

# Elusive Heart

Chapter 1 – HALDIR.....	3
Chapter 2 – FIRST IMPRESSIONS.....	5
Chapter 3 – UNDER ATTACK.....	8
Chapter 4 – HEALING.....	11
Chapter 5 – AWAKENING.....	14
Chapter 6 – GIFTS AND UNCERTAINTY.....	16
Chapter 7 – GALADRIEL’S MIRROR.....	21
Chapter 8 – MANY MEETINGS.....	23
Chapter 9 – SWORDPLAY.....	27
Chapter 10 – SONG OF SILVER.....	31
Chapter 11 – HOME AT LAST.....	35
Chapter 12 – GETTING CLOSER.....	38
Chapter 13 – MONARCHS ON THE PLAIN.....	43
Chapter 14 – QUESTS & QUESTIONS.....	46
Chapter 15 – SYNERGY.....	49
Chapter 16 – SEEING THINGS.....	52
Chapter 17 – The Call to Helm’s Deep.....	56
Chapter 18 – TAKING AIM.....	59
Chapter 19 – THE HOUR OF WAR.....	62
Chapter 20 – THE DAWNLESS DAYS.....	65
Chapter 21 – RADIANCE EXTINGUISHED.....	69
Chapter 22 – THROWING DOWN THE WALLS.....	72

# Chapter 1 – HALDIR

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Haldir stode through the forests he'd known since childhood. He was on patrol on the eastern borders of Lorien, the woodland realm of the Lord Celeborn and Galadriel, Lady of Light. He had pledged himself to protect both the Lord and Lady and their realm when he was but a young elf.

What else was he to do? Celeborn and Galadriel had taken him in as a child when his parents had been killed in the last war of elves and men. He had found deep compassion and profound comfort here in Lothlorien and he loved it deeply as he loved the Lord and Lady. He would protect them above all else and defend the home he loved.

But lately, he had a strange feeling about his duties. Yes, he rose in the mornings with one thought and his singular purpose in mind. Yet....there was something else floating in the back of his mind. A nagging feeling of apprehension combined with a slight tingle of excitement.

His years of service amongst the Lorien Guard had finely tuned his ability to perceive danger ahead of time. Combined with his high elven heritage he was adeptly attuned to foresee events but he was struggling with these misty feelings and vague visions of what was coming his way. It did not necessarily feel like danger but he felt the unmistakable urge to be on his guard.

Sometimes he would awake with his lips tingling and a warmth in his loins as though he had spent the night with a loving elvish maid. Other times he would waken in deep concern, uncertain of his future with a desperate longing and unending emptiness within him. It would be long into the day and after many hours with his Guard comrades before he would shake these early morning feelings of utter aloneness and heartaching despair.

True, he had never found his one true love. His *edar* {soul mate} that elf-lore told would be known to him, the moment he laid eyes on her. This rapture had eluded him to date. He had had relations with not a small number of Lorien's elf-maids but none had captured his heart nor captivated his mind. For the most part, the maids of Lorien were beautiful but lacked the depthful spirituality and the compassion and wisdom that Galadriel embodied.

Yes, from the moment he'd set eyes on the Lady of Light as a young, orphaned elf he had fallen deeply in love with her. As had all elves that were fortunate enough to bear witness to her beauty and kindness.

His deepest dream was to find a maiden with even the faintest traces of Galadriel's qualities. An elvish beauty possessing both intelligence and strength of heart to grace his side for the eternity that blessed the elf-kind. So far, Haldir had found no lady even close to these standards. Secretly, he feared he'd set his sights too high and wished for the impossible.

In the meantime, he'd pledged himself to his guardship duties and tried to think of little else than becoming the best Captain of the Lorien Guard he could. His work took up a great deal of his time so finding his soulmate was easily pushed from his mind. Until now.....until these haunting, lonely dreams that nagged on his heart so.

What could they mean?

He was pulled from his thoughts by the sound of a horn. It was elvish. It was a warning. An enemy had been sighted nearby. He sprang towards the sound of the horn and unsheathed his sword as he ran.

## Chapter 2 – FIRST IMPRESSIONS

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The horn had only sounded once. Haldir crested the hill that overlooked a grove of ancient elms. This signal usually meant that there wasn't a full-on attack but that something or someone had been captured that required his immediate attention.

The morning had been very misty, a dense fog enveloped the grove and as Haldir came down the hillside he slowed to a brisk stride rather than a run. He sensed a group of elves ahead but could not see them yet.

He kept his sword drawn and it gleamed coldly in the misty light. The slight apprehension that had lurked within him all morning, well in fact for most of the past week, increased. He felt his pulse pounding and his nerves slightly on edge. This was very unusual for a situation like this, he normally only felt this way before a large battle or during an ambush. His service in the Lorien Guard had spanned almost 2,500 years and he'd experienced enough immense battles and small skirmishes to prepare him for practically anything.

Both Celeborn and Galadriel had felt that his low-key nature and unflappable character combined with his sheer strength both physically and mentally made him an obvious candidate for the higher ranks of the Guard. His superior fighting skills and devout loyalty to the Lord and Lady fuelled by his unquestionable courage and strategic sensibilities made him a natural choice, after some years service, to be Captain of the Guard.

The Lord and Lady were deeply proud of Haldir's accomplishments and for his part, Haldir strived each day to warrant their pride and exceed their expectations. A case of nervous jitters while approaching a captured intruder did not sit well with him. He was annoyed at his reaction and it served to darken his already apprehensive mood.

He had noticed lately that he was shorter tempered. Normally, Haldir did not suffer fools but recently, his tolerance had decreased even further.

He saw a group of his sentinels through the mist. They stood in a half circle facing someone who appeared to be tall and lithe, rather elvish-looking. Not what he expected.

The line of sentinels parted as their Captain stepped through and looked upon the captive. Indeed she appeared Elvish though not like any elf Haldir had ever set eyes upon. He had travelled to the northern Mirkwood kingdom, west to the Grey Havens and through the lands in between back to Imladris and home to Lorien and he'd never seen an elf with these colourings.

She was female, tall but quite a few inches shorter than he was. Her shoulders were somewhat broad for a female though that may have been accentuated by the armour she bore. She wore a beautifully crafted copper-coloured chain mail vest that mirrored the coppery highlights in her chestnut-coloured hair.

Why was he noting the highlights in her hair? He frowned deeper and glanced at her weapon. She had her hand over the hilt of an elvish sword that was un-drawn and still within its decorative scabbard but her grip was tight about it. The Lorien sentinels all had bows or swords drawn facing her but there appeared to have been no combat...yet.

At last Haldir looked upon her face. Her hair was drawn back from it and braided intricately displaying the unmistakable elven ears. Her eyes were green; the inner circle was the colour of

fresh, springtime grass both bright and smart. The colour turned darker into a deep, forest green at the outer edges of her irises. Haldir had never seen an elf with eyes nor hair of this colour.

Her eyes were slightly glassy like someone nearing exhaustion that had been alert for too long. Her cheeks were flushed and one had a smudge of dirt on it, marring the otherwise perfect elvish complexion.

He took a step towards her and sheathed his sword, the steel ringing as he did so. She raised her chin slightly preparing to address him, she looked of noble blood to him but he could not ignore the warning his pounding temples gave him. He still felt on edge and he was not at all eased with the fact that the intruder was Elvish.

"Who are you?" Haldir demanded.

The female elf, respectfully bowed her head slightly, "I am Taelyra of the Lindárin Realm. I have come bearing the sword, Artanis, as both a gift and a weapon for the wielding of the Lady of Light."

She did not release her hold on the sword's hilt and neither did the Sentinels let down the aim of their arrows at her throat. She raised her head again and looked Haldir directly in the eyes. For a moment, Haldir felt as though he could fall into the green pools, diving as he had done as a boy leaving all the grief and trials of waking life on the water's surface and immersing himself in the tranquility of the underwater realm.

What mind tricks were these? He thought to himself impatiently. She looked like no other elf he'd encountered in all his campaigns and travels. Her Elvish was strange, similar to Sindarin but different too with an odd accent. He could feel the mystical power from her sword but whether it was for good or evil, he could not determine. He had never heard of a land by the name of Lindárin. In these evil times, he did not trust strangers who just wandered the lands, especially alone.

He was overshadowed by feelings of enticement and nervous apprehension making him suspicious of this strange elf's intentions. His intuition was crackling with warning.

His mind snapped back into clarity and he stood a little taller and looked down upon her. "You will not enter this wood," he said simply.

His sentinels smiled inwardly, they respected Haldir unanimously and secretly loved it when he spoke in his clear and commanding tone. Whatever it was he said, in that tone, it meant the statement's terms were non-negotiable. His voice intoned the spirit of the Lorien Guard. The defences of Lorien had never been breached nor would they ever be, as long as Haldir and his Sentinels guarded its borders.

Taelyra's shoulders shrunk slightly and her eyes involuntarily registered disappointment, a result of her exhaustion. This would be as difficult as her father and brothers forewarned. She should have taken a different approach, she reprimanded herself. If she had been thinking clearly and shaped her strategy better she could have made her entry into Lorien less sneakily.

But she was being pursued. She had been pursued for a long while now. She was under pressure and near collapse. Even her wise father and brothers had under-estimated the length of their enemy's arm and she had narrowly missed capture by her evil pursuers. They were coming after her now still, even though she'd entered the Sacred Wood.

"There are enemies approaching quickly. They will be here in moments!" she warned.

"Do you dare threaten us?" replied Haldir.

Could this be going any worse? thought Taelyra, beginning to panic. She could smell the enemy closing in though the fog still hid their approach.

Haldir and his Sentinels also caught the scent. Their attention turned from her momentarily as the first wargs crested the hillside into the grove.

## Chapter 3 – UNDER ATTACK

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A half dozen wargs swept down the hillside toward the Elves, the wargs were accompanied by Orcs of varying sizes running behind them. Immediately, the Lorien guards released the first volley of arrows taking down three of the wargs and many of the Orcs.

Taelyra drew her sword, Artanis. The distinctive ring of elvish steel made Haldir glance her way. He did not trust this strange Elf and he did not want her armed. She had a strange hold over him that manipulated his thoughts and made his nerves edgy.

The surviving wargs swept past and made a broad turn around to make another pass. Haldir grabbed Taelyra's arm, harder than he intended but he did not want his or his Sentinels' backs to her while she wielded that weapon.

"Sheathe your sword!" he commanded.

Taelyra's eyes registered both pain and surprise at his sudden grip of her. Haldir felt momentary guilt then swept it aside, deciding it was more of her mind tricks.

"Sheathe that sword!" he repeated.

Steel rang out around them as the Orcs met the Elvish Sentinels. Taelyra dropped her sword to her side and Haldir released her arm. She stumbled back slightly and looked truly ready to drop from her feet.

Haldir turned to face a large Orc preparing to swing a crude blade at him. Haldir's sword passed through the Orc's abdomen coming out his back. He withdrew his sword swiftly and the Orc fell away dead.

Haldir spun around to see Taelyra's whereabouts but she was no where to be seen, as though she had simply disappeared into thin air. He knew there was an ill intent about her.

A great deal of the Orcs lay dead around the party of Lorien Guards but the wargs were making their second approach. The Elves drew their bows and prepared to launch another barrage of arrows. Haldir caught a glimpse in the woods of a small skirmish and heard the ringing of steel against steel. He ran towards the sound.

He saw Taelyra behead a short Orc and swiftly stab the one next to it. She turned to face Haldir and as she did her eyes grew wide with terror. Haldir could sense the warg bounding up behind him, he knew he had little time. He spun around bracing for the powerful impact that never came. He smelt the stench of the beast as it passed and could almost feel the wiry, matted hair brush his face. The warg lunged past him and caught Taelyra's cloak with its teeth. She screamed as it pulled her from her feet and dragged her over the cliff.

Haldir ran to the cliff's edge and looked down at the river cascading far below. Both Taelyra and the warg plunged into it and were difficult to follow because of the overgrowth on the river's banks and the foaming violence of the water.

Haldir ran back to his guards. All seemed to be all right with them, he shouted that he was going down to the riverside and they followed him. When they got to the river's edge they could see

neither the warg nor Taelyra. Haldir commanded the Sentinels to fan out and head down river. He himself crossed the river at a shallow point and went down a side tributary.

His feet crunched on the gravel as he followed the curving shoreline, he could not see around the bend. Behind him on the main river he could hear steel ringing out again and he knew his guards were embroiled in another fight. There must have been a second party of Orcs trying to sweep round and flank them during their battle with the wargs.

Haldir could smell the disgusting warg and hear its ragged breathing before he saw it. His nerves jangled as he pushed through the dense underbrush and prepared to meet it. What he met, was the warg's last laboured breaths as it died from its sword wounds presumably delivered by Taelyra who lay very still by the water's edge.

Haldir ran to her side and knelt down beside her. Before he turned her over he saw the blood seeping from her into the clear water. He set his sword aside and gently grabbing both her head and shoulder he turned her towards him slowly. Her eyes were even more glazed now but they vaguely focussed on him. She still gripped Artanis, her sword, her hand was still tight about its hilt and its tip was in the water.

Haldir brushed her wet hair back from her face and looked at her as she tried to form some words. He encouraged her to stay quiet and still but she attempted to speak again. They could both hear cries down the river, it sounded as though the fight was escalating and coming towards them.

Softly Taelyra said, "Get your people out of the river."

Haldir's brow furrowed as he tried to understand her meaning. She repeated the message urgently and as she did, he could feel an unmistakable power emanating from her sword. It sort of made his ears ring and the hair on the back of his neck stand up. He thought he had guessed her meaning and he stood up. As he did so, he could see the extent of her injuries and panic coursed through him. He ran down the shoreline and shouted to his guards to get on the riverbanks.

The command had barely left his lips when he heard the roar behind him. He jumped up onto the riverbank as a wall of water cascaded past sweeping the remaining Orcs away, far down the river to their watery deaths.

Haldir blinked in disbelief at what he had just witnessed. The sight of Taelyra's wounds returned to his mind and he yelled for his guards to call for his horse, Nénharma. He ran back to Taelyra's side. Her eyes were closed and her face was extremely pale. He feared the worst as he bent over her mouth to feel if she still breathed.

He could barely feel a faint brush of breath upon his cheek but was startled when he turned his head to see her great, green eyes staring up at him. Her eyes were questioning. He nodded to her and tried to fake a brave smile to let her know her water spell had worked.

"You saved my people Taelyra," her name fell strangely but not awkwardly from his lips.

She closed her eyes in satisfaction and her chest heaved slowly. She was in a great deal of pain and her blood continued to stain the waters around her.

"Hold on," Haldir said as he gently lifted her out of the shallow water and onto the grassy bank. He had little experience in healing but he had seen it done often enough after battles that he felt he had to try something.

He placed his hand gently over the wound in her side and he began to speak quietly to Taelyra. He was both encouraging her to find the strength within herself to endure this wound and praying that her natural elvish abilities would begin the healing process. He placed his other hand gently to the side of her face and he gazed down at her.

Her green eyes brimmed with tears. The sight shook him to his core. He tried to calm her and assure her as best he could.

She whispered to him, "Please deliver Artanis to the Lady of the Wood. It is my father's command."

A panicked look invaded her eyes and Haldir desperately wanted to quell her fears.

"Please..." her whisper faded, her eyelids closed and tears spilled down her cheeks, "my father will be so disappointed."

Her breath racked with her crying and Haldir's heart felt as though it was being wrenched from his chest. He tried to calm her once more.

"You must hang on. Stay with us a while longer and you will deliver Artanis to the Lady by your own hand." Haldir gently encouraged her. "You will do your father's bidding and he will be most proud."

The Sentinels came along the riverside with Haldir's horse in tow. They were shocked by the sight before them. They had seen Haldir take life many, many times. He was the most prolific fighter amongst them but never had they seen him take the role of healer.

It was strange to them, to see him crouched over the Elf maid. His heart barely hovering over hers, whispering words of encouragement to her and trying to imbue his energy into her, as though trying to loan her the strength to make the ride to Caras Galadhon where the power of the Lady could cure her ails.

Haldir looked up at them. Perhaps it was the mist still hanging about the forest but it almost looked as though his eyes were moist. He smiled at the sight of his loyal horse and spoke encouragingly again to the female Elf.

Gently he scooped her into his arms, careful to lay her sword across her. In two strides he was at the great horse's side and he stepped up into the stirrups and settled into the saddle with the Elf maid across his lap.

He grasped Nénharma's reins and leaned forward as the horse sprang up the river's embankment and through the darkening forest.

## Chapter 4 – HEALING

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Galadriel could sense the Elves on horseback approaching before she was actually told of their arrival. Strange her dreams had been of late. She'd had visions of a strange Elvish people, green of eyes and auburn-haired. They wore dark crimson clothing and coppery armour that reflected their bold but brave natures.

They were numerous and she had the vague feeling they approached from the unknown lands of the East. She suspected they were descendants of the Teleri, the Sea-Elves of old, who crossed the sea to live in Tol Eressëa long ages ago. Most thought that this race of Elf had passed into myth. In these dark days though, many creatures and peoples were rising from the mists of myth and proving to indeed be real. Nothing surprised her anymore and she had come to expect the unexpected in these strange days.

The key element she felt was that strength and goodness surrounded these Elves and that they were crossing Middle Earth, not just to leave its shores by the Grey Ships but to help their Elven brethren along the way.

Galadriel felt a great gift was about to be bestowed upon her but even her Mirror could not tell her what exactly the gift would be.

Haldir's great stallion, Nénharma, halted before her and Haldir stepped from him clutching a soaking wet Elf maid in his arms. She was bleeding from a wound in her side and a brilliant sword of the highest Elf-craft was thrust in Haldir's saddle holster.

Galadriel looked upon the female Elf, she was pale and had lost much blood but the inner strength and courage of her people shimmered within her still.

Strange, Haldir in all his adult stature - he was at the peak of his physical form, had a look in his eyes similar to the one he'd had standing before her long ago as a recently-orphaned child. He looked to her desperately seeking her solace and healing. She loved him so, equal to one of her own by birth.

She gently gestured towards the stairs leading to a nearby *talan*. Haldir took the steps two at a time and laid Taelyra gently on the bed within.

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They had been up there a long time, Haldir thought impatiently. He paced restlessly beneath the enormous mallorn tree that held the talan platform above. In that room, Galadriel and her best healers were trying to save Taelyra's life.

He paused as he considered her passing and leaned his head forward pressed to the trunk of the great tree. He could feel the energies working above him and just as he could feel the pulsating life within this tree he could feel the young Elf's life force fading. His heart sank.

Gradually he became aware of the tree's bark gleaming, reflecting a soft but bright light from behind him. He was in the presence of Galadriel. He turned to face her and prepare for the sad news he expected.

Galadriel looked upon him as she always had, with much compassion and wisdom. He kept his emotions as closely guarded as the Realm he swore to serve. It had been an instinctive defense mechanism that had served him well and perhaps even provided his survival. It was not uncommon for young orphaned elves to die of heartbreak but Haldir had withstood the death of his parents and had not only endured but grew into a strong and remarkable Elf.

But sometimes, she felt he closed himself off too much from the world around him and perhaps didn't experience all life had to offer. She hoped he would continue to grow emotionally and someday open up to an Elf who could be his life's partner. Galadriel had not seen the future clearly but she had some inkling of this female Elf's connection to Haldir. Should she involve herself in the matters? Well, perhaps just a bit.

"Haldir," she began, "the healers are having difficulty reaching Taelyra and providing the guidance she needs now. I wondered if you would perhaps help them."

Haldir looked stunned. He? One of Galadriel's top soldiers, step in where her healers faltered? The idea seemed preposterous.

"You were able to help her make the journey here," Galadriel continued, "you've made some sort of connection with her. She needs your support now."

What could he say? The thought of Taelyra passing caused him more grief than he was able to admit. He would do whatever Galadriel thought would help.

He followed her up the steps and into the healing room. It was lit by candlelight and smelled of the strong herbs burning and boiling. The room felt close but comforting. Taelyra looked small and fragile in the large, white bed. Her armour had been removed and she was clothed now only in the fine, white linen of Lorien. She was deathly pale; even her lips had drained of their rose colour.

As he approached the bed, he saw small bruises on her arm and felt deep pangs of regret knowing that he had been the cause of them. He came to sit on the bed next to her and instinctively reached for her cool hand, enclosing it in both his warm ones.

How was it possible he'd perceived her as an enemy? Her elvish features were even more prominent now as she faded. Her high forehead and prominent cheek bones. Her eyelids now shuttered the bright eyes and her beautiful shining hair fell loose about her shoulders in waves of chestnut and gold. She was truly stunning but somehow he had only seen an adversary out there in the misty grove and perceived her as a danger.

His thumb absently stroked her hand; her skin was silken to the touch. He wanted to pass his warmth and energy into her to somehow revitalize her. He did not know how to do so and he realized that he was alone with her in the room now.

He sighed at the realization that the healers and Galadriel had all left. What was he to do? He remembered Taelyra's heavy-lidded gaze as she lay in his arms on Nénharma's back as they entered Caras Galadhon. Even in her injury and exhaustion she had looked upwards to the great trees of the city in wonder and amazement. He barely remembered his own first entry to this place, his utter devastation in knowing his family was gone but his awe at the golden beauty of the great wood that surrounded him.

So, he began to tell the unconscious Taelyra his story. He told her of his parents – what little he could remember – but mainly what he'd been told of his father's bravery and his mother's

kindness. He told her of his love for the Lorien realm and its Lord and Lady. Long into the night he described its beauty and wonder to her, hoping she would be enticed back from the brink of endless sleep to stay awhile with them here and see it for herself.

Silently, he prayed for her recovery so that he might make amends for their faulty introduction and make up for his poor treatment of her.

## Chapter 5 – AWAKENING

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Taelyra woke slowly. She gradually became aware that she was lying in a great, soft bed. Her side ached a bit but mainly she just felt groggy. As though she had just swum from the great depth of an ocean finally surfacing into consciousness.

She took a quick mental check of her body. Both her legs felt okay and she seemed able to move them slightly. Her head could turn both ways but her one hand seemed immobilized. It had a soft but heavy weight upon it. She turned to see a golden head lying across her hand; the soft skin of the face caressed the back of her hand, which suddenly twitched involuntarily.

The head bolted upright and a pair of bright blue eyes stared up at her in wonderment. It was a handsome face, quite handsome in fact. Strong but kind, framed by golden hair that was drawn back by several fine braids. Who was this?

Ah yes, Haldir. She thought she remembered his guards calling to him by that name. She managed a small smile.

He grinned happily. He couldn't remember the last time he'd grinned but it happened instinctively at the sight of Taelyra's beautiful green eyes and her lovely smile. He thought he'd never seen so wonderful a sight.

"Lady," exclaimed Haldir, "it's good to see you awake. You are safe now within the City of the Trees, Caras Galadhon. Home of the Lord Celeborn and Lady Galadriel."

His voice thrilled her. It was both deep and clear. He spoke graciously as one accustomed to addressing dignitaries yet she had seen him wield a sword and knew he had great skills in fighting. He reminded her somewhat of her brothers, both warriors and statesmen, and she felt at ease with him.

Finally - it was reassuring to feel at ease after their rocky start. She was relieved that that was behind them and that she had made safe entry into Lorien.

Safe entry! In order to provide the Lady of Light with the gift of Artanis, her sword! Taelyra's eyes darted quickly around the room. Haldir read her thought and pointed out her sword safely back in its elaborate scabbard propped in the corner of the room.

"As promised," he said with a knowing grin, "it awaits your gift to the Lady by your own hand. You will not let your father down."

He smiled warmly at her and she thought her insides would melt. His eyes were bright and clever, she couldn't even remember having told him about her father's orders. Who knows what she may have said in her injury and delirium last night? She hoped she had maintained some sort of composure.

Her memory was quite hazy after being dragged off the cliff by that disgusting warg though she did recall Haldir's intense blue eyes looking into hers and although she couldn't remember his exact words she remembered him willing her to have the strength to ride with him here. She remembered clutching his strong chest as they rode by horseback and resting her head against

his neck. Even after battle, he had smelled good to her and his strong arms encircling her body had felt so nice. Strange thing.... memory. Hmm.

Haldir was looking at her inquisitively. He must think she was suffering some sort of mental fatigue!

"Th-thank you," she faltered, "for your help and for saving my life. I am most indebted to you."

"There is no debt, lady. You saved the lives of myself and several of my Sentinels with the grace and power of your sword."

Oh yes, the wave of death she'd summoned. She'd forgotten about that.

"The healers made a good tea for you. It will help speed your recovery, Taelyra."

The sound of his clear tenor saying her name! The thrill raced through her again. Why was she feeling like a smitten child? Had she suffered some sort of head injury that made her feel flighty and light-headed?

"Yes, thank you." she replied simply. Get a hold of yourself Taelyra, she thought.

Haldir returned to her bedside with a small cup of the tea still hot from the previous night. Taelyra began to raise herself up but gasped at the sudden stab of pain in her side. Presumably, she should remain still for a while yet.

Haldir put an arm around her shoulders and helped ease her upright gently. Taelyra noticed that he still smelled good. Very good. His hair grazed her cheek and felt silken – she wondered if his chest felt equally smooth.

Where did that thought come from? she wondered wildly.

Her shoulder pressed into his chest as he supported her up, he enjoyed the contact. As he brought the cup of tea to her lips for her, he took advantage of their closeness and breathed deeply and silently the scent of her hair. It smelled of jasmine, he wished he could bury himself in it. As she finished the tea, he put the cup on the small table next to the bed. He eased her gently back down onto the bed noticing the linen nightdress fell slightly off her one shoulder. Her skin looked invitingly soft. Her neck was long and elegant; he wanted to feather kisses down it to the tops of her breasts swelling invitingly just above the neckline of her nightgown. The thin material clung to her curves and he could just see the tips of her nipples through it. He wanted to caress them softly.

Her head fell back against the pillow and her hair once again fanned out beautifully framing her face. Her colour was much improved, there was a blush in her smooth, strong cheekbones and the rose hue had returned to her full lips. Her lips....

The tea had an immediate calming effect on her and she fell into sleep. Haldir took advantage of this in order to stare at her lips. They looked soft as rose petals and had a similar natural crimson colour. He wanted to press his own to them. Gently pry them apart to explore her wonderful mouth with his own. He wanted to possess her with his mouth, branding her with his kisses and tell her of his feelings when words were insufficient.

He sighed. She slept now. To kiss her unbidden was base and invasive. Perhaps he would have the chance to kiss her later, he hoped she would welcome it.

# Chapter 6 – GIFTS AND UNCERTAINTY



Taelyra's recovery was swift. Apparently, Telerin Elves were as resilient as their Lorien kindred.

Haldir had been on his normal patrolling duties but would return in the evenings to check on her and see that she was improving.

Taelyra's strength was returning but her recovery increased exponentially upon meeting Galadriel. Haldir was sitting with Taelyra in her room having tea with her. She had been able to get out of bed that day and sit up at a table. A subtle luminescence enveloped the room; Taelyra felt a tingling, warm sensation that made her turn towards the doorway. Galadriel stood there radiating warmth and welcome towards her and Taelyra thought the sun shining down on a summery meadow had never felt so good.

Taelyra gasped softly and Haldir enjoyed the rapturous look on her face as she took in the gentle radiance that was the presence of the Lady of Light.

Galadriel had come in and spoken gentle words of welcome to Taelyra and told her how pleased she was to see her recovering so well. Galadriel directed the words to Taelyra but her eyes fell on Haldir as she spoke them. She conveyed to Haldir, by thought, her gratitude for his newfound healing skills. Haldir smirked slightly as the thought of him as a healer still seemed ridiculous but he was none the less pleased at the results with Taelyra.

As calmly and subtly as she had come in, Galadriel left them. Suddenly, the room returned to its previous candlelit glow. Taelyra sat in reverend silence.

"The Lady's effect on most, is profound," stated Haldir after a few moments.

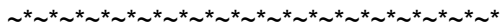
"Mmm," was all Taelyra could manage as she looked across the table at Haldir. Her gaze fell upon the sword propped against the wall behind him.

"Artanis!" she exclaimed, "I forgot to present her with Artanis. How could I be so thoughtless?"

Haldir chuckled, "The Lady has seen the sword; when we first brought you here. She's been informed that you've come bearing a gift from your people and she will await your presentation of it. When you feel able, you may kneel before her and the Lord Celeborn and give it to them."

"I should like to bestow them with it tomorrow, if that is alright," replied Taelyra earnestly. "Will you accompany me when I do so, Haldir?"

"As you wish lady," was Haldir's reply.



Taelyra left the meeting with Celeborn and Galadriel feeling a whirlwind of emotions inside. She felt the very opposite of the cool and collected Lorien Elves. The Elves here all seemed to shimmer irredescently and exude calmness while she could barely contain her excitement at just being here and fulfilling her duty to deliver Artanis.

She felt the meeting had gone very well. She had confirmed Galadriel's speculation that she was a Telerin Elf from the far, Eastern lands of Middle Earth. Taelyra told of her people's contentedness in the Lindárin Realm until the Dark Forces had begun to encroach upon them.

As he had begun to gather strength, the Dark Lord Sauron had summoned great evil from the East and it was the Telerin Elves that first took up arms in the battle for Middle Earth. They had tried to vanquish the evil from their lands but it was too powerful. As well, their King - and visionary - had seen their future. For long years, he'd known that they would someday have to leave their beloved realm. He knew in his heart that the time of the Elves was passing. So en masse, his people had abandoned their fine homes and left the beautiful countryside in order to begin the journey back to their promised glory, the Undying Lands.

Taelyra told the Lord and Lady that her people would arrive at Lothlorien in a matter of weeks and that she and her brothers had been sent ahead as scouts and messengers.

She had tried to speak most diplomatically and present Artanis to the Lady of Light as her father had instructed. There was the small matter of the misunderstanding of Artanis' Wielder but she had tried to broach the issue tactfully and ensure Celeborn understood the Sacred Sword's intent.

Artanis, through its mystical energies, could not be wielded by just anyone who chose to carry the sword. Artanis itself, chose its Wielder and it currently seemed to favour the hand of a woman. Taelyra explained lengthily the history of the great weapon.

Long ago, Artanis had been thrust deep into a rock within the palace courtyard after serving a Telerin Captain well in a lengthy campaign.

It was the sword's will, that it be encased in the stone for ages until its power was once again required. As children of the Captain of the King's Guard, Taelyra and her brothers had grown up within the royal palace. Often they snuck in to the revered spot where the sword lay thrust to its hilt in the boulder. They sensed the awesome power of the weapon and heralded it but once they had overcome their awe, they would each take turns trying to pull it from the stone.

They would feel simultaneous fear and exhilaration and finally fall, laughing at their inability to withdraw the sword. Then feeling guilty for laughing in the presence of the great saber they would race back up to their rooms and boast of the conquests and valiant campaigns they would launch with the legendary blade in their hand.

Taelyra left this particular anecdote out of her explanations to Celeborn and Galadriel as well as the tale of her own liberation of the great sword from its stone sheath. That could be explained later, she had thought.

After her presentation of Artanis, Taelyra found herself rushing along the walkways of the forest and came upon a silvery meadow with a tiny brook running through it. Below the heath she stood upon she heard clear, Elven voices.

"Could you believe it, when she corrected the Lord Celeborn?" said one voice.

"Have you ever heard such pertinence before?" replied another.

"And her clothes, what was she wearing?" said the first again, "She refused the Lady's gifted clothes and wore those brash colours."

"Well, her costume reflects her character, I suppose," said the second Elf. "Bold and brazen."





"Oh," said Taelyra tentatively. This sounded urgent and a bit ominous. She had just come from meeting with the Lady, why would she want to see her again so soon and privately?

"If you would follow me please," Haldir began to lead Taelyra to the Lady's chambers.

As she followed Haldir along the wooded path, Taelyra's thoughts raced trying to guess why the Lady needed to see her so urgently and wondered if it was connected to what Haldir's companions had been saying. Had she committed some offense to the Lord and Lady that required swift and immediate reprimand?

Was the Lord Celeborn so affronted that Galadriel was stepping in to correct the situation? Taelyra's pulse quickened as they walked and she nearly ran into the back of Haldir when he came to stop before a wide stone staircase leading down into a small clearing.

Within the clearing Taelyra could see a large silver tureen encased in a beautifully carved stone base. Next to it was a small pool fed by a tiny, graceful waterfall. On the edge of the pool sat a tall silver pitcher. She did not see Galadriel.

Haldir gestured that she should go ahead down the stone steps. Taelyra seemed frozen to the spot. Haldir glanced at her, her green eyes were wide and she seemed a bit flushed in her cheeks. She was a flighty thing, he thought confirmingly.

"The Lady awaits you," he spoke gently to her.

Taelyra looked at him, almost panicked, Haldir noticed she was shaking ever so slightly. Why was she so apprehensive?

He took her hand gently in his and looked intently into her eyes. "A summons from the Lady is a great honour, to speak privately with her is a gift not a threat," he said calmly.

The warmth of Haldir's hand calmed Taelyra immediately. His words were heartfelt and she could not doubt the love and respect he had for the Lady. He believed in what she embodied and he served her selflessly. This thought grounded Taelyra and she exhaled the breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding.

She smiled her thanks and Haldir encouragingly gave her hand a gentle squeeze as she began to descend the stairs towards Galadriel's Mirror.

## Chapter 7 – GALADRIEL'S MIRROR

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"Will you look into the Mirror?" Galadriel's voice drifted towards Taelyra as though from a dream.

Taelyra startled slightly, she had not seen the Lady standing within the trees.

"What will I see?" Taelyra asked.

"The Mirror shows many things," said Galadriel as she calmly walked towards the small waterfall. "Things that were."

"Things that are," Galadriel filled the elegant silver pitcher from the pool and turned towards the great bowl, "and some things.....That have not yet come to pass."

Galadriel emptied the pitcher into the wide basin and quietly waited for Taelyra's response.

Apprehensively, Taelyra placed her hands on the stone edges of the Mirror and stepped forward to peer into the calm surface of the water. She saw nothing but her own reflection at first.

She tried to calm her nerves, breathing deeply, smelling the cleanness of the water and trying to focus her mind. The surface shimmered slightly and then she saw something.

Gradually images began to surface on the water. She saw her brothers' faces, her father proudly smiling, as he did when he looked upon his children. She saw her King's noble face; his crown glimmered warmly with its golden beauty.

Artanis appeared, shining whitely against a backdrop of roiling black clouds. Clouds filled the entire mirror, they rolled ominously towards her and her heart felt like a cold hand had wrapped around it. Her chest pounded and she heard thunder within the encroaching clouds. She had felt like this when the Dark Lord's forces had amassed against her people and forced them from their lands. They had fought bravely but were far out-numbered by the evil army and in the end knew their only hope lay in re-uniting with their Elven kindred to fight as one force against the masses of Mordor.

Taelyra's breathing was ragged and her fingers turned white as she clenched the sides of the stone base. She shut her eyes against the terrifying images and tears trickled out, falling into the great silver bowl. As her tears hit the water's surface, the images disappeared with the ripples created.

She stepped back away from the Mirror, gasping for air. Even as a child, she couldn't remember ever feeling this frightened. She hated the feeling and wished she could somehow warm her heart. Her eyes were wide and full of fear as she looked at Galadriel. Somehow she found her voice.

"There is a great evil coming," Taelyra warned.

"I have seen it also," Galadriel replied.

"It threatens to cover all the lands of Middle Earth. Days will no longer dawn and all life will fall under its shadow," Taelyra's voice shook.

Galadriel stepped forth to grasp both Taelyra's trembling hands, she looked deeply into Taelyra's eyes and finally the girl-Elf felt some warmth in her heart again.

"There is still hope," Galadriel said earnestly. She willed the girl to believe it.

Taelyra felt somewhat reassured but was still reeling from the disturbing images she'd just seen.

"Go and rest now," Galadriel advised, "you are weary from grief and much toil."

Galadriel called to Haldir who was waiting just outside the clearing. He quickly came to Taelyra's side and gently took her arm from Galadriel.

"Please take her back to her chambers," Galadriel bade him.

Haldir led the pale and trembling Taelyra back to her room. He guided her inside and sat her upon the bed.

"Would you like some tea?" he asked.

Taelyra looked dazed, Haldir began to fear she might be going into some kind of shock.

"Taelyra?" he spoke softly.

Her gaze slowly came to rest upon him.

"No thank you," she finally replied. "Haldir, you need not look after me. I know it is the Lady's wish but your other duties are far more pressing."

Haldir hesitated slightly; he was stunned by her rebuttal but did not wish to remain where he was not wanted. Clearly she did not desire his company now. He left her room but asked one of Galadriel's women-in-waiting to look in on her throughout the day.







Haldir looked at Galadriel to see her reaction to all this reckless emotion. She was beaming warmly upon the Telerin Elves and she turned to one of her ladies-in-waiting. "We will need to host a fine feast this evening," was all she said.



"Well, I see your injuries have not diminished your sword skills," as he staggered back winded from the skirmish.

Haldir couldn't resist a proud smile, his presence was noticed by Kieran. "Haldir!" he shouted.

Haldir was forced to step from the underbrush and enter the meadow. He smiled at the three siblings and complimented them on their fighting skills. He noticed the colour in Taelyra's fine cheekbones – she was flushed from the fight and coppery wisps of her hair fell about her face. Her lips were crimson and slightly parted as she was breathing somewhat heavily from the exercise. She looked ravishing.

"Our sister tells us that you saved her from a slow and somewhat watery death after a scuffle with a warg," declared Rumil.

Haldir smiled modestly, "I think your sister would have endured without me. But I was glad to have helped her and personally escort her into the City of Trees."

"I think you are being somewhat humble," challenged Kieran.

"Or possibly evasive," suggested Rumil.

Taelyra shifted on her feet uneasily.

"We have an ancient law," continued Rumil laughing, "that states that by saving a Teleri Elf's life is to make them yours forever."

Kieran laughed and Taelyra cringed slightly.

Haldir looked questioningly at Rumil; he did not understand his meaning.

"Once you've saved another Elf's life," Rumil explained, "she is pledged to you forever."

Rumil laughed as he clapped Haldir on the back. Haldir, for his part, looked disconcerted.

"Of course," grinned Kieran, "we wouldn't uphold that law, Haldir. We wouldn't wish our sister on anyone who wasn't born bound to her."

Taelyra thought in two short strides she could be at Kieran's side, grasp his tongue and cut it out in one quick move. The fleeting image left her mind and was replaced with mortification as Haldir laughed, quite insincerely, and bid them good-bye. He mumbled something about 'things to do before the feast'.

Taelyra's cheeks flamed as she tried to control her urge to butt Rumil over the head with the hilt of her knife.

"Oh Tae," Rumil laughed as he noted the furious blush of her face, "we were just jesting."

"It's all in fun Tae," Kieran added giving her a quick hug around the shoulders.

Taelyra felt deflated. Not only had Haldir not found the joke funny, he had looked positively horrified at even a jest about being bound to her.



Her hair was pulled up gracefully with tendrils that fell whispering about her fine, pointed ears and long, elegant neck. She looked positively breathtaking. He tore his gaze from her before it became a gawking stare. He was sure he could not mask the desire that rose within him like a tidal surge.

He took a deep breath and strode forward to welcome Taelyra and her brothers. The Elves began to take their seats at the great table. This was going to be a long night, thought Haldir.

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## Chapter 10 – SONG OF SILVER

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Taelyra left the gathering, leaving the musical voices of the Elves and her brothers' laughter behind. The meal had been wonderful and Celeborn and Galadriel had welcomed her and her brothers so graciously. She loved being in the Lord and Lady's presence. Their warmth and light permeated those around them but Haldir's sudden departure from the festivities had left her feeling bereft and lonely.

Her steps fell heavily as she wandered, she knew not where, along the high walkways of the trees. Her thoughts turned towards her father and she realized that she missed him desperately. She wished she could sit near him now. Hear his strong voice and seek his guidance.

Upward she climbed until she reached a platform beneath a clearing in the forest roof. Through it, she saw the stars shimmering clearly against the black velvet of the sky. They looked so beautiful. She was comforted by the thought that perhaps her father was staring skyward also, looking at the same stars right now. She hoped he was not too far off.

When she was young, her father had sometimes sung in the evenings. She and her brothers would gather round and listen. He would sing of their forefathers and their journey across the seas from the Undying Lands to Middle Earth. The songs were often about sea travel and conquest, love and loss, faith and loyalty. She loved them all.

As she raised her head towards the night sky she began to sing. The song was one of her favourites; it was about a young Elf's journey to sea following his true love. Her voice rang clear through the boughs of the trees, the leaves seemed to sway with the tune and carry it along.

Haldir had left the feast with the purpose of returning to work. He thought that a long patrol in the nighttime forest might clear his mind and calm the restlessness in his heart.

He had gone to the Guards' quarters and made enquiries about the night's events. Nothing unusual had happened and all seemed quiet in the Lorien Wood. He absently mentioned that he was thinking of patrolling but he was met with curious looks from his Sentinels. They were looking at his apparel. Indeed, he had not even bothered to go home and change from his formal clothing.

He had shrugged off the idea of patrolling and wandered aimlessly since then. He walked into a large clearing, the trees soaring skyward around him. Very high above was an opening in the leafy canopy through which he could see the night sky. A beautiful voice fell to his ears as though from the very vault of the forest ceiling above.

He began to climb the nearest tree in order to see more. In his heart he knew the origin of the song but his head wanted to confirm his suspicions. As he climbed over the edge of the platform he saw the tall, lithe figure leaning into the curve of the tree's trunk. Her head was tilted heavenward and her voice rang clearly through the still air.

The lyrics were sad, they told of love lost between two Teleri Elves, though not as sad as the voice itself. Taelyra sounded so sorrowful and lonely. Feelings he knew well.

Taelyra finished the song and gazed heavenward. Tears fell unbidden down her cheeks as she breathed deeply of the night air. As she did so, she became aware that she was not alone up



"My parents died when I was young," Haldir explained, "and if not for the kindness of the Lord and Lady I probably would have perished also. That is why I have pledged my life to serve them."

She looked at him as he spoke quietly to her. She was moved by his sudden openness with her. She was uncertain whether he looked more handsome now, dressed in his fine, formalwear – he wore a grey woven tunic detailed with finely sewn silver embroidery. Or when she first saw him in his guard's uniform, sword drawn at his side with the grey-green Lorien cape thrust back off his broad shoulders.

The grey tunic he wore now made his eyes appear an even deeper shade of blue and his blonde hair shimmered in the moonlight. She looked up into his eyes and it seemed to her that a curtain was being drawn back. His face suddenly became open to her and she saw the emotions that ran beneath the surface, like water that swirls and eddies, revealing that there is much activity in the depths below. She blinked; perhaps this mystical place was playing tricks upon her mind. Perhaps her heart was making her mind susceptible to such momentary illusions.

Haldir took Taelyra's hand in his and led her along the pool's edge to a group of large, moss-covered rocks. When he was young Galadriel had found him crying, as he often did in those days. He thought he had hidden himself thoroughly but she found him easily and led him here. She told him he was allowed entry whenever he wished so he began to come here when his grief became overwhelming.

He would lie in the grass and the ferns crying until his face was hot from his tears. Then he would sit upon these rocks, close to the waterfall and let its cool mist rain upon his face. As soothing as a mother's caress, until he felt better.

He gently grasped Taelyra's shoulders and guided her to the best rock. She raised her face to the falls and let the mist fall upon her.

After a few moments, she turned to him and smiled in gratitude, "I am honoured that you would share this with me. Indeed, I feel much better having seen and felt the beauty of this place."

Her chestnut hair was beaded with water droplets that shone in the moon's light. His face was so close to hers, he could even see the tiny water drops on the ends of her thick eyelashes. He wanted to kiss every last one of them.

"I have never brought anyone else here," he heard himself declare. He wondered. He'd not shared it with even his closest friends. This was his sacred place. His most treasured gift. And he had not hesitated to lead Taelyra here tonight.

She looked up into Haldir's face. His handsome face, that seemed to grow closer. She could feel his breath upon hers. She slowly parted her lips and hoped he would draw even closer. She was not disappointed. He closed his warm mouth over hers.

She felt the cool night air again. It was a brief, chaste kiss – a trial. He was looking deeply into her eyes for a response.

She responded by winding her hands up through his hair and bringing his head back down to hers. She kissed him back and this time he opened his mouth to welcome her.

The kiss deepened and their tongues collided. The sensation of Taelyra's soft, velvety tongue meeting his, made Haldir's spine tingle. He ran his tongue along her full bottom lip. Taelyra sighed and caught his lip lightly in her teeth. This excited him and he gripped her waist with his

strong hands pressing her closer to him. She gasped into his mouth as they continued to explore each other with their tongues.

The mist of the waterfall fell all around them and in the moonlight it appeared that a silver aura surrounded them.

## Chapter 11 – HOME AT LAST

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Taelyra gasped as Haldir's hand grasped her dress and pulled it from her shoulder. His lips rained kisses along the curve of her bared shoulder and blazed a path up her neck. He intermittently kissed and nipped at her neck finally reaching her face, which he cupped gently in both his hands.

They were both gasping for breath as he brought his mouth across hers, kissing her deeply while caressing her hairline with his fingers.

She could barely remember how they had got here from the waterfall. They were in Haldir's talan, his room. They seemed to have stumbled their way here, stopping to kiss and carress each other along the way, sensing the urgency that they needed to get somewhere private so they could truly display their feelings for each other.

He towered over her, his frame was large and muscular but he did not intimidate her. His touch was gentle and loving. She welcomed it and desired to feel his hands all over her body. Slowly he backed her towards a chest of drawers against the wall. He gently lifted her to sit upon the chest and leaned against it, spreading her legs as he did so.

He kissed her deeply as his hands swept down the length of her skirt. Taelyra raised her legs slightly so he could reach her feet and remove both her shoes. Her legs were bare; Haldir ran his hands up her silken calves raising her skirt to rest over her knees. Reaching beneath her skirt he gripped her thighs as she shifted her hips forward feeling his hardness, straining through the fabric of his leggings, press between her legs. She felt drunk with desire. Her head fell back and Haldir blazed another trail of kisses down her neck.

He reached behind and undid the ties of her dress. With one strong pull, her dress loosened falling from both her shoulders and hanging precariously on the swell of her breasts. Her hair had fallen down and his kisses had already made her lips slightly swollen, she looked positively alluring to him as he pulled back slightly and drank in the sight of her.

He pulled his tunic off over his head and Taelyra was finally able to confirm that the skin of his muscular chest was as silky smooth as his blonde hair. She trailed kisses across his collarbone and neck while her hands coursed down his body feeling the hard bumps of his abdomen muscles. Long years of sword training had left him with broad rounded shoulders, long, thick muscles in his arms and a well-developed torso.

He gasped as she ran her fingertips down the length of his hardness tracing his amplexity through the fabric. He was every bit as magnificent as she had imagined.

Taelyra shoved his leggings down over his hips while he kicked his own shoes off. She pushed his leggings off him entirely with her foot while she stepped down off the chest of drawers. As Haldir stepped out of his remaining clothing he pulled Taelyra's dress off over her head. Their bodies came together at last completely naked. They pressed fully against each other and it felt like the approach of an electrical storm. Their skin tingled at the contact. The night air felt cool on their bare skin as their hands blazed over each other's bodies, revelling in the curves, the hard parts and the soft spots.

Haldir lifted Taelyra again and she instinctively wrapped her long legs around him as he carried her to the bed. It was large and downy. She fell onto it rapturously. She felt as though she'd fallen

into a delicious dream and wanted to remember every minute detail when she awoke. She looked up at him; he was leaning over her. His size was imposing and some maid's had been slightly alarmed by his physical stature but Taelyra thought he looked glorious.

Her eyes were slightly glazed with desire; her lips full and parted. Haldir's desire was overwhelming for her but he forced himself to set a slower pace. They had all of the night ahead of them and he wanted to make it one she would never forget.

He leaned in and kissed her gently. Taelyra's hands ran up and down the muscles of his back. She brought her hands around lightly coursing up his chest to caress his face as he took turns plunging his tongue into her mouth and then softly sucking on her bottom lip.

He spread kisses along her jawline to her earlobe. She gasped with delight as he ran his tongue along her sensitive ear to its tip. As he leaned across her to suckle her earlobe, she ran her hands down his back to curve around his buttocks. They were hard and muscular, as were his thighs. Reflexively, he pushed his hips against her and pressed his hardness against the softness of her hip.

He felt his shaft harden further, it was hot and hard as though forged in iron. He gasped suddenly when he felt her cool fingers wrap around his length and gently squeeze it. Slowly she began to pump him and he tried to focus on her mouth again, spreading kisses over her face, as his breathing became ragged.

He moved down her neck and withdrew from her grasp. She sighed quietly. He whispered in her ear, "I would not have endured that much longer, melamin <love>."

She smiled at the endearment and let him continue kissing his way down her neck and shoulders. His fingers traced the slight groove that ran from between her breasts down her stomach. She too, had had years of swordplay and training, resulting in a flat, strong stomach. As his mouth reached her breast, his tongue flicked playfully at the nipple. Her breath caught in her throat.

He continued teasing the nipple, languidly swirling his tongue around it, while his hand trailed down to softly caress her inner thighs. Taelyra moaned and Haldir thrilled at the sound. He wanted to make her do it again.

He stroked her thigh as he clamped his mouth over her breast, sucking greedily on it. Taelyra gasped and arched her back. Her hands wound into his hair. Haldir continued kissing and sucking, spreading his attentions to its twin while his hand came to rest between Taelyra's legs.

She spread for him instinctively and he couldn't help but smile at her compliance. His fingers delicately explored her moist folds. He gently spread them and found her tiny, hard bud and began stroking it slowly. Taelyra's back arched again and Haldir's efforts were rewarded with a long, low moan from her.

Taelyra felt like an eternity of ecstasy had passed. How long Haldir stroked her and continued kissing her breasts she could not tell but it was heavenly. Her head fell back and she felt delirious. She began to feel a tightening in her lower back, sort of like a spring coiling.

His stroking of her increased in intensity and speed. Sometimes he would leave her breasts to blaze kisses up her neck and along her ears, ending with a long, deep kiss on her mouth and then he would start the cycle again. But his stroking exploration of her wetness never faltered and she felt the tight coiling flow up her spine like molten liquid.

She gasped for breath and called his name. He was whispering into her ear, his breath was hot and ragged. His hand was still firmly stroking between her legs. A brilliant display of lights went off inside Taelyra's head as she cried out. The hot liquid in her spine erupted into her mind and she felt as though she was falling deliriously through time and space.

When she came back to herself, Taelyra was lying in Haldir's arms. He was kissing her along her hairline and gently caressing the curves of her breasts. Fleeting, she thought perhaps she'd died and this was Menel <heaven>.

She kissed him long and deeply on the mouth. When their lips parted, he was smiling.

"That was a good start," she told him.

His smile widened and he laughed. She loved the sound. He was utterly relaxed with her now, the complete opposite of when they first met. With the moonlight on his blonde hair and glowing on the fair skin of his muscular shoulders, she thought he was the most beautiful creature she'd ever seen. She told him so.

He kissed her in thanks and gently rolled on top of her, supporting his weight with his strong arms. He lay between her legs, spread wide, and she thought she would die of anticipation. She desperately wanted to feel him inside her, to be as one. United in their love and passion.

He looked down into her lovely green eyes, "Amin mela lle <I love you> Taelyra," he said simply.

With that, he entered her. Very slowly at first. She gasped with the pleasure of it. He was thick and strong, he filled her. The feeling of her snug moistness enveloping him and her gasps of pleasure were almost more than he could bear.

He stopped momentarily, trying to calm himself in order to make it last. Buried deep within her like this, encircled by her long sultry legs he felt like never before. He had loved many times but he had never felt this overwhelming sense of fulfillment. Completion, as though he had finally arrived home after a long and arduous journey.

Slowly his hips began to pump. Taelyra arched her back in delight and her hips rose to meet his.

They found their rhythm and their breathing became ragged. Taelyra felt once more, the coiled feeling rising in her spine.

Haldir revelled in the sensation of her scalding wetness and it consumed him. He heard her moaning beneath him and wondered how much longer he could endure.

Taelyra could feel him throbbing deep within her and it was more than she could stand. She bucked her hips against him, her hands tightened on his back as she cried out his name. Her muscles clenched tight around him and she called to him to follow her into rapture. He complied. His thrusts quickened and he found his release. They clung to each other, Taelyra wrapping her legs firmly around him as he felt like he was falling through the wheeling stars of the night sky.

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"Could you be more specific?" asked Rumil laughing. "Practically, all the Elf-maids at the feast last night match that description."

"Alright. The one who ended up sharing your bed with you last night."

"Oh!" exclaimed Rumil happily. "*That one.*"

"Yes, that one," laughed Kieran. His brother could such an ass sometimes.

"And how did *you* fare, brother?" asked Rumil. "Any nocturnal activities to report?"

"None, unless you count the owl that woke me up four times during the night."

"Well, that's a shame." Rumil said sympathetically.

"I went to wake Taelyra before we left, to see if she wanted to join us. But she was already gone."

"Hmm," was all Rumil said.

"Or....perhaps she hadn't come home last night at all," ventured Kieran.

"Well, she's an adult now. She can look after herself. Especially with that great sword of hers!"

"Aren't you curious who she's been spending her time with while she's been here in Lorien?" asked Kieran.

"I'm quite sure I can guess," answered Rumil knowingly.

He could be so smug sometimes, thought Kieran. "Well, who would be your guess?"

"You know what they say," replied Rumil, "Women always fall for men who remind them of their fathers."

Kieran's brow furrowed in thought.

"Kieran!" exclaimed his brother. "You can be so dense sometimes."

"You mean the Captain of the Guard?"

"Yes, of course the Captain."

"Really?"

"Yes. Really."

"But they left the dinner separately last night."

"Yes, I know. But did you see the way he looked at her yesterday? When he entered the meadow while we were training and then later when we arrived at the feast. If I were to bet on it, I'd place my wager on Haldir."



Haldir continued to feed her, revelling in her tongue's flicking motions and the appreciative moans as she enjoyed this sensual breakfast. He could have happily spent the entire day doing this for her.

With the final offering from the plate, he revealed to her, "You are an unexpected gift and a treasure to me, Taelyra."

She finished chewing and swallowed the last piece of fruit. She stared at him silently, moved by his admission.

"Lle luhta amin <I am enchanted by you>," he said.

"Haldir," she began, "We're very different, you and I."

His heart plummeted. What was she about to tell him?

"But I feel," she continued, "When we are together, like this, that our love was destined to be. I feel as though I've found something precious that I hadn't realized I was missing."

Taelyra looked into his face earnestly. He no longer masked his emotions from her. He looked moved beyond words and, indeed, he said nothing.

"I feel complete when I am with you," she finished quietly.

In one quick motion, he captured her lips with his own. Gently sliding his tongue into her mouth, enjoying the sweet strawberry taste. He grew hard and pressed against her thigh. Her hand slid down his stomach and into the top of his leggings to grasp him firmly.

Haldir groaned into her mouth as she squeezed him gently then began to pump him slowly. His hips responded, pulsing with her hand. Their kiss intensified as he plunged his tongue into her mouth mimicking the action he wanted their bodies to take.

Taelyra stripped him of his clothing quickly. He stood naked by the bed while she knelt upon it pressed against the length of his body. Haldir slipped the shirt off over her head and revelled in the feeling of her hardened nipples grazing his chest. His hands coursed down her back, following the inward curve of her lower spine and finally pressing into the softness of her buttocks.

He kissed her again deeply, suckling her bottom lip, then traced kisses along her jaw up to her earlobe. Haldir's hands were everywhere on her body and she gave herself over to him completely. He sent her senses spiralling until she thought she would collapse from delight.

"Amin mela lle <I love you>, Haldir," she whispered into his ear.

He paused and looked intently into her eyes, his face registering surprise.

Taelyra smiled warmly up at him, "Is that so hard for you to believe?" she asked him.

He could not hide the joy he felt. "I have dreamt of this," he told her.

Taelyra loved this new outward display of emotions. She felt the same gratitude as last night, when he'd shared the beauty of the waterfall with her.

She wrapped her arms around him, delighting in the feel of the muscles of his back. Leaning forward, she planted kisses on his neck and collarbone while inhaling his scent, he smelled so good to her.

Haldir traced his tongue along the edge of her ear and she gasped when he took the sensitive tip in his mouth, gently grazing it with his teeth and softly licking it with his tongue. She sighed into his neck and ran her hands up his muscular thighs, tracing his hard length with her fingertip. It felt as though he was carved from marble.

He grasped her powerfully at the waist and instinctively Taelyra encircled his hips with her legs. He lifted her to the head of the bed, pressing her back against the heavy wooden headboard, and knelt between her spread legs. She let her head rest back against the wood, as she was overcome with desire for him.

Her lips parted as she was almost panting with anticipation. He rained hot kisses down her neck and she felt weak with longing. Just as she was about to loll back in collapse, he entered her. It was electrifying. Her arms wrapped tightly around his broad shoulders and her spine straightened as he slowly advanced into her. She gasped with pleasure and he smiled at the sound.

Haldir now lived to elicit sounds like this from her. He loved hearing her respond to his actions. His hips slowly thrust against hers and she moaned as her legs wrapped tighter, drawing him in deeper. He thought he would burst from the intense pleasure of it.

Taelyra's head fell back as she lost herself in the ecstasy of it; she was moaning his name. Haldir gripped her hips firmly, looking at her beautiful face, lost in rapture. He could no longer stand it, his pace quickened and his eyes closed as he fell against her, groaning in pleasure, filling her completely as he found his release.

Taelyra was enveloped by him; his arms encircled her as he pressed hard against her and she was breathless from the intensity of it.

"Vesta amin ten'oiio, melamin," Taelyra sighed into Haldir's ear.

His arms tightened around her. They were as close as two bodies could get.

"I am yours forever, Haldir," she repeated.

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Daintáro [pronounced: dane-thar-o]

## Chapter 13 – MONARCHS ON THE PLAIN

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Haldir bowed deeply to the Lord and Lady as they entered the meadow. He stood next to the Lady's horse linking his gloved hands together he offered her help onto the back of the great steed. Although he had heard stories of Celeborn and Galadriel leaving the Golden Wood, he had never known it to happen in his lifetime.

He mounted his own horse, Nénharma, and called out to his guards who encircled the royal couple as they began to depart. Haldir glanced over to Taelyra and smiled as she fell in next to him, riding a pale grey gelding from the Lorien stables.

It was an early departure, as it took most of the morning, even on horseback, to ride to the Eastern borders of the Wood. They left the density of the forest and rode through the sparse woodlands as the trees thinned before reaching the wide plain, where the long grasses swished about their horses' legs. The group stopped abreast a hillside and looked across the rolling land that sloped down to the River Anduin.

Haldir had viewed the sweeping grassy vista from this point many times but today he took in a very different sight.

The land was covered by a great multitude of Elves: hundreds of them, perhaps even a thousand. The summer breeze carried their melodic voices to his ears, the ground trembled with the energy of this many beings camped upon it. A horn sounded from the masses. Apparently, their arrival was being heralded. He and the entourage stood upon the hill on horseback trying to comprehend the amazing sight before them.

Taelyra smiled proudly at the sight of her people. The Elves around her sensed her joy. They heard her name called from the crowds below. She could not suppress her relief at seeing her people here, arrived safely, encamped beneath the eaves of the Lorien Wood. This was just as she dreamt it would be. Just as her King had envisioned it.

The Lorien Elves were amazed further as Taelyra grasped her sword's hilt, the steel ringing as she unsheathed it, and held Artanis high over her head. A tremendous roar rose up from the crowd. Clear Elven voices rising like a storm. The grasses trembled and Haldir felt his deepest hopes fulfilled in that monumental sound.

Celeborn and Galadriel exchanged knowing looks. This was the strength and support they had desired. Taelyra lowered Artanis and turned towards the Lord and Lady. She bowed low to them in reverence and turning her horse led them down the hillside.

As the retinue approached the Teleri mass, it parted like the tall grass. Taelyra led them through the throng. The Telerins were as tall and proud as their Lorien kinsmen but they were tired and worn from their vast journey. They needed hope. Taelyra kept Artanis unsheathed and held it lowered at her side as she rode through the crowds. Many of the Elves reached out and touched the great blade lightly as she passed, saying blessings beneath their breath. All bowed their heads in reverence to Celeborn and Galadriel as they passed. Haldir heard Taelyra's name and the Lord and Lady's whispered many times over as they rode on.

Finally, they arrived at a wide flat area where great tents of rich dark fabrics with golden clasps and strange markings were encircled by ornate, well-crafted wagons and covered litters. These must be the King's quarters, thought Haldir.

A powerful-looking Elf in fine armour strode up and stopped before them. He nodded to Taelyra as she sheathed Artanis, offering her his hand as she dismounted. She bowed formally to him as he smiled warmly upon her. Haldir could tell that the Elf could not suppress his joy at seeing her.

As Taelyra straightened, she smiled up at him. "Atar," she said simply.

He smiled proudly at her and then looked to the entourage. Haldir dismounted first and the other Guards followed suit. He strode forth and introduced himself.

"I am Haldir of Lorien, Captain of the Royal Guard." He said, bowing to Taelyra's father.

"I am Daintáro," the Elf replied. "Captain of King Ciriáran's Guard."

Taelyra noted the hesitant smile on her father's face. She knew he had never met another royal captain before. The importance of this occasion did not elude her. It had been countless years since the Telerins had met with another Elf culture, let alone their King met with other Elven nobility.

"Târô," Haldir said looking thoughtfully into the older Elf's eyes.

Daintáro looked inquisitively at Haldir, his eyebrows slightly raised.

"Târô," Haldir repeated, "The word in our tongue means 'saviour'."

Daintáro gave a hearty laugh. It was like a happy explosion of sound. "Well," he exclaimed, "I hope I can live up to that!"

To Taelyra's secret delight, Daintáro put his arm around Haldir's shoulders. "Haldir of Lorien," he said, as he guided him back to the group on horseback, "Why don't we see about introducing our sovereigns."

Haldir smiled at that. Daintáro was warm and fatherly. He liked him immediately.

Haldir strode up to Galadriel's side and helped her down from her horse. Daintáro did likewise for Celeborn. The Lord moved forward offering his arm for his Lady's hand. Taelyra stood by basking in their glorious luminescence. As nearby trumpets sounded their fanfare, she could feel her skin tingle.

The heavy flap of a nearby tent was thrown back and out from within stepped the Telerin king.

He was tall and broad, like most Telerin males. Likewise, his hair was a deep auburn colour though touched with silver above his ears. His appearance was unusual in that he had hair on his face, a rarity amongst Elves. He wore a short, trim beard, also auburn. His bearing was noble, and upon his head sat a golden crown.

"Ciriáran," Galadriel said, bowing her head in greeting, "the Mariner King."

"Aran <king>," Celeborn spoke, "Long ages it has been since our ancient peoples met. On the sands of Aman, the deathless shore. It is our great honour to welcome you to Lothlorien, the Woodland Realm."

"Galatáriel," Ciriáran said, also bowing. The Lady smiled warmly; it had been Ages since she'd heard her name said in that ancient tongue.

"Teleborn," Ciriáran continued, "*él síla lúmena vomentienguo* <a star shines upon the hour of our meeting>."

There was a hush throughout the crowd that watched this historic meeting. The only sound was the afternoon breeze blowing through the long grasses around them. Taelyra knew she would remember this moment through the Ages.

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*Atar* = Father

Ciriáran - pronounced: kir-ara-n





baffled Taelyra that such a monumental task should be entrusted to a race of creatures, described as being small and peaceable, as those called Hobbits.

Hobbits must have great, brave hearts indeed, wondered Taelyra, to face such formidable foes and obstacles, as those that the Dark Lord would cast before them.

And what an odd band of comrades had been assembled to aid the four Hobbits. Two men of noble birth, a Dwarf – Taelyra knew not what a Dwarf was, she had never encountered one – and one Elf. One single Elf in the whole party, she marvelled. Granted, he was the King of Mirkwood's son and, apparently, a highly capable warrior. But to have only one Elf along on such a challenge seemed incomprehensible to her.

The ninth member of the Fellowship did sound extraordinary though. A wizard named Gandalf, who possessed mystical and ancient powers. Taelyra had never met any wizards before either; their abilities were unknown to her. But Galadriel's description of Gandalf's strengths and skills reminded her of the powers of Artanis. Powers that Taelyra barely comprehended but knew existed, flowing within the great sword's metal.

The Lady's explanation of Gandalf's transformation from near-death, after his battle with the Balrog, to his rebirth allowing him to fulfill his purpose in the Quest, reminded Taelyra of her own mystical metamorphosis when she was younger. Her own personal quest, which had ended in her establishing herself as Artanis' Wielder.

Strange days, indeed. As fantastic as these stories and beings had sounded, no one present at the meal could deny the feeling that all good creatures and forces in Middle Earth were banding together in defence against the Dark Lord's aggressions.

After the meal, Daintáro had drawn Taelyra aside and asked that she take a walk with him. During their evening stroll, he had enquired about all that had happened to her during their time apart.

Taelyra loved her father dearly and was glad to be in his company again but she couldn't help but feel he was directing the conversation with a specific aim in mind. She knew that Kieran and Rumil had briefed him on much of the information that she was now repeating to him. Finally, his goal became clear as he asked repeatedly about Haldir.

They had arrived at a small, cascading brook. The rush of the water was like music amongst the leaves of the surrounding trees. Taelyra had taken a deep breath and turned to face her father.

"We are deeply in love with each other."

His expression had been unreadable. She could not tell if he had been pleased or not. However, he asked her no further questions and soon after had bade her goodnight.

Now, as she wandered into a clearing, she found herself at the base of the great mallorn tree that housed Haldir's quarters. Seeing light emanating from within, she climbed the steps to his rooms.

## <sup>2</sup>Chapter 15 – SYNERGY

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Taelyra sat with her legs folded beneath her, palms pressed against one another in front of her chest, fingers pointed upwards at her chin. She had a remarkably calm expression. Her breathing was deep and even, she radiated tranquility.

Gracefully she stood, unfolding herself in one fluid movement. Taelyra looked across the fighting area at Kieran who stood in full armour with his sword in hand. Placing the helmet on her head, she pulled her sword from its scabbard. Both Elves looked to their father who stood with Rumil on the dais, watching.

Daintáro nodded to them. "Begin."

Taelyra strode towards her brother, who raised his sword in readiness. She swung fully at him; Artanis humming as it cut through the air ringing out loudly as it met Kieran's sword. He blocked the blow but had to take a step back from the impact.

Haldir and the other Elves heard the ringing of the steel from across the brook. They all turned their heads simultaneously towards the sound and then turned to look at each other questioningly. Hearing the subsequent clashing, they could not contain their curiosity and ran across the bridge, following the sounds of fighting to the wide, flag-stoned courtyard.

Haldir and his comrades stopped at the edge of the stone floor, watching the two Elves parry with lightning quick speed.

Taelyra was aggressively pushing Kieran back with her thrusts and blows. Kieran was inching backwards slowly while blocking her strikes. She brought a two-handed slice around but he deflected it. The metal clanged as he ran his sword down the length of hers, spinning Taelyra away. He took advantage of the moment and began his offensive.

Kieran struck swiftly and Taelyra was forced to defend. Stepping back and losing ground as Kieran drove her back towards the dais. She stumbled as her foot hit the small step and she fell upon the platform. Haldir reflexively took a step forward onto the floor, ready to cross it and help Taelyra up. Rumil saw Haldir's movement and raised his hand, signalling him to wait.

Kieran had practised too long with his sister to think that the fight was over. Taelyra lay upon the steps but brought Artanis up swiftly to block his strike at her head. He had all the momentum and leverage over her as she lay beneath him, but she held strong. Kieran pressed harder but she held him off. Slowly, subtly, everyone in the courtyard felt a low hum that seemed to be emanating from Taelyra's sword. She had closed her eyes, the tranquil look returning to her features. Sweat began to bead on Kieran's brow.

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<sup>2</sup> **Author's Note:** Hi everyone & thanks for reading! I wanted to let you know the inspiration for this chapter. I was influenced by the great fight scene in 'Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon' between Michelle Yeoh & Ziyi Zhang where they fight with swords (mainly) and any other available weapons within a large, flagstone-floored training room.

No one was sure if there was an actual clap of thunder or if they just imagined it but suddenly Kieran was flying back through the air. He landed hard on the floor and rolled up onto one knee. He still held his sword but he was breathing hard as he rose slowly to his feet.

Taelyra sprang back upright from the dais and walked as gracefully and powerfully as a large cat towards him. Artanis hummed with energy and seemed to have assumed a will of its own.

Daintáro smiled subtly and nodded approvingly. Rumil grinned with delight. The Lorien Elves all shook their heads slightly, trying to understand what they had seen.

Kieran and Taelyra began circling each other, preparing to clash again. Kieran appeared slightly winded while Taelyra looked coiled and ready to pounce, like a panther on its prey. Kieran struck first. He used both hands to strike powerfully driving his sister towards the corner where Haldir and his Guards stood watching. Taelyra was blocking strongly but she was being forced back and Haldir fought the impulse to take the floor again to help her. In his heart he believed in her abilities and his innate elvish curiosity wanted to see what she was capable of.

Kieran forced Taelyra back further. She staggered slightly. Kieran took a broad, powerful swing at her and she arched backwards, to avoid his blow. His sword passed over her; she could feel the breeze pass across her face from its momentum. As she straightened, she pushed the helmet off her head and it clanged to the floor. She wanted to be free of the weight of it and her vision completely unobstructed.

She made a thrust that he deflected. She spun around and struck a powerful blow at him. She continued spinning, raining strikes down on Kieran. The observers blinked, as they thought they saw sparks fly off the clashing swords.

Taelyra made one final spin. Her momentum was so great that as she whirled towards Kieran she became air borne. She grasped Artanis with both hands and brought down a blow so powerful Kieran could only brace himself for the impact. Artanis sliced Kieran's sword clean through. The point of the blade careened across the stone floor, clattering to a halt at the feet of the Lorien audience. Taelyra landed gracefully to face Kieran who stood with the broken weapon in his hand.

His face broke into a grin. "Well done," he laughed and nodded respectfully to his younger sister, his mighty opponent.

Taelyra bowed, accepting his capitulation with inner delight. She could sense Artanis' energy coursing up her arm, making her shoulder tingle as its power flowed through her. The sword's vitality went as far as her heart, making her feel indomitable.

Daintáro strode down from the platform, clapping. "Well fought!" he declared, "Both of you. Very well played."

Haldir crossed the courtyard to join them. He, nor any of the Lorien spectators, could disguise their amazement at Taelyra's skills.

"Nicely done, Taelyra."

Taelyra beamed at him. Her eyes darted over to the Elves that had joined him. She had not realized there was an audience. Smiling modestly she told them, "Our fighting style must seem most strange to you."

"Strange but not unwelcome," a voice called out from the nearby trees.

The Lord Celeborn stepped forward onto the courtyard floor.

"Now I understand completely what you were trying to tell me, Taelyra," he continued. "Artanis has a will of its own and in melding with your own energies and skills you combine to become one weapon. A powerful one."

Haldir frowned slightly, he was not sure he liked hearing Taelyra referred to as 'a weapon'.

Taelyra smiled at the compliment and bowed her head respectfully to Celeborn. "Your Lordship, fate has deemed that I should be Artanis' Wielder. It is at this dark time that Artanis has risen again to help our peoples unite and overcome the approaching Evil. We will fight this menace and lead our people to a great victory. We will protect the freedom of Middle Earth."

A strange, cold feeling suddenly encircled Haldir's heart. It was foreign and unpleasant, although he had a vague memory of having felt this way long ago. Was this fear? He hadn't felt it since he was very young. As a child facing the impending loss of his beloved mother.

How could he have been so blind? Fallen in love so impetuously. With the woman who would lead the Teleri forces against the Dark Army of Mordor. Were they both doomed in this battle for Middle Earth?

Taelyra was looking up at him questioningly. To her, it seemed as if a dark cloud had passed across his features shrouding him in doubt and pessimism.

He tried to compose himself and smiled at her reassuringly. She was the most incredible elf. She was unconvinced by his smile. A sad look passed over her face briefly as the group broke up.

The Lorien Elves were talking excitedly with Kieran and Rumil; they were planning to spar together. Celeborn and Daintáro strolled off down a wooded path, deep in conversation. Taelyra walked off alone into the woods. Haldir watched her go from the courtyard floor.

### <sup>3</sup>Chapter 16 – SEEING THINGS

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Taelyra sat at the edge of the Secret Pool, quietly humming to herself. She held Artanis' tip in the water and summoned images of her past upon the water's surface to cheer her spirits.

She had felt good after her fight with Kieran. It had been a challenge and she had made a powerful comeback. She and Artanis were falling into a synergy again, their energies intermingling as a combined force, to serve as one weapon for the common good.

This strange, mystical sword was the only thing she'd ever felt at one with. Well, until she'd arrived here in the Golden Wood. That is until she'd been with Haldir. Their love was unifying. It touched her to her core and she felt changed by knowing him. Haldir had evoked passion in her that she'd been unaware she was capable of. He'd taken her to the heights of rapture and moved her by his admissions of love. It was obvious that he was an intensely private and guarded person, and his declarations to her were all the more precious knowing how closely he protected his heart.

But he had looked at her differently just now in the courtyard. As though he was unsure of what she was, of what she was capable. He'd been unable to disguise the fleeting look of apprehension and perhaps, what? She wasn't sure if she'd seen disdain. She must seem very strange to him; a she-elf warrior, gifted with an ancient and powerful weapon.

Perhaps he was having second thoughts about having plunged into this relationship with her. Perhaps he was questioning his wisdom in loving the wielder of a weapon called upon to face the forces of Evil.

This is what her head had been trying to tell her all those days ago. To put aside her passion for him and focus on the impending Evil she'd glimpsed in Galadriel's Mirror. She had a duty to perform and any personal commitments must come second to that.

She sighed sadly at this realization. With great power comes great sacrifice, her father had once told her. She had not understood his full meaning until now.

Taelyra was suddenly aware of someone standing in the ferns behind her. She turned her head to see Haldir. The sun shone on his golden hair and it was as though an aura of light surrounded him. He was tall and strong and the light loved him, as she loved him. He had a look on his face of surprise and mild disbelief.

"I – I'm sorry," she faltered. "Should I not have come here without you?" She wondered if she'd committed an offence visiting the Secret Pool without the Lord or Lady or one to whom they had granted permission.

"It's alright, *melamin*." Haldir said soothingly.

Hearing the endearment and the undisguised affection in his voice calmed Taelyra's apprehensions. Haldir knelt beside her and looked intently into her eyes. She could have happily fallen into those beautiful blue orbs; they entranced her.

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<sup>3</sup> **Author's Note:** Thanks again for the tireless efforts of Wendy, Beta Goddess of the UK.

"I was surprised," he continued, "by the images on the surface of the Pool."

"*Aiya* <oh>," replied Taelyra. She'd completely forgotten she was still holding the sword in the water.

"How are you able to do that?"

"If I sit for awhile with Artanis and let our energies mingle, sometimes my thoughts and memories can be projected through the sword and onto the surface of calm water."

"Similar to Galadriel's Mirror?"

"Well," replied Taelyra, "not exactly. I have never seen visions of the future. The images are always familiar, my memories."

There was that look again. Like he was trying to comprehend this strange being he'd fallen in love with. Her heart faltered at the thought. He must think her so odd. Her brow creased and her gaze fell to the ground.

"Let us think not of the future right now, beloved." Haldir's hand came up to caress her face. His fingers lightly traced the curve of her cheek.

His touch was like sustenance to her. Taelyra both craved it and felt nourished by it. In such a short time, he had become an intrinsic part of her life. She could not imagine life without him now. He brought his hand gently beneath her chin and raised it. Her eyes met his.

"Will you share your memories with me?" he asked.

"Would you like to see my home?"

Haldir smiled warmly. "Yes. I'd like that very much."

He drew close to her as they sat on the grassy bank of the Pool. Taelyra drew a half circle across the water's surface as though clearing a slate. She took a deep breath, closing her eyes and relaxing into a sort of trance. Haldir leaned forward, looking intently at the water's surface.

He could feel an energy coming off her, it seemed directed down her arm into the sword and at once beautiful images began to play across the flat surface of the water. They followed slowly one after the other. A glorious castle, rolling green hills, cool dark forests with rushing streams. A large golden field where the long grasses blew in the wind, looking like waves rolling on the sea, as the sun dropped below the horizon, its fiery glow melting into purples and golds as the mist of a summer evening rose from the rich earth.

It was breathtaking. Haldir could not have torn his eyes away if he'd tried. He was vaguely aware of Taelyra's calm, deep breathing and a subtle, barely audible hum coming from Artanis.

Suddenly, on the surface of the water appeared a stunning female Elf. She was tall and regal-looking, bearing a striking similarity to Taelyra.

"This is my mother," spoke Taelyra as though from a dream state.

The beautiful Elf's expression changed to sadness as she opened her arms to embrace three children. Haldir recognized a young Kieran and Rumil, while a very small Elf girl grasped her mother's skirts and was scooped up into her arms. She held the girl tightly to her breast as tears flowed down her radiant face. The boys seemed to be trying to console their mother, speaking words of understanding and encouragement to her.

Slowly she released them, kissing each of them on their faces and heads. Two older Elves guided her onto a fine, elven ship and she waved to her children from the bow. Kieran and Rumil each had an arm around the small Taelyra who waved good-bye to her mother as she faded from view on the retreating ship. Mist encircled the ship as it drifted away.

Haldir sat mesmerized by the visions. He noticed a tear escape the corner of Taelyra's closed eyes and trickle down her cheek. He kissed it away softly. Taelyra stirred slightly, the surface of the Pool was shrouded in swirling mist.

Haldir circled his arms around Taelyra and she fell back against him. He brought her to rest on the grass and she opened her eyes. He looked down at her lovingly.

"Your memories move me beyond words," he told her, before kissing her gently and stroking her hair away from her face.

The grass felt cool on her back. Haldir's mouth was warm and loving. He traced light kisses up her cheek and came to rest his lips ever so gently on her temple, not sensual kisses but caring, comforting ones.

She wanted to share more with him. To show him everything, so that he might understand her better, so that they might become even closer. Soul mates perhaps.

She turned her head ever so slightly and whispered softly into his ear, "Would you like to see how I claimed the sword?"

He raised his head; his eyes were bright and alert. "Yes," he answered without hesitation.

They rose back up to a sitting position and Taelyra once again dipped the tip of Artanis into the water. Haldir's arms encircled her waist as he held her close. She could feel his heart beating against her back and his deep breathing on her neck. He peered over her shoulder into the Pool.

The images came rapidly this time. There was Taelyra, older than before but not yet an adult. She was watching her brothers play-fight with wooden swords. She looked thin, a little too thin, and pale. She was leaning against a pillar as though she needed the support to help her stand.

Now she was lying in a bed. Her father was hovering nearby looking deeply concerned. He was speaking with someone - a Healer, perhaps? Taelyra was very still, her face as pale as the bed linens around her. Rumil and Kieran knelt at her bedside.

Then she was alone, asleep in her bed. The sun shone brightly outside and birds landed on her windowsill. She did not stir.

Her brothers again, older now. Taller and broader, dressed in armour and carrying long swords. They were on horseback leading a great regiment of Elves.

A vision of Kieran, plunging a Telerin banner into the ground after a great battle.

Rumil and Kieran again kneeling next to Taelyra's bed, presumably regaling her with tales of their victory. She lay motionless.

The visions came faster.

Daintáro and his sons kneeling before a great statue, praying it seemed. Praying for Taelyra's recovery? Then all three were on horseback, riding out the palace gates. Great dark clouds gathered forebodingly. They were riding to another battle. The army they led was enormous but still the three Elves looked apprehensive. They looked towards a window high up the castle wall, as though hoping for someone to appear and perhaps wave goodbye to them. No one appeared at the window.

Dark clouds rolled across the sky and lightning flickered from them. A torrential downpour. The palace courtyard grew muddy and then flooded. Taelyra's pale and tranquil face against her pillow. A flash of lightning. Her eyes sprang open and she sat bolt upright in the bed.

She rose from her bed and looked out her bedroom window. She was striding across the courtyard, the water running in streams around her bare feet; she was clad only in her dressing gown that clung, soaking, to her body. Her green eyes blazed with purpose. Behind her in the palace doorway stood a strapping and regal figure. It was the King. He followed her. She entered the small, fenced enclosure where Artanis lay plunged into the large rock.

She grasped the hilt firmly. The King stood behind her watching. A bolt of lightning lit the sky as Taelyra pulled the sword from its stone sheath in one long, powerful motion. She stood tall, holding the weapon at her side. The sky blazed brightly, making Artanis gleam in the darkness.

The King called to the Palace Guard who brought dry clothes and chainmail to Taelyra. She was dressed for battle now and upon a great horse. As she was about to depart the King strode forward and grasped her hand in his. He looked up at her with pride and she smiled upon him through the pouring rain.

The image faded on the Pool's surface and Haldir felt Taelyra relax back against him.

"That is how I awoke from the endless sleep to take up my destiny, " she told him. "I rode out to battle and met my brothers and my father. Together we drove back the Dark Forces that night. But we could not keep them abated forever and eventually we were driven from our lands."

Haldir placed a comforting kiss on her neck, below her ear. He pulled her closer to him.

"But our people found hope," she continued, "in that Artanis had returned in our time of need. And the King envisioned our path: to unite and fight with our long lost brethren in the West."

"So here we are," she said as she turned to look at him.

"Yes, here we are."

"Together." He said assuredly.

"We will fight together, and together we will be unconquerable."

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He drew back slightly and placed one last light kiss upon the lips that he treasured.

*"Amin mela lle <I love you>."*

"Return to me, my love," she replied, "and I will be yours for all the Ages."

"Indeed then," said Haldir, not able to hide the joy from his face at her declaration, "nothing will keep me from returning to your side. I will keep your promise close to my heart in the coming days."



She noticed a very attractive and serious-looking female elf near the end of the line, closest to them. The elf seemed unaware of Rumil's attention and continued to fire arrows, her last one hitting so close to the previous one, it split it in half.

"She has very good aim." Commented Taelyra.

"Who?" said Rumil with a slight start.

"The elf you're staring at."

"Was I staring? I didn't mean to."

"You seem, dare I say, *captivated* by her."

"Oh no!" Rumil countered. "I was merely studying her technique. She is quite lithe but holds her bow with remarkable strength. Her aim is incredible."

"Yes, quite."

Taelyra barely suppressed a smile; Rumil could be hopeless sometimes. Though his behaviour gave her hope that perhaps she wasn't the most inept member of their family at disguising feelings.

"Why don't you go over and introduce yourself?" she suggested.

"Well, she's obviously busy right now. Perhaps some other time."

This was a first. Taelyra had never known Rumil to balk at an opportunity to meet another elf, especially an attractive one of the opposite sex.

The pretty elf had emptied her quiver of arrows and turned away from the firing line. She began walking straight towards them.

"Hello," ventured Taelyra.

The female elf stopped before them. "Hello."

"I am Taelyra and this is my brother, Rumil."

"Yes, you are members of the Telerin Guard."

Rumil nodded in confirmation but remained uncharacteristically silent. Taelyra carried the conversation. "You are a skillful archer. We've been watching you practise."

"Thank you. My father taught me when I was young and I have been a member of the Lorien Guard for many summers now. My name is Calinë."

The three elves left the practise area and walked together down a nearby path.

"Calinë," Rumil finally spoke. "In our tongue that means 'light'."



## Chapter 19 – THE HOUR OF WAR

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Taelyra sat atop the chestnut-coloured stallion, next to her father and brothers who were also on horseback. The four elves looked out across the Anduin Plain, eastward, to the southern tip of the forest men called Mirkwood.

Within this part of the forest, Celeborn had told them, was a hilltop named Dol Guldur. It was a former stronghold of Sauron, still steeped in his evil, and it was from here that the Lorien Elves expected the Dark Lord's assault to commence.

So far the Telerin elves had seen no movement but they sensed the approaching menace as acutely as an impending summer storm. All of them were dressed in full armour and their horses wore iron faceplates with chainmail draped across their powerful chests.

Taelyra's mount shifted beneath her as she looked back at the great regiments of Telerin Elves gathered on the Plain. They were armed and dressed for battle. The Lorien forces had joined them.

Two companies, totalling one hundred elves, both Telerin and Lorien, were marching northeast to aid Thranduil, King of Mirkwood, in the defence of his realm. It was early morning and the cold pale light was beginning to mix with the reddening of the sunrise making it difficult to distinguish the Loriens' greyish-green cloaks from the Telerins' weathered crimson colours. All marched with the same strong gait, their heads held high.

Taelyra wished Haldir were here to share the sight. It had been six days now since he'd departed to Helm's Deep with the Lorien archers. Six days and no word on how the battle had gone. Galadriel's Mirror gave no tidings. Nor had any scouts or messengers arrived back from Rohan.

Daintáro turned his horse and faced his children. "The time has come," he looked upon them solemnly. "We must lead our people out to meet our destiny."

"You have made me very proud," he continued. "I love you and am honoured to fight alongside you."

Looking each of them in the eye, his gaze was unwavering, his voice resolute. Taelyra felt a sudden prickling sensation in her eyes and blinked to clear her gaze. The early morning breeze cooled the flush that came to her cheek.

"We will not let you down, father," Kieran said. Rumil and Taelyra could only nod their agreement, overwhelmed by the emotion of the moment.

And then the moment was gone. Daintáro turned towards the Telerin army and shouted the command to prepare to march. Kieran, Rumil and Taelyra rode forth to take the lead of each regiment. As Taelyra rode past the elvish soldiers, she unsheathed Artanis. Her horse's gait lengthened and she held the shining blade high over her head.

A great shout rose from the army.

From beneath the eaves of the Lorien Wood, Celeborn and Ciriáran stood looking out upon the scene. The edges of the forest were teeming with Lorien archers. Some would follow directly



Artanis' metal was of the highest grade. None living knew the date of its exact origin but its workmanship could not be disputed. The blade had a subtle and graceful curve, ending in a sharp point. She had always thought the elegant design of the weapon befitting to a woman's hand.

Elvish script decorated the length of the blade. *Apenia alata* <Noble radiance>, it read on one side, *Vanua ilpen* <Conquers all>, on the other.

*Alata*. Taelyra pondered the word. Its other meaning was 'glittering reflection'. She thought that alluded to the weapon's ability to project images through psychic energy onto water's surface.

But she also wondered about another connection. The Telerins called the Lady of Light, Galatáriel. *Alata* meaning radiance and *riel*, a maiden crowned with a festival garland. Literally her ancient name meant, "maiden crowned with a garland of bright radiance."

Taelyra did not believe the similarity between Galadriel's name and the inscription on Artanis to be coincidental. The two were meant to meet eventually, perhaps to be reunited. Certainly when she'd first met Galadriel and presented her with the sword she had seemed to know something of its legacy.

And now was the time for Artanis to live up to its silvery words. Noble radiance conquers all....

She was pulled from her thoughts by the sound of hoofbeats pounding to a halt as Rumil pulled up alongside her.

"Ready to slay some Orcs, dear one?"

"Yes. More than ready. I wish they would make themselves known."

As though the enemy had heard her, they finally appeared. The edges of the Mirkwood forest suddenly seemed full of movement. Innumerable twisted, dark figures lurking beneath the trees.

The glint of metal in their hands was unmistakable to the eye and the elves' ears heard their beastly cries. Both Rumil and Taelyra shouted to their regiments to ready themselves. Their horses neighed loudly at the sound of the enemies' arrows whining towards them. They held their shields up to protect them from the rain of weaponry. The sound of metal cascading off metal surrounded them. One unfortunate soldier next to them, fell with an arrow protruding out the back of his neck.

The rear guard of Lorien archers launched a responding volley as a great and hideous roar rose from within the forest. The dark skies opened and began to pour as the Orc army ran from the woods onto the plain towards them.

## Chapter 20 – THE DAWNLESS DAYS

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Taelyra pushed Haldir over onto his back and straddled his hips. Slowly, she lowered herself onto him, his girth filling her completely. She moaned until coming to rest at the base of his shaft.

"Blissful impalement," she sighed.

Haldir couldn't help but laugh. It was an extremely accurate description of the act. Taelyra smiled down at him, her hair falling loose about her shoulders, the sunlight glinting on its golden highlights – her nipples just poking through its wavy lengths. She was so beautiful to him then; it took his breath away.

Arching her back, she clenched her thighs and began to ride him. He clutched her buttocks and wondered at the strength of her legs. Years of horse riding, he realized. This was an unusual position for Haldir and he found it exquisite.

Most of the elf maids he'd been with were quite passive in bed, lying beneath him and never showing an interest in taking the lead sexually. They happily complied with his suggestions but were often at a loss when put 'atop' the situation so to speak.

Taelyra showed remarkable command, changing her pace some times and the depth of her thrusts at others. Haldir was delighted when she leaned forward over him, riding only the tip of his shaft, allowing him to take one of her breasts into his mouth. He sucked greedily on it until she deemed it was time for a change.

Straightening back upright, she fully impaled herself upon him once more, letting her head fall back exposing her beautiful throat. Her hair was so long that the ends tickled his thighs. The feeling was enchanting. She reached behind her to cup him in her hand, stroking his velvety orbs. Now it was Haldir's turn to moan.

She delighted in the sound as she continued to ride him. He let her control the pace until he felt himself start to spiral out of control. He grasped her hips firmly to still them.

"You should stop for a moment, *melamin*."

Her face hovered over his. "Why?" she asked, faking an innocent tone.

"Aren't your legs getting tired?"

"Well actually, I was just beginning to get my stride."

She delighted him. He wanted to throw her back down upon the bed and show her just how delighted he was. Flipping her over onto her back elicited a surprised squeal. As he eased himself fully into her, he enjoyed an appreciative moan.

"Taelyra," his voice soft but hoarse in her ear. "You complete me."

They kissed deeply as Taelyra pushed her hips upward to meet his.

Haldir felt as though he was floating. He felt weightless and consumed by light. Blinding light, so bright that he could no longer see Taelyra beneath him and her touch faded from his senses. Where was he?

He could hear voices around him. Moaning. But not Taelyra's and not moans of pleasure. There were sounds of suffering all around him and he felt a pain from within himself.

Slowly, he opened his eyes. Thankfully it was dark and cool in here. He lay upon a rough mattress. His right shoulder ached.

He looked to a window to his right. Outside it was neither light nor dark, but instead a murky half-light without the hope of sunrise.

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"You awoken finally." A friendly elven face came into view, its look of concern changing into a smile. It took Haldir a moment to recognize the features.

"Legolas."

"You scared us, friend."

"Welcome back." He heard a second voice and turned his head to see who was speaking; the pain in his shoulder intensified.

"Elessar! We have won the battle then?"

"Thanks to the strength of the Elves and the fortitude of Men."

Aragorn's eyes creased as he smiled. Haldir shut his eyes in relief. They had seemed hopelessly outnumbered. He knew not how they had emerged victorious but he was thankful. The last he remembered, an Orc had stabbed him through the shoulder with a long knife and Aragorn had helped him from the battlements, into the inner fortress. All was black after that.

"You have lost much blood. Rest now," urged Legolas.

"I must return to Lorien immediately. Battle looms there as well."

"Rest now, *mellon*," Aragorn concurred. "We will prepare your horse for the ride back but you need to renew yourself further before making the journey."

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Haldir put his foot into the stirrup and pulled himself onto Nénharma's back. He looked about in the gloom.

"The sun does not rise."

"The darkness has begun. There will be no dawn," said Gandalf. He stepped forth and patted Haldir's gloved hand. "Please bear my thanks to the Lady of Lorien for sparing us her greatest soldiers in our hour of need."

Haldir acknowledged the compliment and replied, "I hope we meet again, Mithrandir, though in more peaceful times."

He looked to Legolas and Aragorn, who stood nearby. "*Namárië*," and even managed a curt nod to the Dwarf. Legolas seemed to have developed an unlikely friendship with this creature, so he would not treat him unkindly as he had in their previous meeting.

"Thank you, Haldir of Lorien." The Rohan king stepped forward and shook Haldir's hand. "The bravery and support of your people will not be forgotten by the Rohirrim."

"Take what archers are left Théoden, Lord of the Mark. The battle for Helm's Deep is over. The battle for Middle Earth is about to begin."

With that he turned Nénharma northeastward and urged him across the half-lit plains.

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He rode hard until the density of the trees forced him to slow Nénharma's pace. Haldir had entered the southwest border of the Golden Wood and was now nearing Caras Galadhon.

He had much to recount to the Lord and Lady; but more than telling news he wished to hear some. His shoulder seared with pain but more disturbing to him was the chill about his heart. This pallid day had sunk his spirits.

Were Sauron's powers so restored that he was able to black out the sun throughout all of Middle Earth? This was an ill omen, indeed.

Above all else, he wished to see Taelyra. Just the briefest of glances would suffice, even if they could not embrace or kiss. He wished desperately to look upon her beautiful face and know that she was safe. There was hope in the world still if he could at least do that.

He leapt from his great horse's back, sprinting up the stairs that led to Galadriel's chambers.

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"I have returned, Lady." Haldir bowed as she glided into the room.

"What news have you?"

"Saruman's army has been destroyed and the wizard cast out of Isengard. Gandalf took his palantir and rides to Minas Tirith, before the seas of war surround it. Elessar will meet him there and together they will muster all the Men and Elves they can, in order to meet Sauron's forces."

"How fared our company in the battle for Helm's Deep?"

"Our losses were heavy. The defences held, but not without great sacrifice. I gave our remaining archers to the King of Rohan. They follow him back to Edoras and will carry on to Gondor. I rode back here as quickly as I could."

He paused to let his news sink in but could not wait long to hear of the events of Lorien.

"What news have you here, my Lady?"

"Twice we have repelled assaults from Dol Guldur. The Lorien forces fight alongside the Telerins under Celeborn and Ciriáran's command. Thranduil defends his realm in the North."

"I will go at once out onto the Plain," Haldir could not disguise the deep concern in his voice. "I will take charge of the Lorien regiments."

Galadriel heard his anxious note. "Taelyra defends with Artanis upon the battlefield. Go to her now Haldir and aid her in this task."

He bowed and strode from the room as swiftly as he'd entered it.

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If he was perfectly honest with himself, Haldir had to admit that he'd been sincerely intimidated by the size and ferocity of Saruman's army at Helm's Deep. Their numbers had been staggering and the prospect of defeating them had seemed highly unlikely.

But now as he stalked through the woodlands edge he felt sickened by the grievous harm visited upon the Sacred Wood. Trees were charred and some had even been chopped down. Orc bodies lay everywhere.

Helm's Deep had not been his home. It had not been his treasured sanctuary and golden refuge. He'd pledged his life to defending this wood and it enraged him to see it defiled in such a way.

"Haldir, you return!" Celeborn called from a *flet* overhead.

Haldir climbed up to meet him.

"You are injured," he noted Haldir's grimace as he pulled himself onto the platform.

"What news upon the battlefield, my Lord?"

"There is fierce fighting directly East, beneath the eaves of Mirkwood. There is a great deal of smoke from the forest northwards. We fear that much destruction takes place in Thranduil's kingdom."

Haldir scanned the Plain. The dark, misshapen bodies lying upon it were incalculable. There were fair and shining bodies fallen in the mud there as well, saddening his heart.

"Where fight the Telerin guard? Taelyra and her brothers?"

"Straight eastward from here."

"I will go there now."

Celeborn grasped Haldir's good shoulder, looking him in the eye. "Take care, *ionen*. Fight well."

"I will, my Lord."

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*ionen* = my son

## Chapter 21 – RADIANCE EXTINGUISHED

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Taelyra felt an enormous change in the air around her, a sudden drop in the pressure. Her elvish ears sensed a low vibration in the earth as it groaned beneath her.

All at once the Orcs that surrounded her became disoriented. They paused in their actions and stood momentarily stunned.

What had just happened?

Then the subtle hum in her ears stopped and the earth felt somehow transformed. Something had just changed in Middle Earth. Changed drastically.

The Orcs around her staggered and then began to run mindlessly. It was as though they had suddenly forgotten their purpose and had no idea what they were doing here. The Elves swept down upon them showing no mercy.

Taelyra felt a strange tingling in her arm as Artanis began to vibrate in her hand. She looked at the great sword and suddenly inexplicably felt a profound sadness: as though she was about to be parted from something beloved. Her heart wrenched and she was consumed by grief.

She sank to her knees as chaos reigned around her, staring at Artanis as it began to disintegrate in her hand. It defied her senses, how a sword so terrible and powerful, forged by the greatest Elven craft from the earth's strongest metals could merely dissolve into the air. It was then that she realized how limited her understanding of the great, mystic weapon had been.

Tears coursed down her face as the metal of the blade disappeared before her eyes. She was left holding only the jewel-encrusted hilt in her gloved hand. She felt a terrible fatigue sweep over her. She wanted to rest. To lie down upon the trampled grass right here and pass into unconsciousness for long ages. This is exactly how she had felt all those years ago! Just before she'd passed into the lengthy sleep that had only ended with the great storm; the night she had freed Artanis from its stone sheath.

Orcs and Elves were battling around her. Some Orcs were even taking their own lives in their directionless craze. As Taelyra fell to the ground she felt heavy footsteps nearby. She rolled onto her back to see what evil faced her now.

A large and ugly Orc towered over her. He raised his crude blade over his head preparing to swing. Taelyra lay utterly immobilized at his feet. The Orc's muscles clenched as he swung his weapon downwards.

The air was ripped by the force of the arrow as it whistled over her and plunged into the Orc's chest. The impact stopped his arms in mid-swing, making him stagger back a step. A second arrow followed swiftly. It penetrated his stomach, the arrow's head protruding out his back.

The ugly beast looked down dully at his injuries as a line of drool slowly dripped from his mouth. He looked back up just in time to see Haldir's fist collide with his face. The blow knocked the Orc off his feet. He fell onto his back and the Elf plunged his sword through the Orc's throat.

Haldir spun around to look at Taelyra lying inert upon the ground. He knelt down next to her, his eyes scanning her body for the grievous wound that had debilitated her so.

"I have been overjoyed to see you many times before, Haldir," she smiled weakly up at him. "Though none as much as now, I think."

He cast the gloves from his hands and gently cupped her face. His blue eyes darkened with concern as he looked intently into hers. "What has happened to you, *melamin*?"

"I – I'm not sure," she faltered. "Artanis has left us and I fear that perhaps I've served my purpose as well."

Haldir looked at the bladeless hilt still grasped in Taelyra's hand. His face crumpled at the realization of what she was saying.

"No!" he cried out, over the clamour that surrounded them.

"No, beloved" he repeated now in a hoarse whisper, his face hovering over hers.

"Haldir," she whispered, seeing the moistness in his eyes. "I do not know if this is my end. But I may certainly be falling into a long sleep again. Very long."

Her eyes closed briefly, her beautiful lashes sweeping against her pale cheeks.

"Please," Haldir begged. "Stay with me now. I have returned as I promised. And I swear to you. *I swear*, we shall never be parted again."

She smiled at his vow. He was so loyal, his love unwavering.

"I love you so."

"And I love you." He held her in his arms now. "Stay with me, *melamin*. Stay awake for just awhile longer."

His mind raced thinking how he could find a horse in this pandemonium and ride back to the Wood. The Lady would know how to save her, wouldn't she?

"We cannot stop this, Haldir," said Taelyra as though reading his thoughts. "It is the way of things. I must fall to sleep now, changing back to the ordinary elf I was before. I do not know how long I will sleep but I fear that I will not be able to bid my farewells to Lorien. My father will take me on the grey ships to the Blessed Realm and I shall awaken there."

"No. We will keep you here, safe in the Golden Wood. When you awake, it will be at my side. I will swear to your father to take you over the Seas safely when you are well again. I promise you, Taelyra, I will return you to your family but we will pass from Middle Earth together. You and I."

Taelyra's eyes fell closed with exhaustion. She had not the energy to debate the matter with him. She wanted nothing more than for him to wait for her. To awaken some day to the sight of his face but she knew her father's will and it was indomitable.

Haldir held her in his arms and felt her body relax into deep sleep. Her head rolled against his chest as she fell into unconsciousness. Tears coursed down his face as he clutched her tightly to

him. His teardrops fell onto the fabric of her sleeve darkening the crimson colour as the afternoon light faded and the great battle finally drew to a close around them.





Daintáro sat in the heavy wooden chair at his daughter's bedside. It had been a full day now and still she slept soundly. In a few hours he was going to ride out with Celeborn, Galadriel and the Lorien Guard across the Anduin. It was the Lord Celeborn's wish that the forests of Dol Guldur be cleansed. Galadriel intended to throw down its walls and lay bare its pits.

It promised to be a momentous occasion. Normally he would have been honoured to witness such an event. But, he also would have included his daughter in the expedition. He was loath to leave her side now.

Often during her initial long sleep he had wondered what went through her mind whilst she lay in this state. He'd asked her after she had awoken but she'd had no clear memories of dreams or visions. Nor of her family's words to her while she'd slept. She had said it was as though she'd been asleep just one night and awoken suddenly with purpose, knowing without doubt what she must do.

He liked to believe that she could hear him now even if she didn't recall it later. At least now she would know that she was not alone and that her family surrounded her and missed her dearly.

Sighing sadly he looked upon her fair face, peaceful in its slumber. He wished more than anything that he could just call to her and she would sleepily open her eyes and awaken to start the day with him. He took up her small hand in his and felt the ring. What was this gem upon her finger?

"What is that?" Kieran asked, echoing his father's thought, as he and Rumil entered the room.

"It would appear to be a ring of great Elf-craft," replied Daintáro, admiring the sparkle in the stone.

"Who put it on her hand?" asked Kieran.

"Who do you think?" replied Rumil quietly.

Both Kieran and Daintáro looked at Rumil.

"Haldir put this ring upon our sister's hand?" Kieran asked him.

Rumil's face fell in sadness; he closed his eyes, nodding slowly.

"Does this have the same significance here amongst the Wood Elves, as it does in our culture?" Kieran asked his father.

"I would guess so." Daintáro replied sadly. "I was afraid of something like this."

"Why?" asked Rumil. He could not control the emotion in his voice; it trembled as he continued, "Would you rather that Haldir turn from her now, in her time of need? Ignore her, as though she'd fallen from existence?"

"Of course not Rumil," replied Daintáro. "But you know we cannot leave these shores without Taelyra."

"Their parting would have been inevitable." Kieran added, "Taelyra must come with us; her family, her people, to the Undying Lands. Whether she is awake or not."

"She and Haldir can be reunited there," confirmed Daintáro. "They will have all the Ages together then."

"Have you not seen what's been happening around you?" exclaimed Rumil.

"Rumil, please try to calm down," said Daintáro rising from his chair and extending his arms out to his son.

"No!" shouted Rumil refusing his father's embrace. "I will *not* calm down. I was not raised to suppress my feelings nor ignore what is evident around me."

"Have neither of you seen the intermingling of our peoples?" he continued, "We've been surrounded by it since we arrived here! Our kinsmen meeting, talking, sharing their stories, their *lives* over campfires and meals. Lorien and Telerin soldiers fighting together, *dying* together on the battlefields. Our bloods combined in the mud while we fought for our freedom."

"Please Rumil," entreated Daintáro. "Not here, in front of Taelyra. We don't know what she can hear. This may upset her."

"Taelyra!" cried Rumil. "Has been nothing short of a shining example to her people. Both in her actions on the battlefield and in the endeavours of her heart!"

"She came here on her own. *Alone*. And not only ingratiated herself amongst the Lorien High Elves, but also won the heart of their Captain. An Elf I was proud to fight alongside and call friend. He is equal to us in loyalty and valour and he holds his love for our sister above all else. Who are we to say *our* love is superior? And takes precedent over his?"

"We are her *family*, Rumil," interjected Kieran. "We have been her support all her life and we will *not* leave Middle Earth without her."

"Enough!" shouted Daintáro. It was the first time he'd raised his voice and he disliked the air of conflict they had created in Taelyra's room.

"We have been requested to join the excursion to Dol Guldur. We will ride out with our Lorien brethren," he paused to look at Rumil, acknowledging his point. "And we will think long and hard upon this matter during the trip. You will speak no further of it now."

With that he ushered his sons out of the room, leaving his daughter behind in silence.