. Boromir started us off at a walk then slowly transitioned into a canter. Fastred closed his eyes and leaned forward to shift his weight, his hands gripping the pommel tightly.

"How long until Minas Tirith?" I asked over Fastred to Boromir.

"If we do not stop for rest we will reach the northern edge by dawn."

"Will the horses be okay?"

"We will rest them as we can, but we must put distance behind us first. When the orcs do not report back they will know we are out here."

I turned away in the saddle with a troubled look, wondering if we would make it and if Fastred would be all right. The movement of the horse couldn't be easy on his injury, and he likely couldn't use his calf at all so he wouldn't be able to direct it if he had to. Given the severity of the wound, I had to wonder what could be done to help him. If the muscle was as torn up as I imagined, even in the modern day that would have required reconstructive surgery and months of physical rehab. Here… he might never walk again.

It was a black night we rode through, and I could only pray we would be safe when we reached the outskirts of the city as Boromir hoped.
The Ringwraith's Kiss

Chapter Summary

Maddie, Boromir, and Fastred reach Minas Tirith but there's a problem: the war is underway.

Chapter Notes

Writer's Note: I'm not labeling this yet as Boromir/OC because I have no idea how this relationship will work out. Many of you have pointed out their different classes, Boromir's future as Steward, and Maddie's chemistry with Faramir as valid reasons things might not work out. I, however, loathe unhappy endings (you hear that George R.R. Martin?) so we'll see where things go.

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It was a race to Minas Tirith and a night on par with Baiard's last. Fastred rode leaning on the front of his horse and eventually slipped into a kind of sleepy unconsciousness. I initially freaked out and called Boromir to stop when I realized he wasn't conscious, but the Gondorian checked him over and said it was probably better that way; he wouldn't be in pain at least. The wound was wrapped as best as possible given the length of the arrow shaft still stuck in it, and I insisting on putting my Rohirrim ointment or the ale over it whenever we stopped to ensure against infection.

"Why don't you just pull it out?" I asked a little while after Fastred had fallen asleep. We were walking the horses so they wouldn't become too exhausted and to give Fastred a break from the jarring of the horse.

"Think of the shape of an arrow," Boromir replied. "It would do more damage on the way out." I immediately realized what he meant. The triangular shape of the head would tear the muscle horribly if you just yanked it back out.

"But then how do you get it out?"

"Push it through." I winced at Boromir's bluntness, but the man was staring off into the distance, only half paying attention to the conversation. Still, I was never gladder to be traveling with him than that night. Boromir was a natural leader and much more experienced with this kind of thing than I was. I'm sure without him I would have been a total basket case, and Fastred would have been a lot worse off. I had to stop myself from imagining how different things would have been with Baiard. Would he have survived without my incompetence? I had to shake off the thought so I wouldn't dwell on what was done.

We didn't stop until midnight, and by then I was ready to collapse. It was only the rhythm of the plodding and my directions to keep an eye on Fastred that kept me awake at all. When we finally stopped Fastred woke long enough to be helped down from the horse, and he pretty much
collapsed on the bedroll, face drawn tight in pain. We all slept fitfully, and I dreamt of orcs with arrows in their throats and legs, but instead of cutting off an orc's hand I cut off Boromir's. After that I didn't sleep, and when Boromir went to nudge me at dawn I only looked at him miserably.

"It will fade," was all he said to me of it. The sky had begun to lighten, but the cloud cover was stronger today than before, and it gave everything a morbid grey pallor. We saddled up the horses and got Fastred back up with as little suffering as we could manage. He looked wane, but he gave me a weak smile at my fretting. "Come, we must be off," Boromir said. He looked sweaty and tired, like he hadn't had a wink of sleep, and that's when I realized he hadn't woken me for watch.

"You have to sleep Boromir," I told him as he helped me back up on Thunor. He ignored me at first, and I felt my morning irritability spark coupled with my own lack of sleep. "You won't be any help if you fall off your horse."

"I am fine, Miss Maddie."

"Try and sleep now," I said, fighting down annoyance at his stubbornness, "and I will guide your horse."

"I am not so far gone that I need to be coddled," he grumbled back. "I will sleep when we reach the city."

"You'll sleep when you're dead," I snapped back, and spurred Thunor ahead of the group. I felt bad about the comment almost as soon as I said it, but he hadn't exactly been in a great mood either, and I still felt the simmering anger at his mulishness. Still, I knew I was in the wrong, but it took me until our mid-afternoon break to set aside my pride and apologize.

"I spoke badly this morning, Boromir." The Gondorian only grunted, dismounting from his horse and giving it some water after hurrying as fast as we were able. Boromir looked grim as usual, mouth turned down in a frown, and I feared he wasn't going to forgive me easily. "I'm sorry, Boromir. I was only worried."

He stopped shuffling through the saddlebags to look at me. "I am not angry and you do not need to apologize. I know you are as prickly as a bear at dawn and none of us slept the night well." I mock scowled at his words, but couldn't be offended because Boromir said he wasn't upset with me. I felt that bubble of guilt in my chest disappear and was glad of it.

Fastred laughed when he heard Boromir, and it rang a bit stiffly between the three of us. It said something about Fastred's attitude that he kept on though. There's no way I was half as jovial when I had an arrow sticking through my arm. "The morning after I first met Lady Maddie she pulled a blanket over her head when I went to wake her. I had to coax her out from under it."

"You are the strange folk who think waking with the sun is fun. Let me tell you a saying in my homeland: The early bird gets the… bug, but the late bug lives." Too bad I didn't know the Westron for 'worm'.

"I would rather be a bird than a bug, Miss Maddie," Boromir declared, handing me my water skein hooked on my saddlebags. His frown was gone though, and despite the dire circumstances we were in my heart felt lightened enough that I didn't feel the pressure as strongly.

We didn't break for long, and we started the horses at an even walk to give them some chance to recover from the speed we'd maintained most of the morning. "Tell me Lady Maddie," Fastred said to me, wincing at the gentle bumping of his horse against his leg. "I would like to hear more of your homeland."
"I thought I asked you not to call me 'Lady'?' I said instead, always wary of talking too much about the modern world. Too many things were different, and I was afraid to introduce new concepts and ideas into a world not ready for them. World history lessons had taught me that much.

"It is proper, and you have earned the respect of Captain Éomer so I would show you the same."

"Should I call you Lord Fastred then?" I quipped, but he shook his head.

"Nay, I have no title or lordship."

"Well neither do I, so there is no need. The only lord here is Boromir." I wondered then if I would be expected to call him 'Lord Boromir' when we reached Minas Tirith. I knew I called Faramir 'Lord', but it would be strange to start tacking it back on to Boromir's name.

"On the battlefield we are equals," Boromir said, but he managed to look regal about it all the same. It was just something in the way he carried himself. "There is no need to call me 'lord' among friends."

I had to fight the urge to smile too widely at that. I counted Éowyn in that number, but I wasn't sure with others I had met. There was always language, ranks and cultures between us, and that made it hard to define relationships. Was Erynion my friend? Or were we just strange acquaintances? Considering how long Elves lived, he'd probably known me for the equivalent of an hour, I thought wryly.

"I would have thought you highborn, Miss Maddie," Fastred said, and I had to fight not to roll my eyes at the tacked on 'miss'. "What does your family do in your homeland?"

"Uh…" My job and my parents' jobs weren't easily translatable to Middle Earth. My father worked in banking and my mother worked in real estate. Did Middle Earth have banks? Not in the modern sense no, but there were moneylenders and loaners and the like that I vaguely knew of, but my father's job wasn't much like that. And I didn't have the faintest idea how people bought or sold property here either. "I don't know the name for it. My father works with money."

"As a smith who makes money?" Fastred asked, sounding very curious.

"No no, he helps… people save money. Helps them keep it and count it." That was probably the saddest description of a banker I could imagine, but I didn't know a lot of fancy financial words.

Boromir looked over then and said something I didn't know, and I just fluttered my hands in the air when he threw out two more words, probably naming fancy jobs. "I don't know any of those words. We are not highborn but not poor. There are no highborn in my homeland, not in the same way as here."

That diverted the topic successfully. "You do not have lords or highborn families? Only the king?" Fastred said dubiously.

It was on the tip of my tongue to say we didn't have a king, before deciding that would open up a box of questions I couldn't answer. "No, there are no lords. In some… kingdoms they have them, but not in mine," I replied thinking of England. They still had a House of Lords, right?

"Then who leads your armies? And who advises the king?" Boromir asked, and I had his full attention. I hadn't seen him this engaged since King Théoden talked about the other members of the Fellowship.

"The most… the best people in each job." That made it sound like a technocracy, but I wasn't sure
how else to put it. I didn't know how to say "experts" or "the most qualified" people, and it wasn't always like that anyway.

"So the best soldiers lead the armies?" Fastred said thoughtfully.

"Yes, exactly. The best soldiers prove themselves and move up the ranks. In government if the… king needs help on say… health matters, then he will talk to the best healer in the city. Just because he is king does not mean he is… I don't know the word, but it does not mean he knows everything about everything."

Boromir seemed to be chewing on that, and Fastred asked me many questions about how the best of something were determined—I had no idea, experience?—and what our army was like. I didn't know much about the military, and I wasn't sure how comparable it was given they still used catapults here; for one, the air force was comprised of eagles.

"Well, we have ranks too," I said, "but I don't know how to translate most of them." The only ones I knew in Westron were "Marshal" and "Captain" courtesy of Éomer and Boromir. I didn't actually know how those compared though to modern ranks. A Marshal sounded something like a general. Was Boromir also a general? "Is Boromir like Éomer?"

"Pardon?" Boromir asked from the other side of Fastred.

I was thinking out loud now. "Éomer is a captain of an Éored, so he leads 120 men. He is also a marshal, so how many Éoreds—Éoreds?—does he lead? Do you lead 120 men Boromir, or more like a marshal? I think a marshal is like a general in English."

"I am Captain and High Warden of the White Tower. I lead a group of five hundred of our most elite soldiers. In times of war I direct the entire guard of the city, some five thousand men." The numbers impressed me even if I didn't understand some of the words. I'd known that Boromir was a great soldier and a leader, but to hear that he captained the entire guard of Minas Tirith was stunning.

"You must be an excellent warrior!" I exclaimed, pleased by the way Boromir looked almost bashful for a second before he returned to staring into the distance stoically.

"Lord Boromir has a reputation as one of the greatest of Gondor's swordsmen in generations," Fastred said knowingly.

"A soldier is as good as the men by his side," the man in question deflected. I almost wanted to argue it, but thought better of further embarrassing him and shifted the subject away.

"What of Faramir? What rank does he have?"

"He is Captain of the Rangers of Ithilien. They are highly skilled in stealth and ambush and are as elite as the company I lead." There was pride in his voice as he told me this. I had noted before that talking about his brother was a surefire way to get Boromir to open up. "Faramir chose to join the Rangers without the leave of our father, and he earned this rank by many hard years of work."

"That is impressive," I said, memory stirring at the way Boromir noted the Steward's lack of support for Faramir. Boromir had been beloved of his father… but not Faramir? I think that was right. "Is it the same with you?"

"The heir of the Steward automatically holds the title of the High Warden of the White Tower. I was made Captain of my own accord." It took me a moment to work through the last bit, but I understood it to mean Boromir had earned at least one of those titles on his own.
Fastred added his voice to the discussion now. "Captain Éomer was not made a Marshal simply because his uncle is king either. By right of his family does he lead an Éored, but to be made Marshal one must lead many men well."

"I understand." The conversation lapsed after that, but the silence began to be filled with some kind of tension. Boromir was frowning into the distance, but when I looked I couldn't see anything. Not far below us there was the huge wall that surrounded the fields outside Minas Tirith, but there didn't look to be any movement. "Is something wrong?"

"I see no patrols near us." This was apparently a bad sign, because Boromir stirred his horse into a quicker walk, and Fastred and I followed.

"Are we close?" I called still not seeing anything troubling.

"Minas Tirith is there," Boromir said, pointing vaguely to the right and far ahead. "On fine days you can see the glimmer of the White Tower from here. It is a beautiful sight." I remembered being amazed at my first look at the city. Back then I hadn't known what to expect, but a seven-tiered city built like a wedding cake of solid marble had not been it. "Ahead of us are the Pelennor Fields, encircled by the Rammas Echor—the great wall," Boromir told me without prompting. "We should hurry." He moved to a cantor, and Fastred and I fell in behind him. The Rohirrim didn't look great, but he endured as we hurried forward.

The west side of the wall was mostly in ruin, but still stood many stories high. As we approached we could see that the gate was shut. On top I could just make out what might be the shapes of men holding torches. Nightfall was coming on us, and even though it was fairly early the smog made it look much later.

"Hail! Open the gates!" Boromir yelled, and there was a scrabbling of activity on the top of the wall.

"Who goes there?"

Boromir lifted his shield and someone yelled "Lord Boromir!" before he could even speak. I hadn't known the plain shield was that famous, but apparently it worked. A crank was pulled to open the gates and someone started yelling down to us. "My lord, Captain Faramir is under attack at the Causeway Forts, sir. Already the wounded have retreated with the wizard Gandalf, but the rearguard will not hold much longer."

Boromir rushed through the gates soon as they were wide enough, and they hadn't even slammed shut behind us before he was dismounting and calling to the guards. They gathered around the edges of the courtyard and hung off the top of the wall to watch.

"Report!"

Someone snapped to attention, probably the ranking officer, and spit out the report as fast as he could. "Osgiliath was taken this morning, sir. Orcs were said to have built boats and taken the west bank. Captain Faramir fell back to the Causeway Forts but the orcs followed. Gandalf came and took the wounded back this morning, but word is the Captain is still there with the rearguard. Orcs have fallen on the gate though."

Boromir's face became very serious at the news, and I looked at Fastred worriedly, biting my bottom lip. This was not good; it sounded like the Battle of the Pelennor Fields was just hours off.

"How many men are here?" Boromir barked in a no-nonsense voice.

"Twenty-four milord."
"If the Causeway Forts fall then there is no need to man this gate. All but two of you will come with me. The Rohirrim messenger Fastred needs a healer immediately. Two of you will escort him and the Lady Maddie back to the city. Seal this gate and we move out!"

There was a flurry of activity as men rushed to gather supplies and lock down the gate. I shifted Thunor over to Fastred and stroked the horse's neck. "Just a little more," I murmured to him in English. "The homestretch."

I wanted to say something to Boromir before he ran off to fight, but he was already accepting a spare set of chainmail and calling orders the whole time. "Bring all the weapons! Any man who can wield a bow should have one! If you have horses bring those!"

A soldier came running up to me and thrust a torch into my hand. "We need to go milady," he said without introduction, untying Fastred's horse from Boromir's and tying it to his own. A second soldier rode up on his horse and moved to my other side. Then the soldiers led Fastred and I through a stone archway out of the courtyard and down a small track until it opened on the fields. There were farmsteads and some buildings dotting the landscape, but otherwise there was blackness until the far off twinkling lights of Minas Tirith. It looked like a great distance, and I took a deep breath and glanced at Fastred. The Rohirrim looked steady as possible given the circumstances.

Things went awry fairly quickly as we hurried across the plains. Boromir had left the gateway maybe an hour ago with twenty-two men headed straight for the Causeway Forts, while Fastred, the two soldiers, and I headed down the road to the city. We could see fires on the wall, and if I strained my ears I thought I could hear yelling and steel clashing. The two soldiers we were with looked like they wanted to move faster, but Fastred wasn't in any condition to. I kept stealing glances back at the fire off behind us and to our left, knowing that the wall was going to fall. Faramir and Boromir both had to know it, yet they still fought like it could hold.

We'd gone a little more than halfway to the city when the Horn of Gondor rang out across the Pelennor Fields. I thought my heart would stop at the familiar call—Boromir was in trouble. Both brothers were in the middle of the fight, and he was calling for help. My blood felt like ice, and I saw both of the soldiers falter on their horses. All of us were looking back at the wall, watching the fire spread. The men couldn't still be in there; they had have moved to the gatehouse or even the plains.

It didn't take long to see the forts were lost. Coming up in the east we saw horses and men pounding the earth as they ran. They were moving together at least, but they were running from something. "The rearguard is retreating!" one of the soldiers with us yelled. I felt choked with worry but there wasn't anything I could do; I sent up a silent prayer to whatever deity there might be that Boromir and Faramir had made it out safely.

We continued to canter, but it became obvious the line of men from the Causeway were beginning to fall apart. They were being followed by a group of orcs, and that seemed to be the last straw for the soldiers accompanying Fastred and I. They spurred their horses to gallop, and Fastred groaned and clutched the pommel of the saddle in a white-knuckled grip to hold on. My grip on the torch was sweaty, and I gave a moment's though for the sparks caught in the wind that could set my clothes on fire.

We hadn't gone more than twenty yards though before a piercing shriek broke through the night. It was more horrible than nails on a chalkboard. I thought my teeth would rattle right out of my mouth and my ears would bleed.

Turning back, I knew instantly what had made that horrible high-pitched scream. There were two
Nazgûl on those-dragon things swooping over the fleeing men, scattering them in all directions. Horses were running without riders, men were falling to the ground to cover their heads, and others were picked up in the talons of the beasts and thrown hundreds of yards away.

I watched one man fall to the ground in a heap like a doll not fifteen yards from us, and when I looked away my eyes landed on the torch.

Aragorn had frightened these creatures with fire. Could I do the same?

I didn't have time to think about it. I switched the torch into my right hand and rounded Thunor towards the routed rearguard. I didn't hear if the soldiers or Fastred said anything as we galloped at full speed towards the fleeing men, falling in on their side as we approached. I trusted Thunor not to run us into anyone because my eyes were locked on the Nazgûl. The two would swoop down, dragons snapping, frightening the men and making them all duck. Only once every two passes or so did they actually pick someone up. It was a psychological attack—and a powerful one.

I raised the torch in anticipation for the next one to come low enough, eyes following the arc of the dragons, silver-black bodies wheeling in the air. Sometimes they swooped on men on the outskirts, but they struck at the middle just as often. One came around in a low circle, gliding down right for the center where the last of them were on horseback. I hefted the torch, watched the dragon coming lower…lower… aimed and threw it.

The torch flipped end over end and connected with the side of the Nazgûl riding the dragon. The thing gave an ear-splitting wail that shook all my bones, flailing as flames started to lick up the cloak. But in the midst of its thrashing some evil magic turned its faceless head towards me, and I felt like an ice-cold dagger had pierced me down to the soul. All my muscles seemed to shrivel up, my insides as heavy as stone, and I couldn't tear my eyes away from that gaping abyss where its own should be. I could feel myself being inexplicably drawn into the depths of that blackness.

Then the fire caught on the bottom of its hood and the thing threw back its head breaking the spell, letting another bone-shattering scream before flying straight up and away, its partner just behind it. I couldn't feel any euphoria at my victory though; all I felt was a draining weariness unlike any other. I was indescribably weak all over, inside and out; the desire to even squeeze my legs a bit tighter to stay seated on the horse seemed an impossible feat, and each breath felt like a boulder was sitting on my chest.

I let go of the reins, too tired to hold them, and started to list forward, the world going black at the edges, and I had only the vaguest of memories of someone grabbing my arm and righting me in the saddle, before I succumbed to darkness.

I woke up in a white stone room lit by the late afternoon sun and a handful of candles. There were thick dark curtains, a high-sculpted ceiling, and no personal effects at all. The elegant, dark-stained furniture seemed to indicate a guest room, one much finer and bigger than any healing or inn room I'd seen. It was easily the size of the Kinsey's master bedroom and done up in mostly black and white, looking rather stark and unwelcoming.

I felt stiff and my head sensitive and a bit heavy, but mostly I was groggy, like I'd taken too long a nap. My throat was parched and my tongue stuck to the roof of my mouth, so I gratefully poured a glass of water from the pitcher next to the bed and gulped down three before I was satisfied.

I sat dully and unthinking for a long time it seemed, soaking in the quiet and stillness of the room and the blessed emptiness of my mind. I wasn't sure where I was or what was going on, but when the haze I'd been in began to fade I began to remember. There were flashes of riding, the soldiers, the Ringwraith and the torch.
I started to wake up more, and I knew I wanted answers. I could remember riding on Thunor running from the Causeway Forts, and throwing the torch, but then… I shuddered, instinctively drawing my arms around myself as I remembered the abyss of that hole of a face under the Ringwraith's hood and that dark pull. Just the memory of it made me feel cold, and it seemed all the light and warmth of the room was sapped away.

The door across from me opened very suddenly and in stepped Gandalf, no longer stooping the way the Grey would, but standing erect as a soldier. He wore a long grey cloak over his white robes, hood thrown back and snowy white hair falling to his shoulders.

"You're awake. Good, good." He came over and pulled the chair by the window next to the bed and sat down.

"Gandalf," I greeted a bit uncertainly before the questions all tumbled out. "Where am I? What happened? Did everyone make it? How long was I asleep?" I blurted out, but he didn't answer my questions right away, or even acknowledge I'd spoken. Instead he arranged himself on the chair and poured some water in the glass, before finally looking settled enough to give me a penetrating stare.

"You are in Minas Tirith, as I imagine the white stone gives away. It is the 13th of March. You have slept the night and over half the day away."

I had to take a moment to absorb how much time had passed. How long did we have before the battle? "But what happened before? I don't remember reaching the city."

"You would not. You were afflicted with the Black Breath of a Nazgûl," he said heavily.

"Black Breath," I murmured, trying to understand. I replayed the scene in my head, but the terrible non-face of that monster was the last thing I could remember. "I wasn't close enough for it to breathe on me."

"It is not truly breath, for they draw none. But it is the manifestation of their endless malice in sickness. It saps the mind and body, and the soul falls into such despair it may never wake." The wizard's blue eyes were searing, and I had to look away.

I only understood bits of that, but I got the gist of it. It sounded very serious, and I swallowed unconsciously. "How did I recover?"

"An interesting phenomenon to be sure." He paused then, looking out the window for a moment, and I had to consciously stop my hands from fidgeting. Pressing him would accomplish nothing. "I don't quite know exactly, for I am no master of the healing arts, but there is a magic about you now that made it easy for me to draw your mind from the darkness."

"There is magic about me?"

"Oh yes," he said, and there was the tiniest touch of a smile on his lips. "Where there was none before there is a little now. You are not the same person as the one I met. No," he murmured, shaking his head, "You are quite different."

"My memory has changed, as I suppose you know if you read the letter, but that's the only thing," I insisted. I wasn't sure if I liked the idea of changing that much.

"The woman who set a Nazgûl ablaze is not the trembling maidservant I met. She is not the same one described by Lord Elrond and the Ranger Trahern."
I felt oddly adrift hearing that. The person I was before was the person I had been at home. I hadn't been unhappy with who I was then. Was there anything left of that Maddie? Would I even be recognizable to my friends and family? Could I go back... or had I changed too much?

"Gandalf... can you tell me about this magic? Will I be able to go home?"

"I am afraid I do not know. Perhaps in time you will learn more, and perhaps not. There are many mysteries in life." I sunk back into the sheets feeling dejected and frustrated and a tumble of other emotions I could hardly name. Gandalf let me stew in them for a while, both of us mulling on dark things I imagine. Finally my thoughts went back to the Nazgûl though.

"What happened with the retreat? I thought you would be there with your staff, driving the Ringwraiths off." I swore that was part of the story, but had I changed things by intervening like I did?

"I could not have been there, though I desired to be," Gandalf explained unapologetically. "Lord Denethor occupied my attention. It is a lucky thing indeed that you were there." As he said this there was a hint of that twinkle in his eye reminiscent of the Grey.

"Were you away on purpose?" I asked a tad suspiciously. Gandalf gave off a semi-omnipresent vibe that I was unwilling to disbelieve.

"No, and as it were I had no plans to be." He spoke more gravely, the charming demeanor gone. "Lord Denethor has been forcibly retired from the Stewardship."

"What? He's dead?" I asked shocked.

"No, he lives yet. Though there is not much left of the man he once was." I bit my lip to think, knowing this was a major change. I had grown surer that Denethor had died before Aragorn became king, or maybe even before he reached the city, but 'forcibly retired'? And what did that mean for Boromir and Faramir?

"It appears Denethor had a Palantír, one of the Seven Seeing-stones. In it, he thought to know wisdom, but he knew only madness." Gandalf's tone was unyielding, and he bit off the end of the word. "Somehow he saw the image of Boromir fallen at Amon Hen and could not be swayed otherwise, despite both Peregrin and mine words. When Faramir fell back to the Causeway Forts and the Horn of Gondor was blown it only deepened the wound. I was able to delay him from drastic action, but even the sight of his sons returned did not move him from insanity."

The story only grew darker from there, and Gandalf's somber face mirrored it. "He sought to burn himself and the souls of his sons to save them. Boromir was forced to take the Stewardship and confine his father for his own safety. It has not been easy on the sons of Denethor, though I fear this is the better of other outcomes."

At this statement Gandalf watched me carefully, as though weighing what more to say. I was rather dumbstruck by how things had changed. The ripples of Boromir's survival were getting wider every day it seemed.

The wizard leaned forward the slightest bit as though to whisper, snapping my attention back to him with his words. "Am I to assume you intervened at Boromir's death?" I could feel myself flushing but I didn't quite know why. I certainly didn't regret the action, even if it changed things, and so far nothing bad had come of it. The scrutiny of Gandalf's gaze was like a physical thing on my mind. "And that the results of his death would have changed Denethor's choices greatly?" He didn't ask for specifics and I didn't offer them. I could only wait for the axe to fall. "Hm... yes." Gandalf's bright blue eyes were fixed on me, but he seemed to be looking elsewhere now.
"Interesting that Denethor saw a future that did not happen and believed it so."

"I believe I did the right thing." I said, straightening my spine for admonishment about changing the future and messing with timelines.

"And thus have you changed." I didn't know what to say to his pronouncement and didn't get the chance. "We will talk more soon, but I'm afraid I must leave you now. You have been well taken care of, I hope, in the hands of Pippin here." Just as he finished the door creaked open and in popped a hobbit's curly head. He had a youthful face and a very bright smile at the sight of me sitting up.

"You're up, Miss! Well that's great to see!" Pippin bounced in and immediately smoothed out the blankets, making rather a show of it in front of Gandalf. I didn't quite know what was going on, but Gandalf huffed and narrowed his eyes beneath his bushy brows. "How do you feel?"

"More awake now," I said, smiling for Pippin's benefit. My mind was still buzzing with word on the Steward and Boromir's new position—how horrible it must have been for him to see his father like that. The wizard took his chance to leave and swept through the door with only a brief goodbye.

"That's good. I can lie for you if you want though," Pippin confided. "Boromir looked like he was gearing up for a scolding last I saw him. Ah, I mean Steward Boromir." He looked somehow like he wanted to both laugh and cry at that.

"How are Boromir and Faramir?" I asked carefully.

The hobbit tried to smile but he seemed to read my worried face. "Faramir was a tad scratched up, but nothing the healers couldn't fix. He and everybody else have been very busy."

"And Boromir?"

Pippin nervously chewed his lip. "Well, he's the Steward now. Not the way he wanted to be, if you understand my meaning." I nodded, and Pippin's charmingly warm face turned quite sad. "There's no time to mourn, you know. I think that's hard for him. I've only seen him twice since you and he came to the city." He left unsaid the rest, but I could imagine. Boromir struggling not only to come to terms with his father's insanity but also to rule the city at a time of war. "Well, that's dark news and not good for recovering," Pippin said stoutly, obviously changing the subject. "I can't believe you threw a torch at a Black Rider!"

He chuckled and I had a weak one at the sheer ridiculousness of that sentence. "I played softball in college," I offered, and then was forced to explain the basic rules to a curious Pippin. He seemed to find it overly complicated but very interesting all the same.

"Maybe when you're better and Merry gets here we can teach you a Shire game or two," he offered, and I gave him a pleased smile. It was hard sometimes to remember he wasn't a child despite his size and carefree mood, but then he would surprise me. "There's a bit more serious word to tell you too. The Pelennor Fields are full of orcs—almost right up to the gates of the city."

"You've seen them?"

"All in black, stretching beyond the wall and back. The soldiers say they're building siege weapons. It looks endless," he admitted, and there was real fear under the words.

"There's always an end." I was aiming for reassuring but I missed the mark and had to backtrack. "What I mean is, there is some end to the orcs. And Rohan is coming."
"And Merry's with them!" Pippin chirped, perking up again. "Did you meet him? Merry's the good sort, so I hope he stays out of battle."

"Ah well..." I laughed nervously, rather hoping someone would interrupt us, but no savior came. "It's Rohan's army, so if he's with them then..." Pippin's face darkened a bit, and I hastened to assure him. "But I believe Merry is tough. He'll get through it."

"Yeah," Pippin agreed, but it wasn't as strong.

We chatted a little while longer, mostly about the members of the Fellowship. Both of us were trying to avoid lingering on the situation with the former Steward, and I was rather thankful to have something to distract me from it. Pippin ran and got dinner after a bit, which was simple stew and bread. I hadn't realized how famished I was until the piping hot bowl with thick chunks of meat floating in it was sitting under my nose. I ate nearly as quickly as Pippin, who smacked his lips when finished.

"It's not quite as good as food from the Shire, and they don't serve it as often, but it's not bad." He remarked, and I had to smile at that. Even I knew about the hobbits numerous meals a day. Pippin cleaned up the trays and took them without a word, dodging my offer to help. "This is my job Miss Maddie," he insisted. "Lord Faramir and Gandalf told me to make sure you were alright."

"Really?" I asked feeling rather touched by that. Pippin seemed to take the task very seriously.

"Well, when I came here I didn't have anything to do," he admitted a bit ashamedly. "I mostly just toured the city with a guardsman's son. I'm not a soldier." One of the cups unbalanced on the tray and he comically flailed to correct it without putting the tray down.

"Neither am I," I told him, once everything was settled again. "And I don't know what I will do either now that I'm better." I yawned, cutting off what else I was going to say, and Pippin shuffled out with the tray wishing me a good night. Despite feeling a little tired, I'd been laying in bed all day and my body was restless. I stood up in just the shift someone had dressed me in and wandered around the room, opening empty drawers and peeking out the window. I must have been on the side of Minas Tirith because I could see mountains and only a corner of the plains. Even craning my head did nothing but treat me to the view of a solid stone wall.

Someone knocked on the door then, and I was about to call out when I realized I was basically in the equivalent of underwear in Middle Earth. I dashed back to bed and pulled the covers up, feeling a weird cross between embarrassed and stupid, then called out for them to come in.

I thought it would be Pippin, but surprisingly it turned out to be Faramir. He looked wrung out, his face more heavily lined than I remembered, mouth drooping with tiredness and hair limp. He still stood like a soldier and was even dressed in the black and silver of the guard rather than the brown and green he had favored before. It was good to see him though, and I smiled brightly and invited him to sit down in the seat Gandalf had left. He refused though, simply standing behind the chair. It made me a bit uncomfortable, but I couldn't force him.

"You look well."

"Yes, there's only a little tiredness. It's good to see you." Faramir nodded and I could see the exhaustion in his own face. He looked to be the one who should be lying in bed, not me. I indicated the chair again but he ignored it. "How are you?"

He opened his mouth then shut it, seeming to rethink his answer. "These are dark days." I hummed in agreement, but wasn't sure what to say that wouldn't dredge up a wound. "I do not have much time, but I have come to thank you."
Faramir straightened and put his hands behind his back, adopting a formal pose. I swallowed back the questions, confused.

"Boromir and I know what our father envisioned in the Seeing-stone, and Boromir told me of your brave attack at Amon Hen. It is not hard to know that he would have died had you not been there." My throat tightened with embarrassment, and I felt a flood of heat rush to my cheeks. "I want to formally thank you for saving my brother's life."

Faramir even bowed to me, and he put it so baldly that my face had to be scarlet. I was rather mortified at the glow of pride his words instilled in me. "It – It's been paid back in full, I assure you," I rushed to say, stuttering over my words. "Boromir has saved my life many times."

"And you have saved ours at least twice. I saw you throw the torch at the Nazgûl and nearly fall from your horse. Your act saved us and a third of my men. I am sorry to say I doubted you, and I apologize." The heartfelt apology had the most impact on me, and I found that even staring at the floor didn't alleviate the jumble of feelings that surged up inside: unworthiness, guilt, pride, happiness, more embarrassment.

"There's nothing to apologize for, really." I never held it against Faramir that he didn't believe me. Any rational person wouldn't have put half the faith he did in me.

I flailed for further words, but thankfully Faramir seemed to realize they were escaping me. "There is no time to hear your story after you left Minas Tirith, which by the way caused some distress with Lord Kinsey when my messenger was sent." The amused look on his face made me wonder about the details of that.

"I'm sorry I didn't send you a message or something, but I wasn't sure how, and I left in rather a rush."

"One of your fellow maidservants said as much." There was brightness in Faramir's eye though that reminded me a bit of Gandalf's twinkle, though it was duller than I remembered. "Regardless, I hope if we all come through this you can tell it to me in full. Already your words have done much to help us prepare for the coming war, and in my meeting with the hobbits Frodo and Sam."

I sat up more at that. I'd forgotten that Faramir would meet them, and clearly it had already happened now. "How were they?" I did remember the despair that dogged them as they crawled through Mordor, and I hoped there was some strength they might be able to draw on as they got closer.

"Tired but determined. I cannot imagine the burden those two face, and it is obvious that it weights on Frodo's mind." Faramir was circumspect enough not to name the Ring aloud, and I wondered if it had touched him too the way it had his brother. "It is a good thing you had told me of the vile creature that travels with them, otherwise my men would have shot it at first sight."

I nodded, remembering mentioning the important of the creepy creature to Faramir. "What did you say to them?"

Faramir seemed to choose his words carefully. "It is a strange thing to meet ones of such prophecy when you know what may well happen to them. If this is how it is for you with each new person you meet, then you have my respect." I didn't quite get that, but Faramir continued on anyway. "I dwelt on it much that night we caught them, weighing what to say. In the end you were right, they would take the path of Cirith Ungol, so I warned them of the spider that lay in wait. I could only encourage them that they might succeed, and I only hope that is enough." He looked more tired after this, and I felt guilty at the burden I had placed on Faramir.
"Is it enough for you?"

"Is what?"

"The hope?"

He offered me a tired smile and that was answer enough. There was a moment of unbroken silence before he finally spoke again. "Alas that we have no time. For now, I wonder if you have any advice for the coming battle."

I tried to think, switching back to the more serious topic. "Pippin said they are building siege weapons."

"Yes, and deep trenches full of evil fire."

"Oh! Gunpowder!" I remembered Saruman's magic bomb that I had thought sounded suspiciously like gunpowder. For once my modern knowledge might be useful. "Do you remember when I told you in my homeland we don't fight with swords or shields?" Faramir nodded, hands relaxed from his formal position and resting on the back of the chair as he leaned a bit forward. "Gunpowder is one of our weapons. It is a black powder that can be lit on fire with even the smallest spark."

"How do we counter it?"

"Water. If you get the powder wet it will not light. Again, it will explode at the slightest spark, so if you see an orc with one in a bomb—usually a round thing full of gunpowder—you can hit it with a flaming arrow and blow up the orcs!" I'd been thinking aloud again, but the moment I said it I thought it sounded like a good idea.

Faramir shook his head. "Most of our arches are not near the barrels of heated oil, but I will be sure to tell them about the water."

"What about a line of oil? I've seen it done in— I mean, draw a line of oil, set it on fire, and then the archers dip the tips of their arrows in it." I'd seen it done in movies plenty of times, but I had no idea if it actually worked. In theory it sounded fine, though maybe the archers had to have oil-tipped arrows…

Faramir was furrowing his brow the same way Boromir did, and I could see the remarkable resemblance. Faramir was the fairer in color of the two, but he had the same sharp eyes and slightly big nose. Boromir had the heavier brow and wider jaw of the two. "If we fill low barrels of burning oil and set them on the wall the archers could do the same," Faramir murmured, and I grinned when the corners of his mouth started to lift. "I will have some of the men set it out. Fire will be our weapon too. Is there anything else you can think of?"

I tried to remember what little I could of the battle, but it was all a big blur of fighting and death and orcs. "There will be… oh, what's the word? Like elephants. Do you remember in your study the little glass animal with four…?" I mimicked tusks with my hands and Faramir's lips quirked up, but that was the only change in expression I saw.

"Mûmakil? We have seen them on the road, coming from the south. Do you know how to take them down?"

"Aim for the eye?" I guessed. I knew lions worked together to bring down an elephant, but I had a feeling a Mûmak would be a lot harder to kill. "That is all I know I'm afraid."

Faramir nodded, still looking worn out but thoughtful. "Thank you for your ideas and knowledge. It is my hope it will save many men."
"But many will still die," I answered morosely. I remembered Boromir's words about sacrifices and how a leader has to knowingly send his men to death. How did Boromir feel now, leading the city guard into this fight? I could only hope that knowing of Frodo's success would give him some strength.

"There are always some who die and some who live, and it is almost never fair. I am thankful fairness won out this time, and my brother was brought back to me," Faramir said sincerely, and I felt redness creeping back up into my cheeks.

"How is Boromir? He must be very busy." I couldn't say I wasn't hoping he might swing by long enough to say hello, but realistically I knew those were slim chances.

"He is… tireless in his work. He has taken over the wartime duties of the Steward." There was the slightest hitch there, but Faramir buried it and continued on. "He was as relieved as I to hear that you were through the worst."

"Will you please remind him that he promised me to sleep when he reached the city?" As I had hoped, the jest drew out a small smile from Faramir. "And be careful on the battlefield, both of you. I did not kill orcs and attack Ringwraiths to have you and Boromir die here," I added.

"I will do so on both counts," he promised, bowing his head briefly. "Please stay here and recover. I fear the siege weapons and catapults of the orcs will be finished soon, and the battle will begin."

"What about Pippin? And Rohan?" I gasped. "What of Fastred?" I couldn't believe I'd forgotten the Rohirrim soldier until now. What had happened to his leg? I felt a chill blow through me at the thought of how long it had taken us to get him to medical attention. What if all that hard riding had been too much?

"Pippin will be with you. He is to make sure—as Boromir puts it—to stop you from running into battle." Faramir had to chuckle at that, and I groaned at Boromir's idiocy even though I really was pleased. I also had no intention of running into battle, not after my brief experiences with it. "My brother told me how you not once, but twice, threw yourself into battle with nothing but a dirk." He shook his head disbelievingly, but the chortles died down and seriousness took its place. "As for the Rohirrim…" the pause was not a good sign, and I felt all the humor vanish, "he has lost his leg."

Oh God. Fastred, I thought mournfully. Would he ever be able to ride a horse again? What did an amputee do when there was nothing short of a wooden stick to replace the limb? I could only hope they'd had something to knock him out or dull the pain, because I remembered lessons about medieval medicine and hearing about amputations done during the American Civil War. None of it was pretty.

"Will he recover? I—Will I be able to see him?"

"He is in the Houses of Healing. Pippin will know the way."

I felt like there was much more to say, so many more messages on pass to people, so many fears and worries about what would happen on the battlefield. Anything—a stray arrow, a lucky strike—could fell any of the people I knew out there. Any one of them could end up like Fastred or worse. The future wasn't certain, as Boromir had said, and anything could happen. It was a sickening feeling, and I found myself staring at Faramir helplessly, unable to convey the depths of my emotions.

"Take heart," he said kindly, "we are better prepared with you here, and we have hope where
there was none before. The men cheer and sing for Steward Boromir, and they whisper of the Lady of the Secret Fire." At this he smiled at me but it wasn't tinged with laughter as I expected.

"It is a better name than ghost traveler, as Marshal Éomer has called me," I pointed out, trying to laugh and failing miserably. Faramir still looked far too serious.

"It means you are a servant of Eru. Gandalf would not say if it was true or not, but I wonder." I didn't get a chance to respond to that or deny it, since it sounded perfectly ridiculous (sent by the gods to wander around for two years haranguing people for definitions?), because Faramir took his leave then.

I laid back in bed, knowing I wouldn't get much sleep now because of all the things I had to digest. Lady of the Secret Fire (not the cleverest title I imagine), Fastred, Denethor and Boromir, Frodo and Sam, the Battle of the Pelennor Fields… I wished desperately in that moment there was someone I could talk to about all of this, but I didn't dare lay more on Faramir's shoulders, let alone Boromir's, and Gandalf was as equally busy as he was mysterious.

This was my own cross to bear, and it felt heavier than ever. I was restless most of the night, and woke with dark dreams of old kings as white, decaying ghosts, and the same vision of all the people I had met including the Fellowship falling one by one as I led them into battle. When I woke for the third time that night, it was to the booming noise of catapults being released.
The Smell of Napalm in the Morning

Chapter Summary

The Battle of the Pelennor Fields begins, and Maddie and Pippin make themselves useful. But war is a messy thing.

Chapter Notes

Writer's Note: This isn't the most exciting chapter, but almost all of the main LotR characters are fighting and Maddie isn't, so sorry about that! I promise it'll pick up next chapter. As a note too: I have altered the summary of the story to say "semi-realistic" as we have obviously moved far beyond the realm of realism. I mentioned this at the start of Chapter 9, but Maddie would be dead outside Bree if we wanted to be true to realism here, not to mention the depression and anger of culture shock for a couple thousand words. No one enjoys that, so I've striven to write a story that is more realistic than most girl-falls-into-ME stories, but isn't entirely realistic because that would suck.

Also, as "Popthepuff" pointed out, Maddie calls the beasts the Ringwraiths ride "dragons", but they aren't actually dragons. She just calls them that because they are vaguely worm-like with wings. Tolkien didn't actually give them a proper name, instead calling them Fellbeasts, Hell-Hawks, or Nazgûl-birds. Maddie isn't quite that creative though.

EDIT: A big hug to benny for spotting a big continuity error. Pippin says he doesn't know how Gandalf knew Boromir was alive and that's entirely wrong: Gandalf and Pippin were both with Aragorn, Legolas, and Gimli who all knew Boromir survived. So obviously that's how Gandalf knew. I've altered the line to fix that. Thanks again to benny!

Disclaimer: I make no money from this work. Anything recognizable from The Lord of the Rings belongs to J.R.R Tolkien.

The sky was clouded over with ominous dark grey clouds throwing everything into shadow. The air had a metallic tang and hung heavy with tension and fear. I lay in bed looking at the corner of the sky I could see in the window, wondering what today would bring. We were reaching the climax of the story—a lot was about to happen and all at once.

I'd woken just before dawn when the first catapults were launched. The great booms and concussions of falling rock from where the stones broke the city walls was loud enough that I doubted anyone was still asleep by sunrise. It set my blood astir with nerves and dread at the battle about to begin. I hadn't been able to lay still any longer after that.

After lighting some candles to brighten the dark room, I went over to my bag in the corner that had been thoughtfully left there. As I dug through I realized that of my dresses I seemed to have
lost two: the travel worn one I left Edoras just days ago in, and the one I had worn from Lothlórien. I must have left the latter in Êowyn's room before leaving, and the one I came here in had probably been taken for cleaning—or more likely thrown away. That meant I only had a thick winter one and the Elvish dress left.

I pulled out the woolen dress dubiously and laid it on the bed. Compared to the fineness of the guest quarters it looked particularly drab: the ends of the sleeves and skirt were tattered, thread poked out of the hems, and the brown color was all faded. After a moment of thought, I reached back in and took out the lavender Elvish dress, laying it alongside the woolen one on the bed. There couldn't have been two more different outfits.

The Elvish one had survived a year in the bag without a wrinkle or tear, and with a little patting and smoothing down it looked nearly as fresh as when Arasinya gave it to me. It was in the same human style as all my others, but the color was a dead giveaway of its origin. The only people I'd seen wearing any kind of bold colors were hobbits and Elves, and while this one was pastel, human clothing tended towards more earthy tones. While the fanciness of the Elvish dress was certainly more appropriate given the halls I was in, it would also generate a lot of stares.

I looked back at the winter dress and then the Elvish one again, before rolling my eyes to myself. It was either look like a servant or look like a stranger, but either way I was going to stick out here. I should at least look nice doing it.

I rolled up the winter dress and put it back in the bag. I pulled on the Elvish dress, the material light but strong, falling around me in much smoother lines than any dress I'd worn in years. I laced up the front easily, and miraculously it still fit after all this time. I longed for a mirror, but there wasn't one in this room. I washed my face and hands in the shallow bowl of water and did my best to look presentable. Thankfully Elvish dresses had a way of doing that without much work.

Once I'd pulled my hair into some semblance of order and pulled on the slipper shoes I'd worn as a maidservant (the traveling boots were very dirty and ill-suited for such a nice dress) I poked my head outside to see an open door across from me.

There I found Pippin, wide-awake and standing on a small balcony facing outwards of the city. He was wearing a dark tunic that fit a bit awkwardly about the shoulders, with dark matching trousers and silver armguards that went to his elbows. He reached just a head above the railing.

"It's begun, Miss."

I could see the dark sky ahead of him, full of roiling clouds, and in the far distance, like sunset on the horizon, were the fires of Mordor. There had always been a dull red glow from there, but now it looked like all the forges in the Black Lands were working at full strength today. Or perhaps the wrath of the Eye lit up the sky that way.

It took me a moment to move my frozen limbs, but when I walked over to stand beside him I could feel my muscles twitch and tremble at the sight below. Just as Pippin had said before, the armies of Mordor looked endless. Orcs in ordered formation outfitted all in black stretched into the hazy horizon. Huge wooden towers and catapults dotted their numbers, and there was the sound of drumbeats echoing from below. The glint of thousands of guardsmen’s helmets occasionally caught what little sunlight there was, but otherwise the masses of black overshadowed them. I wondered where Faramir and Boromir were.

As we watched, a great burning stone arched high over the lower walls and plummeted to earth with a great crash that sent up a cloud of dust and stone. On the lowest level there were fires, the smoke and bright red and orange of the flames very visible against the white of the city. I thought with dread of Rylan and Adelaide's home. The city had been evacuated so it was unlikely there
was anybody on the bottom two or three levels except soldiers, but it didn't look like the family would have much to come back to. The thought sent a sickening lurch through my belly, and I had to step away.

Pippin seemed struck by the sight for a moment longer before he too left the balcony. I saw that on the front of his black velvet tunic was the silver tree with seven stars of Gondor, and behind him on the bedside table was a helm with the spread wings engraved on both sides like the higher level guards. For some reason he looked right in that garb.

"Good morning," he managed after a moment, voice a bit thick. "Or rather, a poor morning, I think." His eyes flickered back outside, but he didn't say more about it. "I've heard there's a nice garden near the back of this level."

The thought of sitting meekly in a garden pretending the people of the city weren't down there fighting for their lives made me recoil. "No, I want to go to the healing houses. Fastred is there."

Pippin looked relieved. Neither of us were soldiers, but he didn't seem to like the idea of sitting quietly either. "Well I know where those are, and I don't think it's too busy yet. There's just been catapults since before dawn." I nodded along as the hobbit led the way through the halls, taking us out what must have been the guest quarters and into a large stone courtyard with a fountain in the center surrounded by flowers. I'm sure it was more beautiful in sunlight; right now it looked rather dreary with the dark sky and the empty city.

In the courtyard we could hear the dull thuds of the catapults and the echo of the shouts of the soldiers. It made for an oppressive quiet, and I found myself struggling to break it. "I like your clothes."

"Ah, you look very beautiful too, Miss Maddie! I don't like being useless, and when Boromir told me Merry was going to war well..." Pippin trailed off a bit before perking back up. "I asked Boromir if I could serve him to pay back for saving Merry and I. So I've been made a formal member of the guard. 'Course, Boromir gave me guard duty of you." Pippin smiled up at me, not as brightly as the day before, but it made the vacant courtyard a little warmer. "Boromir told me you have a tendency to throw yourself into a fight, so I'm to stop you."

I completely forgot my offer of congratulations on his appointment to laugh at that. Faramir had said the same thing, so it sounded like Boromir was spreading rumors. "Until I met Boromir I did no such thing. He's a terrible influence." I winked at him to make sure he knew I was joking.

"Boromir taught us—I mean, us hobbits—a bit about sword fighting while we traveled. He would always jump right in to protect us though." The curly-haired hobbit sobered some then. "That's what he did when those Uruk-hai attacked. I saw the orc shoot him in the shoulder with an arrow just before we got taken." Pippin's voice had gone soft, the light tones gone. "I'm glad he survived. He's very brave and loyal."

"Yes, and I'm very glad he's here too." 

"Is it true you brought him here on a steed like Shadowfax?"

It took me a moment to place the name Shadowfax, but then I recalled Gandalf's white horse. Fastest in Rohan or something? He was a special horse, I knew that much. "Thunor would probably appreciate being compared to Shadowfax," I joked, wondering what had become of my destrier. After visiting Fastred I would go find out. "But no, Boromir was coming anyway. I just tagged along."

"He said you saved his life," Pippin replied with a cheeky grin, and I felt my face pink a bit.
"He saved mine so we're square."

"What?" Pippin guffawed loudly, and it took me an embarrassing moment before I realized my mistake.

"Sorry, 'square' means we're even. There's no debt between us."

"Why is it a square?" he asked, chuckling as we entered a busy open hall. The healing houses looked well prepared for the inevitable influx of the wounded later—for now, it was still quite empty. There were beds lined all around the walls of what seemed to be the largest ward, each bedside with a small table. There were boxes and barrels of gauze wraps and cloth, wine for numbing the pain, and sharp instruments I didn't want to think about set out on wooden tables. There were a number of people running back and forth putting away supplies and laying out the sheets. At the far end I could see a handful of soldiers in bed, but thankfully not many.

"Oh! Pardon, pardon," one woman said as she stopped before us, wearing an apron like the other nurses in the room. She glanced down at Pippin and then at me, and she looked flabbergasted, which I attributed either to the dress or to the hobbit. "Why, you're up, milady! Lord Boromir brought you in just two days ago!"

"Um, well..." I wasn't sure what to say, but she hurriedly went on anyway.

"How do you feel, milady? Any tiredness, soreness, hurts? Is there anything we can get you? If you're hungry I can get the kitchens to bring you up something nice. There are gardens in the back that are quite safe for you, and you can take a lovely breakfast there."

"No, no, I'm actually looking for Fastred. He's a soldier from Rohan. Lord Faramir said he was here." I squashed the mild insult at the option of breakfast in a garden like I was on a picnic and some delicate maiden. Medieval chivalry had its downsides.

"Oh! Of course, my deepest apologies, milady." The woman fluttered her hands around, and I felt rather baffled by all the circumstance. She called me "milady" at least twice more on the way to Fastred's room and seemed particularly deferential to both Pippin and myself. She even referred to the hobbit as "his majesty" once before Pippin embarrassedly corrected her.

"There was a rumor that I was a prince of the hobbits," he admitted with an insolent smile about his mouth when she was finally gone, leaving us outside Fastred's door. "I may not have told them I wasn't." We both laughed under our breath, mindful of the silence of the halls. While it didn't look much like a modern one, this was the equivalent of a hospital and there was that same hush over it. "Everyone thinks you're a wizard like Gandalf."

I had to stifle a cynical snort at that, remembering Faramir mentioning the name Lady of the Secret Fire too. "I'm certainly no wizard and before you ask, I don't know any secrets about fire." Not unless gunpowder counted.

"It probably started because of the torch and Gandalf. I didn't see you, but Beregond told me you were ashen when Boromir carried you in." Pippin's voice dropped a bit, but I didn't understand.

"Ashen?" Did that mean black? Covered in ash?

"Grey. Sickly. Terrible. But Gandalf did some magic over you and your color began to return. Boromir brought you here and you woke for a bit but then fell asleep again." I didn't remember any of that, but I couldn't help lingering a bit on the thought of Boromir bringing me all the way up here.
Embarrassed now, I pushed all that away and knocked on Fastred's door. There was a muffled reply from the other side, and Pippin and I entered.

The room was smaller than the one I had been in and starker, though I suppose that was to be expected in a hospital. There were two large windows on the far wall and a wardrobe and a desk. Fastred was lying on the bed, but he sat up and offered me a familiar smile on his tired face when I walked in. He still looked a bit thin with rings around his eyes, but he seemed genuinely pleased to have visitors.

"The Lady Maddie, it's good to see you."

"Fastred," I smiled back, steadfastly not looking at the outline of his legs in bed where one lump was obviously shorter than the other. I wasn't sure I wouldn't be swallowed with guilt if I looked. "How are you? Have you met Pippin?"

I made introductions and Pippin was thankfully very chatty and quick to tell Fastred all about the Shire when asked. Fastred hadn't met Merry, which Pippin declared a right shame, but the hobbit's affable nature complimented Fastred's, and the two got along well immediately. Breakfast was brought by not long after we arrived—the flustered nurse probably tipped off the kitchen—and the two enjoyed a friendly argument about Shire ponies versus Rohirrim draft horses. Unfortunately I couldn't contribute much because I hardly knew anything about draft horses except that Clydesdales had furry feet.

"I would bet your Thunor has cousins who are draft horses," Fastred commented between bites of fried egg and toast. Pippin was working on a second helping at the moment.

"I wouldn't be surprised. He's awfully big."

"You should find out his pedigree if you return to Rohan."

"What?" I had to pause while spreading jam, trying not to drip on the sheets. Pippin and I had our breakfast trays on Fastred's bed and were sitting on either side of him. I had stolen a chair from across the hall.

"Do you plan to stay in Gondor?" He asked, and he sounded a bit disappointed. I was confused though.

"No, no, I don't know what I will do after the war. But I don't understand what you said before. Find out what?"

Fastred gave a dry laugh, and while it wasn't the same as his laughter before, it was a welcome sound nonetheless. "You have improved so much in Westron I forget what you do not know. Pedigree. It is the lineage of a horse. The family."

"Oh! I suppose Thunor is not that fancy otherwise someone would own him," I replied, shrugging over my breakfast. I didn't much care for high breeding and such. My family was big dog people, but we'd always had mutts from shelters. I didn't know if similar rules applied to horses in Rohan, but I could guess as much.

Fastred looked rather surprised by how nonplussed I was, and he shook his head into his drink. "You're people really do not use horses, do they?"

Pippin looked interested at that, and I had to explain again that we had different means of transportation. I would admit to letting Pippin think we just used different animals for our carriages because otherwise it would get much too complicated. "Speaking of Thunor, do you perhaps know where he is? Or where the stables are, Pippin?" Fastred shook his head, and Pippin tore into
what had to be his fifth piece of toast this morning.

"There are some stables on this level, so maybe there?"

"I want to check later."

There was some more talk of horses and animals in general—something about differences in pig farming, I wasn't really paying attention—but eventually the topic moved to every hobbit's favorite: food. "What do you eat for breakfast in your land?" Pippin asked me, cheeks stuffed full like a chipmunk. Fastred was marveling at just how much Pippin could eat in one sitting.

"Similar things really. Eggs, toast, jam, pancakes if you have the time." I had a wistful thought of cereal; thankfully, I had long lost the kneejerk feeling of homesickness. I couldn't remember when it had worn off, but I no longer thought of my home world as much anymore, not unless people brought it up. Two years apart from it did that, I thought a bit morosely, reminded of Gandalf's pointed questions about my desire to return home. But those questions were a problem unto themselves.

We were just finishing off the crumbs—well, Pippin was—before the lighthearted atmosphere was interrupted with the sound of bells tolling. It seemed to be an alarm or something, and when I poked my head outside the room I saw healers bustling at the end of the hall. It looked like some of the wounded had arrived.

Fastred only had to see my face to know what was happening. His expression seemed to withdraw, and I saw his left hand reach down for the leg he'd lost. "Is there any word on Rohan? Any news about the fight?"

Pippin and I both shook our heads. "So far there have been only the catapults that I know of. And nothing about Rohan yet."

Fastred sighed, and I didn't miss the way his eyes flickered down to the empty space where his leg below the knee should be. I bit my lip feeling guilty and helpless in the face of his injury. "It's a four day ride to Minas Tirith from Edoras, and an army is slow. They will come."

I nodded into my lap. I knew Rohan was coming, but until then Minas Tirith was on its own. "How are you?"

"I have been better," he admitted, and I winced but he waved it away. "I have always been a soldier. Wounds like these are not unknown to us when we choose this way of life. I will still be able to ride a horse, so my heart is not so heavy." My mind jumped to Boromir and Faramir out there, knowing they were equally likely to lose a limb or suffer some other permanent injury. All the good feelings of earlier evaporated, and I stared out the window into the grassy park behind the healing houses trying not to envision it and failing. My dream of cutting off Boromir's hand came back, and I felt a chill run through me.

The bells began to ring again, signaling another wave of the wounded. I felt restless all of a sudden, my blood jumping, and I stood up and put all of our used bowls, cups and utensils on the trays Pippin had retrieved. I didn't like this sitting around, not when a war was going on. It made my skin itch.

"I'm going to go and see if there's anything to do," I said without really thinking.

Pippin stood up immediately from where he had been seated on two cushions on a chair. "I should go with you."

I looked over at Fastred, worried he might be upset to be alone and unable to help, but he gave me
of his familiar worn smiles, though this one definitely didn't reach his eyes. "Go ahead. Ghost travelers are named for a reason after all. They don't sit much unless it's on a horse," he managed to joke.

"Ghost? I thought you were the Lady of the Secret Fire," Pippin said mischieviously, and at Fastred's interested look I quickly clapped a hand down on Pippin's curly head.

"As I have told nearly everyone I've met, I'm neither."

"You're something special," Fastred said insistently, and I rolled my eyes, feeling uncharacteristically annoyed at this persistence on labeling me.

"I'm something lost," I replied with a bit more bite than intended.

"Three more bowls for the men on the end!" Someone yelled as they hurried by, and I quickly ladled more of the watery leek and carrot stew into the bowls Pippin held up.

The Houses of Healing's two main wards were both full of the wounded and they were starting to fill in the side rooms with as many men and cots as they could fit. Most came in with injuries from arrows or being caught under rubble, though some of the siege towers had managed to launch the orcs inside on the walls before they got knocked down so there were sword wounds too. This wasn't going to be the worst of it by far, and I kept my eyes fixed on beds, eyes, and wrapped wounds rather than any of the gore. I'd never been that squeamish, but TV and movies didn't capture the real horror.

Nurses and doctors were running back and forth wrapping cuts, rubbing ointment, pouring hot wine to disinfect, and cauterizing the worst wounds—I only saw the red-hot knives and was thankful for it. Most of the noise was the calling between nurses and the clattering of armor being dropped to the floor. That didn't mean the general din of a medieval emergency room wasn't punctuated by a scream of real pain or yells for mercy as doctors dug for arrowheads and knives seared wounds shut. Thankfully most of the big stuff was done in separate rooms.

Pippin and I both flinched each time we heard it, and even after a couple hours manning the pots of soup it didn't get easier.

After leaving Fastred, Pippin and I had managed to get back to the main ward only to find chaos. I didn't even ask Pippin if he wanted to help, I just collared the first nurse I could catch and asked if there was anything we could do. She'd looked dumbfounded at the request, eyes flickering between my lavender dress and Pippin's short stature, but when I'd rolled up my sleeves and Pippin repeated the question, she'd handed us off to her superior. That's how we'd ended up passing out soup bowls and cups of water to the ill, since neither of us had any medical experience.

Pippin ran two of the bowls down the hall and I filled a third and fourth and followed behind him. One nurse stopped me and I handed it off to a man in bed with his torso swaddled almost completely in white. His eyes were wide as I handed it to him, but it looked as though he'd barely seen me. The man next to him asked for the second bowl, and I had to carefully place it beside him on the bed because his right hand was wrapped tightly in white—it looked like two or three fingers were missing.

Then it was right back to the pot to ladle out more while Pippin filled cups of water. The routine was comforting as the two of us repeated the exercise for most of the morning. Sometimes I was stopped to hold gauze while a nurse wound it around someone's chest, or asked to bring back more supplies or clean sheets and move cots. Either way, I found dashing about the healing wards
to be the most satisfying work I'd done in Middle Earth. I felt a kind of grim fulfillment at each
task I was given, and it went a long way towards suppressing my fears for the men in the war. I
couldn't worry about anything if I had to ferry soup and water back and forth.

It was late morning when we got sent out of the healing wards to bring lunch to some soldiers and
their ward. There were guards on the seventh level that couldn't leave their posts, and after
someone spotted Pippin in his uniform we were delegated to the task.

"At least the guards don't have to get that bland soup!" Pippin's hobbit stomach didn't much
approve of thin leek and carrot soup, even though it was made with the weak stomachs of the ill in
mind. "We should see if we could get a bowl of this potato soup ourselves before going back."

"We had bread and butter not long ago Pippin," I reminded him, a little breathlessly as we climbed
the stairs. There was no such thing as Tupperware in Middle Earth, so we had to be careful not to
jostle the open bowls of soup on the trays.

The quiet outside was a bit of shock after the activity in the wards, and the walls were too high to
see how the battle was going. The thudding of the catapults was all but gone, but it wasn't silent:
there was the hum of men fighting below. I wished I could see just to get an idea of what was
going on. Outside the healing wards I felt terribly disconnected, like I was at the top level of a
stadium and the game was a thousand feet below. Only this was no game; real men were dying.

I mulled over this as I followed Pippin, who had been directed up to the seventh level a different
way than how I'd gone to visit Faramir, and it looked like the wing we approached was more
residential. There were fine windows with boxes of flowers underneath, and another fancy garden
not quite as stiff and geometrical as the one I'd seen. The guards here didn't question us, I imagine
because of Pippin's uniform, and they stood still as stone as though all was normal.

There was a guardroom near the side of one of the buildings, and at our approach the door opened
and a guard with a bit of extra flair on his pauldrons and helmet stepped out. He had a dark grey
cloak that set off the steel and chainmail he wore and stood a solid half-head taller than I.

"Beregond!" Pippin cried, and made to dash forward before remembering the tray of food in his
hands. "The kitchens have sent us up with soup and bread," he said instead, lifting the tray as
though the guard might not have seen it.

"Things must be bad if they are sending guests on errands," he joked. He had a surprisingly deep
voice but it was also softer than I expected. He turned to me, pulled his spear up tight with one
arm to his side and straightened before giving me a deep bow. "Greetings, Lady Maddie, may you
be welcome in Gondor and bring us good fortune."

My eyes were probably as wide as saucers. Not only did he recognize who I was, but he'd also
greeted me with such formality. The guard behind him was also looking over from his post, and I
felt the burn of blush rise up on my cheeks again. I couldn't believe how awkward this all was.
"Really, that's not necessary, please. We've only come to bring lunch."

"It's not much," Pippin cut in thankfully, "but they don't have many folks in the kitchens. We tried
to get you something better than just bread and soup, but—"

"It's more than enough, Pippin," Beregond said, and set aside the spear to lift the tray out of the
hobbit's hands easily. His armor clicked as he carried it inside the guardroom, calling back: "My
guards can finish your errand." I wasn't sure whom he was referring to, so I followed him into the
room.

The guardroom appeared to be a large closet for the odds and ends of the soldiers up here. There
were pieces of armor and clothing scattered about, and boots dumped in untidy piles. There was a weapons rack on one wall with almost a half dozen spears there, lethal silver tips pointed up, and a smattering of swords and daggers propped up against furniture and the wall. The whole place smelled like a locker room, all old sweat and metal, and I wrinkled my noise. The smell was a strong reminder of high school gym class. I certainly didn't miss public high school locker rooms, and yet I felt a weird nostalgia for that shared experience that no one else in Middle Earth would understand.

"So who are you guarding?" Pippin asked as we left the guardroom, and Beregond began to walk us down another hallway. "Counselors or something?"

It was hard to see Beregond's face behind the helmet, but he seemed uncomfortable with the question. We knew why the moment he opened his mouth: "The former Steward."

That had to be terribly discomforting, to be essentially a prison guard to the man who had been their king in all but name. I didn't think for a moment Boromir wasn't justified in taking over his father's position, but it was still a bad series of events. Pippin was frowning up at Beregond too before looking at me.

"I met him, you know, the Steward that is, but only for a brief meeting. He was… well… I guess Merry would say troubled. He didn't even believe Gandalf and me when we told him Boromir was alive. He said he saw Boromir's death and that was that."

"Gandalf told me. Some kind of magic." I replied, glancing at Beregond who was like stone. Pippin kept up talk of the former Steward though.

"Speaking of magic, it seems he had one of those seeing stones. Gandalf thinks it's what drove him mad."

"The Enemy drove him mad." Beregond said.

"He mustn't have always been that way," Pippin said. "He is Boromir's father after all, and Boromir turned out alright." Beregond's expression—what little I could see of it—hadn't changed, but I was getting the feeling he was uncomfortable with the topic. Pippin was oblivious to this though, and I was trying to think of how to change the topic when Beregond spoke up.

"I was too young to have ever met the Lady Finduilas, Lord Denethor's wife, but it is said he only grew cold after her death. It is not for soldiers to speak of what they see or hear of those they guard." That should have been the end of it, but Pippin was like a naïve dog with a bone.

"When did she die?"

"Pippin!" I said sharply, but he only looked at Beregond expectantly.

"I couldn't help noticing he didn't seem to much like Lord Faramir," the hobbit added thoughtlessly.

Beregond coughed, which was telling enough. Boromir had mentioned it in passing when he spoke of Faramir to me before. A million questions popped into my mind—was Finduilas killed in childbirth for Faramir? Was Faramir somehow involved in her death? Was Boromir just more similar to Denethor and thus preferred?—but none of them were appropriate.

"Lord Faramir has excelled in all his goals. No father could not love a son as great as he." Beregond should be a diplomat with his excellent deflection there.

We turned a corner as he spoke and the sight beyond was enough to forget the conversation.
entirely. We were on the top of one of the outer walls of the seventh level looking down at Minas Tirith. All thoughts of Denethor and his history flew out of my mind, and it was just the battle spread out below us—but it was impossible to forget Boromir and Faramir knowing they were down there somewhere.

Far below us lay the first level, now a ruin of black smoke and crumbled stone. The catapults had done significant damage there, though the walls had held. None of the siege towers from earlier could be seen, and I hoped that meant they’d all been destroyed. Now though, it looked like all the orcs were bunched up under the wall, while legions of archers shot into the crowd. Behind them a handful of our catapults were still working, and it seemed like the fighting hadn't yet spilled into the streets.

"How long can Minas Tirith hold out like this?" I moved over to the edge of the wall, the wind on my face as cold as steel. I had to squint so my eyes wouldn't water.

"The gates of the first level are made of thick wood bolstered with steel made by Men and Dwarves of old. It is said it's never been breached, and I'd like to see the armies of Mordor try," Beregond told me.

"Don't jinx it," I replied, but didn't look away from the fighting even as he glanced at me. The soldiers looked like ants, or characters in a computer game. It wouldn't have seemed real if I couldn't smell the iron in the air and hear the echo of a thousand swords clanging. "They will have to get down from the walls and fight sometime, won't they?"

Pippin came over on my other side, and I'm sure his face of worry mirrored mine.

"Yes. Captain Boromir will do his best to contain the fighting to the fields. When Rohan comes the plan is to surge out of the gates and crush the enemy between Rohan's cavalry and Gondor's infantry." Beregond indicated the direction Rohan would come from and pointed down to where the gate was to give us an idea of the plan. I didn't know anything about military strategy, but it sounded solid to me.

We weren't on the wall long, but it was as we turned away that we heard the piercing shriek of a Nazgûl. I felt my whole body seize up and my vision was blinded for a second with that horrible abyss of its face. I barely felt Pippin grab my arm and shake it asking, "Are you okay?" I could only tell he was speaking because his lips moved, not by his voice, as a second bone-shattering screech followed the first.

Over Pippin's head I could just see the swooping of the beasts the Ringwraiths rode and their black shrouded riders flying high above the ranks of men. I had to put a hand on the wall to steady myself, feeling horribly shaken at the sight. I'd take a thousand orcs over one of those.

Beregond was yelling something to the soldier down the hall before he turned and saw my face. "Take her back down to the sixth level, to the Houses of Healing," he ordered Pippin. With a push from Beregond I stumbled forward, and Pippin didn't let go of my hand as we ran back into the seventh level and through endless corridors and a garden before we reached a small, windy set of stairs.

At the bottom of the steps I felt winded, like an asthmatic that couldn't draw breath, and tugged on Pippin's hand to get him to stop running. I sat down on the second to last step and put my head in my hands, feeling horribly shaken at the sight. I'd take a thousand orcs over one of those.

"Miss? Miss Maddie?" Poor Pippin looked just as scared and out of sorts too.
"I'm sorry Pippin," I gasped out, thinking I must be hyperventilating. It took me long minutes before I could get my breath back and calm my racing heart, but even then I could still feel that crippling fear. Had I really thrown a torch at a Nazgûl? You could hardly tell now, and I laughed, only to recognize the same hysterical sound I'd made after killing that first orc. That made me start to cry. "The face—It's just so wrong."

"I know, Miss," Pippin said, and his mouth was drawn so tight there was a white ring around his lips. He too looked afraid, and somehow that made it easier to deal with my own terror. I started to wipe away my tears, embarrassed at how easily I'd crumbled. I hadn't cried like that in probably a year. "When Frodo, Sam and Merry and I left the Shire we saw the Black Riders on the road. That fear… it isn't natural. It's worse now than it was." He shuddered, and without thought I reached out and pulled Pippin to my chest, hugging him for all I was worth. I didn't even feel the clunky hauberk he wore, just the touch of one scared person to another. His arms were just long enough to get around me, and I started to breathe easier; the impossibly tight ball in my chest where my heart was began to unknot.

"I wish I could say it can't hurt us; that's it's just a monster under the bed. But here in Middle Earth it's real." As I spoke I knew I wasn't talking to Pippin anymore, not really. I was talking to myself—the me that hadn't yet been erased. Gandalf was right to say I had changed, but not all of the old Maddie was gone. What little was left was the same girl that shied in the face of Elves and cried at every emotional bump, and she was showing her face now.

"It's okay to be afraid, but don't let it master you." Pippin said into my collarbone, and I had to pull back to look at him. "Master Bilbo taught me that."

"He's an awfully wise hobbit, isn't he?" My voice was choked, but at least I wasn't crying anymore.

With thoughts of Bilbo facing down a dragon, the Ringwraith didn't seem quite so terrifying—though not by much. Pippin offered me a handkerchief that I thankfully wiped my eyes with. It took a couple minutes to get my legs under me before both of us were standing. I was still feeling pretty shaken, but it has also been cathartic. I hoped, as Pippin and I walked back in silent solidarity to the healing wards, that when Éowyn struck down that Nazgûl they would all flee back to Mordor and rot. Until Rohan came though, Gondor would have to hold out—as would I.

And Gondor did survive.

We heard all the rumors at the Houses of Healing as the wounded came in—Pippin and I were right back in the thick of it cleaning tools and utensils in hot water. The biggest one by far was news of a great battering ram aimed at the main gate. According to the newly injured, it looked like the unfinished muzzle of some beast and was full of hellfire, but Lord Faramir ordered it doused in water, and the flames withered under the onslaught. Already there were stories going around about the magic of the well the water came from. Hearing that story cheered me up as much as being busy did, but it wouldn't last.

We felt the first wave like a sonic boom, rolling over everyone and causing the hair on my arms to stand up. I had the wild thought that it was an earthquake before a second followed, and you could hear the explosion of metal and wood even from the sixth level. I abandoned the tools in the water to rush out of the courtyard, following the crowd to the nearest garden where the wall was at its lowest. We packed up against the edge and those there first were already crying out in dismay. "The gate has been breached!" "A monstrous Ringwraith has struck it down!"

I couldn't see until it was over, but the word rippled around me: Gandalf had driven the Nazgûl back, but the damage had been done. Orcs were streaming into the city, overwhelming the forces
right at the gate. It didn't look like much from this height, but the black forces were definitely funneling into the gateway, though the actual fighting was shrouded by dust and debris. If Faramir was down there ordering buckets of water dumped on gunpowder, then I feared he was in the thick of it.

The bells started to toll again, and most of the crowd rushed back to the Houses of Healing to deal with the new influx of wounded. The rest of us were mostly the lightly injured; those who couldn't fight but weren't bedridden. Pippin was standing on a bench to see over the barrier, and we watched the battle unfold. It seemed at first the orcs had completely inundated the front lines near the gate but then out of the cloud that covered most of the lowest level burst a line of cavalry, all in mail and one of them carrying a flag of black and silver. It was impossible to see any detail, but the cavalry pushed back the orcs and that was when the call of several horns echoed up to us.

At first I thought it was just another orc horn since many punctuated the battle, but then the Horn of Gondor, whose sound was richer and clearer than any other, followed it. I'd heard it too many times not to recognize Boromir's horn immediately. The very walls of the city seemed to shake at the sound, and I felt my heart leap in a rush. Only Boromir blew that horn—he was still alive.

There was the sound of more people joining us at the wall now, and those of us who could see were yelling down. "Rohan has come!" "The Rohirrim are here!" "We're saved!"

In the distance we could see them, like a swelling tide charging in on the western and northern flanks, the Rohirrim cavalry had arrived. I flinched as the first line of horsemen slammed into the orcs, recalling many a movie moment of just that, and then everyone was mixed up in the fighting. The battlefield west of the city quickly became a mess of black orcs and riders, but the tide of Rohan didn't stop. The horse-lords pushed forward, and soon you could see the shape of the army cleaving like an arrowhead through the amassed armies of Mordor. That was when renewed cries around Pippin and I started and everyone seemed to realize that the Gondorian army had surged out of the gates, led by their own horsemen, and were cutting a wide swath in front of the lower wall. It looked like they were trying to join up with the Rohirrim, cutting the orc army in two and driving the enemies around them into the walls where archers could shoot them down.

"Look! There's Gandalf!" Pippin cried out suddenly, pointing down into the masses near the gate. I had to strain to see, but sure enough there was something all in white down there right in the middle of things. There was no way anyone but an Elf or a person of magic could maintain that kind of white clothing in a bloody battle like this. Everybody felt the renewed surge of hope at the sight of our allies and soldiers routing the enemy troops.

Unfortunately battles weren't as quick as that. The fighting continued, the grounds always changing, and I couldn't help flinching each time the Nazgûl shrieked. As I glanced around at my fellow spectators, I could see the way we all were hanging off the banister and over the edge, hooting and cheering, and the stadium analogy jumped to mind again. I'd been to big sports games before—Cliff had been a serious baseball fan, and I'd gone to at least two games with him—and leaning over a balcony railing in the cheap seats trying to see the action was exactly what I'd done then. It bothered me suddenly that I was doing the same thing now, and I consciously stepped back from the edge.

I could still hear the roars of battle, though far away, and it was almost possible to imagine it was cheering fans rooting for their team and not men dying and screaming. Pippin turned around then and jumped down from the bench, looking at me with concern. I just shook my head at him and started back to the healing wards.

When we made it back inside things were, if possible, more chaotic than before. Men with minor injuries were sitting on the ends of occupied beds getting treated while the more wounded slept. Everywhere there were nurses running about, doctors hollering orders, and at the ends of the hall I
saw soldiers carrying out a body wrapped all in black.

"This is no place for you, milady!" A woman yelped at me when I took several steps deeper into the room. She had blood on her apron and the sleeves of her dress, and her hair was falling out of the neat bun it must have been in earlier.

"Is there anything we can do to help?" I asked, ignoring her words.

Luckily one of the younger nurses from before spotted us and after a moment's hesitation jogged over. "Milady, if you've got the time there are rooms in the east wing that we'll be needing. If you might be so inclined, I'd ask you kindly to put these on all the beds and—" I held out my arms and the overwhelmed woman immediately handed me the pile of sheets in her hands and Pippin the stack of linen for wrapping wounds. The other nurse gaped, but didn't seem to know what to say. "Oh thank you so much, thank you really." She rushed through a curtsey and darted away, and Pippin called me milady all the way to the east wing to lighten the expression on my face.

The busywork did exactly what I hoped—the battle was never far from my mind of course, but I could focus on folding and scrubbing, straightening and cleaning, and forget for a little while that my friends and people as good as my family were down there fighting. But it wasn't even an hour later while washing sheets in the courtyard when one of those very people I was trying not to think about came to the Houses of Healing.

"Make way! Make way! Ready a bed!"

The bells were ringing again as two soldiers wearing royal blue cloaks decorated with the tree of Gondor and some kind of bird came rushing through, carrying someone between them. I noticed them because of their outfits, neither Rohirrim nor the city guard but clearly of Gondor. I only saw the armor of the soldier they were carrying until the men were nearly past, and that's when I recognized the hair: long, wavy, golden hair nearly dragging on the ground—too long to be a man's.

I dropped the wash and rushed up behind them to see the soldier's face: it was pale as death—no, ashen—and one I most definitely recognized.

"Éowyn!"
The Multitudinous Seas Incarnadine

Chapter Summary

Maddie struggles with powerful emotions and then a madman. All while the battle continues.

Chapter Notes

Writer's Note: I'm very sorry for the wait between chapters. Work was very busy and this chapter was incredibly difficult to write. I found I had genuine trouble striking an even note. Denethor was especially uncooperative, and he actually took this in an unanticipated direction. On an unrelated note, I have very limited medical knowledge, so if there is any glaring mistakes let me know.

Parts of Denethor's speech have been adapted from The Return of the King the chapter titled "The Pyre of Denethor".

Lastly and most importantly, huge thanks to Noree for giving the chapter a once over for me. Your second opinion helped me sort through all the emotional stuff that kept me nitpicking all week.

Disclaimer: I make no money from this work. Anything recognizable from The Lord of the Rings belongs to J.R.R Tolkien.

"The car was hit by a drunk driver."

My father's face turned the color of sour milk, and my mother blindly reached for his arm, eyes wide and already starting to look wet. She spoke first; my father looked too shocked for words. I'd never seen either of them like this before, and I never wanted to again. "How is she? Will she be okay?"

"She's just come out of surgery and the prognosis looks good. She will have to remain here until she gains consciousness."

Those words rattled around my brain, as we were led down the bland hallway. My little sister, Mackenzie, had just come out of surgery. After a car accident with a drunk driver. It didn't seem real.

My father looked stiff with surprise, walking almost woodenly down the corridor behind the doctor. His jittery worry was belied by the twitch in his hands, and I grabbed his convulsing fingers and squeezed them.

My mother was a bit more composed, but she was walking almost on the heels of the doctor, lips pinched like she was holding back the tide of questions and fears she had. I'd like to think I reacted more like her, but my father and I were more alike in this way.
Mackenzie's university was three hours from my parent's home, and another forty from mine. I'd left work immediately and the whole family had broken speed limits on the highway, and now my father and I were lagging as we got to the door. I'd been in hospitals before, and I knew on the other side of a hospital door was always something sad and hard to see.

The doctor opened the door and led us in, talking about her injuries—whiplash, concussion, spinal cord trauma—but everyone's gaze was riveted on the tiny form on the bed. Why did people look so small in hospital beds? Did they make them that big on purpose? I remember nonsensically thinking that, before my father let go of my hand to rush over and grab Mackenzie's.

My little sister's brown hair looked limpler than I'd ever seen, and there were tubes connected to her arms and into her nose as she breathed shallowly. There was an obvious bruise on the right side of her face from the side-on collision, but the real damage wasn't on the surface.

I don't know when, but we gathered around the bed in a loose circle. My parent's both had teary eyes even though everyone was positive about her recovery. It hadn't made the agonizing wait for her to wake any easier.

I mostly remembered that time at the hospital as full of useless energy. I wanted to be able to do something for her, but when she was unconscious it was up to her to heal. I wanted her to wake up and demand coffee, the specific blend she liked the most, or a sandwich on sourdough, hold the tomatoes. I wanted to run to the nurses and get them to do something more for her. My parents were both plastered to her bedside, but I was too restless to sit there.

Even when Mackenzie opened her eyes and passed the tests to make sure all her brain function was fine, she still looked so weak in that bed, and there hadn't been anything we could do about it. I brought her coffee and sandwiches and her sketchbooks, but she was still on pain meds and still so fragile. It hurt to see my sister, who was bolder and more vibrant than I'd ever been as a child, who I was so painfully proud of, propped up in a hospital bed, sometimes too tired to even sketch outlines in her notebook. But after a couple days in the hospital she'd walked out on crutches, smile still at half-mast but growing.

Everyone said the most important thing was to support her, to be there for her, but I struggled with that. We joked about all the boys holding her books for class and how she got to use the elevator in her dorm, but I couldn't help getting upset when she was in pain, or when she struggled with the limitations of her recovery. She threw herself into her art to get past the frustrations, the same way she had as a girl. When we were young I'd been envious of that. I'd never had anything similar to get me through.

And she recovered. Other than a scar and a flinch from my father at the mention of it, the memory was put aside. She'd overcome on her own, and my pride at her strength helped me forget the fear and worry and my helpless energy.

But now I was experiencing those same feelings again. Only this time there was no positive prognosis.

Éowyn was lying in a bed in a room like Fastred's in the Houses of Healing, still as a corpse, her chest barely moving with each breath. The healer had tended what superficial wounds she had, but when the woman declared she could do nothing more because Éowyn had the Black Breath, all the air had rushed out of me. I'd known she would survive, but this…

Pippin started to pull up a chair to the bedside, and I recoiled and ran back out; I had to know what happened. I yelled to stop the blue-cloaked soldiers who were almost at the other end of the corridor. "Wait! Wait! Did she slay the Nazgûl? The one with the crown?" Both of the soldiers
stopped short and turned around to look at me surprised. "Did she? And what of the King? King Théoden?"

"And what of Merry?" Pippin cried beside me. I hadn't heard him follow me out.

"We were the first to leave the battlefield, milady," one of the men started, glancing at his companion for confirmation. "Prince Imrahil sent us here. He said the sister of Rohan's king had been struck down after slaying the Ringwraith."

They were giving me a curious look, but I barely saw it. "Sister of Rohan's king? What of King Théoden?"

"And Merry! A hobbit. Tall as me!" Pippin added in.

The two soldiers looked at each other again before the same one spoke up. "I know not of a… hobbit. But the word on the battlefield is… the King of Rohan has fallen."

The nurses and other spectators in the hallway broke out into gasps and murmurs, and the soldiers bowed and took their leave. I whirled around and rushed back into Éowyn's room, collapsed into the chair next to her bed, and burst into tears.

I felt all the responsibility and guilt of my decision to interfere crash down on me, and I was drowning it in. I had encouraged Éowyn, my best friend in Middle Earth, to go to war, not remembering this. What if she didn't survive this time? I was so afraid something I had done had triggered this. Éomer would never forgive me for putting his sister in danger, and then there was his uncle—his king. I hadn't done nearly enough to save Théoden; I could have warned Éomer more directly or told the king himself. All my fine ideas of sparing people pain and death had fallen apart.

What if Éowyn never woke? What if my meddling changed that? Did I trade Boromir for Éowyn? Or what if everything was inevitable, and I'd only postponed it?

I couldn't turn my brain off from the downward spiral it had begun, and I started to cry in earnest. All I could think of was what the ripple effect of my actions had done, circling around Éowyn, Boromir, and Théoden. I didn't even hear Pippin until he peeled away one of my hands from my face and started to pat my eyes with a handkerchief.

"There, there," he murmured comfortingly, but I just got tears all over his handkerchief, unable to pull myself together. He even wiped my running nose like I was a child. "She's not gone; she can get better. You did after all, and no one was sure when you got here." I hiccupped, feeling another wave of guilt over how big a burden I was. Pippin was probably worried sick about Merry, but here he was, stuck comforting a hysterical woman.

"It's too bad we don't have some old Toby or cakes," he went on. "Food and smoke is always good in a bad situation." I wasn't sure if Pippin was serious or joking, but he passed me the handkerchief so I could bury my face in it, and he rubbed my arm with his tiny hand.

"I'm sorry Pippin," I choked out after a couple minutes to get my voice back. My cheeks were streaked with tears. "I know you must be worried about Merry."

"Merry's tough," he said, and even in my state I could tell he was saying it as much for his benefit as mine. "And I can't just run out there anyway. Plus, Boromir gave me orders to stick with you."

That started a fresh wave of tears, and Pippin seemed oblivious to my guilt. Eventually though, the crying began to peter out, but I still felt absolutely horrid. Éowyn was comatose and I shared responsibility for it, and Théoden was dead just the same as before despite my pathetic attempt to
stop it. That didn't even consider Faramir and Boromir, and of course Merry. I covered my face with my hands like I could hide from these problems for even a second.

"Hey, hey," Pippin said, squeezing my wrist in his small hand. "I know this isn't good but she can get better. I mean, well... Gandalf's magic saved you, so maybe it can save her too?"

Pippin's selflessness attempt at comfort was stronger than any words—and he was right too: Gandalf's magic had saved me, so maybe he could do it again. Though the wizard had said his magic worked because I had a little of my own. I didn't think my "magic"—I was a tad skeptical about all of this—could do anything for Éowyn, but crying over her certainly wasn't going to help. Pippin was holding himself together much better than me.

I rubbed my eyes and wiped my nose, wincing at the state of Pippin's poor handkerchief. I felt shaky and more than a little spent after my crying fit, but I was also able to think a little more clearly. Didn't they say talking to comatose and unconscious patients helped them? Or was that just to comfort those sitting with them?

I attempted a smile for Pippin, who gave me a bright one back. Hands still trembling a bit and face all blotchy and red, I scooted my chair as close to the bed as I could and picked up Éowyn's lifeless hand. It felt a bit too much like a ragdoll's to be comfortable, but I rubbed the back of her hand with my thumbs to get the blood flowing.

"It's me, Maddie." I started out awkwardly, hearing the scrap of a second chair that Pippin was dragging over. "I knew you could do it." I hiccupped at the thought of Éowyn fighting that horrible monster and my eyes start to water again. I had to blink and stare at the ceiling so the tears wouldn't sneak out. I was tougher than that. I threw a torch at a Nazgûl, right? "I'm sorry I let you go up against it without telling you. It... I was scared things would change, and I didn't know what to do." Excuses... "But I knew you could do it," I repeated, trying and failing not to envision the scene. Éowyn, valiant and alone except for a hobbit, parrying blows with a creature of nightmares. The same monster that's voice had reduced me to tears a couple hours ago. I'd all but sent her to her death. My throat felt strangled by all the emotion, and I had to fight to even swallow let alone speak. I hated how she looked like she was already halfway in the coffin as she laid in bed. At least Mackenzie had been surrounded by IV tubes and machines with the promising beeping of her heart. I could barely hear Éowyn breathing here.

"Try to get better soon," Pippin said in the silence as a gathered myself, and I felt a rush of love and relief for the hobbit I'd met only yesterday. "Miss Maddie will be a right mess if you don't." He tried to smile for me, and I offered a shaky one back.

"He's right you know," I said when my voice had recovered a bit. I tried to think of something more lighthearted, but nothing good came to mind. "You'd better recover before Boromir and Éomer see you." I tried weakly, but my heart lurched at the thought of Éomer, his joyful face at dinner less than a week ago, teasing me about ghost wanderers. He was going to hate me.

Pippin patted my knee, and I glanced at him before squeezing Éowyn's hand. "...Your brother will kill me and Boromir will help him hide the body."

Pippin laughed, and while forced it was better than the silence of our breathing, mine wheezing a bit because of all the crying. It wasn't the best thing to say, but I hoped Éowyn appreciated it if she could hear me.

It felt like hours that I sat there holding her hand but it was likely only one or two. Pippin occasionally got up to check on what was happening outside, but there was no word on Merry. The battle still seemed to be raging, but the sun would set soon, and it would be too dark to fight. A growing part of me dreaded it because I would have to confront Éomer then.
At one point in the vigil I said a prayer in English that Pippin asked me to translate, and I refused because it would be too difficult. Pippin sang a slow song he told me was a children's song from the Shire about peaceful dreams, and after a fair bit of encouragement I hummed "Twinkle Twinkle Little Star". I didn't believe in my magic, but it didn't hurt to think, at the depths of my misery, that I could give her some little boost.

It wasn't yet dinnertime when the bells tolled again, only this time they kept ringing and ringing. The hobbit immediately darted up to check what was going on.

"The guards from the upper levels!" He hissed to me and beckoned me to the door. I squeezed Éowyn's hand one more time and peaked out over Pippin's head. "Look, see the wings on their helmets? They're the city guard given charge of the seventh level and the Steward." We watched nearly a dozen run down the hall, and the bells kept ringing.

"Why are they here?" Then a dreadful thought struck me: "Those are the Steward's guards. What if Boromir is here?" I spun to look at Éowyn's still form. Small, always so small in hospital beds. As much as I didn't want to leave her alone, there was no way I could wait for information.

I sprinted down the hall and tried to listen for the sound of armor clinking. Pippin had followed behind me and was saying something, but I couldn't hear him over my blind panic. I turned another corner and then another, and then there they were: almost a dozen guards in total standing around a doorway on a wing of the healing wards next to the garden. The nearest guards turned together to see who was coming, and Pippin darted out from behind me to demand an explanation.

"Is it Boromir? Is he hurt? Or Faramir?" The guards were looking between the two of us, and Pippin made a frustrated noise and tugged on his uniform before finally one of them tapped his spear on the ground and addressed us.

"Lord Faramir has been poisoned."

It didn't seem possible for my heart to take another blow, but it did. First Éowyn and now Faramir. Would either of them survive? What had I done?

The guards must have read something in my stricken face, because I felt Pippin's small hand grab mine and pull me through the crowd. If the soldiers said anything I didn't hear it. Then we were inside the room, a healer leaning over Faramir with a washcloth, her hood pulled over her hair like a nun. The cloying scent of herbs was very strong despite the open windows.

"There's to be no—" She looked up and saw us, and she looked momentarily stunned before she motioned me over. Pippin had to give me a little push, because I couldn't pull my eyes away from Faramir. His skin was flush with fever, and his hair matted with blood and sweat. He looked tense even at rest, and sometimes his lips would move as though to speak. The sheets were pulled down to show an angry looking arrow wound near his shoulder, and I wasn't sure if I was imagining the faint black crusting of the skin around the injury or not. Either way, he didn't look good at all, and all of a sudden I felt like I couldn't get quite enough air.

"Milady," the healer said, and she had to repeat herself before I could look away from Faramir's prone form. He too looked so small, a shadow of the wise man I'd met before. That was almost more frightening than seeing the wound. "I've been a healer a long time, and I know the power of magic. Seen it done myself on a handful of occasions. If there is anything you can do to help him Gondor would be forever in your debt."

"Magic?" I gasped out, taking a big gulp of air. I could feel my hands shaking, and I wished vehemently for a moment my father were there to hold them.
Pippin had pulled another chair from outside the room and nudged me into the seat. The healer was beside Faramir's head, putting wet washcloths soaked in some kind of poultice to keep him cool. The smell was even stronger as I drew closer, though I couldn't identify any of it. She indicated his hand with her own withered one, and both her and Pippin watched me avidly. I felt strangely separate from the moment, and I knew a part of me was flailing under the guilt and responsibility of what happened, while the rest of me settled into a strange haze.

I picked up his hand, and it was clammy and warm. He had rougher fingers than Éowyn, but they were longer and more elegant like a pianist's. There was a bit of red blood dried between his pointer and middle fingers, and I rubbed it away. Looking at his hands sent my mind to Boromir, who had blunter, broader fingers, and I had a sickening lurch in my belly that accompanied it. Did he know about Faramir? Now it was almost assured he and Éomer would hate me.

"Try that spell again," Pippin said suddenly, and I looked surprised at him. "The one in your language. I think Lady Éowyn looked a bit better after."

It took me a beat too long to answer. I probably would have hesitated if someone asked me my name. "That wasn't a spell, it was just—"

"Milady, I beg of you to try. There's not much more I can do for him, and I know the wizard Gandalf healed you with magic," the old healer said. "Can you at least try?"

…I owe it to yourself to try.

Wasn't it Everlid who said something like that? Except, things had changed. I didn't owe it to myself to try anymore. I owed it to all the people who had become my friends, who had helped me, who had supported me, and who believed in my crazy story. People like Éowyn and Faramir.

I started with the same prayer. I'd learned it as a child when my grandparents insisted on some religious education, and the simple chanting rhythm was comforting. I could see Pippin's shoulders lose a little tension, and somewhere under the cloud I felt another well of guilt rise at the deception. When I finished the room fell silent, and all we could hear was the quiet breathing and the whisper of wind outside.

"Now we must wait and see."

The healer's proclamation made the even silence of the room seem suddenly stifling. There was nothing left to do except wait for the body to heal on its own or…

"I—I'm sorry, I have to go." I stood up abruptly, but I didn't get two steps away the before a migraine exploded behind my eyes. It felt like the cotton in my head had turned to stone and was pressing down on me. Too much crying, too much emotion all at once coalesced into a massive headache. I immediately began to rub my temples, but it was about as helpful as my prayer had been for Faramir.

Pippin was saying something about magic to the healer before he touched my elbow and helped guide me out. "Co- …Éowyn's room," I heard the tail end of, and when the throbbing lessened slightly I was able to grasp Pippin's shoulder.

"Outside, please. I need to sit down." I didn't want to go to Éowyn's room. I didn't want to see her tiny form in that bed again.

Under the shade of a tree in the corner of the garden I all but fell on to the ground, then rolled over and buried my face in the grass, taking deep breaths until the pounding under my skull was somewhat bearable. The grass had been cut recently, and the smell of it brought back a memory of
Mackenzie and me at a park, me teaching her how to roll down a hill. That was before Mackenzie was deathly afraid of bugs. Before either of us cared about dirt in our clothes and leaves in our hair.

I squeezed my eyes shut and tried not to think of home. It would just magnify all the horrible feelings I was wallowing in now, and I didn't need that. Instead, I focused on breathing and willed my heart to slow so my pulse didn't thunder in my head. I don't remember when, but I must have fallen asleep.

When I woke it was dark out, just past dinner I guessed, and there were lights in the windows of the rooms on the courtyard. I could hear the murmur of voices from inside, but outside here it was quiet. My head still felt delicate, but it was no longer throbbing, and someone—probably Pippin though he was nowhere to be seen, had thrown a thick woolen blanket over me. I sat up and rubbed the crust from my eyes, feeling dirty and disheveled. I'd been cleaning and crying all day and then I'd slept on the ground.

I knew I should go to see Éowyn or Faramir, but the idea of facing Boromir and Éomer, who were likely by their sickbeds now, made the edges of my headache return. I was afraid they would blame me, and I didn't feel ready to handle that. Not yet. I wanted more time; I wanted to think. So I cowardly left the garden in search of the stables.

It took a couple twists and turns, but eventually I found the stables by the smell. Only one lamp was lit inside, and the grooms were likely at dinner or asleep, so I quickly took it and went in search of Thunor.

In the stall second from the end I found him, though I would admit it took me an extra minute to be sure. Many of the other horses were destriers, and so I couldn't tell by size alone, and in the darkness all their coats look the same. But he had that long white patch trailing down to his nose and one white sock, and when he whickered in greeting I knew it was him immediately.

"Hey, big guy," I murmured, petting his snout for a moment before unlatching the door and letting myself in. Thankfully there was a box in the corner that I could put the lantern on, and then I went over and put my arms around Thunor's neck and pressed my cheek to his warmth. He snuffled into my hair, and while it wasn't quite the same as cuddling a dog it was just as good. Thunor was freedom and release from judgment.

"Have they been taking care of you?" I petted along his neck and face, and he nudged along my dress looking for pockets with treats. Unfortunately I had none, but he didn't seem too put-off by that. I pulled back after a bit, already feeling more relaxed than I had in hours, and went in search of a brush. As I started brushing out his mane—the ribbons were long gone—I found that it was easy to start talking. It had been a long time since I'd spoken much English, but once I got started the words came to me easily.

"In the books," I began, "Boromir died with the Uruk-hai. That's why I charged in. I never thought it was fair, you know? He always got a lot of heat for being the 'bad guy' in the Fellowship, but everyone's fallible." I fell silent at that but didn't stop brushing as I switched to his neck. "I'm fallible too. And I made a big mistake."

Thunor huffed and settled, lulled into quiet by the rhythm I think. Either that or he was listening— I wasn't above assuming that, given how intelligent these horses were. "Not saving Boromir I mean, I definitely don't regret that. But I couldn't remember much of Return of the King, and I didn't try very hard to. I think I was afraid, or careless. If I had, I could have warned Éowyn about the Black Breath and remembered to give Éomer a better warning about Théoden." I pressed my face to his soft coat for a moment before moving down to brush his shoulders.
"So let's do this together, Thunor. Logic. What's going to happen?" I kept my thoughts strictly on task and absolutely did not think about where Boromir fit into this. My fears that his death was inevitable were steadily growing, and I pushed them back down for now.

"Aragorn will come and defeat the orcs. I'm pretty sure when he does the battle will be over. The whole Fellowship survives, and somehow Éowyn gets better. I can't remember where Faramir was in all this." Something was niggling at me, just like ages ago when my blocked memories of Arda would surface. This time I knew what I was forgetting though: Éowyn's recovery and Faramir.

"Last time…" I said slowly, and the brush began to slow down too as I thought. Thunor's tail swung around and caught me on the arm and I resumed speed. "Last time Boromir wasn't Steward. And Faramir definitely didn't take over the position like Boromir did. So the Steward… Denethor… he wasn't fighting." I got a flash of Pippin and remembered his vow of fealty. He had given it to Boromir this time instead of Denethor. "Where was Pippin? Not with me of course, but not fighting either."

I continued brushing, straining to remember what had happened. It had been so long since I'd watched the movie or read the book, and all the details were gone. But I had read it, and I was living it now, so surely I hadn't completely forgotten.

"There was a fire on the top level. I told Boromir that," I informed the destrier, brushing over his belly with the wiry bristles. He seemed to particularly like that if the way he tossed his head meant anything. "But that doesn't seem quite right. No catapults could reach there, and no orcs got that high… But a fire…" The memory was there, and I was so close. Fire, liar, wire… "Pyre! A pyre for… well it couldn't have been Boromir because he went down the river, so…" I stopped brushing, remembering the scene like a dream. Faramir lying on wood soaked in oil, and a grey-haired man with a torch. "It was a pyre for Faramir," I said, feeling like another headache was coming on, and this time with nausea in the mix. "Faramir was ill, and Denethor thought he was going to die."

Thunor's tail swung up again, but I didn't even feel it hit my shoulder. My imagination and memories were filling in the blanks. Was it really true the human brain never forgot anything?

"This is the same as before then. Faramir and Éowyn both were injured, and both were healed. But then…" The inevitability of it all came back to me, and my temporary elation plummeted. Boromir. No, no. I shook my head, and keeping one hand on Thunor's flank, walked carefully behind him. I petted the slope of his back, the hair velvety smooth. "Denethor died in the fire but not Faramir. Because…" It was on the tip of my tongue but the words wouldn't come.

Suddenly there was a sharp knock on the wooden door, and I jumped, dropping the brush and startling Thunor enough that the big horse nervously twitched sideways. When I looked at the entrance to the stall, I yelped: "Gandalf!" The light bulb in my head turned on. "It was you Gandalf! Pippin swore fealty to Denethor so when he knew what was going to happen he got you and you saved Faramir from the fire but Denethor was too crazy and died!"

Gandalf's expression didn't change at all, and my heart suddenly seized. "Did it still happen?"

"Calm yourself, Maddie. You speak in your own tongue with panic in your voice."

It took me a long moment to realize what he'd said, and then another second to make the switch back to Westron. "Did something happen with Denethor? Tell me he did not try to burn Faramir."

The wizard let himself into the stall; his robes still white somehow despite a day of battle and the poor light. He looked unruffled, but there was dirt on his skin and the bags under his eyes more
pronounced. Gandalf looked more his age than I'd ever seen him—even when he was playing up the grandfather look.

"Nothing has happened with Denethor, and as far as I know only fever burns Faramir. But your questions beg an answer."

"Before... originally, Denethor thought Faramir was dead and tried to burn him. I was trying to remember what happens next, but I still can't remember how Faramir and Éowyn are healed."

"Then they were injured before?" There was something peculiar in Gandalf's voice, but I was too caught up in my own distress to bother with it.

"Yes, though I didn't remember until now." At that dejected statement I went back to brushing Thunor down, trying to will my self-loathing and the all-encompassing fear away.

"Well, I can tell you that Faramir is much the same, and Boromir is standing vigil. At least until he collapses," Gandalf grumbled, and my lips couldn't help but quirk a bit at Boromir's stubbornness. "The Lady Éowyn I could do little for, but I was able to ease the darkness some. She had not succumbed as deeply as I had feared." Gandalf gave me a look over Thunor's withers, but I just looked back down. "As for Merry, other than a blow to the head he is fine. Pippin is with him."

I felt twin waves of relief and sorrow. Neither Faramir nor Éowyn were healed, but at least Merry and Boromir were alive. It could have been much worse, and I was very thankful it wasn't. I leaned against Thunor's back trying not to think about my next step, but Gandalf was uncooperative. "Tell me what you are thinking. There is much to be said for sharing wisdom, though I fear your horse cannot offer his."

Once I opened my mouth, it all just spilled out the same as it had for Thunor. "The war and where I've gone wrong are all I can think about. I wanted to prevent these kinds of things, and yet Faramir and Éowyn still fell." I was half-talking into Thunor's hair, and when he shifted weight I swayed with him rather than move. "I am tired from crying and worrying and waiting. I'm afraid Faramir and Éowyn will die, and I'm afraid Boromir will too. Last time Faramir and Éowyn both were injured, I remember that now, but Boromir wasn't alive. Does that mean I've only delayed his death? Or have things truly changed? What if everything is inevitable?"

"It is not always actions that speak. You have given them something more important than another sword or herb. You have given them hope." Gandalf was unmoving, watching me, but his face was kinder than before. "Pippin believes you worked magic on Faramir and Éowyn. Boromir knows Aragorn is coming and his arrival will foretell the end of the siege. This is not a war to win; this is a war of patience."
"I am not sure I can be patient when everyone is fighting and my friends are dying."

"As it happens, there is something I need you to do." Gandalf's voice had taken on a gravity I hadn't heard before. I let go of Thunor's tail, and it swung back and hit me across the stomach. Both Gandalf and I ignored it. "Denethor is mad, but his story closely follows the one you told. I need you to confirm his words. See how much he knows of the Ring and how much of what he knows is still true. What he has seen in the Palantír is likely what the Dark Lord has seen."

That was not an easy request, but I already knew I couldn't say no.

"Tomorrow, during the battle, speak to him. I will make sure the guards do not stop you. You must be careful, but go alone. His words still have power, and there are those who would mistaken them." I nodded, but there was one more thing. "And whatever you do, do not touch the Palantír."

"Of course," I said, mind already racing to the conversation with the former Steward. It didn't occur to me, until long after Gandalf had left, what Boromir and Faramir might think of this.

"We've brought breakfast!" Pippin announced as we came down the hall. Beregond was already standing there by the guardroom, and he waved a friendly hello.

"And how are you this morning, milady?"

It was still a little weird to be called "milady" constantly, but at this point there wasn't much use in correcting people. The "Lady of Secret Fire" title had gone the whole gossip circuit, to the point that Merry had known about it this morning despite Pippin swearing up and down he hadn't told him.

"I'm well, and you?" Beregond smiled, and there was a little more small talk before the captain invited Pippin inside to put down the tray.

"My thanks, Pippin. And you'll be bringing that up to the lord, milady, thank you." Gandalf had left me a note this morning that I was to bring breakfast up to the Steward. Beregond was apparently informed.

"Uh, yes. That's right."

"To Lord Denethor?" Pippin inquired curiously, and I just nodded. I had no idea what to tell him.

"He's asked to meet the Lady of the Secret Fire and thank her for her noble deed," Beregond supplied in my silence, and I made a mental note to recommend him to Boromir as a diplomat. Clearly the man's potential was wasted as a guard.

"Well I'm sure you're thrilled about that," Pippin joked, and I made sure to look suitably aggrieved for him.

This morning Pippin had been a bit more cautious about what he said to me, but only after Merry had smacked a little sense into him. I'd gone to collect the former Steward's breakfast and had run into the hobbits eating most of the kitchen dry—the servants looked either impressed or horrified—and they had insisted I join them. It had been good fun to catch up with Merry, though I made sure not to ask about the battle. He still had a bandage wrapped around his head and moved a bit gingerly that spoke of more injuries. Pippin had hovered terribly while Merry had looked resigned to the extra attention.

"It was pretty amazing how no one noticed Lady Éowyn," Merry said between bites, as he
recounted the journey from Edoras. Pippin was tucking into his omelet with gusto. "The army moved fast, and most men just slept in their armor. Between a cloak and staying on the edges of the camp we avoided any notice." Then Merry smirked, and it reminded me that he and Pippin were troublemakers before all this. "Of course, I got a lecture as big as any o' Mam's from Boromir last night for that stunt."

Pippin chortled at that, and I tried not to wince at the thought of my own lecture. "Boromir was right angry, he was." Pippin added. "As angry and scared as your mum was when you fell in that bramble thicket and couldn't get out 'til we found you come morning." Both Merry and Pippin laughed at that, and I was glad there were no hard feelings between the hobbits and Boromir. "Still, you've got your own coming, Miss Maddie," Pippin reminded me, and I couldn't quite hide the dismay on my face.

"I told Boromir not to blame you for what I and Lady Éowyn did. He was more worried than upset," Merry said, trying to be comforting.

"I don't expect him to forgive me for Faramir, and I did encourage you and Éowyn. His anger is more than justified." I picked at the mushrooms in my own omelet, no longer hungry.

"He can't blame you for Faramir, Miss Maddie; this is war," Pippin said stoutly. "And anyway, I think he was just glad I kept you off the battlefield. He came round this morning but you were still asleep."

Merry made a grumbling sort of sound that made Pippin look at him. "Pip's right, it's a war and people get injured. You couldn't have known. And I'm sure you won't get a real lecture."

"He's been saving it up you know," Pippin contradicted unhelpfully. "When she first got here, Merry, he was ready to give her a blisterin' one for the Ringwraith. Oh! And the orcs."

"Pip!" Merry, the cleverer of the two, elbowed the other hobbit. By this point I was definitely done with breakfast.

"I've got some things to do. You don't need to follow me Pippin, I promise I won't go far. And I'm sure Merry will want the company." Pippin looked disappointed, but Merry flicked him on the knee before turning to me.

"I'll be with Lady Éowyn, since I've been specifically told to do nothing strenuous. Pip can stay if he likes, but I'll probably fall asleep once I'm finished. Might be better to go with you." I had a strong feeling of déjà vu: just as I'd "suggested" to Merry to go with Éowyn, he was now "suggesting" Pippin to go with me.

Pippin cemented it though: "I still have orders from Boromir to stick with you, Miss Maddie."

And that was how I'd ended up with my personal guard up to the seventh level, hoping some inspiration would strike so I didn't have to tell Pippin outright not to follow. Gandalf had been very specific about having the conversation alone, and I agreed that was wise. Thank goodness for Beregond.

"You're welcome to wait in the guardroom or the gardens if you like," The tall captain said, not giving Pippin any leeway. Turning to me, Beregond indicated the hallway. "This way, milady."

We didn't speak as I followed Beregond through the labyrinth of corridors. We passed mostly plain doorways, tapestries of battles and kings, and sometimes the edge of a garden with statues of warriors long dead. There was a refinement in this area of Minas Tirith that reminded me a bit of the Elves, and I wondered if they'd helped build it or contributed somehow.
Beregond led me around the outside of a garden with a fountain that had three stone children frolicking around it. On the far end was a massive set of doors that had the seal of the Steward of Gondor engraved on the front in silver. Two guards stood at either end of the corridor and saluted to Beregond as we approached. Then the captain knocked on the door smartly and announced: "The Lady of the Secret Fire, Lady Maddie."

I was too nervous to react to the title. Beregond gave me an encouraging smile as I walked through the door, but my stomach flip-flopped all the same.

The room was more opulent than anything I’d seen before, with high arching ceilings and a chandelier made of crystal hanging in the center. There were tall black and silver tapestries: one with names embroidered on it, the other a map of the kingdom. Several bookshelves and a large dark wooden desk were across the room before a bank of windows overlooking the mountains. There was another doorway to the side that must have led into a bedroom. A thick black rug with a white-bordered design was on the floor along with a table long enough to seat twelve between the former Steward and I. Denethor was seated at the desk scribbling furiously on a piece of parchment, and didn’t so much as look up at my entrance.

He wore a thick fur cape and had long graying hair that hung in loose, thin waves to his shoulders the way both his son’s did. His receding hair was brushed back from his forehead, and it made his long nose look narrower and more hooked, a feature neither of his sons inherited. The only sign he knew I was there at all was the wave of his hand to indicate the long table at the front of the room.

I put down the tray slowly and evenly so it wouldn’t clink on the shiny glass top—a trick I’d learned in the Kinsey household. When I’d laid everything out appropriately though, I didn’t know what to do or how to start. I’d decided last night, knowing that I wasn’t much good with words, that I would have to be direct, but I was rather hoping Denethor would just start talking to make this easier.

"Well go on then. Out with you." Denethor said, making another dismissive hand wave.

I wasn't sure if he'd heard Beregond announce my title, so I opted to politely reintroduce myself. I barely remembered Denethor's character, and other than his madness I didn’t know what to expect; I was just proud my voice didn’t shake. "My name is Madeline Green, milord. Gandalf has sent me here to—"

"Gandalf!" Denethor spat out, and he stopped writing, even going so far as to throw down his quill. I jumped a bit at the violence of the motion and the anger in his words. "I have seen more than that Grey Fool knows! Go now, Witch of the Secret Fire, and mayhap you burn with Mithrandir on the walls of this city as all the rest." At this point Denethor looked up, and his face was bitter and scowling, his eyes black and stark against the paleness. Something about them sent a chill up my spine, like it was a shallow reflection of the emptiness of the Ringwraith.

Think of Éowyn. She stood up to a Nazgûl; you can stand up to a madman.

"I- I am no witch, Lord Denethor, but I hope you might tell me what you have seen."

"Only a witch could so befuddle my son," he grumbled darkly. "Faramir was the wizard's pupil and has been lost to me for too long. But Boromir—he was my hope, and you snatched it from his father's arms. Now you have trapped his soul here and corrupted it to plot against me! I know Gandalf's mind, and I know what he seeks is to usurp me!" He stood up so suddenly the chair was knocked back and hit the floor with a crash.

"Boromir acted for the best of Gondor, and there is not plot to usurp you, I—"
"Lies you spout, witch! The White Tower is not blind. I saw Boromir fall at Amon Hen, do not think you can deceive me! What you bring before me now is as a Nazgûl, a wraith! A ghost! My blessed son has always been soft for his lesser brother, and between the wizard's coaxing and wet woman's wiles he has been perverted." My mouth dropped open at the vitriol he was spewing, but he wasn't done yet. "And do not think I do not know of this Ranger of the North you have brought here. I am of the house of the Steward of Anárion, and I will not let my line be controlled and supplanted by a wizard's will!" The former Steward took several steps forward, hunched a bit like the weight of what he had seen was too much. As he spoke spittle flew from his lips, and I had to take a deep breath so I didn't let my indignation flare and mess this up.

"Boromir did not die at Amon Hen—he is alive and fighting. And he is his own man, and now the Steward following you." How could I draw this back to Denethor's visions? I had to be quick otherwise he would cut me off. "If you have seen something in the future, then give him hope so he might rule Gondor with strength."

Denethor actually growled a bit at the word hope, and spat on the ground. I willed my hands not to shake and my body not to move. His anger and bitterness were like a cloud around him, and I had to consciously tell myself not to be afraid. "What have I seen? Is Mithrandir so blinded? His vanity and ignorance has lent him hope where there is none. The end of this war will be at hand soon and all shall be burned—my sons included. Boromir should have died at Amon Hen and been sent to his ancestors along the waves of the Anduin. Faramir should have been struck with a poisoned arrow when the Grey Fool halted that Nazgûl. Even as things change it will all happen regardless, and we shall be as ash and smoke on the wind!" He slammed one fist on the table between us, rattling the plates and spilling the wine. I felt as rattled at the dishware with the words he spoke. He had seen things as the book intended them. What did that mean?

"And why do you believe we will all be ash and smoke?" I managed, remembering at the last second that I was doing this to help Boromir and Faramir. What Denethor saw or not, especially about the Ring, was relevant right now, not my own fears.

"This is only the first tendril of his power, and when Gondor has fallen all the rest shall too. I will not be a slave and nor will my sons. I will rule my own end before I let the darkness take us all. You have heard only lies and false hopes—even now black sails ride up the river to crush you, and the armies of Mordor amass. This is but a fraction of his strength." Denethor was slowly moving around the table, and I was seriously debating my decision not to move. "You labor in hope but it is in vain. I have seen his armies behind the mountains of the Black Lands, and they are vaster and crueler than any imagining. The West has failed, and you have blinded my sons to it!"

He was still moving, and I desperately wanted to step back to create more space. However, I'd seen enough cop interrogations on television to know that giving ground was also showing weakness. I couldn't afford that with Denethor.

"The Enemy lies," I tried futilely, but it was obvious reason wasn't going to get through. "And there is still hope so long as men fight. Your sons have not lost hope."

"One of my sons is already dead, and the other will be soon. Just as I have looked into Mithrandir's mind so have I seen Saruman's doings and the Enemy's. I see with clearer eyes than any before me." He had come so close I could smell his sour breath, and two gnarled hands as strong as metal grasped my upper arms. "You stupid girl, thinking in vain that my son alone could save us. You thought to bring him here where he might die a second time at the gates of his city rather than the forest of another land. But he will die all the same, just as the rest! There is no hope. We have thrown the one thing that could stop this evil straight into his grasp. The end is nigh and inevitable, and all will go up in fire!"
He was squeezing my arms so hard there would doubtless be bruises in the shape of his fingers for weeks to come, but I could barely feel it. He's mad he's mad he's mad I chanted in my mind, but it didn’t stop the overflowing fear that echoed deep inside me at his words. Inevitable…

The door jerked opened and in burst Pippin. I had barely whipped my head around to see him when Denethor shoved me back into the hobbit and barreled past, knocking over one of the guards who had chased after the hobbit.

Pippin tried to steady me, and the moment I was on my feet I ran outside, following the mad lord and three guards. Pippin darted off to the side, shouting about Beregond, but I didn’t have time for that. If Denethor was going after Faramir I had to stop him.

A couple courtyards over before the entrance to the White Tower of Minas Tirith, the crazed Denethor had stopped, cape billowing around him. The guards seemed to have cornered him, and he was shouting nonsense about fire and brimstone.

"Light the pyres for the souls of my sons! Let us die together with pride rather than be broken on the armies of the Enemy! Do not bend your knee to the false king Gandalf brings, his house has no dignity or lordship anymore!"

That was when Pippin burst back into the scene with Beregond right behind him. The men around the former Steward seemed to hesitate, and they looked at the captain for direction.

"Milord, I have orders you are not to leave your rooms. You are—"

"Fool! Your hearts have been stolen by a shade of my son and the wizard!" Without warning he turned sharply, running for the doors of the tower. The two guards there stopped him though, but looked reluctant to do more than push him back.

"Lord Denethor—" Beregond tried, but it was too little too late. The madman swung around with a stolen dagger in his hand.

"All of you who are in league with the wizard—know that it is on your shoulders that rest the doom of Gondor. May my sons find me in the halls of our fathers!" Before anyone could leap to stop him, Denethor turned the blade on himself and sunk it into his chest.

The guards as one sprang forward, but there was no way he was going to survive that. Blood gurgled from his lips and dribbled down his chin, and what little color was in his face slowly drained away. The fire in his eyes that had seemed a will of its own went out, and the only sign there was any sanity left was the way his eyes widened before all life was gone.

I sunk to my knees unable to believe this was really happening. Did I…? Had I…?

Beregond was shouting orders, and then I saw him pulling his helmet off in front of me and waving his hand. He had long straight black hair and scar across one ear I hadn't seen before. Then all of sudden he had a goblet and was tilting my head back to swallow.

Sour. Very, very sour. I coughed and sputtered.

"…That was something no woman should have to see," Beregond was saying.

"Enough," I choked, coughing to get the taste out of my mouth when another soldier offered the cup again. I’d never had smelling salts used on me, but I imagined it was something like this.

"Miss Maddie," Pippin began, but my eyes strayed to the body that the soldiers were rearranging to lie straight, and Beregond was quick to step in front of my view.
"Before you speak milady, know that Lord Denethor was truly mad. You could not have known he would do this."

Except I did. He had been suicidal in the book so it was no surprise he was here too.

I started to shake my head but Beregond cut in again. "Gandalf asked you to do this, and it was the duty of my guards to stop Lord Denethor from any action against himself."

"But the madness is to blame, not any of you!" Pippin interjected, and instead of arguing as I imagined, Beregond concurred.

"Pippin is correct. In madness there is little to be done. I do not know what Gandalf asked you to do, other than speak to Lord Denethor, but it was clear he was beyond the help of anyone." With that, Pippin and Beregond helped me up—more Beregond than Pippin really—and walked me back to the guardroom. We'd only just begun though when a guard ran up a set of stairs to the far side of the garden and yelled to Beregond.

"Captain! Ships on the Anduin! The Corsairs of Umbar!"

Beregond turned sharply. "Send as many archers as we can spare to the lower levels. The men will need all the support they can get." When the new soldier glanced at the body of Denethor Beregond barked at him: "Speak nothing of this."

"Wait! On the Anduin?" I said, and I felt some of the limpness in me disappear. "That's Aragorn. On stolen ships!"

"Aragorn?" Pippin yelped, and Beregond turned to the both of us confused.

"An ally! He defeated the men with the ships and is bringing more men to fight. The battle will be over soon!" Pippin looked marveled, but Beregond looked unsure.

"How do you know this milady?"

"I cannot explain, but I am sure I am right. Sending archers can't hurt though. I need to see the battlefield!"

Pippin jumped into action and quickly began to pull me along. Beregond looked briefly dumbfounded before shouting more orders to his men and following after us. "This way Pippin, so we might see the whole field laid out below."

Beregond led us through a couple more hallways and then out a side entrance into a huge courtyard. I recognized it immediately for its famous triangular shape. Long and narrow, and jutting above the lower levels, it was the crown of Minas Tirith. Beregond led us down the courtyard and around the famous White Tree that was withered and bent like an old man. I didn't get more than a glance though as we hurried by.

In any other country there would have been some kind of railing to prevent people falling over the edge, but here the wall was chest high on me—Beregond found a bench to boost Pippin high enough—and we could peer straight over the edge. Other guards had followed and gathered on the wall around us. Some were murmuring about the former Steward, but it looked like most of the attention was on the battle.

"Over there is the river. Just on the edge. Can you see the sails?"

I couldn't, not yet, and it seemed no one on the ground could either. Below us the fighting was just
a writhing mass of tiny men, and it was impossible to tell friend from foe. Pippin asked about some of the details of the battlefield—catapult pieces, Oliphant remains, boulders launched yesterday—but I couldn't stop thinking of Boromir. He was one of those tiny figures down there. How would he take the news of his father's death? I thought about that, warring with my own guilt over my involvement and the reassurances of Beregond and Pippin that Denethor's madness was his own. Had Gandalf guessed this would happen?

The progression of the boats up the river seemed impossibly slow, giving me too much time to brood, but eventually we could see the way it drew the attention of the fighters, and some on the west side began to line up in preparation for a charge. I had no idea if that was our side or Mordor's, but Beregond confirmed it looked to be horsemen.

It was terribly anticlimactic from there, though I imagine all the soldiers on the field felt differently. From above, it was hard to tell whether the ships were indeed Aragorn's until suddenly men were spewing out of them and the Rohirrim hadn't charged. I assumed the new men were falling upon the ranks of the orcs, but it was impossible to see from this distance. Still, the guards around us began to cheer when it became obvious no one was attacking the men from the ships. The orcs' numbers weren't dwindling that fast though, but already the ones north of the battlefield were starting to retreat.

The rush and thrill of the end of the battle made my knees shake, such relief I had never known. At least one thing has gone right, I thought a bit darkly, as I watched the fight continue below. I couldn't say the same for the rest of the battle, but at least it was won. Tonight, when Boromir and Éomer returned, I would have to hold on to that.
Is There no Fate but What we Make?

Chapter Summary

The Battle of the Pelennor Fields ends, and Maddie has to confront Boromir and Éomer.

Chapter Notes

Writer's Note: I totally fail at good angst. I think because it makes me incredibly emotional just writing it, and then I literally make myself depressed over characters and situations I have total control of. Let me know how things are; this chapter makes me nervous. Also, many thanks to Noree again for feedback! These emotional chapters are really killing me. Can we get back to exploring Middle Earth yet?

The conversation between Éomer, Aragorn, and Gandalf is adapted from the chapter, "The Houses of Healing" in The Return of the King.

Regarding the next update, there may be a month-long break because I will be traveling. Apologies in advance for the wait; your patience is much appreciated.

Disclaimer: I make no money from this work. Anything recognizable from The Lord of the Rings belongs to J.R.R Tolkien.

It was hours after escaping the seventh level and the wired tension of all the guards that things began to move forward again. Word of the former Steward's death had not been broken yet and likely wouldn't be until Boromir returned, so Pippin and I pretended at normal. It seemed to me that throughout the days of the battle time would accelerate suddenly and then slow to a crawl. It left my nerves overwrought.

I'd gone back down to the Healing Houses so Beregond could deal with things on the seventh level and so I could find something to occupy my mind, otherwise I'd replay the death of Denethor ad infinitum. Any work was better too than waiting for the axe to fall once Boromir heard the news.

While walking back down to the sixth level it also proved an opportunity to ask Pippin what he'd been doing near Denethor's rooms anyway. "Pippin, thank you for coming to save me. But… why were you up by the Steward's rooms?"

The hobbit only looked a little sheepish. "Well I was a bit worried, you see. I remembered Denethor when I met him with Gandalf, and I knew he was mad—the angry kind. So I sneaked up there. The Men couldn't hear the yelling, but I could." He waved a hand vaguely towards his curved ear. The point wasn't as pronounced as an Elf's, but it certainly wasn't human. "That, and I was hoping you might do some magic."

"I can't do magic, Pippin," I reminded him, but he didn't comment on it.
"I thought Gandalf wanted you to help him?"

"I… Gandalf asked me to talk to him. You know how I… know things?" He nodded. "Well Denethor saw some things. Gandalf wanted to know what, because, well, the Dark Lord might have seen the same thing."

"Because the Eye also has a Seeing-Stone." I looked down at Pippin surprised, but he was looking at his feet and all I could see was his curly hair. "I looked into one and saw it. That's why Gandalf and I rushed here," he said glumly.

I hadn't realized Pippin himself had never told me that, and it looked like it was something that bothered him. "I know, Pippin. And you know, you may have helped Frodo by accident. The Dark Lord thought you had the Ring, not Frodo, so he doesn't know Frodo is coming." It felt good to share that detail I did remember. With so much that I had forgotten recently, seeing Pippin's face flood with assurance helped to ease the guilt sitting on my shoulders.

We separated down at the healing wards because Pippin wanted to find Merry, and if Merry was with Éowyn I wanted to make myself scarce. I rather hoped someone would collar me for work and save me the effort of deliberately avoiding her sickbed. However, before any odd jobs could find me I wandered by Fastred's room. I decided after a half-second that I really should be a better person and comfort someone—even if I couldn't quite stomach the thought of seeing Éowyn and Faramir.

When I popped my head in the door, the Rohirrim looked to have regained his color and was sitting up in bed. I couldn't say Fastred had the happiest outcome, but at least somebody was healing. He smiled brightly at me, glad to have a visitor, and was more than happy to fill in my awkward silence at times with chatter about his recuperation and the crutch he'd been given. He seemed to be taking the amputation in stride, but I wondered if it wasn't a front so I didn't worry. People here got all twisted up about the sensibilities of women.

He also was delicate with the subject of Éowyn and Faramir and didn't ask for details, which did make me a little grateful for his sense of tact. I still made poor company, I think, but bless Fastred for not telling me so. I was finding that emotionally I didn't deal well with injured friends.

As we chatted the discussion moved away from the hospital at least, and it turned out that Fastred was fairly up-to-date on the battle, but news of Aragorn's charge hadn't reached him yet, so that was something positive to add. The word had also begun to go around that the fighting had ended and the orcs had retreated, which made lunch even cheerier as we talked about what Fastred might do once the battle was over. His place as a soldier would be gone, but he was familiar with horse breeding and he had a family to return to.

After lunch with Fastred I felt a little more refreshed and found myself swept up in work, especially as the end of the fighting has buoyed the general mood in the wards. I mostly was asked to ferry things around, especially as all the mildly injured made their way up here. Makeshift beds had been set up in the same garden I'd fallen asleep in, and the outer courtyard was full of the wounded that didn't need a bed, just bandages and a hot meal.

As I was carefully putting away empty wine bottles to be refilled—it was used for anesthesia—in a storage room a couple hours after lunch, I kept an ear on the gossip from the women scrubbing bedpans. (When this was all over, I was going to slip it into someone's ear that boiling water was the key.) I was too busy splitting my attention as I tried to overhear something about the archers on the first level in between commentary on some man's appearance in a leather jerkin, that I didn't even notice a healer come in. It wasn't until she spoke up that I even knew she was there.

"There's a better window round the corner to listen," said a voice as creaky as her joints. The
elderly woman was only hunched a little, but had sharp, intelligent eyes sunken deep into the folds of her face. She must have been a senior healer, since she seemed to know the storage room (and best eavesdropping places) well as she bustled about.

"Are you the Lady Maddie, by chance? Well? If you are then I'd thank you for buying Lord Faramir some time. If not, then help an old woman carry this." She didn't seem to care if I answered her or not, only handed me a freshly washed mortar and pestle and a stack of clean rags. She gathered together a sack of fresh-cut herbs from the next room that acted as a small greenhouse for some medicinal plants before waving me after her.

"Um, I am Maddie, but I don't think I did anything for Lord Faramir," I tried to tell her as we left the storage room.

"Humble too!" She remarked. "Now perhaps you can help me with this. I've been a healer a long time, and I know when things are beyond my ability. We may have some of the oldest lore of healing in this city, but it cannot do everything."

I wasn't sure what the old woman was talking about and was rather afraid my "magic" was going to be called on again, but I didn't have much chance to argue as she weaved through the hallways. She was clearly highly respected as younger nurses and doctors dodged out of her way, even as she managed to keep up a steady stream of chatter about Gondorian healing techniques versus Elvish ones, with a lot of terminology that went over my head—probably medical jargon.

After a couple twists and turns we ended up in the same hallway as Faramir's room, and as we drew closer to the guards on either side of his door I felt a lead weight form in my stomach.

"Healer Ioreth," one of the soldiers said, dipping his head in a polite bow. "Will you be able to help my lord?"

"I can't answer that 'til I've seen him," she said shortly, and pushed open the door to go in. Both of the soldiers looked at me, but I didn't dare look back at them.

Ioreth had stopped for a half-second in the doorway before she continued in, and I could see why: Faramir looked weaker than before, and the sheets were mused from where he had shifted in fever dreams. His whole face was blotchy red, his hair sweat-dampened, and his breathing quickened in a way that made me very nervous. I knew next to nothing about medicine, but accelerated breathing and high fevers were not good signs.

Healer Ioreth sighed heavily from where she stood by the bed looking down on him. The sags and wrinkles of the elderly healer's face looked deeper than before as she took in the state of Faramir. "I have been a healer all my life, and I helped the sons of the Steward through childhood illness and swordsmanship bruises," she croaked, voice inflected with the weight of her years. "May the gods forbid that he die."

Then she shuffled closer and asked me to bring the bowl over so she could mix together the herbs. Her wrinkled hands were stained and covered in veins but steady as she plucked leaves and broke stems and stalks from the greens. "You are not a healer in your land."

"No, milady."

"There's no lady in here except you," she retorted, but the fire that had propelled her to this room had gone out.

"I am not a lady." She ignored me.

"They say you come from far to the north and east, farther still than the Periannath." She was
pounding the mixture into paste now, and I was impressed at the strength of her arms. I used to be 
exhausted just by mixing cookie dough for five minutes, and I was a quarter of her age.

"Sorry? I don't understand."

"Periannath. The Halflings like the one that came with the Lady of Rohan. The size of a child."

"Oh yes, hobbits," I stumbled, but she wasn't listening to me again. She dipped two fingers in the 
green-brown paste she'd made and spread it on Faramir's throat at the pulse points, and then again 
behind his ears in thick patches. Then from the pitcher in the corner she filled a small glass of 
water and dipped more paste into it, swirling the cup until it had mostly dissolved before expertly 
maneuvering Faramir's limp form to swallow it.

When she was finished with the procedure, she looked subdued. "This is the strongest fever cure I 
know, but this is no ordinary fever. Tell me, in your land do you have a king?" She asked me, 
eyes fixed on Faramir. I don't think we were anticipating any immediate change, but she didn't 
seem to want to move. "Alas, there is no king in Gondor as there was in ages past. There is a 
famous saying in our lore: The hands of the king are the hands of a healer."

It clicked.

Just like Frodo, just like the pyre, some circuit completed and I remembered. Aragorn the King. 
Aragorn the Healer. He had helped Frodo with a magical plant when that Ringwraith stabbed 
him, and it was probably the same thing that could cure Éowyn. I had no idea if it worked on 
poison, but anything was better than nothing.

The world stopped moving at a crawl and accelerated again.

"Healer Ioreth, I will be right back with the king," I said in a rush then bolted out of the room.

I raced down the hall and outside into the courtyard, barely seeing the busy workers as I calculated 
how long it would take me to find Aragorn. He was probably still on the battlefield, and while the 
thought of all those orcs sent a shudder up my spine, I didn't consider not going. Aragorn was a 
healer, trained by the Elves with his magical plant, and I grew surer and surer with each second 
that he was the one who saved Faramir and Éowyn.

I headed for the stables since running through Minas Tirith would take way too long. It took me 
several minutes to find Thunor's tack among all the various saddles and reins, and I wasn't sure 
how much it mattered—Éomer was probably gnashing his teeth somewhere as I thought this—but 
it was probably better to use the same tack he had before.

"Milady, do you need help?" I nearly tripped holding the saddle as a groom came around the 
corner, spotting me easily as I struggled with the heavy gear.

"Oh yes please. I need to leave as quickly as possible."

"Well if you need a—"

"This is my horse," I interrupted, kicking the door of Thunor's stall to show which one. The 
destrier bobbed his head up and down like he was in agreement, but more likely he was just 
excited at the sight of the saddle the way a dog got excited at the leash. I got the feeling Thunor 
did not stay cooped up well. The groom, to his credit, looked confused, but when it was apparent I 
wasn't going to be persuaded to change my mind he set aside the rake he'd been using and helped 
me heft the saddle onto Thunor's back.

With a stool and some finagling, mostly from my end as I had only half an idea of what I was
doing, we managed to get the saddle, blanket, reins and bridle on in good time. With the help of the mounting block I easily got up on Thunor's back. The Elvish skirt wasn't as loose as some of the Gondorian dresses, but I really didn't care. The groom looked like he wanted to protest when I swung up astride, but I'd already forgotten him. Thunor quivered beneath me like a bowstring pulled tight and stamped his foot impatiently.

"Milady, where are you going? It isn't safe in the lower levels of the city."

"To the battlefield. If a man named Aragorn comes up here send him straight to Lord Faramir."
The groom was completely flabbergasted, but I felt far too rushed to explain. Faramir's feverish face flashed behind my eyes, and I didn't want to waste any time.

I trotted Thunor out of the stable and on to the streets of Minas Tirith where he clip-clopped on the stone. It was a bit strange at first to maneuver in such tight corridors since I'd only ridden on the open plains, but we both quickly adjusted, and I grew more confident to take the destrier faster.

There were guards at the gate to the fifth level, but they didn't look to be paying much attention, so I cantered right by them and ignored their yells. Bigger fish to fry and all that. The fifth level was all but empty, and the fourth level was much the same. There were no guards at those gates anymore, and I didn't spare a second glance as I passed the street that led down to the Kinsey house. The ruined fields outside the city loomed larger as I descended, a smoky black and grey specter.

As I wound downward through the third level the signs of the catapult's destruction began to appear. Bits of wall and stone had been knocked free or crushed, and debris from homes and buildings was spread over the ground. The Elves had taught me how to jump a horse, but I hadn't done it since Rivendell and only sidesaddle, so I weaved Thunor around the rubble as quickly as I dared rather than risk it. When Éowyn recovered I would get her to teach me, I vowed.

As I got to the second level I started to see soldiers. There were makeshift healer's tents and piles of collected swords, shields, armor and arrows. The orc ones were tossed in one pile, the Gondorian ones in the other. I'd never thought about what happened to the leftover weapons and armor, but it was rather ridiculous to assume they were just abandoned on the battlefield.

I halted briefly at the first large tent I found, which looked to be manned by field medics. The men nearby gathered around me asking questions and telling me to go back up, and Thunor pranced in place with agitation. He was channeling my urgency, but I had to make sure I didn't overshoot Aragorn.

"I'm looking for a Ranger of the North. He came on the ships. Do any of you know where I can find them?" No one knew where the northern Rangers were, which didn't surprise me. It looked like most of the main army was still outside the gates and that was probably where Aragorn was—and Boromir, my brain unhelpfully reminded me. I cantered off with a bare goodbye, mind already jumping to other places to check.

The devastation got worse and worse as I got deeper into the lowest levels. There were clouds of smoke and dust in the air along with the wrenching groans of the wounded. I passed by at least two smoking piles of orc carcasses, and the horrible smell of burning flesh stung my nose. My eyes watered terribly, but I kept one hand on Thunor's neck to calm him and the other on the reins to guide him as we hurried our way through the second level and on to the first.

There were crushed houses everywhere and boulders the size of horses sitting on top of them; it was hard not to imagine what Rylan and Adelaide's home looked like. Here men were digging through the rubble, likely looking for survivors. I couldn't go as fast as I wanted because the wreckage was everywhere. Around one corner I saw a pile of shrouded bodies and very
deliberately fixed my gaze ahead. I had to focus on saving the living and not on the dead.

As I got closer to the gates I saw more and more men, all asking me where I was going and none of them knowing where Aragorn was (and who he was). There was a crowd of what looked like archers from the wall standing beneath the gaping hole where the front gate had been. I had missed the actual moment it happened, but it looked like the soldiers weren't exaggerating when they'd said the Nazgûl had exploded it. There was nothing but splinters and the giant iron hinges left. Off high above me on the roof of a distant house I could see the contorted metal of one thick band of iron that must have come from it.

As I pulled up short one soldier with a fancier helmet than the others—I really did appreciate how that made differentiating ranks easier—jumped down from the remains of a house to address me. "Ho! What is a woman doing here?"

"I'm looking for a Ranger of the North by the name of Aragorn. Have you seen him?"

"A Ranger? I have not, but most of them are beyond the gates, if he is still alive. If you must, wait here for him!"

"I need to bring him to the Houses of Healing as soon as possible. I do not know how long Lord Faramir has." As I guessed, just the name of the injured captain was enough to get everyone to rethink stopping me. There was a swell of voices as the men traded rumors of what they'd heard about him, and there was genuine worry among the ranks for the fallen captain.

"I can send a man to look for him," the leader offered, and Thunor shifted his weight again as though to remind them I was the one on the horse. "It isn't safe beyond the city walls, milady. Most of the fighting is over, but there are still orcs there. And a battlefield is not something a woman should see."

I looked pointedly over my shoulder at where I had just come from. While orcs had not managed to breach much of the wall here, I had passed a fair number of bodies on my way to the gates, and after two days in the Houses of Healing I had unfortunately seen a lot of gore despite how I tried to avoid it. My stomach was just going to have deal with it.

"Then where is Gandalf?" I asked, figuring that where Gandalf was Aragorn might not be too far. I also needed to tell Gandalf of the news about Denethor—I just hoped Boromir wouldn't be nearby. I couldn't imagine how angry he would be if he saw me on the battlefield, and I already had a host of other problems involving him anyway.

"By the river, milady, but again it isn't safe—"

"If Aragorn comes here send him up to Lord Faramir," I repeated, and when Thunor jerked and whinnied impatiently the men in front of me stepped aside. They didn't initially part, but the big destrier kept shaking his head so the men backed up, and once we were clear of the crush I spurred him into a canter and hurried through what was left of the gates.

The ranking officer hadn't been kidding about the state of the battlefield. By the walls things seemed to have been cleared, but as far as the eye could see there were scattered lumps and piles of corpses where the fallen still lied. A couple burning pyres had been made for the orcs, and those that were alive were checking over the dead. It all flew by me as we cantered across the plain, and yet details kept catching my eye.

What hit me the most wasn't the visual—in fact, war movies gave you a fair idea of what it looked like—but the smell. It's something you can't know until you experience it. A battleground like this has a distinct odor that you won't find anywhere else. It was metal and heat, dirt and sweat. It was
the rank of decay and wetness of rot. I'd gotten a taste of it at Amon Hen, but it was a hundred
times more concentrated here. And there was more to it too: the buzz of insects as they gorged and
the cawing of crows that were circling. The ground was soft with blood and mud, and Thunor
squelched through it at the deepest parts—and sometimes crunched when his hoof met cheap
metal or bone.

There were horses on their sides unmoving and men caught under them, and I had to go wide
around the fallen body of a Mûmak, which Faramir had been right about—it was much, much
bigger than an elephant. But the worst part, of course, was the dead soldiers. Bodies were face
down, face up, sideways and sprawled. Some looked like they were asleep, others contorted
unnaturally. Even as I tried desperately not to look it was impossible not to see. I was thankful so
many faces were covered by helmets, because nothing made the dead more real than those open,
empty eyes.

I couldn't not see Denethor again, deep red slowly staining his clothes from his self-inflicted
wound, just as I couldn't forget that orc's yellow eyes as the blood gurgled around the shaft of the
arrow. I'd seen so much death recently that I couldn't wait for this war to be over.

There were men moving among the dead visible from a distance, nearer to the river. As Thunor
and I pounded closer I could see colors mixing with the black and silver uniforms of Minas Tirith:
greens and reds, those men with the blue uniform with the bird that had brought Éowyn in, gold
and even orange. Aragorn hadn't brought the ghost army it seemed, but a hodgepodge of men
from southern Gondor.

"Is Aragorn here?" I called to the nearest group of soldiers, who were hefting shields to add to a
pile. It looked like the clean-up effort here had already covered the corpses, thankfully, and now
they were dealing with loose weapons and armor.

"What? Lord Aragorn?" One man dropped the four shields he had in his arms, and everybody
flinched at the echoing clatter of metal against metal. "A woman!"

"Yes, yes," I said, getting really annoyed with all this and rather wanting to just pick Aragorn up
and gallop back inside the walls. The landscape here was so bleak, and not twenty yards away
there was a small mountain of orc bodies about to be burned. There was nothing safe to look at,
and I itched to escape the smell. The only thing holding me here was Éowyn and Faramir. "I'm
looking for Lord Aragorn, do you know where he is?"

Three of the men looked stunned to see me still, but one seemed to snap out of it and point further
off. Nodding my thanks, I quickly galloped in that direction, jumping from one group of men to
another to confirm my direction. I heard more cries of "a woman" or "a lady" than I cared to hear
as I galloped on. Finally, after what had to be half an hour of riding and questioning random
soldiers, I spotted a white horse that I hoped was Shadowfax. My suspicion proved correct when I
could finally see the white robed man standing beside him. My shoulders dropped as some of the
tension fled me, and I urged Thunor on faster.

"Gandalf! Gandalf!"

Said wizard managed to be the only person yet who didn't look surprised to see me. "You should
not be out here, Lady Maddie!" He said a tad sharply, but I wasn't about to let him stop me from
my mission.

"I have to find Aragorn, Gandalf. And I have news for you."

Gandalf gave me one short scrutinizing look before nodding to the men he'd been speaking with
and swinging up on to Shadowfax's bare back. He was surprisingly graceful for a man that
physically looked about seventy (with wizards who knows though). His robes even managed to
stay neatly arranged around him, which was a trick I couldn't do with dresses. "Well let us hear
this news. If it has brought you all the way out here I dread to think."

He was grumbling, but pulled Shadowfax up beside Thunor, and I found myself rather disliking
the beautiful horse. His coat was glossy despite the fighting, and he rippled and shuddered like the
wind as he trotted. It made Thunor look smaller and shabbier next to him, and I didn't like that at
all.

"I am here because Aragorn is the one who healed Êowyn and Faramir," I told him a bit
breathlessly, as Gandalf trotted us away from the soldiers and closer to the river. There were more
clumps of soldiers I could see, including one bunch upriver that was definitely on horseback.
Rohirrim?

"So you remembered."

"Yes. Aragorn uses a special herb—the same one that helped Frodo—and I'm sure that's what
cures Êowyn and Faramir."

"Athelas, you mean."

"Athelas!" I repeated ecstatically. Yes that was it!

"You only remember this now?" Gandalf inquired, ignoring my burst of elation.

"Healer Ioreth said something about healing hands and king's hands," I explained quickly, too
excited to take notice of what underlied Gandalf's comment, "and then I remembered."

"Just as the name Frodo caused you to remember before?"

"Yes," I agreed instantly, before Gandalf's point hit me and my breath escaped me in a gasp. "You
think there is something stopping me from remembering."

Gandalf hummed in agreement. "A query for another time though. Is this the news that sent you
galloping on to a recently claimed battleground?" Now he looked almost amused but I didn't get
the joke.

"Well yes, because Aragorn needs to come heal them. But I also have other news." I dropped my
voice a little, not that there was anyone nearby to overhear, and tried to speak quickly. "It's about
Denethor."

"Ah yes, you spoke to him. What has happened?"

"He is dead." Gandalf sighed just a little, and even that small movement seemed to add five years
to his face. "He was very angry when I mentioned you, and seemed to think you were usurping
him with Aragorn."

Gandalf made a thoughtful sound, but didn't seem surprised. I wondered if Denethor had accused
him of that before.

"He also thought Boromir was a ghost we'd raised from the dead, and he knew of Boromir's death
at Amon Hen, and that Faramir had been shot by a poisoned arrow."

"And the Ring?" Gandalf said slowly.

"He knew of it, I think, but he believes it already lost to the Dark Lord." Denethor's exact words
had been about throwing the only chance we had away. It wasn't strictly stated, but the Ring was
the most powerful thing we had, and I knew the Fellowship had not brought it to Gondor
deliberately. Men were the most susceptible—Boromir had proven that before.

"If that were so then we would know." Gandalf didn't sound as dark about all this as I had
anticipated. "And his death? How similar was it to your remembrance?"

Shadowfax slowed to a stop and Thunor followed suit. Far ahead of us there looked to be Elves
gathered, the armor a dead giveaway. They had to be part of the company that had gone with
Aragorn when he left Rohan. I wondered if Erynion was there.

"There was no fire, but he was certainly as mad as I recall." Again, it was a hazy recollection, but
I was sure there were plenty of parallels. "He took his life then, just as he did now. He said…
Gandalf, he said it was all inevitable."

The wizard didn't look troubled by the proclamation, but it had shaken me. Denethor had voiced
my deepest fears, and while I knew it was stupid to listen to a madman I also knew the story of the
prophet Cassandra: doomed to speak the truth that no one would believe.

"Some things may be inevitable. Darkness rises and falls. The sun in the morning and the moon at
night…" Astronomical events weren't what I would consider inevitable, but I understood
Gandalf's meaning. "Inevitable is relative. Now, at this moment there is a something good about to
happen, I trust?"

I was still fumbling through "inevitable is relative" and trying to translate that, but Gandalf's raised
eyebrow stopped me for the moment. "Yes, Aragorn will save Éowyn and Faramir."

"Then you'd best find him." Gandalf said solemnly, then pointed at the gathering of Elves with his
staff. "It is times like these that Men need hope, and King Éomer and Steward Boromir will need
it." Then Gandalf glanced at me one more time with an unreadable look, before he and
Shadowfax galloped away.

I put aside the questions Gandalf arose—because every conversation with him left me with more
questions than answers—and focused on what he'd said: something good was going to happen;
and I would make sure of it. Encouraged now and regaining my sense of urgency, I kicked
Thunor into a gallop and headed straight for the Elves.

"Where is Aragorn?" I called out as I got within Elven hearing distance (at least twice as far as
human hearing distance). Most of them turned to me, and if I had to guess it looked like there were
Lothlórien and Rivendell Elves, based on their different sets of armor and the colors. The Golden
Wood ones were dressed in gold and white, while the Rivendell Elves had more light-grays and
browns.

"Lady Maddie," one of them intoned. I couldn't see much of his face because of his helmet, but all
Elves tended to sound rather alike—with eerily calm, musical voices, though this one was a bit
gruffer. He wore the colors of Lothlórien, so I wondered if he knew Erynion. A quick glance
around their group didn't reveal that elf, but most of them were still wearing helmets, and there
were more clusters of elves off in the distance.

"Do you know where Aragorn is?"

"He is not with us. Were you also upon this battlefield?" Oh I hadn't noticed, I thought
sarcastically. I gave him a suspicious look, but the cheek-plates concealed all but his jaw and even
his eyes were shaded.
"No, but I do need to find Aragorn."

"There are still orcs here, and I do not see a sword on your belt. Do you fight with fire as the Men have said?" I audibly groaned at not just the small talk but also that stupid rumor. How, how, did gossip get around this fast? Did people in Minas Tirith really have nothing better to do than jabber to each other? Even on a battleground apparently? I stuffed any verbal aggravation away though because being short with Elves never got you anywhere. They literally had the patience to wait you out for years. "No, I have seen no orcs and I don't wield fire. Now I really need to find Aragorn to help Lord Faramir and Lady Éowyn. Do you know which way?"

Even though I had to remind myself the elves could probably hear me grinding my teeth, my politeness paid off. "I believe the Northern Rangers are gathered over there." He gestured to the right, and I nodded tightly to him before swinging Thunor around. If I saw Erynion around here he would be getting an earful.

The group the elf had indicated was indeed a bunch of darkly dressed men who were the complete opposite of the elves in appearance. Compared to the earthy, light colors of the Elven armor, these men were outfitted in dark grays and blacks and with black or dark brown hair. They had to be Aragorn's kin by the similarities in dress and features. Someone must have guessed who I was looking for, because there was a stirring in the crowd and the future King of Gondor appeared. If I hadn't known who he was already, I might have mistaken him for just another Ranger, covered in blood, ash, and dirt like all the rest.

"Aragorn!"

"Miss Maddie," he said as he approached, forehead wrinkling as he saw me. He looked neither tired nor excited, just indifferent. I wondered how many battlefields he had seen before.

"You must hurry to the Houses of Healing on the sixth level. Lord Faramir and Éowyn are very sick, and they need that plant. The one... the one that helped save Frodo. You must come quickly." I shifted on Thunor anxiously, but I could hardly drag the future King of Gondor around, and I didn't know how much of my story he believed.

There was a low murmur among the Rangers, but Aragorn just gave me a long look before nodding his acquiescence. I hadn't realized how nervous I was about convincing him until I didn't have to.

One of his men stepped forward and offered him the use of his horse. Aragorn mounted up smoothly, and I recognized some murmured Elvish he spoke to the beast. He held the reins in one hand as the other palmed his sword while he spoke to his men. "Do any of you carry athelas? I fear Gondor may not use it as they once did."

Men patted pockets and bags, some pulling pouches out from under chainmail and tunics. They emptied what little they had into Aragorn's leather bag and dispersed. Then with a click of his tongue Aragorn turned his horse in the direction of the city. I wasn't sure what to say to him, if anything really, but the Ranger was already working into a canter and soon we were moving too fast to hear each other.

More men were gathered at the gates than before, trying to get into the city and listening to news from the crier. Aragorn slowed as we drew nearer because of the crowd, eventually coming to a stop as we waited for room to get through. Unfortunately, because we had temporarily halted I wasn't able to escape one very angry Steward.

"Maddie!" I didn't hear him the first time he yelled my name, but I certainly did notice the horse that galloped straight up beside me. I jerked back on Thunor to make some space—the English
word "asshole" jumping to my lips—before a familiar hand reached out and grabbed my reins.

"Hey!" I yelled, snapping my hand out to get them back, but Boromir wouldn't give them up, and I was afraid to yank on them and hurt Thunor.

"Tell me you were not fighting." His face was drawn tight and his eyes blazed under heavy brows. His voice had taken on a gravely weight that told me he was really pissed. I felt my heart stutter in the face of it, Faramir and Denethor flashing across my mind.

"I didn't fight anything at all, I swear." I gestured at my outfit, but considering I'd been scrubbing and cleaning in the healing wards it didn't really back me up.

"Then what are you doing here." That was definitely an order to talk, not a question.

"Aragorn," I blurted, checking over my shoulder to make sure he hadn't run off at the sight of the furious captain. The Ranger was still beside me on his horse, watching us with interest. Boromir's grey eyes flicked to him for a nanosecond before he was staring me down again. "He can heal Faramir and Éowyn," I said in rush to explain myself before Boromir combusted. "They'll be okay just as long as he can get that herb to them. 'King's hands are best for healing' or something like that. That's what Ioreth said."

That drew the scrutiny off me as Aragorn said something about athelas to Boromir. "Healer Ioreth believes this can help?" the Gondorian looked to me to confirm.

"Yes, and I believe it can help. And you were trained by Lord Elrond, right?" I asked, perhaps a bit desperately as I looked to Aragorn. I didn't really want to be left to deal with Boromir's fury alone, and the man was still holding my reins tightly.

"Yes, and athelas has a long history of healing dark wounds."

It seemed Boromir had been won over. "Make way! Clear a path!" he yelled, and the men who had been watching the drama unfold—fabulous, more gossip—scrambled to part so the Steward and Ranger could get through. "Go Aragorn," he urged. "Lady Maddie and I will catch up."

Before I could get out a reply Aragorn took off, ditching me with a still angry Boromir. The Gondorian tied my reins to his and then spurred both our mounts forward, thankfully hurrying us past the gathered soldiers and back into the city.

"I can ride you know!" I shouted at him, trying to be heard over the clatter of the hooves on the stone as we entered the city. I frantically reached forward to grab Thunor's mane so I'd have something to hold on to. Boromir ignored me or perhaps didn't hear me. We didn't slow until we were through the first level and past the outposts on the second. The city was eerily empty, and while I had rushed through it before without taking notice, now his ire seemed to fill the space as we slowed.

"That land has only just been reclaimed. You do not know what was still out there and you took not a single guard. What if you'd come across orcs? What if you fell from your horse? A battlefield is not something I would wish you to see." He said fiercely, glaring down at me from his horse. Had I been afraid of his anger? It was harder to see it knowing that it was worry that caused it.

"I… I know perfectly well how horrible a battlefield is, and I know there were smarter ways, but Faramir and Éowyn could very well die, and I had to do something," I justified, sitting up just a little more in my seat. Boromir's concern and anger were perfectly understandable, but I still thought I was right. "I made sure to stick to where the soldiers were."
"That does not make it safe, and your recklessness could have gotten you killed."

"Reckless?" I said sharply, then had to take a breath to let go of my immediate indignation before I said something I would regret. *He was worried,* I had to remind myself. "Would it have been better if I'd let Pippin go in my stead? Neither of us are soldiers, but—"

"Pippin at least has armor and a weapon. You have neither." He snapped back, breathing heavily before he pressed a hand to his eyes in a universal gesture of exasperation. "This is a pointless argument. If I asked you not to go near any field of battle would you listen?"

His hands were clenching the reins with white knuckles before he consciously relaxed them. It drew my attention to his hands, and seeing the little cuts and bruises that marred them reminded me that Boromir, before anything else, was alive. He'd made it through two days of battle and was still well enough to yell at me. Some of the clenched in my gut at the sight of him and his fury loosened.

"I promise Boromir, I do not *want* to go near battle. I am still haunted by what little I have seen. But you know I wouldn't go down there if I didn't have to." I didn't know if I got through to him, but the lividness that had marred his face was gone. He muttered something under his breath, but I couldn't hear it over the sound of the horses' hooves.

We picked up the pace on a flatter stretch of the third level and no conversation was possible until we hit another slope and slowed the horses so they wouldn't be strained. By this time it looked like Boromir had calmed completely, and in fact he'd begun to untie my reins from his. "Aragorn can heal him?" His tone was conciliatory as he gave them back to me, eyes flicking up to mine with an unspoken apology. With everything that he would be learning soon—and my role in *all* of it—I mutely accepted the reins.

"Yes, he can. I am certain." I hesitated to say more, but I took in Boromir's profile for just a moment and knew it was best to get this out. "Boromir… I- I'm really sorry. I should have known Faramir would be injured, but I didn't remember in time and then it wasn't until Healer Ioreth said something about kings and healing that I even remembered about Aragorn."

I had to take a breath as mine had shortened with trepidation, but I couldn't tell what Boromir was thinking. He kept looking ahead so I floundered to say more.

"I'm sorry I can't remember everything, and Gandalf thinks there's something blocking it but I know that's an excuse and… and I'm sorry I didn't tell you this sooner but I was afraid you'd be angry at me for Faramir and then another thing—"

"Breathe, Miss Maddie." Some of the sternness had gone from his face when he looked at me, but I couldn't keep eye contact. "I am not angry about Faramir; that is not your doing. Wounds in battle are common, and it lifts my heart to know that he can be saved."

I opened my mouth to dispute my blame in Faramir's injury, not sure why I was throwing myself upon the rack but doing it anyway, but Boromir continued. "You asked me as we left Rohan how a man can lead soldiers into battle knowing they will die. And I told you preparation is all you can do. That is not just preparation of weapons and defenses, nor training your men well, but also the mental preparation. Accepting that there will be casualties and there will be sacrifices."

At the pained way he said this, I unconsciously looked up at him, and eyes were piercing. "Do not feel guilt for Faramir's injury." Even as he said it though, it wasn't enough. There was still Éowyn and Merry, and worst of all Denethor.

I don't know what he made of my silence, but he didn't say anything more until we crossed the
fourth level gate. "I spoke to Faramir before the battle," he said a bit abruptly and adjusted his grip on the reins. I felt distinctly uncomfortable at what might have been said between the brothers concerning me. A hundred things flashed to mind and a hundred more reactions. "There are many things we must discuss, though now is not the time."

My heart sunk as he said this, and the now familiar feeling of dread hit me. Boromir still didn't know about Denethor, and I wrestled with telling him now or letting Beregond do it later. Would he forgive me for not telling him immediately, or would he accept that it was poor timing? When was it a good time to tell someone their father was dead?

We were able to canter again once through the fourth level, where the road leveled out for a time. I scrubbed my fingers over Thunor's hair, feeling strangely like I wanted to cry but there were tears, and like I wanted to pull my own hair out by the ends. I felt pulled in so many directions when it came to Boromir, and that still didn't account for Éomer, who I feared was the more volatile of the two.

Before I knew it Boromir was dismounting, and we were in the courtyard by the healing wards like I hadn't even left. The battleground was all a blur, and my frantic rush to find Aragorn felt like a second compared to now.

"Come, let us go and find Faramir and the Lady Éowyn." Boromir helped me down from Thunor, his hand resting just a moment on my shoulder though I couldn't say why. Then he turned sharply and strode inside the ward, people scattering when they saw him or dropping deep curtseys and bows. It only seemed to register in me now what exactly they were seeing: It was Boromir, son of Denethor of the line of Stewards, Captain of the White Tower among a dozen other titles, dressed in full plate mail from shoulders to feet (if he had a helmet it was gone). He had a two-handed sword sheathed on his hip, and the White Tree of Gondor bloodied and dirtied on his chest. His hair was a tangled mess barely held off his face, and there were lines of dirt and blood on his neck. But more than that, what they saw was the Steward of Gondor with head high, uninjured from two days of battle, walking swiftly but proudly. Some of the nerves in me were swept away as I remembered that Boromir was the victor today. He led the city's defense and held off Mordor's forces until Rohan and Aragorn came, and he fought every step of the way.


…Thinking in vain that my son alone could save us. You thought to bring him here where he might die a second time at the gates of his city...

That was a prediction of Denethor's that was wrong. The next battle wouldn't be here, and I would stand at those gates just to make sure Boromir didn't die by them if I had to.

Aragorn was already in Faramir's room when we arrived, the guards obviously were eavesdropping, but jumped to attention when Boromir strode quickly down the corridor. The smell in the room when we stepped in was clean and pure, fresh like mint but rejuvenating like mountain air. It had swept away all the staleness of illness that always seemed to permeate the rooms of the sick and left it refreshed. Aragorn had a cup of boiling water in his hands with athelas leaves floating on the top, which was where the scent had to be coming from. He didn't even glance over as we entered, and with Healer Ioreth's help he tipped the mixture into Faramir's mouth. Then Aragorn pressed a hand to Faramir's sweaty forehead, focusing with closed eyes. I wasn't sure if he was praying or doing some kind of Elf magic, but the room was hushed to let him concentrate.

I wanted to grab someone's hand to still my own shaking fingers, but I didn't dare. We waited breathlessly for some sign until Aragorn, a bit greyer around the edges now, leaned back and let out a breath. "The worst has passed. Would that Lord Elrond were here so Lord Faramir might recover all the quicker."
Everyone seemed to exhale at the same moment, and the tension fled the room. The red in Faramir's face was rapidly disappearing, and Aragorn stepped away so Boromir could get closer. I hadn't actually seen the two brothers together before; Boromir's affection was so obvious in all his body language as he leaned over Faramir and carefully smoothed the hair from his face. He truly did dote on his brother, and it brought unbidden a thought of Mackenzie.

"That weed is more powerful than I would have thought," Ioreth commented to me.

And then we heard the clicking of armor as Boromir jerked back. Faramir was beginning to stir, blinking slowly. Ioreth gasped the word 'king' under her breath, but it was lost to Boromir's heartfelt whisper of Faramir's name. When the sick captain smiled up at his brother and his eyes finally focused around the room, I felt like my own heart would explode from relief.

Faramir was saying something quietly about a king, and Aragorn something about shadows, but I was just fervently sending up thanks to whoever and whatever made this possible. Boromir's elation was so palpable it lightened his whole face and erased whatever troubles and responsibilities were laid on him.

"Rest, eat some food and move slowly at first. You have been abed many days, the healer said, and your body must recover." Ioreth was staring at Aragorn with such admiration that the moment he even glanced at her she dropped into the deepest curtsey I'd seen yet—there was no way I could go that low and stay balanced.

"Truly Gondor will be blessed in all its day to come with its true king returned," she murmured. Amazingly Aragorn wasn't flustered at the sudden pomp, not even as Boromir sunk to one knee beside Faramir's bed and bowed his head.

"And as the House of Húrin has for generations in ages past, we will stand beside you as councilors in good faith, supporting and serving the true kings of Gondor," said Boromir formally, one hand crossing his chest. Faramir mimicked him slowly, still weak.

Aragorn looked at the solemn Gondorian men with fondness as befitting a king. The Ranger of the North was already like a legendary ruler even without the crown yet. "You do not have to ask Boromir and Faramir, sons of Denethor, sons of Pelendur. It would be my greatest honor to have the sons of the House of Húrin at my side, defending Gondor as King and Steward as our forefathers once did."

Then Aragorn went over and put one hand on Boromir's shoulder, and when both men were standing the two communicated something through eye contact alone before Aragorn let go. He gave Faramir a serious nod and crossed his right hand over his heart too in a gesture that must have had great significance.

I felt suddenly out of place in all this, unsure where I stood and whether I too should make a vow of fealty or some such, but thankfully Aragorn's attention had moved on. "Lady Maddie, where is Lady Éowyn?"

"Éowyn? She's down another hall. I'll- I can show you." He nodded, and with a quick glance at Boromir who was talking quietly to Faramir, I hurried out behind Aragorn.

"She is not ailed by the same thing." He said as we passed the guards, who all bowed very low as Aragorn passed. If they'd heard even half of what was said in that room then the cat was out of the bag.

"No, she's not. It is the Black Breath—something horrible from the Ringwraiths," I shuddered at whatever dark dreams she must be having. We reach Éowyn's room quickly, but I hung back just
outside the doorway though as I realized who else was there.

"Lord Éomer," Aragorn said respectively. Éomer's tangled blond hair was bowed over Éowyn's hand, and he only raised his head marginally in acknowledgement. The Rohirrim looked so broken over her that I was bowled over by my own guilt.

"Lady Maddie," Aragorn called to me, and I flinched as Éomer's head came up again. "I will need a shallow basin of boiling water."

I all but fled, afraid to even look Éomer in the eye and yet knowing that I was worsening it by not facing him. In another room just off the main wards there were several huge vats over large fires kept boiling just for situations like this. Very, very carefully I took one of the clay jugs and dipped it into the water, cringing at the heat and the steam. Oven mitts weren't well designed yet. I snagged a low bowl on my way out, put the jug in the middle, and tried not to drag my feet too much as I went back to Éowyn's room.

"Her will is as strong as steel," Aragorn was saying, and I paused just beside the door to listen. "Her foe was beyond the strength of almost all mortal men, and yet she stood before the wraith and did not quail."

Gandalf had come in while I was getting the water, and I just saw the corner of his robe as he stood by the door. "Indeed," he replied to Aragorn. "Others have long succumbed to this illness, and yet she lives still. Any touched with darkness or unhappiness are the first victims."

"I had heard rumor of the fair maiden of Rohan, and that she was as beautiful as she was filled with dread, for she faithfully tended to her ailing king," Aragorn commented.

"Aye," Éomer replied, and he sounded so grieved that it tore another hole in me. "We both feared for our uncle, but it was her that the duty truly fell upon. I suspected her unhappiness but not once did she complain."

"And as you had the free fields and grasslands of Rohan, she had the walls of Meduseld. That she was desperate to escape that taxing duty I am not surprised, though her fortitude is a testament to your people and your blood, Éomer," Gandalf replied. His words reminded me of the lonely woman I had met in the stable yard of Edoras, who jumped on the opportunity to talk and do something wild—the woman who longed for glory and the freedom that the men didn't share.

I steeled myself and shouldered open the ajar door, knocking it into Gandalf like I didn't know he was there, though I had no doubt he'd known I was in the hallway. I only spared the shortest glance at Éomer, who was watching me guardedly, his eyes suspiciously red and his face dirtied and haggard. Then at Aragorn's bidding I poured the hot water in the basin and withdrew beside Gandalf to let the future king work.

As the leaves seeped and the power of the cleansing herb washed over all of us, noticeably lightening Éomer's face, Aragorn leaned over Éowyn and called her name. Then he pressed two of the leaves between his fingers, letting more of that pure scent steal out and into the room. I felt calmer than I had in days, and while the guilt was still like a noose around my neck it was looser than before.

Aragorn soaked a cloth left by the beside in the steaming water, somehow not flinching at the temperature, and wrung it out before pressing it to her brow, letting it rest for a moment before bringing it to her right arm where she had blocked the blade of the beast. As the fumes began to affect her, she started to breathe more deeply, and Éomer looked about ready to fall out of his seat he was leaning so far forward.
"Éowyn, Lady of Rohan, arise," Aragorn called, and while I was skeptical that "summoning" her from the brink of death was going to work, I could barely breathe as we waited.

When the Ranger encouraged Éomer to join in, Gandalf pushed me forward too. "You are her friend, and I think some of the reason she had the courage to do this great deed."

I wasn't sure if the guilt-tripping was deliberate or not, but I came to stand beside Aragorn feeling a little silly even as Éomer rubbed his sister's hand and said her name earnestly.

Aragorn gave me her other hand and put his own on her brow, and then there was nothing for it. "Éowyn," I said feeling a bit foolish, but how was this any different than talking to her as I did before? "Please wake up Éowyn." I glanced at Éomer, who still looked incredibly distraught and on the verge of tears. His emotion was starting to affect me too. "Éowyn, please, your brother Éomer is falling apart without you."

He glanced at me, and we made very short eye contact before I thought I felt her hand twitch. Éomer leaned forward again, and repeated her name like a mantra until very suddenly her eyes were open and she was looking at him.

"Éomer?" she murmured, and I nearly dropped her hand to cover my mouth to hold in the giddy laughter that wanted to escape. Aragorn relaxed back and before I could think it I had thrown my arms around him, unable to speak past the overflowing happiness that was rushing through me.

The poor man took it in stride and patted my back until I let go, not even a little embarrassed at my exuberance. Faramir and Éowyn were recovered! The guilt that had been eating at me felt infinitely lighter. You could blame me for their injuries, but you couldn't blame me for their deaths, I all but wanted to trumpet.

Éomer was crying when I looked over, holding his sister and rocking her, his face buried in her hair, and it was such a private moment that both Aragorn and I stood up to give them some space. Gandalf had stepped into the hallway and was talking to someone, but as I moved to follow him Éowyn called me back. "Maddie, Maddie please wait."

I went back to her side easily, though still unsure about Éomer, but I had only eyes for Éowyn right now. That athelas was a miracle worker; it had to be. Her color was back, still pale but with the start of a healthy pink glow underneath, and she didn't look half as frail as she had five minutes ago.

"I'm so glad you're all right," I burst out, and then I couldn't contain it and hugged her as tightly as I dared. "I'm so sorry Éowyn, I really am." My eyes were definitely wet, and when I pulled back I wiped at them quickly. Realizing this was my chance I turned to Éomer also to apologize. "I'm sorry too, Éomer. I knew what she was doing and I even encouraged her. I didn't remember she would be injured, otherwise I would—"

Éowyn soft hand grabbed mine and then Éomer's before I could babble anymore. "Maddie, please don't cry. I wanted to do this. I did not want to waste away in Edoras waiting for an offer of marriage, and then to be shuffled from one prison to the next. I know what freedom is, and now I will never forget the taste, nor let it be taken from me again. And I would have left with the army whether you let me or not, so none of this is your fault."

"The Ringwra—" I started, but she squeezed my hand warmly and looked to Éomer.

"Do you really think, dearest brother of mine, that I would not have done this if Maddie had said no?"
"Éowyn, when I found you—"

"Do you?" Despite having woken minutes ago she looked fierce, and Éomer knew a losing battle when he saw one.

"No, though when I beheld you on the battlefield you were as death." She hugged her brother with one arm at his broken words, the other holding my hand captive until the two pulled apart.

"Maddie, there is no blame to be cast on you, but instead thanks. Truly you are of magic. It was so silent for so long, and then through my dark dreams came your words, and all my fears of Éomer and Merry's deaths were blown away. I heard you speak to me, and the world went from black to grey." I could definitely feel my jaw falling open of its own accord, and I struggled for a response. She could hear me? When I was talking to her with Pippin she remembered?

I was saved from answering when Merry raced into the room and barreled around me to hug Éowyn. He was talking at high speed about the battle, and then Pippin was yelping something to Aragorn and none of it seemed quite real anymore.

"Lady Maddie," Éomer said, holding his hand out to help me up from Aragorn's chair I'd fallen into. Éowyn's forgiveness hadn't sunken into me yet, and it didn't seem to have sunken into Éomer either by his grim expression. "Our uncle used to call Éowyn módigu fola as a child, 'spirited filly' in Westron, and Gandalf spoke true before. Caring for our enfeebled uncle all but destroyed the módigu fola in her—but it was not gone. She is right: she would have done this regardless, and I fear I sought blame in this when truly it is hers alone." The look he shot his sister promised that he hadn't forgotten that, but she didn't look the least bit phased. I wish I could have half her confidence for the eventual conversation between Boromir and I.

"As for our uncle though, I must ask what you knew." I could hear the conversation between Merry and Éowyn fall silent, and I was thankful the others had either left or were occupied with Pippin as my mouth had gone startling dry.

"I... I am so very sorry, Éomer. I knew that he might die. I do not remember how or when, but I knew in the battle he could very well fall." I looked up at Éomer who was utterly blank-faced and felt any shred of resolve crumble. "I should have warned you sooner, or warned the king himself, but I did not remember and that failure is mine."

My eyes fell to Éowyn because I could not stand the look on Éomer's face, but it was almost worse. She looked shocked and grief-stricken, and I realized at the same second this was the first news she had on her uncle. All the gaiety of the room vanished in a heartbeat. I had saved two, but not one.

"He was there," Merry interrupted suddenly, and he was looking almost impertinently at Éomer and me. "He saw Lady Éowyn strike down the Ringwraith, and he asked for her, calling her dearer than a daughter. And then... he said he went proudly to his forefathers, because he killed the great beast the Nazgûl rode."

As Merry relayed some of Théoden's last words Éomer looked torn between his mourning sister and saying more to me, and that was when Aragorn returned. One would have thought this was the kind of matter best kept out of, but he stepped in regardless.

"King Théoden died as he wished to, on the battlefield fighting a foe of great worth that felled many beyond count. Let not your anger and grief sully his memory and cast not blame in anguish. The battlefield is only a place of death, and it is a miracle still that any survive it." Éomer looked a bit stunned, and Éowyn's weeping had ceased. I thought for half a second there that a glowing crown was resting on Aragorn's head before the hallucination disappeared.
"Come Maddie," Gandalf said suddenly, breaking the stillness that had engulfed the room. "The war is not yet over, and I wonder if there is more you remember."

I didn't know if I should curtsey, apologize again, or simply leave, but Éomer was watching me with a heavy gaze and Éowyn was silent and bowed. When Éomer consciously turned away to comfort his sister, I all but ran out of the room.

Two steps out though I hit leather and musk, and the moment Boromir's hands grasped my bruised arms to hold me steady I decided to hell with it, I should just let everyone get their condemnation out in one go.

I pulled Boromir's hands off my arms where his grip was hurting and grabbed hold of them instead, clasping them between my own. He opened his mouth and glanced at the doorway where he must have witnessed that, but I was too focused to let him speak. "Boromir, I am so sorry. I cannot say it enough and I will be saying all my life if that's what it takes to earn forgiveness. When I told you I remembered about Aragorn it is also true that I remembered something else terrible. It was a pyre—a pyre for Faramir, and Denethor lit it. In his madness he had wanted to save you both from the hatred and slavery of Mordor. Then when I went to speak with him he ran from the room and he took his own life by the steps to the White Tower. I couldn't remember until it was nearly too late and I didn't know what to do, and now he's gone the same as before, and I'm sorry that death and injury seem to follow me wherever I go and that it is your father I seemed to have sacrificed along with Éomer's king."

There. It was out. I have no idea if Boromir even understood half of what I'd just said, but it hardly mattered anymore. I just needed to let it be heard, so that some of this unbearable guilt might be lifted.

"I just spoke to Beregond," were the first words out of his mouth, and I deflated some. I hadn't even realized how tense I was at his possible reaction to the news. "He said the same as you, and a part of me knew this may very well be the outcome of this war. My father…" he looked terribly pained at these words but determined to soldier on, "my father was… the Enemy has a will not even the strongest man can match. He was brave but foolish to contest the Enemy on his own grounds."

He was referring to the Seeing-Stone, but I held my breath for the rest. "It was Sauron that drove him to this end. You foresaw it by fire only it came by blade, but madness is not something you can predict. I do not hold you responsible and you should not either," he finished firmly, squeezing my hands, and I had forgotten I had been holding his so he would not hurt the bruises.

"But I knew—"

"Sight is not enough, and you cannot control the outcome of all Man, Elf and Dwarf. What will be will be."

I snatched my hands back, hearing the echo of inevitable in Denethor's voice. "Don't say that!" I snapped, feeling hot inside with helplessness and indignation that quickly fanned to ire. "I worked too hard to make sure that you would survive, that Rohan would be readier than before, and I worried too much about Éowyn and Faramir's chances to hear that it's all inevitable." I said the last word with extra venom to show my derision, and Boromir's face went slack with surprise. "If you must say inevitable at least call it a self-fulfilling prophecy so all our efforts are not belittled." I threw in heatedly, but the stunned silence that followed was suddenly awkward, and when Boromir only looked more cautious than combative did my simmering temper begin to flicker out.

"I apologize, I did not mean to offend."
That blew all the wind out of my sails, and I could sense now that everyone was gathered in the corridor behind me and probably wondering what the hell was wrong with me. "I'm sorry," I said for the nth time that day, now truly knowing the feeling of wanting the floor to swallow you whole. "I don't know where that came from. I apologize, Boromir, I—"

"This has been a trying day for all," Gandalf said smoothly over my embarrassment, while I gratefully stopped gibbering and tried not to look at anybody. Thankfully Êowyn and Êomer were not out here, but the hobbits, Aragorn, Gandalf, and at least three guards and a group of healers were. "Why don't you take a rest in your rooms, Miss Maddie, and Pippin will make sure dinner gets to you."

I nodded, sure there were bright spots on my cheeks left over from my huff and now turned to mortification, and they probably got brighter as soon as Boromir took my elbow in as gentle a hold as he could and started to guide me down the corridor. No one behind us said anything, and the moment we were around the corner I blurted out "I'm sorry" one more time.

Boromir let go of my elbow and looked like he might pause in the hallway before continuing on. He appeared more revived than earlier though, and he'd taken off the armor, which probably helped his overall look. "If there is anything to be forgiven, then it is forgiven. I know this has been a… difficult day. Now let this subject rest and do not apologize to me again. We have a saying in Gondor: guilt is the maggots of the soul; if you let it, it will become flies."

"What is 'maggots'?"

"Worms that grow into flies," he said easily, and I automatically shuddered at the translation. I didn't have much of an issue with bugs, but I still didn't find them pleasant. His diversion was successful though, and the discomfort from before was mostly gone.

"How is Faramir?"

"Resting, but well." He replied, and his eyes were a bit brighter when he looked at me. "He wanted to thank you, but you had already left. You must visit him tomorrow."

I wanted to ask if Faramir knew about Denethor, but I also didn't want to rock the boat so soon after it had calmed, so instead I stayed silent and ignored Boromir's sidelong glance.

He was leading me through some back corridors instead of the main wards and courtyard, which meant we avoided most of the prying eyes, though I'm sure gossip was spreading like wildfire. I gave half a thought to what Clarimond and Oriolda might hear once the evacuees returned, but it only made me feel hollow. Boromir stopped eventually at a door that looked identical to all the others in the hall but somehow he knew it was mine.

"Tomorrow there will be much discussion of the next step in the war. You have already said what we will do though."

"The Gates of Mordor," I supplied, a trickle of worry slipping into my voice again. Even though I had vehemently protested the idea of inevitability just ten minutes ago, I wasn't immune from my fear of it. "Boromir, in case there's no time or I don't see you, please be careful. I know it's battle and anything can happen, but… prove to me that it is not inevitable. That some things can change."

I don't know when I attached my trust in myself and my shaky memories to Boromir, but it was done and now it was too late to reverse. I just knew that if something happened to him I'd be shattered because it would undercut everything I had staked myself on. I didn't know how to articulate that intuitive understanding, nor did I think I could put that burden on him, but it made it
that much more important to ask him to be careful.

"All you can ask of me is to try, and I will promise you that," he said warmly, and I felt a rush of affection for him. Friendships in Middle Earth were formed quickly and stayed strong, a sharp contrast to all the empty friendships I'd had before. I'd known people infinitely longer than Boromir and trusted them half as much. "Now promise me that you will avoid the trouble that is your companion. Don't think I have forgotten the orc scouting party or the Ringwraith and the torch." His voice held a hint of warning and he looked more serious, but that was a promise I wanted to keep too.

"I promise to try my best."

There was a heavy pause for just a moment, and I half expected something more to happen, but nothing came of it, and Boromir just inclined his head and wished me a restful evening. I closed the door behind him and collapsed face first on the bed. Don't think, just sleep.
Chapter Summary

Maddie attends the War Council, but Gandalf and Boromir leave her a lot to think about.

Chapter Notes

Writer's Note: I know you've heard this before, but I am really sorry about the wait. This chapter is a bit heavy, but it got too long to add in the more lighthearted parts—that's for the next one. I also wrote a couple drabbles that I did on the side to the general HwF 'verse. I mostly wrote them to give myself a break without losing the Tolkien momentum. I want to thank Guibass too, who is basically my beta now, for giving the chapter a once over, inspiring some of the oneshots, and giving me vital feedback.

Many of the lines in the strategy session are paraphrased from the chapter "The Last Debate" in The Return of the King.

Dates: We have come back to the original timeline. The Battle of the Pelennor Fields ends on March 15th, 3019, and the battle planning session is the morning after. On the 18th, Aragorn will lead the army to the Black Gates.

Disclaimer: I make no money from this work. Anything recognizable from The Lord of the Rings belongs to J.R.R Tolkien. I also don't own Mary Poppins, Pinnochio, or Sun Tzu's The Art of War.

The following morning found me early, marginally bright, but definitely not bushy-tailed. Waking to someone pounding on your door is almost as unpleasant as a blaring alarm clock, except there's no snooze button. The cloud-cover of the days of the battle was slowly drifting away, so thankfully the sun peeked out some more. Right now though it was still in shades of orange and red, which meant it was dawn when I rushed to stumble into a dressing robe and open the door.

It was a summons for the war council later, which I had been expecting, though dreading might be a better word for it. Then not three minutes after I'd flopped back on the bed intending to get just five more minutes sleep, a second knock came. This time it was from a maidservant who left me a dress, a brown wrapped package of something soft, and matching slippers. The dress was, at first glance, very nice, in a soft grey color with muted trim that wasn't too flashy, with silvery string lacing up the front. Then I fingered it and realized it was much thinner than expected given it was still March and the weather chilly, especially in the mornings and evenings.

Which drew me to open the package and discover the real annoyance of the morning: the fiery red cloak that came with the dress. Did it really have to be bright red with a gold-embroidered pattern on the bottom? I asked the ceiling. The Lady of the Secret Fire thing was already too much, but someone had clearly made this for me with that title in mind, because the color and design
fluttered like flames when I shifted the fabric. It was flattering, but also very, very off-putting.

I frowned down at it, like that might somehow fix the problem, but alas, the cloak remained steadfast. Who had made it for me? Or rather, whom was I going to have to kill for commissioning it? I wonder if Pippin was clever enough to do this, but I thought of him as more of a hands-on prankster. And Boromir's sense of humor was... a little flat. Faramir? He did take the rumors more seriously, but he would have left a note or something right?

It was too early for thinking. After a couple slow moments to wash my face and jump-start my system without any caffeine, I laid out the dress and cloak to see if there was any way to lessen the impact of the damn thing. In a very real part of me, past the general annoyance and embarrassment, there was genuine concern about this inadvertent lie that was spreading. I couldn't do magic, I couldn't do any fancy healing or throw fire, but a cloak like this was just digging me in deeper. What would happen when the truth got out? Maybe I should just start reciting the story of Pinnochio everywhere I went.

Unable to do anything about those problems though, I instead fussed over the dress, pulling out at least two petticoats so the skirt looked less like a ball gown. Elvish dresses fell naturally around their legs, but the fancier a Gondorian's dress, the more the skirt fluffed out. I did as much as I could, then gave up and pulled on the dress, and then after a moment, reluctantly fastened the cloak on my shoulders like I'd seen it worn by others. If I were lucky, no one would comment on it at least.

I checked Pippin's room across the hall, but the door was shut and there was no answer when I knocked, so I went to find breakfast on my own. As I walked through the halls I didn't pass many people, but I was overly aware of my cloak and every eye that was drawn to it. To shorten the journey I cut past a courtyard on my way to the kitchens, only to spot Fastred sitting outside at a low table, a pair of crude crutches resting against the wall. "Fastred!" I said in surprise, having not seen him leave his room or even stand up yet. "Good morning."

"Ah! The Lady Maddie. And what a fine cloak that is you have."

Of course the first person I saw would comment on it.

"It's a little ridiculous I think." I stepped out on to the grass, but unfortunately Fastred looked to be just finishing. A servant came out to clear the plates and dishes and stopped short when she saw me. There was a shocked beat, and then she offered a deep curtsey.

"M'lady! Can I be getting you breakfast? Would you like to take it in the private garden or back in your room?"

Fastred watched amused as I managed to request a simple breakfast in the garden—I didn't need or want whatever private garden she was talking about, but I couldn't be sure she'd even listen to me—and tried not to show how awkward it was that the servant wouldn't even make eye contact with me.

"I'm afraid," he said as the maid ran off, completely forgetting to take away the remains of his breakfast, "that I've just finished eating and I must see a healer. But I bid you a good day, Lady Maddie."

"Thanks Fastred, but really, just Maddie is fine. Have you seen any of the Rohirrim yet?"

"Yes," he said, smiling genuinely for the first since his injury. "They moved me to a room with many of my fellow men. It was heartening to see them." Just then a nurse appeared on the edge of the courtyard, hovering for a moment like she was afraid to interrupt. When I stepped away she
came forward, curtseyed to me, then helped Fastred up, though he looked like he was adjusting well to mobility with one leg. It still stung to see him like that, and only reminded me that Éomer was likely going to be at this war council. I wondered if he was still very angry with me.

As Fastred left the same girl from before led me as quietly and politely as possible to a small adjacent garden with a small table set up and a generous spread. It wasn't a lonely meal, though it probably looked that way from afar. I sat by myself and ate almost mechanically. Thinking of Éomer had drawn me back to the upcoming strategy session. I wasn't sure what to tell the council beyond the same information I'd shared with Boromir and Faramir. By this point in the timeline there really wasn't much I could do anymore, but I hadn't forgotten what Gandalf had told me in that stable. I'd given them hope.

I certainly remembered those five days from Lothlórien to Rohan I spent with Boromir, getting drilled on anything and everything to do with the war, and then me in turn drilling him on war terminology. (Which I'd promptly forgotten because no one talked much detail of the war to me.) Still, it hadn't escaped me that Boromir had been more than a little fatalistic about the outcomes initially—and I'd treated it as a personal challenge to remind him that the Fellowship wasn't a total disaster, and this could work if you only stopped being so stubbornly pessimistic.

And lo and behold, Gondor triumphed yesterday.

I tried to hold on to that pride and bit of smugness that accompanied the memories, but it was fleeting at best. At the end of the day, well, what was inevitable? The original ending of the story, of what Denethor had seen? Or a mix of both?

I don't know how long I sat there with worry steadily gnawing my stomach, because I'd barely eaten a quarter of what was in front of me when a guard approached my table. He executed a deep bow that was probably warranted for someone a dozen steps up the social ladder rather than my humdrum self. "My lady, I am to escort you to the war council, on orders from the Steward." I nodded at the exceedingly formal guard, who snapped to attention when I stood, and followed him out of the courtyard. I resolutely ignored the whispers and glances of the girls that ran out to clean up my breakfast.

The room the council was being held in was stark and shadowed, on a corner of the seventh level I'd never seen before. A handful of torches had been lit, and there were narrow windows across one wall, but the room remained quite dark. Around a long table were situated heavy wooden chairs with burgundy cushions that looked about as soft as the stone floor. The room was wholly unwelcoming, though that might have been all the stares.

I must have been the last one summoned or the hardest to find, because it looked like everyone else was here already. I spotted Aragorn at the head of the table with Gandalf at his side, sporting a much cleaner dark grey outfit that was clearly new. Across from Gandalf were two dark-haired Elves that I was sure were Elrond's sons. I couldn't remember if I'd ever seen them in Rivendell, but there was no mistaking the relation and they were the only set of Elvish twins (or really any twins, in retrospect) that I'd met in Middle Earth. They wore Rivendell's colors, and in the darkness of the room I swore they were glowing a little. Or maybe the light hit those Elvish features just right.

Further down the table sat Faramir and Boromir, both in formal looking tunics, though Boromir still had chainmail under his, as though he couldn't bear to be parted from some kind of armor. Beside them was an older man who I didn't know. He was wearing the same royal blue with the bird emblem on it that I'd seen around and had long graying auburn hair. Across from the three was Éomer, who looked like he was still simmering a bit over last night, and I bit my lip when he didn't quite look in my direction, his lips downturned.
"Greetings, Lady Maddie." Gandalf said, breaking the silence as the door shut behind me. He offered me a seat beside him, and the unknown man across the table gave me an assessing look. I was very conscious of the cloak and the image of me it made. I wished vehemently I'd simply dealt with the cold and left it in my room.

"This is the Lady of Secret Fire? I am honored to meet another of the Maiar." He stood and bowed, and I paused to offer him an awkward curtsey, not sure where to even start contradicting him or what he'd meant by 'Maiar'. "I am Prince Imrahil of Dol Amroth."

"Pleased to meet you, uh, my lord. Please, just call me Maddie." I didn't know how to address him or really who he was, though the name was familiar. Was Dol Amroth a neighboring kingdom? Why was he here and not the rest of the Fellowship?

"For those of you who are not familiar, Lady Maddie has the gift of foresight in this war," Gandalf introduced, and the only person who looked surprised was Imrahil. I noticed that Gandalf did not correct Imrahil's assumptions either.

"There have been rumors, but I could not have guessed such magic as this. This is fortuitous indeed! I should hope your prophecy proves well for us all."

"So far they have," Faramir said, also not bothering to correct Imrahil's mistake about my lack of actual prophetic abilities. Apparently we were all just going to be pretend that I was a lot more capable than at least three people in this room well knew.

"Long have I considered this, ere Rohan's stand against Isengard," Gandalf began, thankfully drawing the attention away from me. "There are few options left to us, and fewer still that would not imperil the quest given to the Fellowship, nor that would stop the spread of darkness for long. When Lord Faramir told me of Lady Maddie's vision, it had seemed a desperate choice. But now I see it is not in folly, but indeed the only choice left to us amongst these days we find ourselves in." It was a winding and flowery introduction that was mostly losing me, but everyone else around the table listening raptly. Then he dropped the bomb: "We must march on The Black Gates."

Faramir and Boromir were already familiar with this, but it looked like for everyone else this was the first they'd heard of it. Éomer and Imrahil both glanced swiftly at Boromir, as though to confirm this craziness, while the sons of Elrond didn't react at all. Aragorn continued to mull the table as he had since I walked in.

It took a few moments for anyone to come up with a reply to that, but eventually Imrahil did. "Forgive me, Gandalf, but surely this would be the greatest jest in our history. We don't even have a vanguard's number of men compared to the last war waged in those Black Lands. The cost would be too great, and we could not hope to win. Not unless there is something more to this vision." Imrahil seemed rather shocked at the lack of seeming commonsense from everyone else, and he looked to me like I had some kind of magical answer—which I certainly didn't.

"We are snapping a trap for Sauron," Gandalf supplied in the absence of anyone else's defense. "This is no longer a war about winning, if it ever was. Denethor called his men to fall back and endure sieges, to defend the ever-shrinking territory of Gondor. But now there are fewer places we can fall to and less time to be gained by doing so. There has not, and will not, be any effort like the one that united Men and Elves in ages past."

"Gandalf is right, uncle," Boromir said, speaking up for the first time, and it took me a moment to realize he was addressing Imrahil. They didn't look much alike, so I wasn't sure if he literally meant his uncle or only as a term of familiarity. "We cannot strengthen our defenses anymore because victory matters not on the strength of our arms nor our walls. No blade could strike the
dark tower down, nor could all the men in the world defeat Sauron's armies. This war rests only on whether Sauron regains what is his." Everyone's faces tightened a little, but I did notice Aragorn giving Boromir an interesting look. I suppose this was quite a turn-around from the man who had hoped to use the Ring once.

"The Ring is long out of our hands, but I was, perhaps, the last of us to see the Ring-bearer," Faramir continued his brother's words after a moment. "He went to Cirith Ungol as predicted by the Lady Maddie. I warned him of the great spider there. What happens beyond the mountains of Mordor is blinded to us."

"Even to your sight?" Imrahil confirmed, looking at me again. The weight he was putting on my so-called visions was disconcerting.

"It's not 'seeing' as you think," I said gently, hoping to allay some of the rumors, "but I know it is empty land behind the mountains and full of orcs. I don't know where in Mordor Frodo and Sam are, only that they can reach the mountain together. It can be done." I remembered a slog up that hillside, tensions breaking at some points and eventually the fight at the top, but I couldn't guarantee anything and I wouldn't try. Only that it was perfectly possible, if highly improbable.

"I do not understand one thing," Éomer interjected. "If Sauron takes the Ring all will be in vain. But should he think we have it, why does he not march his forces against us? There is little to stop him between Mordor and here, and he knows as surely as us that the numbers do not weigh in our favor." Éomer sounded a bit desperate, but I also thought he had a fair point. Sauron didn't really benefit from sitting inside his fortress waiting for us to figure out what to do, and he could easily crush us if he wanted.

Aragorn, not Gandalf, answered him, surprising everyone. "Sauron does not have the Ring yet, and if he did we would know, for defeat would come for us on swift feet. His forces would sweep out from his gates and no place, from Elvish dominion to Dwarven hall would be safe. What stays his hand is uncertainty on who's hand the Ring lies."

Gandalf picked up that thread almost immediately. "The very idea that we might seek its destruction has not yet entered his darkest thoughts. Sauron is a creature of greed and evil, and cannot see beyond the bleakest parts of the heart. It is more to his favor to wait and see who arises with the power of the Ring. Only one hand can wield it, not many."

"Divide and conquer," I added, and the movement of the elves' heads caught everyone else's attentions, pinning me in my seat. "It's a... famous battle strategy in my homeland. Divide a kingdom, through politics, religion, or fear, and then when it fights with itself, it will be easy to conquer."

"You know much military history of your people?" Boromir asked, his voice hinting at surprise and his brow furrowed a bit.

"Only the most famous," I defended. I only really knew that phrase and the story of the Trojan horse. Off the top of my head nothing else jumped to mind, except maybe to never attack Russia in winter. Too bad The Art of War didn't exist here, or that would have been a perfect gift for Boromir.

"Which is why," Gandalf started again, with a bit of warning in his voice to indicate we'd gotten off topic, "we must draw his Eye to us. There are names he fears here, and an ancient enemy he has not forgotten. At this point, the wizard looked at Aragorn, and it took me a moment to recall that it was Aragorn's ancestor that had slain Sauron before. "Sauron must empty his land so that the Ring-bearer, though his chance is a frail thing, be given our best hope. We will be the bait, and in greed Sauron will snap his jaws shut on our trap."
This seemed to lay the floor open for more free discussion, and soon everyone was talking. Aragorn shared his brief foray with a Palantír, and there were reports from Éomer about Nazgûl movements and some small orc pack to the north his riders had found. Imrahil confirmed there were more ships of southern Gondorian soldiers coming up the river, and already Faramir had men scouting out Osgiliath and beyond, but so far no second assault looked likely.

"This leaves us to make the next move, but only for a short time I fear," Aragorn finally said, and the room quieted again. "With every moment spent here, Frodo comes closer to the mountain, and closer still to demise." I thought I saw Boromir's shoulders twitch at that. He'd never said anything about what happened between him and Frodo, but if I was remembering correctly he'd tried to take the Ring, succumbing to its power just for a moment. I think the guilt still weighed heavily on him. "This is our duty. Whether we die on the end of a sword outside the Black Gate or sitting here behind stone walls, there will be no new age so long as Sauron stands."

Everyone seemed to fall silent then, the king in all but name having spoken, but after a long moment Aragorn continued. "We are not yet on the brink of despair, but we ride the edge. If Frodo is to succeed we must end this war, even if it puts our lives in great jeopardy. We must march to the Black Gates with the hope the prophecy proves true, and the courage to face all the hordes of Mordor. But to waver is to fall. I will take no man to the gates of Mordor if he does not go so willingly and with brave heart."

It took a moment for everyone to absorb that. "Our father, Lord Elrond, shared this same counsel." A flash of grey eyes caught mine for the barest of seconds before twin heads dipped in respect for Aragorn. "We and the Elves that marched with us will not turn back."

"Rohan cannot ignore the aid that Aragorn and the brothers of Gondor have done us, and neither are we blind to the Ring and Sauron's effect on us all. You have Rohan by your side, Lord Aragorn." Éomer's words were particularly solemn, and he added a formal bow at the end, which Aragorn returned.

"You are my liege-lord, Lord Aragorn, crowned or not," Imrahil declared in a bold statement. "And so your wish is my command. My men will marshal to your side."

"My king," Boromir stood up, back ramrod straight, "as Steward I will gather all the men at my command and as many of the city-watch as can be spared. We cannot leave Minas Tirith unmanned, but I and the men that follow me will march with you wherever you lead."

Boromir didn't even get to take his seat before Faramir stood up. "Like my brother, the Rangers of Ithilien will not stand aside as a final assault is led. We march with you."

It was a feverish feeling that hung suspended in the room for a long moment until Gandalf spoke up. "The number of men does not matter here, nor is this a battle intended to be won. We are challenging Sauron to come out of his lair and fight those left in this world that could stop him. Though he does not have his greatest strength yet, it is many times more than all the Elves, Dwarves, and Men of this world have. We must only hold Mordor off and the Eye upon us until Frodo's quest is complete. It may very well cost us our lives, but if Frodo should fail..." Gandalf looked everyone in the eye, including me, with a heavy gaze. "Then it is only a matter of time."

The White Wizard's words rang out in a sobering declaration. This wasn't about victory at all; it was a sacrifice. Not quite lambs, but bulls to slaughter.

I kept my gaze fixed on the table just in case anyone wanted to double-check with me our chances. Every single one of these people in this room would be marching on the Gates of Mordor. They would have gone anyway, even without my counsel, but they would be going there...
trusting in my prediction of our victory and the hope I had brought when I said that Frodo could succeed. How many more men would take up arms knowing that the "Lady of Secret Fire" had told them it wasn't in vain? And if I was wrong?

Thankfully, Boromir stood and asked about Imrahil's men in Minas Tirith, and the discussion moved to the city's defense. Soon Éomer was giving estimates of the horses and men he had left, and Aragorn was talking about cavalry and foot soldiers. It quickly moved from prophetic talk to the logistics of the assault and the defense of Gondor. Faramir produced a map and soon everyone was pouring over it, even the elves. For the moment Gandalf and I were on the sidelines.

"I do believe your part in this may be over," he said to me in a low undertone, eyes on the group of men who were essentially organizing the fate of the world.

"Do you think so? It would be a relief." I'm not sure if I meant that though. A big part of me was relieved that the burden would soon be off my shoulders if this all worked out. But another part of me knew there was still this battle left, and wondered if there really wasn't something more I could do.

"Mithrandir," Faramir beckoned, and I was left to consider his words for only a moment before Gandalf was ushering me out. "Go take a rest in the gardens. I think there is a statue of a woman there with a bowl in her hands you might like. I will find you there in a moment."

My forehead crinkled for only a moment. It was an obvious dismissal, but I didn't much fancy staying to hear about guard units being shuffled around. So I left and wandered off into the garden the hall was situated by, this one full of tall shrubs and flowering bushes. Buds were already popping up on some branches, but winter hadn't quite fled the city yet, so the leaf covering was scattered. Still, it was beautiful because this was the first day the sun had punched through those clouds from Mordor, and it made even this garden seem cheery.

I wove my way around for a while, discovering a couple of statues without bowls, some benches and a small pond. Near the edge of the seventh level, looking down on a lower garden and a house, I found the statue Gandalf had mentioned. It was a woman in a long robe with both hands cradling a plain stone bowl. I stood on tiptoes, but there was nothing but a dry leaf inside. Her face was quite lonely, I thought, scarred by time and weather. She had empty eyes and straight lips without a single crease or mar, only blankly beautiful and rather sad.

There was no inscription or anything near the statue, and I couldn't quite see the point of it or why Gandalf thought it might be interesting to me. Still, there was a bench across from it, and a planter in the corner that was covered in an overflowing vine that had tiny little buds on each branch. So I sat and waited, trying to organize my millions of questions and not getting very far.

"This is the statue of Nestawen," said a gruff voice lined with age some time later. Gandalf stood beside the statue, inspecting it carefully, without a hello or greeting. He looked contemplative, like it had been a long while since he'd looked upon it. "She was a sister of a queen of Gondor, or sometimes the mistress of the king. Others say a nursemaid to the heir. The legends disagree."

I glanced at the unassuming stone woman. She didn't come across as particularly beautiful, no more than any marble face. "Why does she have a statue?"

"Her compassion for children. No one else has ever quite built such a reputation for the protection and nurturing of children than her. She was their champion when war stripped many children of their parents. She gathered the orphans in the city streets, the sickly from their begging knees, and loved them when no one else did. Treated them with respect and care when others treated them with scorn." He paused, speaking in that slow, thoughtful way of his. It gave me a moment to imagine it. It was easy to envision nun-like Nestawen sheltering homeless children, though I
suppose if she were the king's lover she wasn't much like a nun in that regard. "It was said she swayed the king and his court to, as they say, 'suffer the children but let them not suffer'."

I considered the statue, which was conspicuously missing children and any other obvious sign of Nestawen's legacy, and was curious where he was going with this. "Why does she have a bowl?"

"To catch their tears. Many grandmothers in Gondor tell their new-mothered daughters Nestawen's story. It is said that sometimes there is nothing you can do but wait for a child's tears to stop. Being there is what's most important."

That advice struck me as an oddly modern thing to say, and the story in general heartwarming, but I failed to see the connection to myself. "What are you saying, Gandalf?"

He turned away from the statue to look at me, and I got the feeling he was really taking me in for the first time. Then he came over to the bench and sat down. If he were Gandalf the Grey he might settle himself for a moment, like an old man taking a rest, or even pull out a pipe, but Gandalf the White was not like that. He was harder around the edges. "When I first met you, you were as unremarkable as Leadda Goodbody."

"Who?" More metaphors and stories? I internally sighed. How old was Gandalf, I wondered, that he could talk around you like an Elf?

"A hobbit girl. She would be about... oh, about thirty now I suppose. Not quite grown for a hobbit." He paused again to recall her before continuing. "That is, she was perfectly normal. Not too pretty, not too bright, but right round the middle, as hobbits say—what Bilbo said he always liked to be." I wasn't sure if Gandalf looked happier at the mention of Bilbo, or sadder that he'd robbed Bilbo of such normalcy.

"Of course... I guessed Bilbo had greater depth than even he knew," Gandalf muttered to himself in a deeper voice, and he was no longer looking at the statue so much as the distance.

"Lord Elrond is indeed wise, for he saw you when I saw only another Leadda Goodbody. Some time after the Council I asked him why he let you leave. His voice curled upward with curiosity. "He told me that he could not see your purpose, but that it is folly to stop the driven."

I had to think back to that last conversation with Lord Elrond, remembering his reluctance at letting me go and my insistence. It was hard to remember how I'd felt in Rivendell, it being so distant and such a different place than the realms of Men I'd inhabited for so long, but I must have been pretty persuasive.

"I did not see this same drive in you, or perhaps my fears of the Ring and its circumstances had already clouded me. By the time I saw your letter and discussed it at the Council in Rivendell, I had thought we needed a warrior, a strategist, or even a healer..." Gandalf looked at me very seriously, as though he had a hundred questions to ask and yet not one passed his lips. "But what we needed was compassion."

He didn't look at the statue of Nestawen, champion of children, but I did again. That face I'd first thought lonely and sad didn't stop looking that way, but suddenly I knew why: she was lonely and sad for the children. The hungry and abandoned ones that no one wanted to care for, the overlooked, the hidden costs of war.

"You are a different person than the one who stood stuttering before Barliman Butterbur," Gandalf continued almost without pause. "The woman that fearlessly saved Boromir was the one we needed—the one who threw fire at a Nazgûl. There are tens of thousands of men with swords and shields who fight better than you, and a hundred strategists who would stay their hand in
doubt and act only on the least risk unlike you."

Gandalf was giving me a piercing look I could feel boring through the side of my head, but I couldn't look at him. He had cited the two craziest decisions I'd ever made, both with massive risk and both ending in my injury and getting yelled at by Boromir. But they were both my most successful, with the most gained. I waited for a moment until the feel of his stare was gone, and when he didn't continue I had to ask the most obvious question:

"But why? Why me? Why someone from... so far away? Why, when I knew that the outcome would be alright even without me here?" Why why why, that was all I wanted to know. I could live without how, I could survive without detail, but at least to know why someone like me, who wasn't a Tolkien fanatic, who didn't know any survival skills, who could seemingly bring nothing to the table, had been pulled into this world and set on this course. What part of 'compassion' made me the right choice?

"Would Boromir agree? Faramir? No... no, the outcome would not be the same," he said kindly, though the White had shed the grandfatherly appeal of the Grey. "Compassion—your heart—drives you more than you know. It is what gives you strength, when you have feel like you have none."

I didn't know what to make of that, but I found myself unconsciously reaching up to touch my chest, like somehow I could confirm that. It seemed so... insubstantial. And yet the way Gandalf was looking at me said a hundred contradictions of that thought.

"As for why... Most of us will never know the hows or whys of the world," he said solemnly, looking me dead in the eye, "and that is the way it should be."

I sighed quietly, unable to even muster up a great deal of annoyance anymore. I'd known he was going to say something like that, just as I knew that might very well be the answer I was always going to get.

"Are you sure, Gandalf? I am perhaps the least qualified person to do this. I could name a hundred more suitable people from my homeland, if you really needed someone from so far away. Surely a little knowledge alongside compassion would have worked?" I sounded almost bitter, but he only watched me with those wise eyes that seemed far older than the Grey's.

"I? Not I," he said slowly. "No person could know all the workings of this world, not even if he had ten thousand years to learn it. Only know that in all my years and wisdom, I have learned this: few things are random, and one's quality is most often revealed under the most extraordinary of circumstances. Any Dwarf can tell you each gem is unique, and any Elf can tell you no two leaves are alike. So too is each person."

It was a lot to absorb, and while it didn't really answer any of my endless why's, it did feel like something in my chest settled. Maybe it was like Bilbo's journey, when he said to me that he'd started out with a forgotten handkerchief and finished with lifelong friends.

"But you know what I did when I got back to the Shire? After I'd swatted those Sackville-Bagginses out of my smial and taken back my silver spoons, of course. Well I went right out and used a silver coin made in Erebor to buy the finest silk handkerchief in Hobbiton. And I've kept it ever since. Hardly need more than one, really, though you couldn't have told me that before I'd left with those dwarves."

"Gandalf..." I said slowly, because I did still wonder, and this might be my only chance to ask. "Do you know how I'm here? Or even a little why?" I knew I was likely to get another version of the "the world works in mysterious ways", but I felt like I should ask just one more time.
He seemed to think on it a moment, but only a short one. "How could be simple: magic. The will of others. But why is a question we must all answer for ourselves, though there may be no answer at all. Why was Frodo tasked with this quest, and not another? Why Aragorn, of all his line, will return to the throne of his forefathers?"

He adjusted his aged, knobby fingers on the fine wood of his staff, considering. I waited, no longer feeling as fidgety and eager as before, but ready to hear if he had anything more.

"For most, a purpose is not given, it is made. Were you not at a council of kings and lords because you made it your purpose? Did you not influence the tides of war and the direction of one man's life in particular, as was your purpose?" Gandalf asked me, though it seemed rhetorical. He knew as well as I that from that letter onward that had always been my purpose: to at least push the war a little more in our favor; to save Boromir.

Gandalf stood quietly, his robes whispering on the stone path as he approached the statue.

"That was my purpose," I murmured, because he was right. And the two most daring things I'd ever done had also been my most important choices, even if they'd been totally spontaneous. "But when this is over… when I started, all I wanted was to go home."

"Do you truly want to go back?" He asked mildly, turning a little to look at me.

I opened my mouth with an automatic affirmative, but it closed before I could say the words. I thought of the magnificent places I'd been and all the ones I hadn't. I thought of all the things I'd done, but also ones I'd never tried. I thought of all the wonder and magic I'd seen here, and how there was still more I'd yet to find. But most importantly, I thought of the people I had met, and how I might feel knowingly leaving them behind.

But there were people I'd left behind in my home too: my parents, my friends, my sister. There were places I hadn't been there either: Rome, China, Egypt. And would I miss the skyline of our cities, if I never had the chance to see them again? The food, the familiarity? Didn't my world have a little magic too, if you knew where to look? Did I miss it now?

"I don't know."

"Then there is your answer."

Before I could protest that it wasn't an answer at all, Gandalf straightened from a bit of a hunch he'd adopted, and swept back out into the garden.

"Did you ever regret it? Even just a little?" I asked the statue of Nestawen. I'd been thinking and thinking for at least a good hour here, in this cozy corner of the garden, but I hadn't been getting anywhere. Did I want to go home? It seemed obvious one second—I didn't have a home here, I had no family here, my future was incredibly uncertain—and on the other it seemed even more obvious I should stay—I'd made such friends here, this place was wondrous, I could do anything I wanted. I couldn't seem to find which one was right for me, and I felt like I couldn't leave until I did. The thought of running into someone on my way to Thunor was very unappealing, but there was no one else to talk to. At least a stone statue couldn't judge.

"I mean, did you ever wash and feed and hug and love a dirty, sad orphan, and then go home and just feel tired? Wrung out?"

Nestawen didn't answer.
"That's how I feel. But I don't regret it." And it was true; I could feel that down to my bones. "It wasn't a choice to come to Middle Earth, but I don't regret what I've done here. I kicked that guy in Bree, and I fought Elrond to travel south. I made that choice to leave Minas Tirith and jump the fence in Edoras. I could have hid from the orcs attacking Boromir, could have galloped Thunor into the safety of the city from that Ringwraith monster. But I didn't, and I don't regret it."

I don't know why that was poignant to me, but I felt like somewhere inside me I'd always been waiting for the regret to hit. To wake up one day and realize that everything I was doing was phenomenally stupid, and I should just go back to my day-job and my Thursday drinks with friends, gossiping about coworkers, and living the life I'd led before. But the rational part of me knew that things would be different when I returned. Like Alice back from the rabbit hole, you don't walk away unmarked.

"I feel like I've spent all day working—or maybe it's almost all year—and now I'm tired. But I'm not out of it yet. Éomer's still mad, the big battle is still coming, and Frodo is maybe climbing up that mountain as I sit here and talk to an inanimate object." The tail end became angry, and I exhaled harshly to let it go, because I was mixing up my current fears with the more far-reaching ones. I leaned against the stone wall and tilted my head back to look at the sky.

It was a little grey and cloudy, but there was a far-off flock of birds crossing above me. I breathed in the scent of the garden, the cool mountain breeze, the crunchiness of upcoming spring. There was a distant noise of water, and maybe footsteps far away if I strained my ears. I couldn't say I felt relaxed, but the solidness of the stone under me, and the bite of the wind made everything a little realer.


"Is it common in your land to speak aloud to yourself?" Boromir's voice startled me out of my stupor, and I jerked upright, almost knocking my head against the stone behind me. He was standing on the garden path beside the statue, looking at me curiously. "Gandalf said you might still be here."

"I was thinking," I said defensively. I felt raw from all the personal digging I'd just been doing, and talking to someone else was like rubbing a wound against sandpaper.

He opened his mouth like he might ask about what, but he seemed to read my surly face and simply stopped. I had to give him credit for not poking the porcupine. "I'm fine," I assured him, when I started to recognize the creasing of his brow. Had I come to know Boromir so well in such a short time I could guess his thoughts already? "Gandalf simply… said a lot of things."

"He often speaks of grave things," Boromir agreed slowly. "I should dread you ever meet the Lady Galadriel if this is the look it puts upon you."

"Galadriel..." I murmured, realizing that was another person of great wisdom I had never consulted. I hadn't known the first time I went through Lothlórien, and the second had been in a rush. But once the war was over—should everything work out and Sauron was destroyed, still an if in my books—I could go to her. She might be no more direct than Gandalf, but couldn't she read minds? Maybe she'd do a better job sorting the mess than I did.

"You flit from place to place, don't you?" Boromir sounded almost tired, like he knew exactly what I was thinking.

"I can't help it. My home is… far away. I don't have one here." Boromir's expression turned sad, not unlike the one he'd worn when I told him I couldn't recognize the stars. He looked about to
speak, but I cut him off. "Maybe Lady Galadriel knows if I can go home."

Now a frown was on Boromir's face, a deep one. "Long has it been since you saw it last. Is your yearning still so strong?"

"Of course!" I was almost indignant, but I knew it was probably a fair question. While I couldn't give Gandalf a straight answer on whether I wanted to go home or not, I could say easily that I missed it. My family was irreplaceable, and I would really appreciate pizza being invented.

"I left Gondor on a campaign to the south and east for over a year once." Boromir stepped closer, and almost hesitantly sat down beside me. He was a familiar, comforting presence in a way Gandalf was not. The wizard came with upheaval, the world turning on its head, but Boromir remained as steadfast as he could be. I could appreciate that, when I routinely lost hold of the reins of my own life. "I dreamed of my welcome with silver trumpets, of Faramir and my father's faces at my return. I longed for the foods I could eat again, the places I could go, the smells of the city I grew up in."

He looked down at his boots, remembering, and his hair fell about his face like a curtain until he absentmindedly pushed it behind an ear.

"But when I returned, the bright city walls were greyer than my imaginings, and the trumpets were brass. My father was… proud, but there was no embrace. Faramir was gone on patrol, and while the foods and smells and places were all there, they were not quite as I remembered. It was not as sweet a homecoming as I'd dreamt."

I frowned, wondering if Boromir had felt like that again when he returned to Minas Tirith with me. Obviously a Ringwraith at the door is a poor welcome, but to come back only to see your father's mind fragmented, the city under siege, the men without hope…

I had to sit back and digest it, and so I missed Boromir's searching look.

It was true that long memories tended to remember the absolute best and worst. High school is a nightmare blur, summers are all dreamy afternoons and late night laughs. But the everyday living gets forgotten. Plenty of high school days were utterly normal, and many summer days were boring and rainy. The more nostalgic and homesick you become, the more you sugarcoat the past. How many times had I sat in my college dorm room and longed for home cooking, only to come home and think I'd had better? Or recalled the amazing conversations I'd had with an old friend, only to meet up and find talk stilted? I couldn't remember a solitary incident, but it seemed to be the theme.

"Forgive me, I did not mean to upset you."

"No, no, you've just… given me something to think about." Boromir looked like he might say more, but I waved him off. "You were looking for me?" It was a bald attempt at a subject change. Something about Boromir's honest interpretation and personal experience had hit me in that hollow space I'd kept open for home, and it hurt.

"Ah, yes, the members of the Fellowship, particularly Gimli and Legolas, wished to meet you properly." He sat up straighter on the bench, and it seemed to strike us the same time what a strangely intimate moment this had become. Boromir stood awkwardly and after a belated second offered me a hand up.

"Oh. Oh! Um… of course." I took his hand to stand and then self-consciously brushed the back of my skirt only to touch the material of the cloak. "Actually, Boromir, I was wondering if you knew where this cloak came from."
He actually seemed to notice the cloak I was wearing now. "I do not. But you know, Faramir believes you to be a lesser Maiar, or at the very least an apprentice to one."

"If you see him before me, ask him if it was from him, and do me a favor and correct him. I am not a Maiar, whatever that is, and I can't do a spell to save my life." I felt like I was on even ground again complaining about the rumors. Ironically, the reminder of the cloak brought all those sour feelings back, which made me feel a lot more human after all that introspection with Gandalf and then Boromir.

"Maiar are the servants of the Valar. I had not known until recently that Gandalf was among their number." I wasn't sure if I'd already known that or not, but I was quite sure Gandalf would have mentioned something if I was unwittingly a Maiar.

"Well I can safely say I'm not one of them."

"I do not know who gifted you that cloak, though I will ask Faramir if he knows." Boromir eyed it curiously, and I pulled one side around so he could better see the flame pattern. His expression was hard to read, but I got the feeling he didn't quite know what to make it. I felt justified in thinking it quite silly. "The Fellowship is below in one of the fountain courtyards, if you wish to see them."

"Do you think I can get a new cloak before that? Even something very plain." I didn't really want to see Pippin's reaction to it, since he well knew how vehemently I rejected that ridiculous title. He'd find it all quite hilarious.

"You would deny Pippin the chance to see it?" Boromir quipped, before apologizing for that one. "Forgive me, but you may offend the giver if you should wear another cloak." I sighed, because I knew Boromir was right. "Come, Miss Maddie. I would call for a servant, but Legolas was singing earlier and most could not be pulled away."

"Don't you like Elvish singing?" I had to ask, mostly because I didn't want to fall back into silence.

We discussed Elvish song merits—gorgeous voices, great stories—and downfalls—too much emotion, generally couldn't get through the whole thing without sleeping or crying—as I followed Boromir out of the winding garden and back through the seventh level. There were a number of guards we passed who all inclined their heads to him, reminding me that he was the Steward. It was proving easy to forget because in this time of war Boromir really was more of a general than some political figure. Plus, Aragorn was running around, and to my understanding the Steward something like the vice president.

He left me off a level below and around the corner from where I could hear laughing voices, including a distinctly Elvish one. Several servant girls jumped at the sight of Steward Boromir and I and ran off. I watched him hurry off a moment later, wondering where along the way that prickly demeanor had given way to such a generous heart. Then two hobbits down the corridor broke into a clapping song, and I went to join them.
The courtyard the remnants of the Fellowship had found themselves in was large and stone-rimmed, commanding a view to the south that encompassed fields, far off hills, and the glittering line of the Anduin. It was hard to focus on the impressive scenery though when there was such a mishmash of races occupying the garden: two curly-haired hobbits, a stout dwarf with an impressively braided beard, and a thoughtlessly graceful Elf. It made quite the image.

"Miss Maddie!" Pippin cried as he spotted me hovering in the entranceway, and before I knew it I'd been offered a seat on the hobbit's picnic blanket. It could have made a tent for the two of them it was so big. Gimli leaned against a bench nearby and Legolas perched on the edge of a garden wall. The Elf definitely stuck out in the persistent gloom of the day and the drabness of the wet spring weather.

Renewed introductions were made, since I had only fleetingly met Legolas and Gimli and hadn't really been in any shape to make nice. "Legolas, Gimli, this is Lady Maddie," Pippin introduced. I nodded my head to both of them, and Legolas returned it. Gimli wasn't quite so gracious though.

"Aye, the Seer!" the dwarf said immediately, and I tried not to groan too loudly.

Pippin, of course, couldn't keep his mouth shut. "She much prefers the Lady of Secret Fire, actually."

"I do not!" I said exasperatedly, but I don't think I was heard over Pippin outright laughing at my expression. Merry at least looked like he was struggling not to. "I am not a seer and not of some secret fire. So please, just call me Maddie." I really didn't want to debate how much neither title fit me at all.

"Well that's an awfully fine cloak for a lady with no title," Merry protested with a too-big smile,
"and I'd say you're a seer of some kind, since you knew a tidy bit about the battle before it'd even begun."

"The cloak," I ground out, having temporarily forgotten I was wearing it, "was a gift that I can't give back yet. And I can't do magic like Gandalf." I was becoming a broken record, I swear.

"You'll have to take some title, lass," Gimli advised, once the hobbits had stopped joking about fires and prophecies. "People like to understand these things, even if it's just an empty name. Why, that's what half of noblemen are, and they haven't done anything to earn it!"

"It's why Pippin here was the so-called Prince of Hobbits," Merry tacked on, thumbing at Pippin with a smirk. "No one wants to hear tales of a not-quite-grown hobbit when you can hear about lost kings, war heroes, and princes. Easier to think he's from the grand kingdom of the Shire than just some Took." Pippin nodded along, only realizing a moment later that he'd basically been called the sidekick of the story.

I glanced at Legolas, who fit the mold perfectly as an Elven prince, but he was looking off and a ways into the distance, not paying any attention to the conversation. Gimli and Merry had a point, but it still seemed disingenuous to take a title with such assumptions like "Lady of the Secret Fire".

"There's a story in my homeland about a wizard—called the Wizard of Oz—who pretended to be a very great wizard. But then the people learned he was just a fake, and he lost everything. I do not want people to think I am lying." I'd thought about it a lot since the title was reluctantly bestowed on me, and all I could think was someone was one day going to expect bangs and flying broomsticks and all I had was a dead cell phone.

"Eh, he sounds like one of the minstrels on the caravans," Gimli said dismissively.

"It sounds like an interesting story," Legolas said suddenly, his lilting voice a jarring juxtaposition against Gimli's gravely one. "If there were time I should like to hear it."

"It's far too long, and I don't know how much I remember." I didn't even know when I'd last seen that movie, but it had been a good long while before I'd even come to Middle Earth. As I was thinking about it I missed whatever Merry was saying, something about cider and stories, but soon enough Gimli was addressing me with darker talk.

"I heard there was a war council in the early hours—will we be seeing any more of Aragorn, Boromir, or the wizard?" The dwarf rolled his 'r' heavily, and strung words together so it was a bit hard to understand him.

"Um… I suppose so. The army will be marching in the next day or two I believe."

"Going where?" Pippin asked, wrestling from his pocket a huge apple that made his hand seem even tinier. He took a big bite and through a mouthful asked, "Chasing down the rest of the orcs?"

"Pippin!" snapped Merry, smacking the back of his head. "Your sister'd twist your ear if you talked with a mouth full of food in front of her!" Pippin hastily swallowed.

"To Mordor, actually. It's all rather complicated," I answered. It wasn't really, but I didn't feel much up to talking about it.

Luckily it looked like Gimli didn't want to hear talk of the Black Lands either, because he eyed Pippin's apple and didn't ask more. "Aye, well, I'll be keeping my axe sharp," he said gruffly, chewing a bit on the end of his pipe though it was unlit.

"Alas but for the necessity of it," Legolas added, somehow looking both put upon and
otherworldly at the same time. Only Elves seemed to be able to pull that off.

"Then let's not be gloomy!" Pippin cried, at least this time not around partially chewed apple. "Come, Legolas, tell us what was in that song of the sea you were singing not long ago, and we'll see about a bite for lunch."

"More like a feast!" Merry complained. "I haven't eaten since breakfast." He too was eyeing Pippin's apple. My stomach started to grumble at the thought.

"I'll have you know, Master Hobbit, that outside your Shire that's how it is. Second breakfast indeed," Gimli said smartly. The hobbits looked ready for an argument about the merits of more than three meals a day, so I started looking around for a servant. There was a hallway that wrapped around the far edge of the courtyard, but I hadn't seen anyone pass through.

"Should we find someone?" It came out a bit dubious, but Gimli just snorted.

"No finding needed. Legolas! I don't think my ears have bled enough from your Elvish music." I had to laugh at that, and even Legolas was sporting a half-smile. After a moment to let the hobbits' giggles die down Legolas hummed a couple notes then sung maybe three lines of a song, slow and gentle, rocking the words the way the currents of the ocean swayed a boat. I knew immediately it was about the sea even though it was in Elvish, you could just feel the flow of the water in the tune.

And then a servant dropped something in the hall and the hobbits immediately burst into laughter.

It was funny, I couldn't deny that, but I also understood where those girls were coming from. Elves could be overwhelming even when they're doing nothing but staring into the distance, so I certainly didn't blame the maidservants for getting flustered by the only Elf they'd ever heard singing. Let's face it too; Legolas was handsome by anyone's standards, even if he had that ethereal Elven quality that I found a little too alien.

Since Legolas had a secretive smile on his face it was obvious he'd known perfectly well what would happen. While the others were still chuckling, I got up and caught the poor woman just standing up with the remains of a glass cup in a napkin. I don't know why I'd been expecting one of the teenage girls, because like the currently very embarrassed one before me, most of the servants in this area were middle-aged.

"I was wondering if we might be able to have a little lunch," I asked her politely, curtsying back when the woman hurriedly tried to follow the rules of formality. "And I'm sorry about that."

"Oh! Uh, no, no! I'll have them b-bring lunch right away." She looked roundly mortified which was making me embarrassed now, so I let her go without any specifics and headed back to the courtyard. Legolas glanced up at me with that half smile as I told the others lunch would be on the way.

By this point Merry was insistent on Legolas translating bits and pieces of the song for us, and soon talk turned to the ocean itself. Gimli spoke of the Long Lake near Erebor and how, if you stood on the northernmost shore, you could almost imagine it was the sea. Then the hobbits shared stories of the three White Towers far to the west of the Shire, which they said you could see the ocean from. Pippin insisted Bilbo had gone out that far once before, but Merry disagreed, and there was a short squabble over the truth.

"Have you ever seen the ocean, Miss Maddie?" Pippin asked, once the matter had been settled. (Bilbo had gone closer than any hobbit, but maybe not quite to the foot of the tower, and certainly not up one!)
"Of course," I said thoughtlessly, only realizing a moment later that by the trend of the conversation none of them had ever seen it. Merry and Pippin looked pleasantly surprised and Legolas rather wistful.

"I've heard that it's totally flat, even when there's waves. Some say it's as deep as a mountain is tall!" Pippin said.

"Horrid dangerous though," said Merry. When he wasn't planning mischief he was the voice of reason to Pippin's infectious enthusiasm. "You'd need the right boat to even go out on it. It's nothing like a river."

"I've heard it's like fields of grain the color of stormy skies to the edge of the world," Gimli put in after a moment, strangely poetic for a dwarf. "At night it's black as the sky, but the waves that crash on the shore are white as the moon." There was surprised silence in response to that, and the dwarf seemed to realize that he hadn't quite sounded like himself. "We get pearls from far southern traders sometimes, and that's what they say," he defended gruffly.

"It is something like that," I filled in. I'd been to ports and waterfronts and beaches often enough that the sight of the sea didn't stir much in me. I was beginning to understand the meaning of 'taking what you have for granted'. "It is beautiful, and there's nothing like it."

"When did you see it?" Merry asked, shifting up from where he laid sprawled on the ground.

"Oh, I didn't live too far from it. In the summers my family and I would go sometimes to the… the place were the sand meets the water." I frowned at the missing word. It was less and less often that I found myself missing vocabulary, but sometimes a word as common as "beach" simply failed me. Somehow as long as I'd been here no one had said it.

"The shore?" Merry asked, and before I could answer Legolas stirred, looking south towards the river, attention moved completely away.

"There are gulls on the far horizon!" We all looked over, but Legolas' Elven eyesight was a lot better than ours. "Their voices bring trouble and wonder to me, of salt-air and waves. The songs sing of the sea as a place like no other, and one I've never seen."

Elves didn't generally have as readable expressions and voices as everyone else (and Dwarves' beards hid theirs), but there was something painful in both his excitement and longing. I had no idea what would become of Legolas after the War of the Ring, but at that moment I didn't know whether to hope he would find the ocean, or fear that he might one day.

"It can't be that far from Minas Tirith," I murmured softly. I was unsure of the distance, particularly if you're traveling by horse, but seabirds only went so far inland. I couldn't see them, but the wind was blowing their cries towards us, and they were vaguely familiar to me. They must have come up following the boats from the south.

Legolas' face was a mix of desire and sadness as he watched the birds dip and lift in the air. "If we should come out of the battle in tact, then it pains my heart to say that it will find a way back to where the gulls cry. All my kinsmen hide within them a longing for the surge of the sea, and now my heart too has been stirred."

It was a bit surprising that someone who had been alive for so long had failed to see the ocean at some point or another, but I got the feeling that Legolas didn't quite realize how powerful the yearning would be until the sound of what had to be seagulls. It was curious that he found them so haunting when I mostly associated seagulls with stolen hotdogs.
"There are other things to see," Gimli said quickly and loudly, easily covering the gulls' cries with his booming voice. Suddenly the hobbits too were piping in to tell Legolas to wait on visiting the ocean, as though he had proposed to leave at once and never come back.

"You can't leave yet, Legolas! We've hardly finished this journey and you're planning on another." That was Pippin.

"Pip's right! People still need you here!" Merry added.

Gimli seemed to carry the most weight though, and I vaguely recalled Legolas and his' friendship growing with the Fellowship. "If all the fair folk should leave, those of us doomed to stay will forever lack. There are many places in these lands you haven't yet seen."

"Indeed," Legolas said with laughter in his voice, seeming pleased by everyone's unexpected protests. He was far more jocund than any other Elves I'd met, and I wasn't sure if that was just the company, the elation from a successful battle, or just plain Legolas. Either way, I was definitely going to have to introduce him to Erynion. "I have promised to return to Fangorn when our deeds are done, so the call of the waters must wait a time."

"Well if you're headed that way you might as well come to the Shire!" Pippin added eagerly, and Gimli nearly roared with laughter.

"The Shire's not so near there, Master Hobbit," he chided gently, still snorting.

"I would not mind seeing the homeland of the Hobbits. I imagine it a peaceful place," Legolas said kindly.

That set off the hobbits of course, who always had a good word to say about their beloved Shire. The moment they drew breath though Gimli just had to bring up the mountain, so of course Legolas mentioned his forest. Before long I was trying to squirm out of saying anything definitive about my homeland because the others had noticed I hadn't added my two cents.

"Is it near a forest, or perhaps near mountains? Or no, by the ocean? You said it was not far from the water." Pippin asked curiously, and I leaned back on my hands wondering if I should just outright lie.

"It has all of those."

"It is as big as Gondor?"

"I don't know how big Gondor is, but perhaps," I hedged, and that seemed to satisfy them. Legolas didn't seem too curious, still caught up in the gulls, and Gimli was mollified when I said we had tall mountains, though none like Erebor.

The talk turned to travel in general, and the hobbits begged the story of the Paths of Dead from Legolas and Gimli, which had become as much a part of the rumor mill about Aragorn as the secret fire thing was to me. It wasn't a particularly happy story, but it certainly made Aragorn sound heroic, and Legolas couldn't help a jab or two at Gimli. The grumbling dwarf denied being nervous in what amounted to a massive catacomb, firmly stating that no dwarf would ever be uncomfortable underground.

We were interrupted by lunch, brought out by no less than six maidservants, though I'm not sure that many were strictly necessary. I had to cover my mouth at how many sneaky looks they shot Legolas, who was blithely ignoring them and talking to Gimli. The hobbits were laughing to each other too, at least until the food was laid out on a second picnic blanket. There was roast duck cooked in a sizzling dark red marinade, with carrots and potatoes arranged neatly around it. There
were two soft cheeses and bread on another dish, with butter and sweet jams laid out side by side. I saw a pan full of steamed asparagus and mushrooms, and what looked like a river fish arranged on rice that smelled of onions and garlic and basil. There was even a chilled, creamy soup that looked like clam chowder at first glance, but smelled of sweet potato and bright herbs. It all made my stomach rumble, and I was almost as quick as a hobbit to snatch up a plate.

There wasn't much talk during lunch as we ate, cleaning through dish after dish. The hobbits discussed exactly what ingredients must be in the marinade while Gimli dribbled juices all through his beard. I was savoring all the flavors since I hadn't eaten like this in a long time. Unfortunately I didn't have anywhere near the capacity to eat like the others, so I was the first to put down my plate. I felt almost ready to burst and drowsily contemplated what Westron term would translate closest to "food coma".

Legolas, who ate as neatly and thoughtfully as Elves everywhere, finished up by slowly sipping the soup, like each mouthful required careful thinking. Then there was Gimli, who looked like he might have tried to compete with the hobbits and then come to regret it. Merry and Pippin, however, were still amiably joking and eating hearty scoops of potatoes and vegetables while I thought one more grain of rice might tip me right over.

"Where do they put it all?" I heard Gimli mutter to himself, rubbing his belly like it was sore.

Legolas was looking up at the sun to judge the time. "My kin will have finished their meals by now. I will take my leave and seek them." He stood up easily, really almost springing, and I sat up too.

"Wait, to the Elves? The ones from Lothlórien too?"


"I'm looking for an Elf there too." It took me a longer moment to roll to my feet.

"Then we shall go together. They are camped near the river."

We said our goodbyes to the hobbits—who were still eating—and Gimli, who looked ready to roll over and nap. I caught sight of some hurried maids darting around a corner as we left the courtyard; I'm sure trying to glimpse Legolas.

We took the horses down to the first level, Thunor happy to get out as always. Legolas didn't ride with any tack, which was an unexpected surprise for the groom. The poor guy had fallen over himself to help the both of us prepare the horses, only to see Legolas singing to his white steed and the horse very nearly dancing out the stable after him without even reins on. I had glanced dubiously at Thunor, sure that without the stirrups I would never be able to get up on him, let alone stay seated without the saddle. Elves, I thought, shaking my head.

Once we were free of the stable and I'd managed to wiggle around with the cloak so I wasn't sitting on it or tangled in it, Legolas and I rode down through Minas Tirith to the fields below. The evacuees of the city were returning, so the streets were quite busy with people clearing up rubble from the streets and starting repairs to many of the damaged edifices. We were given a very wide berth as we rode, people stopping and staring and more than a little pointing. Legolas managed not to look self-conscious at all, which was quite the feat in my opinion, because I was trying hard not to make eye contact.

The bottom two levels were the biggest messes, and I could only imagine how distraught the people who lived there must think of the damage. Still, we passed by many teams of people leveling boulders off of crushed houses and cleaning up debris, even families and children getting
involved. I wondered if Rylan, Merewald, and Adelaide were somewhere here clearing out the remains of their home. I promised myself I would find out what happened to them.

Legolas led the way out of the city walls, through the broken gate that already a group of men were scrambling to take apart so a temporary one could replace it, and out on to yesterday’s battlefield. They had removed all the bodies which made it look infinitely better, but it was impossible to hide the churned up dirt, the flies that still buzzed around, and the general smell of the place. The heaviest fighting had been in patches, including right at the gate, so I pushed Thunor into a canter to escape the worst of it. I didn't want to remember what I'd seen riding out to Aragorn, but it was impossible to forget it.

We rode towards the river, eventually seeing a massive city of tents that had to be most of the Rohirrim army, along with the southern Gondorians who’d come up the river with Aragorn, and the Grey Company. Minas Tirith was in no shape to accommodate them all, so it seemed most of the outside armies were camping here.

"The Grey Company occupy the northern flank," Legolas said as we slowed to a trot, sweeping an arm out to point to a flat area that had fewer tents than anywhere else. "You say you are looking for a Lothlórien Elf?"

I nodded, but Legolas didn't ask for more detail. As we approached, I realized that most of the Rangers and Elves just slept on bedrolls on the ground, rather than inside tents like the other soldiers. There were groups here and there of Rangers who paid us no mind, most sharpening weapons or fixing armor. I wondered where the Lothlórien Elves were and whether Erynion really was among them.

Legolas called out an Elvish greeting to a group of Elves sitting beside the river. They were dressed in the pale silver and brown of the Golden Wood, no longer in the plated armor I'd seen the day before. There was a flurry of conversation I couldn't understand before Legolas waved to me and rode off without a single explanation. I was left staring at a group of about ten Elves that were clearly waiting for me to speak.

"I'm looking for… or well… I was wondering if an Elf named Erynion came with you." I shifted awkwardly on Thunor, wondering if I should dismount, or whether I would look stupid if they immediately told me to ride off somewhere else. Elves, especially in groups like this, made me nervous because of their eerily accurate ability to read people, along with how unnaturally beautiful they were. Lothlórien Elves were also less welcoming than the Rivendell ones, compounding this.

"Erynion is among our number. He may be with the others at the forge," one of them supplied, pointing in the direction of a large group of people. I could see a fair number of blonds, so I supposed that was what he was talking about.

"Thank you very much."

I wheeled Thunor around and rode over to the crowd, which was set up around a temporary forge to fix the most dented and broken armor. Most of the rangers looked to be here, as did a good number of Elves.

I dismounted just as several of the Elves nearby turned to glance at me. "Erynion?" I asked, feeling uncomfortable as several of the Rangers also turned to look at me. I was very aware of the damn flame cloak at the moment and how it drew the eye.

One Elf melted out of the crowd dressed in the colors of Lothlórien and, after a slightly prolonged look, I was sure it was Erynion.
"Gi suilon," he said, and walked straight past me to pet Thunor on the nose. I couldn't help frowning a tiny bit at his back. I get half a glance and Thunor gets the equivalent of a hug?

"Don't spoil him," I said, realizing I hadn't really planned what to say if I found Erynion again. Hi? Long time no see? Good to see you're still kicking? What the hell are you doing here? It left me fumbling for words. He probably thought I was weird for just randomly showing up looking for him.

"The stories say you wield fire," Erynion said abruptly, because he absolutely did not warm up to a topic. He pulled a sugar cube out of his pocket to give to Thunor and I sighed. He spoils my horse after I tell him not to, and brings up the one topic I'd prefer to let die.

"Have you ever seen me wield fire?" It was mostly rhetorical, which is how Erynion treated most things I said. The Elf wasn't paying me much mind, giving me only about half his attention any time I spoke. After having most people's undivided attention on me, this was both a relief and an annoyance. That pretty much summed up Erynion, come to think of it. Why had I sought him out? "Did I talk to you yesterday?"

He glanced over at me then started to lead Thunor away, forcing me to follow. Typically, he didn't answer.

"Yesterday. I came looking for Aragorn and talked to an Elf. He had a helmet, so I couldn’t see his face."

"You spoke to my brother."

Well no wonder then.

"He is very like you," I informed him. Erynion let go of Thunor's reins, and like a puppy the horse followed behind him, probably hoping for more sugar cubes. "You should meet Legolas," I pressed, because the silence was moving dangerously towards awkward as Erynion continue to say nothing. "He is very friendly."

Blue eyes glanced at me, and I knew he got my meaning—Legolas was a lot more friendly than he was, and not half as annoying.

"Why did you come to Minas Tirith?" I was only a little curious, since I knew Aragorn had something to do with it.

"To fight."

"Yes, obviously, but why? Not many Elves are fighting in the war."

"The war affects us all. Though a victory has been predicted." I got a look out of the corner of his eye, which made me scowl.

"So you only came because you thought victory was definite?" Erynion didn't take the bait from my mostly sarcastic response. He just shrugged a bit; elegantly enough that no amount of court training could mimic it, and led Thunor over to a bedroll and small travel sack that I guessed must be his. The horse nudged his hand, but thankfully this time no magical sugar cube appeared.

"You have changed," he said, looking more directly at me now and gently pushing Thunor's head away. "There was no burden on your shoulders before."

"I didn't even know what orcs were then," I said, trying to lighten the conversation. I wasn't ready to return to my discussion with Gandalf or Boromir yet.
Erynion turned away and from his bag produced a bristled brush that definitely wasn't for use on human hair and started to brush down Thunor's coat. It took me a moment to realize that wasn't perfectly random, but that he must have ridden a horse down here too. I didn't quite know what to do since he was keeping busy and I was just kind of standing here.

"You were an unsharpened arrow not drawn yet."

"What?" What kind of metaphor was that? I wasn't sure if I should be insulted or if he meant it as a compliment.

"Released now, though the point is a little soft," Erynion continued, completely ignored the angry noise that escaped me at the assertion of a "soft point". I had a feeling that one was not the nicest way he could have said that.

"What are you saying?"

He continued brushing, then casually looked at me over his shoulder. He seemed to be scrutinizing me. "Why did you come find me?"

I blinked, caught off guard by the total change in topic. "I thought I spoke to you yesterday, but I wasn't sure." I hadn't really thought about it beyond that, which was clearly shortsighted. "I don't know many people here," I added, when the elf continued to silently watch me, waiting. I exhaled a bit harshly. "Gandalf is more frustrating than you, and Boromir is always busy. Éomer is... The Fellowship is The Fellowship and well, maybe I should just have gone to see Éowyn and not you."

I don't quite know where it all came from, but Erynion was still looking at me, even ignoring the nudge of Thunor's head on his arm to continue brushing. I made an aggravated noise and reached for the reins, intending to leave the Elf and find Éowyn, even if I had to go through Éomer first. I was embarrassed and confused and I just wanted to escape the situation.

"You are burdened," he repeated from before. "What are you pointed at?" He pulled the reins back along Thunor's shoulders, not letting me grab them.

"I don't know what you mean."

"You went to save the Man Boromir, ill-advised as it might have been. What now is your arrow aimed at?"

I really, really didn't want a repeat of this morning, but Erynion wasn't looking to go easy on me, if he ever had. "I don't know," I said, aggravated. "That's the problem. But I'll figure it out. Now I'm going to go and—"

"A soft point is a soft heart. Not all arrows are meant to kill."

I had to pause because Erynion was echoing Gandalf. Elves really did have a creepy way of guessing what was on your mind.

"I have killed." Two orcs: one with a knife to the back of the neck, the other with a blade to the skull. That was visceral proof I wasn't as softhearted as I looked.

"You walked for a month without complaint. Over a mountain, a river, through forests and plains." Erynion let the reins go, but I didn't reach for them. Was he admitting I hadn't been quite as much a pain in the ass as he expected when we'd trekked from Rivendell to Lothlórien? Even when I'd been so utterly unaware?
"You felt ill at the death of a rabbit," he added, starting to brush back over Thunor's withers.

All lovely thoughts of my endurance and mettle ground to a halt. "You didn't have to prepare it in front of me."

Erynion just shrugged, and I hoped Thunor stepped on his foot.

"Did you know there are flames embroidered on the bottom?" said Éowyn laughingly. I huffed as I straightened up. Jumping down from the high window of her hospital room into the grassy courtyard ended up a lot more dramatic—and dangerous—than anticipated, because the darn cloak got tangled up in my feet. Batman, I was not.

"Trust me, I know," I said with annoyance. "I just don't know who gave it to me and there's no note or anything."

"What about the Lord Boromir or his brother?" Éowyn landed neatly on her feet, even with the skirt of her dress. The courtyard was thankfully empty of people otherwise we might have gotten into trouble for essentially breaking out of the hospital. They'd told Éowyn to take seven days of rest, which she'd given up on after barely twenty-four hours.

"I asked Boromir this morning, but he didn't know. I haven't seen him since then, and I haven't seen Faramir either."

Éowyn looked thoughtful as we strode out of the courtyard and into the hallways. Neither of us knew where we were going, but that wasn't really the point. Éowyn just wanted to escape her hospital room, and I was happy to focus my attention on the cloak and not on all the heavy thoughts of earlier. After talking to Erynion I ridden the glossy Thunor back up to the seventh level, and then ended up seeking out Éowyn because I couldn't avoid the new Rohirrim royals forever. Thankfully Éowyn had been looking for something to get her mind off recent events, and running away from the nurses was just the remedy. She was a terrible influence on me.

"Perhaps another friend of yours in Minas Tirith?"

I shook my head, unable to even imagine the Kinseys doing something like that, and no one else I knew had that kind of money. At least, I thought the cloak must have been expensive with all the work put into it. "It must have been Faramir, who else?"

We dropped the topic though as we came out of the corridors on to a quiet street just down the road from the stables. Without even discussing it, Éowyn and I both headed over to see how Windfola was getting along. I'd only left Thunor half an hour ago when I went to see Éowyn, but he perked up just the same when he saw me. Maybe he was secretly a dog in another life—no wait; he would be a hell of a lot more friendly if that were the case.

I held out my hand, and somehow he managed to look disappointed that I didn't have a sugar cube or other treat on me. I just shook my head as I stroked the soft hair between his eyes. "I'm going to kill Erynion for giving you those you know," I said as sweetly as possible, knowing that animals responded to tone of voice not words. Unfortunately Thunor was either a really intelligent horse or not a particularly nice one (and we know which way I lean), because in response he huffed a cloud of smelly breath in my face.

"Oh! Éomer's horse is here too!" I heard Éowyn exclaim from a couple stalls over. I couldn't help my heart sinking a bit at the mention of the new King of Rohan. I hadn't seen him since the strategy session, but I doubted a few short hours were going to make any difference on his opinion of me.
"Maddie?" Éowyn called, and I left Thunor with one more pat to see what she needed. "Is there a bucket or something with brushes out there?" Éowyn stood beside Firefoot, who was another big Mearas with similar coloring to Windfola. He had less breadth than Thunor but was leaner, more like a sprinter, and there was a definite intelligence in his eyes.

I retrieved the brushes, and Éowyn and I had only just started brushing down his withers and tail when Éomer rounded the corner, a bucket full of more brushes and wax for the saddle in his hands. "Éowyn! What are you doing out of bed!" He dropped the bucket with a clatter, and I froze with the brush in the air. Only Éowyn looked unperturbed.

"Fresh air and exercise," she said, looking a bit exasperated. "Maddie will make sure I'm okay."

I really wished she hadn't mentioned me, because as soon as Éomer approached the front of the stall his eyes flicked to mine, and I knew immediately he still wasn't happy with me. How could he be, since his uncle was dead and I might have been able to do something about it?

"You should not be out," Éomer argued, brow heavy.

"I cannot lay in bed all day, brother. I only came to see the horses."

Éomer looked frustrated, but I'm sure he was torn between understanding his sister's desire and wanting the best for her health. "You need to be careful."

Éowyn just shook her hair, still brushing down Firefoot, while I stood by still holding my brush but no longer touching Éomer's horse. He wasn't leaving, and Éowyn looked to be in a stubborn mood. I felt like my presence wasn't making this any easier. "Maybe I should go," I said softly, glancing at Éomer before quickly looking away.

Éomer opened his mouth to respond, but Éowyn grabbed my hand and pushed Firefoot's tail into it. "I know my brother's mind, and this new burden of kingship weighs on him. You are guiltless concerning my uncle, Maddie, just as the man who sees a farm aflame but brings water too late to save the family. He will forgive you in time." An awkward atmosphere descended on us after her words, and some meaningful look passed between the siblings that I deliberately didn't interpret.

"What is 'aflame'?" I whispered as the silence stretched.

"On fire," Éomer supplied abruptly, and he looked terribly uncomfortable, like he wasn't sure what to do with his hands or where to look. "Perhaps I should speak with Lady Maddie for a moment."

It was a good thing horses didn't have nerves at the end of their tails, otherwise Firefoot would have complained when my hand tightened around it. Éowyn eyed her brother, but after a moment she took the brush from me and she seemed to be smiling. I just hoped she really did know his mind.

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Éomer led me just farther down the stable, out of hearing range I suppose, or maybe it didn't matter. I wished I had something to do so I didn't just stand here twisting my hands waiting for the shoe to drop.

"I spoke with Lord Boromir after the council this morning," Éomer started, and he looked like he wanted to pace but there wasn't space. "I also spoke with Lord Aragorn, and of course my sister. We go into battle tomorrow, and I learned from my uncle never to leave for battle in anger." He rubbed the back of his neck, and I tried to wait patiently and let him get it out, though all I wanted to do was burst into more apologies. "…Lord Boromir said there is some magic at work, and reminded me that not even Gandalf is all seeing. I… apologize if I was unkind after learning of my
"You don't need to apologize," I interrupted quickly. "This is war, yes, but I-, I should have done something. I'm sorry that I did not think in time to, and well..." I was wringing my hands in front of me, surprised that he was already addressing this, and really, really not wanting to mess this up.

"There is no guarantee, and war is war," said Éomer tiredly, and he looked more drawn than I'd ever seen him. It wasn't a great look, with his shaggy hair and unkempt beard. If it weren't for the finery of his clothes he would have looked like a vagabond. "I am king now in all but ceremony."

"You will be a great one." I meant it. I didn't actually remember much of what happened once the story was over, other than Frodo leaving on a ship, but I was sure Rohan prospered with Éomer at the helm. I thought he had all the trappings of a good king at least.

He peeked at me through his falling hair, and it occurred to me then that even though he knew he would be in this role one day, it didn't mean he wasn't insecure about it. "Truly," I tacked on, banking on how much reliance people had in my predictions for once.

Éomer exhaled slowly and seemed to regain himself. He led me back to Éowyn without a word, and then opened Thunor's stall door and led the destrier out with a couple clicks of his tongue. Somebody was going to have to teach me how to do that one day.

"Then as King of Rohan," he said, and Éowyn stopped brushing Firefoot to come to the stall door, "and as thanks for saving my dear sister and being friend to her when she had few, I bestow upon you this steed. May his feet be ever swift, his stride unbreaking, and may he take you far and afield safely."

He nudged Thunor to me, and I gently stroked the big horse's cheeks as he lipped at my fingers, feeling overwhelmed and happy like I hadn't been since the stress of the war seemed to hit me. Éomer was still as shaggy as a homeless man, but his shoulders were stiff and proud like a king's.

"Thank you, Lord Éomer. I promise to treat him well."

Éomer nodded to me and retreated back out of the stable. Éowyn was leaning against the stall door with a soft smile on her face that slowly morphed into a speculative look. "You know, if you should like to breed him I know some good mares that would birth a fine steed one day."

"Breed him?" I laughed out, thankfully getting my bearings back and feeling more lighthearted than I had in what felt like weeks. "And let there be more little Thunor's in the world? I'm not sure it's ready for that."

Éowyn laughed to herself and went back to brushing down Firefoot as I struggled to talk Thunor back into his stall. Once he was out of it he didn't want to go back in. I tried pushing his backside in the direction of the stall but he just kept going in circles so he was never facing the right way. Eventually I gave up and decided to at least walk him around the paddock in the hope that might convince him to cooperate. Éowyn popped her head past Firefoot's stall to see why I was walking Thunor past her. "Are you going riding?"

I turned back, feeling slightly embarrassed but also just plain frustrated. "I tried begging and pushing, but he won't go back in the stall. I think I'll walk him for a moment."

Éowyn was definitely laughing at me as she made a clicking sound with her tongue that made Thunor's ears twitch backward. "Come here Thunor," she called softly, and then added something in Rohirric and my name. She made more cooing and clicking noises along with handfuls of Rohirric until the stubborn horse went back willingly. Éowyn stepped out of Firefoot's stall and
helped me guide Thunor back into his. Once he was in I patted his neck affectionately. This may be a damn intelligent and mulish horse, but he was mine now. I felt him drape his head over me and start snuffling at my hair, and I liked to think he was returning the feeling.

"He's a good horse," Éowyn said quietly once I disentangled myself. She looked melancholy, with her beautiful wavy hair framing a long face, offset by the black cloak she'd pulled on. "We will bury Snowmane tomorrow, though Éomer cannot be there."

"Snowmane?" I asked quietly.

"Uncle's horse."

I didn't know what to say, but I knew just from glancing at Thunor how much that would hurt. I'd loved my family's dogs at home, but we'd lost them before and gotten new ones. They may be man's best friend, but Thunor and I had been through so much that I wasn't sure if any horse could replace him when he was gone.

"I am so sorry Éowyn." She was still hurting from her uncle's death, and since I still felt somewhat responsible for it I didn't even know where to begin to comfort her, of even if that would do any good at all.

"Come, let's find a garden and fresh air. I think I may need to sit," she said, looking to put it out of mind. I took her arm just in case, and we slipped out of the stables and back into the maze of streets and eventually corridors of the guest halls and hospital of the sixth level. Eventually we found a nice spot in a garden with an excellent view of the western side of Gondor. That area at least had been spared the worst of the fighting, and past the great wall it almost didn't look like battle had touched it at all.

"What will you do while the men fight?" Éowyn asked me, as we sat on a bench overlooking the fields.

I tucked my chin in my hand, contemplating the horizon. "I don't know. I might see if some old friends of mine on the first level are okay. I don't really know what else to do."

"What about after? If you do not stay in Gondor, you would always be welcome in Rohan."

I shrugged, still not settled when it came to questions of after the war. At times it seemed like a vast, looming void ahead of me, sometimes near and sometimes far. "I will worry about that after it is over."

A door closed somewhere above us on the balcony, and I glanced back in time to see Faramir addressing a nurse. When he turned and saw us he made for the stairs. He looked pale still and moved gingerly, but what caught me the most was his face. He looked almost resigned, and I couldn't imagine the amount of stress he'd been under in recent weeks on top of his father's abrupt death.

Faramir was stronger than I knew though, because by the time he reached the bottom of the stairs he looked more himself, not a hint of what was underneath showed in his voice or expression. "I see you did not wander far, Lady Maddie. And this must be the missing Lady Éowyn. There was a small uproar from the nurses when you were discovered missing."

"My Lord Faramir," Éowyn said, rising from the bench to curtsy. I thought about doing the same, but Faramir waved it off and came to stand beside us. "I hope I didn't cause too much trouble for them," she said, and I swear she looked almost impish.

"I can hardly judge, as I was told to keep strict bed-rest and yet found myself on the seventh level
this morning." Faramir smiled down at her. "I don't believe we've been formally introduced."

I recognized the hint and stood up to introduce them, wondering if I was witnessing love at first sight. "Faramir, or well, Lord Faramir, this is Éowyn, sister of Éomer, King of Rohan. Éowyn, this is Lord Faramir, Steward Boromir's brother and Captain of the... Gondorian Rangers?"

"Rangers of Ithilien, but close," Faramir corrected, though he was still looking only at her. "It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Lady Éowyn." He bowed formally, and she curtseyed again. Faramir seemed to take to this sort of courtly stuff naturally, but I would bet money Boromir wasn't so smooth.

"And a pleasure it is to make yours, Lord Faramir. I hope you are recovering well from the battle."

"I am, as I see you are too. You were very brave on the battlefield, or so I heard, and it seems you have made a strong recovery." He tipped his head at her. "My deepest condolences on the passing of your uncle and king."

"Thank you," she said somberly, the wound fresh. "I too express my sorrow at the passing of your father, the Steward."

"They were both strong men, and hopefully will be judged kindly by history." Faramir's expression was hard to read.

"Indeed. I am sure tales will be sung of your deeds in this war too." Éowyn said, easily moving away from that difficult topic. "Perhaps you'll even earn another title as fine as Maddie's." She arched an eyebrow at me, and I resisted rolling my eyes.

"If I could give you mine I would," I joked as they both chuckled. I didn't want to interrupt their moment, but I really did want to figure out where this cloak came from. "Faramir, do you happen to know who gave me this?"

He glanced at the cloak I pulled around as though seeing it for the first time, and his brow furrowed a bit. "I did request some winter wear be made for you, as spring can be damp in Gondor, but I think you have a made a friend of the seamstresses. I certainly did not ask for anything like that."

"I don't know any of them," I frowned.

"But they likely know of you," Éowyn put in.

"Yes, and many seamstresses aided in the hospitals where men needed stitching and dressing. Their skills lend themselves to those tasks."

I fluttered the bottom of the cloak a bit to see the flames wave. It was well... an anti-climatic answer, but I just hoped the seamstresses held off on any more embroidery at this point. "I will have to thank them I suppose, even if I do think this is a little much."

"You've worn the cloak all day, up and down the city," Éowyn noted. "That should be thanks enough."

"Speaking of thanks, I owe you mine," Faramir added, finally seeming to draw his attention fully away from Éowyn. "Boromir told me how you retrieved Lord Aragorn from the battlefield to save us. It appears my brother and I may forever be in your debt."

"You are not in my debt, I'm simply glad you're okay. Both of you."
"Will you be well enough to fight, come tomorrow milord?" Éowyn asked gently, and Faramir shifted attention back to her.

"This arm is not well enough yet," he said regretfully, touching his shoulder. "Even with the poison gone it has drained me, and I tire easily. I will remain a prisoner of the healers and with the city guard here in case of any attack."

"I am sorry to hear that. I too would like to fight for my home, as my brother does now. I fear what would become of Éomer though if I should try." There was a smile flickering about her mouth as she looked at Faramir. The two were making some serious eye contact.

"What a diplomatic mess that should be, if I let you sneak off to join the army! Did you know Pippin was asked to make sure Miss Maddie did not do the very same thing?"

Éowyn laughed, and Faramir's features lit up in a way that made me rather wish someone looked at me like that. "Well Merry did a poor job of it in that case, though he too was a hero on the battlefield. Do you know if the hobbits will join the march tomorrow?"

"I do not, I'm afraid."

There was a brief lull in the conversation, which I took as my exit. "Well both of us shall be here at the very least. I'm apparently overdue for a lecture from Boromir anyway." I'd let him talk my ear off so long as he came back alive and didn't make his father's words true. "However, I may be in the lower levels helping with cleaning up, but Éowyn is also recovering in the wards and will need all the company she can get." I gestured to her, and my spirits lifted when Éowyn flashed me a grateful look.

"I do know of a few hidden spots around here, thanks to my brother and mine's explorations in our youth. I would be happy to show you, Lady Éowyn." I was pretty sure he was hiding a grin, and she was definitely blushing a bit.

"That would be wonderful, Lord Faramir. Anything to get a little air."

I was the best wingman in the world, I thought as I excused myself with some made up promise to Pippin. Faramir had eyes only for her from the beginning, and she him. I needed all the good feelings I could get, because today had been an emotional rollercoaster, and tomorrow was shaping up to be another one.
A maid came to wake me early the next morning, before even dawn, and when I groggily opened
the door she was standing there with a pile of cloth in three different colors in her arms. Even with
the weight, she was still able to curtsy, and she had apparently been able to knock. I was not
awake enough to register how that was possible.

"Good morning milady. Some new dresses have been made for you."

Oh no, I thought with dread, startling more alert now. I looked down at the pile of conservative
colors and wondered what crazy embroidery was going to be on these.

I let the maid in and she laid out the dresses on the bed while I poked the fire in the hearth to get a
little more warmth. Mornings were still chilly here, and Faramir hadn't been kidding when he said
spring was wet in Gondor. The dampness could chill to the bone if you let it. When I'd sufficiently
wasted time poking the coals, I turned to see the dresses and actually exhaled in relief loudly
enough that the maid looked over confused. "Which would you like to wear milady?"

There were three: a light grey that rather gloomily matched the sky out my window, a pale brown
like butcher block wood, and a dark green with silver trim. They were all fancier dresses than I'd
worn before, but it was more in the extra flourish on the collars, lacings, and material rather than
any elaborate designs.

"The green, please."

The maid quickly hung the other two in my wardrobe, which had quite the mishmash of dresses. I
had the Elvish one, which had been whisked away last night to be cleaned so it wasn't hanging
there, but the pale lavender of it certainly stuck out. I also had one of my last dresses from my time
as a maidservant, and the poor thing looked particularly tattered and old compared to these two
new ones she added.

With the maid's help I got dressed, laced up, and my hair done, which she insisted on leaving
down with a few small braids as accent in it. Then she popped away from the small vanity and
grabbed my cloak from where it hung on the back of the door. "Uh, I think this dress is thick enough," I said quickly, rising up and shaking my head.

"Milady, it can be quite cold here…"

"I know, but… the color wouldn't match anyway." Thankfully that was a better argument than complaining about the elaborate flame design. The maid seemed to realize I would look like a Christmas card—or well, that green and red were maybe a bit strong together—because she relented and put the cloak away.

Once she left, I headed over to the kitchens and breakfast halls, where I found Merry seated over an early meal with not nearly as much gusto as befitting a hobbit. I had my own plate of bread and eggs put before me as I sat down. "Good morning."

"Good morning," he replied, and despite having six plates in front of him it wasn't a cheery greeting.

"What's happened?" I asked worriedly. Surely there wasn't some other complication on top of everything.

"Pippin will be going with the army," he said despondently, "but Aragorn says I cannot."

I wasn't surprised, but I could understand where Merry was coming from, and I put down my knife and fork to reach over the table and pat him on the hand. Pippin would be the one into battle now, and Merry could only sit here and wait for news. I felt much the same in regards to Boromir; it was a cold lump in my stomach if I let myself think about it. "I won't be going, and neither will Éowyn or Faramir. We'll find a way to be useful here Merry," I said encouragingly.

"Lord Faramir won't be going either?"

"I have a feeling Aragorn and Boromir ganged up on him," I said a little more lightly, which seemed to lift Merry's spirits a bit. "And Éowyn was upset too, though I daresay she won't mind the company."

"What do you mean?" He was starting to look curious, which was a good sign to me.

"Well, you can't tell anyone," I said in a bit of hush, and Merry leaned forward obligingly, "but I introduced her and Lord Faramir yesterday, and they seemed quite taken with each other." I winked, and Merry actually started to smile.

"Wonder what Boromir will make of that?" He bit into a sausage, and nothing showed a revived hobbit more than his appetite.

I shrugged, buttering a piece of toast and wondering if the jam off to the side was blackberry, raspberry, or blueberry. These thick glass jars made it difficult to tell just by look alone, and no one labeled anything. "Well, if he wants an alliance with Rohan he'll get it."

Merry snorted into his eggs, and we were at least a little more cheerful at breakfast after that. It wasn't easy though with all the signs of the army leaving around us. Servants were rushing to and fro with pots and plates from early breakfasts, and there was the clinking of armor and weapons echoing in the halls as the men who were not too badly injured geared up again. Pippin was conspicuously missing, but I didn't want to ask Merry where he was and bring his mood down again.

We left the kitchens and gardens after Merry finished his third helping. Out in the courtyard in front of the wards there was the last handful of men leaving in their armor. The way the helmets
hung over their faces made their expressions hard to read, but I wondered if they were resigned to this, pumped up for it, or afraid. I couldn't blame them for feeling any of those emotions.

Going to the edge of the courtyard you could see down the side of Minas Tirith and on to the fields, now a dull brown from the churned up earth after all the fighting. There were gleaming lines of men in helmets gathered outside the gates, and a whole host of Rohirrim on horseback to one side. They didn't look organized to march yet, but most of the armies of Rohan and Gondor were already amassed, with the Elves and Rangers probably down there somewhere, too small in number to spot from up here. I wondered how early the captains must have woken to get everyone organized. Had Boromir or Aragorn even slept?

"We ought to go down. Do you know where Lord Faramir and Lady Éowyn are?" Merry asked me. He had to stand on a bench to see, and he looked quite solemn as he stared down at the army. I thought the host looked impressive, but as Gandalf had said at the strategy meeting, we didn't have a vanguard's worth of men compared to the orc armies gathered in Mordor. I got a flash of the Black Gates, with enemies in the hills running down the craggy dirt and rocks to surround Aragorn's soldiers.

_There are more of them now_, I reminded myself, staring down at the assembled forces. I didn't know the numbers compared to the original story, but I had to believe there were at least a few more men following Aragorn than before. _They will do it. Frodo will succeed._ Ultimately I hadn't touched Frodo's journey, and that meant he should be on the same path to the volcano, and the outcome should be no different. It really came down to everyone's skill and endurance to outlast the assault on Mordor then. At least, that's what I hoped.

"Come on, we should go down to the first level. That's where everyone is," said Merry, pulling me from my reverie, and I took a breath to re-center myself. Once the army was gone it was all out of my hands. It wasn't a soothing thought; in fact, it was a terrifying one.

We went to the stables to find Thunor already saddled up, which the groom said Faramir had ordered. The horse was shaking his head from side to side as I approached, and Merry hesitated for half a second when the groom opened the stall door. The hobbit was so small he could walk between Thunor's legs.

It was hard enough mounting up in a skirt, but the groom had to basically lift Merry from a stool to get him on Thunor. The destrier snorted and stamped impatiently, and I tugged on his mane in reprimand. "Be patient. We'll be off soon enough," I said in English, to which Merry immediately requested a translation.

"How long have you spoken that language?" he asked as Thunor broke into a trot, never mind a walk, to get out of the stable and off the sixth level.

"All my life," I told him, carefully guiding the excited horse down a ramp made just for this use behind the stable.

"Your people don't speak Westron?"

"No, no, though the languages are similar." It had been such a relief to understand why after spending that first year full of nagging suspicion. Of course, it had been a greater relief once I'd gotten some command of the language. I really did have to go back to Bree and that town-near-Fornost to see those people again. How crazy I must have seemed to them, in my jeans and t-shirt seemingly speaking in tongues!

We were pretty much silent on the way down, me thinking about traveling up that way again and how much faster it would be on Thunor, and Merry, I supposed taking in the damage to the city. It
was definitely looking better as we came down, though as we arrived on the first level much of it was still strewn with rubble. The larger streets had been cleared though, and there were no more fires.

By the gates were gathered lots of people both on horseback and walking, many of them uniformed soldiers probably trying to find their commanding officer. I don't think I fully appreciated what my inflated reputation meant until people were stepping out of the way and pushing back to let Thunor, Merry, and I get through. We'd gotten a good third of the way before someone up ahead called down to us.

"Milord and lady, Captain Faramir has requested you join him. I'll have a man show you where," I'm not sure my thanks was heard over the crowd of voices, but soon enough an Ithilien Ranger appeared ahead of us, beckoning us forward.

We didn't really need the guide because Shadowfax stood out like a beacon, and everyone else was giving their leaders some space, making Gandalf and the rest an island in the sea of men. Shadowfax was almost an albino white, which strangely didn't make Gandalf's robes look grey or dirty, but in fact more white. Too bad I didn't have that kind of magic, because the hems of every dress I'd ever worn would have appreciated it. I spurred Thunor to where Gandalf was talking with Aragorn, Faramir, and Éowyn. Legolas and Gimli were off to the side, looking to be arguing about the horse behind the elf.

"Miss Maddie," Gandalf said in greeting, standing beside his steed as we pulled up. Aragorn was beside him with his own horse who looked to almost be asleep. The King of Gondor was wearing extraordinary armor, with thick chainmail on his arms and gold curlicues on the ends of the gloves. The tunic was decorated with the tree and stars of Gondor, and the long handle of a giant sword peeked out from his hip. I would have thought Aragorn would look strange in that kind of intricate workmanship, being such a plain, unpretentious man, but I guessed the mantle of kingship changed people. He certainly stood as tall and proud as a king.

"I think I'll be needing a bit of help!" The hobbit's curly head poked out around me, and I realized I wouldn't be able to dismount until poor Merry did. Luckily, Legolas stepped up beside Thunor and basically carried the hobbit down. "Where's Pippin?" Merry said once he was on the ground, before I'd even swung my own feet over Thunor. "He'll be needing a word or two about recklessness."

"He's with Steward Boromir for the moment, but they'll be here shortly," replied Gandalf, looking past Merry to me then. I was still dusting off my hands from the tight grip on the saddle so my skirt didn't ride up, and missed his look. "Any last words before the battle?"

I looked up only to be stared at by Gandalf, Kingly Aragorn, Legolas, Gimli, Éowyn, and Faramir. Unexpectedly put on the spot, I of course couldn't remember the word I needed. "Um…" Boromir had definitely taught it to me, and I felt my throat dry up a bit more as Éomer rode over with Imrahil, both in shiny armor too. "It's… in the hills. A surprise attack. What is that called?"

"An ambush," Aragorn said gravely, and I guessed that was the right word, I couldn't remember.

"At the gates. They'll be in the rocks to surround you." I really hoped the movies exaggerated it or my memory was faulty, because I seemed to be remembering what looked like a Super Bowl stadium's worth of orcs versus a hundred men.

"Not surprising," drawled Gandalf, looking at Aragorn and then to Éomer. "A watchful eye doesn't hurt." The horse-lord nodded and shouted something short to a Rohirrim nearby, who turned about-face and galloped off.
Off to the side Merry was absorbed into the burliest hug I'd ever seen, with Gimli's beard not
doubt smothering the hobbit, though it looked like he didn't mind. Faramir, Imrahil, and Aragorn
were having a much manlier farewell, with lots of hands clapping shoulders and that sort of thing.

"Aren't you going to say goodbye to Éomer?" I asked Éowyn, wanting to look away from all of
this because it was making that cold lump inside me swell like a balloon. I'd choke on it soon if I
wasn't careful, and that's why I wasn't thinking about anything other than the immediate moment.
It was going to hit me when they walked away, but I'd fight it off until then.

"We shared ours' this morning. I do not think I could bear to say the words again." Her face was
pinched and tired, frigid like she was holding it together. "I do not wish to be left behind," she
whispered.

"Me neither," I replied softly. The thought of another battle made me sick inside, but waiting
calmly in the city was equally repulsive. I felt like Erynion's arrow metaphor, except that I was
pointed at the ground.

"Pippin!" Merry cried, pulling away from Legolas and Gimli to where Aragorn was helping down
the other hobbit.

Boromir had just ridden up with him, and he was sitting on his horse in the same plate mail as
yesterday, but this time with a new charcoal cape with royal blue edge decorated in gold. His hair
was windswept and features firm, the cape draped over the back of his horse elegantly, and he
seemed to embody all the prestige of his family and office in that moment.

When he dismounted from his horse Faramir went straight over to embrace him, and the rest of us
politely looked away from the brothers and Merry and Pippin, who were having their own
subdued goodbye. The mood was steadily turning more solemn.

"We are nearly ready, milord," Imrahil said to Aragorn, one hand on his sword. He was decked
out in silver and bright blue, and the bird crest was on the side of his helmet and his chest plate.
"The Elvish scouts have already been sent out, and the first from Osgiliath returned without
news."

Aragorn nodded seriously, surveying the men around him. "Good. As soon as the column is
formed we'll march."

"Have you said goodbye yet to everyone?" Éowyn asked, interrupting the conversation I was
watching.

"No, I've only seen Merry before coming here." Faramir and Boromir were still talking in hushed
voices, and it was obvious at just a glance how hard it was for Faramir to stay behind. I
remembered him telling me when we'd first met how much he preferred to be out fighting than
behind a desk, and I think that feeling was exponentially higher when his brother was out there.
My mind made the jump straight away to what he must have felt when he heard Boromir had died
in the original story, how heartbreaking that must have been. And heavens… I might see it too if
this all goes badly.

I bit my lip hard to stop that train of thought, but Aragorn was mounting up and galloping off, as
was Gandalf, and Legolas and Gimli were waving as they too left. The lines of men were forming
around us, armor glinting in the sun, helmets on, and it seemed impossible to pinpoint everything I
was feeling. It was the last stand, the culmination of the war, and the end of my knowledge. I felt
hollow, and then the hollowness filled up with fear.

"You do not look well, Miss Maddie," said Éomer gruffly from his horse. He had mounted up
again and had been drawn back for a final word with Éowyn without my notice. "Did you not prophesize all would be well?"

"It's just words," I said a bit helplessly, feeling the catch in my throat. "It's different when you are dressed in armor on your horse about to go. The blood was just ink when I read it."

Éomer looked sympathetic but not understanding, and he had no answer for me. I'm not sure anything he or anyone else could have said would make this better. It felt like the first stage of grief, where all the pleasantries and logic in the world could not make the mourning heart stop. Until the Fellowship and all the rest came back—or orcs marched in their place—I wasn't going to be able to diminish this horrible feeling. I was afraid all would not end well, that Boromir would die and all the rest, that Frodo would fail. I was afraid I'd shifted them off the knife-edge and into the abyss.

"We must trust in metal now, not blood and ink. But a man's arm swings faster and surer with faith." Éomer turned his horse, which was nearly prancing in place, and gave me one more look.

"Be careful," I told him, because there was nothing else I could say. I was afraid yes, but as Éomer said now, and as Gandalf had told me before, I'd given them all I could. Taking up a sword I didn't know how to use and joining them wouldn't help anyone.

I felt Éowyn move away from me, and then Boromir was striding over trailed by his horse. The cape must have been made of some heavy, velvet material because it didn't flow behind him easily, but all the same he looked proud and great, worlds away from the grumpy, pessimistic man I'd first saved.

He stopped two steps short of me, and we both took each other in: one ready for war, and one about to succumb to it. "You look..." he paused, and I'm sure a hundred synonyms for "distracted" jumped to mind, but Boromir didn't say any of them. "You look very fine in green."

I actually laughed a bit, an echo of other hysterical laughs I'd made before. "I don't feel fine," I said thickly, and before he could respond I plowed on. "I feel... I cannot do anymore for you. I cannot help you." I clasped my hands together tightly for lack of anything to hold on to.

Something about the man I'd spent the last few months focused on helping made this statement an even harder thing to swallow.

"There is a point where all men must help themselves," he said gently, coming a step closer. His shoulders looked too broad with the pauldrons, his expression too soft for his normally grim countenance.

"I know, but..."

"If I could hold the swords of all the men on the field I would. But I cannot. Nor should I."

"Please come back." It slipped out of me, but it was the most honest thing I could say. I liked Boromir, his depth and loyalty, his stalwartness and secretly gentle heart. I didn't want anything bad to happen to him, and it was a bit startling that it wasn't only because of his father's words or proving my existence in Middle Earth: it was for him. He was a man with hopes and dreams and a future so long as he came back alive, and I wanted that for him.

"You have already protected me once," he said. "That is more than anyone could ask. Let us go bravely into this fight without doubt or fear."

I swallowed, stunned a bit by his courage. "I do not doubt you will succeed," and I couldn't say I believed it with all my heart, but I was going to fake it until I did, because that's what he needed of
me. "I only fear that... you won't return."

Boromir's hand hesitated before it tentatively landed on my shoulder. It was heavy, given the added weight of his armor, but that seemed to make it all the more reassuring. "All soldiers know they can make no promises, but I... never have I had the will to return more than now." His grey eyes flashed away from mine, embarrassed at such a confession that had seemed to numb my tongue in my mouth.

"There is... I..." I was fumbling badly for words, trying to express emotion I didn't even comprehend yet, and what came out was a humiliating jumble of choked words. That lump had shifted into a rock in my throat, making it hard to think let alone breathe.

"While I cannot keep a promise now, I should like to ask one of you," Boromir added, and I felt my heart leap higher than the lump at what he might ask. "Even if some memory should come to you, some foretelling, I ask that you not follow us. I... I cannot rest without knowing you are safely in Minas Tirith."

My heart slid back down into my chest, but it wasn't a bad feeling. Boromir's eyes were pleading with me, though he'd never put it that way, and this was a promise I could at least keep. "I promise I will not follow you, nor do I want to."

"You said once before you did not seek another battle and yet threw yourself into one anyway." He was trying to be more cheerful, and I caught the tail end of a smile. It was hard to be cheery though when he was off to war.

"I feel like there is more to say but I... I don't..." I blurted out awkwardly, cringing as the smile slipped away from him. I was a total mess now, and I hadn't walked out here expecting to cry, but there I was, on the verge of tears, feeling like I couldn't remember a single thing I wanted to tell him.

"Be safe, Maddie, and keep a light heart."

He seemed to hesitate, and I found myself blurting out, "I would hug you but for your armor."

I must have flushed the same red as my flame-embroidered cape, and I couldn't look him in the eye. When I did flick my glance up though, his lips were definitely tugging up in a smile. "Upon my return then."

I still couldn't look straight at him, but I nodded. That was as close to a promise as he could make. As he mounted up on his horse I had to say it just one more time. "Be careful Boromir, and come back."

"All you can ask of me is to try, and I will promise you that," he repeated, and then he kicked in his heels and was off.

"Are you crying?" asked Éowyn concernedly, leaning towards me from her seat on Windfola. I was on Thunor, hastily wiping at wet eyes as the army began to march. Faramir was a short ways away with Merry, explaining some of the formations.

"I'm just worried I won't see them again."

"You said all would come out unscathed," she murmured, shifting closer to put her arm around me.

"I did, but that was when... Boromir was not there. I am worried he will not."
Talking about it wasn't helping, and as I started to hiccup on my tears Éowyn was quick to shush me, trying to be soothing. "Don't cry. You don't want him to look back and see that. You have to believe what you told them."

"I do," I said with a hint of frustration. "I do think it will work out, but I'm just not sure about Boromir. He wasn't in… I mean…"

Éowyn did seem to get it, at least a little, because her arm tightened around me. Even with the awkward position on two saddles and slightly different horse heights, I appreciated her comfort. I hadn't come out here expecting to cry at all, but seeing the flags that preceded Aragorn and his immediate group leaving at the head of the column, it had been like a kick to the chest. My parting words with Boromir had left the floodgates open.

Gondor was going to fight. They were the last defense of Middle Earth from the evil that lay in Mordor. All of them were on a suicide mission not meant to be victorious but meant to draw the Eye away from Frodo. They were picking a fight they couldn't win.

"It's okay to be afraid," Éowyn said sympathetically, "but take that fear and make it a blade, for it best serves you rather than be its slave. My uncle told me those words, and it is the only thing I thought as I stood before the Nazgûl King."

I wiped the tears that had slid down my cheeks away and slowly straightened. She was right of course, I was letting my fear get the best of me, and I consciously slowed my breathing and took a few deep breaths.

"There, see? Now he'll see you sitting up on your horse, proud." She pulled back and Windfola shifted a bit away. "I did not know you were so close with Lord Boromir." Her eyes were definitely twinkling mischievously at me.

"But I knew you might be close to Lord Faramir," I replied, redirecting the conversation from dangerous waters.

"What?" She cried, looking a little offended, but it was offset by her smile. "Well you must tell me all manner of detail now."

I shook my head. "I can't. Let things run their course." As I well knew I was no good at deflecting this sort of stuff, and since Aragorn and his banners were almost lost from our sight, I turned Thunor around.

"You can't run, Maddie," Éowyn said, following me. "I cannot believe you would not tell me of this prophecy. Are we not dear friends?"

"Didn't I say everything would work out?" I retorted with a short smile crossing my face, and trotted Thunor over to Faramir and Merry, hoping to distract her. "Lord Faramir, I'll be returning to the city. Will you make sure Éowyn is all right? Someone should stay with her."

Éowyn froze a bit on her seat, but she definitely shot me a look.

"Of course," he said graciously. "Though I must insist you take a guard with you."

"And me!" Merry added from his spot behind Faramir.

"I don't need a guard," I protested, but Faramir was already directing a city guard my way. He was in uniform, and it took me a moment to realize his face was heavily lined with age under his helmet and there were wisps of thinning grey hair slipping out the sides. The old and the young
had been left behind, I thought a bit sadly. That was the way of war.

The guard transferred Merry from Faramir's steed to mine, and then we cantered back into the city gates, already feeling the lack of soldiers keenly. The evacuees were gathered in clumps as we passed by, which immediately reminded me of my promise to myself.

"Merry, do you mind if we look for someone? I have some friends who lived here, and I want to see them."

"Sure, miss. I've hardly got much to do." His voice definitely pitched downward at that, and I thought finding Rylan and Merewald would certainly help the both of us.

My mental map of the first level, what little I could remember, was useless amidst the rubble. Falling buildings had annihilated streets, catapult stones had carved new ones entirely, and most people had simply chosen to recover what they could and start cleaning up the rest.

"I'm looking for a barber," I asked one sweaty man who was leaning on a shovel. He had found a shady spot hidden from a robust woman who seemed to be directing all the activity in this area. He glanced over his shoulder hurriedly when I stopped in front of him.

"Uh, milady, a barber?" His eyes were going back and forth between Merry and me.

"His name is Rylan. Do you know him?"

"Well, er, I can't say I do milady, beggin' your pardon. But Gwínind might." He nodded over to the bellowing matriarch on top of a heap of stone then quickly bowed as I thanked him.

The guard went first, picking his way closer, and as the working men noticed him slowly the hubbub of the area died down until we had Gwínind's attention before I'd even managed a hello.

"Milady," she said roughly, sounding surprisingly humbled for someone who had been yelling moments before. I was still taken aback when people reacted that way to me. "How can I be helpin' you?"

"I'm looking for a barber by the name of Rylan and his wife. Do you know them?"

She stepped gingerly down the pile, some stones scattering by her feet, and shot the nearest man watching a glare. "If you except a lick of bread from me you'll work to dig this shop out," she snapped at him. He jumped to work and others followed, though I was quite sure they all had one ear trained on the conversation.

"I do know Merewald, barber's wife, and their sweet girl, milady. Used to be about five streets over, by the bricklayer, though I suppose that's gone too." The barest look of sadness swept her features before it disappeared. "If you head that way, your ladyship, you might find them or their neighbors. Some people are leavin' this area for good."

"And going where?" asked Merry over my shoulder, and the woman peered around to get a good look, only averting her eyes from her staring when the guard coughed.

"Out of the city I suppose, or if they saved their money up, my little lord. Can't say for sure."

"Thank you, ma'am," I said politely carefully turning Thunor in the direction she'd pointed.

She curtsied as best as she could, given the uneven ground. "A witch healer is welcome among us, milady. They say we would not have any sons of Lord Denethor at all if not for you."
I froze in place at "witch healer" and I thought I heard a hiccup that could have been a stifled snort or laugh from Merry.

"It was King Aragorn who you should thank; he is a great healer," I replied, "I'm merely a messenger." That was about as accurate as I could get in so few words.

"We are beholden to you nonetheless," she said respectfully, head still bowed as I trotted away, discomforted with what she'd said.

"Witch healer," snickered Merry a little. "I think you should prefer Lady of Secret Fire."

"I think I actually do," I admitted, nonplussed.

The guard helped lead the way over the sometimes-indistinguishable blocks until we found a row of buildings where most were still in place though many of the roofs had collapsed and there were a few blackened ones down a ways that must have been lost in a fire.

There were two carthorses dragging a heavy chunk of solid stone out from someone's storefront when we rounded it, and I saw Adelaide sitting with a small pile of stones stacked together like some medieval idea of Lego's. She was in front of a slightly crushed house, with the back end collapsed. The front of the barbershop looked intact though, except for broken glass and two cracked steps.

"Adelaide!" I called as I tried to dismount before remembering Merry again. "Can you help Merry down please?" I asked the guard as the little girl looked up confused, and it seemed to take her a moment longer to remember me. I was just pleased she did at all. It had been a good while since I'd seen her or her family.

"Miss Maddie?" she called back, abandoning her rocks and stopping short when she realized she was almost of height with Merry. I hadn't really appreciated exactly how small hobbits were until they stood next to a human child. I wondered how tiny their children must be, if they didn't get much taller than four feet.

"Hello there," Merry said with a proffered hand, and Adelaide took it politely, giving him an excited once over.

"How old are you?" she asked immediately, not noticing her mother exit the shop to see what the commotion was.

"About thirty-six summers," he said quite jovially, and she shrieked with surprise and laughter, hitting a pitch only small children could.

"Lady Maddie," I heard Merewald breathe, turning in time to see her curtsey. Her dress was quite plain like my old ones, with a white apron now dusted and stained from the hard cleaning she was doing. She quietly beckoned to Adelaide, who regretfully left Merry to go to her mother. Rylan stepped out a moment later only to jolt to a stop too.

"Please don't call me lady, Merewald," I asked, dismounting carefully so I wouldn't land on Merry. "You know that's not my title. I only came to see you again now that I am back in Minas Tirith." I smiled at both of them, hoping they would relax a bit. The class divide was sharper than I seemed to remember, or maybe that was because I was on the other side of it.

"I… We are honored by the visit," she started again, but I tried to interrupt her as politely as possible.

"Really, I don't expect you to treat me any differently. I'm not a Lady of Secret Fire or a witch,
before you ask. I was lost and confused when we first met, and you were very, very helpful to me. I wanted to return the favor, I suppose, and to make sure you were alright, and well…” I waved a bit embarrassedly at my new dress, aware that compared to Merewald I was more done up. "If there's anything I can do you only have to ask."

"We couldn't possibly—"

"That's very kind of you, Lady Maddie," Rylan interjected over his wife, who was trying to pat dust out of Adelaide's hair without looking away from Merry and I. She seemed to have forgotten her own hair was dusted with white stone. "Our home is not terribly damaged, but any repair will have to wait until the stonemasons and craftsmen are no longer busy digging out their buried homes."

"Of course," I replied, feeling exceptionally thankful that Rylan wasn't going the overly polite route Merewald was. I guess I could understand where she was coming from, since she did work in a lord's household. "Will you still have work Merewald? I can't say the Kinseys like me, but perhaps there are others…"

"I am secure, milady, thank you for asking."

"Are you really a lady now, Miss Maddie?" Adelaide inquired, and before Merewald could correct the girl on my title I laughed, waving her off.

"Not a real one no. I was just unlucky on the road and got pulled into the war."

"She saved the Steward," Merry said knowingly, winking at the little girl. "Good deeds are rewarded."

"So that's why you have a nice dress and a horse?" she asked, drawing my attention away from the dirty look I was sending the hobbit. She was scooting closer to Merry, childish curiosity getting the best of her. Unfortunately her mother still had a grip on her shoulder.

"Yes, but you can still call me Maddie, I don't mind." I glanced at her parents, gauging their reactions. Merewald looked torn between propriety and my request, but Rylan seemed a bit more accommodating.

"I thought you might be luckier than most, surviving the Great West road not once, but twice," he said suddenly. "Please take our thanks for saving our new Steward and Captain Faramir."

"Let me gets some scones or sweets at least," Merewald added, and before I could protest she was gone. Without her mother over her shoulder, Adelaide came right up to Merry, who seemed quite amused by the child's fascination.

"You have pointed ears," she announced, spying the leaf shape even through his curls.

"You have round ones," he told her smartly. "We hobbits find that quite strange."

She giggled, sufficiently distracted, and I approached Rylan. "I don't mean to take advantage of my… well, people's kindness to me, but if you should need anything, don't hesitate to ask. You and Merewald were the first kind people to me in Gondor, and if I can repay that I would."

"You have done more for Gondor than likely even rumor says," he answered, shaking his head. "Other than time we will rebuild. We are luckier than most in that sense." Considering the state of the buildings I'd seen closer to the gate he had a point. Many around here were still standing. The same could not be said for those closer to the gate and the walls. "Perhaps some of your magic helped with that."
I opened my mouth to contradict him, but seeing his earnest expression and Merewald's rushed tray of scones and butter, I found myself closing my mouth without knowing why. "Thank you, Merewald." I wasn't that hungry yet, but Merry was more than happy to eat my share too, as he came closer with Adelaide. "This is Merry. I'm sorry for not introducing you earlier," I added suddenly, recalling my manners. "He is a hobbit from the Shire, far to the north."

"I suppose you're not really from Rohan, are you?" Rylan asked with a bit of smile, though I still sensed distance between the couple and myself. Maybe that was time or maybe the rumors really had built me a reputation that was now a wall.

"Uh, no," I said, pressing my lips together. "I'm not. I'm sorry for lying." He just shook his head, dismissing anything about that.

The awkwardness did lessen some as I asked a little about the evacuation and where they went. Most of the civilians who weren't nobles ended up in a series of cities and caves in the mountains built for this purpose, though many weren't big enough to accommodate all the people. The nobles went south apparently, though when I told them there had been fighting there too, we wondered if the people in the mountains hadn't fared better.

"There were more children there," Adelaide piped, "but I like home better. Even if a rock did fall on it."

That seemed to remind everyone that the barbershop needed a lot of work before it would be even remotely functional again, but luckily Rylan was in an industry that would always be in demand. Our guard looked like he was ready to fall asleep if he hadn't already, seated stiffly on the steps of the neighboring building.

"Well I suppose we ought to go. Let me know when you open again, Rylan. My hair is already getting very long again." Rylan smiled, and I was pleased too that Merewald had softened some.

"If you come in the spring I'll put flowers in your hair," Adelaide offered, earning my biggest smile yet.

"Really? That would be great, Adelaide. Maybe I can start a new trend." That put a big grin on her face, and I felt a flush of pride. There might be some new distance between us, but at least we were still friendly.

"Thank you for coming to see us, Lady Maddie," Merewald said politely, standing by her husband and daughter as I mounted up and helped Merry get situated. Then with a last goodbye we trotted back down the street, looking for a major cleared road to take us up.

"They're a nice family. How did you meet them?" Merry asked once we'd found a quieter road sloping towards the checkpoint.

"My first time in Minas Tirith. I didn't know what to do or how to find work, let alone where to stay. They helped me."

"When was that?" he asked as we passed the lone guard there and into the second level.

"A year ago now, maybe a little more." It didn't feel like that long ago, but I'd spent somewhere close to a year as a maidservant, and then I wasn't even sure how long I'd been gone when I left Minas Tirith. Time was so much harder to measure when people didn't really use minutes and hours or days of the week. It was seasons and daylight and nighttime, and I measured things in the lengths between events. Curious, how I hadn't even considered how easily I'd forgotten clocks.
"Well you've done what you can for them. If they're stubborn like hobbits, they won't take help even from the family unless the grandmother forces it on them. You know there was a snowstorm one winter about ten years before my majority, and the roof of the grain shed collapsed under the weight…" Merry chattered on about hobbits arguing about accepting money from neighbors and loans as we climbed the length of Minas Tirith, touching levels I hadn't been able to see without stamped and marked approval a year ago. Now guards didn't even bother to check me, just nodded me in. (Though that might have been Merry, who stuck out a lot more than I did.)

We reached the sixth level, and the emptiness of the wards was palpable. Merry dismounted with a bit of help and went inside, and I walked Thunor back to the stable.

"They say it will take them five days to reach the Black Gates at least," I told Thunor as I pulled his bridle off and hung it outside his stall. "Five days. What am I going to do?"

He snorted a hot breath of air on my throat that made me jump, and I tugged on his mane as I moved around him to unbuckle the saddle. "I thought I would help with the clean up, but you saw how Merewald and Rylan reacted. I don't think I can quite mingle like I used to." It was with mixed feelings I said that. I'd never wanted to be famous before, and I didn't much like it now, but at the same time Éowyn, Merry, Pippin, and all the rest were in something of the same boat. At least it did give me some freedom of movement, which was especially important to me now that I had a horse.

"Well, maybe I can go riding outside the city. Although… they might still be cleaning up there too." I spent the rest of the time brushing Thunor down speculating on what I was going to do with the army gone. As I would soon learn though, there wasn't any need for speculation.
The army is gone and Maddie has to find something to do; thankfully the wait isn't long.

The day after the army left, Minas Tirith was bustling with activity. Even though most of the men were gone, there was a lot of rebuilding to do and plenty of hands to do it now that most of the evacuees had returned. It was, for many people, also a distraction from what was outside their control. Their brothers, fathers, sons, and husbands were off at war, and the only thing they could do was build something for them to come back to.

I didn't get out on to the streets until later though. I spent the beginning of that day trying to be helpful and failing miserably. Faramir asked me to stay on the sixth and seventh levels, so I honored his request no matter that no one on the sixth or seventh levels was really around. There were a handful of nurses and healers in the wards, but I didn't know anything about herbs and I could barely sew on a button let alone a wound, so I couldn't be of much use to them there now that the rush was long over. The sixth level was mostly made up of nobles' houses that remained empty, and the fighting hadn't damaged anything that high up in the city.

That's how I ended up spending a good chunk of the day doing nothing at all and being quite angry about it. No one liked being useless, but I'd essentially spent all morning hearing about how delicate womenfolk were and how a woman of my rank ought not to do such things. If I did everything I ought not to do I'd probably be dead and so would Boromir.

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I was, admittedly, steaming in my righteous indignation, and Éowyn had to deal with the brunt of it when I'd come stomping in a few minutes ago after hearing from the librarians how I shouldn't strain my eyes organizing books. Thankfully I'd cooled off some by the time I reached her rooms and was left to stew.

"I'm bored," I complained for possibly the hundredth time, laying flat on my back on Éowyn's bed. "No one will let me do anything lest I break a fingernail."
I glanced at my companion in invisible chains from the corner of my eye. She was standing by the window staring down at the courtyard now two stories below. Someone had realized giving her a first floor room and orders to stay in bed had been a bad idea.

"I share this burden with you. A healer caught me in the hallway this morning and marched me like a man to the gallows back to my room."

We both sighed, caught up in imagining doing something, anything else. I'd even asked Faramir in the morning if riding was an option, but I'd gotten a strict warning about the perils of leaving the gated areas of the city. That left both Éowyn and I restless, though my restlessness translated into outrage, while whatever that Ringwraith had done to Éowyn left her melancholy. I did what I could to help her, but it was a personal battle of recovery.

Faramir might have been able to do more to lift her spirits, but he had to act as Steward and basically King of Gondor for the moment, all from his hospital bed down the hall. He was organizing food relief efforts, rebuilding of gates and walls, managing patrols and scouts, distribution of basic necessities, and other various tasks. I had offered to do something to help, but that's how I'd gotten leashed to the top two levels.

"What did you do in your homeland in peaceful days? I don't think you ever told me," Éowyn asked me suddenly. Her blonde waves caught the sunlight from the window accenting her timeless, classic beauty if I'd bothered to look.

"Administration and media outreach," I told the ceiling.

"What?"

"Um… I worked for a… guild." There weren't really companies in Middle Earth, but that was the closest I could think of. "And I did- I organized things, and… picked people to do things…"

Éowyn leaned out of the sunlight so she could give me a properly skeptical look. I could just see it out of the corner of my eye as I continued to stare at the ceiling, wondering what on earth had prompted me to answer like that. There was no medieval equivalent to the twenty-first century job I'd had.

"That makes no sense."

"It's a job you do not have here," I answered, defeated. Indeed, all my resume skills might have been fancy things like "excellent team-player" and "efficient with Microsoft Office", but none of those things meant a single silver coin in Middle Earth. I was more broke than most hobos. At least Éowyn could sew.

"Well it may come to pass that the only work required of you would be that of a wife," Éowyn said with a smile, but her words only unsettled me. I sat up.

"And what does a wife do all day when her husband is gone? What will you do all day? Sew? Ride around the fields?" It was a genuine question out of ignorance, but I managed to sound snippy all the same. Éowyn looked at me with genuine surprise.

"In Rohan a woman might lead the house while her husband is gone, ensure the servants know their work, and be sure all the duties and responsibilities of the family's rank are fulfilled. I imagine in Gondor it's much the same." She paused, eyes flickering all over my face as I sat there just staring at her. "It is not the same in your home?"

"No." This was the tip of a giant iceberg I did not need to get into, but I was on edge as it were. My pride as a woman demanded it, especially after what had happened in the Kinsey household.
"Women are not defined by their husband's work in my home. Not all women work—but others continue because they think it is important or they want or need to earn money for their family," I told her. This was an exceptionally general way of putting it, but I couldn't be more specific without running into roadblocks like what exactly my previous job had been. "Sitting around doing nothing is… no one likes that."

Éowyn looked thoughtful thankfully, not offended or shocked at my description of modern gender roles. "Like soldiers," she said slowly, "you told me once that women in your homeland could be soldiers too. But should you marry a noble in Gondor or Rohan—"

"Who said anything about marriage?" I asked confrontationally. I'd said a woman wasn't defined by her husband's work, but maybe I should have said that a woman wasn't defined by her husband too. Not to mention there weren't many people I knew who were marriageable, and most of those I did were very high rank. Surely Éomer had married someone fancy originally, though Boromir was obviously a toss-up since he'd been— "Well it's not all about marriage," I said quickly, stopping that train of thought. "I'm not planning on that anytime soon. At the moment I just want to do something."

Éowyn was still looking curious. "Well, you really ought to only accept the hand of a man with rank. No one expects less than that after everything you've done."

"Who is no one?" I asked, feeling very weird about this conversation.

Éowyn shrugged, but there was something coy about her mouth. "You do have a unique reputation, and many think you some cousin witch of Gandalf. Many a family would like a bloodline like that."

"A bloodline," I repeated flatly. My good family of boring immigrant background and exactly zero exciting people? Which had now been inflated to include mystical powers I neither had nor desired?

"I expect you'll be offered a hand soon anyway. I'd be very surprised if you should turn that one down," she said mysteriously.

"Well now you have to say who!"

"You didn't tell me about Faramir, despite laying scant inches from me and sharing that old betrothal of your youth," she replied coolly, though she'd told me she hadn't been hurt by my silence. Éowyn understood why I hadn't told her, but it was still a good jibe at me.

"Yes but you don't have farseeing powers to my knowledge," I chided, but she'd gotten me thinking of course. Whose hand would I not turn down? Unbidden I thought of Boromir and wished I hadn't been so worried about his armor.

"And I am amazed you have them at all sometimes," she said with a wink. She definitely knew what I was thinking, and I definitely wasn't going to admit it out loud. Boromir was… he was Steward. He had a bazillion noblewomen to choose from, and I had… well I had my priorities. Romance and marriage in Middle Earth would be binding, and I had questions that needed answering first.

Someone knocked on the door and Éowyn went to answer. As the servants laid out lunch I zoned out trying not to think about what the hell I was going to do when everything was over with if I didn't go home. If I couldn't figure out what to do with a few empty days ahead of me, what about
a lifetime? It felt like there was a huge pit open under me and I was flailing aimlessly, like Erynion's arrow pointed at the ground.

Stupid Elves and their stupid foresight.

"Maddie?" Éowyn asked, closing the door behind the maids.

I waved her off, and then I had to deny daydreaming about anyone in particular as we tucked into lunch. The mood lightened quickly as soon as we discovered we had a whole plate of steamed mushrooms in butter to ourselves. Merry had shared a story last night about an irate farmer whose mushrooms he and Pippin had nicked, and all the while slowly hoarded all of the mushrooms on the dinner table. I’d spoken to Merry this morning, but he'd been asked by Beregond to meet the Gondorian's son, and last I'd heard Merry was three levels down doing something with catapults.

"How big do you suppose hobbit babies are?" I asked suddenly. "They must be like the size of baby cats."

"Do you mean kittens?"

"Yes." How did I not know that word?

Éowyn did not quite get my fascination with kittens or other small animals, though I told her that she'd obviously never seen cats do as many silly and ridiculous things as I had. I may have unintentionally left her with the impression I grew up with a dozen cats instead of YouTube, but by the time I realized this it was far too late.

We finished lunch amiably enough, but with the prospect of all afternoon and nothing to talk about with marriage and soft-pointed arrows still on both our minds, I sought a quick escape. I was also unceasingly restless now, while Éowyn was beginning to flag.

"I'm going to see if Faramir has anything for me to do." I stood up, and realized how stiff I'd become. Sitting around all day was something I'd done once at my social media and administration job, and I wasn't keen to start doing it again.

"And if not?"

"Maybe I can convince a nurse that Windfola is bothering the stable-hands and they need her rider to help," I said with a smile, which put one back on Éowyn's face. I did feel bad about leaving her to her boredom, but I didn't think I could stand to sit in that room much longer.

I left and went down the hall, a slightly chilly breeze passing through the courtyard that overlooked Minas Tirith. The plains of Gondor were empty and in some places scorched. The army had left before all the orcs could be burned, so there were great fires scattered here and there. Thankfully the wind blew that smell to the north, and from this distance nothing more than flames were visible. Even so, I shuddered at the remembrance of that hellish field.

That wasn't a good thing to be thinking as I came to Faramir's door. I'd been snappy all day after the third time I'd been told what I couldn't do, so I tried to take a calming breath before I entered. No need to offend the one person who could probably give me a real job.

"Lord Faramir," I greeted, knocking on the door beside a guard to get his attention.

Faramir looked up, surprised no doubt at my return a few hours later. "Lady Maddie, is something amiss?" He had scrolls piled on his desk and already emptied one inkpot. The actual bedroom of this fancy hospital room was attached through another doorway; this room was a sort of office and receiving area, and clearly Faramir's main workplace while he was recovering.
"No, no, I was just, well, I was wondering if there was anything I could do. There isn't much happening on these levels."

I was trying to play it cool, but Faramir was having none of it. "I'd rather you didn't exert yourself unnecessarily."

"It's not unnecessary if it's something as important as cleaning up the city," I said a bit sharply. You'd think I was pregnant and frail but insisting on lifting boulders by his phrasing, and he wasn't the first.

"There are many arms of this beast," he replied tiredly. "Have you spoken to the healers? Or perhaps the library?"

I started to feel my lip curl and that now familiar feeling of outrage building in my chest. "Neither need me. I tried to help the guards above moving equipment and armor, but they refused. I also tried to help the kitchen servants, but the moment I touched a dirty pot they politely turned me around. Even the nurses had no use of me, since I have no training and they feared staining my dress." I said this all quite tightly, unable and unwilling to hide how angry being treated like a delicate flower made me.

Faramir sat back in his seat, no longer splitting his attention between the paperwork and me, but looking at me straight on. My tone and therefore my feelings were obvious. "I do not say this to be cruel," Faramir told me, "but you are as a lady of Gondor and there are expectations that come with that title. You have proven yourself in war and in healing already."

"This is not about proving myself," I snapped, hurt blossoming within my anger. "It is about helping."

"I understand," he said, though he obviously didn't. "And your desire is admirable. Though you have no house in Gondor you are under the protection of my brother and therefore I. I do not wish you to fall ill should you heal the sick, or injure yourself in the rubble. And Boromir explicitly asked me that you stay within the city where you will be safest."

I felt that ire inside me grow stronger at Faramir's straightforward words, said kindly but also steadfastly. However I heard his words through a filter not shared with women of this time.

"I'm not a doll," I said quietly but with fervor. "I thank you for the title I didn't want, but I don't need to be under anyone else's house. I am my own person, and I make my own decisions."

Faramir's brows drew together. "What I mean by house is lineage."

"We all have a lineage." I fired back. "You can just say that you have kings or stewards or whatever in yours. I have a soldier and a farmer and a few others. I know it's important to you, but I'm not raised that way. I can't be idle like this forever. Title or not, house or not, sitting around and knitting all day when people need help is considered cruel to me. I don't like to be told that I can't do something because of my gender or my rank."

There was very likely high color on my cheeks, and I was raring for a fight, but Faramir didn't give it to me. His expression said he was picking apart my words, trying to understand. "It is a dishonor to you to rest when you have done more work than, say, all the food distributors in this city?"

"You can't compare them," I retorted. "One food worker might be the difference between a family starving and living." That might have been an exaggeration, but in many circumstances on my Earth it wasn't. "It's about helping people," I tried, aiming for a different angle. "I don't like to…" I
waved my hands around erratically, unable to immediately translate the word 'mooch'. "I don't like to live off other people's generosity. Not when I can do something. I used to have a job, live alone; I choose where to go and what to do. Now..." I flailed a bit more, vocabulary and grammar losing me in my zeal to get the words out. I seemed to be getting my point across, or at least it was obvious the cultural divide was greater than we thought.

"In some ways I see much of Lady Éowyn in you, and others I see something I have never spied before," he murmured, almost sounding awed.

"That sounds about right," I replied hotly, but I was losing steam. My argument for egalitarianism was clearly not what he'd been expecting, and he wasn't disagreeing.

He shuffled through his papers before addressing me again. "It is obvious to me that you feel strongly about this—and I cannot say I dissent your opinion. I do not have any specific jobs, but you may wander the city freely. I only ask that you take care not to do anything that would bring Boromir's wrath upon me." He only looked to be partially joking.

"I'm already far behind on that lecture, so add it to the tally," I told him, black mood gone with his words.

Faramir dismissed me with a wave, giving me a note to give to the guards on the entrance to the fifth level. I took it gladly and immediately headed down.

As I mentioned before, I didn't have to speculate about what to do because work found me in the most unlikely of places. I had imagined handing out rations or blankets, or clearing rocks or something, but what I ended up doing was a mix of everything. I suppose it fit my broad, general knowledge. I may not know how to find clean water for a well or build one, but I knew the value of boiling dirty water so it was drinkable.

That was one of the first things I ended up doing. On the third level there was a well built into the rock face of the cliff Minas Tirith was constructed from, and fresh mountain water flowed through there to feed the houses of the whole neighborhood. In the midst of the fighting and destruction that well had become contaminated, and a neighborhood committee had been organized to figure out how to deal with it.

Then I came along, disrupting the discussion with only the hope that I'd found something to help with.

"It was clean before?" I asked, and one older man with impressive jowls nodded, waggling them at me. He wasn't a hefty guy, but somehow whatever extra fat he had went straight into his cheeks.

"Well there might be something contaminating it from within. Boiling it would help until you find out what," I offered. The whole group was fixated on me. There was a chill today in the air as the wind blew the dark clouds hanging over Minas Tirith away, and I was rather glad the maidservant had insisted I wear the flame-embroidered cloak this morning. It and the grey dress went well together, and now it was lending me some air of command I was distinctly unused to.

"Boiling it, milady?"

I peered into the deep well so I didn't have to look at them. It looked like a cross between a fountain and a standard well, with a stone lip and a hand-controlled crank to bring water up. Carvings of fish and what might be a very worn down mermaid were on the sides.
"You know, with fire," I replied. I didn't see anything inside the well, but there were a lot of things that could mess up fresh water.

"We do not need hot water, milady."

"Boiling water cleans it," I answered, looking back up at him and quite unable to tear my gaze from those jiggling jowls. "Just boil whatever you use before you drink it."

"Milady," another woman said, curtsying deeply. She had the carriage of someone of noble birth, probably why she was on this committee. It was strange for me to face someone potentially of equal rank, when just a year before I would have been the one curtseying constantly. "Forgive me if I am too bold or impose, but would not a spell be easier?"

My first instinct was to reject the notion entirely, but seeing the gathered people and their trusting faces, I thought maybe channeling the Wizard of Oz might be a terrible, but ultimately lifesaving, idea. "You would still have to boil the water for it to be safe," I hedged, "even for bathing."

"I would trust the safety of our health to your magic, first, if you please," a younger woman added. Her hand was gripped tightly around a toddler's, which sold this horrible idea to me.

"Alright," I murmured, wary. "Magic doesn't work quite like that, but I can…" It would be a placebo I tried to comfort myself; I wasn't an utter charlatan. Of course, if I was channeling the Wizard of Oz I also knew I had to do something dramatic enough to pass as magic for them to believe me. I was no wizard though, so I cupped some water from the bucketful that had been pulled up, and closed my eyes. "Please boil this water before you drink it," I said in English then blew on it. Several people let out their breaths, but I knew I'd done nothing but make an empty wish into the air.

"Thank you milady."

"Thank you."

"May you be blessed," they said, as I shyly waved them off, feeling unsettled.

"You still have to boil it," I reminded them with warning in my voice. "Otherwise it will not be safe. The magic… doesn't work like that."

The fact that they were lighting large fires and bringing out pots when I left made my heart buoyant despite the deception. I did not like lying, but I liked death and dysentery even less.

Fortunately the day did get better in that regard. This deception was the first of a few; mostly relating to other wells as word spread that I could "clean" the water with magic and heat. Then I helped gather rotten fruit from an orchard and toss it before anyone ate it, and word got out that I was helping people with little things here and there. Soon enough I didn't even need to invoke magic anymore; my name and title in some groups was enough to get them to do as I advised.

"Wash your hands thoroughly," I instructed, rubbing my hands in the water with the precious soap. There was little of it, but I'd made sure to round some up for the women. These healers were trying to stop a small spread of the flu. I'd run into them after an elderly woman directed me to a home that was trying to care for sick children. It seemed flu season wasn't quite over yet.

"It's important to use the soap. That's what is most effective." I did not imply that I had tampered with the soap at all via magic, but nonetheless the women took the handful of bars I had gathered like they were made of stardust. "Between each patient," I stressed, "be careful not to touch your face until you have washed your hands." It wasn't foolproof for stopping contagion, but it would go a long way. That was enough to settle my heart as I walked away from the home-turned-
hospital not long after I was sure the women understood the value of hand-washing and boiling rags and sheets for sanitation.

I found by mid-afternoon I was a jack-of-all-trades; many people thought my "magic" had something to do with my knowledge, and not just general science and education. For some of the larger rubble pieces I helped people to construct a pulley to leverage the bigger rocks. I even helped direct people to cart human feces out into the fields immediately outside the walls, insisting it would make great fertilizer no matter how gross. (I'd offered to go with them, but the three elderly gentlemen doing the job would have none of it.) That had been one of the more unpleasant jobs, but unfortunately a necessary one.

The activity I settled on finally had been organizing food stores, because I felt the most useful and I didn't have to invoke an ounce of magic to help out.

"If it is vegetables, it goes in the room with three lines, and if it's grain it goes in the room with four," I instructed, raising my voice to be heard over the din of commotion.

Hours after picking at threads on Éowyn's bed sheets, I was standing in the center of a former guardhouse directing spare food into storage rooms. The healthy fruits I'd been picking while tossing the rotten ones had been gathered by a small army of women and unloaded into a back alley near the distribution center along with a myriad of other foodstuffs from all over the city. The women had been piling them up in corners or tossing them into empty rooms before I came, but sometimes things spilled over and sacks broke, and nothing was even remotely labeled. When I'd arrived, the first thing I'd seen was a woman complaining about getting three bags of carrots instead of the variety of foodstuffs as promised.

I was one of the only ones on the second level who could read and write, so when I'd asked if they'd designated any rooms or something I got a million apologies and curtseys but no clear idea of who was coordinating all of this. I'd been nervous at first, but with the cloak and my determination to be helpful I'd started the tally system for labeling food rooms in flour paste made with water. The back room of this guardhouse that had inadvertently become a food station became a swirl of harried but controlled activity, mostly dominated by women running around to fill bags of food, shuffle things into the correct area, and appease the constant stream of people looking for rations.

"Meats, milady?" asked a boy with a haul of six plucked chickens over his shoulder. It was hardly clean the way we kept the meat, but everything had been salted and humanity had survived for thousands of years without refrigeration so I had let that hang-up go as I adverted my gaze from the bare carcasses.

"The room with six lines. Back in the corner. Hang them if you can."

"Yes, milady," he said quickly, ducking his head when we made eye contact. It was still a bit weird how easy it had been to take control of the situation, but it had occurred to me that for all my fears of my useless "Middle Earth resume", I was more productive now than I'd pretty much ever been in my life.

With no one immediately needing my help, I grabbed a sack of flour, hauling it up and over my shoulder as a new pile of fruit crates came in, dragged by two dour mules. The apples were a bit bruised, but they'd survived the trip well enough, and women quickly stacked the boxes in the back room while some of the children counted out the numbers and bagged them. We did our best to be fair about how much food each family got, and the counting also kept the children out from underfoot.

"Miss, a family's got seven children," I heard from a small voice. It was one of the courier girls
running bags of food back and forth from the entrance where people lined up, and she looked very nervous to approach me. I'd asked them to let me know if any really big families came, since the equal rations we were handing out weren't meant to feed a family of five or more. Looking down at her I wiped my forehead, smearing some of the loose flour all over and tried to smile encouragingly. My dress and cloak were dappled with white, which had at first made the other women aghast, but I had traced one of the flames in flour just to show how much I cared. Clothing could be washed. "Do we give them an extra bag?" she asked tentatively.

"If we have extra of some things, add a few. It shouldn't be heavier than a full bag of apples." She scurried off just in time for someone else to insistently take the bag of flour I was holding. Despite my direction the people here still tried to take most of the heavy loads from me. That's how I usually ended up coordinating things and answering questions more than hefting food. I smacked my hands clean of flour on my skirt and laughed when I little boy no older than three mimicked me in the corner of the room, much to his mother's distress.

"Um… Lady Maddie?" asked someone behind me. I turned to see what else was the problem, and was stunned to see Oriolda, wrapped in a thin brown cape looking nervously at me.

"Oriolda?" I breathed. How different I must appear now, ordering all these people around! I didn't quite know how to feel at the sight of my old friend who I'd left on poor terms.

"Lady Maddie, I… I heard you were here." She looked about to curtsey, but I quickly touched her arm to stop that, then pulled back when I realized I still had some flour caked on my fingers.

"You don't have to call me that," I told her as I beckoned her out the back door. "Igilma?" I called to a woman who had been quick to help me get this entire whirlwind under some semblance of control. "I'll be a moment." She nodded and I led Oriolda outside where we found some empty crates to sit on. It was good to get off my feet now, and this way we weren't being stared at quite as much.

Oriolda sat herself more daintily on the other crate, her big eyes watching me. She'd piled her hair up on her head with two thick braids, the black curls neatly tucked away, and she smoothed out the creases in her dress unconsciously. I'd forgotten I'd adopted habits like that while working for the Kinseys, since the servants' appearances reflected on the family to some extent. After hard travel, battles, and now covered in flour, I was just about the opposite of her.

"How are you? How are Clarimond and the rest?" I was genuinely curious, but I also hadn't actually considered going to find them the way I had with Rylan and Merewald. The anger and outrage at what had happened with the Kinseys and the staff was long gone, but it had definitely soured me to them.

"They are well," she responded carefully. She seemed to be almost in shock at seeing me. "H- How are you?"

"I've been busy," I admitted. "I returned to Minas Tirith only a week ago."

Oriolda nodded, and I wasn't sure what to say. Merewald and Rylan had been a bit awkward and deferential, but we'd warmed up to conversation. Here with my old coworker things were not so natural.

"I… I wish to beg your forgiveness for whatever hurt Clarimond and I have caused you," Oriolda said in a single breath, clutching the fabric of her skirt and twisting it with both hands. It was a nervous gesture I'd seen before when Everlid would scold her. "It is a year past now, and I hope in your heart you may understand that we did not know the truth of you and said things with pettiness out of spite. We are… I am…very sorry and most humbly ask for your forgiveness."
The apology was sincere, and I found myself hoping I might be able to start clean with these girls. I reached out and grabbed Oriolda's hand, forgetting about the flour. "I am not angry anymore. I was hurt, yes, but it has been forgiven. You could not have known the truth," and indeed, I couldn't really tell her I too hadn't known anything for the first months we worked together, "but thank you for apologizing."

"Thank you, mila—Miss Maddie. It unburdens my heart to know that, that you bear me no ill will."

"It was hurtful, yes," I had to say, because she and the rest had all but driven me from the household, though I'd been half out the door already. "But I would not hold a grudge this long. I only hope you understand why I was angry."

"Clarimond and I thought on it often. We were unfair to you," she said, but didn't elaborate. We lapsed into silence, Oriolda still a bit fidgety, but she smiled at me with a flicker of the girl I'd known.

"Where did you go during the war? What of the rest of the household?"

"We left with Lord Kinsey and his family to Pelargir, where Lady Kinsey's brother lives," she explained. "We've only just returned, but when I heard rumor the Lady of Secret Fire was here I… I had to see if it was you."

A sigh slipped out of me, but I was grudgingly coming to accept the title I was going to forever be associated with. It had proved useful today. "Well perhaps you can tell them that my magic is…” I was going to say nonexistent, but after the tricks I'd done today and the advice I'd given, I might very well undercut my own activities. "…It's not like you probably imagine."

"But is it true?" she asked quickly, hands tight in her lap with anticipation. "Can you manipulate fire and heal grave wounds?" It was still weird to me how people I'd known before viewed me now. It was as though Oriolda didn't remember when I was the woman who hadn't understood the variations in petticoats between seasons and types of outings. (I still didn't understand them really.)

"Nothing like that, and I'm sure there are many more wrong rumors," I said instead of a straight answer. "But I'm not really from Rohan," I added.

Oriolda laughed just a little, then almost seemed surprised with herself. "Well Clarimond and I guessed that. And I suppose… well, I suppose your messages with Gandalf and later…” she hesitated, discomfited with bringing up the topic that had pulled us apart.

"As I had said then," I maintained gently, trying to find the balance between kindness and sternness. "It was strictly academic. Faramir wanted only to hear about my… discussion with Gandalf. I was angry that you and the household did not believe that, but assumed much worse of me."

"And I'm very sorry for it," she said again, which I accepted with a nod. Oriolda bit her lip, and I could tell there was a question she wanted to ask but was afraid to voice.

"Just ask," I said with a reassuring smile, "I'm sure it's no worse than anything else I've been asked."

"It is true? About you and the… the new steward? Lord Boromir?" And then as though to make-up for asking such a personal question, she tacked on quickly, "Clarimond made me swear to ask if you were not angry with us."

"Thank you, mila—Miss Maddie. It unburdens my heart to know that, that you bear me no ill will."

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"It is true? About you and the… the new steward? Lord Boromir?" And then as though to make-up for asking such a personal question, she tacked on quickly, "Clarimond made me swear to ask if you were not angry with us."
I had to smile a bit ruefully, but also because this was exactly the question I'd asked myself after Éowyn's ditty about marriage this morning. "I'm not sure what 'it' is, but Lord Boromir is at war so..." there was a hint of speculation in her eye that I was driven to kill almost as soon as I saw it. "There is nothing. Where is Clarimond, if you are here?"

I successfully changed the topic, but I'm sure Oriolda was still thinking on it. I'd have to extract a promise about that rumor-mongering she, Clarimond, and all the rest were prone to before she left. "She had to help settle the Kinseys back in. Only I was able to slip away for errands."

"I suppose those errands don't include food?" I asked a bit mischievously.

"Uh, no," she admitted. "But I could not lose the chance to see if, well, if you were here. I really did want to apologize on behalf of Clarimond and I."

"You did," I insisted, as she looked to be gearing up for round three of apologies. "And please tell Clarimond and everyone I'm not mad anymore." I really wasn't; what had happened was more telling of the worldview of Middle Earth and their upbringing. I didn't have any desire to see the Kinseys or most of the household staff again, but I'd hardly speak ill about them.

"I only ask," I said slowly, thinking about those same worldviews I'd so vehemently disagreed with, "that you remember why I was angry and consider something: why are women treated differently than men? With training, could you not do anything they could do? If you can learn all the complicated embroidery patterns of shoes, couldn't you learn to read and write?"

I don't think Oriolda had even the slightest idea what to say to that, but I hoped I planted a seed in her. I didn't get to hear what she might say though, because at that moment three guards appeared at the mouth of the alley blocking the late sun.

"Who among you has seen the Lady Maddie?" they announced to a cluster of women who were chattering as they collected apples and pears that had fallen out of their crates.

I stood up as they approached, and Oriolda immediately jumped to her feet and curtsied. "Lady Maddie, Lord Faramir had requested you return for the evening meal," said the first soldier with a short bow.

"Ah, of course." I glanced around at the attention we were getting, and realized I'd quite forgotten all the work I'd been doing in my chat with Oriolda. "A moment please." I slipped back in the door to find some of the hustle going down as evening approached. "Igilma, are you quite alright here?"

"Oh yes milady, we're quite fine now, and the day is nearly done. Thank you for all your hard work." She curtsied and a dozen other women in the area followed suit. That made me feel quite ready to return upstairs where Éowyn wouldn't complain if I sat cross-legged on bed and blathered on about itchy socks.

I walked back out imagining it, and then seeing Oriolda still standing there reminded me of many a silly night between us three girls. She and Clarimond had once been those kinds of friends to me, but now a princess of Rohan was. As Oriolda curtsied once more and said goodbye, promising to pass on my message to the rest of the servants, I could only think that I didn't miss her or Clarimond the way I had missed Éowyn when I'd left Edoras. How funny, that someone like me coming with no rank to speak of had fallen in with royals.

The days after passed by similarly, and even though I was glad to be busy, Boromir and the Fellowship were never far from my mind. Had they reached the Black Gates yet? They said five
days, and it had been five days now. Was anyone injured? Were Frodo and Sam okay? The questions didn't cease, and as Éowyn recovered and Faramir put more smiles back on her face, I felt with each day like I couldn't uncoil myself from anxiety. It had taken the form of restless boredom, but more and more it grew to naked apprehension until finally I blinked awake full of dread.

"Aren't you going to the lower levels?" Éowyn asked, her dress making a soft susurrations on the stone of the balcony. It provided a beautiful view of the plains, though they were still blackened mostly. The Rammas Echor was broken in places but standing, and just visible in the east was Osgiliath. My eyes were trained in that direction, but beyond the fallen city.

"I couldn't sleep. Today…" I'd woken anxious with the moon high in the dark sky, and hadn't been able to close my eyes since. I knew I'd dreamt, but unlike my dream of Gandalf and the Balrog this was nothing but red and black. It had filled me with dark thoughts.

"Are you well?" Éowyn slipped into the seat next to me, and I finally tore my gaze away from the imposing mountains of Mordor.

"Yes, but it is a waiting game, and I cannot think of anything else."

I didn't have the heart to go down and deal with the small problems of the city when I could barely tear my gaze away from the east. Was Boromir at this moment engaged in battle? Were Frodo and Sam on the slopes of Mount Doom? I felt so very far from the heart of everything, but I couldn't stop staring out like if I just strained myself I could see the action with my own eyes.

"Come, there is nothing we can do from here. Let your hands loosen their grip," Éowyn said gently, concern coloring her voice.

I hadn't even realized I'd been holding the edge of the stone bench in my hands until I unclenched. It was like something in the very air set my skin to tingling with nerves. I didn't know how she could be so calm; my breath seemed always short.

"I know there's nothing, but…" I stood up to pace because suddenly I couldn't sit any longer.

"Then let's talk of something else. Have you heard of the hill fairies? Many Gondorian children believe that in the hills there are a tiny fey folk." I didn't care one whit about Middle Earth leprechauns, but I couldn't fault Éowyn for trying to distract me. I was poor company though, because my attention never quite focused on the story, always wavering back to the shadow of Mordor. But as the day passed and my disquiet grew, nothing continued to happen.

"Lady Éowyn, Lady Maddie, will you join me for an early lunch?" Faramir asked as he stepped behind us. I wasn't hungry; my stomach was full of anticipation.

"Maddie, won't you join us?" Éowyn asked, taking Faramir's offered hand when I barely glanced at his arrival.

"No, I'm fine."

"What do you sense?" Faramir asked, looking once at Éowyn, whose face no doubt reflected her concern.

"The end, I think." My eyes were once again locked on the black peaks, now overshadowed by thick clouds swept in from the east. My dreams of red and black were still there in the back of my thoughts.

Faramir and Éowyn couldn't convince me to leave for lunch, and I maintained my vigil fixedly.
Later I wouldn't quite understand what held me there, whether it was my own bit of magic or the influence of the Ring and its Master, so close to being united.

It was some time in early afternoon, when the sun was slipping in and out of the clouds and Mordor remained in shadow that my pacing abruptly stopped. Like an impending wave, I knew what was about to hit me a blink before it did.

Something dark and suffocating lifted off the world as I shakily sank into the stone bench. I thought for a moment I could see magic, rippling over Mordor and breaking like a wave hitting the shore. The pale sunlight was just a bit brighter, the air just a little fresher, and my heart pounded a trace easier.

The Ring was destroyed.

I felt like the mountains of Mordor should crack and fall, like the city of Osgiliath should glow, like all the grass should spring up anew. The Ring was gone; the evil that was Sauron had been obliterated in its wake.

The buzzing that had filled my ears in my feverish unrest had vanished, and all the sounds of life in Minas Tirith returned. Yet it all went on around me, the passing of the Ring unknown to the rest of the world. A maid below was humming, carts were trundling through the streets, clothes were flapping as they dried in the afternoon sun. I was still standing on a stone balcony in Minas Tirith of Middle Earth, my hip still aching from where I'd slammed the door on it the day before, my petticoat still scratching my legs. Something huge in the world had changed, but everything else had not.

I don't know how long I sat there trying to catalogue all my feelings, balancing my relief and my joy with the continued anxiety over Gondor's army and the hobbits who had saved us all. I was trying to grasp the changes that were so subtle in the world maybe only an Elf could really see it.

The clouds were clearing in the sky as I watched them slowly sail away to the north, except for a few dark ones hanging yet over Mordor. I tracked their progress almost lazily, thoughts miles away, until slowly dark spots appeared far off in the air, small and unclear but most definitely moving towards the city.

Awareness started to rise in me as I watched the spots' progress, and I fumbled, grasping, the words slipped out of the clutch of my fingers in my mind, and then slowly the shape of wings became just barely visible.

I sprang up from the stone bench and darted down the hall, yelling, "Faramir! Faramir! Frodo and Sam are coming! It's the Eagles!"

I sprinted round two corners and into the doorway with one hand on the jamb and found Éowyn and Faramir jumping apart on a cozy couch. "The Eagles are coming with Sam and Frodo! They need the finest rooms in the hospital and healers!" I said breathlessly, and finally, finally, I felt happy. They'd done it. The hobbits had done it!

Faramir looked dumbfounded at me, but I took off back toward another viewpoint over the city, too excited by what this meant. "See!" I cried pointing as Faramir followed on my heels. "Do you see them?" The Eagles were more obvious now, soaring on the high air currents, winging slowly against the clear sky. I was sure two little hobbits were with them.

"Ready two hospital rooms!" Faramir yelled as he jogged down the corridor. Instead of following his shouts though, I ran back deeper into the sixth level heading straight for the staircases.
I dashed right by the confused guards, breathing hard as I topped the steps to the flat promenade of the seventh level: the perfect landing spot. I had a crick in my side and my lungs were burning, but as I leaned forward at the very tip of Minas Tirith, on nearly its highest point, I could just see a curly head safely caught in an Eagles’ claws.
Spring finally seemed to be coming. The air was getting warmer, the plants were budding, and the kitchen and medicinal gardens were turning greener with each day. It was like Sauron's invisible hand over Gondor had held the turning of the season at bay, and now we were touched with the breath of spring.

It was also the season of new beginnings and new hopes, Merry declared cheerfully after he'd wiped his face clear of tears when he'd seen Sam and Frodo resting in their beds. It was auspicious for a new age free of Mordor's reach, a new age of the rise of Men, and a time for me to figure out new hopes and new dreams. Waking up to spring air made me feel a little more optimistic about my uncertain future.

"When do you think the army will be back?" Merry asked, sitting on an overturned planter in the adjoining garden of Sam's room. The hobbit couldn't bring himself to be far from his brethren, and I'd joined him for a break from city-building in the afternoon.

"Soon I hope. The enemy army should have fallen apart with the end of the Ring. But it takes awhile to move that many men." It was pressing on my mind too. This wasn't over until I knew if everyone survived from the Fellowship and their assorted group.

"I don't suppose there's anything to be done from here that hasn't been done yet," Merry sighed. As soon as Frodo and Sam had arrived at the peak of Minas Tirith, Faramir had sent a messenger on their fastest steed to alert Aragorn. I'd craved to be that messenger, if only to see sooner what had become of Gondor's forces, but Faramir had been clear that wasn't an option. The land of Ithilien was still overrun with orcs, and it would have required traveling along the bleak mountains that bordered Mordor, which were no safer even with the Ring gone.

Merry started to hum a quiet tune from the Shire. "Do you think you could work a little more magic on him?" he asked.

"I think they're just tired," I said, shaking my head. I'd relented when Merry had appeared at my
door early the day after Frodo and Sam's arrival and asked for a few "charms" over the two. My brand of "subtle" magic was gaining traction all over Minas Tirith, and the renown made me think of leaving the city. But to go where? Lothlórien and Lady Galadriel? All the way back to not-Fornost and into that field I'd arrived in?

It didn't feel quite over, the story of the Fellowship, not with Boromir and the rest still gone and Frodo asleep yet, but already I was thinking of what came after. Epilogues always skipped a few years; that unsteady transition from the absorbing influence of the storyline and back into routine.

So yesterday I'd wandered off after a lengthy breakfast and a false spell on Frodo and Sam and ended up talking about grafting fruit trees to a gardener on the fifth level for two hours instead of doing anything productive. There was a reason the epilogue glossed over those transitive years.

Today wasn't turning out much better. It was almost noon and Merry and I had only weeded an herb garden today. Merry had been terribly good at it too, because it had been a childhood punishment he said. I had gotten the hang of it after pulling up a few herbs and rather messily throwing dirt in both our faces.

"We ought to write a song, you know. Us hobbits I mean. Telling the story as we know it," Merry said suddenly. I was picking at a trellis climbing the wall, it's feelers stuck in the cracks of the rocks.

"You should! And I'll clap along since that's about all the good I am with music."

"Surely you can sing a bit or two?"

"No, no," I waved that notion away quickly. "I'm as bad as an orc's horn." That was a phrase I'd learned from one of the women on the second level who had an impressive set of vocal cords. I swear you could have heard her from across a soccer field, that's how loud she could yell—it didn't make the sound pretty though.

We discussed the point a little more, and when Merry sang me a basic chord I proved well enough that I couldn't even match a simple note. In the midst of all this waiting and restless idling, just as the world should work I suppose, exactly what we were waiting for arrived.

Merry's sharp ears heard the rustling of bed sheets first, and then the sound of someone coughing. He jumped up like the planter had gone red-hot under him and rushed into Sam's room.

"Sam! Good ol' Sam!" he cried as he hugged the stuffing out of the other hobbit. There wasn't as much stuffing as there should have been for a hobbit, which had worried Merry terribly when they'd first come in. Hobbits were not meant to be lean, and both Sam and Frodo had been thin. "You and Frodo did it! It's gone!"

"We did it," Sam said, marveling, hugging Merry back and repeated himself three more times. "We did it. We really did it! Aye, and it's good to see you, Merry."

The two hobbits eventually pulled back and just looked at each other, Merry tearing up and Sam's whole face trembling slightly like he didn't know whether to laugh, sing, cry, or grin.

I slipped back outside into the garden and leaned against the wall beside the door. It was a private moment for two of the hobbits of the Fellowship, and I wanted to let them have their time.

"Where's Mister Frodo?" I heard Sam ask.

"Not awake yet, but the healers say he's fine," Merry replied, voice drifting back on a spring breeze. The whole world seemed suffused with a bit more light now that one hobbit had woken.
The last strings of the story were tying off one by one.

"I've got to see him. Mister Frodo, I mean, but all the rest too," came Sam's voice. Then Merry responded more lowly, and I could no longer make out the words. Not at least until Merry returned to the doorway.

"I wanted you to meet him, but he's asleep now."

"That's okay, I bet he's tired. What he and Frodo did... it could not be repeated." I didn't know how to say miraculous, or awe-inspiring, or heroic, or any word that could possibly describe the sacrifice and struggle they'd been through. Maybe there wasn't even a word for it.

"Yeah," Merry said, bouncing back from the somber topic. "What's it called, you said? The waiting game?"

It was a waiting game, not just for Frodo but also for the army to return. I met Sam a few hours later, after the healers had declared him healthy, just exhausted. Sam had made clear he was also starving, so he was in a bit of a food coma when I finally approached his bedside.

"This is Lady Maddie," Merry introduced, as I shyly stood by the foot of the bed. Sam was not in the least intimidating, but I knew better than anyone right now what he and Frodo had gone through.

"It's nice to meet you," I curtsied.

"She can see a bit of the future," Merry explained, holding Sam's hand gently. "She helped out the rest of the Fellowship, especially Boromir, during the fighting." Then the hobbit whispered something else in Sam's ear that made his eyes go wide. I tried not to let my smile fall into a playful grimace at Merry.

"Well you do me a great honor, Lady Maddie," Sam said with a smile. He really did have the air of a gentle neighborly hobbit, so it was all the more amazing how he'd endured the trials to Mount Doom.

"You don't have to call me lady. And I probably can't do three quarters of the things Merry's told you."

"Well it's some sort of magic," he said stoutly, "if you're about slaying Black Riders and knowing a bit of the future."

"Some sort of magic," I conceded. We spent a few more minutes talking about Minas Tirith and small, meaningless things. Sam didn't seem to have any desire to talk about what had happened to him, not until Frodo woke. Merry was just happy to see them both alive, and I think it eased some of the ache in him for Pippin.

I actually missed Frodo's grand awakening a day later, but Merry was there, and Sam jumped out of bed, scaring the healers, so he could be there. I was rather nervous about meeting Frodo, who occupied such a fantastical place in the story. He turned out to be a rather diminished hobbit and somber, but I found staring at his little body in that big bed, that I still thought him remarkable. He'd resisted the corruption of the Ring almost until the end, after all.

"Thank you, then, I suppose," he murmured, looking inward and not at me, after Merry and Sam had told him about me. I was sitting by his bedside, Sam on the bed and Merry at the foot.

"I didn't do anything," I demurred.
We waited in silence, but Frodo was not outspoken. What the Ring had done to him was impossible to fathom, but it had changed him on a fundamental level; opened him to worlds of thought no mortal had ever traversed before. He still seemed to be coming to terms with it, though he perked up whenever he looked at the two hobbits beside him.

"What of Gandalf?" he asked slowly. "They say he was here."

"He's the White now," Merry explained quickly. "Bit different, bit the same. Probably still does fireworks." Sam and I chuckled, but Frodo barely twitched. I wondered if he would have been diagnosed with PTSD or something in my time. It certainly would have made sense given what he'd gone through.

"He's not normally like that," Merry reassured me later, as we left Frodo and Sam to chat. "It's just…"

"The Ring changed him," I supplied. "It's okay, I understand." Merry seemed disheartened with how Frodo acted, but I had not been expecting enthusiasm. Frodo seemed both happy to be rid of the Ring, but also in that tiny bit of his heart, missing it, because the Ring's influence would never fully leave him. I didn't know how to tell Merry that, but perhaps he knew and mourned the young, carefree Frodo he'd known.

Three days later, Frodo had recovered some of his good humor, enough to enjoy Merry's retelling of his adventures, and I had bitten my nails down to the quick as I stalked the parapets. I had become very familiar with every messenger in the Gondorian army, annoyed Faramir to the breaking point, and was still pacing holes into the floor.

The Fellowship and the rest of the Gondorian and Rohirrim combined armies were due back today. No word of any major deaths had been sent back to Gondor, but that was no guarantee. I didn't feel like this story was over until the Fellowship was reunited again, and I didn't feel like my story was going to be over until that happened either. It left me on edge for several days and quite the mess.

For all that waiting though, it seemed abruptly over and forgotten as soon as the trumpets rang out—flags, spotted to the north!

I'd just reached the courtyard that led to the stairs to the lower levels when Êowyn appeared, breathless and hair full of flyways. She took one look at me and I knew she didn't know if she could grin that they were home, or turn white with fear that her brother was not with them.

"Miladies," a guard trotted up to us, interrupting the moment. "Lord Faramir is below, and he requests dignitaries and nobles to come and await the armies."

The orders shored up Êowyn's courage, because she looked at me and said, "You might want to change."

I was wearing one of the older dresses of mine because I hadn't expected to do more than pace and chat with the hobbits, who hardly cared what I wore.

"And I suppose the cloak too?" I said, even as my heart wasn't in the joke. In fact, my heart seemed to be erratically beating in my chest, drumming a mixture of fear and anticipation.

"It has to be the wizard one. You ought to braid your hair or something too," she added.

"No one's going to be looking at me," I griped but I yanked on the cloak, adjusting it haphazardly on my shoulders, and then pulled a brush quickly through my hair to hurry this up. Êowyn helped
me to make two simple braids to hold my hair back, and as I looked in the mirror at myself I thought: This is how I will be seen, for good or ill. If everyone survived, as I knew they did in the books, it would be a triumphant look. If not... I shook my head and pasted a smile on my face for Éowyn.

"There is always someone looking," she said. "It's something you learn early." Her gaze became distant for a half second, and I noticed the gap between us that was so easy to forget with Éowyn.

And then the chasm disappeared and we were both just women whose hopes for the moment turned on seeing familiar faces coming home. I hoped for both our sakes I was right and they'd all come back.

We took the horses down, but it was slow as the few guards left in Minas Tirith forged a path for us. The crowds had already appeared, the elderly, women, and children of Gondor and it's nearby cities squeezing onto the streets and overhangs to see the returning army. People called to me thanks and praise, which was overwhelming my already tested nerves. The banner of the King of Gondor had already been identified, and people were cheering for Aragorn. There was no word yet on the Steward's banner, but as Éowyn said, he was likely marching in a different part of the army to help control it. Cold comfort, but I would take anything.

When we reached the first level I saw Faramir in formal dress on a set of stairs to a great building, now crumbling and seemingly cut in half by a boulder. It was missing its roof and second story, the front wall crumbling, and blood staining some of the white stone, but somehow it looked proud still with stiff-backed Faramir, the elderly nobility of Gondor, and Éowyn standing in front of it. Merry remained on Thunor so he'd be above the crowd and able to see.

It took a long time for the army to approach and we could hardly see anything through the broken gate, but as more and more of it became clear the watchers on the wall shouted out house banners and companies as they recognized them. Some of the people crowded below us cried, but whether in joy that a company had returned or that one had been skipped, I couldn't tell.

"More banners, milords!" One watcher called, and started to shout down house names. I didn't know which house Boromir was in, but as he ran down the list Éowyn suddenly squeezed my arm.

"That's him! The House of the Steward!" she said excitedly. "If they have raised the banner then it means Lord Boromir is beneath it!"

I felt a bit faint with relief, and my knees wobbled dangerously. I had to crane forward to see Faramir, but he seemed to be biting back a smile. When he glanced my way we made eye contact, and I felt the grin spread across my face before I could help it. He'd survived! I hoped that meant the rest had too.

Others besides the Gondorian army began to be called out—the Rangers were declared, as were the Rohirrim, and at least one group of Elves. When the Rohirrim were named, Éowyn immediately shouted about the flag with the white horse on it, and when it was confirmed she put her face in her hands to hide her tears.

"He made it," she said, breathing a little harder than necessary when she lifted her face again, her eyes red-rimmed. "It seems as though they have all made it."

"But what about Pippin!" Merry demanded, still sitting on Thunor next to the stairs so he would be eyelevel with everyone. "Has anyone seen him?"

"Master Hobbit, the guards are not Elves, but I promise should anyone see him I will have you
alerted as soon as possible," Faramir swore.

My feet were starting to ache from standing in one spot for so long, but soon enough the trumpets began to ring in chorus, the sign that the army had finally reached the gate. Everyone in Minas Tirith collectively held their breath as the clipping of horses and the clatter of armor started to rise in a crescendo until Aragorn and Éomer, followed closely by Gandalf, Legolas, Gimli, and a tiny curly-haired hobbit, clattered into Minas Tirith. The cheering poured forth in a rush to greet them, their worn and dirtied faces lightening it seemed with every flower thrown at them. The flag of Gondor's King waved bravely behind them sending the people into an uproar.

I felt like I wasn't quite standing there anymore, like I was watching the movie again and I was seeing the great return through a screen. I don't think my heart quite knew how to take this overload of emotion, so I stood there frozen as Faramir joyously praised the soon-to-be-King and the Fellowship, and then embraced his brother.

I barely even felt Éowyn push past me to hug Éomer. Then Pippin and Merry's voices joined the shouting as they came together and then cried as the news was passed among the Fellowship: Frodo and Sam had returned and were well.

I saw the intense emotion on Aragorn's face at the news, and Boromir too looked overwhelmed for a second with joy, and I knew neither of them had found it too painful to hope for them to survive. The rest too, indeed, seemed almost euphoric.

"—And many thanks too, for the truthful words of our fair lady! It heartened the Men to hear of victory," boomed Gimli, who grabbed my hand and pressed a very bristly kiss on the back of my hand. I jerked out of the daze very suddenly and almost tripped down a step when Gimli yelled a greeting to Merry and picked the hobbit up.

"Indeed," echoed Boromir who was laughing as he watched. "Many a man stood strong with your promise remembered. And to have all the Fellowship together at least is a blessing none of us foresaw." He smiled through grime and bloodied armor, looking elated, and I think I started to cry then, or maybe I started to cry harder.

"You're alive," I cried in English, and Boromir stepped up another step with his arms a little out to his sides, the universal sign of a hug. So I threaded my shaky arms around his neck with the aid of a few more inches from the stairs and clung on. "I wasn't sure, but you are. You are."

"I am glad you are well," he said, slowly pulling away. I flushed as we stared at one another, only to be broken by a gentle tap on Boromir's shoulder by Gandalf.

"The King goes ahead. As Steward you should join him," he said, eyes twinkling at the two of us. Boromir waved me farewell and mounted up again, and the din of the crowd came back in a rush and suddenly all I could hear was crying and laughter, sorrow and joy all mixed up together as men continued to stream into the city.

"You have done well, Maddie," Gandalf said warmly. His robes were actually muddied and his beard a bit shorter than I remembered, but he was alive and well too. "What you do now is entirely up to you—of course, there are celebrations and coronations first. And feasts, since there are four hobbits to honor. I could not imagine missing those."

I smiled, but it was wobbly from a mix of deep happiness and even deeper burrowed fear he'd touched. "You're right, I couldn't miss that." I wiped the tears from my face, smiled and hugged Pippin, and counted the people I saw. It was amazing to realize they all came back. A happy ending indeed, even if endings never really happened.
Legolas, who was standing not far from us, gave me a look I couldn't read as Gandalf returned to Shadowfax and helped Merry up while Pippin pulled away and got a lift from Faramir. As Gimli mounted up with help from two Gondorian soldiers, Legolas approached me.

"The Elves of Lothlórien will stay for the coronation," he said, and I felt surprised and then guilty that I had not thought of Erynion until now, being so caught up with the Fellowship's story. "I am told you traveled with one for a time. I do not believe he was one of the fallen."

He gave me a slight smile before springing up behind Gimli and trotting off. I smiled back, relieved. When I looked up to mount Thunor, I saw Boromir smiling at his people from horseback, following in the wake of his king, the Ring gone, Middle Earth freed, and I felt a swelling of pride fill me so quickly I thought I might burst. They were all here to see this day.

After the initial celebrating of the army's return there was no feasting, dancing, or joyful songs about heroes in Minas Tirith. Instead there were funerals and fires burning in the fields for hours and dirges sung. I didn't have a black dress, but one of the ladies lent me one of hers, and I stood in solidarity with the people of Middle Earth—Men, Elves, Hobbits and Dwarf—to mourn.

A lot of people were lost; I was among the very few who didn't know someone personally who had died, and I was eternally thankful for that. No one could give me numbers, but the orcs had been in the tens of thousands. By dawn the next day soldiers who were well enough were deployed to make sure the roving bands left after Sauron's demise wouldn't band together to attack the city. The Rohirrim ran scouting missions with the Elves, and those left in the city continue to heal and repair the damage.

It was three days of mourning, as per Gondorian tradition. During that time I got soldiers situated in shelters and homes, keeping busy through the memorials and outpouring of pain from the people of Minas Tirith. Everyone was busy in fact. Aragorn, Boromir, and Faramir were governing the city and the army, while Legolas became the liaison for the Elves and Gimli worked on building repairs. The hobbits stayed mostly in Frodo's room, recovering not just from their trials but also from newfound fame. Éowyn had to support Éomer as he was acting King of Rohan, and she had many of her own funerals to go to; not one company had been spared a death.

When the burying and wailing were done though, ribbons and garlands came up all over the city at dawn. The bakers were sold out within an hour of opening, and the food stores in the city were opened to all. Instead of the dour black dresses, everyone wore bright, gay colors to herald spring and celebration. I got to wear my lavender Elvish dress again, which thankfully clashed horribly with the red cape.

I only spent the morning today in the healing wards because Aragorn was hosting a private, celebratory lunch for those closest to the Fellowship. I had been invited, which was an honor, even if I'd been addressed as: "the Witch, Lady Maddie of the Order of Secret Fire" by the messenger. I wondered if there was an official document I could change my title on.

I adjusted the bodice on the Elvish dress as I opened the door to the hallway and almost walked into Boromir, who I definitely expected to be pouring over work until seconds before the lunch. He seemed the type to throw himself into it. He wore a silvery grey tunic with red trim that went well with his eyes, and while there was still a healing cut on his cheek, he looked a lot better than the passing moments I'd seen him over the last few days.

"Hello!" I said, surprised to see him. He looked a little takenaback, so I quickly smiled. "Sorry, you startled me."

"My apologies, I was about to knock. I… May I walk you to lunch?" taken aback
"Of course, I'm not even sure where it is," I admitted. "How are you?"

"Busy, but well," he answered shortly as we walked. "There is much in the city to do before the kingdom arises anew."

"And Aragorn? How's he adjusting?" We discussed it a bit, but Boromir didn't seem much interested in talking about his job, and I didn't blame him, so slowly conversation tapered off and began to get awkward. I wasn't used to feeling that way with Boromir, but ever since that moment before he left for war—well, I'd been trying not to think about it.

He cut through a courtyard and then as we passed by a balcony overlooking some of the gardens Boromir stopped.

"I wanted to thank you for your favor," he said, looking down before back at me. "Many a blade evaded my horse and I as we rode into battle." I was about to ask what he was talking about, but he uncurled his hand and held out a pink ribbon, now very tarnished and more than a little tattered.

It took me a moment to place the ribbon. In Rohan I'd bedecked Thunor in pink ribbons and tied my spare one to the saddle of Boromir's mount. I didn't expect it to last through a race to Gondor and a battle. "I'm surprised it made it," I admitted, and Boromir's smiled relaxed. "You're welcome, then."

"I know you say you do not have magic, but I fear I disagree with you." His smile became teasing and I started to feel a bit flustered. "May I keep it?"

"Of course!" I said immediately, and as he took a step back I realized we were standing a lot closer than normal. As Boromir slip the faded pink ribbon into his breast pocket, I wondered if maybe there hadn't been a bit of magic on it after all.

One month later I was twenty-six years old (give-or-take) and Aragorn was to be crowned king. It was probably the biggest celebration in the last thousand years by my understanding, and the guest list was enormous.

As a birthday gift Éowyn had gotten me a new dress in dark blue with silvery trim for the coronation, which was easily the most expensive gift I'd ever received. I told everyone—including Éowyn—not to do anything for my birthday because no one much celebrated birthdays in Gondor, but Éowyn ignored that as did the hobbits, who did celebrate birthdays and were much offended when I said it was okay to ignore mine. They cooked a huge meal of all my favorite things for myself, the Fellowship, and whoever walked by. Everyone had to keep coming and going from the meal because preparations and repairs to the city were constant work, but it was pleasure enough to see all the people important to me at some point in a day.

Then guests started arriving for the coronation. First lords and ladies from other Gondorian cities, all in carriages and jewels, cluttering up the balconies I liked to spend my free time in. I helped to find places for all of them in the empty rooms on the sixth and seventh floors, and make sure their horses were all stabled too. I learned a greater appreciation for hotel managers in the week of organizing that required.

Then the Elves came, including Lord Elrond and his family, who I recognized immediately. Lady Arwen drew a lot of whispers and stares when she arrived, but no one looked more love-struck or awed than Aragorn. We didn't see much of her after they arrived, but the rest of the Elves lingered in my favorite gardens when they weren't visiting the Lothlórien soldiers still camping out outside the walls.
It was there that I met Lady Galadriel for the first and only time in my life (and without much
desire to see her again, as she was completely terrifying). I was out there to visit Erynion, who I
hadn't seen yet because of the mourning days. I should have remembered that Elves' sense of time
was slower than humans' though, because three days was not nearly long enough to mourn the
loss of someone who had lived two millennia. For immortals there is no harder blow than the loss
of one who could have lived forever.

The Elves didn't wear black or act particularly different, but the whole camp was solemn when I
approached, and conversation was stilted. I met Ethiron, Erynion's brother, again, but neither was
particularly lively. When I turned to leave after telling Erynion I was happy he was alive, even if
he did overfeed Thunor, horns started to blow from all over.

"What is it?" I asked, turning around sharply.

"The Lady comes," Erynion said, rising from where he'd been sitting and quietly feeding Thunor
crabapples when I was looking.

"Can I meet Lady Galadriel?" I asked him, feeling suddenly energized at the thought. She had her
own ability of foresight and more wisdom than any other Elf, so she could help me—maybe to get
home even.

"She chooses whom to see."

"So who do I ask to see her?" I pressed, but Erynion ignored me. "Ethiron?"

"Inquire with her guards. But Lady Galadriel goes on to the city quickly."

I waited around with Thunor and the two brothers until the dust cloud in the distance revealed
white and palomino horses all cantering in time, their silvery harnesses glinting in the sun. At the
lead was Lord Celeborn, Lady Galadriel's husband. He pulled in with the first few guards to greet
his kinsmen, and then shortly after the Lady herself arrived.

I thought Arwen was stunning, and all Elves in general beautiful, but Lady Galadriel was
something else. She radiated a kind of power and wisdom coupled with ageless beauty like the
moon. She dismounted and spoke in Elvish to the soldiers around her, moving surely through the
crowd that parted before her.

I felt very small when she glanced between the guards surrounding her and our eyes met. Her
stare seemed to know me, reading me even from a distance. I had to lean back against Thunor as
she approached lest I fall down as she closed the distance and stopped right before me.

"You are Maddie, not of this world."

I nodded.

"What question have you for me?" she asked, and I felt the words radiate inside me. My blank
mind immediately filled with clamoring questions about purposes and whys, hows and ifs.

Now that it's over, do I stay here in Middle Earth, or do I go home?

She heard me even though I never said the words. I knew abstractly she could read minds, but
feeling that presence of age and light in your head was humbling.

"Know what you are willing to let go of—and what you already have. Stay or go, but commit to
your path."
And then she was turning away, but an afterimage of her face filled with soft light lingered with me. *How did the Elves stand it?* I wondered, as she walked away. It was like staring at the bright white moon so hard that every time you blinked you saw it again in reds and greens—except with Lady Galadriel it wasn't just the image but her words repeating in my head.

I wanted to say something to Erynion, but there was nothing to say. Erynion handed me back my reins and let Thunor nudge the side of my head. "The Lady Galadriel sees many things. Heed her words," he said, and he helped me up into the saddle.

*Know what to let go of,* I thought to myself. *Know what I already have. What have I let go of? My love of iced coffee? Not my parents surely, or hope of home.* But I wasn't sure what the answer was or even if I was right about that, only that I couldn't change my mind once I knew it.
Beyond the Forest

Chapter Summary

Maddie has a decision to make.

Chapter Notes

This was a mishmash of a chapter, but I watched all the way up to Bilbo's departure in The Fellowship of the Ring and got so inspired it all came together. I did follow the movie version of the coronation more than the book (but not entirely) because it just looked so amazing in Return of the King. Thank you to my lovely Tumblr followers for being amazing supportive through it all. Warning: this is not as edited as I would like, but I've deprived you long enough of an update.

Before the coronation and after-party, there were still a million and one things to do. I was good at organizing things—an ability I had thought once strictly for Excel spreadsheets, but clearly had been wasted there. While there were official people handling food, drinks, and accommodations for guests, I dealt with all the forgotten details. We had banners, but where do we put them? Which areas were cordoned off and which were open for partiers? Where did we hide all the decorations before the actual event? How many candles should we blow out to subtly tell people the party was over for the night?

I let myself get caught up in these tasks because I didn't know how to confront the end of the story. The Ring was destroyed, the war was over, and when the crown was on Aragorn's head that would signal the impending epilogue—and I wasn't sure if I was in that. To avoid thinking about it I threw myself into arrangements for the coronation, as though pretending I didn't have to confront my future would make it go away.

Nonetheless, time marched on and two days before the coronation Gandalf appeared to snap me out of my daze. I was helping to unpack the elaborate crystal goblets of Dwarven make—drop one and I was dropping a servant's yearly wage. "Lady Maddie," the wizard called, beckoning me to follow him into the gardens.

"I think a break is in order," he said when I'd caught up. He winked down at me when our eyes met. "You ought to deal with some magic."

I frowned back. "Magic? You know perfectly well I don't do magic, Gandalf."

"Ah, but when you think of magic, what do you imagine? Fire that doesn't burn your skin? Glowing and flying?" He gave me a knowing look. "There are many kinds of magic in this world. Rings… staves… Elven and Dragon magics, and then magic without names at all." He kept walking, going straight through the gardens and toward the back staircase that the soldiers and servants used to reach the seventh level.

"What are you talking about Gandalf?" I asked exasperated. There were hundreds of cups and
plates to unpack, let alone the cutlery we hadn't even gotten to yet. I liked the distraction of the business of those chores instead of being yanked around by a wizard.

"I am talking about Boromir and you, of course," he said matter-of-factly. He nudged me up the stairs. "Go to the White Tower. See if you can't help him with a self-appointed task of his own." He nodded at me when I looked back at him confused, then walked away. I thought about going back to the great hall and ignoring his advice, but he'd hooked me with Boromir. What self-appointed task did he mean? What was all that stuff about magic?

I started climbing up the small staircase and appeared in a back corridor near the residential area of the seventh level. The White Tower wasn't hard to find, seeing as it was the tallest thing in Minas Tirith. As I approached the main doors—the same ones Denethor had taken his life in front of—the two guards in front hesitated, but stopped me.

"What is your purpose here, milady?"

"I'm here to see Lord Boromir," I said as confidently as I could. I wasn't wearing my cloak or anything fancy, seeing as I'd been digging through crates all day, but the guards glanced at one another before uncrossing their spears.

"He wished to be left undisturbed."

"Gandalf sent me to help him," I explained, hoping they didn't ask for any more detail.

The two guards looked at each other again, gauging perhaps who would take the fall if they got in trouble, then finally one stepped aside and a moment later the other did too, leaving the way unbarred. I pushed open the heavy oak doors and stared up at yet another winding staircase. It almost looked to be out of Wonderland, growing tighter like a corkscrew the higher it went, making me feel very small and very tired just looking at it.

"Boromir?" I called when I was about a third of the way up, but doing so took all the air from my lungs. There were some small rooms in this tower, but they all seemed to be empty. He was probably at the top of course, and my lungs burned as I kept going up. I'd hiked across the world, run straight into battle, climbed up and down a mountain, but these stairs were conquering me.

"Boromir?" I puffed again a bit later, and I thought I heard a grunt. I had to be most of the way up by now, but looking down made me dizzy. It was like the stairs were endless, and the white walls, white floor, and white sunshine out the windows made it all look like some kind of horrific void.

"You should not be here," Boromir said as I crested the top floor and basically collapsed on to the bench indented into the marble wall. It was the most comfortable seat I'd ever sat on.

"I thought you might need help," I managed after a few more breaths, leaning over my knees.

"I am fine," he said, but he was staring like a dead man stares at a ghost at the cloth-covered thing across the room.

The top of the tower was encompassed in three layers of arching windows capturing the full sun of the day. Through one side there were snowy mountains, another the plains of Gondor, and further yet what looked like possibly even the seas, hundreds of leagues to the south. It was a magnificent view, but the light seemed dim somehow in the wake of that shrouded thing at the far end.

On top of a plain stone pedestal across the room was a cloth-covered sphere. Why it was up here and what it was I didn't know, but Boromir's fear of it made me very nervous.
"What is it?" I asked him, standing up.

"I must deal with it. My father... left it to me." Boromir did not seem to want to get closer to it. I wasn't sure if I was imagining the ill feeling it emanated but I didn't like it all the same.

"I don't think you should touch it."

"Be gone, Lady Maddie. This is a task I must undertake for myself."

His shoulders were stiff and tense, and he held himself with every ounce of his heritage. I only felt more uncomfortable seeing how he summoned up his courage. What demon was Boromir facing up here on this Tower under that cloth? Gandalf thought I could help him and I wanted to try.

"What must you do?" I asked, coming forward a few steps so he could see me in his peripheral vision. Boromir steeled his jaw but didn't even glance at me.

"It must be removed from Minas Tirith. Taken deep into the bowels of the earth, or smashed under a Dwarven hammer," he said, sounding pained. But he started to walk towards it like he was walking up to the Dark Lord himself, every step deliberate and forced.

I stayed across the room but watched with horrible unease; a more visceral version of the sense you get watching the monster in the horror movie stalk the victim. I knew the thing under that black cloth was tainted somehow, cursed maybe, and yet Boromir didn't seem able to stop himself. Inexorably he came closer until he stood on the bottom step of the platform, his fingers touching the corner of the cloth. I held my breath for what felt like a small age before he yanked it off in one movement, throwing the silk to the ground.

Beneath was a black bowling ball swirling with red fire. The colors were mesmerizing, like watching galaxies expand and burst in fleeting seconds, spinning around trapped inside this globe. It was a dark version of a crystal ball; the blackness inside so deep I felt myself along with the light of the room drawn in. The longer I stared into it the sicker I felt.

"My father's Palantír," Boromir whispered, the words echoing, though whether that was the room's acoustics or the adrenaline pumping through me I didn't know. "It drove him mad to see the visions it created."

"Sauron drove him mad," I said back. That much I knew. But I also knew Denethor had seen things as they'd been in the book, and I didn't know where those visions came from or if the sphere had given them to him. Inevitable, he'd said, speaking of Boromir's death. I started to cautiously approach. "Don't touch it."

Boromir didn't look away even as he spoke to me. "I am of two minds. I know this power's potential for harm, and yet to throw it away is a waste my kingdom could not stand."

"It can stand it," I said. "I don't like it. Throw it in the sea."

"Sauron is no more. These Seeing Stones were once part of the pinnacle of Gondor," Boromir continued, turning to me. "The Palantír could be once again, now that our kingdom is restored. Did Aragorn not say that he was able to look upon one and wrestle with the Dark Lord himself? Could this not be his to use as the kings of old did?"

"I do not like what you're saying, Boromir," I said, reaching slowly for him. He looked back at the stone, like it was going to physically pain him to make this decision. "Listen to yourself. This is dangerous magic."

"Dangerous yes, but Gondor..." He paused, looked down at me, and then he closed his eyes and
shuddered, taking several steps back from the Seeing Stone. "I cannot break the lure. I am- I was the weakness in the Fellowship's line, the man that would break first at the charge. I cannot- even in this I do not learn." He crumpled to his knees, cradling his hands like they had betrayed him. "With these hands I tried to take the Ring from Frodo," he said between shuddering breaths, "and with these hands I would be as my father, lost in madness to save my kingdom and people. The weakness of Man is lust for power, and I have inherited this tenfold."

"But you've resisted it," I protested, crouching down beside him and taking his hands in mine. "It's only a weakness when you let it control you, and it doesn't now." Boromir shook his head though, denying my words.

"I am tempted by power," he said brokenly, finally looking up at me. "It is the curse of Men, the curse that brought Isildur low and many Men before and after him. It is forever a target upon my back."

His personal self-respect was in tatters, and I realized then that I had only known Boromir when he was on a crusade to prove himself. He had been ready to die for his people and his honor, and he had been ready to do anything to absolve himself of threatening the safety of the world by trying to take the Ring from Frodo. I knew him at his lowest points in life, and all I could think was that I was so grateful he was alive today to be saying these things, and not sunken at the bottom of a river without a proper grave.

I touched his cheek, unbearably sentimental over this man, and he glanced at me again with those grey eyes. "You, brave and noble Boromir, are tempted by black magic and the desire to help your people. There is no shame in that. That's the Man I saved, and I don't regret it. A person is strong when he knows his weaknesses and fights them. How many can say they have done that and triumphed?" I challenged.

Boromir looked at me with slowly morphing wonder. "You saved me once so I might redeem myself-"

"I saved you because you are a good Man who would have died too soon," I interrupted.

Too many things flitted across his face in that moment for me to pinpoint any one, but I slowly pulled my fingers from his cheek and gave the grim Boromir a smile. "Now let's get rid of this dangerous thing. It has no place in Gondor."

He looked back at the Palantír that had brought him so low. "You are right," he said slowly, standing like gravity was three times as heavy on him, and yet he stood upright all the same. "It has no place in Gondor. Old magic like this has no place in the world of Men."

His words grew stronger until he picked up the black silk cloth and threw it with finality over the orb. Then carefully he picked up the ends and carried the Palantír like a stone in a sack without touching it at all, and when he turned back to me I felt a flush of warmth and pride flow through me for him.

"Into the ocean with it, or some other terrible fate be upon it," he declared, and he marched down the stairs with the Palantír.

Palantír could not, apparently be destroyed so easily, but the Lothlórien Elves took it on a boat to the sea, where they promised to drop it into the deepest part they could find. Erynion went with them, so I knew the malignant thing was in safe hands.

Boromir was more at ease after that, and at dinner Gandalf patted me on the shoulder as he passed
me by. Nothing else was said about it.

After dinner though Boromir walked me back to my rooms to thank me. "This deed is done, and I have much to think about," he told me, standing in the hallway as I stood with my back to my door. "Thank you for your words."

"They were only the truth," I said a bit awkwardly. When our eyes met again there was that tension between us that had been cropping up more often. Unable to articulate what it was or what it meant to myself let alone out loud, I didn't address the Oliphant in the room and wished him a hasty good night. He dipped his head and I watched his broad back walk away through a crack in my door. I didn't get to see him again until the coronation.

Like a wedding, when all the napkin and flower arrangements were done and everyone was in their places, it all went smoothly and everyone forgot if one table didn't have roses and one banner got loose in the wind and went sailing over the parapets. (I noticed, of course, because I'd put the thing there.) Everyone forgot it all as the ceremony began.

Steward Boromir stood on the steps of the throne room, shoulders thrown back proudly wearing robes of dappled grey and dark red and a small circlet on his head. He stared down the walkway covered in white petals where Aragorn would walk. I stood beside Éowyn and Faramir, between other Gondorian nobles and foreign dignitaries on one side of the parade's path. Across from us were the Dwarves and Elves: Lady Galadriel in silver robes, Lord Elrond in finely cut mauve, and Arwen outshining everyone in pale green. Among us all there was a hush, all aware of what a profound moment we were living in.

The silver trumpets Boromir had spoken of to me rang clear and bright in the mid-morning day, sending birds up to the sky in a cloud as the procession began. Aragon appeared at the end of the seventh level balcony, resplendent in a velvet cape, armor, and somber dignity.

Standing two steps above Boromir was Gandalf, and in his hands was a shining mithril and gold crown with a design somewhere between a feather and stylized radiating light. We all waited as the king marched toward us, passing me by just ten steps from the stairs. I heard blessings murmured from the crowd, even Elvish ones whispered over him. When he reached the end, Aragorn mounted the steps and gave a short bow to the Steward, in honor of his traditional place to hold the throne for the king.

When Aragorn reached the top he bowed on one knee, and Gandalf laid the crown on his head and intoned, "Now come the days of the king."

"Behold the King!" cried Boromir when Aragorn stood, and the cheers were immediate and thunderous. All of Gondor was cheering as the rightful king stood before them, the kingdom risen again and a new age declared. When Aragorn raised his hand all fell silent in a gasp.

He made a brief speech, but what truly touched the crowd was his song. He sang lowly and slowly, but the words carried through the crowd and many closed their eyes to better listen. Elvish I knew, and though I didn't know the meaning I sensed the promise in his words. When he was done the people wept and cheered again.

And then he made his way back through the crowds down the procession line, accepting bows and honors from Éomer, Elvish lords, and others alike. When he reached the four hobbits near the center fountain though, it was Aragorn who bowed before them, and swore that they bowed to no one. Everyone fell to one knee, even Gandalf. No one in the history of Middle Earth deserved the honor more than the four hobbits of the Shire.

Then the coronation was over and it was time for the celebration. Most of the masses of Minas
Tirith returned to the lower levels for feasting and dancing well into the night, with provisions provided by the King. I was invited to the upper echelon's party on the seventh level, and Éowyn insisted on poking at my hair and fixing the fancy bun it had been pulled into before I could enter the room.

"What's the big deal?" I asked, tucking a few flyaways for her too, but she looked fine. Better than fine really, since she was glowing after holding hands with Faramir during the entire ceremony. She was making me self-conscious though, and I smoothed down the beautiful dress she'd gotten me carefully.

"This is an important night, and you ought to look good. You'll probably be toasted at some point too," she added. I flushed immediately, horrified at the idea. The room would be full of lords, Elves, Dwarves, and every manner of important people. Perhaps I could hide in the garden.

The thought was too late, because we were ushered in and announced at the door, and before I knew it Gimli had swept me up to introduce his father, who had come down from the Lonely Mountain. The white-haired Glóin wanted to hear all about Nori and Bofur's travels and Bilbo, and I was more than happy to regale him with the story so long as it meant I could avoid any other limelight.

Most of the night went like this, with the candles burning long and the food picked and nibbled as I talked to Fellowship members, a few Elves from Rivendell who remembered me even if I did not remember them (I did not admit it, nor did I tell the twins of Elrond I still could not tell them apart), and a few odd nobles. When I'd had enough of the crowd I slipped onto the wraparound balcony and found a quiet spot for some cool air.

"How is the evening, if you have not had enough of small talk, that is?" Boromir asked, appearing at my elbow a few minutes later. He was a welcome relief from talking to all the people I barely knew.

"Exhausting. How do courtiers do this?" I asked, gratefully accepting the glass of wine he offered.

"There will be a toast to honor the Fellowship members and their friends before dessert is brought out. You will be counted among us," Boromir warned, and he smiled as I groaned theatrically.

"Maybe I can hide under the table."

He barked a laugh and I laughed too, glad the tension between us was gone for this night. "I should like to see you manage that beneath a dozen Elven noses."

We both chuckled at the thought then fell into comfortable silence. A small quartet played a light dance number, but I'd only danced once this night with Faramir. I didn't know the steps to any of the songs so I'd avoided the floor. For one second I wondered if Boromir would ask me to dance, but then he cleared his throat and looked at me quite seriously.

"I wished to tell you that I have spoken to Aragorn," he said. "I have surrendered my office."

"What?" I sputtered. "Surrendered? Being the Steward? But your family has always been Steward!"

"I know my weaknesses," he admitted straightforwardly, as though he had prepared this speech. "I learned that I must acknowledge them to overcome them. Faramir does not share the same ones I have. And I am not a man of the city." Boromir looked down into his glass and then poured it out on the grass below. "I love this city and my people, but returning and leaving it is what I love, not staying."
I didn't think my eyes could get any wider. What would he do?

"King Aragorn has given me the Princedom of Ithilien," Boromir said before I could ask. "Faramir will be Steward, and I will be Prince of Ithilien and General of Gondor's Armed Forces."

I found myself smiling with relief. "I thought you were going to be a Ranger for a moment and I couldn't imagine it," I admitted, and Boromir actually laughed.

"You are the ghost wanderer," he said, "Not I. My kingdom needs me, but it needs my strengths more than what my blood demands of me. Faramir will make a fine Steward." There didn't seem to be any doubt or regret in him, and that reassured me more than any words.

"He will, and I think you will be a good General." I could see it too. Boromir was a man of the army, and for him to sit and muddle over paperwork and diplomacy seemed ill fitting, even if I thought he would have been a great Steward too. "Does that mean you'll leave Minas Tirith?" I asked suddenly, realizing he'd said Prince of Ithilien, and I had no idea where that was.

"Yes, I will when all these celebrations and ceremonies are over. Orcs are still in strong numbers near and inside Mordor, and Osgiliath, the former capital and crown of Ithilien, must be rebuilt." He stared off into the distance, past the garden and the walls and into the night sky dotted with stars.

"Well, say goodbye before you go," I said emptily, not knowing what else to say. I felt a little hurt at his leaving, but I squashed the childish impulse. He looked at me with his mouth slightly open, like he might add something more, before suddenly a small bell was ringing in the main hall and dessert was announced.

When we returned to the party the food had been swept away and all manner of sweets, fruits, custards, and cakes were laid out. "Before we eat," Aragorn called, still wearing the crown though he'd abandoned the armor for a soft tunic, "I wish to honor those members of the Fellowship who traveled so far, and all who supported them." He raised his glass and listed off names and accomplishments, and when he reached mine and called me Hope-Bringer, I blushed bright red. I did not see the way Boromir looked at me from his spot of honor by Aragorn.

The wedding of Aragorn and Arwen was a month later, so everyone stayed to celebrate that too. Minas Tirith was as much in an uproar over this as they had been for the coronation, and the regular folk were over the moon at having a beautiful Elf for their queen. I had as many odd jobs to do for the wedding as I did the coronation, but I spent more of my free time with Boromir than I had since traveling with him. His duties were limited at the moment since most of the soldiers were on leave. There were no raids or battles to be fought, and most governing was on hold except for the essentials, and he was no longer involved in that.

We still had awkward moments sometimes, but they couldn't outweigh how easy it was to forget the rest of the world when we were together. For that reason and my denial rearing its head, I didn't bring up his leaving. It was like I hoped to buy more time by not addressing it. It never occurred to me Boromir might be doing the same.

Sometimes we wandered the gardens, and other times we joined the others for lunch or the hobbits for tea. Sometimes I cajoled him into helping with my tasks, but more often we simply enjoyed one another's company. I would go to bed thinking about those moments, the little smiles, the jokes, how lighthearted things were with the Fellowship and friends, and kept thinking this is what I want to remember without allowing myself to follow that thought through.

The wedding was glorious and beautiful, and more than a few people cried when they weren't
gaspıng over the bride. I didn't think it was possible for Arwen to look more ethereally beautiful than she did, but she managed. Lord Elrond handed her off to Aragorn with pride, even though I was among the few mortals there who realized he was also handing her over to age and death. For an Elf that is a terrible thing to do.

There was a party after this ceremony too, and I spent much of it coaxing Erynion to talk and rolling my eyes at Boromir behind his back. I drank too much though and ended up spending the second half of the night in a chair in the corner because my head was spinning. Erynion, in a rare moment of helpfulness, seem to understand what had happened and kept the others from bothering me. When I was soberer, I was angry that I had let my desire to make this last night with everyone perfect ruin it.

With the wedding celebration over that was the end of the hiatus the victory had brought Gondor. The time after was marked by those who left, and I don't think I was alone in finding them strangely numbered. I was very aware of when people left and the spaces in the city they had once occupied, like seeing all the furniture in a familiar room gone. For three days it poured, washing away the stench and dried blood from the battlefield and rinsing the streets of the city clean. Much of Minas Tirith all but shut down under the downpour and I found myself at loose ends again.

Boromir was leaving for Ithilien soon, and Faramir would be going with Éowyn to witness Éomer's crowning. Lady Galadriel had already left, rain notwithstanding, as had the Dwarves of the Lonely Mountain. Pockets of soldiers and visitors from the other Gondorian cities were also exiting as the rain lightened. Seeing all of these people leaving for the wilderness, and looking out my window at snowy mountains and green land, made me desperately want to get back on Thunor and travel again.

But I didn't know where I wanted to go. The story was over, so I could go home… right? Or I could stay. Thinking of it though, I couldn't sort what I felt more devastated by: giving up on my homeworld and parents, or losing my friends in Middle Earth.

Éowyn left with Faramir and Éomer. The hobbits started to pack. Within a month of the coronation I felt like all the little strings that had tied me here were breaking, and I could feel myself cracking along with them. The white walls and white stones of Minas Tirith became as suffocating as the trees and rhythms of Rivendell life had once before.

"Merry, when are you leaving?" I asked at breakfast a day after I'd seen travel packs come out of closets and the hobbits start stuffing bags with food.

"Two days time," he said, giving me a curious look. "We'll be having a farewell feast, don't you worry. We wouldn't slip out without a big goodbye!" Pippin nodded along beside him, cheeks bulging with food.

"Can I go with you?" I blurted out.

"You want to?" Merry asked, eyebrows going up, but he looked excited. "We'll be going to the Shire, and I know you'd love it when you see it!"

"But what about everyone here? Like Boromir and the big folk? I thought you liked being among them?" Pippin asked.

"Boromir's going to Ithilien, and I don't know what I'd do here. I just… I need to get away. I want to…" I fumbled for words and Merry exchanged a look with Pippin.

"You goin' home?" he asked quietly.
"I don't know," I said, tasting something unpleasant in the words. Commit, Galadriel had told me.

"Walking the path will take you where you want to go," Legolas said from over my head. "You are welcome to join us, Lady Maddie."

And so I pulled out my travel bag that afternoon and just stared at it on the bed. It was worn in all the right places, the straps softened from use but still strong. As I reached inside I touched denim with the tips of my fingers, and I thought to myself I might be wearing this again soon. I couldn't decide if I found that comforting or not.

I said my goodbyes to Aragorn and Arwen when I happened on them later that day. I'm not sure if they believed this was goodbye forever or not because I didn't know either. I would be seeing Éowyn and Faramir in Edoras, so perhaps I would know then.

The hardest farewell was Boromir's though. He and I had been though quite a bit now and a lot more unsaid, and I didn't want someone to whisper in his ear I was leaving. So the same day I asked Merry if I could go, I sought out Boromir. He was in one of the military offices signing scrolls.

"Boromir, I…"

He took one look at me and sighed. "You're leaving."

"Yes," I said, "How did you know?"

"Your face and manner… it is not unexpected news."

I felt guilt ripple through me, as though I were leaving him specifically. Boromir… he and I… we'd become close, yes, but he would be leaving me behind too. I wasn't sure if I was trying to leave before he left me, or because I'd seen my opportunity and taken it. Either way, it was a reality.

"The hobbits, Legolas, and Gimli are leaving with some of the Rivendell Elves. I'm going with them." Boromir's face was like stone, but his eyes couldn't fully hide his disappointment, and that struck me harder than any words. "I… I have to go. I don't know what I want, but I can't stay. It doesn't feel… right."

I couldn't really explain it, this wanderlust, but I knew in my bones I'd be unhappy in Gondor if I stayed. Boromir would be based in Ithilien and gone for long stretches, and Faramir was juggling the duties of his new position and supporting the King. The hobbits were going home, as were the Elves, and Éowyn would be newly wed soon with all that entailed. That left me in limbo. My skin itched at the very thought of drifting around trapped behind Minas Tirith's walls.

"You really are the ghost wanderer." Boromir's voice was soft, accepting, but under it was pain.

"You're wrong. A wanderer has no home, no safe place to return to. But I do." I walked the last few feet to him and covered Boromir's rough hand with my own. His eyes flicked down to it, and something passed across his face I couldn't read. "I know I would be accepted here. But I'm not ready. Not yet. I'm not… There isn't… Not yet. I can just feel it. Lady Galadriel said I had to… commit."

Boromir turned his hand over under mine until we were palm to palm, the touch now much more intimate; I could feel the calluses on the tips of his fingers rubbing against my skin. His looked at our hands and me and there were a hundred things he wasn't saying and there were a hundred things I was trying to say and failing miserably. "You are going home."
Once upon a time I would have said yes without a thought, but I didn't know when that changed. It had been so gradual that now home wasn't the same. The world I'd left three years ago was... I had been happy there, I was sure. Middle Earth made me happy too though. Life was fulfilling in ways I didn't know it could be here. The very fabric of the world seemed deeper, and all my experiences in the last three years couldn't compare to the twenty-three I'd lived before. But a part of me wanted to take all this back to my first home and change how I lived there. More of me feared that my place wasn't in Middle Earth anymore with the story done.

"I'm looking for answers," I told Boromir, curling my fingers around his big ones. "If that takes me back home then... But that's not—I don't know what I want anymore, Boromir. I don't know where I'm supposed to be."

Boromir's stoicism broke then, and his hand tightened around mine as he said strongly, "Gondor can be your home, if you would but choose it! What happens if you don't find your answers? Will you continue to wander until you truly are a ghost wanderer as they say?"

I hadn't realized how hard this would be on both of us until now, and I had to blink back tears and shake my head. With a murmured apology Boromir fumbled for his handkerchief and offered it to me.

"I don't want to wander forever," I told him because it was completely true. "I want to be in the right place, but I can't stop wondering if I belong at home now."

"That I understand, even if I do not like it," he admitted, looking resigned as he pressed my free hand between both of his. "I hope when your heart settles, that it will be here. There will... always be a place for you here."

I felt warmth and maybe something stronger rush through me at the halting way Boromir spoke when he was being completely open.

"I will not forget that," I promised.

It felt like there were infinitely more things to say, and yet nothing would move my lips. All I could do was squeeze his fingers, my eyes starting to get teary again. He could see it, and I thought maybe there was a glimmer of hope in him then.

When I tried to give him his handkerchief back he refused it. "That is my favor for you, please keep it," he said. "May it bring you as much luck as yours did to me." He paused then before adding, "I will wait."

It was the promise I didn't want to ask him for, but to deny it would be a lie to myself and an insult to him. He looked bowed for a moment, weighed down, and then he straightened and regained his mantle as Prince and General. I wasn't quite so capable of hiding my emotions, and I had to turn away and cover my eyes.

I last saw him standing above the gate as I rode out beside Sam, following the lead of the Elvish horses. As I rode across the scored Pelennor Fields, I kept turning over Boromir's words. It felt good to have a place to come back to if I needed it.

Boromir's promise pulled me towards Gondor even as my fears and old desires pulled me north to home. Some nights I would go to sleep and wake sure that if I simply went back to Fornost and walked three days west I'd appear at my apartment door moments after I left. Like Lucy Pevensie returning to the hide and seek game. Like Alice climbing back up the rabbit hole.
Then other nights I'd lay in bed and dream of riding up to Boromir and jumping down from my horse and into his arms. Like Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy.

Sometimes I didn't know which fantasy was more ridiculous or if they both were. What if I misconstrued what Boromir meant? What if I got three days west of Fornost and simply found myself standing in a field? Both of these options were just as likely, and both of them were equally terrifying. I wanted to be home; whether that meant my apartment or… or with friends in Middle Earth.

In Edoras I was able to forget for a time those divisive thoughts. Éomer had been crowned king, and the town was livelier than I'd ever seen it. Thunor snuffled around the hay and stables appreciatively, and I almost feared he would want to stay until Êowyn laughed and told me he'd be sick of being cooped up in a stall within the week.

Indeed, we were there for a week because Merry was formally inducted into the Rohirrim guard, and there was feasting and gift-giving afterwards. Frodo and Sam had never been to Rohan, but were greeted with deep reverence and honored by getting to name a new line of horses. This was, as Êowyn whispered to me in the hall, the highest honor that could be visited on someone in Rohan, and thus was the line of Bilboan horses created.

Éowyn and I spent most of the time together, and after a lot of pushing and a lot of knowing looks—including several from Faramir—I admitted to some of what Boromir and I had said and my fears.

"I think… well, I feel…"

"Do you see how you can't say it?" Éowyn laughed, touching me on the shoulder affectionately. "I bet he can't either. But neither Faramir nor I have any doubt what he is thinking, so I know he's hoping you'll come back too." She hesitated before putting her arms around me. "Maddie, you're my very best friend. I don't want you to leave."

"Éowyn." I hugged her back for a brief moment before we both pulled back. "I don't know what to do here, but I feel like my story is ending, if that makes sense. It may be… it may be time to go home."

"Or time to make a home," she said.

We left Rohan the next day and angled towards the Glittering Caves of Helm's Deep at Gimli's insistence, and it was well worth the small side trip. Even the Rivendell elves, who called the caves Aglarond, were impressed with the dazzling light of the crystals refracting off the water inside the old fortress. The whole place was aglow and for once everyone was as filled with wonder as I had been when I first came to Middle Earth.

Then as Legolas' behest we reached the edge of Fangorn Forest, and it was there we split from the four hobbits and the Rivendell elves. I considered going straight north with them, but somehow committing myself to the direct route left me restless as I lay on my bedroll at night. If I were really heading home, then I wanted to take the scenic route while I still could. So I stayed with Legolas and Gimli and pretended like I was more interested in seeing the Ents than I was.

"And what interest have you in trees, lass?" Gimli asked as we trekked deeper into the forest. Most of the Ents that were left from the assault on Isengard were in the furthest reaches of the forest. There was a kind of hush this deep in, where the trees were older than any other living thing in Middle Earth, as Legolas told us.
"Walking and talking trees sounds amazing," I said.

"But why have you truly come this way?" Gimli said, giving me a look over his beard. He didn't believe me any more than Legolas had when I said I wanted to see the Ents.

"I do want to see the Ents. I also want to… think."

"Many would say Imladris is a place for thinking," Legolas added quietly from ahead of us. He was taking in all the trees in fascination, listening to their whispers across the branches and the creaking and moaning of the timbers.

"Is your home like this Legolas?"

He glanced back at me very briefly, but didn't comment on how I didn't answer Gimli's question. "There is more undergrowth, and the trees grow closer together. But the canopy does remind me of home."


"It is only humid if you insist on wearing chainmail, tabard, and metal-lined boots, master Dwarf," Legolas retorted, and for the moment we had humor again and I could pretend my worries were forgotten.

"This certainly seems like what Merry and Pippin described," Gimli confirmed, poking at the trickling stream to the side of the clearing with his boot. The dirt was soft and moist here, with flowers and vines spilling from the low hanging trees and bright-colored mushrooms poking up through roots as thick around as I. Light filtered through the many layers of leaves above us, tingeing the grove with pale green light. This was Wellinghall, the home of Treebeard.

"Are there any Ents here?" I asked, looking around. It had taken us four days of marching uphill looking for this spot. Legolas had started to get directions from trees near the end when we'd begun to wander.

"Yes, they are here," he said. He vanished into the trees without another word while Gimli rolled his eyes and sat down on an upturned stone. Eventually I decided a nap was in order when Legolas didn't return with a bunch of Ents. In the lazy summer heat I curled up in the shade and drifted off to Gimli's humming and the murmuring of speaking trees.

I woke up some time after to an alarming creaking and grinding noise. At first I thought the tree above me was about to drop a branch on me, but as my eyes focused I realized that there was a tree standing in what had definitely been a clearing before.

"Ah, hrum, this is the woman?" said the tree, leaning down a bit and casting a great shadow over me. One of his eyes, covered by a heavy brow of bark, was easily the size of my palm. "I am Treebeard, as some have called me," he said slowly, as though each word took great thought. Looking between the two trunks that made his legs, I saw Legolas standing on the branch of another tree and talking to it, his face lit up with wonder. Gimli was standing at the base with his back to me.

"And what brings you here to our forest?"

"Curiosity," I answered when I'd swallowed most of my awe. "And the stories of Merry and Pippin."

"Ah, the hobbits!" he said, slowly but excitedly. "They are good folk and so small." He seemed to
peer down at me then, and I stood up to show I was not as small as hobbit, though I wasn’t sure how much of a difference that made to fourteen-foot tree. "Are you also from their northern home?"

"Oh, no, I'm from farther away," I said, staring up at the deep-set golden eyes within the bark of his face. Treebeard offered me his hand to clamber up, and I did so carefully, trying not to scrape my hands on the roughness of his bark.

"Are there Entwives where you are from?" he asked, eyes now sad. It was surprisingly easy to tell his feelings even when the shape of his face was hard to read.

"No, I don't think so. The forests there are... very small."

He looked very solemn then, but he didn't ask why, and I was glad I did not have to tell him that my people were not very kind to trees. "Entwives preferred the smaller plants, I think," he said. "We Ents tend the trees."

I didn't know what to say, so I just sat there on the elbow of an Ent. When he took three huge steps over to a ridge, I could look down across a forest that went almost to the horizon on all sides. It was so vast it looked like you could wander forever inside it and never reach an end.

"You are restless, it seems," Treebeard said after a solid ten minutes of silence. I could no longer hear Legolas talking in Elvish to another Ent, and I realized Treebeard had moved away for privacy. Had Legolas and Gimli said something? I thought about denying it, but one glance at Treebeard and I felt plainly ridiculous for hiding my indecisiveness. Galadriel had been right: I needed to be committed to my path, whatever it was.

"I don't know what to do," I admitted to the tree. "I am from very far away and I don't know how I got here or if I can go home, but I feel like I should try. But then I want to stay here in Middle Earth too, and I just don't know anymore."

Treebeard hummed for a while, before what I think were his eyebrows gradually creased with thought. "I have been searching for the Entwives for some time," he said, "particularly mine, Fimbrethil you call her in your tongue, but have not found them. Perhaps... I never will." He paused for an entire minute, but I was coming to remember or perhaps realize that Ents did everything at about a third of the speed of everyone else. "What are you searching for in your home?"

"Well, nothing. I mean, I'm not looking for something," I explained. "It's where I was born. My family might be worried about me."

"Do you still think about them much?" he asked, shifting his weight a little so a trickle of sunlight warmed my bare arms. "I think of Fimbrethil often."

I felt guilty at my answer. "No, not as much as I used to. I miss them of course, but then I look at the mountains, or, or, talk to an Ent and..."

I tapered off into silence. After at least twenty more breaths Treebeard asked, "Do you think Fimbrethil thinks of me?"

"Well I hope so," I said, though I had no way of knowing really. "She was your wife."

"Hrum, yes, but many ages and many acorns have grown to trees between us. I am not ready to stop looking for her, but is she looking for me?" Treebeard sounded sad even through the crackling and rumbling of his voice. Separated from his wife for so long both possibilities of her searching and her not—or not being alive at all—were nearly equal. Was my situation the same?
Was that what he was trying to show me?

"But there are nuts to tend here too," he said thoughtfully, then leaned down carefully while I clutched to one branch poking out of his shoulder. With the greatest gentleness, Treebeard touched the thin branch of a small tree barely as tall as I was.

"I don't have any nuts to tend," I told him as he straightened and I tried to resettle somehow so I wasn't so sore from my rough perch. It was impossible when he had bark for skin.

"Then pick them and plant them, as the Entwives in their gardens would say… or so I think."

I couldn't imagine what opportunities I would find to eek out a living somewhere in Middle Earth right then, but I had managed to do it before. I'd found the Kinseys, I'd groomed horses in Rohan, and I'd organized parts of the clean up in Minas Tirith. But fitting Boromir into it, or going somewhere different than Gondor altogether…

"You know…" Treebeard started even more slowly than he normally spoke, and I had to wait another fifteen breaths before he continued. "I don't even remember what the Entwives look like, hrum. Do you remember what your family looks like?"

"Of course!" I said immediately, but when he continued to stare out into the forest to recall the faces of the Entwives, I had to admit I was being optimistic.

In pieces I remembered my family: the texture and look of my sister's hair from behind; the crinkles by my mom's eyes; the way my father's skin folded around his wedding ring, now a bit looser than it once was as he lost weight with age. When I tried to imagine their faces though, the images became jumbled like a Picasso painting and it was hard to sort out the features anymore. My mother's eyes were hazel, but the same shade as Oriolda's had been or were I confusing them? My sister's smile, or was that mine from the looking glass or her's? Did my father have that dimple in his cheek—yes, yes he did, but Rylan had one too.

My family was a blurred sensation of love, but out of focus. That I didn't immediately know how to feel about that told me more than I could handle right then, and I squeezed my eyes shut.

"Doesn't it bother you that you can't remember them?" I asked Treebeard after another moment.

"Ah, I remember some," he responded after another minute of thoughtful humming. "If I find them again then I will have new memories. And if not… the Elf Queen said maybe I will see them in Nan-Tathren, or I will grow roots and new memories here. It's not so bad, these fates."

"But what if they still miss you? What if it's like no time has passed? Or you're meant to be there now?"

Treebeard took no notice that my question wasn't about Entwives at all. "Maybe they miss me like I miss them," he said in that slow, gravely way of his, voice creaking with thought. "And maybe they've found new forests to tend or grown roots and slept. You cannot grow the same leaf twice; each one is different. Perhaps… not knowing is better," he finished sadly.

I touched one of the leaves that grew from his shoulders, understanding what he meant. No leaf had quite the same pattern of veins or outline. Each one a little different.

"If you knew you could find them, would you?" I asked.

"Oh? I don't know," he said, lingering on each word. "But I know it would not be the same."

And there it was. I didn't know if I could go back, and I didn't know if I wanted to. Maybe…
maybe like Treebeard said, it was better to stop holding my family in limbo, like a wish on a string. Maybe it was better to stay and grow my own forest here, as Treebeard had done with Fangorn.

We stayed one night in the clearing, and neither Legolas nor Gimli wanted to speak, which I was perfectly fine with. I'd made my decision, but it took that night, wandering among the ancient trees of this magical forest, looking up at constellations I didn't know, mourning quietly for the family I was giving up, to be at peace with it. In my heart I understood then there was no going back to the way it was.
I took Thunor the next day and bid farewell to Legolas and Gimli. Gimli was unruffled by my change of heart, and Legolas only dipped his head in acknowledgement of my decision. I said my goodbyes to Treebeard, too and thanked him for his help. He hrummed for a time before wishing me well.

I saddled up Thunor and walked him back through the forest, following Legolas’ rough directions to the east. It had been a long time since I had traveled alone, and while at times it was lonely, I found I appreciated the space to think. I spent it reminiscing, singing to myself, and planning out where I was going and what I was doing.

Having little direction had always been terrifying to me. Maybe I was a bit of a control-freak, or maybe spontaneity had scared me, but I’d always had a guiding idea behind my travels. Now I’d abandoned it and all I had was the bare bones: go back to Gondor, find Boromir, and pick and plant a life, as Treebeard had told me. Easier said than done.

For once though I didn’t feel particularly discouraged. In fact, my mind and heart were clear of the doubts about my place, my future, and my choices that I’d harbored for years, and that seemed to give everything a glow.

When I came out of the canopy of Fangorn Forest a few days after leaving Gimli and Legolas, I walked into the kind of landscape that’s rocky and uninspiring. The grass was the pale brown of plains constantly buffeted by too much wind and too little rain, and the sun burned down hot on the endless lands where little beauty abounded and even less flourished. It wasn’t as majestic as Fangorn, as lively as Gondor, or as picturesque as Rivendell, but in that moment I loved it nonetheless. I loved it because when I mounted up on Thunor and spurred him to gallop, what was dull and plain was breathtaking because it was freedom. I was galloping across open land, beholden to no one, and I could do anything and go anywhere and suddenly… Middle Earth was at my feet and nothing was holding me back now.
As Thunor thundered across the dirty blond grasslands, eating up land and sky, I started to laugh. The wind caught the sound and threw it behind me, throwing it so far away that I hoped a small echo reached my family. They might never know how happy Middle Earth made me, but making the choice to stay felt right. I would let happiness drive me now, not fear and insecurity.

I rode my way south, and when I didn’t strike the Limlight River I determined I’d veered southeast in the forest and was now somewhere in the Wold. I rode south and down through East Emnet, going once so far east I caught glimmers of the Anduin, and I turned back west and south to avoid the hills. I camped when I wanted, confided in Thunor at my leisure, and ate my dried meat and stale bread not quite with relish but with pleasant familiarity.

I had meant to go around the hilly region near the great waterfall in the Anduin. It was harder to ride through and it was where Boromir had been killed originally so I had no great desire to be there. My attempts to go west though were tempered by fears of going too far and ending up closer to where the bands of wild men traveled, so I didn’t push as hard west as I should have. One sunny afternoon, plodding around boulders and shrubs and watching a distant herd of deer grazing, I came above a high crest on the ridge and beheld something I’d never seen before.

It was the two great statues of Gondorian kings that Boromir had told me about, flanking the sides of the biggest waterfall in Middle Earth. Each had a hand out as though to stop invaders from entering Gondor, garbed in rippling cloaks and mail with elaborate helmets so high up I’m sure only the Eagles could have nested there. In the shadow of some of the greatest stonework I’d ever seen, I felt a flush fill me again at this world I was in. I decided to make camp early and relax in sight of those sentries.

I dismounted, removed Thunor’s tack, and prepped my camping spot. As I dug through my saddlebags to find canteens and food my hand found the hard plastic of my phone. Gently I pulled it out of the bag, followed by the jeans and waded up t-shirt I had somehow kept through years of travel. There was also, deep at the bottom of the bag, I small nickel and a mirror. The keys... I remembered slowly, I’d given them to Bryce and Ysmay.

I sat down carefully and cradled the bag in my lap, taking all the pieces of my old life out one by one. I laid them all out on the hard grass and stared. The jeans were faded and wrinkled, the shirt stained beyond saving. My phone was deader than a stone, and the mirror and nickel were dirty but rubbing them with my fingers returned some of their original color. I ran my fingers over the button of the jeans, the machine-perfect seams, and the even lines of the t-shirt. I didn’t need these things anymore. I would never wear their like again.

I folded the t-shirt and jeans neatly and slowly picked up the nickel.

I couldn’t even remember why I’d kept it or how it had managed to stay with me all this way. It still had those perfect ridges around the circumference, and the tiny Latin letters were all but hidden under dust but still raised under my fingertip. It wasn’t worth much at home, but it was worth even less here, and I didn’t think I needed a lucky coin anymore, if it had ever been that.

I tucked it into the pocket of my jeans, slipped my cell phone and all the memories I couldn’t handle into the folds of my shirt, and picked up the last piece.

The mirror was a cheap thing I’d gotten at a market. The jeweled design on the cover was pocketed with dirt and missing pieces, the metal tarnished. It still popped open though, and I slowly took in my face in a reflecting glass smoother than any human one in Middle Earth. I had not seen my reflection so clearly since I was last in Rivendell, and I hadn’t looked long when I’d shown Éowyn the mirror in Edoras.

But now I looked and I was changed. My face was tanned and freckled, my lips fuller and the
color in my cheeks stronger. The nose I’d always worried about didn’t bother me at all, hidden as it was beneath a gaze brighter and sharper than I’d ever seen.

This wasn’t the same Maddie my parents and sister had known. I stared at my reflection and said out loud, “Staying in Middle Earth is the right choice.”

Burying my home entirely wasn’t though. I put the mirror back in my bag.

The hillock I was on wasn’t the highest, nor was it particularly notable at all, having a few shrubs and not even a tree at the top. It was in full view of the Pillars of Kings though, and it was here that I stood up again, took a deep breath of Middle Earth air, and started digging.

I had only my hands and a small spoon for eating, but the labor didn’t matter, it was the meaning behind it that did. I dug through the hard packed earth at the top to the softer, moister dirt below, and then below that to where the worms slithered through. And once the hole was clear and deep enough, I took my folded clothes and my phone and laid them to rest at the bottom. Then I covered them back up.

Goodbye Modern Earth.

I was running low on supplies when I stumbled on a small Rohirrim village. They were able to tell me that I was east of Edoras, and it would be faster to ford the Entwash and continue to Gondor than stop there. I wanted to see Éowyn and tell her I was staying, but I also didn’t want to break my momentum, so I forged on. I would send her a letter, or better yet, go to her wedding celebration in Minas Tirith and surprise her.

I left the next morning and galloped through plains that turned green and flowering as I approached the river, following the same path across I’d taken before. Then it was several more days towards the White Mountains before turning east to ride along the range towards Minas Tirith.

People traveled along this road with more frequency than I’d ever seen. Even though I’d left my fiery cloak in Minas Tirith people still recognized me a few times, and with them traveled news of my return. I had no idea of this until still days outside of the city when a trotting group of guards in shiny silver armor and black capes came up to me on the road.

“Hail, Lady Maddie!” the one at the head cried. “We are of the fourth legion of the King, guards of the White City. King Aragorn has bid us accompany you.”

Other travelers stopped to gawk as Thunor slowed to a stop, huffing impatiently. “How did you know I was going to the city?”

“How did you know I was going to the city?”

“Rumor had reached us of your arrival. We will guard you anywhere you go in the kingdom, milady,” the guard replied promptly. I sighed, but was actually glad for the company. Traveling alone was invigorating, but it did get lonely.

Together then, they rode with me and shared their fresh food as we headed back towards Minas Tirith, staying at inns along the way. None of them loosened up much, but they did tell me what news they’d heard. Most of it was about the rebuilding effort, but there were nuggets about Boromir’s leaving and plans regarding Faramir’s return.

The city was bustling when we rode in, the White Tower almost blinding in the bright afternoon sun. My contingent of guards cleared the way quickly and soon we were riding up the levels to nearly the top where someone must have gone ahead and warned the king. It wasn’t Aragorn
“You have come back,” she said with a smile as we clicked to a stop on the cobblestone outside the residential quarters on the sixth level.

“I made my decision,” I answered, dismounting. The guards were all staring at the queen and none had gotten down from the horses. I didn’t know Arwen well at all, but she was smiling at me and it made her face shine with warmth. It was strangely motherly.

“My heart is gladdened for you. I, too, know how heavily such a decision weighs.” She dismissed the guards with a wave and they took Thunor with them to the stables. Arwen walked with me into the hallways heading toward the room I had occupied before. “Lord Boromir will be pleased.”

“He is here?”

She shook her head just slightly, silky black hair never clinging, flowing like her gown with her movements. My hair, I realized at that moment, was a nest. I had bathed at the inn last night, but cantering all day to reach the city had turned it into a giant knot. “He has gone to Osgiliath to begin rebuilding and to organize the forces there to clean up the orcs left in our lands.”

“He must be terribly busy then,” I said for lack of anything else. I was still going to see him; I knew that for sure as we entered my old rooms. The bed was still neatly made, and my cloak hung in the closet. Seeing all these things I’d left half-believing I’d never see them again, I had to smile as I touched just the outer edge of that ridiculous red cloak.

“Not so busy for you. I will gather a wardrobe for you and send you on to Osgiliath. If you are willing, much work will be needed there. The city was destroyed many times.”

“I’m no city-planner,” I protested, even as Arwen signaled to a maid down the hall for hot water.

“Neither is Lord Boromir, and while we have architects and masons there, many decisions are made by him alone. He must also run an army however, and doing both is difficult.”

I was suspicious, but Arwen waved the maids through to the bathing room and walked me to the window. There she paused to take in the same view I’d spent many hours lying in bed staring out at: mountainside, city, and later tonight, stars that were getting more familiar with each day.

“It was the easiest choice in the world to be with Aragorn,” she started softly, looking at me gently. “But the choosing was the only simple part. I must carve the rest of the way myself. You do not have to stay in Osgiliath, nor do you have to help rebuild the city. You may do as you like.” Arwen smoothed a hand down my cheek. “But it shall give you a handhold with which to grasp.”

She smiled, and I felt an answering one on my face because of how beautiful she was. Then she swept out of the room and I sunk into a luxurious bath and an ocean of thoughts.

Three days of leisurely soaks in the hot water and a lot of back and forth and pros and cons lists, and I was ready to ride to Osgiliath. I had been hoping to go alone, almost craving the freedom between the two cities, but the risk of orc attacks were great enough that Aragorn insisted I go with a group of soldiers who were going to reinforce Boromir’s troops. I gave a moment’s thought to just leaving regardless of what anyone told me like I had before, but people would actually recognize me now.

“Milady,” the captain greeted, dipping his head and spear from horseback as I entered the
courtyard near the gate to the lower levels, Thunor proudly trotting behind me on a lead. He’d just been brushed and gleamed like a prize-winning horse, flaunting his glimmering sides. I rolled my eyes at his antics and accepted the step up on the mounting block.

“It is two days ride to Osgiliath and we had best be cautious. Orcs have been sighted along the river.”

I nodded and mounted up. I let the first three soldiers lead the way, with two along my sides, and then three more in the back. I felt like a prisoner under guard, but they would only hold that formation while in the city. After that I’d be free to outrun them on Thunor.

Together we rode out from Minas Tirith, high towers flashing in the dawn light, making light conversation about the recovery from the war, some of the men’s families, the places I had seen. They were friendly enough for the short trip to Osgiliath, or as many of the men called it, the City of the Stars. I realized as we rode, that I’d never been this far west. The new earth to be trampled was exciting.

By morning of the next day the broken towers were well within sight, rising like jagged spikes in the horizon. The city was split in half by the river, the closer half shorn down to a single level, like a man cut at the knees. The eastern part was a burnt out husk of rubble, having born the brunt of the attacks. Between the orcs and the Gondorians everything should have been gravel but the main order of the city remained. There were tall columns defying the devastations around them, a part of an aqueduct still left, and some homes that had been fixed up enough to house soldiers.

No one paid us much mind as we trotted in, not even as my every thought burned with what I’d tied to my saddle straps that morning. Some of the soldiers with me had eyed it and smiled, but no one said a word. We rode in and slowed as we reached the center of the city. It was on a spit of land sticking out on to the river, with the command center marked by a flapping Gondorian flag above it. We dismounted outside this tent and one of the soldiers hurried inside.

“Are these all the forces?” I asked, wondering if I should dismount too.

The captain trotted closer to me. “Nay milady, these are but the strategists, some officers, and the masons. Most of our forces lay outside the city, ready to defend it from attack.”

“Are attacks frequent?” I asked, shifting on the horse. I didn’t really care about his answer, because my fingers were tingling so hard I had to clench the reins.

“Small raids, nothing you need fear.”

The swirling in my stomach wasn’t from fear as I turned back to look at the morass of people all working to protect and rebuild this city. I shifted in the saddle, almost unable to sit still. Boromir was somewhere around here, hopefully waiting for me. Hopefully, I thought, then tried to banish the doubt. It had barely been six weeks since I’d left. Everything would be fine.

“Lady Maddie,” a leather-clad messenger beckoned, “the Prince is this way.” It took a moment to realize he meant Prince Boromir, and while my heart rate kicked into high gear I wondered how he took to the moniker. Probably more gracefully than I had taken to my title.

I guided Thunor through the maze of tents and workshops, all busy belching smoke and clouds of stone dust as the artisans worked, and ringing with the sound of metal on metal as soldiers sparred and fixed armor. It wasn’t as familiar a place to me, but I felt a warmth in my gut that it one day might be. Finally we stopped at a tasseled silver tent right alongside the river with a small courtyard in front. I recognized Boromir’s horse tied up at a post outside.
The messenger disappeared back into the maze as I jumped down and Thunor immediately ambled over to steal the other horse’s water. I smoothed my hands down my dress, tried in vain to tuck away the hair falling out of my braid, and marched in. I assumed someone had announced me so I ducked under the second awning into the interior room.

He had his back to me while scribbling a note on a large map on the wall, and his shirt was untucked with his pants loose. He hair was even unbound. It was the most relaxed I’d ever seen him.

“Boromir?” I asked.

“Leave the report there,” he said, studying the map. It looked to be the lands outside the city, carefully marked with landmarks and notations.

“Boromir,” I repeated, this time a bit more playfully. I tried to hide the huge smile on my face but it was futile. My whole body was tingling now.

“Hm?” he turned and his breath caught as he saw me. I guess no one had announced me after all. “Maddie?”

The moment I laid eyes on that face I was suddenly unable to think of any of the clever greetings I’d thought up on my way here. His expression was so perfectly caught in happy surprise that I’m sure it didn’t matter anyway.

“I’m back,” I said like a dolt.

“For good?” he asked, dropping the quill on the table and rounding it. Then he seemed to realize he wasn’t properly dressed by Gondorian standards and hurried to shrug his coat back on.

“For good, mostly,” I practically chirped. I now knew what a cup overflowing with happiness felt like as we both looked at each other breathlessly. “Lady Arwen said I might be able to help you here with the city.”

“You would do this? Help to build the city back to its former glory?” He’d gotten the coat on by this point but it was left unbuttoned like he’d forgotten halfway through.

“If you trust me to. I hardly think I know how, but I’ve visited quite a few cities if that qualifies me.” I felt a flush on my cheeks at the way we continued to not talk about the last words we’d shared.

“I trust you to have the best intentions,” he said earnestly.

“Intentions won’t get me far.”

Boromir looked questioningly then. “That’s all you need to start.”

We both stopped, but he seemed to be holding himself back. I ached for a hug, for something, as Arwen said, to grip here in Middle Earth, so I took a few steps forward and wrapped my arms around him.

He immediately softened and I pressed my cheek to his chest as his big arms went around me too. He smelled like oil, a faint tinge of metal, and Boromir, and I knew it would be okay now. I had a place to plant my forest. “Thank you for offering me a home.”

He coughed embarrassedly and we politely separated. I felt my ludicrous grin from early soften to one of affection as I looked at him. His cheeks were tinged with the slightest bit of red but he
looked me steadily in the eye. “Gondor is your home, and I stand by my prior words.” There was a half second pause where I almost opened my mouth to ask the question outright when he went on. “I’ll arrange for quarters to be made up for you and your things brought there. It’ll be temporary until something more permanent can be set up. Tomorrow I’ll introduce you to the artisans and show you what plans we have so far.”

I nodded, and we both smiled stupidly at each other again. “That sounds good. I wouldn’t mind stretching my legs a bit anyway while they settle things.”

He nodded, holding the awning for me as he showed me out. “Just be careful not to go to the outskirts of the city. The structures are not all stable either.”

We left the tent to see just two guards at the entrance to another tent and Thunor sniffing around Boromir’s destrier. I’d almost forgotten my surprise in my excitement to see Boromir. He was a man of action more than words, as I’d learned, and I wanted to show him in a way he’d understand best.

I made a few clicking noises to get Thunor’s attention and when the horse turned I felt Boromir’s stiffen beside me. When Thunor approached us, Boromir’s hand went to the handkerchief tied around one of the saddle straps. It was a fine white silk one with a dark grey embroidered edge. I had fingered it many times since he’d given it to me when I left.

“Arwen told me it was traditional,” I said, biting the inside of my cheek so I wouldn’t laugh nervously and mess this up. “You wore my favor, so I wore yours.”

“Yes,” he said, “she’s right.” There was a rueful smile on his face and his hand slipped into his pocket and pulled out a crinkled but familiar pink ribbon. We both looked at each other and I wondered if I could kiss him. “I will see you for supper, I hope?”

“Of course,” I said, biting my lip and then accepted his hand up to mount, letting the moment slide. The touch lingered for a half-second, and I squeezed his hand. It had to be the most handsome smile I’d seen on him that I got back for that. Then he stepped back, and with a few words to the guards I was led further out from the main encampment to a temporary tent they’d set up for me. I had too much energy to sit though, so I dropped my bags and meandered back out.

I wandered the city, clambering over rubble, peeking into entryways, even finding the remains of what was once a sprawling garden, now dried out and overgrown. Eventually I found my way to a bell tower on the water still left standing. It didn’t look safe, but I wanted to see this city I was making my home, and I wanted to see this world I had finally chosen.

I climbed up, choosing my steps carefully, hugging the wall so I didn’t fall, and catching glimpses through the holes in the sides of the building of blue sky and white stone and people growing smaller as I climbed higher.

At the top, the bell itself was dented, rusted, and fallen, lying on its side in the dust. There were bits of stone and marble scattered about, so I shuffled carefully to the edge and looked out across a vista I had seen so many times before and still could not fully appreciate. On one side, looking south, the river wound into the mountains, disappearing into a haze of golden earth and blue sky. To the west lay Minas Tirith I knew, though I couldn’t see the twinkling of the city yet. The sun was setting on that side, spreading warm colors across the canvas of the heavens. North, most of the city lay out before me, roads twisting and turning, tents poking up among the debris, flags waving.

And east laid the dark mountains of Black Lands and the army. Cooking fires among the encamped soldiers were lighting up as the shadows grew long on this side. I looked at the dark
clouds over the darker lands and thought about how fantastical it was that I stood on a bell tower in Osgiliath here in Middle Earth looking at Mordor. This tower would be my first project to fix.

I felt so happy to have something to look forward to, to have friends, to have a whole world that I finally belonged in. All the clamoring questions were quiet finally. I leaned out on the ledge and closed my eyes, turning my face up to the setting sun.

“Why did I forget? Why didn’t I remember *Lord of the Rings* until I talked to Gandalf?” I asked the wind. It blew my words out over the ramparts and into the distance.

“Why did I come here?” The wind blew those away too.

“What do I do now?” The wind blew my words back at me this time.

I knew there was a mythology here in Middle Earth. I knew there were some form of gods and there was magic. Whether or not I ever understood that or those questions didn’t matter really, as I was learning. What mattered were my choices and my deeds.

I exhaled and went back down the tower to start my new life.

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