No one is born great and wise, not even the great King Gil-galad or Master Elrond, known throughout Middle Earth for his wisdom and knowledge. For young Thranduil, left alone among the Noldor, the road toward wisdom and greatness is fraught with deep-seated anger, sorrow and remorse. But, sometimes, you have to let go, forgive the enemy and yourself in order to move on. This is Second Age seen through the eyes of Gil-galad, Elrond, Thranduil and Sauron, their journey toward darkness or greatness, a story of undying friendship and enmity.
Chapter Summary

Melian holds the last child born within Menegroth. And within the bright eyes of the child, she sees much darkness and grief yet to come.

Chapter Notes

This work is based on Tolkien’s published work and follows his canon closely. I tried to fill in only those areas where Tolkien did not mention, left vague or only touched upon without any further explanation.

The story is told mainly from the viewpoint of Mairon, Thranduil, Elrond, and Gil-galad but the main focus is on Thranduil as he is the one Tolkien wrote about the least which gave me much freedom to create his character and backstory without distorting Tolkien's work.

For those who may be interested, I made a family tree for both Sindar and Noldor royal families that incorporates my OCs and Thranduil's family line. This can be found at http://justcypress.com/to-be-a-king/ Thank you for reading.

Menegroth. April 12, First Age 468

LADY MELIAN, the Queen of Doriath and the lady wife of King Elu Thingol, held a tiny infant in her arms. It had been a long time since a child was born within the stone walls of Menegroth. And, he may be the last. Even within Doriath guarded with her power, a shadow had fallen. And outside the borders of Doriath, the Enemy’s shadow lengthened and the darkness was coming. But today her husband was laughing with his nephew, Lord Arandur, and Arandur’s son Oropher, the child’s father.

The baby squirmed in her arms and the gold of his hair glowed as the highlight of silver, ever present in all of Thingol’s kin, sparkled under the sunlight. Melian fingered the silken cheek of the baby. Holding the infant made her ache for Luthien, her beautiful child who was now lost to her.

Just then, the baby opened his eyes and Melian was drawn into the bright blue-green eyes the lady had never seen among the Sindar. A light from a nearby window bounced off the baby’s eyes making them glow as if faceted like gems. They were almost the exact shade of his mother’s eyes.

“Hello, Thranduil,” Melian whispered.

The baby looked up into Melian’s twilight gray eyes then smiled. It was as if the whole room brightened and the sunlight enveloped him. Melian smiled back.

“He is so beautiful, Arinariel. I could see him grow up to become one of the most beautiful of your
kind,” she said softly as the baby took hold of her finger and grabbed onto it with surprising strength. “I see the beauty of a true Eldar in him.”

Melian looked deep into the infant’s bright eyes, then she frowned as a light from the window faded and a shadow fell. Within the depth of the baby’s eyes, she saw so much grief to come, her heart broke. She held the infant closer. There will be much grief this little one must endure in his long life.

“Arinariel, raise him to be a healer like you,” Melian said softly. “Do not let him become a warrior like his father. In time, he will become a powerful lord, but I see much grief in his life.”

Lady Arinariel smiled sadly with a look of one who knew what kind of grief lay before her son.

“If I could keep him safe by making him a healer, I would. But, alas, my lady, it is not within my power, for is it not I who brought it to him by delaying the grief I should have born?” Arinariel’s eyes misted with much sorrow. “If I could have convinced Oropher like Galadriel had of Celeborn…”

“Then Thranduil would not have been born. It may seem as if you contrived it, but it is the will of Eru. Children are precious gifts and those given in times of darkness are even dearer as they are given to us in furtherance to His design, a light for these dark times of approaching shadow.” Melian fingered the fuzzy golden hair, much paler in color than his mother’s glittering gold tresses.

“But, we are safe here, my lady. I know even the Dark Lord cannot match his power against yours.”

“You forget I am merely one of the Maiar while the Dark Lord is one of the Valar. I cannot hope to match Morgoth’s power if he is to come here himself.”

“But, surely your protection around Doriath will hold?” Lady Arinariel said.

“Perhaps. While I am here,” Melian sighed, another drawn out sigh, as she looked far away, her heart full of grief. “But, sometimes, it is not the evil that brings darkness but the folly of our own making. And, even I cannot undo a doom that is already written.”

“You speak of the doom of the Noldor?” Arinariel asked. “It is terrible how much loss Feanor’s sons have faced, even if it was the doom of their own making. I hope Galadriel goes far enough away that the doom will not touch her.”

Melian smiled, pushing away the thoughts that troubled her. Despite the troubles to come, today was to be celebrated.

“Who managed to finally pry Celeborn away from Thranduil? I thought he would never give me a chance to hold the baby,” Melian laughed.

“Thranarin,” Arinariel smiled back. “He managed to convince Lord Celeborn to join the rest of the warriors in celebrating. I think Celeborn was fussing over Thranduil, more than when Thranarin was born, as his way of telling Galadriel that he also wants a child.”

“I know he was,” Melian laughed, pushing away her grief for now. “And, I am quite sure Galadriel knows but is ignoring it. Too many desires she has at the moment to want to start a family. But, she will, in her own time. She is the wisest of all her kin, I dare say. But, right now, she is blinded by pride and ambition. In time, she will come to see that it is the simple things that really matter.”

“There is more to her than ambition and pride, my lady. She is generous of heart and noble, as noble as they come,” Arinariel said, frowning as she took back the squirming infant from the queen.
“I did not mean to speak ill of her, Arinariel. Merely, that she still has much to learn.”

“In that sense, all of us have much to learn,” Arinariel said looking at Thranduil. “I wish I could impart even a small portion of her wisdom to him. It is a pity that he will not grow up in the light of the Valar. At the least, if Galadriel was not leaving, she could have taught him some of the wisdom of Noldor.”

“Do not worry, Arinariel. Many believe knowledge is wisdom, but that is not so. All who are wise have much knowledge but not all who have knowledge are wise. Too many forget that knowledge alone does not give you wisdom. True wisdom comes from deep understanding acquired through painful experiences that bring enlightenment and ability to see things as they truly are. Such a thing, however, requires more than a book knowledge and is much harder to achieve. There will be much loss and pain along the way. Had Noldor more wisdom and less knowledge, there would have been less haste, less willingness to commit violence against their kin, and maybe all the losses that had come and will come could and would have been avoided. But, alas, we have all been unused to loss and sorrow until the intrusion of the Enemy. And for some of us, the wisdom gained may come too late.”

The queen sighed, her heart heavy with the sorrows of the Age but she pushed them away the moment Arinariel looked up. Melian smiled warmly down at the child’s mother.

“Worry not for Galadriel. She may not be the most powerful or the most knowledgeable among her brothers and cousins, but she is the wisest of them all. She will not allow the wisdom gained from her experiences in Middle Earth to be wasted. I just…I will miss her very much when she is gone. When is she planning to leave?”

Arinariel reached out and the queen of Doriath took her hand. “Before another war breaks.”

“Soon, then.” Melian’s heart was saddened but she smiled down at the baby’s mother. “I am glad, at least, you will be here, Arinariel. No matter what will come, it is good to have a friend near.”

Then, the queen looked down at the baby who was now yawning and nudging closer to his mother as his eyes filled with sleep.

“And, for him, too. A good friend to share each other’s burdens. Yes.” Then Melian smiled brightly. The queen ran her finger over the baby’s soft cheek and his little face illuminated with a brilliant smile as he fell asleep in his mother’s arms.

---

**Melian** (Sindarin, *Dear Gift*)--One of the Maiar, heavenly beings who served Valar. Mother of Luthien.

**Doriath** (Sindarin, *Fenced Land*)--Realm of Thingol and Melian in Beleriand during First Age. It is known as "Fenced Land" because Melian used her power as a Maia to place a protection of enchantment on the borders of Doriath so that no one could enter without the will of King Thingol. Under the light and teachings of Melian, Doriath flourished and was considered the greatest realm in Middle Earth during the First Age.

**Elu Thingol** (Sindarin, *Greycloak*)--Originally, a leader of Teleri known as Elwe (*Quenya, Male Star*). He led the third group of Elves, Teleri, to West. When he arrived at Beleriand, Elwe was entranced by Melian and was lost. Two third of the Teleri would not wait and followed Elwe’s brother Olwe to Valinor. After awakening, Elwe gathered those who remained and established a realm with Melian as his queen. This realm is called Doriath and its people, Sindar.
**Eru Illuvatar** (Quenya, *The One Father of All*) Supreme deity and creator of all. Created Ainur first out of his thought which is Valar and Maiar collectively. Eru created Elves, then Men, so Elves are called Firstborn and Men, Secondborn. Dwarves are created by Vala Aule and given blessing later by Eru.

**Valar** (Quenya, singular, Vala) spiritual beings born of Eru's thought and aided Eru in creating the world. There are 14 (15 if you include Melkor, later known as Morgoth) that entered the world and reside at Valinor in the Continent of Aman west of Middle Earth. Men call them gods.

**Maiar** (Quenya. Singular, Maia) lesser spiritual beings to assist Valar in creating the world. Some of the well known are Sauron and balrogs. Gandalf, Radagast and Saruman are also Maiar who in the shape of old man were sent to Middle Earth as wizards to help fight against Sauron later in the Third Age.
Chapter Summary

Hiding from the Valar after the War of Wrath, Mairon finds an Elf hunter near his hiding place. He decides to have some fun with the hunter, but instead, the fallen Maia finds an opportunity that he had never thought was possible.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Blue Mountains. September 2, Second Age 143

MAIRON missed the fire pits of Angband and the deep burn of the lava that flowed ever beneath the Iron Mountains. These mountains in the far east of now destroyed Beleriand were cold. There was no liquid fire like the ones that used to flow beneath the mountains that surrounded the iron fortress.

A stray wind howled as it sped through the hollow cavity of the cave. Mairon allowed his formless body to be caught in the wind’s invisible grasp and flew out onto a desolate landscape outside. The sun was falling and the gray landscape outside the mountain glowed red.

Mairon followed the wind as it softened and sighed toward a cluster of pines that grew at the feet of the mountains where a deep valley cut into the side of the mountain’s roots. Ever since his master was taken away by the Valar at the end of the Great War, Mairon had hidden beneath these rocky mountain ranges.

The fallen Maia shuddered at the last image of his master.

Outside the walls, the clamor of the Valar and their host was so loud, the solid stone walls of Angband shook like wooden hut amid a storm. The light outside was blinding and with the Thangorodrim shattered and Melkor’s great dragon lay dying, the defeat was imminent. Shaken, Mairon ran to his master.

The Great Melkor, in his corporeal form, as huge as the mountain with his iron crown shining with the light of the two remaining silmarils, sat on the stone throne as if he had no care in the world.

“What shall we do now, master?” Mairon asked.

Melkor laughed, his dark head thrown back. His laughter rang through the stone walls when the clamor outside rose like an angry beast and swallowed it. The ground trembled and cracked with a thunderous noise. With a loud rumble, the stone ceiling shook and pieces of rocks, dust, and rubble rained down onto the great hall, but Melkor looked at Mairon with twinkles in his dark eyes, a smile playing on his lips.

“The right question, Mairon, is what will you do now?”

Like a lone wolf, Mairon let out a howl as heat churned within his breast. The hollow sound rang through the vast mountain range, echoing off the distant horizon.
Restless, Mairon rushed the wind and rustled the leaves of the pine trees that stood several leagues from the cave whence he came. Far to the south, a lone figure was returning home, his catch slung over his shoulders. Mairon had seen this figure before. This Elf was the only one Mairon had seen who wandered so far up North, away from where his kindred had settled by Belegaer, the great sea, that separated the Middle Earth from Valinor.

Knowing he could get rid of the Elf-hunter whenever he wished, Mairon had not bothered with the Elf. But today, he was in the mood for some blood. Mairon flew south toward where he had seen the hunter put down his kill to rest.

The fallen Maia wished he had his physical body. Then there would have been choices as to the different shapes he could take that would throw this hunter off. A warg? A vampire? Or something unexpected? Mairon knew this Elf was no mere hunter. Although the Elf wore a worn leather jacket with brown tunic like one of the Laiquendi, Mairon had seen the strength of the light in his eyes. He certainly was not one of those lesser Elves of Middle Earth.

Thinking about his choices, Mairon regretted not having his physical form. He could have even looked an Elf-lord. But imitation of Eru’s children required much skill and power as well as time. Skill and power he had aplenty, but the time he did not have if he was to use the disguise now. But he still had control over his servants and other beasts.

Mairon swept past the plain between the valley where he saw the hunter skinning his catch next to a stream. After some thought, Mairon decided to go further south and backtrack. The fallen Maia was aware that most Elves knew the north was crawling with Orcs who had escaped the destruction of the last war.

As Mairon passed the hunter, he slowed down and made a long arc. The valley cut deep through this section of the mountain range. One side was a steep cliff with a drop of several leagues.

As he flew over a grove of pine trees, feeling the presence of his servants, something caught Mairon’s eyes. One of the smaller pine trees had been knocked over as if by some great force. There was a track that went straight over a cliff. Curious, Mairon flew over the cliff, the hunter forgotten for now.

Mairon swooped down from his lofty heights to the floor of the valley. Something with life pulsing through its veins lay among the stones and rocks that were strewn all over the bottom of the cliff. There, he saw the unlikely trio: Elf with an elk and a wolf.

The Elf’s long dark hair was splayed over the rough floor strewn with rocks. Near him lay a cold body of large elk its spiked antler half jammed into the Elf who lay clutching at the bloodied antlers on his side. The Elf’s legs lay strangely twisted. Next to the elf was a wolf.

Mairon flew nearer, then pulled back sharply. The air was thick with sickly sweet, metallic scent. There was blood everywhere, a splash of dark red on pale gray rocks. It was on the elf, on the elk and the wolf and on the rocky floor.

The wolf was dead. A dagger stuck on its neck, its white eyes glazed, its mouth still foaming. But the Elf, he was alive. Mairon could feel the pulse of the blood in the elf’s veins although it was becoming faint with each passing minute.

The Elf was young, barely two centuries old.

However, the Elf did something that surprised the forsaken Maia. With halting voice, barely audible, the Elf called on the spirits.
Spirits were souls of those who refused the summons of *Mandos* after their body had died. Those who refused the summons wandered about the Middle Earth as spirits. Most of them did not bother with the living, but some, if called upon, can be bargained with. But such a thing was dangerous unless one who summoned them was powerful enough to control the spirits. And among the Elves, as far as Mairon knew, such practice was forbidden.

Mairon looked into the eyes glazed with pain. In the depth of the gray eyes, Mairon saw such fierce desire, the forsaken Maia was intrigued.

“You want something,” Mairon said.

“Help…help me…”

Mairon smiled. This one was desperate enough to give anything.

---

**Angband** (Sindarin, *Iron Prison*)--fortress of Morgoth (Melkor), the first Dark Lord, during the First Age

**Thangorodrim** (Sindarin, *Mountains of Tyranny*)--highest peaks in Middle Earth during the First Age. It was a group of three volcanic mountains among Iron Mountains underneath which Morgoth built his fortress of Angband

**Laiquendi** (Quenya, *Green Elves*)--Part of Teleri who followed Elwe (Thingol) to West, but lingered in the forest, unwilling to cross the Misty Mountains. But a small group later followed Denethor and moved into Beleriand and settled in Ossiriand. This group is called Green Elves and they mingled rarely with others, especially after losing their king after the first war fought in Beleriand against Morgoth.

**Mandos** (Quenya, *Castle of Custody*)--One of the Valar. He is the keeper of the dead. When children of Illuvatar die, their souls go to the Hall of Mandos.

---

Chapter End Notes

To make the stories read easier, I have added a calendar to the front of each episode. But they are in Shire format, not Elvish. An Elvish calendar was divided into seasons (Spring, Summer, Autumn, Fading, Winter, and Stirring) rather than months. As this system is unfamiliar to most of us, I opted to use a regular calendar format. So, the month and dates are not accurate to Tolkien's work, but the years will correlate to the events written in Tolkien's work where appropriate.
The White City

Chapter Summary

While his father is preparing to leave Lindon, Gil-galad offers a choice for Thranduil, if you can call it that. But, his unplanned and unexpected first visit to the capital city of Lindon makes it clear to Thranduil that he cannot stay.

Lindon. October 29, Second Age 143

THRANDUIL OROPHERION looked up at the crisp blue sky, so unlike the dark gray storm that raged in his heart. The words that had him ride hard all night howled behind his ears.

Do you love him enough to let him go?

Thranduil pulled his horse to an abrupt stop and hesitated before the wide open double gates. The tall gates of steel and stone were built between two massive marble statues, at least six stories high. The gates led to a city built on a green hill with tall peaks of the Blue Mountains shielding it on the east.

Braigon neighed loudly, shaking its dark mane, its breath hot and rough. Thranduil whispered words of comfort as he patted his horse’s neck.

The city built within the white walls were filled with pale buildings and lofty towers with round domes, glowing like a white gem under the rising sun. Thranduil squinted at the light. He realized now why the capital city of Lindon was called Minas Silivren, the Glittering White City.

Darting his eyes over the blue and gold armored guards stationed high above the ramparts built over the gates, Thranduil entered the city. After the devastation of the last great war, Elves who had not sailed to the Undying Land of Valinor have carved pale white rocks found abundant along the western coast and built a grand city with tall towers and wide avenues lined with fragrant cypress trees.

Streets filled with the sunshine and the refreshing scent of cypress were bustling with people.

Leaving his horse at a post, Thranduil walked toward the streets paved with white stones. Standing at the edge of the city, Thranduil felt like a child inside a house looking out at a bright, sunlit garden full of people.

Laughter permeated the air. Elven children squealed with delight as they played with colorful balls that jingled, seal bladders painted in colorful dyes of ocean blues, fire reds, and tree greens, filled with beads and bells.

Thranduil had not seen Elven children for a long time. Elwing and Earendil had been the only children besides himself at Sirion. But that was over two hundred years ago now.

As he stood watching, a jingle of a stray ball caught his eyes as it bounced and rolled to a stop by his feet. A child with long curly hair ran toward him, her white dress peeking under a short leather vest. Thranduil bent down to pick up the bright blue ball and felt a tug on his hair. He looked up and saw a pair of light gray eyes, the color of rain clouds. In the child’s dimpled hands was a handful of his
golden hair.

“Pretty,” the little Elven child said.

For a moment, Thranduil was reminded of Elwing and he smiled despite himself. The girl pawed the glittering silver gold locks in her hands, her clear eyes full of wonder and joy.

“Ellariel, we do not pull other people’s hair.” A dark-haired Elf laughed as he picked up the little girl, carefully loosening the child’s hold on Thranduil’s golden locks. The Elf wore a faded brown tunic under a well-worn leather jacket. A hunter’s outfit.

“I apologize, young sir, for my daughter. She has never seen a golden hair before…” The Elf’s bright face was full of laughter. His gray eyes, the exact shade of gray as the child’s, were filled with piercing light.

Thranduil’s breath hitched as he froze and the ball burst in his hand with a loud pop. The child’s father immediately pulled the child into his arms as he turned toward Thranduil. When his gray gaze fell on Thranduil’s face, blood drained from the hunter’s face.

“Forgive me…” the hunter said as he stepped back, shielding the little girl protectively. The girl squirmed in her father’s arms as he wrapped his arms around her and hurried away.

“But, my ball, ada. My ball…” The little girl whimpered as the father disappeared around the bend in the road.

Thranduil looked down at his hands. His hands were fisted tight, knuckles white with tension. What had once been a ball filled with tiny red beads and silver bells was now a tangled mess in his hand. The sparkling red beads that filled the ball had spilled all over the white cobbled street under his feet.

Thranduil sucked in his breath and looked down at the busted ball in his hand as if for the first time. As the tension on his shoulders and hands eased, the bursted ball slipped off his fingers. There was something in the face of that Elf that Thranduil had forgotten.


Thranduil shook his head. Forget? He could never forget it. Maybe pushed away in the back of his head as he wandered the East with his father, but he will never forget what they had done. But that elfling, she was just a child. She was innocent.

People passing turned and looked at him, talking in a hushed voices among themselves. Thranduil walked away from the busy avenue and the sight of the children playing.

But these are Noldor. These are Noldorin children, children of killers, a voice whispered in his head.

A claw, sharp and long, ripped through his heart. Thranduil hissed and stopped from walking as the memory of Menegroth seized him with its dragon claws. He gritted his teeth as the claw twisted. He bent down, gasping for breath. Images of burning Menegroth that had been pushed back, but forever etched in his memory, came alive, sudden and scorching. He could smell the heavy metallic tang in the air, taste the bitter smoke and the dark fear that had gripped him.

His lung tightened painfully and Thranduil tried to breathe as his lungs screamed for air.

“Are you all right?” someone touched his arm. Thranduil jerked away from the touch as if it was dragon fire, stumbled back and ran to where he left his horse.
I don’t belong here, not with these people, Thranduil decided.

Leaving Minas Silivren, Thranduil spurred his horse towards a small forest far from the walls of the White City.

By the time Thranduil reached the entrance to the forest, the sun was heading down toward West and the breath on his horse was like a breath of a fire drake. Thranduil stopped and breathed in the earthy scent of oaks and beech trees that are abundant here. The smell of leaves and earth, the green scent of forests, always calmed him.

Getting off the horse, Thranduil ran his hand down the back of Braigon which glistened with sweat. Thranduil whispered the song of comfort until Braigon’s breath calmed.

“Forgive me,” he whispered softly to the horse as he leaned his head onto the animal’s head and closed his eyes.

It was a mistake to go to the Noldorin city. But he couldn’t sleep or rest after Lord Istuion’s visit. The elder lord had asked to see Thranduil alone, after dinner. And when he did, Lord Istuion had talked of the king’s offer to foster Thranduil at Lindon.

*The finest education, a chance to learn from the wisest and the most skilled in Middle Earth,* Istuion had said as if Thranduil would even consider. The elder lord had made it sound as if Thranduil’s staying in Lindon would help his father. But the young Sinda had stopped listening.

There was no reason to stay.

Calmer now, Thranduil led Braigon to a well-worn path that led to a house built beneath a large oak tree. The trees were already starting to shed, covering the dark earth with its bright-hued leaves of yellow and red.

This part of the wood belonged to Mithlond, the Grey Havens. Both the house and the land were under the rule of Lord Cirdan. They were given to Thranduil’s father to house those who followed him although his father seldom stayed here.

The house was built with the same pale stones that were everywhere here. But unlike the magnificent buildings carved out in stones with gleaming woods and marble pillars of the White City, this house was plain with cobbled stone walls. It was one story building, but it sprawled around the entire entrance to the wood.

It had been a small structure at first, but rooms were added as more of the survivors of the destruction of Beleriand came to his father.

While Thranduil and his father stayed here only brief periods after many years of wandering, people inevitably knew when they returned. And, no matter how inconspicuous his father tried to be, as soon as people found that his father was back, there was always a crowd of people who wanted something.

This time was no different. Ever since they returned from mapping the area far east, his father had been busy meeting people. In fact, his father had just returned from a meeting with the Noldorin king who had granted him leave to take those people who wanted to go east over the Blue Mountains. Soon, they shall leave Lindon permanently to settle in a forest far from here, somewhere where there are no Noldor and no war. Soon, they would have a home of their own again.

Today, as usual, the house was bustling with people. Thranduil had expected it. However, he did not expect to see king’s guards at the house. And they weren’t the only Elven warriors in the courtyard.
With a frown, Thranduil stepped into the courtyard after leaving his horse when a force knocked him off his feet.

Thranduil felt earth slip under him when a strong hand held onto his upper arm and pulled him up before he hit the ground.

“Are you all right, penneth?” asked an unfamiliar voice.

Thranduil looked up into a light filled gray eyes. It was a guard in the blue and gold armor of King Gil-galad.

A Noldo from Valinor.

Thranduil’s body tensed as soon as he saw the keen light within the Elf’s eyes. Although all Elves were born with starlight in their eyes, only those Noldor from the blessed land of Valinor had such intense light that any Elf who had seen them would be able to tell those Noldorin Elves born in Valinor from the other Elves and from those Noldor born in Middle Earth.

“Don’t touch him!” Someone snatched Thranduil’s arm from the Noldorin warrior and pushed Thranduil behind, stepping in between Thranduil and the Noldorin guard.

It was Tatharion, one of the few surviving royal guards from Doriath. He had watched over Thranduil since they fled Menegroth. The Noldorin guard raised his hands, palm up.

“I was just trying to see if he was all right,” the Noldorin warrior said. “I did not mean to throw him off his feet.”

“No harm done,” said a familiar voice. “Come, Tatharion. He was just trying to help Thranduil. You are overreacting, you old Elf!”

Thranduil looked over at Tatharion’s shoulder and saw a warrior with white hair in silver and white armor.

“Aron!” Thranduil stepped forward, nodding toward Tatharion who withdrew still glaring at the king’s guard with his one good eye.

Aron stepped forward to take Thranduil’s hand in a warrior salute.

“How are you, elfling? It’s been a while since I last saw you and Uncle Oropher. How long has it been? Fifty, sixty years?”

Thranduil returned the greeting, throwing a wary glance at the Noldorin guard. The guard shook his head, then retreated to a corner of the courtyard where rest of the warriors in the king’s colors were standing around.

“Are you here to see father?” Thranduil asked.

“That, too, but I am here escorting Lord Cirdan.”

“Lord Cirdan is here?”

“Along with the messenger from King Gil-galad,” Aron gestured toward the Noldorin guards.

Thranduil frowned looking around. The courtyard was filled with Elven warriors in three distinct colors: Gold and blue of the King Gil-galad’s guards, white and silver of Lord Cirdan and blue and silver of former Doriath guards who now served his father.
The king’s guards were huddled together, a wide distance away from his father’s guards who were glowering at them. Only Lord Cirdan’s Elves were laughing, some standing with the king’s guards, others talking to his father’s warriors.

“What is happening?” Thranduil asked. This was the first time Thranduil had seen royal guards here at his father’s house. No matter that he was once one of the princes of Doriath, his father was nobody at King Gil-galad’s court.

“I do not know, elfling. The only thing I know is that Lord Cirdan received a message from the king and now his lordship is here. He accompanied the king’s messenger to see your father.”

Then, Aron looked up and down at Thranduil, his eyes wide.

“Thranduil, my young friend, you have grown since the last time I beheld you. You have outgrown me.” Aron laughed. “And to think that your lady mother once worried about you not growing.” Aron chuckled as he shook his head as he looked over the young Sinda once again.

Thranduil shrugged.

He was the youngest among the Sindar born in Menegroth. And, until the end of First Age, Thranduil had been a scrawny elfling. While most Elves were full grown in the body upon reaching one hundred years of age, Thranduil had been slow to grow. It was not until he was out in the wild with his father that he had grown to his current height and size.

Now, at 265 years of age, no one called him little, not even those Noldor from Valinor who were the tallest and largest among all the Elves of Middle Earth. That is, they were the tallest after those with the royal blood of King Thingol of Doriath and his brothers. As Thranduil’s father, Oropher, along with his cousins, Lord Amdir and Lord Celeborn, were the only surviving princes of Doriath, it wasn’t surprising that Thranduil grew taller than the most Elves.

“Where have you been all these time?” Aron asked. “They were looking for you since early afternoon. All the lords are gathered at the library. I believe they are expecting you.”

“Me? Why would they want to see me?”

Aron shrugged. “I do not know, elfling. All I know is that they are waiting for you. You better go on.”

Thranduil excused himself and headed to the library. At the door, the young Sinda paused to take in a breath. Then, he raised his hand to knock when a sound of loud scraping and a crash came through the door.

“I will not leave my son!” his father roared.

Thranduil stood stock still, his hand still in the air.

---

**Valinor** (Quenya, *Land of Valar*)—Also known as the Undying Lands, it is the realm of Valar in Aman across Belegaer, the great sea, that separates Continent of Aman from Middle Earth. In order to protect Elves from the clutches of Melkor (Morgoth), Valar had called Elves to live in Valinor. Everything in this land is hallowed and stainless. Major cities are Valimar where Vanyar, the first group of Elves, reside with the Valar. There are also a Noldorin city of Tirion and Teleri city of Alqualonde by the sea and an island of Tol Eressea to the east.
**ada** (Sindarin, *daddy*. Short form of adar, *father*)

**penneth** (Sindarin, *young or little one*)

**Menegroth** (Sindarin, *Thousand Caves*)—the capital city of Doriath where King Thingol ruled with Queen Melian at his side. The underground fortress was built with the help of Dwarves of Belegost at a time when Sindar were in friendly terms with Dwarves. These were not the same Dwarves who later killed King Thingol and sacked Doriath, bringing long enmity and distrust between the Elves and Dwarves. Not everyone in Doriath lived in Menegroth. Many Sindar lived freely among the forests within Melian's enchanted fence as well as the outside the fence.
Chapter Summary

Through the library door, Thranduil hears the discussion of the lords regarding the king’s offer. What he hears decides his choice.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Lord Celeborn’s calm voice came through the door as Thranduil listened.

“Oropher, it will only be for a limited time. He is not asking you to leave Thranduil here permanently.”

“How could you ask this of me,” his father’s voice shook. “He is the only one I have left. If Gil-galad didn’t want me to leave, then he should say so, rather than suggest... Did he really think I will leave my son, among the Noldor? All alone?”

“He will not be alone. He will be fostered by the king and I will be here and so will Lord Cirdan. He will receive the best education the Noldor could provide…” Lord Celeborn sounded as if he was pleading.

“There is nothing these Noldor could teach my son!” his father said. “I cannot ...I will not leave my son.”

“Then, how will you lead these people, Oropher?” The deep baritone full of authority interrupted. Thranduil knew the voice belonged to Lord Cirdan. “I helped your followers to build the ships, but it was because the king allowed it. As much as I want to, if the king does not give me permission, I cannot give you the ships to carry your followers to the east.”

“My lord, you are not saying--” his father’s usually calm voice trembled.

“I am under King Gil-galad’s command. But, even if I could provide you with the ships, what will you do for the provisions? For arms?”

“But he wants my son as a hostage. My son!”

“No, not as a hostage, Oropher, but to remain here as the king’s ward… “ said the voice of Lord Istuion. He was Lord Cirdan’s nephew but grew up with Thranduil’s father. And along with Lord Amdir, he was like a brother to Oropher.

“You, too, Istuion? They bought you, too?” his father’s voice was filled with anguish.

“I am going to ignore that, Oropher. You know better. All we are saying is that Thranduil could be educated here, learn about Noldor, so that we could have a better relationship.”

“I don’t want any relationship with Noldor! That is why we are leaving,” his father said, his voice cold as winter.
“My friend, no matter how much it pains you, we are kin, the Sindar and the Noldor. We must learn to live together,” Lord Cirdan said.

“How? When they ripped out my soul and shattered my heart?” His father’s voice sounded rough with emotion. “And, now they want to rip out what remains?”

“His majesty is not trying to deter you,” an unfamiliar voice said. “My king will foster him, provide him with the best education and nurture him like a prince along with the king’s young cousin until you are settled. In return for your son’s service, whatever you may need for the move east, my king will provide with no need to pay them back. We are in much need of good captains to fight the enemy.”

“The enemy is gone. Angband has been utterly destroyed by the War of Wrath when the whole of Beleriand sank under water.”

“What you say is true, Lord Oropher, but as you well know, many of those orcs and some of the dragons have escaped the destruction. And while you were exploring the east for the past century or so, those creatures have been breeding in the North. There have been sightings of dragons and our scouts have reported increased Orc activity since the last time you have mapped them. We had several attacks on the northern villages outlying Lindon.”

“What is that to me?” Oropher said. “I am nobody. Gil-galad has his army. Let him deal with it.”

“You are part of this realm. You represent the Sindar.”

“You are mistaken, Lord Erestor. I represent no one but myself and my household. Lord Celeborn is the Lord of Harlindon, over Sindar who reside in Lindon, not I.”

“Oropher, he is not talking about the residents of Harlindon. They are mostly Mithrim who have resided with Noldor at other Noldorin realms or those who lived outside Menegroth,” Celeborn said. “You are the leader of the surviving council that ruled from Menegroth.”

“You have forgotten, Celeborn,” his father’s voice was bitter as the wind in mid-winter. “There is no longer Doriath, thus no council. We are just survivors of the destruction. And let me remind you, Celeborn, since you have left Doriath before any of the attacks took place, we are the survivors of the destruction that Noldor caused. Those who have joined my household are just that, survivors. They are no longer advisers or captains.”

“Yet, almost all of the surviving royal guards are here with you,” the one called Erestor said. “And, many who lived in the capital city of Menegroth, the upper echelon of Doriath council who have not sailed to Valinor, are here with you. Can you deny it? You are one of the princes of Doriath and the leader of your people.”

“You have Lord Celeborn. He is as much a prince of Doriath as Amdir and I. Let him supply the warriors your king needs.”

“Please Oropher, you know as well as I that most of my people are not the trained warriors from Doriath, not like many of your followers. Those who have been warriors under Noldor serve the king already in his army,” Celeborn said, his voice sounding defeated and barely audible through the door.

“You are telling me, because those who follow me are warriors, that I should leave my son behind? To do what? To face the serpents of the north? To die like the many who burned in their fires? Let Gil-galad run his blade through my heart, for that is what he is doing. I will not leave him. Even if…”
even if it means I cannot leave.”

Thranduil took in a sharp breath to contain a tremor that went through him. He closed his eyes and took another long breath. For the past century, he has traveled with his father, mapping the routes, making contacts with wood elves who lived in a great forest far east. All through that, his father had been distant, rarely looking at him or addressing him directly, except for one occasion.

Since his mother’s death at Sirion, his father had thrown himself into doing his duty and meeting his obligations. They have always come first. But now, his father was willing to put aside everything. For him.

Thranduil swallowed the lump in his throat. This was what Lord Istuion was referring to last night when he had asked to see Thranduil alone. Thranduil laid a trembling hand on the door and laid his head over it. What had been a puzzle last night came back clear as sunlight now.

“You father cannot stay here,” Lord Istuion said. “It is your father’s dearest wish to leave Lindon, but even if Oropher wanted to stay, he cannot. He has a duty and an obligation to lead the people who want to leave.”

Thranduil had not known why Lord Istuion was saying that. Of course, he knew that. The young Sinda knew what duty meant to his father. But it was what Lord Istuion had said before that which had puzzled him.

“Do you love your father?” he had asked. “Do you love him enough to let him go so he can do what he needs to do? For I know that your father will give up all that he is. For you. Can you let him go and stand on your own?”

Now, Thranduil understood. Rather, he had known but did not want to know. The young Sinda fisted his hands, then took in another long breath to calm the tremble that ran through him. Then, picking up his chin, Thranduil knocked on the door before entering the room.

A hush fell over the room as Thranduil entered.

Thranduil looked at his father. Oropher was standing, leaning on the table before him, his two arms spread out, holding onto the edge of the table. There was a chair knocked out behind him. He was clearly agitated, although when Thranduil entered, his father straightened and assumed the all familiar serene face, all emotions gone from his demeanor.

Thranduil turned away from his father and bowed with his hand on his heart toward Lord Cirdan who sat at the head of the long table across from Thranduil’s father. Lord Cirdan, Lord of Faladrim, those Sindarin Elves who lived at Grey Havens by the sea, smiled brightly at Thranduil.

Next to Lord Cirdan stood an elf who was unfamiliar to Thranduil. He was dressed in deep blue and gold of King Gil-galad’s colors.

“You have asked to see me?” Thranduil turned back to his father.

“We have asked to see you, Thranduil,” Celeborn rose up, next to his father, “because we have an offer from the king’s court and it regards you.”

His father cleared his throat and glared at Celeborn, but he seemed unable to speak.

“First, let me introduce you to Lord Erestor from King Gil-galad’s court, one of the advisers to the king,” Celeborn said, gesturing to the unknown Elf next to Lord Cirdan who gave Thranduil a slight bow. “He is here to ask you to join the king’s service. Next year marks the First Yen of the Second
Age. King Gil-galad is recruiting the first company of king’s guards among the youth of Lindon. He requests that you join them. Unlike us where our youth must be over 250 years in age, under Noldorin rule, any Elf over 125 years of age can join the king’s army if they wish to walk the road of a warrior.”

Lord Erestor who stood next to Lord Cirdan stepped forward.

“We understand that you have already received your warrior training,” Lord Erestor said with a smile on his face. “We also have few among the youth who have been training for some time. Among them, we have chosen the most skilled to train as officers for the new recruits. We hope that you can join them. The training for the new officers will start in the coming Spring. You will be instructed by the best of our warriors. Our esteemed swordmaster, Lord Gilmagor, who commands the king’s army has agreed to train the top officers himself,” Lord Erestor said as if Thranduil should know who Lord Gilmagor was.

“It doesn’t matter,” his father turned his icy winter blue eyes toward Lord Erestor. “We will be leaving so there is no reason for him to join the service of your king.”

“Oropher, the decision rests with Thranduil. He is no longer a child,” Lord Celeborn said, putting a hand on his father’s arm. Oropher snatched his arm from Celeborn, then looked at Thranduil.

Without a word, his father shook his head once.

The young Sinda glanced at Lord Istuion who sat next to his father’s other side. Istuion’s eyes, grave and sad, met Thranduil’s eyes steadily.

“My king is willing…” Lord Erestor started, but his father cut him off.

“You need not listen to what he has to say, son.”

“I will hear him, father,” Thranduil said, taking his eyes away from Lord Istuion to look toward the king’s adviser.

“My king is willing to provide all the provisions and arms your father has asked for, all that are needed for your father to bring those of his followers to the far east where he plans to settle. His majesty will do this asking for nothing other than for you to serve him as one of his officers for his army. You will be treated with the utmost respect due you as the great-grandson of Lord Olwe. And, we will provide you with the best instructors for the finest education we can offer. You will not be in want of anything while you stay in Lindon as the king’s ward.”

“For how long?” Thranduil asked, ignoring the sting of the iron claw that dug into his heart, drawing blood.

The lords and the king’s messenger had left, and only Thranduil and his father remained joined by Lord Amdir and Lord Istuion. His father remained silent, looking away out the window.

“Why, Thranduil,” Lord Amdir asked. “Why did you even agree?”

“What would you have me do?” Thranduil asked Lord Amdir, his father’s cousin who was raised with Oropher and was like an uncle to the young Sinda. “Did you want me to just stand by and
watch my father sell more of mother’s things? Yes, I know about that. What little she had with her. They are all gone.”

Lord Amdir looked down at his feet then glanced at Oropher.

Thranduil turned his defiant eyes to his father as Oropher turned toward him. His father’s face was impassive as it ever was.

“Thranduil, that…” Lord Amdir placed a hand on Thranduil’s arm. “It was not just your mother’s. All of us, we had to sell whatever of value we had. Even then, we could not meet the cost. There are so many who want to come with us…”

“But, why does it always have to be you, father? There are others. Why is it always you?” Thranduil said, instant regret building inside as soon as the words tumbled out of his mouth.

His father’s light blue eyes clouded, but otherwise, his face remained unchanged.

This was not what Thranduil wanted to say. He wasn’t sure why he even said them. The iron claw that held his heart tightened. His heart lurched when he looked upon his father’s impassive face.

His father met Thranduil’s eyes for a moment, then he turned away and walked out of the room. Amdir glanced at Thranduil but hurried after Oropher.

The claw twisted inside Thranduil’s gut, stopping the flow of air into Thranduil’s lungs. He felt sick. He wanted… he wasn’t sure what he wanted. He just wanted his father to know what was in his heart, but somehow, when he tried to talk to his father, words came out wrong.

“Thranduil,” Lord Istuion’s steady voice and a firm squeeze on his arm made Thranduil turn to the elder Sinda. “I know this is hard for you, but this is the right choice, for you and for your father. Your father will now have enough resources to settle the people he leads and you will get a chance to learn from those who are considered the wisest in Middle Earth.”

“Is it? Is this really the only way? Why does it have to be me? Why my father?” Thranduil could not help the bitterness that rose from the pit of his stomach.

“There is no one else. Celeborn and Amdir are the only other remaining princes from Doriath besides your father. As you know, Celeborn gave his fealty to Gil-galad. He rules Harlindon under the Noldorin king. And, as for Amdir, he chose to follow your father.”

“There’s your uncle,” Thranduil said. “Lord Cirdan is the eldest and the most respected of all Sindar left in Middle Earth now that most of them passed from this world or have sailed to Valinor.”

“You know that my uncle is loyal to Gil-galad. He fostered the king since Gil-galad was a child. He embraced Noldor since the beginning. The people who follow your father, they will have nothing to do with the Noldor. You know that. They may esteem my uncle, but they do not accept his policies just as they have rejected Celeborn for the same reason.”

“How about you? You hate Noldor as much as I do.”

Istuion sighed. “Hate is such a strong word, Thranduil. Besides, I am of Lord Cirdan’s line, not of King Thingol. The remaining Sindarin elves from Doriath and the Green Elves from Ossiriand who want to leave Lindon all want to follow those of King Thingol’s line and that leaves only your father, Celeborn, and Amdir.”

“But, Elrond is alive. He is here in Lindon, I hear.”
“Yes, he is. But, he is a Noldo…”

“He is Elwing’s son!”

“Yes,” Istuion sighed again. “But, he is also the son of Earendil, Lady Idril’s son. As the great grandson of Gil-galad’s uncle, Elrond is the king’s closest kin. In fact, there’s a word that Gil-galad may name Elrond his heir.”

“Ridiculous! He has more of his mother’s Sindarin blood in him than that of a Noldo. Even his own father had less than half of Noldorin blood in him.”

Istuion sighed again and looked at Thranduil.

“It does not matter how much Sindarin blood he has. If his father is a Noldo, then he is a Noldo. You know that, Thranduil.”

“But his father is not a Noldo! Earendil’s mother may be a Noldorin princess, but his father was a human. A child follows his father’s race and the last time I saw Earendil, he was a man and not one of us.” Thranduil knew he was making a losing argument, but his heart would not be appeased.

Istuion frowned and shook his head patiently. “Yes, strictly speaking, Earendil was a mortal, but as a half-Elven, he has chosen to become an Elf and that makes him a Noldo since Noldorin blood is all he has of Elven blood. You can argue all you want, but he is what he is, Thranduil.”

Thranduil got out of his seat and started to pace. The heat was insufferable. Thranduil yanked at the neckline of his tunic.

“And as for Elrond, I believe he will be joining the officer training along with you,” Istuion said, his voice quiet.

“Wonderful!” Thranduil glared at Istuion as if he was an Orc incarnate. "Elwing's son, now a dog for the kinslayers..."

“Thranduil!” Istuion grabbed onto Thranduil’s upper arms with such a firm hold, Thranduil couldn't move. “Listen to me. This is important.” Istuion's usually gentle eyes held steel in them. "I know this is hard for you, but these people here in Lindon are not the same Noldor who attacked us at Menegroth and at Sirion. Many of the Noldor here are the same Elves who suffered losses at Sirion in the hands of Feanor’s sons. Feanor’s sons and their followers are the only Noldor who committed the kinslaying. Do you understand, Thranduil? Do not lump all Noldor together as one.”

Thranduil shook his arms away from Istuion and looked away.

How could he have forgiven them so easily? Thranduil could not understand. Lord Istuion’s sister, Aron’s mother, the one Thranduil loved as his own aunt, was killed by the swords of Noldor back in Menegroth.

Istuion squeezed Thranduil’s shoulder and gave him a sad smile before leaving him alone.

---

**War of Wrath** *(FA 545-587)* is the last war of the First Age and the greatest war ever fought in Middle Earth. A host of Valar which included Vanyar and the remaining Noldor in Valinor along with Valar and Maiar fought against the forces of Morgoth and defeated him, ending Morgoth's rule over Middle Earth.
**Beleriand** (Sindarin, *Country of Balar*) is western most part of Middle Earth where Noldorin and Sindarin realms existed during First Age. After the War of Wrath, the entire land mass sank into the sea and was lost.

**Harlindon** (Sindarin, *South Lindon*) -- Celeborn ruled Harlindon under Gil-galad. Most of the Sindar who remained in Lindon lived in Harlindon under Celeborn and his wife, Lady Galadriel.

**Yen** (Quenya, *long year*) is how Elves calculate years. 1 yen is 144 solar years, so First Yen is the 144th year. The plural form is yeni.

**Olwe** is King Thingol's younger brother. When Thingol disappeared in Beleriand under Melian's enchantment, Olwe led to Valinor the majority of Teleri who were unwilling to wait for Thingol. Once in Valinor, Teleri took Olwe as their king. His daughter, Earwen, married Finarfin, third son of Finwe, Noldorin king in Valinor. Galadriel is Earwen's daughter. Tolkien said Olwe has sons, but they are unnamed and not mentioned in any of the stories.

In my story, Olwe had two sons during the trek to Beleriand, Arandur and Amglar. Once in Beleriand, Olwe, thinking they will follow soon, left his two eldest sons behind to look for Thingol while he led to Valinor those Teleri who were unwilling to wait. Thus, Arandur and Amglar along with Galadhon, son of Elmo (youngest of Thingol's brothers) stayed behind. Once the three cousins found Thingol, they gathered the rest of Teleri to live under their uncle's rule. Arandur is Oropher's father, Amglar is Amdir's father and Galadhon is Celeborn's father.

**Chapter End Notes**

Things in the glossary are information most diehard Tolkien fans already know, but for those who have come to love LOTR through the movies, this may help. Because character names and geography are mostly in Elvish, there may be some who have difficulty remembering them, so I changed them into common tongue (Westron) after it is used and explained. I want to make it as easy for all readers as possible. (There was a time when I, too, had a hard time understanding the words).
Having taken the control over the body of the young Elf he found up North, Mairon has found his way into the White City. There, at the forge where the youth's sister works, Mairon meets someone with whom he feels a strange connection.

White City. December 20, Second Age 143

MAIRON pulled back as the heat of the forge licked at his arm. The heat usually did not disturb him, but this fragile shell of the body burned so easily, he had to be careful. Already, he had burned several fingers as well as one of the eyebrows. Although Mairon saw that the Elven body healed quicker and was stronger than the body of men, it still was a nuisance.

Mairon poured the melted metal into the mold he had prepared, then dunk it into a vat of water. The metal screeched as the moist white steam shot up and surrounded Mairon, showering him with the scent of metal, heat, and fire. Mairon closed his eyes and relished the heat and the scent. He did not realize how much he missed working at a forge.

Quickly, before the metal could set completely, Mairon took the cooled metal off the mold and with expert hands stretched the now malleable metal into wires of various thickness wrapping them around the gems, softly singing the enchantment to incorporate it into the piece being shaped. Soon, a delicate hair ornament in a shape of a butterfly sitting atop a flower sat on his palm. It had been millennia since he created anything for the pure joy of it, and an unfamiliar thrill fluttered in his stomach.

"That is quite a skill," someone commented from behind him.

Mairon whirled around. It was unlike him to not have noticed another’s presence.

The one who stood behind him was a tall Elf, a Noldo of a typical coloring, dark hair and gray eyes, but he was not a typical Elf. And he certainly was not someone the owner of his body knew, for Mairon did not recognize this Noldo among the images of faces he had seen from the youth’s mind.

The Noldo who stood before him wore a blackened leather apron used by most jewel smiths, and his garment was dark with soot and burns. He looked like any other smith, yet, Mairon’s skin flushed from the power that radiated from this jewel smith. This Elf was powerful and he had seen the light of the trees of Valinor. Although it was the first time Mairon had seen him and obviously the first time the owner of his body had seen him, there was something familiar about his face.

Within the intense silver-gray eyes framed by high cheekbones, Mairon saw the image of someone long ago albeit with flaming red hair. Despite the different coloring of the hair, the proud nose and the chiseled chin were an almost exact copy. A family resemblance, no doubt.

Once he realized who it was, Mairon tensed although the uncounted years of dealing with others had allowed him to hide it well.
Could this jewel smith see through him? Mairon knew that by merging his essence with the body, the transformation was complete. Although he knew he had a complete control, Mairon couldn’t help but wonder.

Once the bargain was struck and met, Mairon had possessed the Elf’s body and had put the Elf immediately to sleep. It was not until the body recovered that Mairon filled the youth’s head with images of what had happened, wiping clean his memory of the orcs or the incident of their meeting. Mairon had kept the youth’s mind hazy and let him do the talking once he had arrived at the White City. He knew he shouldn’t behave in any way that would make him stand out, but at times like this, when he saw the forge, he couldn’t help himself even though he knew that Elves saw far more than Men did and were difficult to deceive.

“I don’t think I have ever seen a metal work quite like this,” the Noldo said, his gray eyes riveted on the small hairpin in Mairon’s hand.

Mairon relaxed.

He did not expect detection. The hunter was also from Valinor and several centuries older than this Noldo, but even he had not seen through the physical body. But Mairon knew better than to underestimate his opponents. His bitter experience with Thingol’s whelp and her human lover had seen to that. And powerful blood ran through the veins of this Noldo in front of him, maybe not as potent as that of Luthien, but Mairon knew well to take care. After all, he was in the middle of an Elven city, far from his underlings.

“May I?” the Noldo held up his hand and Mairon placed the bejeweled piece on it.

The enchanted piece, shaped like a butterfly fluttered its delicate wings as the gems made into snowdrops twinkled like stars as it opened its bejeweled petals.

“The metal work is a wonder in itself, but the enchantment spell on the piece is something I have not seen. It is a work of beauty,” the Noldo held Mairon’s eyes. “And you are not one born in Valinor. Where did you learn how to do this?”

Mairon smiled at the look of wonder in the Noldo’s eyes. But this was nothing to Mairon. He had been so enthralled by the work, not having worked with his hands for a long time, he didn't give it much thought. Had he his true form, he could have made things these Elves could not even imagine. But with the limited power this young body supported, Mairon could not use the whole of the massive power he had. It was an inconvenience Mairon tolerated for a chance to see Elves up close. At least, his knowledge was all intact.

“I learned the spell from somewhere and changed it a little. It isn’t much. Just a small trinket for my sister.”

“Sister?” the Noldo’s face brightened as he looked Mairon up and down. “You must be Rodwen’s brother. You were the one for whom she asked me the permission to use my forge?”

“Your forge?” Mairon asked even though he knew. Rodwen had been talking about this Noldo whenever she could.

“I am Celebrimbor. I run this forge along with several others in Lindon managed by my followers.”

Mairon feigned surprise and immediately bowed respectfully.

“Thank you, my lord, for allowing me to use your forge. I hope I am not a nuisance.”
If there was one thing Mairon had seen in his short time at the White City, the Noldor were attached to manners and these small acts of acknowledgment did wonders.

“No, not at all. I am always looking for a talented smith. This is one of the best jewel work I have ever seen and I have seen much.” Celebrimbor handed the hairpin back to Mairon. “Rodwen did say that you create beauty with your hands. And your sister is quite skilled as well. I did not know that the talent runs in the family.”

Mairon shrugged as if it was nothing, but he was immensely pleased. It had been ages since someone had praised him for his craft. Once, long ago in the fiery forge of Aule in Valinor, Mairon had been the greatest of the Maiar, praised for his unparalleled skill in craft and building. It was in the Aule’s forge that he had earned his name, Mairon, the Admirable One. But now, most Elves just called him Sauron The Abominable. And while he worked for Melkor, he had put all his talents into making the machines of war; he did not have time for trivialities such as this.

“Rodwen has been talking nonstop about you. I heard you were lost in the mountains for close to two months. How’s your injury?” Celebrimbor looked down at Mairon’s leg. “I heard that you have gotten injured while hunting up in the North?”

Mairon, too, looked down at his legs. In fact, the broken legs took much longer to heal than Mairon had expected. For the Maia who was unused to any prolonged physical injury, it had been hard. The side of the Elf’s waist where the elk’s antler had cut open had been messy and dangerous and without the hunter’s aid, Mairon knew the body would have died and no matter the deal that was struck with the youth, one could not possess a dead body. And the wily youth had known it.

“Yes. I fell off a cliff. A wolf was tracking the same elk I was hunting.”

“Rodwen told me you were lost for a while. Your hunting companion returned without you, I heard. I remember how devastated Rodwen was. The guards were out looking for you for a whole month before giving up. It is strange how they did not find any trace of you.”

“I was much more north than they realized.” Also because that was part of the bargain. The dying Elf had wanted to prevent his hunting companion from finding the way further North to the cliff where he had been seized and thrown over with the Elk’s antler jammed into his stomach. Up there, on the top of the cliff, were not only the wolf and the elk, there was also a company of orcs.

“How did you manage to find your way back? I heard you and your companion were quite far up north.”

“Luck was with me, I believe. There was an Elf who lived nearby and he was out hunting. He found me. He and his family nursed me back and brought me back to Minas Silivren.”

“Indeed? I didn’t know there were Elves living that far up North. It was not luck, my young friend. Valar were looking after you.”

Mairon tamped down a scoff. Valar had nothing to do with it. The young Elf had not known that when he called out to a spirit, it was Mairon the Maia who answered, not some wandering soul. The wily Elf thought he could save his companion and still deny the spirit by offering a body that could not be saved. But, Mairon had seen into the young Elf’s mind and had known what the Elf had planned. The fact that there was an Elven hunter nearby and a group of orcs that he could command all had helped. Had the Elf’s fëa left the body before Mairon could take over completely, then no matter that the Elf had given up his body freely, no amount of power would have allowed Mairon to possess the body and subdue the Elf’s soul.
“Yes, if the hunter had not been there, I would have been lost. He brought me back to the city although he left without seeing my family. You speak the truth, my lord. Maybe it was Valar looking after me.” Rather, this may be what my master meant, Mairon thought wryly. "Maybe I am blessed because if I wasn’t injured, I would not have had this chance of meeting you. My sister is always talking so highly of you. It truly is an honor."

Celebrimbor laughed, his dark gray eyes shimmering into silver as he did so.

“I am sure not as much as your sister talks to me about you. You are always welcome here. I would love to see more of your work. In fact, why don’t you come and work with me?”

“You honor me, my lord. If it wasn’t for the training…”

Celebrimbor’s eyes darkened with disappointment.

“Ah, I had forgotten. You are one of the twenty-four selected for the officer training. Rodwen did mention it. When do you start?”

“I believe the training starts in the Spring, after the New Year’s celebration.”

“I see. Well, you are welcome here until then. After your military training, if you are interested in becoming a jewelsmith, come look for me.”

“I am honored, my lord,” Mairon said simply and bowed. As he watched Celebrimbor walk away, Mairon felt a strange flutter in his stomach. Something told him that he and this Noldo were connected in some way.

*——*

**Luthien** (Sindarin, *Daughter of Flower*) was the only child of Melian and Thingol. She was known as the most beautiful of all living beings in Middle Earth. She has half Maiarin blood from her mother. With the help of Huan, the dog from Valinor, she defeated Sauron and rescued Beren, a man. Luthien later married Beren, becoming the first Elf to marry a mortal. Together they managed to obtain one of three silmarils from Morgoth’s crown. This story is in Tolkien’s *Lay of Luthien* and in *Silmarillion*. Aragorn was singing *Lay of Luthien* when he first met Arwen in the forest in Rivendell. Arwen is a direct descendant of Luthien through her father, Elrond, and is said to look just like her.

**Celebrimbor** (Sindarin, *Silver Fist*)—son of Curufin, 5th son of Feanor. He was the only known grandson of Feanor. He was at Nargothrond but took no part in the deeds of his father and uncle regarding Luthien and Beren. Celebrimbor repudiated their deeds and when his father and uncle were cast out of Nargothrond, did not follow them. During Second Age Celebrimbor moved to Eregion (some versions say he ousted Celeborn and Galadriel) and became its lord. He formed Gwaith-i-Mirdain, the guild of elven craftsmen, and accepted Sauron (in his fair form of Annatar) and through his teachings made the rings of power. The three elven rings were made by Celebrimbor alone and were untainted.

**Fëa** (Quenya, *Soul or Spirit*)—souls or spirits of Elves and Men

**Vala Aule** (Quenya, *Invention*, also known as Mahal, *Maker*, in Khuzdul, the language of Dwarves) is a Vala and a smith, a maker of all crafts. He crafted substance of which Arda is made. He created Dwarves, impatient for the children of Eru to be born. Noldor learned much from him while in
Valinor. Mairon used to be a Maia under Vala Aule, but was seduced by Melkor and became Melkor's most powerful lieutenant.
Farewell

Chapter Summary

Too soon, the time arrived for Oropher to depart. Thranduil is grieved that he should bid his father farewell with so many unsaid things between them. There are things he wants to say to his father. Will he be able to say them before they are parted, maybe for the end of days?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Grey Havens, March 10, Second Age 144

**THRANDUIL** looked up at the sky. It was deep blue with no clouds in sight. It would be a lovely day to sail, yet the world seemed gray to the young Sinda.

From where he stood, leaning against an oak tree up on a hill, Thranduil could see the harbor where the three white ships were anchored and preparing to set sail. Just as Lord Cirdan predicted, the wind was blowing easterly.

His chest heaved and a thick lump formed in his throat but Thranduil knew no tears will come. The day he was covered in his mother’s red blood, he had sworn that he will never cry again.

A horn cried out from the ships, a sound of a lost fawn calling for its mother.

Thranduil swallowed the painful lump in his throat, knowing that too soon, his father will be taken from him, the last remnant of all that he had loved. The ache that had grown steadily since the day he had agreed to stay in Lindon exploded, making his throat throb and ache with an intensity of a sudden storm.

The young Sinda took in a long breath and fisted his hands.

This was his decision; it was his choice to walk this path. Hasn’t his father always told him to trust himself? He must trust that he had made the right decision. If his father can bear this, then so can he.

But there was one thing that grieved Thranduil more than the pain of the separation to come. Before he was parted from his father, he wanted to resolve the distance that had grown between them. His father tried to hide it from him, but ever since the loss of his mother at Sirion, his father had kept away, keeping the contact between them to a minimum. Even through their wanderings in the east, his father barely spoke to him and looked at him even less.

Thranduil knew the fault was his and did not blame his father, but before he let his father go, Thranduil wanted… he wasn’t sure exactly what he wanted. He just knew that there were things that needed to be said between them. But the time passed, and he didn’t know how to approach his father. And now, the time had run out.

The lump in his throat hardened, making it hard for him to breathe. He was drowning in the vast
waters of the ocean and no matter how much he wanted to scream, no sound came. The shadows that circled him ever since he left Menegroth drew closer.

“Thranduil!”

Thranduil took in a quick, calming breath before he turned to face the one who called him.

“They are ready to sail. Lord Oropher is looking for you,” Aron said as he walked over to stand next to him.

”How are you faring, mellon nin?” Aron’s silver-blue eyes scanned Thranduil’s face.

“I’m fine,” Thranduil replied and hurried down to the docks. He didn’t want to give Aron a chance to say more. Thranduil wasn't sure he could handle it. Not today.

There were many people at the docks, all saying their farewells. Most of them were already on board. Thranduil saw his father and Lord Amdir standing with other Sindarin lords and some unfamiliar faces. They moved away as Thranduil approached, leaving his father alone with him.

“Come, ion nin. Walk me into the ship,” his father said.

Thranduil nodded and followed his father onto the elegant white ship carved into the shape of a swan. In his private quarters, his father turned to face Thranduil. His father's blue eyes were dark and unfathomable.

“Have a safe journey, father,” Thranduil said. His voice sounded stiff and cold even to his own ears, but it was all Thranduil could manage.

Oropher’s eyes dimmed as he looked into Thranduil’s eyes. The young Sinda tried hard to meet the gaze of his father, but he couldn’t. Without thinking Thranduil looked down, feeling around his neck for the chain beneath his tunic.

His father reached over and pulled out the chain bound with a layer of thin strips of leather forming a thick necklace around Thranduil’s neck.

“Is this…?”

Thranduil looked into his father’s blue eyes for a fleeting moment and gave a quick nod before casting his eyes downward.

“You carry it?” It was just for a moment, but his father’s voice wavered as he fingered the leather-bound chain around Thranduil’s neck.

“Always…” Thranduil managed, then gave a fleeting glance toward his father. “Although…I don’t deserve it…”

Thranduil cast his eyes down again. His eyes stung and he did not want his father to see his weakness.

But immediately, his face was chucked up. His father’s large hands, calloused and hard from uncounted years of wielding his sword, wrapped around Thranduil’s face. Thranduil sucked in his breath at this unexpected gesture. Although his father had never been unkind to him, ever since the death of his mother, his father had been like winter, pale and distant.

“I don’t blame you, son,” his father whispered, his voice unsteady and hoarse.
The throb behind Thranduil’s throat flared and choked him, stinging his eyes, blinding him. The pain knocked out the air, barely enough to breathe. Thranduil bit down hard on the back of his teeth and blinked away the tears. He didn’t realize how much he needed to hear those words from his father. It was as if the heaviest chain of all other chains that had dragged him down all these years had lifted although Thranduil knew he did not deserve such release.

His father’s blue eyes bore into him.

“The fault was never yours. You are not to blame. Just as love and concern for Elwing brought you to that place, so has it brought your mother there.” His father looked into Thranduil’s eyes as if he wanted to burn that into him. “Promise me that you will not blame yourself.”

Thranduil knew his father expected an answer, but the pain in his throat was overwhelming. He could barely make any sound. So, he just nodded and looked up.

“If anyone is to blame, it was I…” His father's eyes misted.

Thranduil shook his head vigorously, still unable to utter a word. He realized for the first time that his father blamed himself. Unable to speak, Thranduil grabbed his father’s arms and looked into his father's light blue eyes transferring all that he felt.

His father’s eyes warmed as he pulled Thranduil’s head and laid his forehead on it.

“As soon as we are settled, I will find a way to bring you back with me. I will be waiting each day until then.” The words trembled, a bare whisper, so unlike his father, but Thranduil heard them.

Thranduil nodded again and looked down at his feet. There were so many things he wanted to say, but he was drowning again. His lungs burned and the throat tightened so hard, he couldn’t make a sound.

Just then, the horn blared. Ships were preparing to depart. His father dropped his hands and stood up straight.

“Thranduil, these Noldor, the high elves as they so call themselves, may know more, are stronger and smarter, but you are not just any Sinda. Your blood is as noble as any one of them. Don’t forget who you are. Show these Noldor what you are made of. Do you understand, my son?” His father’s blue eyes flickered as he chucked Thranduil’s face up again and looked deep into his blue-green eyes. “Do not let them crush you.”

Thranduil fisted his hands. “Never. I will never let them defeat me.” He managed although his voice cracked and shook.

His father’s face brightened with fierce pride as another horn rang out, much longer this time.

“Lord Istuion will be here until the next spring to finalize last minute agreements and bring along any who have not made it to Grey Havens today. He will act as your guardian until he leaves. Later, if you need assistance with anything, don’t forget there is Lord Celeborn at Harlindon and Lord Cirdan at Grey Havens,” his father said. “They will help you. Trust them.”

Thranduil nodded.

“I know I have not been a good example to you. Your mother…” his father’s voice broke and he looked away, but resolutely, he turned back to Thranduil. “All she ever wanted was for you to be happy.” His father eyed Thranduil with an unfathomable expression again.
Thranduil dropped his head, but his father reached out and ran his hand through Thranduil’s hair just as he used to do when Thranduil was a child.

As his father’s hand moved from his blond hair to rest on his shoulder, Thranduil felt a tremor from his father’s hand. In that moment, a realization shined through Thranduil’s head foggy with grief. His father was as afraid of losing his son as he had been of losing his father.

“I will find my way back to you, adar. I promise,” Thranduil said although the pain in his throat was unbearable and the tears in his eyes threatened to spill.

A firm squeeze on his shoulder was all he got but the young Sinda knew his father understood him. When Oropher let Thranduil go and straightened, his face was serene as it had ever been.

“May the light of Elbereth be ever with you, my son, in all your endeavors and keep you safe,” his father placed his hand over his heart and bowed.

“And may her white light ever be with you, my father, all through your journey and keep you safe,” replied Thranduil to the now ancient words of Doriath, echoing his father’s gestures and words.

The father and son looked at each other and smiled, a genuine smile for the first time since the loss of his mother at Sirion.

Too soon, the three ships moved out of the bay. As Thranduil watched the ships pass out of the harbor, Lord Cirdan turned to Thranduil.

“Now, Thranduil!” And, the ancient Elvenlord held out a bow and a quiver. Thranduil grabbed them and ran.

Nimbly, Thranduil ran up the steps carved into the rock that faced the sea as fast as he could to a small swan ship docked to one side. Its bow was facing the sea where the three white ships were departing from the harbor.

By the time Thranduil climbed up the ship and made it to the middle of the foremast, the three ships were moving out to the open sea in a straight line as Lord Cirdan had said.

Thranduil jumped up onto a ridge built onto the foremast. As the salty wind blew, the ship swayed up and down. It took him some time to balance himself on the ridge and make himself comfortable with the motion of the waves. Once he was confident he could manage to stay up without falling, Thranduil grabbed an arrow.

The ships were already far out, but he had to try. Thranduil threaded one of the three special arrows Lord Cirdan had given him just for this occasion. Lord Cirdan had said that if Thranduil could not hit the target within the time he draws three arrows, the ships would unfurl their sails and they will be too far out even if they managed to be in line.

Unlike most of the Elven ships which had a single mast, the three ships built for his father had three masts on each ship. And on each of those masts, a steel ring was nailed to it, each ring a lady’s hand’s length wide in diameter.

Thranduil kept his eyes on the first set of three steel rings on the hindmost ship and waited for the ships to line up just so that all three sets of rings on each ship would be overlapped enough for him to
shoot his arrow through. Keeping his breath steady, he sent a brief prayer to the Valar before he pulled back the string and released the first arrow.

The arrow sped through the air with a deadly aim. It passed the first three rings of the hindmost ship, then the ship in the middle moved up as waves hit it and the arrow hit the outer ring of the second ship and fell off into the ocean.

Thranduil fitted the second arrow as soon as he released his first, but as he released the arrow, a wave hit the bow of the ship he was on and the arrow flew off, completely missing the mark altogether.

Thranduil looked up at the sky, watched the direction of the flag high on the mast, took a gulp of breath then nocked the last arrow as his heart thundered in his breast.

____________________

*mellon nin* (Sindarin, *my friend*)

*ion nin* (Sindarin, *my son*)

*adar nin* (Sindarin, *my father*)

Chapter End Notes

To Elves, children were few and they were precious to them (exception are those Elves in Valinor. Look at Feanor with his 7 kids). Tolkien said Elves do not think of having children as begetting, but rather as ones given, like a gift.

But even among the best of relationships, there are things unsaid that could cause misunderstandings.

See you all next chapter. Elrond is at Grey Haven on the king’s behalf.
Chapter Summary

Elrond has come to Grey Haven as the envoy from King Gil-galad to bid farewell to the departing Sindar and to welcome Thranduil to Lindon. But having met the young Sinda, Elrond is disturbed.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

ELROND who came as an envoy of the king along with Lord Erestor frowned, looking up at the tall blond figure on the mast of the ship as the young Sinda threaded the third arrow onto his bow. With his pale gold hair flowing behind him, balanced precariously on the edge of the mast, he cut an impressive figure.

“Is there a reason for the son of Oropher to shoot at the departing ships?” Erestor asked.

“He is trying to shoot through the rings nailed on the masts of the three ships,” Istuion said quietly.

“And, not just one set of three rings, Lord Erestor.” Lord Cirdan turned to Erestor fingering his white beard that danced in the ocean wind. “He wants to shoot through the three rings of each one of the three ships and gets that arrow to land on the bowsprit of the front most ship where Oropher is.”

Erestor frowned. “Ships are already far out and they are still moving. He just shot through the first three rings. Even that would have been difficult for many under such circumstances. How will he be able to shoot the arrow through all three ships? Although the ships are in a straight line, you forget the waves and the wind.”

“That is true, uncle,” Istuion turned to Lord Cirdan. “Although the setup is similar to the test that was given to us, we did not bob up and down," Istuion said, then turned to Elrond and explained. "We had to shoot through logs with rings that swung in a set arc, each swinging at different times. And even then, most of us took many tries before making it through the first or second set of rings.”

“Beleg had done it, all three sets, and on his first try,” said Celeborn who stood next to Lord Cirdan who nodded in agreement.

“Indeed. I was there when Beleg was being tested. He even made the shot while riding on a horseback although that took him one more try.”

“You are talking about a legend who was famed for his unparalleled skill in archery. Is there any Elf who could measure up to Beleg?” Istuion asked, looking out at the ships.

“But what is he trying to prove?” Erestor asked and looked toward where Thranduil stood.

“This isn’t just any feat, councilor.” Lord Cirdan turned to Erestor.

“This is the rite of passage for all Sindar who want to be a warrior,” said Celeborn. “You must be able to shoot through the first set to join the Order of Warriors, then through the second set to join the march wardens, but the third sets of rings, now that would place you among the few elite warriors of
Doriath.”

“He is the last member of the warriors of Doriath,” Istuion said. “But Thranduil never had a chance to take part in it. Everything from Doriath…” Istuion stopped. Celeborn put his hand on Istuion’s shoulder and stood still, both lost in the shared grief.

Sorrow, like a drop of black ink on a bowl of clear water, clouded the elder lords. But as soon as Elrond sensed it, it was gone.

Then, as they watched, Thranduil let go of the last arrow.

Elrond realized he was holding his breath. It seemed for that moment, all sounds died except for the wind.

The arrow flew straight and deadly through the first set of the rings, then past the second set of rings, then hit the bowsprit of the front most ship after going through the third set of rings.

They must have seen Thranduil high up on the mast because everyone on the ships was out on the deck. As soon as the arrow hit the mast, they burst into a song, surprising Elrond.

Then, Elrond was again surprised. The Sindarin lords Cirdan, Celeborn, and Istuion along with others in the dock joined in the song. It was sweet, fierce and sad. Although Elrond was not familiar with the song itself, he knew it to be a warrior song where a youth is being initiated into the Warrior Order. The words were in Sindarin, but it was different than the ones used by most Elves. It was ancient, words more flowing and more beautiful in sound than the Sindarin that was used by everyone now.

Something hot stirred in Elrond’s heart as the song came to a conclusion. He wondered if it was because he was a part Sinda.

Lord Cirdan laughed out aloud once the song ended.

“Well, Valar be praised. Oropher got the best parting gift anyone could ever give him,” Lord Cirdan said. "All those winter days Thranduil spent balancing himself on that mast paid off."

"He practiced through the winter?” Elrond asked.

"Do you think he was able to do that without any practice? Thranduil probably had enough taste of icy sea water to last him a lifetime." Cirdan laughed again, the sound like rumbling of waves. “I believe he forswore the sea altogether.”

"I thought he managed because he is a Sinda. Aren’t a bow and arrow the main weapons Sindarin warriors use?” Elrond asked.

"You know our culture well, Elrond," Cirdan smiled. "Just as Noldor start out with learning to use their swords, we start out learning to use our bows before we are trained as warriors."

“I believe Oropher holds the record for being the youngest to pass the test. And, of course, Beleg for succeeding at the first attempt, isn’t it?” Celeborn turned to Istuion.

“Oropher also beat all of us to it, coming second to Beleg for successfully shooting through all three sets of rings on his fifth attempt. Thranduil did it on his third try,” Istuion said.

"Yes,” Cirdan smiled looking up at Thranduil. “The skill runs in his family, I believe. Lord Arandur was quite skilled with his bow as well.”
“According to my father, Oropher surpassed his father,” Celeborn said. “It seems Thranduil will surpass Oropher.”

“Does that mean Thranduil’s son will surpass Thranduil?” Lord Cirdan said with twinkles in his eyes.

“Quite possible,” Celeborn smiled back.

It was then that the blond Elf who had climbed down the mast joined them. Elrond watched as Lord Cirdan greeted Thranduil.

The first thing Elrond noticed was the height. He was even taller than most Noldor. In fact, Thranduil did not look like other Sindar. Among the dark haired people and the silver or white haired lords, Thranduil was golden.

Most Noldor and Sindar are dark haired in a variety of shades. Some Sindar of noble houses, like Lord Cirdan’s, have a white hair, but generally, most Sindar are dark haired like Noldor with the only exception being those from the royal house of Doriath. All who were related to Elu Thingol, except for those with the blood of Melian, had a silver hair.

“You remember Elrond, son of Earendil? He is the younger of the twins,” Lord Cirdan said as he led Thranduil to Elrond. “Elrond, meet Thranduil, son of Oropher. You were too young and a mortal at that time to remember him well, but Thranduil and your mother grew up like siblings.”

Just as Lord Cirdan said, Elrond’s memory during his time as a mortal was not clear. It was not until he had made his choice to become an Elf that everything came into a sharp focus. He remembered even the minute details afterward, but the memory of his childhood and of the times before he became immortal remained vague as if he was looking at a forest covered in a thin mist.

As to his childhood, there were only a few things he remembered well, such as Maglor’s voice, like gentle waves, that lured him and his brother to sleep after nights of terrible dreams. Elrond did not remember what those dreams were, but he remembered screaming in the middle of the night, the darkness and that terrible feeling of falling and being alone. He used to wake up clinging onto Elros.

And suddenly, Maglor would be there, comforting like the sunlight, folding both Elros and him in his gentle arms. Thousands of needles plunged into Elrond’s heart at the thought of Maglor.

Shaking off the memories, Elrond looked up at Thranduil. When a pair of bright eyes fell on him, Elrond took in a sharp breath and stared, at loss for words.

Thranduil’s eyes were mesmerizing, but it was not the beauty that took Elrond’s breath away. It was the chillness of the air around Thranduil. There was something cold and distant about the young Sinda like a lone star in the dead of winter.

Despite the brightness of the gem-like eyes, Elrond sensed darkness and despair in them, even of death. It reminded Elrond of the eyes of both Maedhros and Maglor. In the last two remaining sons of Feanor and those of their followers, there had been lingering darkness and despair. Elrond understood that it was because they have seen too much death and destruction. Those Noldor were ancient, worn and grieved; they had experienced too much loss. But, to see such darkness in one so young, for Elrond knew Thranduil was barely a century older than he, it startled him.

“Mae Govannen, Thranduil,” Elrond said, trying his best to sound welcome which he did not feel. He did not know why. Elrond never disliked anyone before but there was something about Thranduil that Elrond did not like. He couldn’t explain it but his heart did not warm to the cold Sinda.
Thranduil’s frozen eyes grazed over Elrond. Despite the reservation, Elrond could not help but look into the unusually colored eyes, neither blue nor green, yet both. Elrond thought he had never seen such a color in another Elf, yet somehow, they looked familiar. Wanting to see deeper, Elrond stared into Thranduil’s eyes, but they were shuttered and unreadable, a rare thing to Elrond to whom reading other’s feelings was like a second nature. But, this young Sinda in front of him felt like a thick wall of ice: impenetrable, distant and devoid of emotion.

“I came as a messenger from his royal majesty, King Gil-galad, to welcome you to Lindon,” Elrond smiled with his hand over his heart. “His majesty looks forward to making your acquaintance. He has prepared your quarters within the King’s Tower where he welcomes you—”

“I will stay in the barracks with other cadets in the training,” Thranduil said, his voice matter of fact, deep and firm. His voice reminded Elrond of a sound of a hunter’s horn ringing deep within a forest.

“Barracks is where you will spend most of your time during the training, but when you are not, the king thought you will be more comfortable having your own quarters.”

“When and where do I report for training?” Thranduil asked.

Elrond pursed his lips realizing that for Thranduil, the matter of housing was a topic that was already closed.

But, Lord Erestor who stood next to Elrond did not notice.

"My young lord, the rooms are already prepared and his majesty—”

“I did not ask you,” Thranduil said, giving Erestor a side glance.

Erestor flushed.

“Now, Thranduil.” Lord Istuion placed a restraining hand on Thranduil’s upper arm.

“Will you tell me when and where or do I need to find that information on my own?” Thranduil said, his voice even, not a hint of any emotion in them.

Elrond met Thranduil’s icy gaze.

“On the tenth day of Spring at the West courtyard outside the King’s Tower. Line-up is scheduled at sunrise,” Elrond said.

Thranduil regarded Elrond, then nodded.

“If you will excuse me, I have much to prepare,” Thranduil said. He bowed toward Elrond, then to the Sindarin lords, then turned on his heels and walked away.

Elrond watched Thranduil's broad back, feeling Lord Erestor bristle next to him.

“Have I done something wrong? I certainly did not mean to offend,” Elrond said looking around at Lord Celeborn, then at Lord Istuion.

“We were only extending the king’s hospitality,” Erestor huffed, clearly offended.

Lord Istuion sighed.

“It is not you, Elrond. It is Thranduil. Please excuse him, Lord Erestor. I’m afraid, Thranduil is not into exchanging pleasantries,” Istuion said.
“He is having a trying day. The departure of his beloved father and the people he loves must have worn out the lad. He doesn’t say much, but he is usually of impeccable manners. I’m sure once he gets to know you and becomes familiar with those around him, he will be more amiable,” Lord Cirdan said jovially.

Elrond noticed Lord Istuion shifting nervously where he stood. Something told Elrond that Lord Istuion didn’t quite agree with his uncle.

He hated to admit it, but Elrond was glad. Had Thranduil stayed in the King’s Tower, Thranduil would have been quartered in the same wing as Elrond.

Elrond thought back to Sirion. Although Elrond did not remember Sirion well, he remembered his mother, the majestic, dark haired lady who always stood by a tall white tower, looking out toward the sea. Her features were unclear in Elrond’s mind, but he remembered the sadness in her face and the warmth of her presence. And the only time her face brightened with joy was when a tall and muscular man with long wavy blond hair came from the sea, smelling like an ocean wind.

His mother laughed when the man was about. Elrond remembered how her joy would infect his brother and him. He remembered the squeal of laughter as the man hoisted him up high in the air, but then, the man would leave again and the house would fall into silence. It was much later that Elrond realized that the blond man in his memory was his father. His father may have been a hero to Elves and Men, but Elros and he barely knew him.

But besides his father, there was also another blond in his faint memory who could make his mother smile. He was a lithe and scrawny youth who was more delicate than imposing, the same blond youth who had abandoned his brother and him to the mercy of those who had blood on their hands.

Thranduil differed greatly from the beautiful, delicate youth Elrond remembered from Sirion. But Elrond recognized the unusual blue-green eyes of the youth. Having met Thranduil now, he realized that Thranduil and the young blond Elf are the one and the same.

“I will come back for you,” the blond youth promised before leaving them in the darkness of the cave, but that was the last time Elrond and his brother saw him or their mother.

Elrond (Sindarin, *Star Dome*)—(Born FA 532) One of the twin sons of Elwing and Earendil. Like his parents, he is a peredhil (Half-Elven). Peredhils are born a mortal, but as Earendil’s sons, they were given a choice to choose which race they wished to belong

Beleg (Sindarin, *Mighty*)—Captain of the march-wardens of Doriath and known as the greatest archer of First Age. (For the story about him, read *Children of Hurin* by Tolkien)

Earendil (Quenya, *Sea Friend*)—son of Lady Idril, Noldorin princess of Gondolin, and Tuor, House of Hador, a mortal. Thus, Earendil is a peredhil. Gondolin fell when he was 7 years old. The refugees of Gondolin escaped to Sirion where he met and wed Elwing. Earendil loved the sea and was often away on voyages. When he was away, remaining sons of Feanor attacked Sirion. Earendil is considered one of the greatest heroes to Men and Elves.

Mae Govannen (Sindarin, *well met*)

The tenth day of Spring—April 10: To make the dates easier, I made Yestare (New Year) as April 1th, the first day of spring
Next chapter we meet Gil-galad and find out his reason for keeping Thranduil in Lindon.

Hope you find the story interesting. I do not have a beta reader so I am not sure how the story sounds from a third person perspective. It is completed, as I have written it years ago, but I am revising as I go. This being my first Fanfiction, I would appreciate any type of review as to what works and what doesn’t. Thank you all for reading.
The King's Dream

Chapter Summary

Gil-galad waits for Elrond who is scheduled to return to the King’s Tower. Just a few days to go until the new yen, the king is visited by that dream which had pestered him for months on end, something he had not dreamed for quite some time until now.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

**King’s Tower. Mach 25, Second Age 144**

EREINION GIL-GALAD FINGONION felt the cool air of Spring blow through his balcony as he stood watching the guards empty the training fields below him. The night was falling like rain as the last glimmer of crimson streak disappeared behind the far away horizon.

Elrond was due back from the Grey Havens tonight. Hopefully, his cousin was successful.

The king sighed and went back to his chambers. With Spring came the First Yen of the Second Age and the first young recruits into his army. Previously, the army consisted of the surviving warriors from the First Age who have chosen to remain in Lindon. They were all highly skilled with many centuries of experience but they were used to serving under different princes from the House of Finwe, whether they were sons of Fingolfin or Finarfin. It had taken many decades to bring them together into one cohesive working unit.

The new recruits this year will be the first soldiers to enter the king’s service strictly under his own name. Thranduil will be one of them. Gil-galad let out a long sigh. Will holding onto Oropher’s son be enough? Gil-galad did not know, but he was running out of options now that Oropher has left with his followers.

Sighing again, the king sank into the blue silk cushions embroidered with silver stars. Last night, he had that dream again, the one he had the first night he slept in the palace after its completion.

In his dream, he saw a large clay pot. Inside the pot grew three trees. The tree on the left was white as untrodden snow, the middle was golden and the one on the right was silver.

The White Tree standing under a golden light was the smallest, but most beautiful with snow-white flowers of unearthly beauty.

The Gold Tree was illuminated by a flaming sun and under its fiery glow, the Gold Tree grew bigger and stronger than others and its branches filled with golden leaves and fruits.

The Silver Tree was illuminated by a winged moon. The light of the silvery moon was pale under the fiery light of the flaming sun. But despite being overshadowed by the flaming sun, the light of the moon was true and the Silver Tree grew and spread, its delicate branches blooming with white flowers that sparkled silver. The music filled the void and Gil-galad knew everything was good.

But suddenly, a bolt of lightning flashed overhead. A dark seed flew over from the north and crashed
Gil-galad ran to the pot. Among the broken shards and loosened earth, the broken two-third of the Gold Tree and the Silver Tree stood, supported by their entangled roots, clinging onto what remained of the earth.

Gil-galad sighed with relief and went closer to look at the seed which had fallen by the foot of the Gold Tree. It was shiny and raven black. He reached out but before he could touch it, it shuddered then cracked. Inside glowed bright red and when Gil-galad bent over to take a closer look, a flame leaped out. Gil-galad jumped back and the flame swayed and danced and spread over onto the trunk of the Gold Tree. The flame crackled and licked, then ravaged one branch, charring it beyond recognition. Black and sharp, it broke, then plunged into the Silver Tree.

“Ai! Ai!” wailed Gil-galad, but there was nothing he could do but watch as the charred branch impaled the silver trunk. The Silver Tree shuddered. Somewhere thousands of voices wailed. And the blood flowed, red as anger and swift as tears. It slid down the trunk of the Silver Tree, leaving a dark scar. And the blood flowed onto what remained of earth. The music stopped, replaced by the wailing of unseen voices.

The Silver Tree withered, its white flowers turned to gray dust and its silver leaves fell like flakes of snow. The metallic scent of blood and the odor of burning wood pervaded the air as the silver roots untangled itself from the roots of the Gold Tree and shriveled, now a twisted husk of what it once was. The earth that was held by the commingled roots began to loosen. A dark weed sprouted from the seed. It spread and grew all around the broken pot, fed by the blood and the loosened earth.

“What can I do?” Gil-galad asked as sorrow seeped into his heart. The weight of the grief pulled him down onto the ground. A shoot grew out of the weed. It was long, shiny and sharp. Suddenly, it lunged.

Gil-galad jerked awake.

The king pulled at the neck of his tunic. His body burned as if scorched. He got out of the chair where he had fallen asleep and took in a breath before grabbing a cup of water to gulp it down. It was the same dream, but he had not dreamed it for some time now until last night.

After several months of having the same dream, Gil-galad had sought an elderly loremaster. The king had known that it was a warning of sorts and that it should not be said to just anyone. The loremaster had agreed and has told the king that time will come when he should reveal it.

Since then, the elder loremaster had sailed to Valinor, leaving his post to his young protégé. Now Gil-galad was the only one who knew of the dream and he had not been able to tell it to anyone, not even to Cirdan, Gilmagor, and Elrond, the three Elves whom he trusted above all others.

Gil-galad grabbed a key he wore around his neck and took out a long box, elaborately carved and gilded in gold, from his desk. Inside was a rolled parchment. Its edges were worn and tattered.

The wailing of the voices. Over many nights, Gil-galad had written down the words, struggling to remember the words which faded as the morning sun rose.

The king skimmed over the phrases that he had read over thousands of times.

A dark seed grows, fed by blood and ire;
The old evil awakens, hiding its dark fire
To ensnare innocents in its tangled shoots.

The Darkness will rise and the lights of Arda fail
From the seas to the mountains all will travail
As the ring of gold claims dominance above all.

For the hope to shine and never wither
The two houses of silver and gold must stand together,
Brother to brother by blood and love, all roots mingled.

When the darkness …

Gil-galad stopped. The last stanza was still hard for him. He rolled up the letter, then put it back in
the box. He wasn’t ready to face it yet. There was so much yet to do.

When a knock was heard, the king quickly put the key away.

“Enter!”

Elrond walked in, still in his riding clothes.

“How was your trip to the Grey Havens, Elrond?”

“I am afraid, sire, that I do not bring the news you desire,” Elrond said, his usually sunny face sullen.

“Oh? How so?” Gil-galad offered him a goblet of wine which Elrond took and sat down on a seat
opposite him.

“Lord Istuion declined the position.”

Gil-galad nodded feeling disappointment swept through him. He expected it knowing how close
Lord Istuion was with Oropher, but he had hoped that the Sindarin lord would share in his dream by
joining the council. Besides being Lord Cirdan’s nephew, Gil-galad had immediately liked him the
moment he met the Sindarin lord when he first came to Lindon with Oropher to seek an audience.
Although grave and distant as any other Sindarin councilors from Menegroth, Gil-galad saw warmth
and quiet strength in Lord Istuion.

Gil-galad had offered Lord Istuion a seat in the council hoping to persuade the Sindarin lord to stay
in Lindon. The king did not want Lindon to become an exclusively Noldorin realm. He wanted his
realm to become inclusive of all Elves regardless of their roots. In order to do that, he needed
councilors who had served in Menegroth’s court among his own court but those who decided to
remain in Middle Earth chose to leave Lindon with Oropher. The few who remained politely refused
the king’s offer, opting instead to live in Grey Haven with Lord Cirdan or at South Harlindon with Lord Celeborn.

Gil-galad bit down a sigh. His dreams had shown him that darkness was coming and only by being united can they defeat it.

“And Oropher’s son?”

“I met with him as you have asked,” Elrond said. “He declined to stay in the King’s tower.” Elrond looked away, avoiding the king’s eyes. Gil-galad regarded Elrond. Although his demeanor was calm, Elrond’s usually calm gray eyes looked restless. Something was amiss.

“So, what did you think of him?” Gil-galad asked.

“He is cold and arrogant,” Elrond said. He took a sip of his wine and looked down at his feet.

“Well, that sounds just like Oropher. The trait must run in the family,” Gil-galad said with a smile watching Elrond. The king had never known his cousin to make such a statement about anyone, even those who deserved them.

“Do we really need to deal with him? I know you hope to bring together all Elves and want to keep in touch with those Oropher led away, but surely, there must be other ways in which we could find common ground with the Sindar. Is it necessary for you to foster this Sinda? Why must it be with Oropher and his Elves? Lord Celeborn seems agreeable enough and you have Lord Cirdan on your side. Are they not enough?”

Gil-galad was more than surprised at the outburst, and he wondered what the Sinda has done to put off his easy-going cousin. It was rare for Elrond to dislike anyone and even rarer to show such dislike. Usually, Elrond trusted and accepted everyone, even the difficult ones. He is usually the one making excuses for other’s bad behaviors, trying to understand them the best he could.

“The Sindar under Lord Celeborn and Cirdan are not the ones I worry about.”

“The ones who followed Oropher are only a small portion of Sindar, just a handful. There are many who stayed behind and chose to live under Lord Celeborn and Lord Cirdan. What could Oropher do against you?” Elrond frowned.

“It is not that I think he will rise up against me if that is what you believe. If I believed that, I would not have fought the council to let him go.”

“Then, what is it that you fear?”

Gil-galad looked away, keeping firm control over his emotions. The king knew well the power Elrond has. His young cousin has an uncanny ability to read people’s emotions.

“Did you feel anything from him? Did you sense something from Thranduil that affected you?” Gil-galad glanced at Elrond.

Elrond dropped his head. He was silent for a moment, but slowly, he shook his head.

“No. He was difficult to read. I didn’t feel anything from him. He was like a block of ice.” He looked up, a frown on his face. “But there is something dark about him.” Elrond pulled at his front braid, something Gil-galad noticed Elrond did when his cousin was troubled.

“Something troubling you, Elrond?”
Elrond glanced up. There was hesitation, but Elrond shook his head again, then forced a smile.

“It’s nothing. It’s just… he obviously does not want to be here and I wondered why you would keep him here, against his will.”

Gil-galad repressed a sigh and wondered if he should tell his young cousin. He trusted Elrond. But his cousin was still young and there was much he needed to know and learn. The king knew that Gilmagor did not plan to linger in Middle Earth. As soon as Elrond was ready to take the responsibility, the Lord Commander planned to sail.

“Finish your training, Elrond. And one day, I will tell you, but know that it is vitally important that all of us are united. And more than anyone, I need to have Oropher understand the importance of this unity among us Elven kin. It is precisely because he does not want to be part of us that we need him. It is my hope that you could reach Thranduil in a way I could not with Oropher. Perhaps, Thranduil will listen to you and Oropher will listen to his son.”

“You are the king. If Oropher did not listen to you, what makes you think his son will listen to me?” Elrond frowned at Gil-galad.

“Oropher has no connection to me, but he and his family owe you allegiance. If there is one good thing I am sure of Oropher, it is that the duty and obligation were bred into him at birth, just as you and I have been. I am sure his son is no different. At least, I hope so.”

“His family’s obligation to me, or to my family, died the day Doriath was lost. And I am a Noldo. I doubt Oropher, or Thranduil for that matter, considers me as one of them.”

“Blood endures, Elrond. Realms may fall and mountains sink into the sea, but the blood remains. As long as you remain your mother’s son, no Sindar can ignore you. I am counting on it.”

---

**Ereinion Gil-galad Fingonion** (Sindarin, *Scion of Kings, Star of Radiance, Son of Fingon*)

In *Silmarillion*, Tolkien has it that Gil-galad is Fingon's son (House of Fingolfin). But in later writings, Tolkien made Gil-galad first as Finrod's son, then later as Orodreth's son (House of Finarfin) which would make Gil-galad Elrond's distant cousin and the first cousin to Lady Galadriel.

I went with Gil-galad as Fingon's son for two reasons: (1)Gil-galad's epesse Ereinion, meaning Scion of Kings, is more fitting as Fingon's son. His great grandfather Finwe, grandfather Fingolfin, and his father Fingon all had been high kings (2)As Fingon's son, Gil-galad would be closely related to Elrond as the first cousin to both Elrond and Lady Galadriel. If he was Orodreth’s son, the king would be a distant cousin to Elrond while becoming the first cousin to my Thranduil character.

**Finwe**— the First high king of all Noldor. He was one of the three Elves, along with Ingwe (Vanya) and Olwe (Thingol's brother), who led the Elves to Valinor. He is also Gil-galad's great grandfather.

He is the only Elf to have married twice. By his first wife Miriel, he has a son, Feanor, who later with his 7 sons, led Noldor back to Middle Earth from Valinor. Miriel died after giving birth to Feanor which was an unusual event as she was first to die in Valinor. Because of the unusual circumstance, Manwe (King of Valar) allowed Finwe to take another wife.

By his second wife Indis, a Vanyarin lady—a niece of King Ingwe of Vanyar, Finwe had two sons
and two daughters. Gil-galad’s grandfather Fingolfin is the eldest son with Indis. Lady Galadriel is the daughter to Fínarfin who is the second son of Finwë with Indis.

After the rebellion by Feanor, Valar forbid Elves from marrying more than once in their lifetime.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter we glimpse into a bit of Thranduil's past, to the time when he was just a child and fleeing the burning Menegroth.
The Fever

Chapter Summary

Thranduil prepares to attend the training at Lindon. The past month since his father's departure has been filled with the dark shadows which haunted him since the day they fled the burning Menegroth. Can he leave them behind?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Grey Haven. April 7, Second Age 144

THRANDUIL looked down at the bed in his room at Lord Cirdan’s mansion in the forest. A month had passed since his father left. Tomorrow, he shall leave this house and travel to Minas Silivren.

He had never stayed here long, but the thought of entering a Noldorin city troubled him. He looked at the bed where the things he needed to pack lay in a neat pile.

He did not have much. The king will provide the uniform including an armor and a weapon. He didn’t really need anything else, not that he had anything else. Whatever of value he had were destroyed at Menegroth and they barely had enough at Sirion. And when he wandered the wild with his father, they made do with whatever they could get their hands on.

There were only three things of value to him. One of them he had given to Glineth for safe keeping. And the other… Thranduil fingered the leather-bound chain on his neck. He wondered if he should leave it with Lord Istuion. He couldn’t bear it if he lost it, but then, he didn’t want to be parted from it.

Holding onto his necklace, he looked at the rest of the items on the bed Glineth had laid out for him: Bow and a quiver; several pairs of undergarments; socks; a new cloak Glinth had given him this morning as his early begotten day present; a comb made of beechwood—.

Thranduil picked up the comb. He didn’t really need it. Although all Elves, whether male or female, were vain about their hair and spent hours grooming, Thranduil knew there was nothing he could do with his. His hair was so straight and slippery, he couldn’t even braid them. With a snort, he tossed the comb over his shoulder.

When his eyes rested on the double blades sheathed to the back of his quiver, Thranduil swallowed hard and took out one of the blades. He will have to leave these with Lord Istuion. Engraved with silver vines, the hilt was studded with three large green gems in a shape of beech tree leaves, an emblem that came to represent House Arandur.

These double daggers belonged to Lord Arandur, Thranduil’s grandfather. King Thingol had gifted them to Lord Arandur when the king gave him the command of the king’s troops. It was the same daggers the dying Lord Arandur had given to Oropher in Menegroth. And in the midst of the Great War when everyone, including Thranduil, had forgotten about his first centennial begotten day, his father had gifted them to him.
Thranduil’s throat thickened as longing for his father and Menegroth rose like a mist about him.

A soft knock made Thranduil look up as the door to his room opened. Thranduil schooled his features.

Glineth walked in with a tray richly laden with a bowl of stewed apples, honey cake, and nuts. There was even a glass of wine. Although his begotten day wasn’t until five days later, Glineth had prepared a sumptuous dinner that night as he was due to depart early next morning.

Petite even for one of the Nandor, Glineth had been with Thranduil’s family for as long as he could remember. Thranduil was told that she was there even when his father was a mere youth. And when Lady Arinariel married Oropher, Glineth served as his mother’s lady’s maid. To Thranduil, Glineth was family, a second mother. When his father left, leaving Lord Istuion to follow, she had asked to stay behind. She said she needed more time before leaving Lindon, but Thranduil knew that she had stayed back for his sake.

“You barely touched your dinner, so…” she smiled brightly at him, her rich brown eyes warm and concerned. “You haven’t been eating much lately. At least have some dessert, my young lord.”

“Don’t address me like that, Glineth. I’m no lord. Look at me.” Thranduil scoffed. “I am going to be a guard to a Noldorin king, a dog for the king of kinslayers to do as he is bidden.”

Glineth frowned.

“If Lady Arinariel was here, you wouldn’t dare say such a thing,” she said with a frown.

“Then, I guess, it is good that my mother isn’t here.” Thranduil snorted.

Glineth put down the tray on a small table next to the bed.

“Listen to me, Thranduil. No matter where it lands and what it must endure, an acorn will become an oak tree. Unless you let them, no one can make you who you are not.”

Thranduil sighed and turned away to look out the lone window in the room.

“I know that. It is just….” Thranduil dropped his head. “Forgive me. I am not myself today.”

Glineth reached out to touch his face and looked into his eyes.

“You look so much like your mother.” Glineth smiled faintly. Then she rubbed the area under Thranduil’s eyes as he pulled back.

“You have not slept much since your father left, Thranduil.” Glineth frowned. “It is happening again, isn’t it? I see you walking the forest in the night. You are--”

“I’m fine.”

“Thranduil, you must tell Lord Istuion. He could talk to the king, maybe he could delay the training-”

“No! I told you, I’m fine!”

Thranduil took in a sharp breath when he saw the look in Glineth’s eye. He had never shouted at her before, even when he was at his worst. His mother would definitely not approve if she had been here. Was he going to let this darkness get the better of him? Thranduil let out a long sigh to release the tension in his body.
He rubbed at his forehead, then he took Glineth’s hands in his.

“Please, Glineth. I can handle it. I am no longer a child. I am not going to let the darkness consume me. I am stronger now. Do you not trust me?”

Glineth smiled, although it did not reach her eyes.

“I trust you, Thranduil.” She ran her hand through his hair. "But, if it becomes too much… if you are in any way…” Glineth stopped. “You know that I am here for you. I will stay here as long as you need me. Do you understand, young one?”

Thranduil nodded obediently. “Forgive me?” His heart ached at having made her aware. She would worry now if she wasn’t already.

“Always. You know that.” Gineth smiled then. She reached up on her tiptoe to kiss him on his cheek. “Rest then, dearest. Valar know you need the rest,” Glineth sighed.

Thranduil gave Glineth the best smile he could muster. Her eyes showed that she wasn’t fooled, but she did not press him further. She moved to leave but stopped at the door.

“We have a word that Aron will arrive late tonight.” she said.

Thranduil frowned.

“He will accompany you in the morning.”

“I’m not a newborn babe. I can find the way there myself,” Thranduil said pursing his lips.

“No one doubts that, dearest,” Glineth smiled softly. “He is on his way to the White City as a messenger for Lord Cirdan. He wants to spend the day riding with you.” With that, she left him alone.

After Glineth left, Thranduil stuffed everything on the bed, except for the bow and the daggers, into his pack and laid down on the bed. He knew she was right. He needed the rest. Thranduil had not slept much since his father left, and he was weary.

Thranduil ran his hands through his face. No matter how tired he was, no matter how on edge he had been, he knew he should not snap at others, especially Glineth. He knew that in his head, but he could not control his impulses at times. His tongue lashed out as if it had a mind of its own.

Control your tongue, Thranduil. Control your temper. Thranduil repeated to himself.

But for the past month, his dreams were dark and filled with old shadows that haunted him since the last day of Menegroth. Thranduil rolled onto his side. But he was stronger now. He will not succumb to the darkness his mother fought so tirelessly to bring him out of.

___________________

River Sirion. January 22, First Age 507

“Nana!”

Thranduil screamed as loud as he could, but breath caught in his throat as if he had run through the whole of the Forest of Neldoreth.
The forest burned, red flames licking like tongues of snakes. Thranarin fell forward, his eyes wide as a spot of red in front of his chest grew bigger until the fire burned through. Smoke rose and Thranarin’s bright silver hair was swallowed up by the flames. Thranduil struggled to call out to his older brother, but no words came. The acrid smoke choked through the lining of his throat, stinging his eyes, and knocking out his breath.

“I am here, meleth nin. I am here,” said a beloved voice, but he couldn’t see. The thick smoke blinded him.

“Nana!”

“Arantaur, I am here,” she said, and something warm enveloped him. “You are safe, my love. You are safe.” Her voice mixed with the howl of the wind far away. And like a wind to a smoke, everything disappeared as if nothing had been.

Thranduil strained to open his eyes but they were so heavy. It was a struggle to lift the eyelids. When he finally managed, Thranduil saw a faint glow. And along with it, there was a scent of herbs and niphredil,* his mother’s scent.

The beloved face of his mother looked down at him, her bright, light-filled eyes were shiny with moisture. She smiled brightly at him.

“Nana?”

She nodded, and her lips moved, but no sound came. Instead, she smiled again and kissed his hand in her grasp.

“I’m hot,” Thranduil said.

“I know, sweetheart. Here, drink,” she pressed a cup onto his parched lips. But Thranduil could not move as if a large boulder pressed down on his chest and kept him pinned down. His mother lifted his head and poured the liquid onto his withered mouth. Just then a wind whooshed in and along with it something white and glittery.

“My lady.” Thranduil heard Glineth call his mother but he was too tired to look.

“Look, Arantaur, snow,” his mother said as she scooped up a handful of snow. “It is snowing outside, dearest. Will you not get up so you could go out and play?”

She placed a handful of snow on his head. It felt cool against his burning head, but it only lasted a moment before it flowed down his forehead in trickles as his mother wiped it off and added another handful of snow onto his face.

Thranduil loved snow, but now, he was so tired.

“Where’s Elwing?” Thranduil asked. “Where’s Thranarin?”

Glineth covered her mouth and turned away. His mother’s lips moved but no sound came. The light in her eyes wavered. Her bright blue-green eyes shone looking like jewels under water.

Glineth pulled his mother back and turned back to him as his mother moved out of Thranduil’s sight.

“Elwing is sleeping,” Glineth said, sounding strange. “When she wakes, I’ll bring her to you. If you get up, then you can play with her, wouldn’t that be good, little one?”
“I’m so tired,” Thranduil said.

“I know. But, you have to try. Yes?”

Then, his mother was back at his side again.

“You have to try, my sweet. Please try to keep awake. Please, my love, for me?”

His mother picked him up from the bed and drew him into her arms. Then, she rocked him as if he was still a baby. He was too big to be rocked, but he was too tired to protest. And Thranduil really did want to get up for her. He loved his mother so.

But his eyes were so heavy and everything seemed to go around and around. It seemed to him that the world around him was fading away into a gray mist. And when he closed his eyes, it was filled with dark images, flashes of gold and red armors, filled with screams that jerked him awake, then sucked him back into darkness. And they were followed by a sense of immeasurable grief and guilt. Thranduil didn’t know why he felt so sad or why he felt such guilt, but he felt as if he had done something terribly wrong. And no matter how much he wanted to get up, he couldn’t.

It was all just too much and Thranduil wished he could just disappear. He wanted to become nothing and felt his body become airy as if he could float away when he felt a pressure on his hand. Someone pulled.

“Thrandy…” A familiar voice called.

Exhausted, Thranduil did not care, but he knew that voice and she shook his hand incessantly, not leaving him alone.

Thrandy…” The voice kept calling and kept pulling at his hand. Her voice shook, filled with sniffles.

“Thraaanddy…” She was crying now.

Elwing.

Elwing was crying. Thranduil struggled, drawing every bit of energy he had left. When he managed to open his eyes, a pair of large gray eyes stared right at him.

Elwing had her chin on the bedding where he lay, her round baby face only a breath away from his, her two dimpled hands clutching onto the edges of his bedding. She looked at him, her eyes filling her face, wet with tears.

“Don’t go, Thrandy. Glineth says you are going away. I don’t want you to go.”

Even though everything ached and hurt, Thranduil reached out. He didn’t want Elwing to cry. When the new king and the queen came to Doriath, they told him that it was his duty to protect the little princess. He made a solemn promise in front of the king, his grandfather, and father that he will always keep Elwing safe.

“Don’t…cry…Elwing.”

________________

Gray Haven. April 8, Second Age 144
Thranduil sat up on the bed and yanked open the neck of his tunic. He felt suffocated. Heat consumed him as if he was a burning log. Thranduil threw open the window in his room and took a lungful of cool morning air.

“I will not succumb,” Thranduil whispered to the trees outside his window.

He looked up at the sky where a lone star shone brightly. Darkness was receding now, silver moon pale on the sky as the new dawn gazed down at him.

During the long trek down from Menegroth to Sirion, after they fled the burning city, Thranduil suffered a deadly grief like the many survivors who lost their loved ones. Feanor’s sons attacked during the Midwinter Festival, the longest night of the year.

The trek down River Sirion to the secret Haven by the sea in the middle of snow blizzard, leaving their beloved home behind with hardly anything in their hands, the strength of the Elves failed. Many died on the road during the months-long trek, not of the cold or hunger but of grief, despite the countless number of warriors who sacrificed their lives so that the few could escape down the river.

After the devastation of Menegroth, Thranduil had been too young and too weak of strength to endure the force of grief that wrecked his young body and mind. He was 38 years old.

Thranduil used to be ashamed, thinking of how weak he had been that he almost succumbed to the grief. He should have been old enough. Elwing was only three years old and had lost both her parents including her two older brothers who were six.

It was not until his mother explained to him that Elwing was a mortal that Thranduil understood. Apparently, unlike Elven children whose bond with their parents are so acute that young children who lost both parents did not survive, children of men did not die from the severance of such a bond as long as they are given good care. Thranduil had marveled then at the strength of mortal children. For the Elves, children are bonded to the hearts of their parents just as spouses are bonded to each other’s souls. Losing one’s mate shattered his soul while losing children or parents shattered their hearts. It is the worst kind of loss among his kindred and many who lacked strength did not survive such loss.

This was one of the reasons why Elves did not have children in times of war and unrest. And soldiers did not go to war when a child was born to them. And because their memories did not dim and felt everything intensely, young Elven children did not survive witnessing violence. They said it was only because of the skill of his mother as a healer that Thranduil survived.

But his mother told Thranduil later that it was Elwing who saved him.

Everyone who survived worried over Elwing, but she was hearty and strong. And unlike young Elven children who could not form a new bond with another other than their parents, Elwing took to Lady Arinariel and grew under her care as if Thranduil’s mother was her own mother.

In the beginning, they have kept Elwing away from Thranduil, afraid that like Thranduil, the much younger Elwing will lose her will to live. But, that day, when Thranduil was so far gone that they couldn’t get any response from him and everyone had given up, Elwing sneaked into where Thranduil lay.

Glineth and his mother had found Elwing by Thranduil’s bed, he was told, on a tiptoe, holding onto Thranduil’s bedding. When his mother saw that Thranduil opened his eyes at Elwing’s urging, she had told Glineth to leave them together. They let Elwing sleep next to Thranduil. She sang to him, told him stories and even laughed as Spring arrived.
And as Spring turned to Summer, Thranduil got out of bed and learned to walk again and even smile at times with Elwing at his side. And the too few survivors of ruined Doriath settled by the mouth of Sirion as it flowed into the sea.

And as years passed, Elwing grew and her memory dimmed. Apparently, the memory of mortals faded with time. The fact that Glineth had shielded Elwing at the time of the bloody attack also helped, Thranduil supposed. But even if she had seen it, it seemed to Thranduil that Elwing would not have remembered or felt the horror and grief as acutely as did Elves.

In fact, just like her father, Elwing grew rapidly. In 14 short years since they settled at Sirion, she grew tall and fair. At 17 years of age, she was a young maiden who looked as old as if she was an Elf maid of over a century old, making Thranduil feel as if he was the only child left even though he had just reached a majority.

The knowledge that Elwing’s mortal blood made her forget the events that happened less than two decades ago didn’t make it easier, however, when Elwing chose to marry Earendil of Gondolin. It left other Sindar, including Thranduil, but especially his father as Elwing’s guardian, speechless. Had it not been for the intervention of Lady Arinariel and Lord Cirdan, Oropher would have never agreed to the union.

And Earendil who had solemnly promised Oropher to love and protect Elwing, failed her at the moment when she needed him the most. And, in the end, Thranduil, too, failed to keep his solemn promise to keep Elwing safe.

------------

**Begotten day** is a birthday for Elves. Because they are born exactly to a year to the day they are conceived, it is called the begotten day. In my story, Thranduil is born on the 12th day of Spring, First Age 468.

**Thranarin** (Sindarin, Vigorous Morning)--Thranduil’s elder brother and Oropher’s first child (He is one of my OC)

**Nana** (Sindarin, short form of Naneth, mother)—mommy or mom

**Nephridil** is a white flower that used to grow in the forest of Doriath. It is said that it first sprang when Luthien was born.

**Meleth nin** (Sindarin, my love)

**Arantaur** (Sindarin, Lord of Forest)—Thranduil’s name his mother gave him at birth. Only Lady Arinariel called him by this name. According to Tolkien, Elven women gave prophetic names to their children

**Elves on Aging**—According to Tolkien, up to 3 years in age, Elves and Men look the same. But afterward, Elves grow slowly in the body. At 50 years, they reach their majority (I took that to mean they will look about 13 or 14-year-old. During the Medieval period, once a child entered a teen, about the time of first menstruation for girls, she was considered an adult and able to marry). Based on that, you could calculate how old they would look if they were Men. Divide the Elf’s age by 4. At 38 Thranduil would have looked like 10-11 years old human child.
Tolkien said, “some hundred years would pass before they were full-grown”. I take that to mean that they would look 17-18 years old by the time they are 100 years in age (Men are in their full adult form at that age). Although Elves may look as they do not age, they do, just so slowly it is not discernable to Men. Mortals may not be able to tell, but Elves, I think, would be able to tell how old each other is.

Chapter End Notes

This coming week will be a busy one for me so I wouldn't be able to post until Thursday this week.

Next post, we look at what Sauron is doing before he joins the training.

Thank you so much for reading.
On his last day at the forge, Mairon remembers back to the time of his biggest humiliation and the last day of the War of Wrath. And within the warm and innocent eyes of a young Elfmaid, Mairon finds something unsought, something he had not felt before.

White City. April 8, Second Age 144

MAIRON pounded the molten metal. Today will be his last day at the forge. In two days’ time, he will be joining the cadet training and leave for the King’s Tower. As loath as he was to leave this forge, Mairon was curious to meet other Elves, especially the king. Although the parents of the Elf whose body Mairon possessed are members of the nobility, they obviously were not part of any ruling class and lived far from the palace and its occupants.

Among others, Mairon was curious about King Gil-galad. Until he came to the White City, Mairon had not known that there were two members of Finwe’s line who are still alive. As far as he knew, only two sons of Feanor survived, but they were lost after the Great War.

But what intrigued Mairon was that instead of Celebrimbor, who was older with more power and better claim to the throne, it was Gil-galad, a young whelp less than three centuries old and feeble as a newborn pup, who was the king.

Under Melkor’s leadership, it was the strong who led. Mairon followed Melkor because his master was the strongest. He had visions the other Valar lacked. And Melkor chose him, the strongest among all Maiar, to be his captain.

Mairon stopped and looked down at the metal bar he had pounded into a thin metal sheet.

Mairon had always been the strongest among Melkor’s followers, but he did not always succeed against their enemies. The fallen Maia ground his teeth at the remembered humiliation at the hands of the Sindarin whore and her mortal lover. And that blasted hound!

Mairon threw his hammer onto the work table.

After the battle with the Huan the wolfhound, Mairon fled, wounded and bleeding, to Taur-nu-Fuin in fear of his master’s wrath. But Melkor had been surprisingly nonchalant about it when Mairon had a mind enough to report the incident to warn his master.

“Let them come,” Melkor said, pulling up a corner of his lips with a wicked glint in his eyes. “Through them, I will get to seed more fields. If they are going to do the farming for me, why should I bring out my own hoes?”
Mairon had not known what Melkor meant at that time. His master was always steps ahead of him no matter how much Mairon tried to follow. It was not until Luthien and Beren escaped with one of the jewels that Mairon had understood that his master was referring to the Elven realm protected by Melian.

When Mairon had summoned the balrogs and other captains to pursue Luthien after she and her lover escaped with one of the three jewels on Melkor's crown, his master had stopped them.

“You need not send the captains, Mairon, nor you go yourself. Send out the goblins. The mere presence of the horde should be enough to give a semblance of a chase.”

“You do not wish to have your jewel returned, master?” Mairon had not realized that those jewels were dispensable.

“What need I of the jewels?” Melkor had laughed, his dark eyes glittering with mirth. “From the beginning, they were mere bait. And now they are all caught in my net. Feanor, I expected, but Melian I did not. I had something else planned for her, but this will do nicely. Now, Melian’s daughter and her lover are taking the doom with them into Doriath. By her and her lover’s hand, the Sindar shall also share in the Doom of Noldor and so much more.” With that he had laughed, his head thrown back, the stone walls ringing with his laughter.

And his master had been right. Doriath fell without them having to do anything but to watch. Within few decades, all Elven kingdoms fell and the whole of Beleriand had belonged to them.

But that brief respite from the battles did not last. Valar had come with a mighty army. Even now, Mairon wasn’t sure if his master had seen it all and knew what was coming.

Mairon sucked in his breath and leaned into the work table. The image of his master as he laughed sitting on his iron throne as the Valar’s army threw open the gates of Angband was still fresh in his mind.

After Valar’s army stormed into the Great Hall, Melkor had gotten up from his iron throne and welcomed them into the hall with open arms. Melkor was laughing, but his fellow Valar were not. This time, they did not bother to listen to Melkor, nor allowed him a chance to talk. They cut off Melkor’s hands and feet, then chained him before anyone could do anything.

Forced to kneel and watch, Mairon had been afraid. If they could do that to Melkor, the greatest and the most powerful of the Valar, then what could they not do to him? Fear ruled his heart then and Mairon had trembled.

It was then that Eonwe, Manwe’s herald and a fellow Maia, turned to him.

“Come back with me, Mairon. I will go with you to Lord Manwe. Take your due, let Lord Manwe judge you for all you have done and when you are thus cleansed, you and I can again be friends as we once were.”

And Mairon was moved. Before his allegiance to Melkor, Mairon had been great friends with Eonwe. And the fallen Maia truly did want to repent. He wanted to return to Valinor and be his old self again.

But before he took Eonwe’s offered hand, Mairon glanced at his master, the one whose face was hidden behind the curtain of his long dark hair. It was then Melkor lifted his face and looked at Mairon with his cool gray eyes. And in them, Mairon heard his master’s laughter which rang clear in his mind, spoken only to him.
Well, my dear Mairon. What will you do now? Will you go back to Valinor and kneel before Manwe and Aule? They might forgive you, you know, if you are sincere enough. Then everything will be as before, will it not, my Little Flame? It will be the same, perfect little world ordered exactly the way they want. You will be nothing but one of the many subjected to their whim. Or would you rather make this world into the perfection that you so desire? I have sown enough seeds in this world that given time, you will have power enough to order it the way you please. It will all be yours. But then, do you have what it takes?

Melkor had laughed aloud, throwing his head back, with that typical gleam of amusement in his eyes, then he was gone.

“Damn him!” Mairon jumped back at the jolt of pain, dropping the piece he was holding. The acrid odor of smoke and burned flesh assaulted his nose and Mairon grimaced.

“Brother!” someone gasped.

Mairon turned around to see Rodwen who looked at his hand with eyes round and filled with horror.

She ran over, grabbed his hand, then plunged it into the bowl of water that lay on top of the table next to him.

“You burned your fingers again,” she took out the hand, then started to blow gently on the fingers that started to form small cysts at the tips. She applied something she carried in a small glass jar she took from her leather bag. The pain calmed.

“Can you not take care?” Rodwen looked up, her clear gray eyes shiny with moisture. “You really should be careful with the fire, brother.”

Mairon looked down at Rodwen. She was a delicate creature, a wisp of womanhood. Even in this form, it would be so easy to break her with his one hand. But as he looked into the trusting clear eyes, unfamiliar warmth spread inside him. He could feel the warmth of her affection, the sting of grief for his pain. Her mind was open and full of concern for him. He was not used to being fussed over or being looked at with such open and unassuming adoration.

At first, such excess of emotion from her seemed contrived. Mairon could not believe that someone would care about another so whole-heartedly, to feel pain as if the other’s pain was her own. He had thought her actions only a guise but he had seen into her wide open mind. There was no deceit there; her thoughts were pure as the heat of the volcano and genuine as the power that flowed through his veins. And her tender concern touched him like things rarely did.

“Do not worry over me, sister. I’m fine. Only a minor burn. See?” he showed his fingers which were blistering, angry red streaks on the tips of his fingers. “They are not burned as badly as before.”

“I don’t know why you are forgetting about your fingers lately. You never used to burn your fingers. Maybe you are concentrating too hard? The things you create are beautiful, much more beautiful and wonderful than I have ever seen you make or seen anyone make, but I rather have you whole and healthy.”

“Now, you sound just like mother.” Mairon laughed.

This was all new to him, having a family, having people around him who cared what he did and was genuinely concerned about his well-being. Although part of him knew that it was only his shell that was loved, when Rodwen looked up at him with such warmth in her eyes, it made him, however briefly, wish he could stay in this form forever.
Back in Valinor, the closest to a family he had was Aule. The Vala watched over him, taught him many things, but the stern Aule rarely listened. He constantly lectured Mairon as to what not to do. It was Melkor who had given him the full freedom to do as he willed and trusted that Mairon will do them well.

Melkor was also the first one who had given him full rein, allowing him to experiment and push the boundary of knowledge. After Aule, Melkor had been the closest Mairon had, but his master had always been so above him. Despite allowing and encouraging Mairon to do what he wished, Melkor always managed to make him feel like a child.

“Come now, brother. Mother has prepared a farewell dinner for you. The whole family is coming to the dinner and spending the last day with you tomorrow.” Rodwen pulled at Mairon’s hand.

“I am hardly going far,” he protested, but Mairon was looking forward to the meal. It was another thing that was new to him—eating, especially the plants. The Orcs and Men he ruled over did not eat plants, only meat. But the Elves ate a surprising number of a variety of plants and Mairon found that he liked them.

“I am only going to the King’s Tower….”

“But we won’t get to see you often. Indulge our mother for tonight, brother. Ever since almost losing you, mother gets anxious about you. And, I do, too. Please come, dear brother. Everyone is waiting.”

Mairon smiled and allowed the young Elfmaid to lead him home, feeling the warmth of her hand in his.

*Feanor’s eldest sons* are Maedhros and Maglor, the only two of the seven sons of Feanor who survived to the end of War of Wrath. (Rest of the sons in order are: Celegorm, Caranthir, Curufin, and the twins, Amras and Amrod) After the war, bound to the oath made with their father to recover Silmarils, the two brothers stole the two jewels from the camp of Valar’s army who recovered the jewels from Melkor’s crown. They slew the guards who were guarding it and took hold of the jewels but roused the camp. The brothers were willing to fight to the death to keep the silmarils, but they were allowed to go. But the jewels did not tolerate the blood-stained hands of Maedhros and Maglor and burned them. Unable to endure the pain, Maedhros jumped into the fiery chasm with his silmaril and Maglor threw his into the ocean. It is said that Maglor still wanders the shores singing of the grief of Noldor.

**Jewels**—Three silmarils Feanor created with the light of two trees. It is considered to be Feanor’s greatest work. Melkor (aka Morgoth) slew Finwe, Feanor’s father, and fled with the gems to Middle Earth. To revenge his father’s death and to recover the jewels, Feanor defied the Valar, made oath that sealed their doom and left Valinor, leading Noldor to Middle Earth. The battles fought during the First Age are called ‘War of the Great Jewels’ for this reason.

**Hound**—Huan, the wolfhound of Valinor belonging to Vala Orome the hunter. It was given to Celegorm, the third son of Feanor, in Valinor. It followed its master to Middle Earth when Celegorm left Valinor. Huan was given a special gift by Valar where he can speak three times during his lifetime. When Luthien was captured by Curufin and Celegorm, Huan spoke for the first time and helped Luthien escape. He accompanied Luthien to Sauron’s tower and helped her rescue Beren,
killing all the werewolves and defeating Sauron who fled. Huan returned to Celegorm, but encountered Luthien and Beren once again and when Curufin tried to kill Luthien, Huan turned against his master and defended her. He then brought skins of Sauron’s monsters for Luthien and Beren to use as a disguise to gain entrance to Angband. Huan died from injury after defeating Carcharoth, Morgoth’s werewolf.

**Manwe**—(Quenya, *Blessed One*) also known as Sulimo (Quenya, *Breather*) and Aran Einior (Sindarin, *Elder King*) Lord of the Valar and all of Arda, brother of Melkor and with Melkor the eldest of Ainur (refers to both Valar and Maiar) created by Eru Illuvatar (The One God)

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter: Nightmare—His first night at the White City, a dream that will haunt him in the days to come, and a glimpse into the youth Thranduil had been just before the tragedy at Sirion
Nightmare

Chapter Summary

On their ride to the White City, Aron asks Thranduil about Elrond. And Thranduil's first night in the White City is filled with the old shadows he thought he had left behind at Sirion.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Lindon. April 9, Second Age 144

THRANDUIL rode out of the mansion in the forest with Aron early yesterday morning. From the mansion, at a leisurely pace, it was two day’s ride to the White City. Although they could have arrived in the city by mid-afternoon, they lingered in the forest where they had camped for the night. Glineth had packed them a sumptuous feast with cold meats and stewed fruits, but Thranduil could not eat them. For once, Aron did not push.

"Where will we be staying tonight?" Thranduil asked as the White City loomed before them. The sun was sinking, but he wasn't sure if he wanted to sleep among the Noldor any earlier than he had to.

"Lord Cirdan keeps a small manor within the White City where he houses his people when visiting the king," Aron said with a knowing smile. "It is staffed with our people. My uncle thought you would rather prefer to sleep there before heading to the training field tomorrow morning."

Although he was Lord Istuion’s sister son, Aron looked very much like Lord Istuion, with the Sindarin lord’s white hair and silver eyes. They even shared the same temperament, gentle and warm as a summer wind.

For the past fifty years or so, Aron had left Thranduil and his father and was at Grey Havens where he completed his training as a captain of the guards. As one of the captains for Lord Cirdan’s guards, Aron has chosen to remain in Grey Haven when Oropher left which surprised Thranduil as Aron, like Lord Istuion, was more a family than just a friend.

"Are you prepared, Thranduil?" Aron asked. “You know that Noldor are the best warriors in Middle Earth?"

“I will be with the cadets, Aron, not full-fledged warriors,” Thranduil said nonchalantly.

“But unlike the Sindar, they train earlier, soon after reaching their one hundred years of age.”

“And? I have been training since I reached my majority.”

“That may be true, but you have not had a training in a structured environment and the training will be unfamiliar to you. These youngsters received training in this environment for decades. But more importantly, these cadets are sons of Noldorin nobility from Valinor and are the best among the youth of Lindon.”
“That may be so, but all the cadets are born in Middle Earth. You think they are superior to me?”

“You are far more experienced but don’t underestimate them, Thranduil. Not all, but some of them will be as good as one of the seasoned warriors from Doriath, maybe not as experienced, but as well trained. I have trained with some of them. These Noldor are very skilled.”

“They may beat me with swords, but with a bow…”

“Yes, I have seen your skill at Grey Haven. I don’t think there will be many here that can match your skill with a bow, not even among the full-fledged warriors. But, this is about training as an officer, not about being a Bowman. They will expect you to be proficient in all the weapons, not just with a bow.”

“So, you feel I do not qualify?”

“I’m not saying that. Your instincts are honed in the wild, actually fighting orcs and trolls. These cadets, as good as they are, have been trained in a training ground. I have no doubt as to your fighting instincts. But, your skills on individual weapons…” Aron sighed with a shake of his head. “Noldor are superior when it comes to swords and spears although not so much with bows. But, you are Uncle Oropher’s son. If you are anything like Thranarin—“ Aron stopped and took in a sharp breath.

Thranduil bit down a gasp as a sharp pain swept through him.

Even after all these years, hearing his brother’s name said aloud brought on the pain anew. When the sting of the ache passed, Thranduil turned to see Aron looking away, his eyes haunted and dark with the remembered pain.

Thranduil reached out and squeezed Aron’s hand. Thranarin may have been his brother, but he was also Aron’s sworn brother. Aron’s bond with Thranarin had been as strong as his. And when Thranarin fell at Menegroth, Aron was there, had seen what Thranduil had seen. If anyone felt Thranduil’s loss, it was Aron.

Aron squeezed back and nodded, his emotion in control now.

Older than Thranduil by two and half centuries, Aron was born around the same time as Thranarin. He had trained with Thranduil’s brother and joined the Royal Guards at the same time. Along with one other, Durion, who followed Thranduil’s father to the east, the three of them had been inseparable until the day Noldor attacked Menegroth.

“I just don’t want you to be crushed.” Aron managed a smile. “Just be ready for some bruises on your ego, Thranduil. I had some sound beatings when I first started and…” Aron hesitated. “Noldor have a tendency to think they are better-- in all things. And mostly, they are.”

“Well, we’ll see about that,” Thranduil scoffed aloud.

“Do show them, Thranduil.” Aron smiled brightly now. “I can’t wait to see what you will do to those unfortunate souls that get in your way.”

Thranduil allowed his lips to curve up. Aron knew him well.

“You want me to come with you tomorrow morning?” Aron asked.

“I think I can find my way to a training ground, Aron.” Thranduil rolled his eyes.
Aron smiled with a nod.

"By the way, I got you a sea barrel from Grey Haven. It will be delivered to the manor house in the city. When you have time off from training, you can try it out. I remember how much you enjoyed them. It is for your begotten day present."

Thranduil smiled, something he did rarely these days. "Indeed? What am I going to do with a sea barrel, Aron?"

Aron shrugged. "Well, there is a lake under the King’s Tower and the water runs all the way down to Gulf of Lhune. I am sure you'll find something. You always do." Then, his expression tightened.

"Talking of Grey Haven, what did you think of Elrond?"

Thranduil quickly turned away. He was not ready to talk about Elrond yet. The ache that started the day he met Elrond at Gray Haven flared up into a painful throb.

"What is there to think about? He’s a Noldo," said Thranduil in a measured tone.

Feeling Aron’s eyes scanning his face, Thranduil tightened the rein over his emotions.

"He looks old. At least, now, he will not age like a mortal. Did you know that although Elrond chose to be one of us, his brother chose to remain a mortal?" Aron asked.

Thranduil turned to Aron.

"Why would Elros do that? What will happen when he age and die? How could they choose to be apart? There are none but two of them left."

Aron shrugged.

"Only Valar knows. Elros left for the island with the Edain after the war."

"That means Elrond is alone. He has no one now, no parents, no brother…” like me, Thranduil sighed. "Elwing wouldn’t have liked that. After what happened at Sirion…” Thranduil said no more, but shook his head.

"I doubt Elrond remembers much of the events at Sirion. Little Elwing did not remember any of it,” Aron said.

Thranduil thought back to the day at Grey Haven when Lord Cirdan introduced the grown up Elrond. Lord Istuion had mentioned that Elrond will be there and Thranduil had steeled himself. He did not expect Elrond to remember him, having seen how little Elwing remembered of her childhood, but it still hurt when Elrond’s gray eyes looked at him without any hint of recognition.

And Little Elrond was no longer little. He had grown into a noble young lord. His twilight black hair and the sculpted chin and cheeks reminded Thranduil of King Dior who was considered beautiful even among the Elves. And Elrond’s gray eyes were very much like Elwing’s, full of warmth. But there was something definitely mannish about him although Thranduil had not met many men. Maybe it was his complexion. All Elves have pale skin, but Elrond was darker than most Elves and more muscular. Like Earendil. Thranduil wondered if Elrond was as hairy as his father. Earendil had hairs in places Thranduil had never thought was possible to have. Thranduil grimaced.

"Thranduil?" Aron broke into Thranduil’s thoughts.
“Yes, he looks older,” Thranduil mumbled. “Elrond looks older than you, Aron. It seems everybody is passing me and leaving me behind.”

“Well, you are our youngest.” Aron laughed and patted Thranduil’s back, then squeezed his shoulder, looking at him with eyes full of sympathy. “He may not remember you, but you remember him. That should be enough.”

“It is not as if I expected anything else.” Thranduil scoffed.

Aron looked unconvinced, but nodded and asked again, “Are you sure you don’t want me to come with you tomorrow?”

“No.”

“Then, I may leave early. Do not be alarmed if you do not see me in the morning.”

The mouth of River Sirion. May 25, First Age 538

The beach was empty as always. This area was not far from the Elven settlements, but no one ventured out here. The beach was hidden as it lay under a sheer cliff which jutted out above him. Standing above the cliff, one could not see the sandy area underneath. It wouldn't be until Thranduil was past the shadow of the rock above him that anyone on the top of the cliff could see him.

This was his secret place, the one which he shared with no one, not even with Aron and Durion, not that they had much time for him. Although Thranduil reached his majority twenty years ago, warriors took every opportunity to leave him behind. And when he is included, Thranduil was always kept at the back, away from the dangers where he was allowed to pick off orcs from distance. He knew that he was too young to be initiated into the Warrior Order, but times were different now. They needed every abled body who could wield a sword or a bow. Dangers around them have grown while the number of warriors diminished. So many of the warriors had been lost at Menegroth.

But while he convinced his father to train him as soon as he turned his majority, even now, warriors kept him away from the heat of the battle whenever they could. But, how was he to learn to be a warrior when he was always pushed behind the backs of others whenever there was any skirmish worth mentioning.

This time, too, while Lord Amdir took Aron and Durion to meet with the warriors from Noldorin settlement to stop orcs that were encroaching too near their haven, Thranduil had been excluded.

His mother, at least, had given up insisting that Thranduil become a healer. Not only is the healing art something Thranduil had no talent in, he wasn’t even remotely interested in it. He had no idea why his mother had it in mind to make him a healer.

Tamping down the mounting frustration, Thranduil urged his horse into a run. He was not allowed outside the living quarters during evenings, certainly not around marshes and definitely not in the open areas like this beach, but Thranduil figured what his parents did not know wouldn't hurt them or him. At least, if they found him missing in the morning, they wouldn’t be as alarmed as they would be to find him missing after the dark.

So far, the Dark Lord’s creatures had not found their settlements, but there were dangers all around them, especially at night. But at times like this when the sun was rising and everything glittered
golden, Thranduil felt it was still like those old times, back in Doriath, under the beech trees of the Forest of Neldoreth.

As Thranduil felt Brennil stretch her neck and thunder down the firmly packed sand, trembling with excitement at being allowed to run freely, he closed his eyes and spread his arms wide and felt the winds rush past him, whipping his hair and face. He was sure that if he could fly, it would feel like this.

He whooped at the top of his lung, as loud as he could and laughed out aloud. This was the only place he could do this as the noise of the waves and wind masked all the sounds he made, no matter how loud.

All the anguish he felt seems to disappear at this moment, all his frustrations and anger that he wanted to hide from his father, and especially from his gentle mother.

Feeling better, Thranduil rode back up the narrow track between the two large boulders. The entry to the beach area was hidden by tall grasses that grew abundant here. Thranduil had found this pass only two moons ago, tracking a game.

Just as he got up onto the grassland by the bank of the river that flowed down into the sea, Thranduil looked up towards the white tower of Arvernien as he always did when he was here. The Noldorin settlement where Elwing lived with her husband Earendil and the refugees from Gondolin was built on a top of a cliff, westward from the Sindarin settlement headed by his father.

There was something heavy laden over its sky, something dark.

Curious, Thranduil rode towards it. Elwing’s mansion was only an hour of hard ride away.

Then, he saw them, tall spears and red armors glistening in the sky that was just now beginning to lighten. The sun was not yet over the Ered Luin (Blue Mountains) but he could see the glittering red armors and helms trimmed in gold. When he was close, but far enough to not gather their notice, Thranduil got off his horse and crept towards the soldiers. If there was one thing he had learned from his father’s warriors, it was stealth. And these red-armored soldiers were obviously Noldor and Thranduil had learned to be wary of them.

When Thranduil saw the device on the armors glinting on the faint dawn, he froze. He could never forget it: Eight flames with eight rays shooting out of a jewel in the middle. A device of Feanor.

Thranduil’s heart pounded like a war drum.

White City. April 10, Second Age 144

"Thranduil! Thranduil!"

Someone called, but Thranduil could not turn away from the scene before him.

Thousands of glittering spears and those warriors in red and gold armor turned suddenly and they faced Thranduil. Their eyes radiated with piercing light and their spears ran red with blood as the soldiers thumped end of their spears on the ground. The sound was deafening as the ground
trembled beneath the young Sinda.

And there was blood.

There was so much blood they flowed like a river all around him, around Thranduil’s feet. Dark claw of fear gripped Thranduil’s heart, its ragged iron nails tore through his tender flesh. Thranduil gulped down air. He wanted to scream. He wanted to run, but hands, hundreds of hands, stained red with blood sprouted out of the ground, through the river of blood and closed around his mouth, his neck and his feet. They held onto his arms and his legs and dragged him down into the river of blood.

Thranduil choked and gasped for air, unable to scream or struggle.

Someone shook him hard and the world before him began to fade. But the red blood did not. His lung screamed and his chest tightened painfully. He was drowning.

“Thranduil!”

A painful slap on the face ripped Thranduil from the blood stained hands. Thranduil opened his eyes wide, gasping for air. His body shook like a tree in the storm as his lungs burned. He couldn’t breathe.

“Breathe, Thranduil. Breathe. It was just a dream, my friend. Just a dream,” Aron’s voice soothed as he grasped Thranduil’s face, his hands cool and comforting against the fever that ran through him.

When air filled his lungs, Thranduil looked up and saw Aron’s dark silver eyes looking down at him. He sat up on the bed and willed his trembling to stop. Yet, his hands still shook. Aron got up and brought a glass and pressed it to Thranduil’s lips. Even now, his chest burned as if he had been drowning.

“Drink!” the older Elf commanded.

Thranduil turned away. He had not wanted Aron to know. Aron was so over-protective, as bad as Glineth, sometimes worse.

“Drink now, Thranduil,” Aron’s usually gentle voice was filled with steel. Thranduil rolled his eyes, but took the glass and drank.

“When did you start having nightmares again?” Aron asked, his face pale and drawn.

“I’m fine.”

“Thranduil…”

Thranduil got out of bed. “Stop coddling me! I’m not a child. In two days, I will be 266 years old, not a child of 38. I can handle one nightmare.”

Aron frowned at him, but Thranduil stared back; he will not back down. For too long, too many have sacrificed for him. No more.

Aron sighed. “If there is--”

“I know. I know. If there is anything that doesn’t seem right, I am to let you, rather, to let your uncle know. Satisfied?”
Aron nodded.

“That, then, go, before you are late on account of me. I can find my way around. If my brother has not told you, I can speak Quenya as well as I speak Sindarin.”

Aron’s eyes widened.

That was no surprise. Quenya was forbidden to be used or spoken in Doriath. But his mother had not agreed that knowledge should be forbidden, and his father had agreed. And within the security of their own chambers, his mother had taught Thranduil and his brother.

“I don’t think anyone here speaks Quenya anymore.” Aron smiled after a while. "Never mind that. Are you sure you don’t want me to come with you?"

“I’m sure.”

Aron held Thranduil’s eyes for a moment, but in the end, he nodded.

“Then, I'm off to see Lord Erestor. I will be breaking my fast with him. Don’t forget to eat before you leave. It will be a long day. Just look for the tallest white tower on the top of the hill. You can’t miss it.”

______________________________

**Edain**— 3 Houses of men who helped Elves in their wars against Morgoth. In order to thank them for their loyalty and assistance, Valar granted them an island near Valinor.

**the Island**— Refers to Numenor which Valar gave Edain for their help in the fight against Morgoth. Elros was its first king. Aragorn's ancestors are from Numenor and are descended from Elos.

**On Elrond’s Age** —Elrond was born in the First Age 532. After the War of Wrath ended in FA 587, Elrond was 55 years old and a mortal when he was given a choice to become an Elf. But as a Peredhel, Elrond would have aged much slower than other Men. Tolkien said Aragorn as a Numanorean had a longer life than most men. Tolkien considered Aragorn to be at the prime of his life, a man of about 45 years old at the time of LOTR which is about half his age of 87 years. So if Elrond was like Aragorn, he would have looked like 27 year old when he was 55. But, unlike Aragorn, Elrond has undiluted Elven blood in his veins which would have given him some advantage of couple years, I think. Still, Elrond would have *looked* older than Thranduil and Aron despite being younger.

**Arvernien**—Southernmost tip of Beleriand where Cirdan established a secret haven for the Elves running from Morgoth. In FA 506 Feanor’s sons attacked Menegroth and Sindarin refugees fled here and established a settlement by the Mouth of Sirion. They were joined by the refugees from Gondolin in FA 511 (they took close to a year to travel to the haven).

**Quenya**— Ancient Elven language used by those who live in Valinor. Noldor spoke Quenya until Thingol forbid its use upon learning of the first kin-slaying of his brother Olwe's people by Noldor. Afterward, Noldor adopted Sindarin and Quenya is used only for ceremonies. (Think of Quenya as Latin for Elves)
Next week: Chapter 12 Lost
Glimpse of Minas Silivren, the Glittering White City of Lindon
Lost

Chapter Summary

The dream he had during the night had affected him more than he realized and Thranduil found himself lost among the myriad of streets in the White City. Can he find his way?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

White City. April 10, Second Age 144

THRANDUIL stood outside Lord Cirdan’s manor. The darkness was fading, the moon pale in the sky. Yet it was still too early and there was no one else around.

With his pack on his shoulder, Thranduil looked up at the tall tower on the top of the hill. The White City was built on a large hill overlooking Gulf of Lune to the south with the Blue Mountains to the east. Lord Cirdan’s manor where Thranduil stayed was located just within the walls of the White City by the South Gate.

Once outside the manor, a street paved with white stones steadily headed all the way around the large hill and on top of that hill was a massive white tower, taller than any other structures in the city.

Not seeing anyone around, Thranduil headed up the road. Now that he was out of the manor, he was famished. He realized that he had not eaten anything since he left the mansion two days ago. Last night, being in the Noldorin city had made him uneasy and he had no appetite. And, this morning the blood in his dreams had made his stomach queasy and could not eat. Thranduil hoped that they served good meals for the cadets. He could even eat an Orc now. Then he grimaced. Well, maybe not an Orc.

As he walked up the road, Thranduil noticed that on each side of the road there were many smaller side streets and on each side of the streets were rows of houses built with white stones with pointed roofs and bright blue tiles. Tall, arched windows with elaborately curved window sills crafted in white wood were everywhere.

Some of the houses were large with sweeping stairs. Many of them were decorated with tear-shaped amber lights under the eaves of their roofs, some with silver chimes. Under the approaching dawn, the houses glowed pale. And every time wind swept between the houses, a soft sound of tinkering music wafted through the still empty streets.

The chimes reminded Thranduil of his childhood home in Menegroth with its silver fountains and chimes made of crystals. Instead of amber lights, they hung golden lanterns among the carven branches of stone white trees where Lady Melian’s nightingales sang sweet songs amongst the bejeweled leaves.

His heart constricted. An iron claw that held his heart ever since they left the burning Menegroth tightened and dug into the tender part of his heart as his thoughts flitted toward the Western Garden of Menegroth and his beloved beech tree. They were all gone now, deep in the bottom of the ocean.
The claw dug deeper.

Thranduil’s throat thickened as he stood in the middle of the empty streets listening to the silver chimes and their haunting songs.

Just then, a peal of laughter rang through the empty streets. Thranduil turned to watch two young Elves, barely past their majority, run past him, laughing. Their dark hair danced in the early morning wind, their laughter clear and joyful. They ran to someone who sauntered out of one of the houses ahead of Thranduil. Then, the two youngsters squealed with delight before running down the street. A tall Elf with dark hair stood watching the two youngsters, shaking his head. He wore a light tan colored tunic, sleeves rolled up over a well-muscled arm.

Thranduil approached the Elf having decided to ask for the direction. Among the myriad of roads and streets, there must be one road that ran directly to the King’s Tower.

“Excuse me. May I ask what is the best road to take to the King’s Tower?” Thranduil asked.

The Elf turned around to face Thranduil. The light in his eyes was pale and keen, making his eyes glow in the approaching dawn.

Thranduil widened his eyes and stumbled back. Ice laced down his spine.

“Are you all right, young master?” the Elf asked.

Thranduil’s heart thumped loud and painful as the iron claw clamped over it.

The Elf reached out and touched Thranduil’s arm. The skin of his arm where the Noldo touched burned. Thranduil snatched his arm from the Elf, then turned and ran.

“Did you not want to know how to get to the King’s Tower?” the Noldorin Elf called from behind him. Thranduil didn’t turn back but slowed his steps and kept walking, biting down the desire to run. He was no coward; he will not run.

His heart thumped so loud, it blocked everything else.

_Do not let fear rule you._ Thranduil repeated his mother’s words to him. His mother had taken decades instilling that into him. He will not let her down. Thranduil clenched his back teeth and walked on even though he didn’t know where he was going. The street paved with white stones curved. He followed up the road, then down and up again until the street curved again.

The tower loomed high up above him. He looked up at the sky. It was so much brighter now and more people were on the streets.

Thranduil picked up his pace and ran up the white road. The road went ever higher. Then he stopped abruptly.

In front of him was a wide-open area with white stone walls that came up to his thighs. It was a dead end. He was high up now and he could see a tall dark mountain rising ahead of him and behind the mountain, the sun was rising and the sky was blood red.

Thranduil took in a sharp breath as his chest heaved. The claw squeezed and his heart tightened as if it will burst.

_So much blood._
He turned to stone. His feet grew roots and burrowed into the spot. His heart thumped faster, louder, frantic war drums in his ears. His breath hitched and became painful. As he watched, frozen and mute, the sun rose higher and the red began to bleed away.

The rising sun tinted the entire sky golden. The white stones in front of him glittered like silken robes of an Elven lady as the golden light turned white and the sun rose fully out of the shadows of the mountain.

Thranduil stood watching the sun and felt his heart slow into a soft thump. His head that has been pounding a moment ago, cleared.

He closed his eyes and let out a long breath, and stretched out his senses to feel the air around him. He dug deep inside him as his mother taught him. Ever since he decided to stay in Lindon, he was on edge. He had allowed emotions to affect him, snapping at people who didn’t deserve them. How childish was he?

Thranduil took in another breath. Keep your fears in control, Thranduil reminded himself. You have fought this shadow once. Back in Sirion, after Menegroth. But, then, he had his sun and the moon back then. Now, there were no lights left in this world for him. Thranduil opened his eyes wide and glared at the shadows dispersing now. But I am no longer a child. I am stronger now. Over hundred years he had struggled in the wild east, running through the grasslands, venturing through the unknown passes among the mountains and strange forests, and fighting under the dark gray nights in the cold of the north. Through all that he fought his shadows and kept them at bay. He can do it again.

He fisted his hands. He squared his shoulders and turned around.

Then it struck him; the line-up was at sunrise. Cursing softly, Thranduil looked around. Ahead of him, the stone roadway headed up higher and on the pinnacle stood a stone tower glowing bright white in the rising sun.

The King’s Tower.

Thranduil quickened his pace as more people began to appear on the streets. Soon, one, then three then six people began to pass him. Thranduil felt himself stiffen, heat rise in his body. Their eyes didn’t seem to glow in the full light of the sun, but Thranduil couldn’t help the shudder that ran through him as he passed more and more Noldorin Elves on the street.

Willing his stiff body to move, Thranduil hastened, his eyes fixed on the white tower. In a few moments, the street he was on came to a wide avenue. The avenue headed straight up to the King’s Tower.

Up close, the King’s Tower was a colossal structure built atop a low grassy hill surrounded by a channel of water.

The road he was on led to the King’s Tower through a white bridge behind massive double gates. The gates were wide open.

On each side of the gate was a large stone carving of a guard in great helm and armor holding a spear in one hand and a shield in the other. Carved in white granite, it glowed golden as the morning sun shone down on them. They were about five stories tall on each side of the great gate and beneath each statue stood a real-life guard in the golden armor reminiscent of those of Gondolin guards Thranduil had seen at Arvernien. Their golden helms were tall and curved and decorated with blue gems. On their shoulders, they wore deep blue cloaks that fell about their feet. And from their eyes,
lights keener than starlight shone. Thranduil stood still, unable to take his eyes off the two guards and the light in their eyes.

“What is your business at the King’s Tower?” one of the guards asked when Thranduil who stood rooted in front of them did not speak.

“I…I am here to train,” Thranduil managed, relieved that his voice did not shake.

The other guard looked up at the sky.

“You are late, are you not?”

“Well, I am here now,” Thranduil lifted his chin and stood back, his shoulder squared, doing his best to relax his stiffening muscles.

The guard who spoke first frowned then looked at the other.

“The gate that accesses the training fields is at the end of the garden in the middle of the palace. The training fields are adjacent to West Courtyard which is directly below the King’s Tower. I would run if I were you, young one,” said the other.

Willing his stiff legs to move, Thranduil ran over the bridge and through the garden which led to a large courtyard paved with white stones. At the far end of the courtyard was large stairs and each side of the stairs was a balustrade in elaborate patterns made of white wood.

By the stairs that led downward stood a lone figure, a tall and thin Elf with long dark hair in elaborate warrior braids. As Thranduil approached the stairs, the Elf turned to face Thranduil.

“Are you here to train?” He wore a golden leather armor instead of gold plated armor worn by the guards by the gate. But he was without the blue cloak. He, too, was a Noldo from Valinor and his eyes were bright with fierce light. Thranduil swallowed hard and nodded stiffly. Instead of the Elf's eyes, Thranduil tried to focus on the crooked nose of the Elf.

Elves do not have scars or any type of blemish on their skin. Unlike mortals, on Elves, scars healed completely over time and did not leave any marks. But, this Elf must have had his nose broken at one time and it healed without being set properly.

“You are late! Do you think this is some play gathering? Drop your pack and run! Everyone is already lined up,” the Elf barked pointing to the stairs.

Taken back by the command, Thranduil dropped his pack and ran down the stairs.

But at the first landing, he stopped from running despite himself. The training fields were immense. Wide as the ocean, three levels of fields spread out before him.

The stairs from the landing where Thranduil stood led to the first level which was a wide open field inlaid with flat slabs of rock. Below that was another field that was twice the size of the first one and covered in short grass. And the field at the bottom was the largest open field Thranduil had ever seen. The ground of the last one was rough with uneven surfaces. From where he stood, just outside the King’s Tower, he could see all three fields below him. The smallest field just down the stairs could hold about 2-3000 soldiers and each field lower could easily hold twice the one above it.

There were many Elves on each of those three training grounds, some doing drills, others practicing simulated battles.
Thranduil looked around. It would take all day to find where he had to go, then he saw that the field just below him held Elves who were not yet in uniform.

Thranduil took in a big breath and walked down the rest of the stairs to approach the Elves on the first field.

*I may be late, but I made it. How much harder can this be?* Thranduil comforted himself.

But, he was wrong. The day was just about to get worse. Much worse.

Chapter End Notes

Next
Chapter 13: Lord Gilmagor--Elrond feels guilty
Chapter Summary

Elrond waits for Thranduil on their first day of the officer training. Thranduil is late and trying to defend the young Sinda, Elrond finds himself in trouble that he did not want.

Chapter Notes

This chapter is bit long so I had to cut it into two parts.

White City. April 10, Second Age 144

ELROND surveyed the cadets around him. With Spring, all three training fields were filled with warriors doing drills, practicing new skills or testing out new arms.

Now that there was no Dark Lord and his minions scattered, more Elves were having children. But this year was the first time in this Age that they were able to recruit enough youth who were old enough. Despite the peace of the times, the king wanted a well-trained army.

“Elrond, did you hear about the Lord Commander?” Belegor asked. Excitement rose from his companion like ocean waves.

Belegor and the many of the cadets here were those born at the beginning of the Age and Elrond have been training with them for several decades now.

From this group, top three will be given a choice to join any division such as the coveted position within the royal guards, even a chance to train with the elite group of warriors known as Silmacil. Although all of them will be given a command of their own squad after the training, there was also a rumor that Lord Gilmagor, the Lord Commander of the King’s Army, will train the cadets himself.

“Do you think it is true that Lord Gilmagor will train us?” Belegor asked.

“I do not know, but the king believes so. But, I don’t think Lord Gilmagor will instruct all of us from the beginning. Only the top cadets will have that honor,” Elrond said, his eyes scanning the entrance to the practice field. Where was this Sinda? Elrond glanced at the brightening sky.

“Perfect. That would mean we will be among the chosen,” Belegor said, lifting his chin as he, too, looked about him. “You and I are the best.”

“Perhaps,” Elrond said.

I should have visited Lord Cirdan’s mansion in the woods. Elrond sighed. He knew the king expected him to befriend Thranduil during the Sinda’s stay in Lindon, but Elrond had talked himself out of the visit. At the Grey Havens, Thranduil made it clear that he wanted to be left alone. It was
never said aloud, but the message had been unmistakable.

Elrond looked at the sky again. The sun was rising. The Sinda should have been here already.

“Do you know what will they be testing us on? I heard they will test us today to see how much we know,” Belegor said.

Elrond shook his head.

They have not been given a detail as to what the officer training entailed. Elrond heard many different versions, though. Gil-galad’s army consisted of old warriors from different realms of First Age and they all had their own way of training their new recruits.

Elrond looked at Belegor. “Once the drill masters are here, I am sure they will give us the details.”

Just then, three warriors in golden leather armor over blue tunic approached the group. Even just by looking at the way they walked, no one could mistake them for anyone other than warriors. There was power in their confident strides. All three of them wore their warrior braids with pleats on them showing that they are officers.

The sun rose out of the mountains and the sky was bright. They were not the same officers who had trained him and many of the cadets, but Elrond recognized the tallest of the three. He was a lieutenant in the Royal Guards responsible for the protection of the king and highly respected among the warriors.

“Gather up!” the lieutenant said. “Six columns.”

Immediately cadets separated into equal numbers to form six columns in front of the officers.

“First, I am Lieutenant Gwendir. To my left is Officer Bellion and to my right, Officer Malthorn. We will be your instructors as well as judges. I understand most of you have been training here for some time. Then, I will assume you are aware of the rules, but we do have someone new joining us,” Officer Gwendir said looking at Officer Bellion.

“Sir! We are missing one. There are only twenty-three of them,” Officer Bellion said.

A murmur went through those gathered.

“Is it true that Lord Gilmagor will be training us?” Someone at the back of the line spoke up.

“It seems some of you have forgotten the basic rules. What is Rule 3, cadet?”

“No! Do not speak until spoken to. Sir!”

“If you know the rule, I suggest you follow it,” Gwendir said then looked around at the rest. “Once the training starts, any disobedience will not be tolerated. Understood?”

“Yes, sir!” Cadets said in unison.

“Now then, who is the new face. Let us see him,” said Lieutenant Gwendir as he looked around the cadets.

No one moved forward and a murmur ran through the cadets as they looked around themselves. Elrond grimaced when he saw, behind the shoulder of the lieutenant, someone coming down from
the top of the staircase that connected King’s Tower to the training fields.

There was no mistaking who it was. None now lived that Elrond had seen who had the glittering gold hair like Thranduil other than Lady Galadriel although his was much paler in shade.

And there Thranduil was, his waist long hair loose and without any warrior braids, shimmering like a spray of water all about him. Elrond thought Thranduil did not want to be noticed. That was the feeling Elrond got when he first met the Sinda, but if the fool truly did not want to be noticed, he certainly wasn’t doing a good job avoiding attention.

As Thranduil walked down the stairs, Elrond felt the waves of curiosity rising in other cadets as they, too, caught sight of the Sinda. Once at the bottom of the stairs, Thranduil stood at the edge of the training ground, obviously unsure as to where he needed to go. The blond Sinda scanned the crowd. When his cool eyes fell on Elrond, Thranduil squared his shoulders and walked toward the lieutenant who stood in front of the cadets.

It was then that the feelings of excitement suddenly shot up all around him bombarding Elrond with a flurry of emotion. Even when he was trying his best to control his senses, not wishing to intrude on others, it was hard to ignore such explosion of excitement. Elrond looked up at Thranduil as the tall Sinda approached, then bit down a groan when he saw another figure far behind the blond Sinda. It was Lord Gilmagor, the master swordsman and Lord Commander of the King’s Army.

Because this was the first day of the officer training, Elrond had not expected the Lord Commander to be here. Known as the greatest swordmaster of the known world, it is said that while Feanor first invented armor and weapons, Lord Gilmagor developed the Way of the Sword and what is now known as the Noldorin Style. It is believed that all the best swordsmen among Noldor, and all those from House of Finwe, were instructed by him.

He was also the king’s teacher and Gil-galad respectfully deferred to him in all military matters. Elrond knew that Gil-galad had wanted Lord Gilmagor to train him. But even the king did not command the swordmaster. Elrond understood that if he wanted to learn from Lord Gilmagor, he had to earn that honor.

And now Lord Gilmagor was here. Elrond could understand the tenseness mixed with excitement from those cadets around him. He knew that every one of them wanted to have Lord Gilmagor as their instructor.

Thranduil approached the lieutenant, oblivious of the figure behind him. Lord Gilmagor stopped far back.

Lieutenant Gwendir whirled around to face Thranduil when the blond Sinda cleared his throat.

“Yes?” Gwendir said to Thranduil.

The blond Sinda looked taken back at first. For a brief moment, a strong wave of unease emanated from Thranduil, but before Elrond could grasp the emotion, Thranduil seemed to have regained composure and took control, blocking Elrond’s senses from reading any further.

“I am here to train,” Thranduil said after clearing his throat once again.

“Have you been informed that the line-up was at sunrise.”

“Yes.”

“Did your sun rise later than theirs?” Gwendir said, tilting his head towards the cadets in front of
him.

A laughter swept through the cadets. Thranduil’s face flushed, but he did not look away.

“No, it did not,” Thranduil said.

Gwendir waited but Thranduil said no more.

“No excuse for being late?” Lord Gilmagor who had stood far back from them was suddenly in front of them. Gwendir straightened, thumped his heart twice with his fist and stepped back, giving his spot to Lord Gilmagor.

“None,” Thranduil said as he faced the elder Elf.

Elrond frowned when Thranduil seemed to shrink back from the swordmaster. The Sinda stood back, his body tense and rigid, so different from the confident and cold youth Elrond saw at the Grey Haven.

“Good. Because there is no excuse for being late.” Gilmagor turned to the group. “Am I clear?” Lord Commander’s voice was filled with steel. It was a powerful voice yet with the resonance of a river flowing peacefully under sunlight.

“Yes, sir!” Everyone shouted out.

“Name.” Gilmagor turned to Thranduil.

Thranduil swallowed hard, but said, “Thranduil Oropherion.”

“Son of Oropher? You are a Sinda?” Gilmagor frowned.

As soon as Gilmagor said the word “Sinda” Elrond felt the curiosity and interest of the cadets for Thranduil deflate, a ball that just got punctured.

Elrond swallowed the bitterness in his mouth. He had expected such reaction, but he was disappointed at the immediate cooling of the interests of the warriors around him based on the knowledge that the newcomer is a Sinda.

Most of the cadets chosen to become officers are the offspring of Noldorin nobles although many of the incoming soldiers are Sindar and the number of Sindar that lived in Lindon far outnumbered that of the Noldor.

It is true that most Noldor are superior when it comes to warfare and handling of weapons. Even so, Elrond knew there was a definite tendency among the Noldor to look down at Sindar, especially Nandor, as inferior. It was never said or spoken outright, but Elrond felt it as surely as a winter wind that chilled his skin even when it could not be seen.

“Well, Thranduil Oropherion. Lateness does not exist among my soldiers. That is immediate disqualification…” Gilmagor’s voice rang out.

Elrond wished he had taken the time to talk to the blond Sinda. Had he reminded Thranduil, maybe this would not have happened. Although Elrond had no love for Thranduil, he also disliked the snicker that rippled through the cadets. The moment Gilmagor let it known that Thranduil is a Sinda, he was labeled inferior by the Noldorin cadets.

“My lord,” Elrond stepped out of the line where he was standing. “Thranduil is new to—” But his
“Did I tell you to speak, Earendilion?” Gilmagor turned his cool gray eyes toward Elrond. Elrond felt his body heat up. The Lord Commander’s steel gray eyes bore into Elrond and he felt ice slid down his spine.

“Lieutenant Gwendir!” Gilmagor called.

“Sir!” Officer Gwendir stepped in next to the swordmaster.

“It seems to me, your cadets do not know the rules. Why don’t you enlighten them.”

“Sir!” Gwendir brought his fist to his heart, then turned to those lined up.

“There are only four simple rules: One, do not question the order given. Two, do not place your fellow soldiers in peril. Three, do not speak until spoken to. Four, the last goes without.

The Lord Commander turned to the cadets once the lieutenant was done with the reciting of the rules.

“You are here to become an officer, a leader, an example among others. What you do will reflect on all who follow you. A muddy water upstream will cloud all the waters downstream. Never forget that.”

Then, he turned to Thranduil and Elrond. He gestured them to come closer.

“I would have thought both of you know duty and obligation better than most. It seems you need to be reminded what it means to carry a burden,” Gilmagor said and his eyes bored into Elrond then Thranduil. The Sinda seemed more flustered than Elrond thought possible. “At the end of the Sun Field is a pillar,” Gilmagor continued. “And by that pillar are the white stones that were used to build the King’s Tower. Grab a piece of rock from there and bring it up to here,” Gilmagor pointed to a stone pillar at the edge of the field nearest to where the cadets were lined up. “And, be quick. Until you return, your brothers at arms here will be doing the push-ups.”

Gilmagor gestured toward Gwendir.

“Feet up!” Gwendir commanded.

Cadets flashed daggers at Thranduil and Elrond as they did a headstand with their feet straight up in the air, their entire body supported by their arms.

“Count!” Gilmagor ordered and the cadets shouted out “one!” as they flexed their arms to lower themselves to touch their chin to the ground, then back up again.

“How big?” Thranduil asked.

“Make that two. And, for the rest, double up!” Gilmagor shouted.

The cadets flexed their arms touched their chin to the ground, then pushed themselves off the ground to clap before landing back on their hands to touch their chin again, their feet still up in the air to straighten their arms.

“Two!”

Thranduil cursed under his breath but ran toward the edge of the field leading to the stone bridge that connected the upper field to the lower. Elrond followed.
I should not have said anything, Elrond regretted, but he had not expected this.

The king had introduced Elrond to Lord Gilmagor some decades ago, but Gilmagor stayed away from the palace and the politics. It was only two decades ago that Lord Gilmagor finally succumbed to the king’s request and accepted the command of the army. During that time, Gilmagor had corrected Elrond on his form, explained intricacies of swordsmanship, but did not officially train him. Gil-galad had warned Elrond that Gilmagor was fastidious with people and extremely careful about who he took on as his students. After completing the training of the king, Gilmagor had not accepted any new students so it was a surprise that he had agreed to train the cadets himself.

Elrond caught up to Thranduil.

“Why were you late?” Elrond asked. “Was the time unclear to you?”

“No,” Thranduil said.

Elrond waited but realized that Thranduil had no intention of explaining.

“If you were aware of the correct time, then why were you late?” Elrond frowned up at Thranduil whose face was impassive and devoid of expression that Elrond could read.

Thranduil glanced at him briefly with a frown but remained silent.

“Had you been on time, we wouldn’t be in this mess—”

“I did not ask you to defend me.” Thranduil stopped, then glared at Elrond before speeding up ahead.

They ran past the bridge that connected the second field to the third. Although Elrond had trained in these fields, this was the first time he had to lug up a rock. But he knew that while it was easy going down, it will be another matter to go back up carrying a load.

“How big are these fields?” Thranduil asked when Elrond reached his side.

“From Edalan to Ithilan to Anoran…Down then go all the way back up, little over a league and half, I believe.”

Thranduil turned to Elrond. “Those are the names of the fields?”

“Yes, the smallest field on top is Edalan (Star Field), the middle one is Ithilan (Moon Field) and the largest is Anoran (Sun Field).”

“Interesting. Well, a league and half. That isn’t so bad.”

“You think so? Wait until we have to go back up with the load,” Elrond said dryly, biting down the desire to roll his eyes.

The slopes that connected the training grounds were rather steep and in no time, they arrived at the end of the Sun Field where there were piles of rocks just outside the boundary of the field. Thranduil stood at the edge of the field as Elrond took a breath.

“Did he mean these rocks? They are big,” Thranduil mumbled.

Elrond looked down at a large formation of rocks just at the edge of the field. There were boulders as
large as one of the houses, but even smaller ones were twice the size of their head.

Thranduil jumped down among the rocks and started to look through them.

“What are you doing?”

“Looking for the smallest one. He did not say how big.”

“I don’t think we have the time,” Elrond said. “It will take us much longer to go up if you didn’t notice. We have uphill as well as the weight to drag us down.”

Thranduil scoffed aloud at that, but he took up a rock slightly smaller than half his torso. He threw it at Elrond who caught it with a grunt, then picked up another.

“Let’s go,” he said and scrambled up the edge onto the field.

“But, he said two.”

“We have two,” Thranduil said. “One,” he held up the one in his hand. “Two,” he gestured toward the one Elrond held.

“I do not believe that is what he meant.”

“I don’t care what he meant. He said two and we have two.” Thranduil turned and ran toward the rampart up the middle field.

Why in the Valar’s names did I bother to speak up! Elrond looked up toward the West, then he picked up another rock with his other hand. Carrying one more added significantly more weight. He looked up at the Star Field from where he stood. The way up seemed far indeed. Elrond weighted the rocks in his hands. Extra rock will slow him down. Elrond thought of the cadets up on the Star Field then dropped one and followed after Thranduil. If he were to show up with two when Thranduil only had one, there will be no way for the Sinda to defend his action.

By the time they ran up the ramp onto the Star Field, both were panting. The rock which hadn’t felt that heavy in the beginning had begun to weigh like a dragon hoard.

“We better get moving,” Elrond said, noticing the condition of the cadets.

The cadets on the ground were in a bad shape. Barely any of them were maintaining their legs high up toward the sky. Their faces were red and their arms shook.

Elrond ran toward the pillar Gilmagor had mentioned and dropped his rock, followed by Thranduil.

Lord Gilmagor motioned to Gwendir and the cadets tumbled into a heap where they were. Lord Gilmagor glanced at the rocks under the pillar, then tilted his head as both Elrond and Thranduil stood at attention.

“Why are there only two rocks?” The lord commander looked at Elrond then at Thranduil.

“You said ‘make that two’, sir!” Thranduil said. “We brought up two. Sir!”

Gilmagor’s eyes flashed. His lips curved, but the smile did not reach his eyes. “Well, Thranduil Oropherion. So, I did,” Gilmagor’s voice was soft as a bird feather.
He turned to Elrond, “Go join others, Earendilion.”

Elrond hesitated. He certainly didn’t want to get into further trouble, but at the same time, he did not want to leave Thranduil. He felt responsible for the Sinda and although the sword master kept his emotion hidden as well as Thranduil did, Elrond could feel a storm rising in the sword master.

Thranduil was in trouble.

---

**Silmacil** (Sindarin, *White Sword*)—an elite group of warriors charged with special missions (my creation)

**Nandor** (Quenya, *Those who turned back*)—part of Teleri who followed Elwe (King Thingol) but turned back at Misty Mountains and remained in the great forest. They are also known as Silvan Elves or Wood Elves. Portion of Nandor who traveled to Beleriand and joined Sindar later is called Laiquendi (Quenya, *Green Elves*)

*Edalan (Star Field), Ithilan (Moon Field) and Anoran (Sun Field) –the names of the three training grounds (in my story only) will be in English. As Elvish is not my forte, I will stick to what I know.*
Chapter Summary

Elrond watches Thranduil through the long day as cadets are being tested. What he saw made Elrond question the ability of Thranduil.

White City. April 10, Second Age 144

ELROND watched as Lord Gilmagor turned to Thranduil.

“I wanted two rocks from you, Oropherion. Should I start the cadets on another set of push-ups?”

The cadets behind them groaned.

“I think our Sindarin prince is used to getting his way and does not know how to take orders from others,” Lord Gilmagor said as he gestured Lieutenant Gwendir.

Thranduil’s face turned a dark shade of red and before Elrond could stop him, Thranduil picked up the rock he just dropped, then hurled it against a stone pillar. With a thunderous cry, the rock split into two.

“You want two rocks, then have two rocks!” Thranduil hissed.

There was a gasp and everybody fell silent.

It was so quiet, Elrond could hear the soft gurgle of water flowing on the sides of the training fields. Gilmagor shook his head and wagged his finger at Thranduil.

“Temper, temper, Oropherion. Now, not only are you late, you just violated Rule Number 3. Go back down and bring up two pieces of rocks. Go!”

Thranduil’s face turned even darker as he glared at Gilmagor, but he turned and stomped away toward the bridge that connected the Star Field to the one below it.

“Rest of you, twenty laps around the Star Field, then armor up.”

Elrond stood motionless, watching Thranduil. He should have informed the Sinda of the rules and maybe he should have met with him prior to the start of the training. But he had not wanted to see Thranduil again and had put it away at the back of his head. It was his fault. Elrond fisted his hands.

“Move on, Earendilion,” Gilmagor said as he turned away.

Elrond knew he should just do as he was told. This was the way of the military, especially during training, but Elrond knew he wouldn’t forgive himself if he walked away now.

“My lord,” he called out before Gilmagor walked away.

Lord Gilmagor stopped, then turned around slowly. The Lord Commander's forehead was pinched
and his eyes were narrowed. Lieutenant Gwendir who stood just behind Lord Gilmagor shook his head at Elrond, but the Half-Elf braced himself and faced Gilmagor.

“I, too, didn’t bring two rocks and I knew you meant two, sir!”

“Earendilion,” Gilmagor’s voice was cold and steady. "Your father was one of my students at Sirion although for a brief time. Do not think my tenderness for him will make me lenient towards you.”

Elrond picked up his chin and stood at attention.

“No, sir! I do not expect that. Sir!”

Gilmagor’s steel gray eyes bore into Elrond like ice spear. Elrond held his breath, unable to breathe, biting down the desire to run. When his body felt frozen and Elrond felt as if he will crumble on the spot, Gilmagor turned his chin toward the bridge and walked away.

Taking a lungful of breath, Elrond ran after Thranduil.

Thranduil did not bother to run this time. He sauntered down the small stone bridge then onto the Moon Field as if he had all the time in the world.

“We better hurry up if we hope to make it on time,” Elrond said as he slowed down next to the blond Sinda. “They will be getting their armor and weapon after the run. The last one always goes without. They always have one less than the number needed. If we hurry, we could at least get to the armors and weapons in time—“

“Why are you here?” Thranduil said, his eyes straight ahead. “Didn’t the Crooked Nose tell you to join others?”

“Crooked Nose?” Elrond looked at Thranduil, but the blond Sinda did not answer. Elrond let out a sigh. “What does it matter? We better hurry. It will take much more time to carry two rocks up the fields.”

Thranduil stopped in his track and threw Elrond an icy gaze.

“Elrond I had known at Sirion was smarter than you and he was only six years old,” Thranduil said. “Stay away from me if you know what is good for you.” With that Thranduil took to a run, leaving Elrond behind.

The two pieces of rock they had to hurl did slow down their progress noticeably and by the time they have gotten up to the Star Field, most of the cadets were already in their armor and gathered at the training ground.

“Come on, Thranduil.” Elrond urged Thranduil into the armory at the base of the King’s Tower. As they walked in, the last group of Elves was walking out, each with a body armor, greaves, vambraces and a spear. One of them thrust a bundle to Elrond along with a spear.

“We saved it for you,” he said as he glanced at Thranduil, then hurried out with his fellow cadets.

Thranduil must have heard, but he walked in, glanced at the empty shelves. All were empty of the armors and spears save for one shelf marked under a label *Meduion*, the one who is the last. Instead
of a hardened leather armor, there was a wooden one.

Four pieces of thin wooden boards were woven together with ropes and meant to be worn over shoulders and tied together with a rope attached to the middle board. There was a wooden pole next to it instead of a spear. It was a plain wood pole with a pointed end. Without a word, Thranduil took the wooden boards and wore it and took up the pole.

“Thranduil…” Elrond frowned down at the armor and the spear in his hands and offered them to the blond Sinda.

“I have mine,” Thranduil said and walked past Elrond.

Outside, the rest of the cadets were lined up with the spears by their feet.

“Ah, here is our Meduion,” Gilmagor said when Thranduil approached. He gestured Thranduil forward. “Let’s see how good you are.”

The Lord Commander gestured toward Gwendir. The lieutenant along with the two officers took up their spears and faced Thranduil. In their golden armor with shining spears in their hands, the three officers looked impressive.

Suddenly, Elrond felt a surge of emotion from Thranduil. Although Elrond could feel emotions from others who were near him, Thranduil had been one of the few who kept a tight control over his feelings. But now, there was a swirl of mixed emotions coming in waves from the blond Sinda. Elrond frowned.

Among the jumble of feelings that flowed from Thranduil, Elrond found one major emotion: Fear. No, not fear. It was stronger than that.

A terror.

That’s what it was. Elrond turned sharply toward Thranduil as the three officers surrounded the blond Sinda.

Elrond couldn’t understand. The three officers are warriors from the First Age. They were from Valinor and had fought in the many battles of the First Age and survived. They were far better skilled than any of the cadets. There were none better to test the cadets without causing any serious harm.

Officer Bellion called out, “Ready!” before he lunged and his spear flashed. Thranduil stood there rigid as if he had turned to stone and the spear tore through his left side and whipped across his left waist.

Thranduil staggered, his teeth clenched.

“You are slow, Oropherion. Maybe you need some encouragement.” Gilmagor gestured toward the cadets and Elrond along with the rest of the cadets took up their spears and started to thump the ground with the butt of the spears. The ground trembled as twenty-three spears pounded onto the stone covered floor in a coordinated movement. “Ra! Ra! Ra!” They shouted.

Thranduil’s eyes widened as the terror spiked and rammed into Elrond’s senses making Elrond gasp.
Just then Gwendir shouted, “Ready!” before his spear lunged at Thranduil’s right side. Thranduil did not move as Gwendir’s spear whacked Thranduil’s right arm. The wooden pole in Thranduil’s hand flew off the air as Officer Malthorn swept his spear clear across Thranduil’s legs.

Thranduil tumbled onto the ground, his face bloodless.

“Stop!” Elrond moved without a second thought. He grabbed Thranduil up from the ground and then was shocked to find that Thranduil was shaking. But the moment it registered, Thranduil snatched his arm from Elrond’s grasp. And, whatever emotion Thranduil had let slip was gone. The blond Sinda was cold and shuttered as he was when Elrond first met him.

“Do you intend to meddle into the training, too, Earendilion?” Gilmagor’s voice was spiked ice.

Elrond swallowed hard and looked at Thranduil who has gotten up now. The Sinda’s blue-green eyes were chips of ice, emotionless and cold. There was no emotion, no feeling from Thranduil as if Elrond had all just imagined it.

“Earendilion, five laps, Star Field. Now!” Gilmagor’s command whipped through the air.

Elrond had no choice but to run. The Half-Elf ran to the edge of the field as he heard Lord Gilmagor call out the next Elf.

By the time Elrond returned, it was his turn to face the officers. They were fast, but not impossible to block. Elrond could tell the officers held back their speed and strength. It was as Elrond had expected. He didn’t feel that the officers were being more gentle with him than they were to Thranduil.

*What is wrong with that Sinda?* Elrond wondered. Thranduil was supposed to have been trained as a warrior. He should have expected this much aggression. Was his training under Sindarin warriors so inferior that he could not stand up to the challenge? Elrond knew, of course, that Noldor are better skilled, but Thranduil was supposed to have been taught by the best of Doriathrin warriors. Elrond had heard about their prowess as warriors. Maybe all that were just talk. Either Thranduil’s training was subpar or he was just afraid. Thranduil didn’t look like a coward, but then such a thing can’t be discerned by just looking at a person.

A spear thwacked across his left shoulder. Elrond winced and pulled back sharply to avoid another hit.

“Pay attention!” Gwendir snapped. Elrond didn’t need to be told twice.

When each cadet was thus tested, they moved on to the rest of the weapons from the use of swords to bows to long daggers and spear.

And on each weaponry they were tested, Thranduil did not fare better. Even with a bow where Elrond had expected a far better result, having seen Thranduil’s performance at Grey Haven, the young Sinda was mediocre at best.

Elrond couldn’t help but notice the look of disdain from other warriors as they glanced at Thranduil and snickered among themselves. The blond Sinda said not one word but carried on with a face devoid of emotion. And when the morning session was over, Thranduil was one of the five warriors with the least scores. And accordingly, those five were made to run around the three fields while the rest of the cadets took their lunch.

And as the day wore on, Thranduil got worse.
The gruesome day ended as the sun peered over the far away horizon just before disappearing over the west. Most of the cadets lay on the ground, exhausted. Lord Gilmagor had gone up the stairs into the King's Tower after the initial tests on the weaponry concluded.

Elrond turned to Thranduil who was leaning against a stone pillar by the edge of the field. If the rest of the cadets were in a bad shape, Thranduil was worse. He was barely recognizable from the morning. The wooden plates he wore were broken and hung loosely about his neck. His entire sides, arms, and legs, lacking armor and thus exposed, were slashed, torn and bruised. His fair skin, almost transparent in its whiteness, was black and blue, many places red and inflamed, a shocking splotch of colors on the whiteness of his skin. Bruises were everywhere from the side of his head to his bare hands, even his arms which can be seen through his torn sleeves. Elrond could only imagine how much pain Thranduil must be feeling. Even with the full armor with vambraces and greaves, Elrond was aching all over from the day long pounding coupled with hardly any rest. He marveled at how Thranduil never once cried out and bore everything with a grim, determined face.

He may be a coward, but he wasn’t a whiner.

“Gather up!” Lieutenant Gwendir approached them once the last ray of sunlight faded into twilight. “We will go over how the training will go from now on. First, today’s activity is over so you can ask questions if there is one. Starting today all your activity will be graded. Every day we will put up names of the top three cadets with the highest scores and the bottom five with the lowest. At the end of the year when the training ends, the top three will have a choice of where they will be assigned. Also…” Gwendir stopped suddenly and smiled.

All the cadets fell silent. Elrond felt everyone around him tense. An air of anticipation swirled all around him like a morning mist.

“As I am sure you all are wondering, Lord Gilmagor will be picking some of you to train himself.”

Everyone whooped. Excitement ran rampant among the cadets. And questions came from everyone at once.

"How many of us?" "When?" "What will the choice based on?"

The lieutenant smiled.

"I don't know the details. Three are the most he ever trained at one time, but whether that will include top three cadets is not known. Lord Gilmagor has his own way of making the decision. No one could say. I suggest you do the best you can. He only trains those who are most capable."

Belegor wriggled his eyebrows at Elrond as two of his closest friends pounded on the Belegor’s shoulders as if he has already been chosen. Elrond swallowed a groan. As much as Elrond hated to admit it, Belegor was one of the best swordsmen among the cadets. He probably has a reason to be congratulated although it was rather too soon.

Elrond glanced at Thranduil who was standing a bit apart from the rest of the cadets, looking away. The blond Sinda seemed oblivious to the excitement of those around him.

“All right. Calm down. I am not done,” said Gwendir. “From today on, all of you will bunk at the barracks. But until the field training which is scheduled for the Autumn, you will have a free day at the end of each week unless you are one of the bottom five. Also, the one who receives the lowest score for that day, thus the bottom of the list, your Meduion, will be running to the bottom of the field to bring up a rock just like Thranduil Oropherion did today. As for the other four on the bottom list, they will be doing the head push-ups double time until the Meduion returns.”
Everyone groaned.

Gwendir smiled. “The best part is, the bottom five will be doing this while rest wash and eat their dinner. So, whoever the last five are, you better hope your Meduion is fast, strong and reliable. Or better yet, do your best to avoid being the last five on the list.”

Just then, Officer Malthorn approached Gwendir with a scroll. Gwendir took it and whistled out aloud.

“Well, here is the Meduion for today. Congratulations, Thranduil Oropherion.”
The King's Council

Chapter Summary

Gil-galad wants to present a matter very close to his heart to his councilors. But his councilors have other matters they want to discuss. It seems the division in his council only grows stronger.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

King’s Tower, April 10, Second Age 144

GIL-GALAD glanced at the door for the hundredth time. He hoped no one noticed and he knew that he really should pay attention, but the matter he wanted to bring to the council was very close to his heart and he wanted to present it as soon as he could. And normally, he would bide his time as what he proposed would cause a stir, but Gil-galad had that same dream again last night. Something was happening and Gil-galad felt for the first time that the time was slipping away like the sands under his feet eroded by the ebb and flow of the water.

Unfortunately, Lord Cirdan, his staunchest supporter beside Lord Gilmagor, had gone back to the Grey Havens soon after the New Year celebration. And Lord Gilmagor was at the training field. He was to return after inspecting the cadets, but the afternoon session had started a while ago and he still was not here. Of course, the king knew he could count on Lord Celeborn and Lady Galadriel, but while they were highly respected, they did not command many supporters among the council.

Sighing inwardly, Gil-galad glanced at Lord Erestor who stood just below the dais whispering something to Captain Aron from the Grey Havens. At least the news from Lord Cirdan was good. But then, the king did not doubt that Lord Cirdan shared his view when it came to Elrond.

If he could just convince the chief councilor, things would become easier. Gil-galad didn’t count on it, however. Lammaeg usually opposed whatever Cirdan proposed or agreed. But the king was aware that the opposition against Cirdan stemmed mostly from Lammaeg’s resentment of Gil-galad’s attachment to Lord Cirdan. It was strange to him how Lammaeg didn’t begrudge his attachment to Lord Gilmagor, but when it came to Lord Cirdan, Lammaeg almost seemed unreasonable. But how could he not be attached to Lord Cirdan? The elder Sindarin lord had been a father to him while his mother slowly faded away out of grief after the Battle of Unnumbered Tears.

“You must stay strong, my son,” she said. But she had not stayed strong for him and as soon as Gil-galad was old enough to carry on, she closed her eyes and did not get up.

Gil-galad sighed and pushed away the dull ache brought on by the thought of his mother. Instead, he looked at Lammaeg as he listened to Celebrimbor with apt attention. Although the chief councilor clashed often with Cirdan, Gil-galad did not doubt Lammaeg’s loyalty to him. The chief councilor was not only his mother’s brother, Lord Lammaeg had served on the council for his great-grandfather King Finwe, to his grandfather and to his father before him. His uncle was invaluable in ordering the new realm, gathering the scattered remnant of Noldor and bringing them all under Gil-galad’s authority. And when Celebrimbor, as the eldest surviving male of Finwe’s line, took control of the council after Gil-galad was crowned king at mere 66 years of age, it was Lammaeg who put
Celebrimbor in his place whenever the king's elder cousin was out of line.

Through the years, his uncle had been the pillar that held Gil-galad up and steered him through the overwhelming duties of being the king. But unlike Gil-galad, Lammaeg shared Celebrimbor’s view that Noldor were superior to all other Elves and races in Middle Earth and that Noldor should rule over others. In fact, both councilors had argued fervently against having Celeborn rule Harlindon, conceding only after taking away the right for Lord Celeborn to have his own army. All warriors serving in Harlindon were under the authority of the king and wore Gil-galad’s colors. Although Gil-galad respected his uncle, he knew that Lord Lammaeg, as well as Celebrimbor, was a hurdle he will one day need to overcome.

The king drummed his fingers on the carved armrest made of white marble as the afternoon sunlight poured through the tall arched windows lining the length of the Hall of the Council. Celebrimbor’s deep baritone mumbled at the edge of his consciousness as the king watched the afternoon sunlight elongate the shadows.

Gil-galad wondered if he should send one of the scribes sitting behind the chairs of the councilors to go look for the Lord Commander.

The king glanced at Lord Erestor again. The young councilor was loyal and an excellent orator but he was yet new to the post and didn’t command many supporters. And the king knew for sure that his uncle preferred Celebrimbor over Elrond. No. It would be best to search out for the Lord Commander before bringing up the matter of his heir.

Gilmagor may not like being part of the council but his words carried much weight. Not only was Gilmagor deeply respected by many Noldor including his uncle, the Lord Commander was known for his wisdom as much as his knowledge of weapons and military strategy. Gil-galad knew that his wish to build up the army would not have passed the council if it was not for his master being on his side. But Gil-galad knew that sooner than later he must learn to stand on his own. Even without him saying so, the king knew the call of the West was beginning to wear heavily on Gilmagor.

“…assemble expedition. What does our king say in this matter?” Celebrimbor who had been addressing the council suddenly turned to the king.

Gil-galad tensed, feeling grateful that he had been looking at Celebrimbor although the king had no idea what his elder cousin had been saying.

“Assembly expedition…” Gil-galad repeated the last words he heard and tilted his head. It was a trick he learned from Lord Cirdan. The lord of Faladrim never answered anything directly and always made the listener wait for the answer. But no matter how long he took, Lord Cirdan made it seem it was all worthwhile. Gil-galad just hoped he looked as confident as Lord Cirdan was.

Gil-galad nodded as if he was thinking. He glanced at Erestor.

The young councilor took one look at the king, then turned to Celebrimbor.

“But the cities Naugrim have left behind are old now and crumbling in many parts. To assemble expedition of our troops down the caves of Naugrim seem dangerous. What do you think, Captain Astalder? You know best as you have been there and seen the condition of the underground cities.”

Captain Astalder’s lips crept up, his gray eyes dancing as his eyes met the king’s. Gil-galad was sure that even if others didn’t, the astute captain knew Gil-galad had not been paying attention. If there was one thing Gil-galad found about the captain of Silmacil, it was that the captain knew much more than he let on.
“As I said, there are traces of Orc army all around the base of Blue Mountains. The places Lord Oropher has marked were cold already, but the Orcs have definitely been there. The track led down into the abandoned underground city Naugrim had left behind. Expedition down there is not recommended because it is a completely uncharted territory. The sinking of Beleriand has ruined many of the cities and I believe that is one of the reasons that most of them have migrated to the east. Even so, if there are any remnant of Naugrim, they may consider our presence an intrusion.”

“But if we do nothing, how would we know?” Celebrimbor asked, looking around at the councilors. “And if there are any remaining Naugrim, then we should invite them to Lindon and find ways to give them an incentive to stay and work with us.”

“But what would having a relationship with Naugrim do for us,” said Celeborn who sat with an uncharacteristically grim face. “They have all left for the east, too far from Lindon to have any meaningful relationship even if a relationship could be established.”

Celebrimbor barely acknowledged Celeborn. Instead, he turned to Gil-galad.

“I believe it is your wish to include everyone, to establish a realm that brings everyone together,” Celebrimbor said. “Is it not so, your majesty?” Celebrimbor tipped his head gracefully toward the king.

Gil-galad plastered a smile on his face. His cousin was careful to refer to him, but everyone knew that Celebrimbor and Lammaeg ruled the council. There was hardly anything Gil-galad could do without first obtaining their approval. And it seemed to the king that he needed to fight both Lammaeg and Celebrimbor for every little thing he wanted to get done. Many times, Gil-galad found himself frustrated that he was a king in name only even though he was no longer a child he once was when he first became the king.

“I think we all want unity among all the people that occupy Middle Earth, Lord Celebrimbor,” Gil-galad said. “But we must focus first on uniting our kind before we can include others.”

“With due respect,” Celebrimbor said glancing at Lord Celeborn. “Most Sindar live in Harlindon and Lord Celeborn seems loyal to you. I don’t see how there is no unity among our kin?” said Celebrimbor. His emphasis on the word ‘seems’ was not lost on Gil-galad and the king quickly glanced at Celeborn whose face remained unchanged except for his hand which fisted shut.

“Seems, Lord Celebrimbor? Nay, councilor. I know not ‘seems’,,” said Lady Galadriel, her melodious voice soft and dangerous.

“My apologies, Lord Celeborn,” said Celebrimbor. “It was not meant as any disrespect to you.” Celebrimbor nodded toward Celeborn, then bowed to Lady Galadriel who sat next to her husband, her hand on Celeborn’s arm.

“I have no doubt as to any under Lord Celeborn,” Gil-galad said firmly. “But there is Lord Oropher —“ Gil-galad started, but he was not allowed to finish.

“What is Oropher but a knave from a forgotten kingdom,” Celebrimbor snapped.

“I would advise you to rephrase that, Lord Celebrimbor,” Celeborn who sat with ever darkening demeanor growled. His voice was frigid as winter snow, looking more like Oropher than his usual sunny self.

Gil-galad had never known Lord Celeborn to frown. The Sindarin lord was usually serene and diplomatic. Most of the time, Celeborn played a mediator, soothing disputes among the councilors
who divided into those who supported Celebrimbor and those who supported Cirdan. And with powerful people such as Lord Lammaeg backing Celebrimbor, it seemed supporters for his elder cousin grew larger each year. And each year, Gil-galad saw division among his councilors grow with Celebrimbor and Lammaeg on one side and Sindarin lords like Cirdan on the other. Although the last kinslaying was close to two hundred years ago, it seemed the anger over the incident did not lessen. And the attitudes of many Noldor such as Lammaeg and Celebrimbor made matters worse.

Gil-galad shuddered remembering the first line of the lament: A dark seed grows, fed by blood and ire.

Celebrimbor glanced at Celeborn.

“But as you said it yourself, Lord Celeborn. Those who have departed east is too far away from Lindon to establish a meaningful relationship with. Oropher is gone, even further than the Naugrim. And even if he wasn’t, what is his loss to us? Unlike Oropher, the migration of the Naugrim has an impact on us. They have delved and provided us with raw materials for the armors and weapons the king has desired. We are not miners. We know nothing of mining deep under the mountains. What we can obtain from quarries are limited. Without these cave dwellers, we will not have enough raw materials for smithing. And without raw materials, we cannot produce more arms.”

“So what do you suggest, Lord Celebrimbor?” Lady Galadriel asked when none of the councilors spoke.

“Since we also need to investigate the ruins and the abandoned cities of Naugrim, we should send representatives there, ready to explore, so that if we do meet any remaining Naugrim, we can negotiate and establish a trade. It is better to obtain their permission to enter their city rather than assume the city is abandoned and just enter,” Celebrimbor said. “And just because some of them have attacked Sindar, why should we give up having a relationship with them altogether? Just as not all of us are guilty of kinslaying, not all of them are guilty of killing our kin.”

Gil-galad glanced at Lord Celeborn. Understandably, the Sindarin lord’s face was dark, his usually serene face lit normally with smiling blue eyes was pinched. The king has heard from Lady Galadriel how Lord Celeborn’s father was killed trying to protect the king when King Elu Thingol was attacked. And a year later when the whole of Dwarves of Nogrod attacked Doriath, Celeborn’s brother died protecting the borders from those Naugrim. It was understandable that Celeborn has a special dislike of the Dwarves.

In that sense, Gil-galad understood Celebrimbor’s barely veiled ill will toward Celeborn. The Sindarin lord was from Menegroth and Celebrimbor harbored a special dislike of Sindar from Menegroth ever since his father was killed there. To a grieving son, the fact that the attack was instigated by his father and his brothers meant nothing. As Lord Gilmagor always said, anger blinds people and makes them unreasonable.

But at the same time, what Celebrimbor said made sense and there was no solid reason to deny Celebrimbor.

“If the king would allow, I would like to lead the expedition to the Naugrim cities,” said Celebrimbor.

“But you are needed here, Lord Celebrimbor. My soldiers need their weapons.”

“With due respect, Sire, we are at peace. Even if we need to fit the new recruits, many probably don’t know how to use the proper weapons yet.” Then, he held out his hand before the king could protest.
“And, I have others in my forge who could work on the armor and the weapons.”

“Well, that is settled, then,” Lord Lammaeg said, getting up from his seat.

The stone chandeliers above their heads began to glow like starlight as the sinking sun covered the council chamber in a deep red glow.

----------

**Naugrim** (Sindarin, *staunted people*) Many dwarves who originally lived in the roots of the Blue Mountains left starting around year 40 of Second Age and migrated to Misty Mountains and joined Durin’s Folk in Moria.

“**Seems…’seems’**” is a line from Hamlet. It just seemed to fit so well here, I couldn’t resist.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry that this took me much longer than expected. This is a new chapter that was not in my original but hopefully, it will make later events easier to understand.

Next, Chapter 16: Dark Bud
Dark Bud

Chapter Summary

Mairon having spent a day with the cadets began to wonder what a wonderful army the Elves will make if he can only find ways to bind them to his will. And in a young Noldo and a Sinda, Mairon finds something he could use.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Lindon. April 10, Second Age 144

MAIRON was impressed. Having observed these Elves in their own city, Mairon could understand now why his master wanted to subjugate these Elves so much.

Mairon had met Elven warriors before, of course. But they have all been during the First Age, in times of war, either on the battlefield or in the dungeons. Mairon had never seen Elves amid their society. When he was in Valinor, it was during the time when Elves were not yet awake. And long before the Elves arrived in Valinor, Mairon had followed his new master into Middle Earth.

And these puny beings, even with their limited knowledge and power, were intelligent, brave and skilled. If he could have these Elves under his will, there will be no race on whole of Middle Earth that Mairon could not conquer. Suddenly, all the things his master promised seemed achievable.

But how to get these Elves to obey his will? If there was one thing the War of Jewels has taught Mairon, it was that he should not underestimate these Elves. For Ages, his master tried to bring them under his dominion. When they first awoke, his master captured the Firstborn and tempted them, tortured them and tampered with them. But the Elves were strong in body and mind. Only by breaking their spirits and mutilating them beyond recognition was Melkor ever able to bring them under his will.

However, there was a big side effect. Breaking their spirits, thus breaking their will and tampering with their body, his master found that they lost the will to survive. Their souls left the body and his master was left with the lifeless and useless body. So, before the souls could separate, Melkor filled them with his will and that of wild beasts. They were infused with a desire for life so they will not willingly choose death; with a hunger for destruction so that they will kill and destroy without hesitation; but most importantly, with fear for their master so that they will obey without question.

“Master, they are worthless,” Mairon remembered telling Melkor. “They have no honor and no courage and they degenerate into sniveling weakling full of fear.”

“But, fear is good, Mairon. It is through fear that we will control them most effectively. They will never question their order, nor will they think any further than what they are told. We will never need to doubt their loyalty. If you command them, they will give up even their life for you, for I have conditioned all other desires second to their fear of their masters.”
“But as soon as their spirits are completely overrun, their bodies degenerate and twist into something hideous,” Mairon had said wrinkling his nose. Not only were the captured and twisted Elves turned ugly, they smelled horrible as well.

“Ah well,” Melkor had shrugged then. “It is Eru’s way to prevent tampering with his children, I suppose. It does not matter. Ugly, they may be, but they are strong and hardy. They will make good enough soldiers.”

But the twisted and mutilated Elves were difficult to breed. And as powerful as his master had been, he could not create new life out of nothing. It was not until his master captured Men and interbred them with the first Orcs that they were able to breed a massive army.

But Mairon did not like working with the Orcs. Easy to breed and obedient to his will they were, but they were stupid, cowardly and so uncouth compared to these Elves. There must be some way to bring the Elves under his will without breaking them totally as his master had done.

“What do you think of our Meduion?” A cadet next to him asked, interrupting Mairon’s thoughts as he stood up along with the rest of the cadets to head to the lake to wash up.

Mairon glanced at the blond figure who was running down the stone bridge to the field below as the last four cadets did a head stand as Lieutenant Gwendir watched.

“What about him?” Mairon wasn’t interested in the Sinda or any Sindar for that matter. What are they but glorified wood elves? Even his master did not care for Teleri when he was at Valinor. According to his master, all Teleri, whether they are Sindar, Laiquendi or Nandor, are meek as new born babes. He said they have no ambition, no sense of glory, and that they are perfectly happy in their forests and seas.

“He didn’t look like a Sinda, did he? I thought he was one of the king’s relations or something. What a disappointment,” the cadet said glancing at the blond Elf. “I thought at least he was going to be a worthwhile warrior to watch out for.”

Mairon scoffed. “Pretty package doesn’t always mean much. Sindar are good to look at, but not much else,” Mairon said then turned away. The moment he found that the new cadet was a Sinda, Mairon’s interest had died. He had not bothered to scan the young Elf. There were plenty of powerful Noldor here where his time and interest would be better spent.

Mairon remembered clearly what his master had told him about the Elves back in the First Age. His master always said Vanyar had the strongest mind, were not moved or tampered with. Noldor were physically the most strong, but they craved knowledge and power so most easily persuaded and manipulated. Teleri, Melkor had no use for. They were simple and happy people who cared naught for power. Teleri were content, thus unwilling to be persuaded.

“Why did you choose Noldor, Master? I thought there were other more powerful Elves than these pathetic group.”

“Ah, yes. The Vanyar, my brother’s favorite Elves. Powerful in mind and magic they are and more beautiful. But they are much like my brother. They are blind and obedient to a fault. They are too narrow-minded and stubborn to listen to others. Besides, They are not as skilled with their hands as Noldor are. And unlike the Vanyar, Noldor wanted knowledge and power. Remember, Mairon. The ones who want power are the ones most easily tempted. Of course, Noldor would also make better soldiers than the rest of their kindred.”

But the Noldor had turned out more resistant than his master had thought. Once they arrived in
Middle Earth, his master thought to slowly bring them under his dominion. But they have arrived at Middle Earth earlier than his master had foreseen and had ruined his plans. To make the matter worse, the Noldor resisted his master to their last breath instead of succumbing.

On a hindsight, they should have conquered Doriath long before Noldor came. If Teleri were weak, Sindar as part of that group would have been easier to break. They could have used them against the Noldor, but his master had thought they would have enough time. They had been wrong.

Mairon turned his eyes toward the blond Sinda far below at the Sun Field now. Could he be thinking this in a wrong way, the way his master had done?

Among the Noldor, there was one who Mairon knew to have power and influence among the cadets. And if what he gathered from others was correct, this Elf also had the king’s ear. Mairon looked at the young Noldo who stood amid the cadets and was the only one who still seemed interested in the blond Sinda. Although the Noldo tried to hide it, Mairon noticed him stealing glances at the blond Sinda throughout their activity.

Mairon scrutinized the young Noldo.

Elrond Earendilion. This one had powers even the Half-Elf was not even aware of yet. A powerful blood ran through this half Man, half Elf mutant, all the blood of his hated enemies mingled into one. Mairon had kept a careful eye on Elrond the moment he first laid his eyes on the young Noldo.

Even among the impressive array of Noldor before him, it was hard to miss Elrond. There were few even among Noldor who were as tall as this young Noldo. In fact, unlike the svelte construction of other Elves, the Half-Elf was of a sturdier built typical of Men. With his darker skin and muscular frame, at first glance, Mairon almost mistook Elrond for a Man. Upon a close inspection, however, he could not miss the starlight in his eyes, nor the power that ran through Elród’s person. If left to grow, Mairon knew this young Noldo could grow into a dangerous threat. Mairon wondered what could temp this Noldo. Oh, what he wouldn’t give to see this Half-Elf kneel before him. If Mairon could bring Elrond into his service, the Maia was sure he could find ways to influence the Noldor. In any event, even if he failed to influence the Noldo, Mairon planned to wreck his vengeance on Elrond before leaving the White City.

The fallen Maia looked at Elrond, then at the blond Sinda whom Elrond was watching. There was something there between them. He couldn’t quite get his finger on what that was, but something told Mairon that he should mind it.

According to his master, Eru’s children had two weaknesses: fear and sympathy.

“Mairon, give these lesser beings something to fear and they will do anything to get away from it, even stomping over what they consider sacred. And best way to get at them is to use their sympathies. If they feel strong enough for another, they will even give you their life to save the other.”

And Mairon has experienced that firsthand. The Elf of his body had been willing to do what was forbidden for the love of his friend. If it had not been for that, Mairon would not have had this opportunity. And this young half-Elf had plenty of sympathies. He overflowed with it. Mairon had watched as Elrond stood by Thranduil even though the Noldo clearly disliked the blond Sinda.

Mairon wasn’t sure exactly what the feelings Elrond had for the blond Sinda, but the Sinda’s presence affected the young Noldo greatly.

Mairon smiled. Maybe, the Sinda could be useful after all.
**Firstborn**—refers to Elves who were the first of Eru’s children to be awoken in the world. Men are referred to as Secondborn as they woke later with the rise of the sun.

Melkor’s brother is Manwe, the king of Valar and all beings in Arda (the world)

My view of Melkor and his view of Noldor is different from that of *Silmarillion* and other writings but I don’t think this is divergence. *Silmarillion* and other writings are based on history written by Elves, Men and later by Hobbits. History is written in the perspective of the writer and is limited by his own knowledge. The writer could not possibly know exactly what Melkor was thinking. Mairon, as someone who actually served Melkor, would know better the thoughts of his master than anyone else.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter 17 Will of a Warrior--how Thranduil is coping with his first day
**Will of a Warrior**

Chapter Summary

His body not being the only thing that is bruised, Thranduil wonders if he is good enough

Chapter Notes

Big thank you to everyone who left me reviews and kudos. Thank you so much. You make me eager to put up more chapters. Special thanks to Yellowwomanonthebrink and Titan for sharing their eagerness for my stories. I am putting this episode earlier than my schedule for you. As for how long Thranduil is supposed to stay in Lindon, here's your answer, Titan.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

*Lindon. April 10, Second Age 144*

**THRANDUIL** bit back a groan as he let go of the rock, careful to keep his face blank. No matter what, he will not show weakness in front of these Noldor.

“You can wash up at the lake, Oropherion,” said Lieutenant Gwendir. “Follow the other four.” The lieutenant gestured toward the last four cadets who collapsed in a heap where they had been doing their head push-ups. “There is a lake at the bottom of the King’s Tower where all the warriors wash up after their training. And the barrack for the cadets is up the main stairs by the south wing of the Tower.” With that, the lieutenant dismissed them. Training fields were now completely empty.

“Have your feet turned to stone?” one of the four cadets said to Thranduil, irritation evident in his eyes. Thranduil knew he had taken much longer to complete his run than this morning, but it had been all he could do.

“He’s a Sinda,” the other cadet next to the first Noldo said as if that answered everything. They hurried to stone stairs cut into the boulders at the south edge of the Star Field which Thranduil had not seen until now.

“Elmaethor is a Sinda but he is quicker than the others, unlike him,” another grumbled as he followed the other two down the stairs.

The last of the four turned to Thranduil. He was shorter of the four cadets and Thranduil could tell that he is one of the Sindar.

“Don’t mind them. They are just tired and in pain. In case you didn’t know, there is a change of bedclothes with the towels next to the stairs.” With that, the Sindarin cadet nodded to Thranduil and followed after the other three.
Silently, Thranduil trailed behind them, biting down a hiss. The motion of walking shook his wrist and the pain was excruciating.

“In pain, are they?” Thranduil scoffed under his breath.

When they came down to the ground level, just below the level of the Sun Field, there was a lake that pooled beneath Southern turrets of the King’s Tower. Streams that ran under the bridges that connected the three training grounds and the channel of water around the King’s Tower all flowed down over the rocky cliff feeding the lake.

While the other four cadets washed under the waterfall near the stone stairs, Thranduil walked toward one of the several willow trees by the lake. From where he stood, the turrets of the King’s Tower looked as if they could touch the sky.

After carefully peeling the torn and stained clothes off his aching body, Thranduil sank into the cold lake water. He hissed as he gingerly picked up his right wrist. It was now visibly swollen and throbbed with each movement.

During the first test with the spears, Thranduil had twisted the wrist just as the spear hit him on the arm. Without any vambrace to protect the forearm, the hit was direct and painful, but worse, the twisting motion just at the moment of the hit must have damaged his wrist bone. The pain had been excruciating and it had grown exponentially worse as the day progressed.

It was not until he was being tested in archery that Thranduil realized the extent of the injury to his wrist. Although it throbbed and burned from the previous spear thrust, he thought it merely bruised. But, when he tried to draw the bow string, the pain shook his hand and his hand neither had the strength to pull all the way back nor the tenacity to maintain the pull, both of which affected the accuracy of his arrows. Everything got steadily worse after that.

With each encounter, the paralyzing effect of facing the Noldor from Valinor lessened when he concentrated on something other than their glowing eyes. But, the exhaustion coupled with the escalating pain from his wrist shattered his concentration making it difficult for Thranduil to overcome the paralyzing stiffness that came upon him in the initial encounter. He needed a moment, but the moment was all it took for the tests.

Throughout the day, it took most of his effort to keep his right arm from shaking. The Pain, he was used to, but the snicker of the Noldor, the contempt in their eyes and the pity in Elrond’s, those were unbearable. It took all Thranduil had to keep going, to keep up the look of placid unconcern he had carefully mastered over the years. But even then, if he could have crawled under a rock, he would have.

Thranduil grimaced as the pain flared again. He wrapped his good hand over his swollen wrist and tried to muster what little healing spell he had learned from his mother. But he was too tired, and he didn’t have the strength the spell needed. It was times like this that he regretted not learning more from his mother.

In the end, the spell was weak. A mere sprinkle. But the pain receded a bit and Thranduil sighed as he lay back, dunking his entire body and face in the cold water.

The sides where the swords and spears cut and tore his skin burned and every muscle in his body ached and throbbed. Thranduil wondered how deep this lake was. He was so tired. He opened his eyes in the darkness of the water. It was as if he floated in the world that was silent and dark. Silent except for the music of Ainur that still lingered in all the waters of Arda. The soft gurgling of melodies calmed his pains for a moment and Thranduil was comforted by the aqueous darkness and
the silent melodies.

When he could not hold his breath any longer, Thranduil emerged from the water, letting the water drip down in rivulets down his body.

The lake was empty.

Thranduil looked around in the silence of the lake and realized that the other cadets must have washed quickly and left even though there will be no dinner for them. They probably wanted to make sure they have a bed to sleep in tonight. "The last one always goes without", the lieutenant had reminded them before leaving.

Thranduil scoffed as he got out of the water and dressed in the bedclothes and slippers found with the towels. It didn’t matter to him. There were many nights when he had to sleep on a cold ground. He didn’t like it, but he could bear it.

Thranduil looked up at the sky. Thousands of stars sparkled above him. Somewhere in the White City and inside the palace, people were singing the song of praise to Elbereth Gilthoniel, the Lady of the Stars. Thranduil sang the words softly to himself.

Under the vast sky, he felt so alone.

He wondered if his skills that he had honed in the wild not enough. He was, after all, just a Sinda. Those who were born under the lights of two trees were superior, even his mother had said so.

Are these Noldor so much better? Will I always be the last? The Meduion even among the Noldor?

Among his father’s warriors, Thranduil had been the youngest and was the last to be taught the Ways of the Warriors by the soldiers who were the march wardens and the royal guards of Doriath. Normally in Doriath, Elves were not allowed to train to be warriors until reaching 250 years of age, but due to the times, Thranduil started after his majority. He was the youngest and the smallest among the warriors. He thought he had outgrown being the last, always trailing far behind all of them. But he had learned to catch up to them and to pass some of them behind. They said he was farther ahead than anyone had been at his age. But all that meant nothing because he is a Sinda and inferior.

The moon was full tonight but clouds gathered blocking a portion of the moon. And in it, Thranduil saw his father’s stern face. What will his father say if he knew that Thranduil was standing here doubting himself?

“Remember who you are. Show them what you are made of,” his father had said. But will he be able to compete against these Noldorin cadets? Was he good enough?

Thranduil looked down at his swollen wrist. Pain that had calmed for a moment, flared up. It reminded him of the first time he was allowed to join the warriors in a field training, over two centuries ago now in Sirion. Thranduil had pleaded, argued, then finally persuaded his father to take him, promising his father that he will go back to his mother to become a healer if he could not keep up.

It was the last day of the month-long training. He was running far behind the warriors after a long day of tracking through swamps and rocky cliffs after spending the day training in weaponry. They were on their way back to the camp 5 leagues away as the sun was sinking. Exhausted after the long day, Thranduil tripped over a rough trail and tumbled down the jagged cliff they had just climbed and hit the bottom of the rocky floor.
Thranduil was alone in the dark when his father found him with torn hands and a sprained ankle. After seeing that there was no other major injury, his father said, “You’ll live. A warrior does not moan, groan, or quit. We break camp at dawn. If you are not there, then I will send one of your mother’s healers to return you back to her.” With that, his father climbed back up the cliff leaving Thranduil alone at the bottom.

With no other choice left to him, Thranduil climbed up that cliff nursing his sprained ankle. And all through that night, Thranduil dragged his sprained ankle through the swamp, up more rocky cliffs, and limped along the rocky riverside for five leagues to the campsite. He cursed at his father, at Valar and whoever he could think of whenever he stumbled and slipped down a cliff and had to climb back up all over again. More than dozen times through the night, he thought of giving up. But each time, somewhere near but out of his sight, someone was singing the song of praise to the Lady of the Stars.

And in the haze of the morning fog as dawn approached, covered in mud, his hands and face scratched, torn and bleeding, Thranduil had dragged his injured foot into the camp. As he practically crawled into the campsite, the warriors gathered around him and they sang to the last star as it faded in the brightness of the rising sun. It was as if he was there all along and the long night had only been a dream.

When the warriors had dispersed to break the camp, Thranduil had turned to his father.

“Did you not for a moment wonder whether I would make it?”

His father had looked at him with a frown.

“There is not one among the warriors here who doubted you would make it to the camp in time. Did you doubt yourself, Thranduil? If there is nothing else you trust in this world, son, trust in yourself and your ability. No one will believe in you if you do not believe in yourself. If you have the will and determination, anything is possible.”

Thranduil knew his father had meant every word. And all the anger and hurt he had felt, all the curses he had stored for his father and others had fallen away at that moment. He knew then that they had believed in him even when he did not believe in himself. And he realized then that all through the night, the warriors had taken turns watching over his progress.

Thranduil knew his father had not wanted the Noldor to crush him.

It had been his choice to stay and serve the Noldorin king. Until the fifth yen that was promised, he may have no choice about serving the king, but he certainly wasn’t going to grovel beneath Noldor, and he certainly wasn’t going to remain their meduion, no matter if these Noldor are born talented.

Thranduil stretched out his right hand against the sky. The skin pulled where it was swollen and Thranduil winced as pain ripped through his arm, making it hard for him to keep it from shaking. Until his wrist heals, it will be a challenge, but he had made it through worse things than a damaged wrist. Today may have been bad, but he had worse.

“Did you hurt your wrist?” someone asked and Thranduil whirled around.

Elrond stepped down from the stone stairs that led up to the Star Field.

“It looks badly swollen,” Elrond said and he reached over.
Thranduil stepped back out of Elrond’s reach.

“I’m fine.”

“I am not your enemy, Thranduil. I know little, but I have some training in the healing arts. I could help you,” Elrond said.

“I don’t need your help.”

“Then, at least get some salve from the healers. There is a healer’s ward below the south wing of the King’s Tower, just before the barracks. It is on your way. You could also ask one of them to use one of the beds there. There will be no more bedrolls at the barracks…”

“I don’t need a bedroll.”

Elrond sighed. “But, please, do have your injuries addressed. Tomorrow will be even more grueling. You don’t want to start the day with any unnecessary pain, especially when you haven’t had anything to eat all day. Here. I saved you some.” Elrond held out a bundle wrapped in a piece of linen. When Thranduil did not move, Elrond opened up the bundle. It was a slice of thick bread and pieces of dried fruit.

“I told you, I don’t need your help.” Thranduil turned away.

“Look, you don’t need to like me.” Elrond blocked Thranduil. “But you will need all your strength tomorrow. Your body will need nourishment to heal faster. You should at least eat.” Elrond thrust the food in his hand toward Thranduil, but the Sinda slapped it away. The sudden motion knocked the food off Elrond’s hand and the bread and fruit fell onto the ground.

“Leave me alone, Peredhel!” Thranduil walked away without bothering to look.

----------

**Warrior training age** for Sindar is 250 years, but it is 125 for Noldor. I made it this way because unlike Noldor who were in constant conflict with Morgoth, Sindar were in the relative safety of the protected realm of Doriath, so they didn’t have a need to replenish their warriors as often as would have the Noldor. (I probably think way too much about these things. >_<

**Elbereth Gilthoniel** (Sindarin, *Star Queen Starkindler*)—Refers to Varda (Quenya, *sublime* or *lofty*) Queen of Valar, wife of Manwe. Varda made stars thus known as Lady of the Stars. Elves revere her the most among all the Valar and in times of deepest darkness and need, call upon her for it is said that she can hear all voices from every corner of the world.

**Fifth yen** refers to year 720 (yen = 144 years, so 5x144=720). As this is year 144, Thranduil has 576 years more to go in his service to Gil-galad

Chapter End Notes
Next: Chapter 18 When It Rains It Pours--At the barracks, a fellow cadet tries to put Thranduil in his place.
When It Rains It Pours

Chapter Summary

It is the end of the long, difficult day. Thranduil just wants to lay down and rest but that is not to be. Apparently, the day is not over yet.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

King ’s Tower. April 10 Second Age 144

THRANDUIL entered the barrack set aside for the cadets.

It was one large rectangular room with a tall window at the end of the short wall furthest from the door. Long wooden platforms were built against the two long walls topped with bedrolls. There were eleven bedrolls on the wooden platform on the side of the wall with the door and twelve on the long side of the wall.

Across from the door, there was an empty spot where a platform should have been. There was only an empty space there and a bare stone floor. And leaning against the empty spot was Thranduil’s backpack. On top of the pack, a bundle of blue tunic with golden leather armor lay folded. There was no wooden platform and no bedroll but the wall had a wooden sign nailed to it with a word “Meduion” written on it.

When Thranduil entered the room, cadets were laughing, sitting on top of their bedrolls or at the edge of the wooden platforms, gathered into several groups. However, when Thranduil stepped into the room, a hush fell.

“Welcome, Meduion,” a tall Noldo at the end of the room rose up and made an exaggerated bow with elaborate hand gestures toward Thranduil. Cadets around the Noldo sniggered.

“Don’t mind Belegor,” one of two cadets who was sitting on the raised platform next to Thranduil whispered as the blond Sinda settled down on the stone floor next to his pack. “He is one of the best among us, but he can be rather proud. The fact that he placed first on today’s list probably makes him an ass at the moment,” the Elf said.

Unlike the majority of other Noldor, this Elf’s eyes were amber in color and his hair seemed darker brown than black. He leaned down, his eyes warm and friendly.

“Thranduil Oropheron? I am called Cellon, son of Brundor,” the amber-eyed Elf said with a smile. “And this is my friend Gelir, son of Amarthon.” He pointed to the other elf who was sitting next to him.

The other Elf, who looked like a typical Noldo, gave a terse nod.

Thranduil gave a quick nod back then laid down on the stone floor. He took out his cloak from his backpack and placed it over him with his pack as a pillow. At this moment, Thranduil did not care.
He was tired and exhausted. He did not care who or what the others were called. Every part of his body throbbed and ached and the bones and muscles seemed to creak as he stretched out on the stone floor.

Thranduil sighed contentedly and closed his eyes with a relish when someone kicked at his slippered feet.

“Meduion, you do not get to sleep first. The last is to be the last of everything,” someone said.

Thranduil cracked open his heavy lids. It was the one called Belegor standing above him, his hands on his hips. His gray eyes were twinkling with amusement. Two other cadets peered down behind Belegor. Thranduil sat up with a heavy sigh and looked up at Belegor who leaned over him.

“I am tired and achy,” Thranduil said, his voice even and emotionless. “And because of that, I will forgive your rudeness, Noldo. Next time, do not touch me. I will not give you another warning.”

Thranduil laid back down and closed his eyes.

“What did you just say, Meduion?” Belegor kicked at Thranduil’s feet again, this time harder.

“Leave him alone, Belegor. He is new. He is not familiar with the rules,” said Cellon who stood up to block Thranduil from Belegor as the blond Sinda sat up.

“Let him be,” Cellon said to Belegor.

Belegor pushed Cellon out of the way. The other two Elves behind Belegor pulled Cellon away while blocking Gelir who, too, got up from his bed.

Belegor turned back to face Thranduil. Sighing, Thranduil got up to his full height.

“You deaf?” Thranduil sneered down at Belegor.

The Noldo was tall, about Elrond’s height, only about two to three finger width shorter than Thranduil with a typical dark hair and gray eyes, but perhaps with more finely chiseled features than others.

“You do not know your place,” Belegor growled, thrusting his face into Thranduil.

“Oh, no, Belegor,” Thranduil said with a shake of his head. “I know exactly where my place is. It is you who do not know or do you not know how to read?”

Thranduil pointed toward the wooden sign behind him.

“I swear it says ‘Meduion’, is it not Cellon?” he turned to the amber-eyed Elf who had introduced himself earlier.

Cellon smiled widely. “It sure says so, Thranduil Oropherion.”

Soft laughter rippled through the room. Belegor’s face turned red. He narrowed his eyes into slits.

“Why don’t you get back to your nice ‘I-am-first-place’ bed and let me be,” Thranduil said.

“You insolent…” Belegor reached forward to grab at the front of Sinda’s tunic. But his hand never reached it.

With unforeseen speed, Thranduil grabbed the hand, twisted it and with a swift kick to Belegor’s
feet, pulled the Noldo over his shoulder. Belegor landed on his back with a loud thud.

There was a gasp around the room followed by a silence. It took Belegor’s two companions a moment to recover before they moved. But Thranduil was faster. The one who was just behind Belegor rushed at Thranduil, but the Sinda kicked him in the stomach, then when the other moved in from the side, punched him in the chest. When they bent forward, Thranduil’s elbows crashed down on their backs. Both fell in an instant.

Thranduil winced and shook his right hand where pain exploded, stopping him a moment to swallow a groan. But, soon, he turned to Belegor, ready to strike the Noldo once more if needed. But, Belegor seemed dazed as he raised himself off the floor and sat up.

Thranduil scoffed. He may be tired, but his instincts were honed in the wild fighting for his life.

Thranduil had wandered the plains and the forest of the east for over hundred years following his father. And during that wanderings, they had spent several decades in the North when an encounter with a large group of orcs led them up North of Misty Mountains. During those years, Thranduil fought orcs, trolls and other dark creatures. The North had been a vast unforgiving place unlike the fertile wooded forests and wide plains between the mountain ranges. Besides being inhospitable, the region was crawling with creatures bred by the former Dark Lord.

Although they had lost many good warriors in the process, his father had thought it prudent to scout the areas where these creatures hid. They spent several years in the harsh conditions doing a thorough search, mapping the locations and recording the numbers of the creatures that inhabited the north region.

Due to their small number, they had tried their best to remain undetected, but they could not avoid occasional clashes with the creatures. And there were many times when Thranduil found himself fighting for his life and for those of his companions. There was no way these cadets who were taught on a training ground was going to best him.

As Thranduil straightened, the door opened. Elrond walked in and looked around at the silent room.

“What happened?” Elrond asked, then gasped when he saw Belegor on the floor and two of Belegor’s companions sprawled beside him. Following behind Elrond was Lieutenant Gwendir.

“Remember to put your uniform on before lining up tomorrow morning,” Gwendir said, then he frowned as he took in the scene.

Gwendir looked at the cadets who were all on their feet now, then at the three Elves on the floor.

“What is going on here?” the lieutenant bellowed.

Belegor who had managed to stand up pointed to Thranduil. “The Meduion attacked us.”

“Thranduil Oropherion?” Gwendir frowned at the blond Sinda.

“I told Belegor that I wasn’t going to give him a second warning,” Thranduil said, raising his chin to face the lieutenant. He kept his eyes straight, avoiding the light in Gwendir’s eyes.

Gwendir furrowed his brows.

“Causing commotion is not a behavior fit for an officer. Oropherion, outside!”

Elrond turned to Gwendir. “But, sir, it is about to rain…”
“Do not go further, Earendilion. Do not make things worse for yourself,” Gwendir warned then stepped out of the door.

“How?” Gelir asked as Thranduil was about to follow Lieutenant Gwendir out of the door. “If you can move like that, how is it that you are the Meduion? How are you able to do that to Belegor and the other two?”

Thranduil shrugged. “Their eyes didn’t glow.”

“What? What does that mean?” Cellon blinked next to Gelir, clearly not understanding, but Thranduil did not bother to elaborate.

When Thranduil stepped outside, Gwendir was waiting.

“I don’t need to explain what your punishment is, do I, Oropherion?”

“No, sir.”

“Then, get going. If you are quick enough, you may get back before the rain comes,” Gwendir looked up at the sky. Unlike before, the cloud covered the sky hiding the moon and the stars.

Thranduil headed toward the field below when Gwendir called him again.

“Once you are done, you can sleep in the shed by the infirmary, if you prefer. It is a tight space, but there is hay there. It may be preferable to a hard stone floor.” With that Gwendir nodded, signaling him to start.

Thranduil ambled down to the Star Field. With no moon and starlight, outside was pitch dark, but Thranduil had no trouble finding his way to the training fields. The white stones with which the stairs and the ramparts were made, including the boundaries of the three training grounds, glowed pale white in the darkness as if they held the light of the stars inside them.

Any other day, Thranduil may have admired the glow of the lights, but right now, he could barely keep his feet moving. He didn’t even have the strength to prevent the shaking of his right hand which ached and burned as if axed and scorched. Part of him wanted to get this over with, he was just so tired, but the other part of him just didn’t care anymore.

When he arrived at the corner of the Sun Field and cradled a rock in his arms, the sky far to the East flashed followed by a thunderous roar. Thranduil looked up. As if the sky suddenly cracked open, rain poured down with a fury. The sudden gush made Thranduil swerve loosening his hold on the rock. Pain exploded double on his wrist and the rock slipped off his arms, throwing Thranduil down onto the mud.

The rain pounded down his head and shoulders, roaring like jeers of Noldorin cadets. Thranduil looked up at the dark sky, ignoring the thousands of heavy raindrops demanding him to bow down.

Light flashed and thunder roared. Thranduil roared back with everything he got.

-------------

On sleeping--In LOTR, Gandalf and Legolas are seen sleeping with their eyes open. But I limit open-eyed sleep to when Elves are traveling outside their realm, in an unknown area or hostile place. In my headcanon, when Elves are within the safety of their home or in an area where they feel safe, they will sleep like any other race. Otherwise, it wouldn't make sense for them to have eyelids.
Next Chapter 19: Thrashed--First Age at Sirion when Thranduil faced a red headed Noldo
Thrashed

Chapter Summary

Exhausted, Thranduil sleeps, but his dream is filled with the memory of Sirion. And Elrond’s patience with Thranduil has run its course.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

White Tower of Arvernien. May 25, First Age 538

<9:02 AM> Once he reached a wide-open stone terrace built over a cliff, Thranduil stopped and hid behind a tall granite statue erected at its boundary. The flowering bushes that surrounded the statue gave Thranduil ample coverage but he scooted down low when he saw one of the three red armored soldiers walking back toward the middle of the terrace. The Noldorin soldier had been looking around large vases at the far end of the terrace where the stone stairs led to a white tower built on the edge of the cliff. The tower was Elwing’s favorite place to watch for a ship that may carry her husband back home.

Thranduil aimed his arrow at the Noldorin warrior when another soldier in the red armor came out of the mansion that stood on the far right of the terrace. He walked over to the one in the middle of the terrace.

“She’s not in there. Search all around,” the second soldier said in Quenya. It was the same commanding voice that had jeered at Thranduil previously. Now that Thranduil could see him closely, he realized the one with the jeering voice has a hair that was as red as a sunset, a rare color among the dark-haired Noldor. In fact, his red armor was gilded in gold with designs of the rays of the sun around the eight-pointed star.

Thranduil grabbed another arrow when a third warrior with a bow strung and ready in his hand came around from the back of the mansion to join the other two.

“I don’t see her, Ambarussa. Are you sure she came this way?” the archer said to the redhead.

“I’m sure!” The redhead frowned.

Noiselessly, Thranduil took out the third arrow. He lined the three arrows over his bow, then nocking one arrow to the string, aimed it at the Noldorin archer. Once he disposed of their archer, Thranduil should have the time to shoot the other two who only had swords. Thranduil silently planned the moves and calculated the distance, then he pulled back the string of his bow.

As the string became taut, Thranduil felt a chill run down his spine. He took in a breath, then let the tension of his bowstring settle.

No matter how much he wanted to deny it, Thranduil knew he had no chance if he was to face the three highly trained Elven warriors directly. His best chance was to shoot them down as quickly as he can before any of them could reach him. And at this distance, with nothing near for the three warriors to hide behind, Thranduil knew he could kill them, if not all of them, at least two before
he had to face the last of them.

But how could he kill another Elf? All Elves were kin, no matter how distantly related.

And the three Noldor standing on the terrace were so close, he could see the gray color of their eyes. Thranduil swallowed hard.

A tremor passed through him, shaking his very core. He had killed orcs and goblins, and he had hunted for food, but he had never killed another Elf before. Despite all the hatred he felt for the Noldor, everything he believed in cried out against committing the deadliest of sins. He lowered his bow.

Then, Thranduil thought of Menegroth. These Elves were the ones who had killed his brother, killed his grandfather, killed Aron’s mother and the gentle queen. They were the same people who destroyed the home he loved. Thranduil clenched his back teeth and picked up the bow again. Elwing’s life depended on him killing them.

With trembling hands, Thranduil held up his bow and aimed it at the Noldorin archer as the Noldo stood next to the redhead. Thranduil took in a big breath to still the tremor that went through him. His heart pounded as if it will jump out of his chest. The young Sinda glanced at the Noldorin warriors, afraid that they could hear it.

The threaded arrow in front of him shook and Thranduil stepped back to steady himself before pulling back on the string when something crunched under his feet.

The redhead turned and looked directly at where Thranduil hid.

“Come out! I know you are there. Are you an Elf or a filth of the Dark Lord who hides in the darkness and skulks like a coward?” the redhead said aloud.

Thranduil knew better than to abandon his bow, but his blood boiled and anger darkened his heart and mind.

He stepped forward into the opening, then threw down his bow and the arrows on the ground. He took out his long knife which was strapped to his belt along with his dagger.

The redhead laughed when he saw Thranduil with his long knife drawn.

“A child?”

“I’m not a child!” Thranduil spat. “You want a fight, then fight, Noldo.”

A corner of redhead’s lips curled up.

“You are no match for me, elfling,” the redhead said, holding up his head high to look down at Thranduil. The redhead looked very tall against Thranduil’s slight and lithe frame. Although Thranduil was 70 years old, he was smaller than most Elves at that age.

“You think because you are a Noldo that you are superior to everybody,” Thranduil rushed in, swinging his long knife, going for an opening on the redhead's right.

The redhead barely moved, but slid past Thranduil’s thrust as if it was a mere play.

“We are superior. I’m guessing you are not one of our kin from Gondolin?”

“I rather be an Orc than be one of you, you kinslayer!” Thranduil huffed having made several swings
and thrusts but not having made even the barest contact.

“Then, you are one of the Elves from Doriath? How is it you speak Quenya?” the redhead frowned, taking another step to avoid Thranduil’s advance.

“You murderer. Your kind killed my brother, my grandfather, my aunt, people I loved, destroyed my home.” Thranduil swung with all his strength using all that he had learned but none of his swings touched the redhead who with deft movements avoided them.

“I have lost family, too, at Doriath,” the redheaded Noldo growled, then took a swing, easily blocking Thranduil’s labored thrusts.

“Every one of your kin deserves death.” Thranduil ground his teeth.

The redhead’s eyes flashed, then with a roar, Ambarussa slashed twice at Thranduil’s arm. The long knife in Thranduil’s hand clattered to the ground. Thranduil gritted his teeth, but could not prevent a groan from escaping as he grabbed at the two gaping wounds on his arm as the red blood seeped through his fingers. The redhead, with surprising speed, stepped forward and grabbed Thranduil’s neck, picking him up off the ground.

“What do you know of death, elfling!” The redhead bared his teeth, his lips curled. The bright light of his eyes seemed to glow like a firelight.

The steel gauntlet on the redhead’s hand dug into Thranduil’s bare neck. Thranduil gagged, breath cut off him. He tried to pry off the steel covered fingers, but try as he might, the redhead did not loosen his grip.

“Ambarussa, please,” one of the two red-armored warriors, the one with the bow, pleaded. “He is but a child. Let him go. He is no threat to us.”

It was then a horn rang out surrounding them with a long deep note, then tooted twice.

The three red armored warriors stopped and the redhead loosened his hold on Thranduil, enough for the young Sinda to take a breath.

“It’s Lord Maedhros’ horn. He is calling all the warriors to retreat,” the one who had intervened looked up at the redhead.

“I am not done yet, Astarno. She has the Silmaril. We are not done until we find her,” the redhead said as he turned back to Thranduil, then tightening his steel fingers over Thranduil’s neck once again, the redhead picked the Sinda up off his feet, then shook him.

“Where is she?”

Thranduil struggled as the steel fingers dug again into his throat cutting off blood and breath.

Stop!” A shrill voice rang out. The three warriors turned. “Let him go or I’ll drop this in the depth of the ocean where none of you can ever find it!”

At the base of the stone stairs that led up to the white tower, Elwing stood, tall and majestic.

The white jewel set amid the Dwarven necklace glowed bright white on her neck as she held the edges of the bejeweled necklace towards them.

The redhead growled, then hurled Thranduil onto the ground. Then without a second thought to the
young Sinda, Ambarussa turned to move toward Elwing.

Thranduil did not think. He grabbed redhead’s legs and held onto them with all his might.

“Run, Elwing, run!” Thranduil shouted in Sindarin.

The redhead’s steel gauntlet came crashing down on Thranduil’s head, once, then twice, but Thranduil hung onto him harder as something thick flowed down his forehead and stung his eyes.

“Get off me!” Ambarussa picked up Thranduil bodily and hurled the young Sinda onto the ground, smashing him on the side of his wounded arm.

The pain on his bleeding arm and the side where he hit the ground exploded as if pummeled with an ax, but Thranduil bit hard onto his back teeth. Trembling from pain, Thranduil got up and when the redhead walked near him to pass him, he sprang onto the redhead’s leg once more.

“You are not going anywhere!” Thranduil screamed.

The redhead’s other foot came crashing down on Thranduil’s side. Pain blasted through his body and Thranduil groaned and rolled over, unable to hold on.

Thranduil tried to lift up his head, but a cold steel clad foot held Thranduil’s head down on the dirt.

“If I were you, elfling, I’ll stay down,” the redhead growled. Then, he turned to the other two warriors.

“Astarno, shoot the woman and Thornandur, you take this elfling,” the redhead took off his foot from Thranduil’s head and turned.

“Ambarussa…” the one called Astarno protested.

“Now! Stop her.” The redhead commanded.

Ignoring the throbs of pain wracking his body, Thranduil threw himself onto Astarno who was threading an arrow onto his bowstring and shouted with everything he got.

“Run, Elwing! Run!”

---

White City. April 11, Second Age 144

A heavy groan escaped Thranduil’s clenched teeth as a burning claw ripped through his wrist. The raw pain sizzled all the way to his bones as if the wrist was hacked, then thrust into a pit of roaring fire. Realizing he had rolled over onto the injured wrist, Thranduil carefully lifted his body off his hand, then gingerly grabbed the throbbing wrist. It was even more swollen today than it was yesterday.

The pain was so acute the quick healing spell he had used last night was useless against it.

Biting down another groan, Thranduil sat up. Every part of his body ached. The dark memories of Doriath and Sirion that haunted him every night now were fading in the light of the morning, but the
shadows lingered.

“These Noldor really know how to thrash you,” Thranduil said through the gritted teeth, remembering the pounding he got from the redhead almost two centuries ago. No matter. That Noldo was dead and so was the other Noldorin warrior. Out of the three, only one remained: Astarno, the one who shot Elwing. It was one name Thranduil would never forget as long as he lived. One day, if that Noldo was still alive somewhere on this earth, Thranduil shall find him and kill him with his own two hands.

Cradling his right hand, Thranduil laid back down on the hay. He was exhausted. He needed food soon. He wasn’t sure if he could take another such grueling day without anything in his stomach.

Just as he closed his eyes to block out the throbbing pain, someone pounded on the door of the shed before wrenching it open.

“Get up, you fool.” Elrond panted at the open door to the shed. “The lineup is in few minutes.” He threw a bundle at Thranduil. “It’s your uniform. If you don’t want to be the last one again today, you better get dressed and get yourself to the Star Field.”

Thranduil sat up and took in Elrond’s agitated form as the young Noldo tried to catch his breath as if he had been running about all morning.

“Who asked you to be my keeper?” Thranduil drawled up at Elrond. He was too tired to care really, but he didn’t want anyone telling him what to do, especially a Noldo, even if it was Elwing’s son.

Elrond’s eyes practically burned like a fire pit.

“You ungrateful, arrogant Orc!” Elrond stepped forward, then just as quickly, he wrinkled his nose and stepped back. “Bah! You smell terrible,” Elrond grimaced. “And you look even worse,” Elrond said looking over the blond Sinda.

Thranduil scratched the back of his head. He supposed he looked bad. He had been drenched and covered in mud when he crawled into the shed last night. And too tired to care, Thranduil had slept in the wet clothes, mud and all. He could imagine how bad he must look and smell.

“You better wash up, too. You already missed morning meal and you don’t have much time,” Elrond said and took out a loaf of bread stuffed with strips of meat from inside his tunic. “You have to eat something before you start today. An empty stomach will deter your recovery and it will be even more grueling today.”

Elrond offered the bread to Thranduil. The Sinda didn’t take it but looked up at Elrond with disdain.

“Damn you, Thranduil! Pride will get you only so far. It will not fill your empty stomach. I knew Sindar can be stubborn, I didn’t know they can also be so thickheaded. If you are going to be a half-wit, then go ahead.” Elrond threw the bread on top of the bundle he had given Thranduil then stomped out, closing the door of the shed with a bang.

“So, you are not all meek and nice, are you?” Thranduil said with a scoff, unable to prevent one end of his lips from creeping up. “You may be your father’s son, but you have your mother’s temper.” Thranduil laughed out aloud. Then, picking up the bread, he ate it like a wolf starved.
Ambarussa (Quenya, *top-russet*)—the twin sons of Feanor, Amrod and Amras. They were the youngest of Feanor's seven sons. Both Amrod and Amras were called Ambarussa, a name given by their mother. In *Silmarillion*, both twins survived Menegroth along with Maedhros and Maglor but perished at Sirion when they attacked Elwing to get their hands on the Silmaril Elwing held. But in *Shibboleth of Feanor*, Amrod died at Losgar when his father burned the swan ships not realizing one of the twins was sleeping inside one of them and only Amras survived until Sirion. I chose to go with the latter in my story.

At 70 years old, Thranduil would look about 15-16 year old human.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter 20: Longing-- Elrond's grief
Chapter Summary

Elrond is grieved by the thought of his brother who is now lost to him.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

**ELROND** stomped down the stairs to the Star Field. The other cadets were just beginning to trickle into the training ground, some practicing, but most of them just fooling around and laughing as young Elves tend to do when left to themselves.

Too tired last night to think, Elrond had fallen asleep as soon as his head touched the pillow but when he did not find Thranduil in the barracks in the morning, Elrond thought the Sinda had gone either to the lake to wash and dress or to the dining hall. But when Thranduil’s golden head was not at the dining hall, Elrond found himself looking for the blond Sinda at the practice fields. In the end, he was running, asking after Thranduil at the infirmary, questioning other cadets, checking every place he thought the Sinda may linger.

He told himself not to worry. Thranduil made it clear last night that his help was not welcome, yet Elrond couldn’t let it go. Gil-galad rarely asked anything of him but the king sought him out for this task. It was a duty and Elrond wanted to do it well. As the time came to line up approached and Elrond couldn’t find anyone who had seen Thranduil, Elrond went to Lieutenant Gwendir to report the Sinda missing.

*And that ungrateful Orc…* Elrond let out a long breath trying to calm himself. While he had been frantic searching for Thranduil, worrying over him, the Sinda had been sleeping the morning away.

When Gil-galad first approached him, Elrond thought it would be an easy task. Thranduil was only 64 years older than him. They were practically same age. Lord Oropher was much older and difficult to approach, but even the cold Sindarin lord, when they first met, bowed to Elrond in acknowledgment, a courtesy which Oropher did not show even to the king. Elrond thought Thranduil would be easier to be friends with being younger and maybe less burdened by the past sorrows as did his sire. But Elrond was wrong.

Thranduil wasn’t just difficult to reach, the Sinda brought out dark memories Elrond did not wish to remember. The moment Elrond looked into the cold and distant eyes of Thranduil, the Half-Elven was sucked back into that time back in Sirion, the time that Elrond thought he had forgotten. But with the memory of those blue-green eyes, the images of the darkness of the cave, the muffled sounds of clanking of weapons and the wailing screams, they all came back. And those words:

“I am going to get your mother. And I will come back for you.

After Elrond came back from their first meeting at the Grey Havens, there were too many nights Elrond awoke, startled, his hand seeking Elros in the dark, crying out to his brother. But there was only empty space. Elrond had to light the lamp, trying to push away the dank smell of the cave that
lingered in the quietness of his chambers.

_Elros. Elros. My better half. My brother._

Something hot coiled in his throat and Elrond swallowed it down as the memory of his brave older brother made Elrond’s throat ache. His brother had tried his best to soothe Elrond even as he too shivered as they clung to each other in the darkness of the cave, afraid to breathe or cry.

The thought of Elros brought waves of longing Elrond had carefully tucked away.

The day he met his brother again after the Great War, Elrond had lost his temper then as he had with Thranduil, but back then, it had been more out of grief than anger.

“Why, Elros? Don’t you want to see mother again? They told you, did they not? Valinor is closed to the mortals.” Elrond rubbed at his chest where the muscles above his heart tightened painfully.

Elrond could not imagine being in the Middle Earth without his older brother. If they were to be sundered, then the thirty-five years Elrond had waited to see Elros after his brother left to fight with the Edain in the Great War meant nothing. Elrond bore the separation because he thought once the war was over, they will become a family again. But instead, Elros told him that they will be separated forever.

“I’m sorry, Elrond. I did not tell you of my decision because I wanted you to choose out of your heart, not for my sake. I wanted you happy.”

“Happy? How could I be happy when you and I will be separated forever?”

Elrond’s heart broke as he realized how little time they had together. Once his brother left the shores of Middle Earth, Elrond will never see Elros again. Men, no matter how long-lived, never lived long enough. Had Elros chosen to be an Elf, even if they separated from each other and went to the _Hall of Mandos_ one day, be it thousands of years later, Elrond will see Elros again. But Elros chose to remain a man. A man’s life differed from the Elves. Elrond did not know where Men went after their souls passed from this world.

“I would have followed you,” Elrond said, his throat thick and tight. Bitter tears flowed down his cheeks. His family will never be together again.

“But that is it, brother,” Elros said, grabbing Elrond’s shoulders, touching his forehead onto Elrond’s as his eyes, too, filled with tears. “I knew that if I told you my choice, you will choose likewise even when I know your heart is with the Elves. I didn’t want you to follow me and be my shadow, brother. You are more important than that. Go where your heart tells you. Become who you were meant to be, Elrond. You know, as well as I that this is what was meant to be.”

Elrond wept bitterly then, for he knew Elros spoke the truth.

Many days after Elros left Middle Earth, Elrond regretted his choice to leave Elros to fight in the War of Wrath while he led a smaller part of Maedhros’ people to Gil-galad.

When the Great War started with the landing of the host of the Valar in Beleriand, Elrond and Elros had been too young, only thirteen years old in age. But as soon as they turned twenty, Elros decided to join with Men to fight the Dark Lord.

“Do not go,” Elrond had begged. “This is not our fight, Elros. Valar had forbidden us from joining in the battle.”
“Not us, Elrond. Only the Exiles and those Elves whose hands are tainted with the blood of their kin are forbidden. We are not Elves. We are Men. The Edain are our people, our grandfather’s people. Have you forgotten who our parents are? Maedhros and Maglor may have raised us, but they are not our parents.”

Unlike Elrond who had forgiven Maedhros and Maglor of their bloody deeds at Sirion, Elros had never quite forgotten that these two Noldorin Elves were responsible for the loss of their mother and their home. And although he had come to love and respect Maedhros and Maglor, as soon as Elros became old enough, his elder brother had wanted to leave them.

Knowing what was in Elros’ heart, Maglor had reached out to Gil-galad who had become the high king of all Noldor in Middle Earth. Under a truce, Gil-galad had agreed to accept those followers of Maedhros and Maglor whose hands were not tainted with blood. There were women, artisans and others who were not warriors and who had not participated in the bloodshed at Menegroth and at Sirion.

As this was the time when the whole of Beleriand was overrun with Morgoth’s creatures, the exhausted and dwindled army of Maedhros and Maglor could not confront the Dark Lord’s creatures and they had been running, moving from place to place, never quite settling down long in one location. For those given leave to move to the Isle of Balar, it meant protection from the onslaught of the Orcs running rampant in Beleriand as the war raged. And Maglor had given Elrond and Elros the task of leading these people to Gil-galad.

But instead of going to Gil-galad, his brother had joined the war alongside the Men.

Seeing the resolution in the depth of his brother’s eyes, Elrond had known then that there were no words that could dissuade his brother.

“Then, I will come with you,” Elrond had said even though all he wanted was to take care of the people who were entrusted to him.

Elros had shaken his head, with that same firm look.

“No, Elrond. This is where we must part. We are no longer children. We must walk our own paths, brother, even if those paths lead to different places.” Then, with a smile that lit up his gray eyes like a glint of light on a sword, Elros had clasped Elrond’s back. “Besides, you don’t like fighting. I know how much you want to be a healer, Elrond. Go. Take care of the people you are to lead. Before long, we will meet again.”

Elrond had thought then that once they meet again, they will settle down with Gil-galad who had given him a home and they would become a family again. But Elros chose a different path.

Pain bloomed in his heart knocking out his breath. Elrond couldn’t shake off the feeling that had he been a warrior like his brother, he would be with Elros now.

Elrond looked toward the West again.

In few months, it will be a century since his brother sailed from Middle Earth. Now, Elrond had no one except Gil-galad. The king was the closest family Elrond had in all the Middle Earth. The sorrow he hid deep inside him swelled up like a swollen river. Elrond fisted his hands and swallowed hard. This was not the time to get emotional.

Keeping a firm hand over his turbulent emotion, Elrond glanced back at the shed before running down the remainder of the stairs to join the cadets on the training ground.
Elrond will become what he knew the king expected of him. Gil-galad hoped that Elrond will eventually take over the command of the army. According to the king, Lord Gilmagor planned to sail as soon as the army was in order. And Elrond was determined not to let the king down, even if it meant giving up his desire to become a healer. If he had made this decision sooner, maybe Elros would not have left him.

“Elrond?” Someone touched his forearm and Elrond looked up.

Belegor peered into Elrond’s face, his gray eyes concerned. “Are you all right?”

Elrond forced a smile.

“You were frowning,” Belegor pointed to Elrond’s forehead. “I have never seen you frown like that. What is bothering you, my friend?” Belegor pulled Elrond’s hand off his front braid which the Half-Elven had not known that he was pulling.

“It is of no concern.” Elrond dropped his hand and tried to shake away the memory and the longing.

“It’s that Sinda, isn’t it?” Belegor knitted his forehead, his handsome features pinched. “You are getting yourself involved with him, that is why you are like this.” Belegor shook his head. “Elrond, some people are just not worth being nice to. You can’t be nice to everyone.”

“It is nothing like that, Belegor. The king has asked me to watch over him,” Elrond said simply.

“I see. Now it makes sense. So it is true that the king was thrust with the protection of this Sinda? It is no wonder then why the little Orc acts so high and mighty despite being a Sinda.”

“I do not think it is quite that…” Elrond wanted to explain, but knew it was useless. Once Belegor made up his mind, nothing changed it. Although open-minded about many things, Belegor rarely listened to others. And the younger generation of Noldor, unlike elders who were wise enough not to say so outright, were not afraid to voice their superiority over other Elves.

Belegor was no exception. His father was not only the chief councilor but also the leader of those Noldor who believed in the superiority of Noldor over all other Elves. And Elrond was very aware how Lord Lammaeg thought his half-Elven blood not sufficiently Noldor enough for his taste.

It was good that Lord Lammaeg’s children did not share their father’s thoughts regarding Elrond. Belegor accepted Elrond as a Noldo. And once accepted, Belegor never bothered with the other parts of Elrond’s mixed blood. But Elrond knew that not all of Belegor’s friends accepted him as fully as Belegor did.

And if he was very honest, Elrond never felt completely Noldor because there were some Noldor who did not see him as one of them. And he never felt completely Sindar because many Sindar did not accept him as one of them. Sometimes, Elrond wondered what he was. As accepting as many Noldor were, Elrond didn’t feel that he fit in, neither with Noldor nor with Sindar, and now, neither with Men. He was all of them yet none of them.

Belegor patted Elrond’s arm. “Don’t worry about the Sinda. We’ll put him in his place. If that Orc thinks he can tackle me unaware again, then I am not Belegor Lammaegion,” Belegor ground his teeth.

Elrond felt unease ran through him. He could feel Belegor’s anger and disgust. He knew well how other cadets and many young Elves in Lindon looked up to Belegor. Almost everyone knew who Belegor was. And his friends were loyal. If Belegor went against Thranduil, it meant hard times for the Sinda.
“Belegor, do not concern yourself with Thranduil. He doesn’t know much about how things are around here. I should have kept him informed of the rules and other things. It was my job and I failed.”

“Stop taking the blame for other people’s shortcomings, Elrond.” Belegor threw his arm around Elrond’s shoulder. “Your problem is, you care too much, my friend. Just stand back and watch.”

Belegor winked and moved away when they saw the three officers approach. Behind them, the remaining cadets scrambled to get to the field before the officers.

Among them was Thranduil. But unlike others, the Sinda did not run. With his long legs, the blond Sinda strolled onto the field and sauntered into the forming line. He stood there as if he had no care in the world, his hair still wet and clinging to his head. Then, with his head held high, Thranduil surveyed those around him with an icy cold gaze.

“That Meduion thinks he is the gift of Valar to Middle Earth,” Belegor standing next to Elrond sneered under his breath.

“Come now, Belegor. The officers are here,” Elrond said to remind Belegor.

The Half-Elf hoped that Thranduil would ignore whatever he heard, but that was not to be.

Thranduil turned towards them. With a corner of his lips curled up into a wicked grin, Thranduil raised his chin towards them.

“Belegor, was it?” Thranduil drawled. “How’s your back?”

Belegor’s eyes flashed like lightning, ramming Elrond’s senses with the force of searing heat.

“Attention!” Officer Bellion called out just as Elrond reached out to grab Belegor. But the officer’s call snapped Belegor back. The Noldo took in a sharp breath, then turned back to face the officers, his face tight and jaw clenched.

“Line up. Two Columns.” The four columns of cadets dissolved seamlessly to form two columns. “Five laps around the entire training fields. Start!” Officer Bellion’s voice boomed across the training ground and the cadets began to move in unison.

Elrond glanced at Thranduil. If the fool was stupid enough to make Belegor his enemy, then there was nothing Elrond could do. Had Thranduil’s foolishness been tempered with humility, Elrond may have been inclined to persuade Belegor otherwise, if his friend could be persuaded, but the way it stood, Elrond may end up punching that arrogant face of the Sinda before Belegor had his chance.

———

**Hall of Mandos**— the Dwelling place of Vala Namo (Quenya, *Ordainer* or *Judge*), also called Mandos (Quenya, *Prison-fortress*), the Doomsman of the Valar. The Hall is where the spirits of Children of Illuvatar, the Elves and Men, go after their death to await their fates. Thus, the hall is also called “Halls of Waiting”. The Elves could choose to reincarnate into bodies identical to those of their prior life after certain periods of cleansing and self-reflection unless they were judged guilty after committing some terrible misdeed, in which case, they are to wait in the halls until the ending of the world. Elves and Men went to different halls where Men left Arda (world) completely unlike Elves who were to either reincarnate or wait in the halls until the end of time. It is said that the hall grows in size as the world age.
**War of Wrath** (aka Great War)—the last war of First Age fought by Valar, Elves, Dwarves and Men against Morgoth, the Dark Lord. Morgoth was defeated utterly and taken prisoner. But, Sauron escaped and hid. This war lasted 42 years and ended up destroying the Beleriand and sinking it under the ocean.

Chapter End Notes

Next: Chapter 21 Heir--The king discusses with Gilmagor the matter of his heir
King’s Tower. April 11, Second Age 144

GIL-GALAD stormed into his chambers followed by Lord Gilmagor.

“He is my cousin, heir of my father’s brother. Have you forgotten that he is *Idril’s* grandson?”

“I have not forgotten. It is precisely why he cannot be your heir, Ereinion. He is the grandson of Turgon’s daughter. Our kings come from the line of sons, never mind that he is not even of pure Noldorin blood.”

“When have you become the purist?” The king challenged. “I thought only Lord Lammaeg talks of ‘pure blood’. I expect that from my uncle, but you…”

“My feelings have nothing to do with agreeing with Lord Lammaeg just now. You know I don’t agree with the views of your uncle, but I agree with him as to this matter.” Gilmagor held out his
hand, stopping Gil-galad as the king turned to protest.

“This isn’t about my view of Elrond. It is not about my feelings but about what your people expect. As their king, it is your job to execute the will of the people, not for you to execute your will on them. If you hope to unite all Elven kind in Middle Earth as you so wish, you should not start by alienating your own followers by changing our tradition for no reason. The purity of the blood aside, you cannot name an heir who is from a daughter’s line until all heirs from the line of sons are exhausted. That is the way it has been and that is the way people expect it to be. Even now, there are many who see Celebrimbor as having the better claim than you. And by rights, Celebrimbor should have been the king as the sole surviving member of the line of Feanor. And, make no mistake, Ereinion, had it not been for the kinslaying by Feanor and his sons, the crown would not be with you.”

Gil-galad took off the golden circlet on his head. “Then why did they make me king? I didn’t want this.”

“Because you are the only surviving heir in the House Fingolfin. After Maedhros gave up his right to the kingship to your grandfather, all of us acknowledged Fingolfin as the high king and the kingship has remained within his House.”

“And as Uncle Turgon’s heir, Elrond is part of this House. Why would it be wrong for the crown to go to Elrond, especially when Uncle Turgon had the crown before me?”

Gilmagor let out a long sigh and raked his hair.

“Turgon had the crown after your father’s death because you were only 27 years old and too young to rule. He was the eldest surviving male of the House at that time but Turgon knew the kingship will fall back to you and not to his heir even if he had a son. His heir would have only inherited Gondolin, had it survived, not the high kingship. Besides, Elrond is a Half-Elven.”

“But so was King Dior of Doriath. He was a Half-Elven and a mortal at that but he became the king after Thingol.”

“But their circumstance differs from ours, Ereinion. After King Thingol’s death, they were only two who could have taken the kingship. Lord Celeborn was one of them but he had left Doriath decades before Thingol’s death and they knew not where to look for him. The other was Lord Arandur but he refused, claiming that Lady Melian wanted Dior to inherit.”

“Lord Arandur as in Oropher’s father?” The king looked up at Gilmagor.

Gilmagor nodded.

“Yes. Lord Arandur was Thingol’s nephew but according to him, one of his captains brought a word from Queen Melian before she disappeared, that she wanted Dior to inherit. And when Lord Arandur refused the crown, it excluded everyone in his House including Arandur’s nephew Amdir as he grew up in his uncle’s house along with Oropher.”

"No matter what Lord Arandur claimed, Dior became the king because people accepted him."

"People of Doriath accepted Dior because they respected Lady Melian above all others and took her words to heart. I am afraid your words alone will not have the same effect on our people.”

Gil-galad sighed knowing this to be true.

“How do you know all this?” Gil-galad asked. “For a Noldo, you seem to know Sindarin history
“Master Pengo is knowledgeable and wise, but his knowledge of Sindarin history comes from pieces of information he gathered from the refugees of Doriath he met at Sirion. And the stories he added to his Annals are mostly those stories that are of interest to us and are written with our perspective. Unfortunately, those Sindar Pengo had access to did not always have the firsthand knowledge and many of their accounts missed the names of others not central to the story. And, Oropher’s people, those Sindar from Menegroth who had actual knowledge of what happened in Doriath, stayed away from us.”

“So, where did you get your information. I doubt any of Oropher’s people opened up to you.”

“No, they did not,” Gilmagor scoffed. “But Oropher was close to Lord Cirdan and deferred to him in all matters. I went to talk to Lord Cirdan when you first came to me regarding Elrond. I knew everything about Elrond’s father, but not enough about his mother.”

“And the knowledge did not convince you that Elrond is worthy?”

“As I said, it is not about the quality of Elrond’s blood. He has a royal blood of both Noldor and Sindar but he comes from a daughter’s line from both royal Houses. If there was no Celebrimbor, some may not question Elrond’s qualifications despite his mortal blood. But as it stands, Celebrimbor has the better claim until you have a son. If you name Elrond your heir now, you are practically telling Celebrimbor you reject him as a part of your family. As Lammaeg said, under you, we will be united. But, if people are given a choice between Elrond and Celebrimbor, most will choose Celebrimbor.”

“That includes Lammaeg himself,” Gil-galad said. “He believes anyone who is not Noldor beneath notice. My uncle thinks Elrond does not have enough of Noldorin blood in him.”

“I know how you feel about Lord Lammaeg and his views, but I recommend that you keep them to yourself, Ereinion. You need Lammaeg. He commands a large following and has the connection and influence over many Noldor. But most importantly, Lammaeg is loyal to you. No matter that your views clash often with his, he will never think of betraying you.”

Gil-galad sighed as he looked down at his hands. He knew Gilmagor was right.

“Do you think they will choose Celebrimbor even though he is Feanor’s grandson?” Gil-galad knew he was making a losing argument, but he had to ask.

“You know the answer to that. It is not our way to blame a son for the error of his father, or a father for the error of his child. No one blames him for the act of his father and neither should you.”

Gil-galad nodded, realizing he cannot fight this now. The king felt the scrutiny of his sword master and turned to meet the piercing eyes of the elder Elf.

“Let me ask you, Ereinion, as your friend and not as your teacher or adviser. Why do you insist on naming your heir now when you are still young? You are a young ellon with prospects better than most. We are at peace now. Is it so strange for the council to think that you will marry one day and produce an heir? Have you not seen the hopeful eyes of the many young maidens in this kingdom whenever you pass? What is it that spurs you to want an heir not of your own body? And why is it that you want an army when we have no dark lord to speak of?”

Gil-galad threw himself onto one of the chairs in his chambers. He pulled at the neckline of his velvet tunic, suddenly feeling suffocated.
“Talk to me.” Gilmagor’s eyes softened as he stood before the king. “What haunts you, young one?”

The king put his hand over his mouth. The vision of his mother lying on her bed, once beautiful face that became too pale and too thin, a wisp of her former self, swam before his eyes.

Once, proud and majestic she was. With long dark hair that was waves of silken curls and gray eyes that twinkled like evening stars, his mother had been the only source of joy for him in the land by the sea which was strange and foreign, so different from the windswept Hithlum with the scent of pines and snow-capped mountains where he was born.

Gil-galad was less than 20 years old when his father sent him away with his mother to the care of Lord Cirdan.

“Ereinion,” Gilmagor called, bringing the king out of the thoughts of the past. “Will you not talk to me?”

“I don’t think I could marry,” Gil-galad whispered, repressing the overwhelming sadness that clung to him like a morning chill.

Gilmagor frowned as if he had not heard right.

Gil-galad reined in the tremor that shook him as Silwen's soft silver eyes and moonlight white hair swirled like morning mist in his mind making his heart ache and bleed. But this was not a matter related to the realm. It was personal and as such, it had no bearing on their discussion. The dream, maybe, but not this. Gil-galad's eyes swept over the gilded gold box sitting on his desk before meeting Gilmagor's eyes again.

“I heard that you started to train the cadets yourself? Why is that? I thought you were planning to select only a few to train?” The king leaned back in the chair, trying hard to sound normal.

Gil-galad knew that his master was too sharp not to notice the intentional change in the subject, but he wasn’t ready to talk about it. Not yet.

Gilmagor met the king’s gaze and held it but after a moment, sighed, then took a seat across from the king.

“I met a new cadet. He intrigued me.”

“Oh?” the king looked up at his sword master. It was rare for the elder elf to say such a thing. Gilmagor was quite fastidious when it came to people. Of all the years the king had known him, the only other person Gilmagor found ‘interesting’ had been Elrond although that alone did not make Gilmagor take on Elrond as his pupil as the king had hoped. “Tell me about him.”

“At first, I thought he was a Vanya, someone I knew in Valinor although I knew that couldn’t be.” Gilmagor’s eyes clouded for a moment as if he was seeing somewhere far.

The king raised his eyebrows. “A Vanya? I thought there were none in Middle Earth?”

As far as Gil-galad knew, all of that race of Elves went to Valinor before the birth of the sun and the moon. According to what he read, Vanyar did not readily mix with others. Of the few that did, they were all married into his family.

“He wasn’t. He was just golden.”

“Golden? I know of none now in Middle Earth except for Lady Galadriel. Of course, unless he has a
blood of Men like Elrond. I have seen mortals with a blond hair although their hair is not so radiant in color as the Vanyar. Their colors certainly were not like Idril's or Lady Galadriel's."

"I do not believe there is any mortal blood in him. I am talking about Oropher’s son, Thranduil. I guess you have not met him yet?"

Gil-galad shook his head.

"I offered to house him here in the palace, but he refused. And my invitation to the celebration of the First Yen did not reach him. According to Lord Istuion, Thranduil went into a forest as soon as his father left and didn’t plan to return until after the celebration ended. I received a similar response for the dinner invitation before the training. I don’t know whether he is avoiding me or the timing was unfortunate. So what intrigued you?"

"I thought I saw something in him. At first glance, I could tell he was a trained warrior. Although he is young, it looked as if he was tested in a field. The way he stood…the look in the eyes. But…”

Gilmagor seemed hesitant to go on.

"He was not what he seemed?"

"I am not yet sure, but there is something not right about him. I sensed fear in him."

"You are not saying he is a coward? I cannot believe that the son of Oropher could be a coward.”

Gil-galad gaped at his sword master.

"Sons do not always take after their fathers, nor are fathers always like their sons. But I do not think it was a cowardice. Hardy and resolute, he was. Stood and took everything without one word of complaint although he suffered more than all the rest. That alone tells me he is no coward. I have driven the cadets hard all day. I wanted to see how hardy they were. As I always said…”

"Yes, I know.” Gil-galad smiled remembering the grueling training Gilmagor put him through insisting that a leader must get up when everyone is beaten down even if he was hurting more than the rest.

“A leader needs to have a great stamina, both in mind and body along with plenty of iron will and determination,” Gilmagor said as if he wanted to drill that into the king.

"Then what do you think it is? Did he at least do well enough against other cadets?"

“No. He was the meduion."

Gil-galad couldn't believe it. "I thought Thranduil was trained by the best of Doriath warriors?"

"I can’t say how well he is trained, but he certainly is experienced. I could tell by the ease with which he grips his weapons and how quickly he adapts to those around him although he seems to have some difficulty with his right hand.” Gilmagor stopped, then shook his head. "But, something haunts him. It weighs him down and affects him deeply. Whatever it is, if he cannot overcome it, he cannot lead. And there is another problem.” Gilmagor sighed. "He is not familiar with the Noldorin style. I don’t think he knows any of the patterns for wielding a sword other than his native Sindarin movements. I have learned the Sindarin style from Lord Cirdan’s people. The patterns are much more simple, effective but not as sophisticated as ours although I’ll admit to some innovative moves.”

“Can we set someone to teach him?”

Gilmagor scoffed aloud, but his eyes laughed. “This young Sinda declared to me that he can learn
whatever patterns in Noldorin style before the next quarter.”

Gil-galad rounded his eyes.

“That is in ten days. What has made him say such nonsense? Does he even know how many patterns there are?”

“I care not. He said he could, so I expect him to do so.”

“But, master…”

“He is young and arrogant to a fault. He must learn to be responsible for what he says.”

“But what if he can’t do it? The sheer number of patterns in ten days? You spent one week for each pattern when you taught them to me.”

“When I trained you, you were learning to wield your weapons for the first time. I needed to make sure you learned your patterns correctly. But Thranduil is already a warrior. The style may be different from what he may have learned, but a trained warrior should be able to pick them up much more quickly than a novice. Well, that is, if he is a properly trained warrior. He has yet to show me that he is.”

“Still…ten days? What will you do if he cannot do it?”

“Then, he will be unable to keep up with the rest. But more importantly, an Elf who says things lightly has no place among my officers. I will send him down to basic training with the common soldiers as I told him I will do.”

The king knew nothing he could say will change Gilmagor’s mind. The swordmaster had originally wanted to sail to Valinor and reluctantly agreed to take a temporary command of the army upon the entreaty of the king and the council. But Gilmagor had made it clear that he will not tolerate any meddling by anyone, including the king and the council, as to how he trained the army while he was in command.

But, how will Oropher take it if they throw his son down to basic training with common soldiers when they have told him that his son will be trained as an officer? Gil-galad rubbed at his forehead.

“At the least, shouldn’t we teach him the patterns?”

“I have already set Elrond to do so. I have tied them to be each other’s warrior companions.”

“Elrond would not like that. He is not very fond of Thranduil.”

“If Elrond is willing to disobey commands to defend the Sinda, then he will make better warrior companion to Thranduil than any other. Besides, they can learn much from each other.”

“Disobey commands? Elrond?” Gil-galad asked. That didn’t sound like Elrond at all. But Gilmagor did not elaborate. “And if Thranduil is anything like Oropher, then I don’t know what Elrond can learn from him,” the king added.

“I know Oropher is difficult but he has a will and determination rare in many others. You should not have let him go.”

“What should have I done? Chain Oropher to Lindon? It would have only brewed more discontent. How can I hope to unite our kind if I hold any of them against their will?”
The king stood up from his chair, sudden heat suffocating him. Gil-galad was keenly aware that he was keeping Oropher’s son against his will; but, that could not be helped.

“But if Oropher is to establish a realm, how will you deal with him and his followers then? At least when they were under your rule, your words would have governed them.”

Gil-galad walked over to a table and poured himself a drink. There had been a heated discussion among the Council before Oropher was allowed to leave Lindon.

“Oropher said he had no wish to establish a kingdom. I don’t think he has that sort of ambition. You agreed with me on that.” The king turned to Gilmagor and offered him a glass of wine.

“And I still do, Ereinion. It is the only reason I voted with you in the end. But, he is a born leader. People flock to him of their own will. Have you not seen how many of his followers grew by the time he left?”

The king thought back to the time when Oropher first approached him with the request to leave Lindon. In the beginning, it had only included his household, barely enough number of Elves to fill one ship. But they have grown over the years to require three ships by the time Oropher sailed. Although it still was only a handful compared to the number of Sindar who remained in Lindon, it was large enough to garner the attention of the council especially because they consisted mostly of the upper echelon of former Doriath citizens such as the surviving councilors, royal guards, and craftsmen who had lived in Menegroth.

“Even if Oropher does not have such ambition, his followers may. Ambition alone does not make one a king, but neither does a lack of it prevents one from becoming one,” Gilmagor said.

“In that event, it is Celebrimbor I should worry about. His supporters seem to be growing.”

“It is precisely why Lammaeg and I are against you naming Elrond your heir now, Ereinion. We do not want to antagonize Celebrimbor or give his followers a reason to choose between you and him.”

“I suppose,” Gil-galad looked away with a sigh realizing that they had circled back to the issue they had originally started with.

“Then you understand why we don’t want you to name Elrond your heir now? Right now, you need to focus on growing your power and influence. As soon as he is ready, install Elrond as part of the council. I will help you. Let the council see who Elrond is. Let Elrond earn his place rather than naming him your heir against the council’s wishes. Besides Celebrimbor, there may also be a child. We need not decide on the heir until you are sure there will be no child.”

Gil-galad nodded. But the king was sure already that there will be no child. But how can he tell Gilmagor that he will never marry, that he will never have a child of his own?

__________________________

Idril (a Sindarized version of Itarille, Sparkling brilliance)—Daughter of Turgon, thus the princess of Gondolin. She was the second Elven princess, after Luthien, to marry a mortal.

Ellon—male elf

Hithlum—Northern Beleriand ruled by Fingolfin, then later by his son, Fingon. In Silmarillion, it is stated that after taking the high kingship, Fingon sent his young son to Lord Cirdan for safekeeping
few years before leaving for Battle of Unnumbered Tears, the last battle fought by the Noldor against Morgoth where they were utterly defeated. Fingon died in this war and the crown passed to Turgon, Fingon’s brother. It was not until the death of Turgon after the fall of Gondolin in FA 510 that the high kingship came to Gil-galad.

Age for Elves—Up to 3 years of age, Elves and Men look same, according to Tolkien. But afterward, Elves grow slowly. At 50 years, they reach their majority (I took that to mean that they will look about 13 or 14-year-old human. During the Medieval period, once a child reached 13 years in age, when girls have their first menstruation, they were considered adults and marriageable). So, up to age 50, divide the Elf’s age by 4 and you will get how old they look if they were human. At 20, Gil-galad would have looked about 5 years old, and at 27, he would have looked about 7 years old.

Tolkien said, “some hundred years would pass before they were full-grown”. I take that to mean that they would look 17-18 years old human by the time they pass their 100 years of age. To me, although Elves may look as they do not age, they do age, just very slowly and not discernable to humans. Humans may not be able to tell, but Elves would be able to tell how old each other is.

Chapter End Notes

Next: Chapter 22 Warrior Companion

Next chapter will be up most likely on Monday due to the busy weekend. Have a great weekend everybody. And thanks for reading.
Warrior Companion

Chapter Summary

Thranduil finds himself with a broken wrist and ten days to learn Noldorin style of sword patterns. Elrond is assigned his warrior companion. He may be Thranduil's only hope if the Sinda could manage to bite his tongue.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

King’s Tower. April 11, Second Age 144

THRANGLUIL watched as the elder healer who had set his broken wrist talk to Lieutenant Gwendir. She spoke in a hushed voice that Thranduil could not hear. Gwendir’s eyes met Thranduil’s briefly before the lieutenant left.

Thranduil grimaced as he looked at his injured wrist which lay under a pile of herbal mixture meant to calm the swelling. It was laid on a pillow and propped up on a wooden desk.

A young healer who looked barely hundred or so in age carefully removed the herbal mixture from the part of the wrist that required stitches and started to sew the wound shut. Thranduil wasn’t sure if it was the herbal mixture, but the pain had calmed making it bearable unlike the moment Belegor’s spear hit it. Along with the sickening crunch, the blast of pain had been so strong, Thranduil had cried out, unable to hold in the agony that tore through his lips.

The moment Thranduil heard the crack, he had known the wrist finally broke despite how carefully he had wrapped it tightly with a piece of wood and strips of his torn tunic early in the morning.

If it wasn’t for that confounded young Noldo, Thranduil was sure he would have passed the day without an incident. Well, except for that little mishap with the Crooked Nose in the morning. But, how was he to know that the Noldorin style of sword wielding was so very different from the style he had learned from his father and the other warriors? Thranduil found that there was much in the use of swords that he had not known. Although his thorough training in the wild allowed him to make quick adjustments and adapt to the differences in techniques, he just didn’t know enough and soon found himself at odds with others.

And Gilmagor had eyes of an eagle. And Thranduil had let his pride say stupid things. The young Sinda sighed. Thranduil knew he had no one to blame but himself.

The young healer who was finishing up the stitching of his torn skin looked up with a question in her eyes.

“It’s nothing,” Thranduil said. The girl went on to remove the rest of the herb mixture and took up a green salve in a clear jar. The swelling and the bruising that had made the wrist unrecognizable had calmed. Thranduil was thankful that the throbs of pain were bearable.
As for Belegor, Thranduil was sure the Noldo’s strike had been intentional. Thranduil had been careful to hold all the weapons with his left hand, trying his best to protect the injured wrist throughout the day. Belegor obviously noted this and when they were put against each other to practice blocking, the Noldo had aimed for the wrist.

Thranduil hissed and bit down a curse as his wrist burned and the throb worsened. Pain laced through his skin as if someone cut open his wrist with freshly forged steel still hot from the fire.

“Forgive me, I should have told you that it will burn,” the healer said, her eyes wide, her cheeks flushed red. She glanced up at him but quickly downcast her eyes.

“I’ll live,” Thranduil said through gritted teeth, trying to ignore the intense burn that seemed to magnify the pain.

“Once the burn settles, the pain will lessen,” the young healer said as she placed a white fabric before adding small wooden splint to fixate his wrist before binding all of them with strips of linen.

Thranduil pursed his lips and tried not to show how painful the handling was. The young healer glanced up at him again before dropping her eyes. She has been doing that for some time and Thranduil wondered if his face betrayed too much pain. Whatever the girl may think, it was the best he could do.

Once she was done, the elder healer came to check. The young healer got up and vacated the seat for the elder who sat and picked up Thranduil’s wrist to check the binding. She wrapped her hands over the binding and sang a soft tune, the words of which he didn’t recognize and the sharpness of the pain lessened. Thranduil let out a breath he didn’t realize he had been holding.

“Very good, Lassiel. The binding is well done,” the elder healer turned to the younger who beamed at the compliment.

“So, how does it feel now?” the elder healer asked Thranduil.

Thranduil shrugged. “Manageable,” he said.

The older healer’s eyes twinkled.

“You are not much of a talker, are you, young one? Next time, if there is next time, do come early instead of waiting until things get this bad,” she said.

Thranduil looked up as the elder healer from Valinor regarded him. Unlike the bright eyes of the warriors from Valinor, the bright eyes of the elder lady did not bother Thranduil. Most of the elder ladies he had known in Menegroth had those bright eyes from Melian to Lady Galadriel. In fact, the healer’s bright eyes reminded him of his mother’s warm and gentle eyes.

“This injury is not from just one strike with a spear. Your wrist was already injured and overused. I would guess as early as yesterday morning. Being brave does not mean you have to take pain when you don’t have to. We are here near the barracks just for such incidents as this.” The healer gently padded the bound wrist. “Before it finally splintered, it would have hurt quite badly.”

“I had worse.”

The healer smiled patiently. “It is not a weakness to ask for help when you need it, young one.”

“Thank you,” Thranduil said and got up.
The healer’s gray eyes twinkled as she smiled up at him. She raised her eyebrows.

“Where do you think you are going?”

Thranduil frowned. “Return to the training field.”

“I do not think so. You are not to use your right hand until the bone sets. You have overused it after its initial injury. It will take time for it to heal. I have already talked to your lieutenant.”

“But…”

“No buts.” The healer’s calm eyes brooked no argument.

Just then, someone walked into the infirmary. It was Elrond.

“He may not be able to use the wrist but I am afraid he is not excused from the training, Mistress Taurien.” Elrond said to the elder healer who beamed up at Elrond.

“Hmmm, I am afraid I cannot allow him to do anything that will cause any strain on his wrists tonight. Besides, today is almost over. I will insist that he be allowed to recover for the rest of the day without any further strain on his injury. Starting tomorrow, he can start with activities that would not put too much weight on his right hand.”

“I understand, Mistress Taurien. I can guarantee that he will not be straining his wrist further today. But he does have things he must do tonight.”

“Is that your officer’s order?” Mistress Turien frowned.

“It is.”

Thranduil looked up at Elrond.

“But why is it you are here?” Thranduil asked. They could not have sent Elrond just as a messenger.

“They just assigned warrior companions for everyone and I happened to be assigned yours,” Elrond said.

“Wonderful,” Thranduil said dryly. Thranduil knew that he would be paired with someone eventually but had not expected Elrond. When training warriors, they always paired them so that they can share loads from simple chores to protecting each other’s backs in battle.

“Don’t worry, Sinda. I am not happy about it either,” Elrond said. Thranduil glared at Elrond and the young Noldo returned it in kind.

Mistress Taurien raised her eyebrows, looking at Elrond then at Thranduil.

“Now, why would you two be reluctant to be each other’s warrior companion?” Mistress Taurien said. “You two are two of a kind…” She didn’t get to finish her sentence.

“In what ways?” both spoke at the same time, turning their heads toward the healer.

Thranduil was sure the look of disbelief and disgust on Elrond was also on his face.

The healer laughed.

“First of all, both of you are different from the rest. Just by looking at you, that is obvious.”
“Different from others, I’ll grant, but I am nothing like him,” Thranduil said, his chin pointed at Elrond.

“Thank the Valar for that,” Elrond said coolly. “I would like to believe I am not so ill-tempered or ill-mannered.”

“I rather be ill-tempered than be ‘il-lusory’.”

Elrond raised a single eyebrow with a look of disbelief.

"Illusory? I? How am I deceptive? You are the one who acted like a coward in front of everyone, earning the first meduion title among the cadets, yet before the day ended, you downed three of the best. If that is not illusory, I do not know what is.”

“Well, you are the one who acted so concerned for me. ‘Eat this Thranduil. Let me help you, Thranduil’” the Sinda imitated Elrond’s voice. “And now you are a different person. If that was not deceptive, what was that then?”

“Are you sure both of you are over two centuries old in age because you two sound like two elflings in their thirties,” the healer said, her eyes twinkling with laughter. Thranduil looked away feeling the heat on his face.

“Come now, Sinda. We have much to cover,” Elrond said, his face flushed and his voice subdued. Thranduil turned to Mistress Taurien and inclined his head respectfully.

“Excuse me.”

The elder healer nodded back, her eyes twinkling again. These elder ladies always made Thranduil feel like a child. Thranduil quickened his pace to follow Elrond closely.

As soon as they stepped out of the infirmary, however, Lassiel, the younger healer, ran up to them. When they stopped to look at her, she glanced at Elrond.

“I will be at the western corner of the Star Field, meet me there,” Elrond said and left them alone. Thranduil watched Elrond walk away as the young healer handed a small bundle in her hand to Thranduil.

“I—uh—forgot to give you this,” she said, her voice small and hesitant. “These are pockets of powdered willow barks. A pinch on a cup of any drink or meal will help you with the pain. But please don’t overdo it. Too much can induce nausea although it will be temporary and not harmful.” She bit her lower lip and stole a glance up at him, her cheeks flushed. “If you need more, you are welcome—.”

“I won’t. Thank you.” Thranduil turned, tucked the herbs into his pocket and hurried after Elrond.

“That was quick,” Elrond said pulling up a corner of his lips.

“She was giving me some herbs for the pain. Why would it take time?” Thranduil frowned. Elrond held his eyes, then snorted softly as he turned away.

“What?” Thranduil frowned.

“Nothing.” Elrond shook his head. Then, he looked up at Thranduil. “Did you really tell Lord Gilmagor that you can learn the entire patterns of the Noldorin style by the next quarter moon?”
“I did.”

Elrond tilted his head and looked up at him, lifting a single eyebrow. “And what has prompted you to say such a thing? Do you even know how many patterns there are?”

Thranduil shook his head.

“Just as I thought.” Elrond shook his head and sighed. “Only someone who is ignorant would make such declaration.”

“Who are you calling ignorant?” Thranduil sneered. “How hard could it be?”

“It is not a matter of difficulty, Sinda. They can be learned with time. It is a matter of the sheer number of patterns you have to remember. There are six major ones.”

“Only six?” Thranduil snorted, rolling his eyes.

“Yes, six,” said Elrond with a smirk. “Six major patterns, each pattern with six defensive and six offensive sub-patterns.”

“Each?” Thranduil's shoulders sagged despite himself as he quickly calculated the number of patterns he would have to learn. “Seventy-two patterns?”

“Seventy-eight. Each major pattern has its own moves.” Elrond looked at him coolly. “And you have only ten days. Oh, and don’t forget you are not excused fully from the training and the chores. You will be marked as the meduion for the rest of the days you have to miss a portion of your training because of your wrist. Lord Gilmagor will not make you carry a rock, but you are to run the entire course around the three fields five times before the line-up in the morning two times at the dismissal.” He looked up counting with his fingers. “That is what? A seven and a half leagues run in the morning before the training and three leagues after the end of the training.” Elrond turned to Thranduil with a smile. “And don’t forget the chores. We are up for the service at the dining hall for the next two nights starting tomorrow.”

Thranduil couldn’t help himself from groaning.

“You have nobody to blame except yourself,” Elrond said coolly.

“Well, thank you for your wise observation, Master Know-it-all.” Thranduil glared at Elrond.

“You should have allowed me to help you when I first noticed your wrist. I would have helped you,” Elrond said meeting Thranduil’s eyes, cool smile gone from his face and the warmth back in his gray eyes.

“And I will say this again, Peredhel. I don’t need your help.” Thranduil faced Elrond.

They glared at each other for a moment.

Then, Thranduil realized the rashness of his words. He knew nothing of the Noldorin style and he knew of no one to ask. If Elrond decided to not help him, he was totally alone to learn the patterns by himself. Even if he trusted his abilities, Thranduil knew he could do nothing without someone to instruct him. But to back down now, his pride would not allow it. The Sinda swallowed hard and looked away, breaking the eye contact first.

The rational side, the practical side of him, urged him to apologize and ask Elrond for help. Of what he had seen of Elrond, Thranduil knew Elrond would not refuse him, but his tongue weighted tons
as if it grew large and heavy. He fisted his hands, then stretched them out.

*Just say them, dammit*, he cursed at himself. Thranduil bit his lower lip then looked up.

But, before Thranduil could force open his mouth, Elrond turned away.

“Let’s hurry up. We have only a few hours before we have to turn in for the night. By my calculation, you need to learn eight to nine patterns each day. With about 30-40 moves you have to learn for each pattern, you do not have much time.”

Thranduil stood watching Elrond loosen his muscles in preparation. Whatever words of placation Thranduil had tried to form died on his lips. As unfair as he knew he was being, Thranduil couldn’t help anger flicker in his heart. Or, maybe it was shame. Thranduil wasn’t sure, but he did not like it. Elrond made him feel small and unworthy.

Elrond shot him a glance as Thranduil stood mute and unmoving, trying to fight the desire to walk away.

“Come and loosen up your muscles, Sinda. And, don’t worry. I am not doing this to help you. Gilmagor ordered me to teach you the patterns. It is up to you to learn and practice them so you could keep up when you do the patterns with the cadets, that is if you can manage to learn all the patterns in time.”

Thranduil scowled, but squared his shoulders and joined Elrond.

Chapter End Notes

Next: Chapter 23 Begotten Day Present--Thranduil finally makes it to the dining hall, meets Gil-galad and gets himself into even more trouble.
Finally having made it to the dining hall, Thranduil meets Gil-galad. Confrontation with Belegor tempts Thranduil to do something he wouldn't normally do.

**The King’s Tower. April 12, Second Age 144**

**THRANDUIL** entered the dining hall crowded with warriors. Or so it looked as it was the first time Thranduil saw it, never having made it to the dining hall until tonight. He was surprised that the dining hall was rather small for such a massive palace.

Although small, it had several tall windows along the long walls making the room airy. Each of the white spaces between the windows was covered with expertly weaved tapestries that covered the wall from top to bottom depicting the battle scenes from the First Age.

The one closest to Thranduil had a blue background with a sky full of stars. The Battle Under the Stars, the first battle Noldor fought in Middle Earth. At the far end of the wall was a scene from the most recent war, War of Wrath, showing the gargantuan black dragon against a red sky fighting a winged ship with a golden light. On the ground, the white light of Valar’s forces crashed onto Morgoth’s dark soldiers.

Amid the white walls and the pale gray wood of the tables, the tapestries woven with colorful threads stood out. Underneath the ceiling ablaze with crystal lights were two columns of long tables, each large enough to hold twelve full-grown Elves. Many of the twelve tables in the hall, six on each side of the long walls, were half full as some stood congregated around the wide center aisle talking amongst themselves.

“This is your first time here, Thranduil?” someone asked. Thranduil turned as Cellon, grinning ear to ear, came up to stand next to him. “How’s your wrist? I heard your wrist was injured as of day one. How did you manage? And that first night. That was unexpected.”

Thranduil shrugged and turned away. He didn’t want to dwell on it. But instead of going away, Cellon talked on.

“My warrior companion and I are also up for the dining hall chore tonight along with you and Elrond,” Cellon said although Thranduil had not asked. “You and Elrond are on the floor to serve drinks tonight. Glingaeron and I will be helping in the kitchen. We switch tomorrow.” The Noldo then added without any prompt on Thranduil’s part, “but you don’t need to clean up. Gelir and Erfaron are responsible for cleaning up tonight.” Cellon even pointed out the other Elves he was talking about as if he was Thranduil’s guide.
“You are so helpful,” Thranduil said with what he thought was unmistakable sarcasm, but obviously this 'Helpful-Guide' didn’t get it. Cellon looked at him with his face full of smiles.

“No problem,” Cellon said. “Ask me anything.” He said with such enthusiasm, Thranduil looked at the Noldorin cadet with a frown. Cellon blinked, his smile wide, his eyes twinkling with genuine interest.

Thranduil rolled his eyes and turned away.

*Another of Elrond variety,* Thranduil decided.

“How is it that cadets eat here?” Thranduil asked as he saw the table on the farthest corner filling up with fellow cadets in training.

“We are considered junior officers,” Cellon laughed. “But if you noticed, most of us are on a chore duty and will eat after most of the officers are done.”

He swept the room and noticed that there was no dais.

“How is it that cadets eat here?” Thranduil asked.

“High table? Why would they have a high table here? This hall is for the soldiers although for officers, not for the nobles,” Cellon said.

“Nobles have a separate hall where they dine and congregate?” Thranduil asked with a frown.

In Menegroth, Lady Melian and King Thingol ate with everyone, nobles and commoners alike. If you were lower in the social status, you were seated farther away from the high table where the king and the queen sat. Still, if you made it on time when they were in the hall, you could eat at the same time with the king and the queen.

“First of all, this hall would be too small to hold everyone. We have several halls, one for the common soldiers, this one for the officers, and another one for the nobles. And most of city residents dine at their own home.”

“Many of the officers are from noble houses and they eat here,” Elrond said as he walked over with two jars of wine. “Sometimes the king joins us, but most of the nobles eat with their own kind.” Elrond thrust one of the jars to Thranduil. “It is our turn to serve wine tonight,” he said to Thranduil.

“Is Sindar’s way different?” Cellon asked. “I have never been outside the White City. Well, except to hunt up North. Where exactly are you from? You seem unfamiliar with our ways. Are you from Harlindon?”

“No,” Thranduil said and ignored the expectant look in Cellon’s eyes.

“He is from Doriath. The Sindar who know nothing of the ways of Noldor are all from Doriath,” a lanky Elf said as he approached them. The Elf had a nose like the beak of a hawk and was shorter than Elrond or Cellon. His earth brown hair had a warrior braid of Faladrim, Lord Cirdan’s people. “I am Glingaeron, son of Earfindor. Welcome to Lindon, son of Lord Oropher,” he said to Thranduil and inclined his head in greeting. Then, he turned to Cellon. “They are waiting for us in the kitchen.”

“What do you know of Doriath?” Thranduil asked. It has been now 228 years since his beloved home was destroyed. These Elves looked barely a century and half old at best.

“Not much. I have a relative from there who moved in with us at Grey Haven. He was one of the
artisans from Doriath. Most people I have met who lived within the boundary of Doriath don’t seem to know much about Noldorin ways.”

Before Thranduil could reply, a chorus of voices arose seeking a drink. Elrond gestured Thranduil and the Sinda followed. Thranduil and Elrond took turns answering the calls for drinks, weaving through the tables.

“Well met, cadet, who would you be?” One of the officers turned to Thranduil as the blond Sinda poured wine into the officer’s goblet.

“I don’t remember seeing you around here before?” another said next to him.

Thranduil bit down hard on the back of his teeth trying his best not to get rigid. Most of the officers at this table were from Valinor and they were old, at least several millennia old. Thranduil could feel his heart pump harder. He could feel the power of these Elven warriors. The air around this table crackled with them and it only made Thranduil even more tense. He could feel his breath quicken as they looked upon him with their keen eyes full of bright light.

“Don’t worry, lad. We are not going to hurt you,” another said with a merry laugh.

“Aren’t you too big to be afraid,” someone said and everyone in the table laughed jovially.

“I am not afraid!” Thranduil managed when he took control of his breath again.

Sudden heat inflamed Thranduil’s body. He tightened his grip on the wine jar as anger stirred in his heart, that he, Thranduil Oropherion, should be an object of ridicule to these Nordorin warriors. These killers of kin.

“Leave him alone.” The one who greeted him first admonished the group. “Can you not see you are making the lad uncomfortable?” The Noldo turned to eye Thranduil. “Do not mind them. They are just teasing you, young one. They don’t mean anything by it.”

Thranduil tried hard to keep calm his frantic heart and bit down on his lip.

“By the way, cadet, are you in some way related to House of Finarfin?” the Noldo asked. “Besides your golden hair, there is something about you that reminds me of Lord Finrod and his brothers.”

Whatever heat that surrounded Thranduil flared up tenfold. Thranduil gripped the wine jug harder. He wanted to smash that smiling face of the Noldo in front of him when someone grabbed Thranduil’s wrist holding the jug.

“Captain Astalder,” Elrond pulled Thranduil aside, then pump his fist twice to his heart in a military greeting. “It’s good to see you and your team back in the city. Will you be staying at the King’s Tower for a while?”

“Who knows?” The captain laughed, his laughter clear and merry. “How’s your training, Elrond? You know the lad?” The captain nodded toward Thranduil with a twinkle in his eyes.

Elrond smiled warmly. “He is my warrior companion, Thranduil. He is new to Lindon.”

Just then, some people began to thump on the table seeking wine.

“Please excuse us, captain, but we are needed,” Elrond said and pulled Thranduil with him. “Can I come and talk to you later?” Elrond asked the elder Elf even as he pushed Thranduil toward other tables. The elder Elf nodded and Elrond beamed at him before pulling Thranduil with him.
“If you have to ever lose your temper, Thranduil, you will do well to avoid Captain Astalder and his warriors. They are the elite squad, *The Silmacil*,” Elrond whispered. “They are probably the best warriors in the whole of Middle Earth. If they wanted to, they could probably kill you just with a look.”

“I am not scared of them,” Thranduil said with a frown, glancing at the table with the captain. They were laughing and eating, no longer paying any attention to the two young Elves.

“You sure looked as if you were,” Elrond retorted. “What were you doing anyway? You looked as if you were about to explode.”

“Your captain said I reminded him of Finrod!”

Elrond rolled his eyes. “I think he meant it as a compliment.”

“How is being compared to a Noldo a compliment?”

“You arrogant Orc!” Elrond snapped. “Lord Finrod’s mother is your father’s aunt. Besides, what is wrong with being compared to your cousin? In truth, Lord Finrod was the great warrior prince you can’t even hope to measure up to. And let me remind you, Thranduil. You are inside a Noldorin city. You are under the service of the Noldorin king. Just accept it. Stop this useless prejudice you have against us. We are not the same Noldor you have grievances against.”

Thranduil glared at Elrond and he opened his mouth when there was a commotion in the dining hall. The warriors in the hall cheered as someone walked into the dining area. Both Thranduil and Elrond turned to look.

A young but stately Elf with a powerful presence and imposing air walked in followed by Lord Gilmagor and another elderly Elf. The young Elf was finely dressed in deep blue velvet tunic with elaborate gold circlet that held back his long dark hair. His intricate warrior braids were plaited with gold and blue ribbons.

Even among the best of the Noldor gathered in the hall, this young Elf stood out. Although he was young, there was power and grace about him. And Thranduil’s heart filled with dread.

“Come now, Thranduil. The king is here. He will want to see you,” Elrond said as he pushed Thranduil toward the newcomer.

‘Thranduil bit down a groan. He knew that a meeting with Gil-galad was unavoidable, but he had not wanted to meet the king just yet. But knowing there was no excuse he could come up with to postpone this meeting further, Thranduil trudged forward.

“By the waters of *Belegaer*, stop looking as if you are walking into certain death. He is not going to hurt you in any way,” Elrond whispered next to him, his voice filled with amusement.

Too soon, they were in front of the king. Gil-galad smiled broadly and looked at Elrond then at Thranduil as Elrond bowed to the king.

“So, you must be Thranduil Oropherion. Welcome. I apologize that I have not had the time until now to welcome you to Lindon.” The king smiled graciously and inclined his head. “I had hoped that you would join us for the New Year’s celebration a month ago.”

This year marked the First Yen of the Second Age and the celebration of the New Year had been one of the largest held in Lindon. Oropher had left twenty days before the celebration, but after his father’s departure, the king had invited Thranduil and Lord Istuion to the palace. But instead of
accepting the invitation, Thranduil had gone off to a forest leaving Lord Istuion to make excuses for him.

Thranduil had thought that was that, but instead of taking the hint to leave him alone, the king had sent another invitation to dine at the palace. Thranduil had ignored that, too, and ran off again getting an earful from Lord Istuion later for shirking his duty. But, Thranduil did not understand this need to maintain some sort of diplomatic relationship with the king. He was nobody. His father was just a wanderer now and nothing more. What need was there for a diplomatic relationship? He was just another Elf serving under the king’s name. As soon as the term of his service was up, Thranduil will leave this place and that was that. He wished Gil-galad would just leave him alone.

Gil-galad looked at Thranduil with all smiles and graciousness.

Thranduil took in a breath, then inclined his head, touched his heart then swept it out in a graceful manner. As much as he hated to do it, Thranduil had been taught by his mother who demanded nothing less than impeccable manners from her son.

“Thank you, your majesty. No apology needed. I had not wanted your welcome anyway.”

The older Elf behind the king with elegant green velvet dress tunic frowned mightily and Lord Gilmagor pursed his lips. But Thranduil did not care. He avoided looking at their bright eyes and instead focused on the king.

“Well, I am glad then that I didn’t get the chance.” The king’s face retained the smile although it did not reach his eyes. “If there is anything you are in need, please feel free to tell me. I want you to feel perfectly welcome in my city.”

“Oh, everything is perfect, your majesty. I have a roof over my head and a stone floor under my back. What else would a humble soldier like me need?” Thranduil looked up, shook the wine jug in his hand. “If you would, your majesty, I am in the middle of doing my chores. Please excuse me.” Thranduil made an elegant bow again then turned around before anyone could stop him and walked away from the king’s presence.

“Did you have to be such an ass?” Elrond whispered behind him as he followed Thranduil away from the king.

“What do you mean? I thought my manners were impeccable,” Thranduil said nonchalantly.

Thranduil noted that the king and the elder Elves went to join Captain Astalder and the members of Silmacil. The Sinda made a mental note to avoid those groups of people. Lindon was big enough. Surely, he could survive here without having to run into them.

Thranduil went on to serve wine on the rest of the table when he came upon the table where Belegor sat with his friends.

“Fill up the goblet, wine boy” Belegor said. Thranduil ignored the bait. It will soon be Belegor’s turn. The Noldo should know better but then Thranduil could see himself doing that, so he ignored the Noldo and picked up the jug to pour wine into Belegor’s goblet.

“I hope you can fill a goblet better than you can handle a sword, Meduion. Sindar are so incompetent,” Belegor said rolling his eyes upward.

Reason, along with caution, flew out of Thranduil’s head. Thranduil inverted the jug and emptied its content on Belegor. The wine gushed out onto Belegor's face and hand, splashing all over the table.
“Oops!” Thranduil shrugged as Belegor and those who sat around Belegor jumped out of the way as the wine splashed and spilled onto the table and towards them.

In a blink Belegor was in Thranduil’s face, his wet sleeve dripping wine. He wiped the splashed wine on his face and pointed his finger at Thranduil.

“You did that on purpose, you Orc!” Belegor hissed. “Don’t think you could do what you did the first night, Meduion. You took me by surprise, but that won’t happen again.”

“Perhaps,” Thranduil said and allowed his lips to curve up. “You want to find out?”

“Stop it, both of you! Did you forget the king is here?” Elrond stepped in between Thranduil and Belegor. “Don’t create commotion, you two,” Elrond growled.

Belegor glared at Thranduil and Thranduil glared back, unwilling to be the first to move, but Elrond pulled Thranduil away.

“Is this what you want Lord Gilmagor to see, Belegor? Thranduil, go to the kitchen and get a new jar of wine.”

Belegor glanced at the table with the king and cursed under his breath, but stepped away.

“Go. Get wine, Thranduil. Go on.” Elrond pushed Thranduil toward the kitchen.

Thranduil marched into the kitchen as Gelir passed him with a large basket.

Thranduil knew he was acting like a child, but Belegor and all these Noldor brought out the worst in him.

*Control your temper, Thranduil. Keep it together,* his mind reasoned. *This pettiness does not become you,* Thranduil reminded himself as he entered the kitchen.

The kitchen was busy, cooks and helpers going in and out and no one minded him. The smell of roasting meat by the roaring fireplace and the aroma of herbs and the thick soup boiling in a large cooking pot all managed to water Thranduil’s mouth reminding him how many nights of the meal he had missed. For each day he was labeled the Meduion, he was not allowed a hot meal. He was allowed only the packaged meal mixed with herbs Mistress Taurien insisted Thranduil needed to help heal his injury.

Thranduil looked around and found a room with wooden barrels on top of a large table with several wine jars. He passed a large cooking pot and entered the room.

The room was dark and small. The large table took half of the room. Along with the barrels and wine jars, there was a wooden bowl filled with some sort of herbs.

As he reached for one of the jars, Thranduil winced as pain shot through his injured wrist. Whatever the healers had done yesterday was wearing out. Thranduil reached for the pack of powdered willow bark the younger healer gave him. Maybe he could drink some wine with the medicine. He looked around the room.

Just behind a door, in a dark corner, stood a tall wooden case displaying goblets. Thranduil moved over behind the door to grab a goblet when someone walked in and took up the bowl with herbs. She took a handful of the herbs from the bowl and threw it into the cooking pot. She obviously didn’t even notice that Thranduil was in the corner.
“Put the rest of the herb later once it is fully boiled,” the cook instructed someone when she suddenly screamed, “No, no, no!”

Thranduil poked his head out and saw that Glingaeron had brought out one of the wine barrels. Cellon stood next to the cooking pot gaping at his warrior companion and the cook.

“That barrel is not for tonight,” the cook tutted to Glingaeron. “Don’t you see the special gold seal?” She pointed to an elaborate marking on the side of the barrel. “This is a special barrel Lord Lammaeg brought for the king’s table only. His majesty is saving this for Midsummer Festival when there will be all the important lords in attendance. This is not for the lot of you! Take it back and bring a plain barrel next to the cellar door. Don’t you even touch the ones in the back. Now get!”

Cellon laughed as Glingaeron grumbled and hoisted the large wine barrel back up and took it away. The cook sighed and shook her head, but another called on her from the other side and she rushed away.

So the king keeps the best wines for himself and his guests, does he?

Thranduil thought about what a sumptuous feast the king of Nolder would have in his fancy palace with all the elegant lords and ladies. Then, he thought back to the desolate times Sindar had back in Sirion after Noldor attacked Menegroth, after everything had been taken from them. The cold days down River Sirion. The days with hardly enough to eat. And the years wandering the wild forests of the east without a home. Hatred for the Noldor burned through him.

Thranduil stepped back into the darkness of the room when he saw Gelir approach Cellon with a basket full of dirty dishes.

“What is the matter?” Cellon must have seen something on Gelir’s face.

“Nothing. Just Belegor being…” Gelir’s voice lowered and Thranduil couldn’t hear.

“That son of Orc!”

“Cellon, leave it,” Gelir said but both of them walked away.

When he saw that there was no one around the cooking pot, Thranduil stepped out.

His distaste for Noldor flared. Thranduil looked at the open packet of herb the healer had given him. The girl had said too much of willow bark powder will induce nausea. The whole packet of the herbal powder would make the whole lot of them sick.

They are Noldor, let them get sick, a voice whispered in his head.

But many are innocent people who had no hand in causing me or my people grief. It is only the sons of Feanor and his followers. Thranduil closed the packet of herbs in his hand.

Think about Belegor, Gilmagor and the warriors who laughed at you, a voice whispered again.

But, Thranduil knew that those warriors were just jesting. It was the same kind of friendly banter he used to exchange with his father’s warriors when they roamed the wild. But somehow when it came from the Noldorin warriors, it had grated on him.

They were just teasing. They were innocent of what happened at Menegroth and Sirion.

Thranduil took in a long breath to steady his hammering heart and to clear his head.
“These warriors are innocent. They are not to be blamed for what happened,” Thranduil said the words out aloud to convince himself.

*They are Noldor. No Noldor are innocent!*

Thranduil grimaced as his head rang. The last thought rang out so loud and clear it felt as if someone shouted into his mind. Thranduil touched his head, then hesitated.

*The healer did say this isn’t harmful. It’s not poison. Just something to make all of them feel bad,* Thranduil reminded himself, then he poured the entire content of all the packets into the cooking pot and mixed it in.

*This will be my present.*

“Happy Begotten Day to me,” Thranduil said softly with a bitter smile. Then picking up a jar of wine, he left the busy kitchen.

Chapter End Notes

Next: Chapter 24 Sprout--Elrond watches as Thranduil and Lammaeg clashes
Elrond sees a new side of Thranduil and he does not know what to make of it.

**Star Field. April 13, Second Age 144**

ELROND noticed that Thranduil was distracted as they practiced the patterns. Usually, Thranduil was focused and alert, careful to follow even the smallest details of Elrond’s movements. But tonight, Thranduil’s mind seemed to be elsewhere. Elrond wondered if Thranduil was also sick last night. Elrond did not see the Sinda at the infirmary but Thranduil probably did not consider a stomach trouble worth a visit to a healer.

Last night, after they had finished their chores at the dining hall, Thranduil left to go to the shed to sleep, preferring the small space over sleeping on the stone floor of the barracks.

When Elrond went to the barracks after washing up, there was a chaos. Many of the cadets were feeling nauseous and several of them regurgitated contents of their dinner. Elrond, Cellon, Gingaeron and few who seemed all right, took the sick cadets to the infirmary. But the healing ward was already full with officers who were not feeling well either. Elrond assisted the two healers who stayed up through the night helping the cadets and officers calm their turbulent stomach.

Because of the number of the warriors affected by this puzzling condition, more healers from the city were called into the King’s Tower only to find that once they arrived, the condition calmed.

The sickness only lasted for few hours. After the midnight hour, nausea had calmed and many returned to their barracks to sleep. But some had worse than others and suffered until few hours before the dawn.

“Were you nauseous last night, Thranduil?” Elrond asked as he completed the movement to wrap up the sessions for tonight.

Due to the time restriction, he just didn’t have the time to go over the movements of all eight patterns Elrond had scheduled to teach. They were up for another night of chores at the dining hall tonight.

“No. Why?” Thranduil looked up sharply.

“I saw you practice your patterns all through last night. I was just wondering if you couldn’t sleep because of nausea.”

Thranduil shook his head.

“That’s good. With that seven and a half league run at dawn, it would have been really terrible to have nausea as well. At least for once, the rest of the cadets probably feel like you today. They, too, did not get much sleep last night.”

“How are they?” Thranduil asked.

Elrond frowned at the unexpected question.
“The cadets. You said they didn’t sleep much,” Thranduil clarified as they headed toward the dining hall.

“They are all fine now. Many got sick last night. Two or three threw up too much and were under Mistress Taurien’s care until this morning but the rest seemed all right. After three hours or so, everyone was well enough. But so many got sick, Lord Gilmagor was having the incident investigated.”

“They found anything?”

The question seemed innocent enough, but coming from Thranduil, Elrond thought it strange.

_Maybe the Sinda is finally warming up to the cadets._

“They think maybe it was the soup. It seems the people who didn’t get sick were the ones who didn’t have the soup last night.” Elrond grinned. “It is good that Cellon bumped into you when he was bringing out that soup for us. If it wasn’t for that accident, we might have gotten sick last night, too. Although it could be that Cellon did that on purpose to spare us.”

“Why do you say that?” Thranduil stopped from walking and looked at Elrond with such a frown, Elrond was taken back.

“They think Cellon may have been responsible for putting something in the soup kettle. The cook said she found traces of some different herb in the cooking pot. According to the cook, Cellon was the only one who was near the soup kettle besides herself.”

“But why would they suspect him? There is no reason for him to do such a thing,” Thranduil said showing more emotion than Elrond had ever seen him. “If anything, Cellon does not seem like someone who would have a reason… to do…that.”

Elrond felt a slip of emotion, like a soft, stray wind, that touched his delicate senses. Anguish? Frustration? It was hard to tell. The feeling was brief and was gone the moment Elrond thought he felt it.

“That is true. Cellon I know gets along with everyone. But I was told that Cellon had an argument with Belegor last night and few cadets made some disparaging remarks siding with Belegor. Probably Belegor’s friends. I am not sure exactly as I was serving at the table with the king and did not see it myself….”

“And? Just because he was upset at few cadets? That does not make him guilty.”

“I agree with you,” Elrond shrugged. “I, too, cannot imagine him doing anything like this. My senses never detected anything other than good intentions from him in all my interactions with him.”

“Your senses?” Thranduil frowned.

Elrond bit his tongue and winced inwardly. He didn’t want anyone to know about his so-called ‘special talents’, especially this Sinda. “I meant, I never felt anything bad about him. We all have some sense of that, don’t we?”

“Perhaps,” said Thranduil and looked away.

It surprised Elrond that Thranduil would even care whether they suspected Cellon or not. As far as Elrond saw, Thranduil did not seem to care about others.
But it looks as if they have already decided that Cellon may be the one. While you were doing your evening laps around the fields, guards came to escort Cellon to Lord Gilmagor’s office.

“What?” Thranduil frowned mightily.

“Yes, there is a talk that he may be charged with a crime. The king got sick, too, and I heard that there is a possibility that the council may get involved. Cellon may get kicked out…”

“Orc crap!” Thranduil said it so loud, Elrond almost jumped. “Where’s Lord Gilmagor’s office?”

“What?”

Thranduil’s reaction completely baffled Elrond.

“Gilmagor’s office. Where is it?” Thranduil asked.

“The first floor of the central tower…”

Thranduil turned and ran.

“Where are you going?” Elrond called after Thranduil.

“Gilmagor’s office!”

Elrond looked toward the dining hall. They were supposed to help in the kitchen today. Missing chore duty has its own set of punishments. But, as warrior companions, they are supposed to move together as one. Elrond cursed softly to himself and ran after Thranduil. This blond Sinda will be the death of him someday. Elrond was sure of it.

When Elrond caught up to Thranduil, he was inside the hall of the King’s Tower. As it was dinner time, the hallway was quiet and empty.

“What is this? Why are you two here?” the Lord Commander asked.

“Sir, Brundorion is innocent,” Thranduil said, standing at attention, his hands behind his back.

“And how do you know this?” Gilmagor asked.

Inside, Cellon stood at attention before a carved wooden desk that stood between two large windows. Behind the desk sat Lord Gilmagor. And there were three others in the room: Captain Astaldar, Lieutenant Gwendir, and Lord Lammaeg wearing the same green velvet tunic he wore last night when he accompanied the king.

Elrond took in a sharp breath. If Lord Lammaeg was here, then the matter was being taken much more seriously.

Lord Gilmagor looked surprised when Thranduil walked in, followed by Elrond.

“What is this? Why are you two here?” the Lord Commander asked.

“Sir, Brundorion is innocent,” Thranduil said, standing at attention, his hands behind his back.

“And how do you know this?” Gilmagor asked.
Thranduil swallowed, then bit his lip with his head down, but he looked up and said in a clear voice.

“Because I did it. I put willow bark powder in the cooking pot last night.”

Elrond could feel a headache coming on. He cursed under his breath and glanced at others in the room. Gilmagor pursed his lips. Lord Lammaeg, Cellon, and Gwendir looked as if they were struck dumb. Captain Astalder alone seemed amused.

“And may I ask why?” Gilmagor asked, his voice subdued and calm.

“I wanted to get back at some of the cadets…and you,” Thranduil swallowed hard and turned his gaze away, not meeting Gilmagor’s gaze.

“Did you conspire with Cellon Brundorion?” Gilmagor pointed to Cellon.

“No, sir. He knew nothing of it. It was a decision on an impulse. I alone did it.”

“Were you aware that your actions could affect his majesty?” Lord Lammaeg cut in, looking over Thranduil up and down.

Thranduil glanced at the Chief Councilor but immediately looked away. Instead, he looked at the space ahead of him, just above Lord Gilmagor’s head.

“Yes,” Thranduil said quietly.

“Do you know the consequence of your action?” Lammaeg narrowed his eyes.

“Whatever the consequence, I will take its just share. But it was just a prank. Nothing more,” Thranduil said.

“Prank? You tried to poison the king. That is treason,” said the Chief Councilor.

“No sir, I did not. I made him nauseous, yes. But I knew the herb was not lethal. It wouldn’t have killed him. And I wouldn’t have done anything to kill him. I am no kinslayer after all, unlike some …” Thranduil let his words hang.

Elrond groaned. The room fell silent. It was quiet enough to hear a rustle of wind outside. Everybody knew what Thranduil was inferring. Lammaeg’s face darkened as he took several strides to stand in front of Thranduil.

“Do you know who I am?” Lord Lammaeg asked Thranduil, breaking the silence.

“No, sir.”

Thranduil seemed to shrink back at the closeness of the elder Elf at first. Elrond could feel the unease rising in Thranduil and saw that it took an effort for the Sinda to stand there, but he didn’t back away although Thranduil did not meet Lord Lammaeg’s eyes.

“I am his majesty’s Chief Councilor. I have known from the beginning that you are trouble. And when I saw you last night, your actions confirmed that. You think because you were once a kin to a king that you are still somebody, don’t you? The truth is, pup, you are nobody.”

“Lord Lammaeg!” Lord Gilmagor rose from where he sat. His words cut through the air brimming with a warning, but the Chief Councilor continued without regarding it.

“However great Doriath once was, it does not exist anymore. Do you understand, pup? You have
no realm, no title. You have nothing. You are here out of the kindness of my king’s heart and nothing more. You are in no position to parade your arrogance. Do you even know what kind of trouble you are in?” Lammaeg said, stabbing Thranduil’s chest with his finger with each phrase.

Whatever unease Thranduil seemed to have had with Lord Lammaeg evaporated as the Sinda’s eyes practically spouted fire. Elrond was hit with searing heat, something akin to a raging volcano, as Thranduil’s flawless white skin took in a shade of red, but his voice was steady and cold, cold enough to freeze the air in the room.

“Why don’t you enlighten me, my lord, as you are so eager to do so?” Thranduil hissed, his teeth clenched. Unlike a moment ago, he held Lammaeg’s eyes as if the Sinda wanted to burn holes in them. “As you say, I am nobody. I see now that truth does not matter. You have judged me regardless. So, you want to charge me with a treason, then do it! There is nothing you can take from me that wasn’t already taken by your bloodthirsty kin.”

“Why you insolent young pup!” Lammaeg roared, his face turning a darker shade of red than that of Thranduil.

“Enough of this.” Gilmagor cut in. “Lord Lammaeg, this matter deals with one of my cadets. It is my jurisdiction. I will deal with this my way if you don’t mind,” he said to the Chief Councilor.

“This is a matter of the king’s security!”

“As you heard, there was no intention to harm the king. It was a prank. A bad one, but with no intention to truly harm anyone, especially the king,” Gilmagor’s voice was cool and calm.

“You heard him. He intended the king to suffer.”

“He also said it was just a prank, that he knew it will not kill the king. And it seems to me the cadets and I were the main target of the prank, not the king.”

“You will just take his word?” Lammaeg frowned at Gilmagor. “The words of the perpetrator. The words of the Dark Elf?”

“My lord, there is no need for the name-calling,” Elrond burst out. He knew what Thranduil did was wrong, but such use of the words was uncalled for.

Elrond knew better than anyone how the term ‘Dark Elf’ originally referred to those who have never been to Valinor, thus never seen the light of two trees. Someone like himself. And it would include many of the younger generation of Noldor who were born in Middle Earth. But Noldor used that term to mean all other Elves in Middle Earth and never to refer to another Noldor. And amongst them, the term was used as a derogatory word to refer to uncivilized Elf. And the Sindar, whose society had flourished under the light and wisdom of Valinor brought by their Maia Queen Melian, considered the term an insult when applied to them.

When Elrond opened his mouth again, Officer Gwendir who stood next to Elrond took hold of Elrond’s arm and pulled him aside, then shook his head in warning. But both Lammaeg and Gilmagor ignored Elrond’s outburst as if he had not spoken at all.

“No, Lord Lammaeg. I am not just taking his word. I am looking at the circumstances and the evidence. No one got truly hurt. Everyone recovered within two to three hours. It was an inconvenience and nuisance to those who experienced it. But I have a word from Mistress Taurien that the nausea was temporary and the herb is harmless in any other way. And before you came to interrupt me with Cellon Brundorion, my lord, I was about to pass judgment. Now that I know
better, I will do so, but as I said, this is a matter of discipline for the military and not a matter for the council.” Lord Gilmagor walked to the door then opened it. He looked at Lammaeg, then turned to look at the open door to his office pointedly.

Lammaeg glared at the Lord Commander.

Elrond tensed wondering if Lammaeg would back down. Lord Gilmagor may command the king’s army, but Lord Lammaeg controlled the king’s council. It was well known that Lammaeg and Gilmagor differed in their views on many issues and clashed often. And Elrond knew how much Gil-galad hated getting in between them. But more importantly, even as powerful as Gilmagor was, the ultimate authority over all matters, including the military, lay with the king’s council.

The air in the room went heavy and Elrond swallowed hard. He could feel everyone in the room tense. Something dangerous flowed around the air of the room.

Lord Lammaeg lifted his chin and threw a knife glance at Thranduil.

“I am going to keep my eyes on you,” Lammaeg said to Thranduil. Then he turned to Lord Gilmagor. “The king will hear of this,” the councilor said then swept out of the door. Gilmagor closed the door behind the councilor.

“Oh, thank the Valar,” Captain Astalder sagged on the seat he was sitting. “I almost threw up and I didn’t even have dinner yet,” he said. “Just looking at the councilor’s face gives me indigestion. Don’t you agree, my lord?”

Gilmagor snorted but didn’t respond. He turned to Cellon.

“You are dismissed Brundorion. Nothing of this matter is to be spoken outside. Understood?”

“Sir!” Cellon touched his heart twice with his right fist, glanced at Thranduil, then left the room.

Gilmagor walked to his desk and sat down. Elrond looked at Thranduil who stood rigidly, his face dark, his eyes stormy. The knuckles of the hand that gripped his wrist behind his back were white with tension.

Captain Astalder got up and passed Gilmagor’s desk. Elrond noticed the silent looks the two exchanged.

The captain went over to a window next to the desk and looked out.

“You two return to the dining hall and complete your chores. Once we make the decision, I will send for you. Dismissed,” said the sword master.

Thranduil who had been looking down at his feet looked up. Gilmagor met his eyes and held it until Thranduil brought his fist to his heart and left. Elrond followed.

All the way to the dining hall, Thranduil said not one word. And Elrond did not know what to make of Thranduil. But one thing was clear. Whatever rapport Elrond thought he had built with Thranduil over the past three days was just a brief sprinkle of rain on a cracked and dusty earth after a long drought.
Chapter Summary

As a part of his punishment, Thranduil is sent to a loremaster.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

**King ’s Library. April 14, Second Age 144**

**THRANDUIL** regarded the floor to ceiling double door at the end of a long hall. The room was at a corner of King’s Tower in a quiet part of the palace. He stepped into a large room with tall and narrow windows. Despite the many windows, maybe due to several large bookcases covering all the walls in between them, the room felt dark except for the middle of the room where a massive table carved in wood stood.

There was a balcony built on three sides of the walls forming an upper floor where more bookcases can be seen against the walls.

“Excuse me please.” Thranduil walked fully into the room when no one answered after a knock. The room was silent.

Sunlight poured in from high above. Thranduil looked up to see a domed ceiling. It had a large circular opening in the middle which allowed a stream of light to fall onto the table. Unlike the tall and narrow windows, the light from the ceiling illuminated the table as if it was a gigantic table lamp. There was no sign of anyone. A tranquility surrounded the space and it was as if he stepped into a different place where all time stood still.

“Master Pengolodh?”

Thranduil called out, careful to keep his voice down a notch. This was a library after all. He remembered being scolded for laughing too loud in the library of Menegroth which was like a vast vault filled with scrolls, codices and old Elves.

Today was the first rest day for the cadets. It was a short week as they started the training in the middle of the week. But it didn’t matter to Thranduil. As the Meduion, he was not allowed to leave the King’s Tower.

Since he couldn’t go anywhere, he did his mandatory morning run before dawn hoping to work on the patterns for the entire day. Only seven more days to go before the test and he was already behind schedule. There just weren’t enough time between the training and the chores. And now this.

As part of his punishment, Thranduil was commanded to help the loremaster with whatever task at hand until his wrist heals. His real punishment is scheduled for the end of the spring, to muck out the officer’s stable for the period of one moon cycle just prior to Midsummer Festival.

Lieutenant Gwendir made an announcement that the culprit came forward. He also reassured the cadets that Cellon was innocent. Both Cellon and Elrond were commanded not to speak of the
incident to anyone.

Thranduil supposed they were trying to protect him from any retaliation by the cadets, but the Sinda would rather confess in front of everyone and receive punishment accordingly and openly instead of being hidden behind their so-called ‘mercy’. He didn’t want any favors from Noldor no matter how well meaning it was.

But this was punishment. The option did not rest with him.

Thranduil let out a heavy sigh. And if he was honest, what he did was reprehensible even to him. Thranduil wasn’t sure why he did it. To make so many people suffer to get back at few…Thranduil winced and shook his head. He was just glad his father, or worse, his mother, was not in Lindon to hear about it.

“Loremaster?”

Silence.

Thranduil sighed again and walked to the table in the center of the room. Someone had been in the middle of copying a codex. There were jars of ink and feathers sharpened and fitted with silver nibs along with several prepared scrolls, half filled with elegant Tengwar.

When it seemed as if there was no one in the library, Thranduil approached a bookcase, wondering what kind of books the King of Noldor kept in his library. He picked up a codex bound in silk threads when he felt a movement above him. With an instinct of a warrior, Thranduil caught several falling scrolls with one hand.

Thranduil looked up.

There was a ladder leaning against one of the many bookcases lining the walls of the second floor. A young maiden stood on the last rung of one of the ladders that were all around the room. There were several scrolls on her arms and one tucked under her chin. On her mouth, she held a piece of paper. She dropped the paper from her mouth onto the top of the scrolls on her arm.

“Forgive me,” the maiden called down to Thranduil as she stepped off the ladder and straightened. Then she disappeared behind the railing, beyond Thranduil’s sight.

Thranduil frowned up at the now empty railing when the door to the library opened. A thin Noldo of slight build with an armload of scrolls entered.

“Oh, you must be the new cadet,” the Elf said.

His frizzled dark hair was pulled back in a low ponytail with blue silk cord, marking him as someone who studies lore. He had a smudge of ink on his earlobe and a full smile on his face. He looked rather young for a loremaster, looking no more than six or seven centuries old at the most. Of what Thranduil remembered of loremasters at Doriath, all of them had been two or three millennia old, at least.

“Lord Gilmagor said you will be coming by,” the Elf said as he pulled at his ear, then looking behind Thranduil, he smiled warmly. “Oh, good. You found them?”

Thranduil turned around just as a maiden with glossy waves walked down a twisty stairway hidden behind a column just right of where Thranduil stood.

“You met Lady Lalaithwen, I presume?” The Elf looked at Thranduil again.
“I just got here,” Thranduil said, turning back to face the Elf. “You are Master Pengolodh, the loremaster? What exactly am I to do here?” Thranduil asked.

The Elf put down the scrolls on the table and straightened. “Oh, please call me Pengo. That is what everyone calls me. What did Lord Gilmagor tell you?”

“I am to do whatever it is that you required of me.”

“Ah, I see. Well, I am supposed to teach history, but I am so overwhelmed with work. My master sailed leaving me in charge of so much…” the Elf smiled again, then his eyes filled with excitement. “I am in the middle of compiling my annals. It is a lot of work, but so exciting.” He rubbed his hands together. “It will help me greatly if you can assist Lady Lalaithwen here. She will be teaching the young ones our history while their teacher is on a temporary leave. This will give me time…”

“You want me to help her teach Noldorin history?” Thranduil glanced at the young elleth then frowned at the loremaster. “I am sorry to inform you, Master Pengolodh, but I know nothing of Noldorin history.”

“By the lights of the trees! You did not receive any instructions in the histories? You seem like a noble born.” Pengolodh looked Thranduil up and down, his eyes wide.

“I did not say I do not know history,” Thranduil said, trying his best not to roll his eyes. “I said I do not know Noldorin history.”

“You are not one of us?” the loremaster’s eyebrows went up to his hairline as he looked Thranduil once over then rested his eyes on Thranduil’s hair. “You cannot be a Vanya.” Then his eyes grew even larger if that was possible. “You are a Sinda?”

Thranduil felt his body heat up and he frowned down at the skinny Elf in front of him.

The young elleth who looked several decades over a century in age stepped forward unbidden.

“What Master Pengo means is that you are quite tall and big for a Sinda. Most Sindar are smaller,” she said, pulling up a corner of her lips. She was rather tall, even for a Noldorin maiden, coming almost to Thranduil’s chin while most ellëth just barely reached his shoulders.

“Not all Sindar are smaller than Noldor. Where I am from, my height and size are a norm,” Thranduil said, bit forcefully than he intended. And although it may not apply to all of the people in Doriath, it certainly was true when it came to his family and immediate kin.

“You are from Menegroth?” The loremaster’s wide open eyes filled with thousands of lights as if they were struck by stars.

“I am.”

“Oh, my! How wonderful!” The loremaster clapped his hands together like a child, his face glowing like a moon. “It is so hard to find people from Menegroth. I managed to gather some information from other Sindar from Doriath, but those from Menegroth are rare and difficult to approach…Oh, yes. Yes! You must tell me everything you know about Doriath.”

“Certainly not! I am not telling you anything about Doriath, Menegroth or anything that is to do with the fallen kingdom,” Thranduil hissed.

The Loremaster who had been almost jumping with excitement shrank back.
“I will do whatever other things you may want of me, but do not talk or ask me about my former home. Do not expect it, loremaster,” Thranduil’s voice rang through the empty library, more a command than a statement.

Pengo looked completely taken back, his eyes wide like a child who was just scolded for no reason.

“You need not shout,” the young maiden said. “Master Pengo was not trying to force you to do anything you do not wish to do. He was just excited at the prospect of learning more about your people. He is a scholar which you obviously is not.” The elleth looked up at Thranduil’s glare and met it, her chin held high.

Thranduil’s blue-green eyes clashed with her dark gray ones. People rarely looked at him with such boldness when he frowned but the young woman stood firm, meeting Thranduil’s glare without a falter. Thranduil took in a breath, then took a step back to incline his head. It wouldn’t do to be rude to a lady. And a lady she certainly was.

“I apologize for raising my voice,” Thranduil nodded toward the Loremaster. “But, as I said, do not expect me to talk of Doriath,” Thranduil repeated, this time easing his tone, but brooking no argument.

“As someone supposed to be getting punished for his action, you are in no position to demand anything, Thranduil Oropherion,” Gilmagor said as he stepped over to the center of the room to stand next to the Loremaster.

Thranduil straightened and stood at attention, biting his tongue, knowing that if he did not do so, he didn’t know what other trouble his troublesome tongue could get him into.

“Oropherion?” The loremaster’s eyes widened again. “Lord Oropher’s son?”

Gilmagor turned to the loremaster. “I should have given you more information about him, but I didn’t get a chance, Pengo.” Then the Lord Commander turned to the elleth. “Lalaithwen. I didn’t know you will be here this morning. Will you excuse us, please?”

The girl curtsied to Gilmagor and left the room, throwing a brief glance at Thranduil as she left.

Once the door closed after the maiden, Gilmagor spoke again to the loremaster. “He is also the one the king talked to you about tutoring.”

Pengo looked at Gilmagor, then turned to Thranduil.

“I do not need tutoring.” Thranduil could not help the words that leaped off his tongue.

Gilmagor turned to regard Thranduil. The Sinda felt himself tremble at the light in the elder Elf’s eyes and turned away his own gaze at first. But resolutely, Thranduil turned back and met the bright eyes of the Lord Commander.

I will not succumb. Thranduil told himself. No Noldor will crush me. Thranduil thought back to the anger he felt at that king’s councilor and held onto it as a child would his mother’s hand at his first step.

The Lord Commander held Thranduil’s eyes. Briefly, Thranduil thought the Crooked Nose’s lips twitched upwards but it was gone in a moment.

“The king promised you a thorough education. I wouldn’t call it a complete education if you were to leave here without learning anything about our history. Since you cannot use your wrist, you will
join the cadets in the morning for the strategy sessions, but skip afternoon sessions on weapons training and come here before your session with Elrond on the patterns.”

“I do not believe my father would mind that I knew nothing of Noldor and their history,” Thranduil countered, feeling more sure of himself as the tremor he felt at meeting Gilmagor’s eyes calmed.

“But if you knew nothing of Noldorin history, then, you wouldn’t be able to help Lady Lalaithwen with the teaching of the children,” Master Pengo said.

“Lalaithwen? What is this about teaching?” Gilmagor frowned as he turned to the loremaster.

“I didn’t realize he was the same person that the king talked to me about, so I had planned for Thranduil to help Lady Lalaithwen teach the children. I had too many things on my hand and Lady Lalaithwen offered to take over the teaching of the elflings,” Pengo explained.

The frown on Gilmagor’s face deepened.

“Did her father approve this?”

“My lord? I didn’t think he would disapprove. But, she made the offer as we were talking about it just this morning. I didn’t think it was inappropriate for me to accept.”

“No, of course not. But, I do not think her father would approve of having her here—.” Gilmagor glanced at Thranduil.

Thranduil got a distinct impression that Gilmagor almost added, “with him” at the end of his sentence. Whoever the maiden’s father was, he probably didn’t want his daughter mixing up with a Sinda.

Good riddance. Thranduil scoffed to himself. He had no intention of being involved with a Noldorin elleth either.

The loremaster looked completely puzzled, but Gilmagor waved his hand.

“Never mind that. I will send you Elrond. He will probably be better, anyway, at teaching than Lalaithwen.”

The loremaster smiled widely, his gray eyes lighting up.

“Oh, yes, my lord. That would be preferable, but with the cadet training, I didn’t think Elrond would have the time to teach the children. He knows the history well, better than most. I would love to have Elrond.”

Thranduil couldn’t help rolling his eyes. It seemed Elrond was popular whether it was the infirmary or the library.

“But will not taking him off the training cost him? I do not want to make it hard for Elrond to catch up to the other cadets later.”

“You do not know Elrond if you think so, Pengo. He is far advanced than most others. Missing a week of weapons training will hardly matter to him,” said Gilmagor with a wave of his hand. “But after the end of next week, they will have to return to their training.” Gilmagor glanced at Thranduil. There was definite amusement in Gilmagor’s eyes now. “And Elrond and his warrior companion here could help you teach the children, twice a week perhaps, as a part of their chore afterward? That is, if Oropherion passes his test on the patterns,” said Gilmagor and turned to Thranduil. “How are
“Coming wonderfully, sir,” Thranduil said with a smile plastered on his face.

“Indeed? I look forward to seeing your entire seventy-eight patterns. Shall we start right after your morning run on Monday after next week?”

“As you wish.” Thranduil wanted to smack that grin hovering on the Crooked Nose’s face, but instead, Thanduil smiled back. “Sir!”

“Carry on, then,” Gilmagor said, then turned to the loremaster. “Pengo, do your best.”

The loremaster bowed respectfully to Gilmagor as the sword master left the library.

“Well, I suppose, we should start with your lesson. Those scrolls I brought are for you. I was going to have you and Lalaithwen gather materials to teach the children while I instructed the Sindarin prince on Noldorin history, not realizing you two are the same people.” Pengo laughed but stopped when Thranduil did not.

Instead, the loremaster gestured for Thranduil to sit.

“These are some of the scrolls that deal with the history of Arda, those brought by the Exiles. I guess we will start with the beginning of Arda when Eru Illuvatar created the world by creating Ainur, the Valar and the Maiar, including Melkor, the one later called the Dark Lord Morgoth.”

“I think I know enough of that. You forget, Loremaster, that our Queen Melian was one of the Maiar. I have been taught about the creation from the great lady herself.”

“I see. How about the sundering of the Elves? Let’s start with the three groups of Eldar: the golden-haired and blue-eyed Vanyar, the dark-haired and gray-eyed Noldor, and the largest group…” Pengo gestured Thranduil to continue.

“Teleri are dark-haired and gray-eyed as well although there are some who are white-haired like Lord Cirdan,” said Thranduil.

The loremaster looked up and eyed Thranduil. “Well, except for your noble kin who are silver-haired and blue-eyed. But, you are not exactly silver-haired, nor are you blue-eyed.”

“I am here to learn, not to answer questions,” Thranduil said.

“I didn’t say you need to answer,” Pengo said and smiled brightly. “I am merely thinking out aloud. You will see me do that often. And, by the way, I am part Sindar. My mother was a Sindarin lady…”

“Did I ask you?” Thranduil frowned.

“No, you did not,” the Loremaster smiled again, his gray eyes laughing. “Just thought you might want to know.”

“I don’t.”

“Oh well,” Pengo shrugged, then laughed again. “Then, let’s see how much you know. I need to make sure you know enough before we can move on.”

Thranduil shrugged.
“Tell me what you know of the sundering of the Elves.”

“Three groups of the Elves were led by their respective leaders. But the Teleri, being many, were slow and were delayed. When they arrived at Misty Mountain and the great river, many decided to settle down at the large forest there. They are now what we call wood Elves or Silvans.”

“Is that where your father led the many of his followers who did not wish to stay in Lindon?” Pengo asked when Thranduil stopped to take a breath.

“I thought I told you I wouldn’t answer,” Thranduil said, looking at the loremaster with steady eyes.

“I thought you said you were to do whatever I required of you,” Pengo said, then pulled at his earlobe, tilting his head like a child. “Or was that Lord Gilmgor?” He grinned widely, looking up at Thranduil with innocent, wide eyes. “No matter. Go on.”

Thranduil realized that the loremaster was not the bumbling fool the Sinda originally thought.

“When the Teleri arrived in Beleriand where Vanyar and Noldor were waiting, all the Vanyar and all of the Noldor who journeyed to the west into Beleriand were ferried across the ocean to Valinor. But the Teleri did not. They lost their lord, Elwe, and wanted to look for him. But many of the Teleri were impatient to go to Valinor. So they were led into the Blessed Land by Elwe’s brother.”

“Your great-grandfather?” Pengo asked.

“Yes, by Lord Olwe,” Thranduil said. Pengo’s eyes glittered like gems.

“Then what happened?” the Loremaster asked, his gaze intent and excited.

Then It was obvious to Thranduil that the loremaster did not know the details of what happened to Teleri afterward and was eager to learn.

Before leaving Middle Earth, Lord Olwe left behind his two eldest sons, Arandur and Amglar, to look for his lost brother Elwe, most likely believing that all of them will follow soon after. Arandur and Amglar, along with Galadhon, their cousin, had separated into east, west and north to look for Elwe while Lord Cirdan searched south near the shore.

“Well,” Thranduil drawled, leaning back on his seat. The loremaster would have to do a lot better than make a simple threat to get anything new out of him. “The rest who remained to look for their lord, settled down in Beleriand under Elwe and Melian who became known as King Elu Thingol and Queen Melian of Doirath and those Teleri are called Sindar.”

The excitement faded from the loremaster’s eyes as Thranduil wrapped up the whole story in one sentence without adding any new information that wasn’t already known.

-----------

**Pengolodh** (Sindarin, *teaching sage*)—born to Noldorin lord and Sindarin lady, he is known as one of the great loremasters after Rumil and Feanor. He is also referred to as “Sage of Noldor”. He was born in Nevrast at Beleriand during First Age. He wrote *Annals of Beleriand* (stories of First Age) and edited *Annals of Aman* (stories of Noldor in Valinor).

**Tengwar** (Quenya, *letters*)—writing system invented by Feanor. It is also called Feanorian alphabet

**elleth** (Sindarin, *female Elf*, plural form is *ellyth*)
A/N: Silmarillion or LOTR were supposed to be a history written down by Elves, then by Men, Hobbits, etc. The stories are Noldor-centric. Even those stories with Sindar and Edain, they all center around Edain (Men) and Noldor, or those that were of interest to Noldor and Men. What little of Sindarin history is told through the stories of Luthien and Turin all of which were of interest to the Noldor and to the Men. There is very little information on the important Sindarin characters so it is no wonder that we have no background information on Celeborn, Thranduil, Amdir etc. Their stories would only be familiar to those who lived in Menegroth and interacted with them. And these prior inhabitants of Menegroth would not have talked to Noldorin historians such as Pengolodh. Why would any Sindar who lost so much in two kinslayings want to talk to a Noldo about the most trying times in their lives? As for Thingol and Luthien, any Sindar (even those who didn't live in Menegroth) would have known about them. And what little of information on Beleg and Mablung would be told through Men who recorded Turin's story.

Chapter End Notes

Next: Chapter 26 The Dark Side—Mairon is happy with his find.
Dark Side

Chapter Summary

Mairon schemes to use Thranduil's anger to get what he wants.

Chapter Notes

Sorry this is bit late. Busy, busy week. Summer is always a busier time for me.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Kitchen. April 17, Second Age 144

Mairon walked into the kitchen carrying empty wine jars. The kitchen was preparing for dinner and everyone was busily engaged.

“You four, come with me!” someone barked.

Mairon turned about as the blond Sinda walked in with an empty basket along with Elrond.

“Yes, you four,” the Elf limped over then pointed toward Thranduil, Elrond and Mairon, Erfaron, who were working in the kitchen tonight.

Mairon knew the older Elf to be the butler who managed the dining halls within the palace. He was an old Elf with a slight limp. An old injury from the First Age, no doubt.

“Come, come, cadets. I don’t have all day!” snapped the butler. “We have supplies that just came in. They need to be brought in,” the Elf said as he gestured them toward the back of the kitchen.

The kitchen was an enormous complex that occupied one of the smaller towers behind the Great Hall just next to the dining hall for the officers. It had walkways and doors that led to practically every part of the palace. Mairon had never been inside any kitchen before coming to Lindon as he never paid attention to it. His master and the fellow Maiar had no need for food, unlike the Orcs and Men who required constant feeding.

Having seen how the kitchen led to almost every part of the Palace, Mairon thought about how easy it would be to storm a castle if they could manage to get into a kitchen. It was too bad that this kitchen was located amid all the training warriors, in the most heavily guarded area in the entire White City.

The Butler stopped in front of a thick wooden door reinforced with steel braces. The door was left open now but Mairon noted that it took two keys to open the door.

Looking at the thickness of the steel reinforced wood, Mairon wondered what the King of Noldor kept in his cellar that there was such security.
In fact, Mairon had wondered why the walls of the White City were so thick? For a city that was built during the time of peace, it had walls that were tall, thick and well secured. He wondered if these Elves knew something he didn’t.

The door opened into a long set of downward stairs and the four cadets glanced at each other before following the Butler down.

“Have any of you been down here before?” Elrond asked Mairon and the other cadet as the Half-Elven glanced at Thranduil. The Sinda was silent as usual.

“No. First time. You?” Mairon asked Elrond as Erfaron next to him shook his head.

“Just a handful of times,” Elrond said as they went down a long flight of stone stairs onto a well-lit corridor.

The corridor stretched to the right. And there was another set of stairs on the right that led up. Thranduil stepped toward the stairs.

“Not that way, cadet. That goes up to the South Tower. Nowhere to go but up,” the Butler said.

The elder Elf led them further down the corridor. Far ahead, the corridor crossed another passageway with a wide channel of water flowing next to it.

“Is that a water channel?” Thranduil who rarely said anything suddenly spoke up.

“The King’s Tower is built on a hill in the middle of a lake. They widened a large stream that flows from the lake into the Gulf of Lhun and made it into a water channel wide enough for a passage of a boat. That is how we get supplies into the King’s Tower,” Elrond said.

The butler raised his eyebrow and looked at Elrond, then at Thranduil, but did not say anything. Instead, he harrumphed then stopped at a wooden door to the left.

It was a plain door with no markings. The butler opened the door to a dark room where he stepped in and waved his hand. Several balls of light, no bigger than fists, floated up to illuminate the dark room.

It was a cellar. There were barrels upon barrels on the right side. On left was wooden lattice panel. Through the carved openings, Mairon saw several tall wooden shelves which lined the walls. They were filled with wine barrels and glass jugs.

Separating the wine cellar on the left from the rest of the room was a wide middle aisle with three long wooden tables. The right side was filled with neat rows of barrels with different colored labels.

On the ceiling hung cured meats of all kinds. Tall wooden shelves lining the far walls contained piles of thick discs of various shades of yellow and white. And many varieties of dried herbs hung from the ropes from the ceiling, its herbal aroma fighting with the heady scent of fermented fruit from the left side.

“Down the center aisle to the door at the far end,” the Butler pointed. “You three get the barrels outside, and you,” the butler turned to Elrond and pointed to the wine cellar, “bring up one of the wine barrels up to the kitchen for tonight. Don’t touch the barrels with the gold seal. Take up the barrel as it is lined by the door. I have ordered it so there will be no further mistake as to which barrel,” the Butler said.

Mairon and the other cadet followed Thranduil down to a small door at the back. Outside was a
narrow passageway cut into a boulder. You could see glowing crystal lights giving off a faint light. Somewhere at the end of that passage, the sound of Elves laughing wafted through the air.

Once out of the narrow passageway, Mairon saw that it was a small underground dock. The landing was cut out of large stone and there were steps cut into them that led into the water. Several Elves were unloading barrels as well as glass and earthen jugs from the boat.

“You three here to help?” one of the Elves unloading the supplies asked. He raked a hand through his white hair tied in a low ponytail. He didn’t wait for the answer as he pointed to the barrels piled on the entrance to the passageway.

“ Those are all salted fish,” he said. Then he picked up another barrel to hand over to one of the Elves standing on the ramp. “They are all counted. Where’s Athradon?”

“ Here, you impatient Sinda.” The Butler limped out into the dock. “I will count them myself, thank you,” he said to the one who spoke earlier.

The Elf on the boat laughed. “As you wish, Noldo. It is all the provision I am to deliver for the Spring season so you do what you need to,” said the Sinda on the boat.

Athradon frowned. “Aren’t you going to deliver meats and wine from Harlindon in the next quarter moon?”

“ Aye. I meant from the Grey Haven. But yeah, from Harlindon, there will be that and the two shipments quarter moon before Midsummer.”

It was then that Thranduil who had been looking around the underground dock asked. “Can you access this dock though the water?” He pointed to the water under the boat.

The white-haired Sinda on the boat laughed again.

“ Aye, lad, if you are a fish. This is the lake water below the training fields and it is deep, I was told.”

“Don’t even think you can get into the cellar, cadet,” Athradon who had been inspecting the barrels turned to Thranduil. “The lake is deep as the ocean here and,” he pointed to the waterway which curved to the right. “This waterway goes directly to the dock where the barracks for both the palace and city guards lay.”

“ You keep this cellar too damn secure, Athradon. They are food, not treasure,” the Elf on the boat said. He turned his jovial face to the cadets. “Come and enjoy the hospitality of our Grey Havens, lads. Lord Cirdan keeps his cellar thrown open. He doesn’t mind few cadets getting into his wine or food. You have to either have a wing or a fin to get into the cellar here.” The Elf shook his head, but he was laughing.

“Move out, Harador, before you tempt our cadets to the dark side. Too disciplined and strong are our cadets in Lindon, to be easily swayed, unlike those from the Grey Havens,” Athradon said with a sniff and turned away.

“Dark side? What’s bad about getting few bottles of wine, eh?” Harador winked at the cadets before he turned back to order his Elves.

Not easily influenced? Mairon swallowed a laughter. You think so, Master Athradon?

It hadn’t taken that much to push Belegor into action. Just a suggestion here and a word there. The Noldo was angry and had seethed with indignation, his pride sorely hurt. Anger was such an easy
emotion to manipulate. Mairon smiled inwardly.

His master had taught him early on not to underestimate the damage that anger could do.

*When anger burns, it does not discriminate friends from foe. It burns all.*

Mairon remembered well his master’s glee as he told Mairon of his prized seedling. Now, Mairon could understand how his master felt with Feanor.

“Ah, you had to see him, Mairon. The fire in his eyes, the heat in his soul, it was like looking into my own,” Melkor had gushed. “And just like that, he slammed the door on me. Me!” His master laughed. “The Elf may think he had turned me away, but when you see what he had done, then you’ll know he had played right into my hands.

*It is too bad I wasn’t there to see it with my own eyes. Oh, how glorious the red blood would have looked in those blue waters of Aman. None could have sullied those hallowed waters better than the blood of the Firstborn, the ones the rest of my sorry lot tried their best to shield from me. The brightest of the Firstborn defied them and spilled the blood of their own kind. What an irony! Even I could not have done it better.*”

Mairon moved the barrels into the wine cellar as the Butler instructed. He glanced at Thranduil as the Sinda followed the butler out the back door and noticed that Elrond’s eyes followed the blond Sinda.

Elrond’s interest in the Sinda had not diminished. That made Mairon feel more sure that this Sinda was the right one. The one perfect sprout.

“*Remember, Mairon. You only need one. Just one well-chosen piece. Stain its hands with blood to seal the deal and that one dark sprout will do more damage than all the army of Orcs at your command. Remember that, Mairon. Blood begets blood.*”

Mairon had not been sure at first whether this Sinda would be useful. Both sprouts Melkor had nurtured, Feanor and *Maeglin*, were not only full of anger, they were also in the position of power and influence.

But this Sinda is a minor princeling of an obscure House not worth mentioning. He had no influence and no connection. Except for the distant relationship to Elrond, there was nothing to recommend Thranduil other than his eye-catching looks. His tall stature and the mesmerizing coloring certainly made the Sinda easy on the eyes but those qualities meant nothing when it came to power.

Despite his misgivings, however, Mairon kept an eye on the Sinda. There was darkness in Thranduil and the anger in him sizzled so hot at times, Mairon could bath in it.

But despite the anger and hatred, Thranduil had been reluctant to act against those he hated. This puzzled Mairon. Why wouldn’t anyone want their enemy to suffer? Thranduil wished it; there was no doubt as to that. Mairon had felt it radiate from the Sinda. Yet, Thranduil hesitated when the time came. Worse, he confessed too quickly. Mairon could not understand the Sinda’s action. He had expected the Sinda to keep quiet, to let another take the blame. Didn’t he consider all Noldor his enemy? The secret would have made it easier for Mairon to manipulate him.

Mairon carried the barrels lining the backdoor into the wine cellar and was arranging it when he saw through the carved openings of the lattice paneling the other cadet move closer to Elrond. Mairon had noted him because Erfaron was one of the close friends of Belegor.

He was saying something to Elrond in a low voice. Mairon sent out his senses to hear better. As good as the Elven hearing was, there were limits. His Maiarian senses, however, were much more
powerful. And his senses were one of the few among his vast powers that he was able to retain in this body.

“Is it true that it was not Cellon who was responsible for tainting the soup?” the other cadet asked.

“You heard Lieutenant Gwendir. Cellon is innocent,” Elrond said under his breath as he threw a glance at Mairon’s direction.

“But you know who did, don’t you, Elrond? You always know.”

“I am not to talk about it, Erfaron. That was the order from Lord Gilmagor.”

“So, you do know. Come, Elrond. It wasn’t just my warrior companion and me, it was everybody, including other officers.”

”Erfaron, leave it, please. It was just a prank.”

“Just a prank? Come, Elrond…”

But before Erfaron could say more, Athradon limped in from the back door followed by Thranduil carrying a barrel.

“That’s all the supplies. Once you put them into their respective spots, bring these items to the cook,” the butler said and pointed at the barrels, meats, and herbs.

As they each carried their individual packages up to the kitchen, Mairon hid a smile.

What the Sinda needed was a bitter taste of Noldorin ‘hospitality’. Something to shake his hesitation, something to make his anger and the distrust of Noldor simmer. A word here and a push there to fan his hatred. If he can get the Sinda to erupt, have the Sinda kill...

But who to kill?

Mairon wondered who would prevail if he put Thranduil against Elrond. Can Thranduil kill Elrond? Would the Sinda be able to? Elrond was skilled with his sword. Mairon had seen it. But the Sinda had reflexes beyond the skill of the cadets. Without a sword in hand, Elrond had no chance against Thranduil. But with swords, Elrond would not be an easy kill for the Sinda. Thranduil could shoot Elrond, but as far as Mairon had seen, Thranduil’s skill with a bow was mediocre at best. And with weapons in hand, that fight may end up with Elrond’s hands in Thranduil’s blood.

But that would do just as well, Mairon smiled.

Blood on Elrond’s hand would torment him. That would be good, indeed. Mairon did not just want to see Elrond dead. He wanted to see this descendant of Luthien on his knees, begging, crushed and tortured. The Half-Elven must atone for the humiliation Mairon suffered in Luthien’s hands. Yes. Anything less would not do.

And he had time. He would not rush this. His time within this body was limited, it was true. But it would be enough time to find the weakness in the Elves and torment the son of Earendil. Yes, indeed.

------------

Maeglin (Sindarin, sharp glance)—son of Aredhel, a Noldo and Turgon’s sister, and Eol the Dark Elf, a Sinda related to Thingol. He is known as the traitor who brought down Gondolin. He loved
Idril (Elrond's grandmother), Turgon's daughter, but Elves do not wed their first cousins and Idril did not like him having felt the darkness from him. When he got captured by Morgoth, he gave up the location of Gondolin for the promise of lordship over Gondolin and Idril who was already married to Tuor (Elrond's grandfather).

Chapter End Notes

Chapter 27: Cadets--Belegor confronts Thranduil
The Cadets

Chapter Summary

Only one more day to learn the patterns, Thranduil and Elrond rush after their work at the library. They are confronted by several cadets who have some business with Thranduil.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Western Courtyard. April 20, Second Age 144

**THRANDUIL** and Elond finished their work at the library as quickly as they could. After today, Thranduil had only one more day before he is to be tested for the patterns. With the work at the library added to his usual chores and remaining training, Thranduil had less time to learn the sword patterns.

Tomorrow was the rest day and Elond had convinced Master Pengo to let them skip tomorrow so Thranduil could have a whole day after he was done with his morning and evening runs around the fields. Already, the training fields were empty as many cadets cleared out after the end of their chores.

Thranduil and Elond left the library at King’s Tower and headed toward the Star Field. They turned a corner passing outside a walled garden that led to the Western Courtyard when Thranduil’s mind blared in warning.

A force propelled Thranduil forward before he had a chance to react. Only the years of experience dealing with unforeseen events allowed Thranduil to catch himself before hitting the ground. When he straightened, however, the young Sinda found himself surrounded.

“Thrand…oof!” Elond’s call was cut off and muffled. Thranduil whirled around to look for Elond who was following behind him. Two cadets held Elond down on the ground, his arms twisted back, his mouth and eyes covered. Thranduil turned back to those who surrounded him. There were six cadets. One of them was Belegor.

Despite the hostility radiating from the cadets, Thranduil couldn’t help being impressed. He had not felt their presence. As noiseless as these cadets were taught to be, Thranduil had not expected it of the Noldorin warriors. Maybe it was the heaviness of their armor, but as far as Thranduil remembered, the Noldorin warriors he had seen at Sirion made a lot more noise than his father’s warriors who were practically soundless no matter how heavily armed they were. But, then, these cadets did not wear any armor. Either that, Thranduil was slacking and not paying attention to his environment as he was taught to do.

“What do you want?” Thranduil asked although he could guess.

“I heard it was you who had poisoned the soup,” Belegor said, his eyes narrowed and dark.
“I wouldn’t say ‘poisoned’ but yes. I put the herbs,” said Thranduil, noting that the other five cadets moved around and now made a tight circle around him, each warrior only an arm’s length out of his reach.

If these cadets were Orcs, six was no match for him, but these were Elven warriors. Even though Thranduil was able to catch Belegor and his two companions off-guard the first night, the Sinda knew he could not have bested Belegor and his friends without the surprise in his favor. Had it been a fully open confrontation as it was now, he may not have been able to throw all of them off their feet in such a short time.

“So you enjoyed making everyone miserable, Sinda?” Belegor said.

“Not everyone, but you? Yes.”

Belegor’s face turned dark as his nose flared. “Is that so?” He glared at Thranduil.

“So, Belegor was right? It was you who made us sick?” one of the Elves who surrounded Thranduil asked. “My warrior companion was so sick he threw up all night,” he growled.

“Well, if you want your revenge, go ahead,” Thranduil said and opened his arms wide, palm up.

“Do you even know how sick some of us got?” another cadet said.

Some of the cadets who surrounded him began to pound their fists into their open palms, but none of them made a move toward Thranduil.

“Either you get this over with or get out of my way,” Thranduil said, glancing at each one of them.

Someone behind him made the first strike. Sharp pain cracked behind his back and Thranduil propelled forward. A cadet in front of Thranduil caught him with an upper hook into Thranduil’s stomach. Pain, sharp and biting, kicked into his stomach, yanking his breath. Thranduil clenched his teeth to prevent crying out. But before he could right himself, Thranduil was thrown back as a fist smashed into his face, then his chest. He was unable to count the number of punches that followed until his knees hit the dirt.

Thranduil fell on the ground, on all fours. He lifted his hand and wiped away the sticky wetness on his chin. His mouth burned as a taste of metallic tang filled his mouth. The cadets who surrounded him pulled back as soon as Thranduil was down.

“Why isn’t he fighting back?” one of them asked.

Belegor who had stood back until now stepped forward, his eyes shiny with excitement.

“You are not so stupid after all. Are we too much for you, Sinda?” Belegor said then bared his fist. The Noldo’s lips curved up wickedly. “Now, for the final blow.”

Thranduil looked up as Belegor’s fist flew toward his face. Before it could make a contact with his chin, however, Thranduil grabbed it.

“Not you,” Thranduil growled through his bleeding mouth. “I have no regrets as to you,” Thranduil said as he got up, off the ground, using Belegor’s fist to pull himself up.

Belegor hissed as his eyes sparked with fire.

“What’s going on here!” someone bellowed just then. Thranduil let go of Belegor's fist as the Noldo
stood at attention and Lord Gilmagor stood before them.

The cadets immediately straightened in attention. Thranduil grunted as he made an effort to straighten. The muscles pulled and ached everywhere. The Sinda bit down another groan.

“What happened here, Oropherion?” Gilmagor asked once Thranduil managed to stand up straight.

“Sir!” Belegor stepped forward.

“Careful, Lammaegion. I did not ask you.” Gilmagor glanced at the young Noldo. The Lord Commander’s voice was full of warning, a quiet before the storm.

Belegor flushed and clamped his mouth shut.

Gilmagor turned to Thranduil. “Oropherion?”

Thranduil took in a breath. He could feel the nervous glances of the other cadets.

“I fell, sir,” Thranduil said staring straight ahead.

Gilmagor narrowed his eyes as he looked Thranduil up and down.

“And how did you fall?”

“On my hands and knees, sir.”

The air in the garden turned heavy as silence filled the space.

“And Belegor’s fist?”

“I was using it to get up, sir.”

Gilmagor’s eyes sparked into little flames and Thranduil felt his insides shiver at the keen light in them but it did not have the debilitating effect it used to have. Still, Thranduil focused his eyes straight ahead and not on the Lord Commander’s eyes.

“Think carefully what you say, Thranduil Oropherion. Lying to your commander is not only an act unbecoming an officer, it is punishable. Do you want to rephrase your answer?”

“No, sir.”

Gilmagor narrowed his eyes, then he turned.

“Earendilion!” Gilmagor called out.

Thranduil turned around to see Elrond dusting the dirt off the front of his uniform before standing at attention. The faces of two cadets standing at attention next to Elrond were drawn and drained of blood.

“What happened here?” Gilmagor walked to stand before Elrond.

Elrond glanced at Thranduil. Thranduil shook his head. Elrond pursed his lips and frowned for a moment, but said, “I fell and did not see anything. Sir!”

Gilmagor glanced back toward Thranduil. The Lord Commander’s lips curved up, but the smile did not reach his eyes. Thranduil felt cold run down his spine at the look in Gilmagor’s eyes.
“Is there anyone here who did not fall and saw what really went on?” Gilmagor looked around at the other warriors. His voice was soft as a lady’s silk dress.

No one said anything, their eyes forward.

Gilmagor turned to Elrond, then back at Thranduil with a big smile on his face.

“So, you are telling me, Oropherion, that you fell and Lammaegion here helped you up?”

Thranduil remained silent.

“And these other cadets? They were here to help you, too?”

When Thranduil still kept silent, Lord Gilmagor continued.

“Since these cadets have been so kind to you, Oropherion, you wouldn’t have any objections to returning a favor by helping them with their chores, do you?” Gilmagor tilted his head, his lips curved up.

Thranduil fisted his hands at the impulse. He wanted to punch that grin off the Crooked Nose’s face.

“If they wish it,” Thranduil said.

“Of course, they would want you to. Is that not so?” The sword master looked at other warriors who were looking quite uncomfortable now.

“What chores were you and your warrior companion supposed to do tonight, Lammaegion?” Gilmagor asked. His voice was silky and dangerous.

“Sir! We were to fill water barrels. But… we have already completed our chores, sir!”

“Is that mean there are no more barrels to fill?”

“No, sir. We have four more barrels. But they are for next week and we do not need help. Sir!”

“Oh, but you were so kind to help Oropherion here. I am sure he wouldn’t mind filling them for you. Isn’t that so, Oropherion?”

Thranduil bit his tongue. He didn’t need any more problems and he was very aware how his tongue tended to get him in trouble. But the extra chore meant even less time to work on the patterns. But, it was either comply or tell and Thranduil was loathed to do the latter.

“But sir,” Elrond who was frowning behind Thranduil spoke up.

“Was I speaking to you, Earendilion?” Gilmagor said, his eyes on Thranduil.

“But, sir…” Elrond persisted.

But before Elrond could speak further, Gilmagor raised his index finger stopping Elrond. The Half-Elf’s shoulder sagged, but Elrond stepped back.

Gilmagor smiled brightly, then turned to the other warriors.

“And, as officers who value honor, fairness, and friendship, you all would want to help Oropherion with his chores. I am sure that all eight of you gathered here to help this one cadet who had to remain in the barracks. Is that not so?” the old Elf’s voice was smooth and sweet as honey.
When no one said anything, the Lord Commander continued.

"Being such good companions, you eight will do 10 laps run around the three fields for Thranduil. In fact, you can start tonight to show solidarity. Then, tomorrow morning, all of you will do another 10 laps run in Oropherion's stead. As it was with Thranduil, you are to finish before sunrise. Questions?"

"But, sir," Belegor stepped forward, "tomorrow is a rest day and I am expected to break my fast with my family tomorrow morning…"

Belegor stopped when Gilmagor eyes flashed, then the young Noldo stepped back as the sword master's eyes narrowed into two keen lances.

"Thranduil Oropherion would have run tomorrow whether it is a rest day or not. As faithful and helpful companions, I expect you," Gilmagor eyed Belegor, then turned to the other warriors, "and all of you, to be there for your fellow cadet. Is that clear?" It was not a question and all of them knew it.

"Yes, sir!" Belegor and the seven warriors said in unison although they sounded weak and reluctant.

"Good. You are dismissed. Go! Do your run now."

The cadets, their shoulders sagging but unable to utter a word in front of the Lord Commander, moved away quietly.

Both Elrond and Thranduil also turned to leave.

"You two. Stay."

Thranduil glanced at Elrond who met his eyes.

Lord Gilmagor watched others leave. When all of them have disappeared out of the garden, the sword master turned to Elrond.

"You have a very bad habit of interrupting your officer, Earendilion."

"Elrond has nothing to do with this," Thranduil said.

Gilmagor's eyes glinted and Thranduil stopped but glared back at the Lord Commander.

"I expect that of this one," Gilmagor gestured toward Thranduil. "But, you, I expected you to be cooler headed. Any more interruptions from you and I will have to rethink your position. Everything has a right time and place. Am I clear, cadet?"

Elrond met the commander's eyes. Then, the young Noldor dropped his head. "Yes, sir."

"Good. Now, what did you want to say, Elrond."

"Sir, Thranduil already has more than enough chores. As is, we are behind on the patterns. Filling four water barrels alone will take a good half a day. Sir, Thranduil only has tomorrow to complete his patterns and we still have so much to cover. We had chores every, single day." Elrond sounded as if he was pleading.

"Then, I suggest you help him with it. You are his warrior companion. His burden is your burden. With two of you, you should be able to cut the chore time in half," Gilmagor said with a shrug.
“But even with two of us, it would take at least good four hours.”

“Then what are you waiting for? You are dismissed.” With that, Gilmagor disappeared after the other cadets.

Once Gilmagor was out of sight, Thranduil sagged holding onto his stomach. He leaned onto a wall. “By Belegaer, those Elves hit hard. Damn!”

Elrond grabbed Thranduil’s arm and led him to a bench few feet away.

“Those cadets are the best among the youth of Lindon. Did you expect anything less? Let me see.” Elrond tried to pull open Thranduil’s tunic for a look.

“Just bruises, nothing broken.” Thranduil swiped away Elrond’s hand. Then, Thranduil looked up and saw that Elrond’s right cheek was swelling up. It looked red and tender.

“They hit you, too?” Thranduil turned Elrond’s face towards him for a closer look, keeping a tight rein on the anger. It was one thing for them to hit him. He deserved it; Elrond did not.

“No. They were just trying to keep me down.” Elrond fingered the now swollen side of his face. “I almost threw one of them off me, trying to get up. One of them elbowed me to keep me down. But, why didn’t you hit them back? You could have gotten to at least three or four of them, the way I have seen you move.”

“They deserved to let out some of their anger. They didn’t do anything to me and I hurt them. I might have done the same if I were them.”

“You seemed unwilling to extend such courtesy to Belegor.” Elrond chuckled.

“That Orc! Oh no. I wasn’t about to let that bastard hit me. I did that whole soup thing mostly for Belegor’s sake.”

“And, Lord Gilmagor?”

“Him, too.”

“Unfortunately for you, Lord Gilmagor did not have the soup that night and Belegor only very little. He didn’t even get sick at all.”

“Ah well,” Thranduil shrugged. “Just my luck.”

“Maybe Thranduil, you shouldn’t do things like that. You antagonized whole of the cadets and other officers. For what? A failed attempt to get back at two people who didn’t get hurt at all?”

Thranduil held Elrond’s eyes, then scoffed out loud. “You think me an idiot, don’t you, Peredhel?”

Elrond shrugged. “I just wondered why you did what you did.”

Thranduil rolled his eyes. “Have you never done anything on a whim? Do you always think everything through carefully before you do them?”

“Not all the time, but…And Belegor, he is not a bad person if you get to know him. He is honorable and friendly. Most of the time, anyway. Actually, in some ways, he is a lot like you.”

“In what ways?” Thranduil glared at Elrond.
“He is bit hot tempered and doesn’t always think before he acts or says things.” Elrond smiled, his eyes crinkling at the edges. “And as he is probably the best among the cadets, you could learn a lot from him.”

“I don’t want to learn anything from him!” Thranduil sneered. “And sneaking up on me like that. Is that something an honorable Elf would do?”

“You put herbs in people’s food to make them sick. Would you say that was honorable?”

“At least, I never pretended I was honorable.” Thranduil scoffed. “You go on, I have to go get that chore done so I can get the rest of the patterns down,” Thranduil said then grimaced as he got up, unsteadily, on his feet.

“I think you need to rest a little.” Elrond held onto Thranduil’s arm to steady him.

“I don’t have time, Elrond. If I don’t learn all the patterns by the day after tomorrow, Gilmagor will kick me out of the cadet program. He doesn’t seem like someone who makes empty threats.”

“No, he is not. But, you still have so much to learn. I am not sure you can…especially with you in this condition. Mayhap you can talk to Lord Gilmagor for mercy. He is not unreasonable. He must know that this feat is almost impossible. With all the things that went on, there just wasn’t enough time.”

“No. I am not going to give him the satisfaction of seeing me beg. And, I don’t think he is the kind of person who would bend the rules just because someone asked. No, I have to make this work.”

“Be reasonable, Thranduil. We were supposed to finish eight patterns each day, but we are hopelessly behind. With just one day to go, we should have finished all the patterns, but you have yet to learn the six major ones. And they are the hardest! How are you going to get that all done and have time left over to practice the entire patterns? You have to at least practice the whole pattern once…even then…”

“Just listen to me,” Thranduil turned Elrond around to face him. “I found a way to do the patterns faster.”

Elrond raised his eyebrow.

“I practiced the movements for each pattern and set it to a rhythm. I have been doing it every night after your lessons. The evening and morning songs to Elbereth…” Thranduil hissed as he shifted.

“Thranduil, I think you should have yourself looked over.” Elrond pulled him over to the direction of the barracks where the infirmary was located.

Thranduil shook his arm off Elrond’s grip.

“I can handle pain. This is nothing, Elrond. Cadets hit me hard, but they threw clean punches. I had worse. Orcs can be quite nasty to their captives.”

“You got captured by Orcs?” Elrond looked at Thranduil with wide eyes.

Thranduil sniffed, then nodded. It was one of the toughest ordeals he went through while mapping the North, next only to things that happened at Menegroth and Sirion. But, maybe because of it, what little mishap he had to go through here didn’t feel so bad. His father was right after all: Roots that weather frosts get stronger.
“Thranduil?”

The blond Sinda looked at Elrond. The young Noldo’s gray eyes were warm and open. They were filled with concern, so much like the eyes of Elwing they were, Thranduil’s heart ached at the thought of her.

“Thank you for your concern, Elrond. But, I’m fine,” Thranduil said more gently than he had ever allowed.

Then, the Sinda got up and turned away, suddenly conscious. Thranduil reined in all his emotions and carefully tucked them deep inside. Only woe befell all those he ever cared about.

“I am going to see about the filling the water barrels. If you are willing, I will see you tomorrow for the patterns,” Thranduil said formally, inclined his head, then without sparing another look toward the young Noldo, Thranduil walked away.

Chapter End Notes

Next Chapter 28: Giving Up--sometimes all we could do is to hold on. It is a lesson Thranduil learned up at the unforgiving North.

A/N: Because my schedule during summer is not set as it is during the academic year, my posting will also fluctuate as I travel throughout the summer. I will strive to put more, but I can only say that there will be, at least, a chapter each week, most likely posted on Thursday/Friday. Thank you all for reading! Have a wonderful and safe summer!
Chapter Summary

Only a few hours before the test on the patterns, Thranduil finds himself worn out and wondering why he struggles so when he could just give up. He finds unexpected and unlooked for help.

Chapter Notes

Warning: There are depictions of violence and minor character death.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Sun Field. April 21, Second Age 144

**THRANDUIL** made another turn, circling his sword in the air. For hours now, Thranduil practiced the last six patterns. Not only were they the hardest, being the most advanced, they were also the least familiar to Thranduil. Although he knew that he only needed to learn the steps and not master them, the movements themselves were difficult to learn. It was also harder because even Elrond was not a master of these six patterns and could not explain them as fully as Thranduil wanted.

Last night, Thranduil spent most of the evening filling the water barrels. When Thranduil finally made it to the field, it was after the midnight hour and Elrond had been waiting for him.

They had worked through the night and although today was a rest day, Elrond stayed with him through the entire day, only leaving to attend the dinner meeting with the king.

Sweat began to bead Thranduil's forehead as his breath roughened. Elves did not sweat normally. It was a sign he needed a rest. Thranduil swerved as he made a wrong turn. His practice sword hit the stone in front of him and flew off his hand. The force threw Thranduil onto the ground. With no strength to get up, Thranduil lay sprawled on the ground feeling the ache in his wrist spread down his arm. His wrist was still healing and the strain he put on it did not help.

Thranduil groaned and covered his sweat soaked face with his hands. The palms of his hands burned. Through the faint light emitted by the white stones, Thranduil looked at his bare hands as if for the first time. There was not a spot on his palms that was not blistered, smudged or crusted with blood. Even with his Elven strength and stamina, back to back days and nights of constant strain on his body were beginning to take a toll.

For the past ten days, the only rest he had was when he rested his exhausted mind while doing walking-sleep during his morning and evening runs. Walking-sleep was a required skill when you trained as a warrior. It allowed warriors to perform long marches over great distances without the need to lay down to sleep. While they moved, soldiers slept open-eyed to allow their body and mind to rest. But walking-sleep can only be done when you are doing something repetitive that demanded minimal concentration. Unlike marching or running, practicing the patterns required mental acuity and physical exertion.
Thranduil let out a long breath. He was so tired.

Everything ached, each joint, each muscle in his arms, his legs… his entire body. He felt like he was buried, heavy earth weighing him down, cutting off blood, breath…life. Even the darkness around him seemed to weigh him down.

Thranduil lay still, his arms and legs spread wide. Everything was quiet. Silence and darkness, dark gray under the starlight, filled the empty space all around him.

Thranduil looked up at the star-filled sky. He had been working, doing chores, training and working on the patterns for non-stop for days now without any sleep or rest other than walking-sleep. And what little rest provided by the walking-sleep was obviously not enough.

In few hours, dawn will come and he must rise to do his morning run before facing Lord Gilmagor for the test.

“İ can’t do this,” Thranduil whispered into the darkness of the vast Sun Field.

*Why am I struggling so hard? Why am I bothering with all these? Why don’t I just give up? Who cares if I am a foot soldier? I am nobody anyway. I can’t do this anymore.*

Thranduil closed his eyes.

---

**Northern edge of Misty Mountains. June 10, Second Age 105**

Someone screamed and Thranduil struggled against the heavy mists that filled his consciousness. Something was rotting. His stomach roiled as something foul and acrid pricked his senses. His body felt so heavy. Pain laced down his back as if burning rocks seared the skin there. He wanted to open his eyes, but his lids were heavy as if someone buried his head in the ground. But the blond Sinda opened them wide when a scream of a familiar voice pierced his ears.

Thranduil pitched forward but something held both his hands back. Coughing, feeling weak and unsure, Thranduil looked about him and found that he was tied, his wrists bloody and bound to two large stakes, one on each side of him.

Thranduil blinked to clear his weary eyes. Stone walls closed all around him. A stray light from above through a crack in a rock formation was the only light. Fear constricted his throat when he realized he was inside a cave. Thranduil grew up inside a cave but Menegroth was a vast place full of light and beauty, filled with songs and treasures beyond wonder. This cave was rough, dark and damp, filled with the sickening odor of decay and blood.

Thranduil’s stomach tightened into a knot as he realized where he was. Ahead of him, a huge orc, its worn iron armor dark with age, stood over someone. The creature sniggered as he pulled away a bloodied fist.

“Leave…leave him alone,” Thranduil cried out when he realized who it was. His voice came out cracked, barely above a whisper. “Tatharion!” Thranduil called out the name of the Elf who had watched over him since he was a child at Sirion.

The Orc, his twisted face made more horrifying by a fresh knife scar that tore across his face, stood over the old guard of Doriath. Tatharion sat slumped against the Orc. Blood dripped off Tatharion’s face, his one eye torn open and hollow, drenched in blood.
“This is what you get for interfering, Maggot,” the Orc said, as he shook Tatharion and his bloodied fist. The Elven guard sagged onto the dank floor when the Orc let him go.

The Sindarin warrior had tried to shield Thranduil with his body when a group of Orcs took turns to whip and slash at Thranduil. They have dragged Tatharion away and made the older Elf watch as they beat Thranduil senseless until the blond Sinda passed out.

The scarred Orc turned, grinning ear to ear and glanced at Thranduil.

Fear clawed Thranduil’s inside as he remembered. Thranduil, Tatharion, and Dirnenion had been overwhelmed by a horde of orcs. They had managed to cut the number of Orcs by half but in the end, there were too many.

But where was Dirnenion?

Thranduil looked around. Dirnenion was Tatharion’s warrior companion. Those two always moved together.

Thranduil strained to look through the haze and the pain. He wondered if his father was looking for them. The three of them had been on their hunting duty, to catch something for dinner when they were attacked. By the light that poured from the crack in the cave, Thranduil knew that it was a daytime, but he could not tell how much time had passed since they were dragged in and tortured.

Thranduil scanned the dimly lit cave until the Orc with the scar stood in front of him.

“Looking for the other Maggot?” The Orc laughed, his laughter cruel and amused.

The beast pointed to a group of orcs huddled together to Thranduil’s right. They were cackling, some poking and kicking at something in the center of them. Shaking their iron covered bodies, the group parted and started to move away, leaving the center open to view.

There was a body, crumpled and bloodied to a pulp, unrecognizable except for the dirt and blood crusted Elven boots. The twisted and violently mangled body left no doubt. No hope.

Fear, dread, and uncertainty burned away as the heat took hold of Thranduil. Overwhelming grief crashed into his aching body and shook him.

“You cursed seeds of Morgoth! Kill me, too, you miserable Filth!”

Curses poured out of Thranduil. Dirnenion would not have been murdered if he had not tried to protect him from the Orc’s knives as they hacked away at Thranduil’s hair and shoulders. Both Dirnenion and Tatharion had tried to shield him. Just as his mother had. So many of them. Too many have died to keep him alive. Why? He wasn’t worth it. Was not his hand tainted with blood? Have they not died because of him?

“Kill me!” Thranduil screamed.

“No problem, little worm,” the scarred one, the one who had taken Tatharion’s eye limped over with the leather ropes knotted here and there with shards of stone.

“Killing’s not a problem, Little Elf Scum. But we need to have some fun, too.”

The other orcs crowded around Thranduil, grinning and nodding.

“Yeah, then we should roast him. He looks tender.”

“Beat him! Beat him!” shouted the rest of the Orcs as they gathered around Thranduil.

Thwak!

The scarred Orc obliged. Thranduil’s skin tore and bled as the stones and the leather ropes rent the skin and bone apart.

Thwak! Thwak!

The pain made thinking impossible but Thranduil clenched his teeth and refused to scream. He didn’t want to give these foul creatures the satisfaction.

Thwak! Thwak! Thwak!

Thranduil’s lips tore under his teeth and blood filled his mouth with acrid liquid iron. Every nerve end stood up, burning, sizzling, raw with pain.

So much pain. Why was he still clinging onto this life? Why was he struggling when this world was so full of pain, misery, and suffering? His life, as short as it was, had been filled with nothing more than anguish and despair. He hated it. Hated this world, this pain, this ugliness. There had been only suffering after suffering, days filled with the loss after loss, a winter after winter. Spring seemed so far away and all the trees were barren, leafless and lifeless. Why was he struggling when it was easier to just let everything go and pass from this world?

Thranduil let out a shuddering breath. All he needed to do was to give up. Let go.

“Thranduil!” Someone picked up his face. Thranduil looked up to see Tatharion’s bloodied face. The guard’s once comely face was hideous. Where one of his eyes would have been, there was only a mangled flesh, rest were beaten and swollen ghastly mess.

“Hold on, young one. Don’t give up,” he said in a voice weak and trembling. “For us, for your father, for yourself… Hold on… just a little longer…”

Tatharion didn’t finish. He was yanked away. And the scarred Orc who seemed to have been knocked off his feet got up. The creature took out his curved sword and stood tall over Tatharion and Thranduil.

“Say goodbye, Elf scum!” The Orc said to Tatharion. “We are going to have some more fun with your little elfling. But don’t worry. I’ll send him over to you soon enough.”

The orcs inside the cave cackled aloud as the scarred orc raised his sword high above him.

Then, the scarred Orc pitched forward. A green feathered arrow sprouted from his neck. Then one after another, orcs fell. Every. Single. One.

Thranduil let out a breath and passed out.

When Thranduil came to, he lay on his side as someone applied something thick and cool behind his back, shoulders and the arms. When his eyes focused, Thranduil saw a face covered in glittering silver hair. His father’s face was calm and serene as it ever was.

“Tatharion. Dimenion…” Thranduil managed although his throat was parched and the sound was
barely audible.  

“Tatharion is with the healer. Dirnenion… “ His father let out a shaky breath. “He is with Mandos.”

Thranduil’s heart constricted. He felt numb. “I failed them. I failed you…”

“They did their best. And you… held on.” His father’s voice shook, a rare show of emotion but it lasted only a second before he resumed the stony demeanor.

“I couldn’t do anything…I did nothing while…” Thranduil’s throat closed. His voice failed him.

“There will be times when no matter what you try to do, you could do nothing. Sometimes, holding on is all that we could do, son. Do the best we could and hold on. As long as you hold on, there will be another chance, another day. In times like this, the only thing that is important is that you do not give up.” His father rested his hand on Thranduil’s arm. “Remember that, Thranduil. No matter how difficult, no matter how hard, don’t give up. Life is a precious gift given by Eru. Pain. Suffering. All these. These are just a trial He gives to make you stronger. Sometimes it is hard to believe that, but you must believe, son.”

Thranduil could not look at his father. He wanted to believe, but he didn’t feel it. He didn’t feel worthy.

“So many died trying to protect me. I don’t…I am not…” His throat thickened, constricting the flow of air. It was so hard. Why must he struggle? Thranduil let out a shuddering breath.

“Then that is more reason for you to go on. Don’t let their sacrifice be for naught, Thranduil. They have given you the greatest gift they can give. You must fight that much harder, struggle that much more, to make their sacrifice worth it. Do you understand, son?”

“But sometimes it is so hard. I don’t know if I can…” Thranduil closed his eyes. He was so tired. So tired of this struggle, this constant pain and hurt. “I am sorry, father. Maybe I am not worthy….“ Shame shook him then. How weak was he? He turned his face away.

His father lifted Thranduil’s face and the young Sinda looked up, half afraid and half delirious of his father’s closeness. His father had been so distant through all their wanderings.

“Son, we all falter; we all doubt. There is no shame in it. But, at the end of the day, if you are still alive, if you hold on, even if you have nothing in your hands, you will learn to stand up and walk again. What suffering Eru gives, it is there to make you stronger. Believe, my son. Roots that weather frost get stronger.”

Sun Field. April 21, Second Age 144

Thranduil frowned as he looked up at the stars. The last words of his father rang clear in his mind.

The roots that weather frost get stronger.

He looked up to see how much the stars had moved. He didn’t have much time and he was loathed to waste any more. Thankfully, the stars had barely moved. With a groan, Thranduil sat up.

Giving up was not an option. All those people who sacrificed for him, he must give back that much
more, fight that much harder. He had a lot to atone for. His thoughts reached into the last moments of Menegroth. Thranduil shook his head hard. No. He promised he will not blame himself. If this was Eru’s punishment, he must endure it. It was his lot to suffer. To give up was to reject Eru’s mercy and to trivialize the sacrifice others made for him.

He took in a breath to gather what strength that remained in him and picked up the sword that lay on the ground and started the last of the patterns.

He will not give up. He will fight and struggle to his last breath, for his mother and Direnion who had given their lives for him; for Tatharion’s lost eye; for his brother and the countless number of Doriathrin warriors who died; and for the lives of the dear ones he had taken.

He picked up speed.

The last pattern was difficult. Thranduil made a swing. His arm ached from the strain. His knees shook and Thranduil dropped his sword. He grabbed his wrist as pain shot through it. His right wrist had not fully healed and the strain was becoming too much.

“Dammit!” Thranduil swore aloud into the dark night.

“You are holding too tightly to your sword,” a voice drawled.

Thranduil whirled around and there at the center of the Sun Field, on top of the rock formations, crouched Captain Astalder atop one of the rocks. Thranduil took in a sharp breath as his body stiffened as he beheld the light in the captain’s eyes. In the darkness of the light, the captain’s eyes glowed like those of a wild animal.

Captain Astalder got up and lightly jumped down and stood only a few feet from Thranduil in a blink. With a speed too fast even for Thranduil’s Elven eyes, there was a gleaming steel in the captain’s hand.

“Gripping tighter to your sword stiffens your arms which is what makes it difficult for you to make that move. And you are putting unnecessary strain on your body. This last pattern is Water. Think about what water is. It is flowing.” Astalder’s sword arm moved. “It is all embracing.” Like a piece of silk garment hung on a branch, he moved as if he didn’t have a bone in his body. It curved and swayed like a stream of water. “It is neither stiff nor sharp.” His sword followed making a circle in the air. The starlight gleamed along the edge of the steel and as he moved, the sword moved as if it was a stream of light at the captain’s fingertips. “It flows, is smooth and unending.” The captain’s arm was formless, like a water meandering down a shallow stream. The sword gleamed as if it had no form or shape.

Thranduil stood there, mesmerized and awed by the beauty of the movements as Captain Astalder danced under the starlight, a wisp of a silk garment twisting in the wind. His movements were smooth and flowing like a river, his sword just a gleam in his hand.

Thranduil had seen Elrond and his fellow cadets do the patterns but never had he seen it being executed so beautifully or so masterfully. It was breathtaking.

“Now, you try it,” the captain said. “Think of yourself as a stream of water flowing down a creek, bending and twisting around a stone as it flows downward.”

Thranduil turned and twisted.

Astalder pulled up Thranduil’s shoulder, then his other hand landed on Thranduil’s stomach.
“The strength of this movement comes from here, at your center. Breathe out as you turn and curve your body. Breathe in as you straighten. Your core should be firmly in control but the rest of your body must be fluid as if your body has turned liquid. Let your hand swerve around the sword handle.”

“But, if I don’t hold it tight, the sword will slip,” Thranduil said looking at the sword in his hand.

“If you grip tighter, it becomes easier to knock your weapon.” Astalder’s sword flashed and the sword in Thranduil’s hand flew off his hand. Thranduil looked up wide eyed. He did not even see Astalder’s hand move.

“Think about your joints. Your arms move freely. Although they are joined, they are not stuck together. Hold your sword within your hand so that it will not fall, but grip loosely and allow it to move freely within it. Don’t think of your sword as something separate from your body. Think of it as an extension of your arm. Now follow me.”

Together, they moved. Thranduil followed the captain’s movement as the Noldorin warrior flowed around the space between them like a stream of water that flows over boulders. There were no other words to describe the way he moved. The Elf flowed like he was one of the elements.

“Now we are coming to the offensive patterns. Let the power flow through you like a river that swells up after days of rain. You rush, you engulf, you are a thunderous waterfall, devouring waves of the sea,” the captain’s sonorous voice went up a notch.

The movement took a turn. What had been a smooth flowing stream of water swelled up into an angry river, a rapid, rushing, crushing force.

Thranduil tried to keep up. Astalder’s sword was just a blur now, a tidal wave.

Thranduil panted as his heart raced. Yet, the movements did not strain him as it had before.

The captain went over the major patterns, correcting Thranduil’s form as he guided Thranduil over each movement. Unlike Elrond, the captain was a master and under his guidance, Thranduil grasped the basic principles behind each pattern although he knew that he was far from mastering them.

When Thranduil had gone through each major pattern without stumbling, the captain smiled. “As I thought, your instincts are finely tuned. You have a way to go, but I see much potential in you.”

“Why are you helping me?” Thranduil asked once his breath calmed.

Astalder shrugged.

“It looked like you needed help.”

“I have nothing to give you in return,” Thranduil said.

“Sometimes, you need to give and accept for no other reason than that it was needed to be given and accepted,” the warrior said. Then, he yawned. “And, I was bored anyway. If I may ask, you are a double wielder, are you not?”

Thranduil frowned. When it came to the use of the swords, he was more used to the double long daggers favored by the march wardens of Doriath.

“My weapons of choice are the bow and double long daggers.”
Astalder frowned. “Bow, I understand. You are a Sinda. But, double long daggers? You mean the short swords? Why those? They are great if you are smaller, but with your height and strength, I would think you would go for the full-length swords. It takes extra skill, strength, and agility to wield two full-length swords, but you have the height, strength and reflexes few possess. It would be a waste of your natural assets.”

Thranduil shrugged. He had never thought about it. The march wardens of Doriath all used double long daggers for close quarter combats. His father alone, amongst them, had favored his long sword.

“Something to think about, cadet. Good luck in the morning!” With that, the captain disappeared into the darkness as suddenly as he appeared.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter 30 Test--Elrond watches as Thranduil is being tested on the patterns. Thranduil cramp the years worth of patterns in ten days. Will his performance be enough to pass the test?
**The Test**

Chapter Summary

Thranduil takes his pattern test. Will he pass without any trouble?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

---

**Star Field. April 22, Second Age 144**

**ELROND** sat up and blinked away the fatigue when someone shook him. Captain Astalder stood looking down at him.

“It is best to sleep in the barracks, Elrond. These stones are probably too cold for you yet. At any event, you may want to move out of this spot if you don’t want him to see you. He will be starting his run soon,” Captain Astalder said with a grin.

Elrond grimaced as he got up from the stone bridge connecting the Star and Moon fields where he had been sitting for several hours now. The cold of the stone seeped through his bones chilling him. He never could shake off the cold like other Elves. While his senses became sharper and more acute, his tolerance of cold and heat did not increase. Cold still made him shiver and the heat made him sweat. And while he ran faster, moved more elegantly and was more agile than he had ever been, these changes also made him aware how different he was from other Eldar.

Elrond shook off the stiffness. He had not realized he had fallen asleep. All around him darkness was receding and dawn was approaching.

It was just before midnight when Elrond had come to check on Thranduil when he saw Captain Astalder steadily moving closer to the Sun Field. The captain moved so stealthily and silently that Elrond almost didn’t notice him. And Elrond was sure that if he didn’t stand where he could see the whole of Moon and Sun Fields, he would not have noticed the warrior.

“How did you convince Thranduil to let you help?” Elrond asked.

“I did not give him a say. And the desperate rarely has a choice.” Astalder wriggled his eyebrows, his steel gray eyes sparkling like a polished silver. “Everything has a right time and place. If you time it right, things tend to work out.” The captain winked.

Elrond smiled. The nephew and the uncle were so much alike yet so different. Where Lord Gilmagor was strict and unyielding, the captain was carefree and compassionate. Elrond always found Lord Gilmagor difficult to approach. The Lord Commander was like a serene river that Elrond couldn’t fathom the depth. Although the surface seemed calm, if he looked closely, the current churned with such power he was sure it could sweep away anyone or anything.

Captain Astalder, on the other hand, seemed friendly and easygoing; he was open like a lake of clear water that you could see everything within. Yet open as he seemed, underneath, power lay there that
Elrond could not measure. It made Elrond wonder how powerful those other warriors of First Age must have been.

“What do you think, captain. Will he pass?”

Astalder shrugged. “Who knows? His instincts are sharp. He understands quickly. But then, the patterns are not meant to be learned overnight. It is a process that requires time. It must ingrain itself intimately into a warrior so that he must be able to execute without even thinking.”

“But he wasn’t given enough time,” Elrond said.

“Not given or not taken?”

“Does it matter?”

“Not to me, of course!” Astalder laughed. “But to my uncle, it may.”

Elrond frowned.

“Does that mean Lord Gilmagor will not pass Thranduil even if he is worthy?”

“Unfairness is never a fault of my uncle, Elrond. You could be sure of that.” The captain lay a comforting hand on Elrond’s shoulder. “Besides, he is aware of what the king wants. One whose heart is loyal always knows what is in his lord’s heart.”

Then it dawned on Elrond.

“Did the king send you?”

Astalder threw back his head and laughed. “If he has, you would know better than I. Is it not so?” Then, he winked. “A good warrior knows what his commander wants even if it is not said.”

With that, the captain waved his hand and disappeared before Elrond could ask more.

Elrond sighed but turned back to watch Thranduil making his morning run. It was so hard to get anything straight out of these Elves. He wondered if he will be like that, too, with time. It seemed to him that they don’t start out that way. At least, the young cadets were not that way. And of course, Thranduil was too straightforward.

Elrond watched Thranduil making his last lap around the fields when he felt a presence.

“So, how is he doing?” Lord Gilmagor stood next to him. “Is he ready for the test?”

“Sir,” Elrond turned to Gilmagor. “Are you really going to throw him down to the basic training if he fails? You know as well as I do that he is better qualified than some of us in the cadet program.”

“Skill alone does not make a good officer, Earendilion. To be a good leader, one must value his words like a dragon his gold. A leader who allows his arrogance to speak without substance cannot inspire others nor earn their trust.”

“But I don’t think he is all words, sir.”

“We’ll see,” Gilmagor said as he watched Thranduil run up the bridge towards them.

Gilmagor gestured Thranduil to follow.
“Sir, he just ran seven and a half leagues. Shouldn’t you allow him some rest before starting the test?” Elrond frowned looking down at Thranduil who bent down to take a breath. His back rose like waves and his breathing was loud and harsh.

“Whatever for? He is in perfect condition to start. He should be sufficiently warmed up,” Gilmagor said. “Are you ready, Oropherion?” the Lord Commander stood under the eaves of a tree that stood just outside the outline of the Star Field. “Whenever you are ready.”

“But, sir?” Elrond protested, but Thranduil reached over and laid a hand on Elrond’s arm.

“I’m fine,” Thranduil said quietly, his breath still rough.

“When are you ever not?” Elrond couldn’t help the sharpness in his voice.

Thranduil’s eyes lit up like gems as the blond Sinda’s lips curved upwards.

“Are you worried about me, Elrond? But if I don’t make it, then, you’ll get a new warrior companion. Wouldn’t you like that, Peredhel?”

Elrond glared at the Sinda. That wasn’t far from the truth; Elrond would rather prefer another for his warrior companion. But to hear it from Thranduil’s lips, it sounded wrong. Elrond did not like it.

With a scoff and a glint in his eyes, Thranduil walked over to stand few feet from Gilmagor.

“Let’s start with the most advanced, shall we? If you don’t know them enough, there is no reason to go through the entire seventy-two patterns,” Gilmagor said.

“As you wish,” Thranduil said then took a carefully measured breath, turning his body to make the first movement. With a nod from the Lord Commander, the blond Sinda started.

Elrond held his breath. Elrond knew Thranduil did not sleep at all the night before and was sure that the Sinda barely slept the past ten days. Elrond suspected Thranduil slept during his runs but with the amount of strain he put on his body in addition to the injury he sustained on his wrist and from the cadets, Thranduil needed a proper rest. And the patterns were physically demanding.

Starting with the elemental patterns which were the hardest, Thranduil moved. His movements were sinuous, swift and strong. The undulation of water, the speed of the wind, and the strength of trees all entwined in one.

Elrond let out a breath. The Sinda was doing rather well. His major patterns were halting at times, but it showed the grasp of the principles and the concept. Elrond was sure the few hours Captain Astalder spent with Thranduil gave the Sinda what Elrond could not.

Although the king had assigned him a sword master once Elrond arrived at Lindon, it had been the occasional sword lessons from Captain Astalder that had really opened Elrond’s eyes. The practice was an integral part, but seeing the moves performed by a master was a priceless lesson in itself. In that sense, Elrond had been lucky, he had a chance to learn from the best. Both Maedhros and Maglor had been the master wielders of swords.

The six years Elrond had spent learning about weapons under Maedhros and Maglor had been invaluable later when Elrond started to train seriously under the weapons master Gil-galad had assigned him.

In the beginning, Elrond had not been interested in wielding a sword, but Elros had pestered Maglor
ever since he turned thirteen to teach them to handle weapons. In the end, it was one of the Edain whom Elros brought to Maglor who convinced the Feanor’s sons that they were old enough to be trained.

Even then, Maglor had been reluctant, thinking they were too young. Maglor tried to interest Elros in other subjects, but Elros had been adamant and eventually, Maglor gave in, seeing how quickly they grew.

It was later that Elrond learned that Elves encouraged their children to learn about the world before they are taught to handle a weapon, whether for pleasure or for need. Only after attaining the age of one century was an Elf allowed the access to the weapons. For the Elves, weapons were turned to as the last resort as a means of protection and defense after having gained knowledge of the preciousness of all life.

In a way, it was ironic to Elrond that he had learned to value all life from the sons of Feanor.

As Elrond’s mind wandered to Maglor and the Feanorean army with whom he and his brother had spent fourteen years before leaving them, there was a sudden commotion from the field below them.

A sudden warning blared in Elrond’s head and with an instinct born of years of training, Elrond jumped away as something shot past him one after another. Alarmed, Elrond turned to Thranduil and thought he saw something flash. A dread filled his senses.

The blond Sinda stood still as if carved in stone, frozen in a pose. Lord Gilmagor who had been standing few feet from Thranduil was now standing an arm-length in front of the blond Sinda, two naked swords gleaming in his hands. Below Lord Gilmagor’s feet lay broken pieces of four spears, the kind that was used with catapults.

Just then, a warrior ran over. His face was pale and stricken.

“Lord Gilmagor,” he sounded as if he was being strangled. “I…” the warrior gulped, “I apologize, sir. We were maintaining the catapults before today’s training. One of them misfired.

“Was anyone hurt?” Gilmagor’s voice showed no emotion.

“No, sir,” the warrior said as he eyed the broken spears and Thranduil who has now straightened from his pose.

“Were not the weapons masters instructed not to point the weaponry in the direction where there are others?”

“It was pointed toward the Gulf, sir, but a supply wagon slipped and the impact thrust the catapult this way when it was triggered.”

“See to it that something like this never happen again.”

“Yes, sir! Sorry, sir!”

Gilmagor dismissed the warrior and turned to Thranduil.

“Never mind the interruption. Let’s start at the eighth movement of the Sun Pattern.”

Thranduil frowned. He hesitated as he took the starting position. His movements which were undulating and fluid a moment ago started to lag, each turn hesitant and unsure.
Elrond realized what was happening. Unlike himself who had trained on the patterns for decades and
the movements had become a part of him, to Thranduil, who had crammed the information in a
matter of days, he couldn’t just stop in the middle of a pattern and pick it up from a different part. His
muscles have not had the time to ingrain the movements into its memory. Having memorized it in
sections, as a set of patterns, Thranduil could not start from a middle at a moment’s notice.

“No, no no!” After a while, Gilmagor stepped in, his eyes narrowed. “That is not the correct pattern.
Eighth movement, Oropherion.”

Thranduil looked down, but Elrond felt it. It was brief, just a passing emotion like a brush of wind,
but it was a definite panic that Elrond felt from the young Sinda.

“Am I to understand that you do not know?” Gilmagor asked. “Eighth movement of the Sun Pattern,
do you know it or not?”

Elrond took in a sharp breath as his heart began to race. Thranduil was not his ideal Elf in any way.
The blond Sinda was arrogant and ill-tempered. And, he was cold and distant. All the characteristics
Elrond disliked. But at the same time, Elrond knew how much Thranduil put into this, and how
much the young Sinda suffered in the short time he had been in the White City. And no matter what
Elrond thought of Thranduil, he knew that the Sinda did not belong with the new recruits.

“Well, Thranduil Oropherion?”

Thranduil clenched his fists, but did not move, nor did he say a word as he dropped his gaze.

After thinking for a minute, Elrond took in a long breath, then he began to sing. It was a song
dedicated to Elbereth: Part two of the Song of Praise dedicated to the Lady of the stars. It was Song
of Morning which was sung just as the last star disappeared before the sunrise.

All Elven children from the day they were born grew up listening to them and the first thing they are
taught when they learn to speak were these songs.

The Song of Praise was divided into two parts: Song of Evening and Song of Morning. Each
contained six movements just as each pattern contained six defensive movements and six offensive
movements.

The night before, Thranduil had shown Elrond what he had done in order to remember each pattern
with their many different moves. Thranduil had changed the tempo of the Song of Praise faster and
started each pattern at the beginning of the Song of Praise as he sang them to himself.

Elrond started the Song of Morning at the first movement. Among the faint background noise of
warriors training, Elrond’s voice rang out clear.

Thranduil turned to Elrond. Their eyes met. Then, just as Elrond expected, Thranduil began to move,
adjusting his movements to the song as the first movement ended and second began.

Gilmagor turned to Elrond and frowned, but he did not interrupt as Thranduil moved in tune with the
song.

By the time Elrond finished his song, Thranduil completed the Sun Pattern. Although Thranduil had
several areas where he obviously didn’t know them enough to show perfect form, he completed the
entire patterns to the end.

Lord Gilmagor crossed his arms as Thranduil stood still as the Sinda controlled his breath to
complete the patterns.
There was silence.

Elrond looked at the Lord Commander.

“Do you think you know the patterns completely?”

Elrond was taken back by the question. He turned to look at Thranduil. The Sinda frowned but did not say a word.

“I asked you a question, cadet.”

Elrond swallowed. Was this a part of the test? He wanted to protest, but Gilmagor’s previous warning rang clear in his head. The commander had warned that he will not allow any further interruptions.

Elrond turned back to Thranduil. The Sinda’s jaw locked. Elrond could see the veins on Thranduil’s neck twitch and his blue-green eyes turn into chips of ice, but the Sinda did not utter a word.

Elrond wondered whether it was a trick question. It couldn’t be good no matter what Thranduil said. If Thranduil said he knew, then Elrond was sure Lord Gilmagor will point out the many areas where Thranduil faltered. If he said he didn’t, then he was admitting that he didn’t know them completely.

“Well, Oropheron? It is a simple question. Do you or do you not?”

Thranduil clenched his fists but dropped his head.

“No. Not completely.” Thranduil admitted.

“Indeed. You are far from knowing the patterns completely,” said Gilmagor.

Thranduil’s shoulders sagged. Elrond fistd his hands. This seemed wrong. But he did not know how to defend his warrior companion, for what Gilmagor said was true.

Lord Gilmagor turned to Elrond.

“You have something to say, Earendilion?”

“Sir, I know what you say is true but if he knows enough not to hinder his training with the cadets, wouldn’t it be sufficient? All of us learned the patterns over the period of years, Thranduil only had ten days. Yet in that time, he has learned it. You cannot expect perfect form, sir. Isn’t it enough that he has learned them?”

Lord Gilmagor’s lips curved.

“You thinks so, Elrond Earendilion?”

Elrond felt cold run down his back. There was something in the way the commander said the words. Lord Gilmagor turned to Thranduil.

“It is true that you have learned your patterns. But it is also true that you do not know them completely. In fact, until each pattern becomes ingrained, so much so that it can be executed without a thought when needed, it cannot be said that you know them. Patterns are the basic requirement for an officer in my army.” Lord Gilmagor gestured to Elrond. “But your warrior companion is adamant that you know enough. To prove that, you and your warrior companion will train the new incoming recruits in the pattern. Questions?”
Sir?” Both Thranduil and Elrond protested at the same time.

“You said yourself that I do not know the patterns completely. How do you expect me to train others in it? And Elrond has nothing to do with this. Why should he share in my punishment?” Thranduil asked.

“The recruits are absolute novices and you know your basic patterns well enough. Among the both of you, I am sure you will manage. And as for Elrond, he chose to defend you. And as your warrior companion, it is proper for him to share in your punishment. You should think about that before you act in the future, Oropherion,” said Lord Gilmagor.

“Is that mean you are cutting both of us out of the officer program?” Elrond could not help but ask.

“Not fully. You will train with the cadets in the morning but for the afternoon weapons training, you will be excused to teach the recruits. Dismissed.” Gilmagor turned away.

“But sir!” Thranduil said.

Thranduil opened his mouth to speak, but Gilmagor turned to Thranduil with one finger out towards him. Thranduil eyes slanted with fiery light, but he clamped his mouth and just glared.

Elrond glanced at Thranduil as he felt a swarm of heat rise from his blond companion. Thranduil’s hair seemed to have a life of its own as its ends stood up as if it was mane of some wild animal. Elrond watched fascinated, his own protest forgotten, as the veins on Thranduil’s temple twitched and Thranduil’s jaw locked. But, it only lasted but a moment as each strand of hair sank back down on Thranduil’s shoulder as if it was just a wind a moment ago. The heat dissipated as the young Sinda took control of himself.

“Good. I am glad to see you finally getting in control of yourself. You could say all you need to say without having to disobey commands. If you expect to command, you must know what it is to be commanded. You can return to your training. You will commence with the teaching of the recruits starting this afternoon.”

With that, Gilmagor walked down to the Moon Field as Elrond and Thranduil watched.

Elrond turned to Thranduil when he heard the young Sinda grind his teeth.

“I’m going to get that Crooked Nose one day,” Thranduil said under his breath.

Elrond shoved Thranduil’s shoulder with his.

“He could hear you, you ass,” Elrond hissed. “And you have already tried and failed. Remember the disaster of the soup incident?”

“That was unplanned.”

“Please Thranduil. Don’t take this personally. He is just doing his job.”

“You think so?”

“I know so. Don’t get me in any further trouble, Thranduil.”

“Then, maybe you should stay away as far from me as possible.” Thranduil walked away to join the cadets who were listening to the three officers at the other end of the Star Field.

Elrond sighed as he watched Thranduil. As try as he might, Elrond wasn’t sure if he could honor the
king’s wish. The Sinda and he were just too different. And it seemed to Elrond that he could not avoid trouble whenever he was with Thranduil.

Chapter End Notes

Next: Chapter 30 North: Gil-galad discusses the expedition to Dwarven ruins and the cadet field training to come.
North Expedition

Chapter Summary

Gil-galad discusses the expedition to North and learns about dragons.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

King’s Tower. May 30, Second Age 144

GIL-GALAD looked down at the whole of Minas Silivren that lay before his feet. This was the second highest point of the White City facing the east. It lay directly across the King’s Tower which faced the great sea.

To the east, the Blue Mountains rose up curving around the White City. And to the south, Gil-galad could see the main gates of the city where a steady stream of people passed through the gates. The Summer Solstice was one score away and the city was bustling with Elves coming to the city for the celebration.

By the time of the Midsummer’s Festival, this place will be filled to its brim with the Elven folks from all over his realm to participate in the Festival which will start at sundown at midsummer’s eve. As the first Midsummer celebration of the New Yen, it will be the biggest celebration yet, even larger than that of the New Year.

Already, the streets were full of people busily preparing for the festival. The rows of fragrant cypress trees that lined the white streets were decorated with gold lanterns. And lining each side of the streets were white flower boxes filled with the bright gold flowers meant to ward off evil spirits.

Although Gil-galad had performed the rites every year since he had become the king, giving thanks to Eru Illuvatar as the sun rose on the longest day of the year, this year will be special. This year, on the midnight of the midsummer’s eve, Gil-galad will start the Onen Calad, the Light Sharing.

Thinking of Onen Calad, Gil-galad bit into his lower lip. He wasn’t worried about the thanks-giving ritual as he had performed that many times; but, this will be his first Onen Calad. It was a ceremony performed during the times of peace as it required a certain amount of control and peace of mind. Master Pengo had told him that it was not performed during the First Age by the hidden kingdoms because the release of the light in the night by the masses made their location glaringly obvious. And even by others, it was performed during the early part of their arrival into Middle Earth.

“Sire?” Erestor turned to Gil-galad. The young councilor oversaw the preparation of the ceremony and had been busily directing other Elves regarding the placement of the altar and the people.

“It is nothing. Do not concern yourself, Lord Erestor,” Gil-galad gave the councilor a smile. “Just thinking about Onen Calad.”

“Do not worry, Sire. For many of us, this will be our first time also. Besides, I have seen your light as you practiced the rites with Lord Lammaeg and the Lord Commander. The Fire burns strong in the House of Finwë. It will not fail you.”
Erestor smiled brightly with a fierce confidence which Gil-galad did not share, but the king returned the councilor’s smile with his own.

For some time now, Gil-galad had been practicing the gathering of the light within him. All Elves have a light within, a part of the Secret Fire that burned in the souls of each Elf. On the midsummer’s eve, as the night deepened, every Elf will sing the praise to Eru. They will gather their inner light and send it off into the sky. The lights will be filled with their sorrows, their regrets, and the many things within them that they wished to let go. Some lights will be filled with their hopes and wishes, usually those belonging to the children. It is called “Light Sharing” but Gil-galad felt it was an unburdening of the things that weighed on their souls, a way for them to cope with the heavy burden of the immortality.

They said Onen Calad was a life-changing experience, one that must be felt, not something that can be told in words. Gil-galad looked forward to it, but part of him was afraid. There were so many things he wished to let go, but there were also so many things he wanted to hold onto. His mother’s gaunt face flashed before his eyes along with the soft silver eyes of Silwen. Pushing away the sting, Gil-galad took in a breath and turned to Lord Lammaeg and Celebrimbor who were still engaged in the discussion of the details of the expedition to the North.

“Is it really necessary to take other jewel smiths in this expedition, Lord Celebrimbor?” Gil-galad turned to his cousin when he overheard Celebrimbor say his smiths will accompany him.

“If we find Orcs or Dragons, it will quickly become very dangerous for your smiths,” Lord Gilmagor said who stood next to Lord Lammaeg.

Celebrimbor inclined his head toward Lord Gilmagor. Gil-galad found that if there was one person Celebrimbor deferred to, it was Lord Gilmagor. Perhaps the one-time pupil found his master still intimidating, something Gil-galad understood.

“What you say is true, my lord, but most of the smiths I have chosen had been warriors during the First Age and fought in the battles. They are well-skilled with the weapons. The younger, inexperienced ones and those who lack warrior training, I plan to leave them across the river with the North Legion. With the whole of North Legion there to protect them, I believe they will be safe.”

“But what will happen when the dragons appear? Didn’t Lord Oropher’s report mentioned about the sighting three of those beasts?” Gil-galad asked.

“That report is few decades old, Sire. And according to the report, those worms were still young, not yet mature enough to breathe fire. I do not believe they will be much of a threat,” said Celebrimbor then turned to Captain Astalder standing behind Lord Gilmagor. “And Captain Astalder didn’t find any trace of them. Is that not so, Captain?”

“That is so, my lord. We have combed all the valleys and crevices of the Blue Mountains but we didn’t find any trace of them. But, these serpents have wings. They could be anywhere,” Captain Astalder said.

“Even so, if they come upon us, with the Silmacil accompanying us, I would like to think we could handle them,” said Celebrimbor.

“You are assuming, of course, that there are no more than those three, Celebrimbor. A dangerous assumption, that,” said Gilmagor. “There could always be another, older worm with them. Oropher and his warriors sighted three dragons, not that there are only three dragons. But where there are dragonlings, there may also be a mother. A she-dragon of child-bearing age will breathe fire. And no matter how brave or powerful the warrior, a fire-breathing dragon is not to be taken lightly.”
“Are you assuming then that there may be mature dragons in the Blue Mountains?” Gil-galad turned to Lord Gilmagor.

“Be prepared always and no foe will take you unaware,” said the Lord Commander.

“Then, isn’t it too dangerous to send any troops up north, never mind the expedition?” Celebrimbor frowned.

“Dangerous, indeed. But necessary. If there are dragons, cold or fire-breathing, we must take care of them, sooner than later. Once they grow and become fire-breathing, it will not be the fire breath alone that we need to worry. The older they become, more independent and more dangerous they grow. Then no walls will be high or strong enough to keep them out and no cities will be safe,” said Gilmagor.

“What do we know about the dragons?” Gil-galad asked.

‘Enough. After the devastation of Dagor Bragollach, we have gathered much information on the dragons. Many members of Silmacil perished to get this information,” Gilmagor said gravely. “With the addition of the knowledge Elros and the Edain brought from the Great War, we know enough of these Morgoth’s beasts. And unlike the wingless variety, the ones with the wings are not capable of independent will until much older. But with time, they will grow powerful enough to command themselves just as Orcs do. But unlike Orcs, the worms will become much more powerful and intelligent with time.’

“Will Silmacil be enough to kill them?”

“If there is no dominant will to control them. Even the ones of child-bearing age should be less than five centuries old and not yet powerful enough. As the Silmacil did not find a trace of them, it is most likely they are hiding underground. And if they are, there is no better time to exterminate them than now. Once they are out in the open, it will become much harder to fight them. That is the reason I have decided to move a part of the North Legion up over the river.”

“But, my lord,” Celebrimbor turned to the Lord Commander. “Although I understand that the part of the mission is to make sure these Dwarven ruins do not harbor any Orcs or Dragons, the remaining Dwarves may view this as an act of war. Wouldn’t it be better to open negotiation with them and convince them to help us?”

“I am aware of that. But the Dwarves in the Blue Mountains are not what they once were. Whether they like it or not, they will need our help to fight the dragons,” said Gilmagor.

“Where are these Dwarves located? Where do you expect the dragons to be?” asked Gil-galad.

“Captain?” Gilmagor turned to Astalder.

“There are two major Dwarven cities: Belegost which is located half way to the Upper River Lune and Nogrod which is just past the Lower River Lune that mark our boundary. North of the river all along the foot of the mountains are the Dwarven settlements. More than half of Nogrod is under water and most of that city was abandoned after the war Nogrod waged against Doriath. It seems Nogrod Dwarves dwindled significantly after that war. Most of the survivors have migrated east or joined the Belegost Dwarves. Their city is now in a complete ruin. I do not believe any of Morgoth’s creatures are there. There is too much water.”

“Then, where?” Gil-galad asked.

“If any orcs or dragons are hiding in the ruins, it would most likely be in the Belegost city. I have
taken a team to search the area but it was like a maze down there. Most of the city is in ruins and the access will be a problem. Many Dwarves from Belegost have also moved east and those who remain are scattered near the main entrance to their old city. When we approached them, they were quite wary. They met us fully armed with their weapons drawn. We couldn’t convince them to allow us to enter the ruins and I had to resort to sneaking a team past them. If you think we are leery of them, you need to see how skittish they are with us,” the captain said.

“That is why you should leave me and my smiths to smooth the way. They are already leery of us. If they see a whole legion of us, we may end up with a war on our hands. Give me time to speak with them. Silmacil will be more than enough protection, my lord,” said Celebrimbor.

“You will have time, Celebrimbor. North Legion will accompany the cadets after the Harvest Festival. They will be stationed near an Elven village there. Even if you fail, the Dwarves cannot question our right to protect those of our own. Besides, if there are fire drakes and they managed to survive the Silmacil and become air-born, we will need a Legion. Warriors stationed across the river will be too far away to be of any help,” said Gilmagor.

“Cadets?” the king frowned. “A village? I don’t understand. Why would cadets be there? I thought they will be doing their field training up north of Grey Havens, not anywhere near our northern border?” said Gil-galad. “And what village? I thought all Elven villages have moved below the Lower River Lune?”

The captain glanced at Lord Gilmagor before letting out a sigh.

“I received a message from the team I left up north. They found a small Elven village southeast of the main gate of the Belegost Dwarven ruins.”

“Why would anyone live so far up north?” Gil-galad said.

“It is a Laiquendi (Green Elves) village. Probably the reason why we missed it before, Sire. You wouldn’t find them unless you are actively looking for them. Even then, they are very difficult to locate,” said Astalder. “My scout noticed it only because of an elleth with a young child was visiting the village. The report said the pair came from further north.”

“Are you telling me there are more Elven villages up further north?” Gil-galad frowned.

“Not more, Sire. Just one. After the encounter with the elleth, my team said they scoured the area and they are quite sure there are no other villages up north. They seemed to think the elleth and the child live outside the community.”

“I thought only Sindar lived scattered. Do not all Green Elves live within a community?” Gil-galad asked.

According to what Gil-galad learned from Pengolodh, except for the Sindar who lived in Menegroth, the rest of the Sindar lived freely all over the forests within the protected borders of Doriath. And the Sindar outside the protection of the girdle roamed the rest of Beleriand freely. But the Green Elves lived close together as a community away from others. And unlike other Elven societies where only fully-grown youth are taught to use weapons, all Green Elves, regardless of their gender, were taught to use their bows, hunt, and fight as soon as their children reached their majority.

“That is my understanding as well, Sire. But it looked as if the elleth came to the village to obtain supplies. One of my scouts followed the elleth and the child, but someone waylaid him.”

There was a gasp from the councilors around the king who had been listening to the captain.
“Are you telling me, Captain, that someone, one of the Green Elves no less, waylaid one of the Silmacil?” said Celebrimbor, his eyes wide open and unbelieving.

“Well,” the Captain shrugged. “It is hard to believe, but that was what the report said. My scout said he was attacked. The attacker knew exactly what to expect and knocked my scout cold before he could react. When my Elf woke up, he tried to find the attacker and the elleth, but there was no trace of them.”

“Was he sure that it was a Green Elf?” Celebrimbor asked.

“I do not know. According to the report, the attacker wore a hunter’s outfit of the Nandor but he was tall and seemed familiar with the Silmacil training, however unlikely it sounds. But the main problem is not him or the elleth but the village. It seems they will not let any of my Elves enter their village nor hear anything they have to say.”

“And why not?” Celebrimbor asked. “They are just trying to help them.”

“They made it clear to my scouts that they will not talk with any Noldor,” the Captain said.

“What have they against us that they would not deal with your Elves?” Lord Lammaeg who had been quiet until now said with a frown.

“The Green Elves held King Thingol as their overlord, my lord,” said Councilor Bainor, a Sindarin lord of Mithrim who had lived at Gondolin. “Although they kept themselves aloof from others, Green Elves considered themselves part of Doriath. With what happened there and at Sirion, it is not difficult to see why they would be wary of Noldor.”

Lord Bainor was one of two Sindarin council members who were not from Grey Havens or Harlindon. He and the other Sindarin lord represented Mithrim, the Sindar who lived outside Doriath and lived further north. Most of them had accepted the Noldorin rulers as their lords and had mixed with the Noldor since the First Age.

When there were no major council meetings, like now when Lord Celeborn and Lord Cirdan and their accompanying Sindarin lords were not in attendance, Lord Bainor and the other Sindarin councilor were the only voice of Sindar in the council.

Lord Lammaeg grumped loudly. “If they do not want our help, then we should let them be. Unwanted help is only a burden.”

“It is easy to say that when you have barely dealt with them, Lord Lammaeg,” said Lord Commander. “How could they not be suspicious when many Noldor here tend to look down at other Elves. Although Sindar are tolerated and many are accepted as equals.” Lord Gilmagor nodded toward Lord Bainor. “Many Nandor are looked down upon as uncultured second-class citizens. But even if they do not want our help, we cannot ignore them. There are women and children in those villages. Elven children.”

“And I certainly will not allow any harm come to any of my people whether they are Green Elves or Dark Elves or whatever they are called. If they live in this part of the world, those Elves are my people,” said Gil-galad. “I will lead this expedition.”

“Absolutely not!” said Lord Lammaeg. “With due respect, Sire, Lord Celebrimbor will be there and so will Elrond with the cadets. You three are the only remaining heirs of the royal houses. With the uncertainty of danger, there is no need to have all three of you there, especially when there may be a fire-breathing dragon.”
“I agree with Lord Lammaeg on this,” Gilmagor said before the king could protest. "This is not a big enough event for your presence. At any event, you should be in the city with the people. The people will need their king if the expedition goes awry."

“Well, I don’t understand why the cadets have to be up north,” said Gil-galad, trying hard to suppress the heat he felt. He was the king. It was his right to defend his people. “You said it is dangerous, yet you plan to take the cadets who are still too young and untested.”

Gil-galad remembered the horror of facing the Orcs. Although he was kept far enough away from the actual battles, he had ridden with Cirdan in one of the Falathrim ships, shooting down the Orcs on the mainland as they tried to save as many survivors from Beleriand with the ships.

“Dangerous, indeed, it will be but half of North Legion will be with them as well as the Silmacil. This is an opportunity for the cadets to see the warriors in action as well as to participate in the actual battle in a safer environment,” said Gilmagor.

“How is that a safer environment?” Lord Lammaeg asked. “The cadets have never even seen the Orcs. Even if the Silmacil could take care of the dragons, the Orcs may escape and the cadets may have to fight those creatures.”

“It is precisely the reason why I wish to take them, Lord Lammaeg. Training in a training ground is good but unless they are tested in a field of battle, they will never learn what it means to face those foul creatures. And no amount of hunting wild animals can prepare them when they have to face a horde of snarling Orcs intent on killing them. Even as foul as the Orcs are, taking a life of a sentient being is a traumatic experience. The first time will be difficult even for the best of us. The cadets will require time to recover.” Then, Gilmagor turned to the king, his steel gray eyes boring into Gil-galad. “You wanted a well-trained army? Only experience can train them well enough.”

“But the warriors under Feanor stepped off their boats into Middle Earth and they fought and pushed back the Morgoth’s army,” said the king. “They had never seen the Orcs before coming here, surely.”

Lord Gilmagor smiled without humor and Gil-galad saw much grief behind Lord Gilmagor’s eyes.

“Feanor’s army had blood on their swords and revenge in their souls. What horror they had seen in Middle Earth was nothing to what horror they had caused at Aman. When we arrived in Middle Earth, it was after spilling much blood. And those of us who endured Helcaraxë, we were hardened body and mind by the trials we faced. These cadets, they are indeed brave and well trained, but they know nothing of grief, nothing of the struggles and the violence. They know of naught but peace and they will fall like leaves in autumn after a storm if thrust suddenly into war. Believe me, your Majesty. These young cadets, who seemed so well trained in their weapons and strategy, will not suddenly become the calm, clear thinking officers without first overcoming the trauma of their first kill and their first battle.”

“And to relay your fears, your majesty,” Captain Astalder spoke up. “Based on what information we gathered so far, the Orcs are just a ragtag group with no dominant will controlling them. And the winged dragons are not what their predecessors had been. Unlike the wingless variety, the winged dragons are completely dependent on a dominant will. It will be many centuries before they become strong enough to be a threat all on their own. As long as there is no Morgoth or one of his powerful lieutenants controlling them, the most you need to worry from a winged dragon is its fiery breath. And we have not seen evidence of any control. The orcs that have raided the northern villages were weak and poorly managed. The villagers fought them off without any help from the border guards. I believe with the North Legion and the team of my warriors, we can effectively control the number of Orcs the cadets will face. We wouldn’t let any harm come to them, Sire.”
Gil-galad looked at the captain then at the council. Many of them were nodding.

“If it is necessary for their training then I will leave that to you, Lord Gilmagor,” the King said.

Gil-galad had learned to choose his battles. And when Lord Gilmagor and Lord Lammaeg agreed, it was best to retreat. Besides, the king had another matter he wanted to press with his Lord Commander. For some time now, Gil-galad had been unhappy with how Lord Gilmagor had treated Elrond. It was one thing to demote Thranduil. The Sinda probably deserved it, but Elrond? His young cousin was more qualified than anyone and Gil-galad could not understand Gilmagor’s reservations about teaching Elrond. Although the king knew how his master felt about anyone telling him what to do, it was one matter Gil-galad planned to get his way.

-------------

**Gold Flowers**—refers to St. John’s wort which was used to decorate homes during Summer Solstice to ward off evil.

**Onen Calad** *(Sindarin, *Sharing Light*)—This is not canon but something out of my imagination. Elves are creatures of light and I wanted to give them something that distinguishes them from others.

**The Secret Fire**—also known as the Flame Imperishable, it is the power wielded by Eru Illuvatar, the power to give life and substance. Eru’s creations all have the Secret Fire imbued in their fēar (souls) and have free will and independent thought, as opposed to those created by Morgoth. This is the reason behind the dominant will that can control Orcs and Dragons.

**Nandor** *(Quenya, *Those who go back*)—Part of Teleri who started the journey west but remained behind Misty Mountains. They are also called wood elves, but a smaller part broke off, led by Lenwë to the south and developed great knowledge and skill with herbs, trees, and the beasts. Before the rising of the sun, a part of the Nandor led by Lenwë broke off and followed Denethor, Lenwë’s son, and came to Beleriand. They were welcomed by Sindar of Doriath. They are called Laiquendi, the Green Elves. They are also known as “Hidden People” as they rarely mixed with others.

**Falathrim** *(Sindarin, *coast people*)—Part of the Teleri who stayed behind in Beleriand by the shores. They are the first builders and sailors of ships. Cirdan was their lord. Quenya name is Falmari, but that word is used to refer to Teleri who went to Valinor and took Olwë (Oropher’s grandfather in my story) as their lord.

**Helcaraxë** *(Quenya, *ice fangs*)—Referred to as ‘Grinding Ice’, it is a region that connected Aman and Middle Earth in the far north. It is a vast waste of “fogs and mists of deathly cold” with hills of ice that clash and grind. Second, larger host of Noldor entered Middle Earth through Helcaraxë after being abandoned by Feanor.

**Dagor Bragollach** *(Sindarin, *Battle of Sudden Flame*)—fourth battle of the Wars of Beleriand fought by Noldor against Morgoth. It was a disastrous war for the Elves and Men which scattered the Noldor and almost completely destroyed House of Beor. Fingolfin and his nephews (Galadriel’s brothers), Angrod and Aegnor, died in this war.
Chapter End Notes

Chapter 31 Finding the Light Within: Thranduil finds himself in a position to explain how to find the light within
Chapter Summary

Thranduil finds himself in a position to help someone find the light within in preparation for Onen Calad.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

North Gate of White City, June 17, Second Age 144

THRANDUIL rotated his shoulders. He had been working since the dawn, cleaning out the sixty stalls and carrying out the cart of horse manure into the one end of the enclosed meadow. He will return here at the end of the day to work the manure into the earth. After today, only one more day was left to his punishment.

He couldn't wait to return to the Lord Cirdan's manor house in the City. Now that he had mapped the route into the cellar, he only needed to execute the plan. He just hoped that Aron brought another sea barrel Thranduil requested.

"Sir!"

Just as Thranduil sighed and leaned into the two rakes he had been using, someone called him.

Farion, one of the three Green Elves among the recruits Thranduil trained with Elrond, walked towards him, his joyful face full of smiles.

"You are still here?" Thranduil asked.

All recruits and cadets were sent home a week ago for a twelve-days of celebration to spend with their families before the Midsummer Festival.

The young Nando scratched the back of his head, flashing his teeth.

"I live too far up north for me to travel home and return in time for the competitions," Farion said. "But some of my friends have come to the White City to join the celebration."

"Indeed? You plan to compete?"

The celebration of summer solstice took twenty-four days. First twelve days were spent with family and the latter twelve days was a public affair consisting of many competitions, dancing, and singing. It was rare for Green Elves to come out of their tightly-knit community. It was even rarer for them to join others whether to train like Farion or to celebrate with others. Even at Sirion, those Nandor who had joined his father kept to themselves, rarely joining others in the communal dinners.

"They say Noldor are better at almost everything but not so much on archery. So, we thought to try our hands in the competition."

"Good for you." Thranduil smiled. "My father always said the Nandor are among the best of the
archers."

"I do not know if Noldor think so."

"Noldor are good at many things, Farion, but not all and certainly not undefeatable. Maybe they are born with a greater ability, but nothing that can't be overcome with hard work. Don't let anyone tell you otherwise."

Even as he said the words, Thranduil laughed at himself. It was so much easier to tell others what to do than to do them yourself.

"Was there a reason you sought me out?" Thranduil asked.

Farion scratched his head again. "I heard that you were still in the city and working. If you do not have a place to stay… We have camped outside the East Gate. It would be an honor to have you among us, if you will."

Thranduil was touched. He knew well how rarely the Green Elves invited strangers among them. And for a moment, Thranduil thought of changing his plans.

"Thank you for thinking of me, but I have other plans."

Farion flushed.

"Of course. It was presumptuous of me." The sparkle in Farion's eyes faded. He looked away at the streams at the far edge of the pastures. "I…Thank you," the Nando said simply. But Thranduil knew what Farion meant.

Farion had lagged far behind others when Thranduil and Elrond joined the recruits. Shorter and lighter than others, Farion was quicker and more agile, but when it came to the weapons training and especially with the patterns, Farion was slow to learn.

"I don't think I would have been able to catch up to the others if you did not take the time to give me those extra lessons in the evenings, sir. I don't know how to repay you."

"Do not think much of it. Recently, an officer helped me when I was in need. Sometimes, you need to give and accept for no other reason than that it was needed to be given and accepted. At least, that was what he said to me."

"I see," Farion turned to face Thranduil and smiled brightly. "Do you need help with the raking, sir?" Farion reached for one of the rakes in Thranduil's hand.

Thranduil held onto them and shook his head.

"No. I am done for the morning. I cannot work on the meadow, anyway, until the horses are back in their stalls."

"If you don't mind me asking, sir. Why the two rakes?" Farion asked. "Is it not easier to use just one?"

Thranduil scoffed. "It was the Lord Commander's order. He wanted me to use two rakes every time I mucked out the stables and worked on the pastures."

By now, everyone knew about the soup incident. After what happened with Belegor and the cadets, no one tried to exact revenge, but the reception of the cadets had been cold. Not that Thranduil cared.
When Thranduil first reported to the stables, the stable master handed Thranduil two rakes and one cart along with the written order from the commander.

Cleaning the stables was not new to Thranduil as he had done so since Sirion. At the White City, most of the horses were kept outside the city walls to roam freely on the rolling grassland that stretched from the city walls to the edge of woodland that bordered the conifer forest. However, about fifty of the horses were kept in the stables built along the arm of the North Gate of the city. These horses were pastured in a meadow three-leagues wide. A creek running westward from the mountains separated the field from the rest of the grassland.

It was Thranduil's job to muck out the five stables, each with twelve stalls, once the horses were let out to graze. Thranduil needed to clean all the stables before joining the cadets each morning. Once his work with the recruits and the chores were completed, Thranduil returned to the stables in the evening to clean up the meadow of any manure and work them into the soil.

That was not all. He had to use the rakes, one on each hand, to do the work. And each day he could not complete the entire work, an extra day was added to his sentence. And if he worked without a rake on each hand, two extra days were added.

But using the long handled rake, one on each hand, made the job much harder and more painful. Thranduil was sure the Lord Commander thought of it purely to torture him. In the beginning, the length of the rake hindered the work. Each night, his arms felt as if they will fall off his shoulders. The discomfort and the pain slowed him, and for the first two weeks, he couldn't finish mucking out even the half of the stables before he had to join the cadets. And the cleaning of the meadow took even longer.

As he failed to complete the work on time, more days were added on, and Thranduil ended up working extra two and half weeks to his assigned one month. Now, with only five days to the summer solstice, only the king's guards and the city guards who were on duty were in the King's Tower. It was good that Thranduil didn't have anyone to celebrate with or had a home to return to.

After a month of working every day, however, Thranduil could kick his cart to roll along in front of the first stall and muck out the entire twelve stalls by the time the cart hit the wall on the other side of the stable. In less than two hours, he could muck out sixty stalls and put fresh hay in them. In fact, the two rakes became very handy now that he could wield them as if they didn't weigh at all. Thranduil was sure he could muck out the stables faster than anyone. Then he sniffed. *It's not something to brag about, you idiot.*

Thranduil headed toward the lake to wash once Farion left. He will be accompanying Elrond and Lady Istawen, the teacher who Elrond and he had replaced during her absence. They will escort the children who will join the healers going to the woodland beyond the grassland to collect herbs for the upcoming festival.

Mistress Taurien led several younger healers into the open grove to gather several different varieties of plants that were used in the infirmary.

Their eyes sparkling with curiosity, two to three elflings surrounded each healer, listening with apt attention. Until the children reach their majority, they will learn diverse topics in a variety of subjects. By the time they reached one century in age, many of them will choose to specialize in one.

Thranduil sat under one of the trees outlying the grassy area and watched the little ones laugh. He leaned back into the soothing embrace of the tree's music. It was a wonderful time to be a child. There was no threat hanging over them like a dark cloud. Nothing to fear. No danger. No worries.
And there were many other children. Growing up at Menegroth as the only child in the city was lonely. All he had wanted then was to have another child to play with. How happy he had been when Eluréd and Elurín came to Menegroth. But that had been short-lived.

Thranduil grabbed at his chest. The thought of Menegroth never failed to stab at his heart. Taking a quick breath, Thranduil got up, pushing away the thought of Menegroth, when he saw that one of the elflings reached for a small flower on a tall-growing bush.

"Elloth, no!" Thranduil moved at the same time he shouted.

The little girl jumped and looked up just as Thranduil picked her up and pulled her away from the bush.

"Did you not hear Mistress Turien say a moment ago that this bush is dangerous? This is a Blood Thorn. You get pricked, and it will bleed you to Mando's Hall!"

The girl blinked as Thranduil let her down on the grass, away from the said bush.

"But it looks so pretty," she said, pressing the tips of her fingers into her lips.

"Never judge a thing by its looks, Elloth. Sometimes what looks the nicest can be the deadliest."

*Do not trust, little one. Trust brings nothing but pain.* Thranduil bit down the urge to shake the child. How naïve he had been once. He had trusted when he should not have and caused the death of so many.

"You are scaring her, you ass!" Elrond hissed into Thranduil's ear as he pulled Thranduil away from the child.

It was then that Thranduil noticed the unmistakable fear in the child's eyes.

Elrond knelt in front of the girl then took her in his arms. The girl burst into tears.

"It's all right, little one. Thranduil did not mean to scare you. He was just worried. There, there." Elrond patted the girl as she whimpered against his shoulder.

Thranduil looked away. He could kick himself if he could. He turned and walked away from the scene as the other healers and children turned to look.

He was never good with the little girls. Even while he was helping Elrond teach the children, Thranduil had found young girls difficult to handle.

*Let Elrond deal with her.* These little ones were sensitive, not at all like Elwing.

At Sirion, Elwing bullied Earendil and Thranduil even when Thranduil was the eldest and was biggest among them. When the three of them played, as there were no other children around them, Elwing was the one who always dictated the rules. And when the play didn't go the way she wanted, Elwing would make them do it over until she was satisfied. Earendil and Thranduil used to call her the "Dark Queen" behind her back.

Thranduil scoffed at the irony. Elwing used to send Earendil home in tears, usually with a black eye, a bloody nose, or both. How they ended up falling in love with each other, only Valar would know.

Thranduil stopped walking when he heard a sound of someone scream. It was a repressed sound almost hidden by the gurgling of the brook, but someone was distressed.
Thranduil scooted down low and glided toward the sound, hastily stringing his bow. When he saw a slim figure standing by a large boulder behind a willow tree, Thranduil climbed up the tree, careful not to make any sound.

It was a young woman. She was a healer, that was clear by the gray hooded robe she wore. The girl stomped her foot as she pulled open her hood. A cluster of dark curly hair tumbled out and fluttered in the breeze.

"It is hopeless," the healer mumbled. She let out a long sigh, raked her hair before standing up straight. She held up her hands, slowly raising them up above her head toward the sky. When she tilted her face up, Thranduil realized it was that young assistant healer. He had not bothered to remember her name, but he knew that face.

Seeing the gestures, Thranduil realized what the girl was doing. She was trying to bring out her light to send it off to the sky in preparation for Onen Calad. Someone told her the gestures, but it was clear that the girl did not understand the process.

After repeating the same gestures for some time, the girl plopped onto the moss-covered floor and covered her face with her hands. Her shoulders shook.

Noiselessly, Thranduil stepped back into the shadow of the tree branches. It was none of his business. What did he know of comforting anyone? If anyone could help, it was probably Elrond or Mistress Taurien.

Thranduil jumped off the tree then turned to move away.

"Thranduil!"

The Sinda almost jumped at the call, his hand automatically reaching for his sword. He quickly glanced at the young healer and caught a glimpse of her wide eyes as she sank down behind the boulder. He straightened to face the one who called him. It was one of the guards who had accompanied the healers.

"The healers are taking the children to a grove across the stream. They are going to practice Onen Calad with the elflings. Did you see any of the healers here?"

Thranduil shook his head.

"If you see any of them, please tell them to meet the rest of the group at the pine grove across the stream."

"Will do," said Thranduil "Has Elrond gone with them?"

"Yes. Check around here, Thranduil. Mistress Turien said her assistant went this way to practice. I will check further in." With that, the guard moved away.

Thranduil turned toward the boulder.

"He's gone. Did you hear him?" Thranduil asked.

The young healer peeked out from behind the boulder, only her eyes and top of her head visible, looking like a doe about to run.

"Yes," she said softly, her dark gray eyes wide and hesitant as she stepped out.
"All right then," said Thranduil and turned.

"Don't…" she said.

Walk away, Thranduil. His mind warned.

"Don't go, please."

Thranduil grimaced but turned to face her.

"How may I assist you?" Thranduil asked as politely and as nonchalantly as possible.

The young healer glanced up at him, her one hand twisting the other.

Make excuses. Walk away, Thranduil.

"Do you…do you know how…the Onen Calad? Do you know how to find the light within?"

"No."

"Oh." The girl's head dropped, and her shoulders sagged.

"Did not your mother teach you?"

"My mother… " The healer looked away. There was a moment of silence. Thranduil wished he did not ask. "She did not survive the grief after my brother died at Sirion," she said and dropped her head.

An iron claw clamped around Thranduil's heart. Just before she dropped her head, he glimpsed the familiar pain in her gray eyes.

"You grew up at Sirion?" He had not known that there were other children besides Elwing and Earendil. And this healer looked young. He didn't think she was more than a century in age.

"No. After escaping Gondolin, we stayed at the Isle of Balar with the king. But my brother Nestadion was at Arvernien. He served under Lord Egalmoth."

Thranduil frowned. He knew that name. Egalmoth was the captain of the guards at Arvernien, the one who was left at the mansion to protect Elwing.

"I am sorry for your loss," Thranduil said. At Sirion, the Noldorin soldiers who served Earendil had fought side by side with his father's warriors. He had forgotten that many Noldor died that day trying to protect Elwing.

The healer shook her head. Her eyes misted. "I don't know why I am telling you this. Somehow, it seems as if you will understand."

Don't trust me. Words shot up to Thranduil's throat, but he bit them back. She didn't need to hear that at this moment. Instead, Thranduil pulled back. He wanted to leave. He wasn't good at these things. Thranduil wished Elrond was here. Elrond would know better what to do.

"You seem easy to talk to," she said, looking down at her feet.

Are you serious? Me? Thranduil fought the urge to shake the girl. Either she was naïve, blind, or both.
"I was trying to gather the light within. Mistress Turien explained it to me, but I can't seem to do it."

Thranduil sighed.

"It is because you focused more on the gestures," Thranduil said.

The girl looked up, her eyes wide. "I thought you told me you don't know anything about Onen Calad."

"I said no such thing. I said I don't know how to find the light within."

"But I thought all of us have a light within us?" she asked.

"Well…yes." Except for me.

"Why do you sound so unsure? If I can't do it, does it mean that there is something wrong with me? I do not know what I'm doing wrong."

I should have walked away. What did I get myself into? Thranduil had long ago stopped seeking the light inside him.

"Miss, it is not that you do not have the light within you; it is only that you don't know how to find it. Had not your father taught you anything if your mother could not?"

This was a kind of thing a mother taught a child. But rarely, when a mother was not available, then the duty fell on the father.

"My father has not been the same since my mother passed away," the healer said.

A sharp ache rippled through him, a knife thrust into the pool of his heart.

Thranduil’s mother had been the sunlight in the lush forest that had been his father. When she died at Sirion, his father withered. What had been a summer forest of light, vibrant with life, had turned into a winter forest of darkness. And within that forest that darkened ever more, Thranduil had lost his own light and had not been able to find it.

"The process is nothing to do with the gestures. They are only there to help you focus." Thranduil plopped onto a ground across from her. He crossed his legs in front of him. "Sit. Make yourself comfortable," he said.

The healer walked over and sat down across from Thranduil, imitating his posture.

"I cannot show you. I can only tell you what I know."

She nodded.

"First, you must open your mind," Thranduil said.

The girl let out a long breath and closed her eyes. She laid her mind bare in front of him. Thranduil shuddered at such open display of trust.

"Now think about all the things that weigh you down. The grief. The loss of your brother…your mother and all those whom you have loved."

The healer frowned. She clenched her hands that lay in front of her.
"Think of them as rocks. The pain, the loss, and the anger. Each is a lump of rock that sits inside you and weighs you down…” Thranduil said surprised at how much he sounded like his mother.

Thranduil remembered back to that time at Sirion, after he had recovered from the deadly grief. Although he walked and talked, something had been missing from him. They said he had lost his light. It was a combination of his mother's tireless effort and Elwing's unfailing affection that kindled the dying embers of his light to shine again. But even then, it had taken them twelve long years.

Sirion. June 21, First Age 518

"Take the burden out of you, Arantaur," his mother's voice was music. Melodious and fragrant, it wrapped around Thranduil. "Weigh them in your mind. Feel their texture, their weight. They are not so heavy, not so cold." The song soothed as it always did. His mother's song gently prodded his mind like a gentle kiss on his forehead.

The lumps inside him, those that had settled deep inside and blocked all light within him seemed to lift a little as his mother's song pervaded the dark recess of his mind. His mother's voice was hypnotic, yet the burdens still felt heavy and cold. It was then that a warm hand held onto his icy one.

"You can do this, Thranduil. I believe in you," said a beloved voice.

Thranduil looked up and met the warm gray eyes. Elwing smiled widely. Her eyes were bright, filled with the starlight, rare in the eyes of the mortals. She was so big now, taller than Thranduil by a full head although she was only fifteen years old. And whenever his mother had these sessions with Thranduil, Elwing was there.

These days, Elwing spent more time at the Noldorin settlement with Earendil than with him, but she never missed these healing sessions.

"What happened in Menegroth…It was not your fault, my son," said his mother's voice among the music that lingered in his mind. "You are not to blame."

"But I …" Thranduil's breath quickened as his heart raced painfully as it always did whenever he thought of Menegroth.

"The sons of Feanor were already there. It was not you who let them into Menegroth." His mother's voice soothed as the song asserted itself into his mind.

"Thranduil, you are no longer a child. Stop being so stubborn. It is time to let this go and move on," Elwing said with such a firm conviction Thranduil blinked up at her. "You reached your majority this Spring. You are not going to grow if you hold onto these burdens." Elwing's eyes crinkled with laughter. "How long do you intend to remain this little?"

"I'm still older than you," said Thranduil with a frown. But Elwing grew so fast, Thranduil knew that the age alone could not stop her from growing bigger and taller than he.

Elwing shrugged then picked up her chin.

"I am taller than you, shorty," she said and grinned. Her eyes flashed mischievously.

"That's enough, you two."

His mother gave them a look, but her song did not waver. It continued to weave its power all around
Thranduil. The bare trees, leafless and lifeless, stirred. Sunlight flooded the plains where the grass was brown and a tangled mess. The frozen earth trembled as it thawed under the warmth of the sun.

"When you let go of the winter, spring will come. I promise you, my son. But first, you must want it." His mother reached for his other hand and held it in her grasp. "If you let me, I will help you. I am here, Arantaur. I will always be with you."

His mother turned up Thranduil's face to meet her eyes, so much like his own.

---

**Woodland outside the White City, June 17, Second Age 144**

The eyes of the healer in front of him wavered and filled with tears that brimmed over.

"Do not hold onto this grief and sorrow. No matter how harsh the winter, spring must come. In time, Earth will thaw, and flowers will bloom. It is how Eru meant them to be." Thranduil said the words of his mother, lowering his voice a notch. He wasn't good at soothing anyone. But somehow, he wanted to comfort this healer. Thranduil knew better than anyone the weight of such grief. He grabbed her hands. They were cold and trembled within his grasp. "This grief. You need not bear it alone." He squeezed her hands.

The healer bent her head as her shoulders shook.

In a subdued voice, barely above a whisper, Thranduil sang the words of healing that his mother sang to him many years ago. Because he had heard them so many times, the words were ingrained into his mind. But he was not his mother. He did not have the powers that she had. But he sang anyway, for the words soothed him then. Maybe, they will soothe her now.

The healer's hands which had been cold a moment ago warmed in his hands.

The healer looked up, her face tear-stained but bright. The starlight in her eyes glowed warm, and a light enveloped her. Even under the bright morning sun, Thranduil could see the light emanate from her, surround her. It was there in the folds of her gray robe and like a halo around her dark head.

"You found it," Thranduil said.

The healer nodded and smiled brilliantly.

Thranduil let go of her hands to withdraw his hands, but the girl held onto them. She leaned in.

"Thank you…” she said. Her gray eyes were alight with light, and within them, Thranduil saw something sparkle, something more than just gratitude. He wasn't sure what it was, but everything inside him blared in warning.

Thranduil pulled away from her hands and stood up on his feet.

"If that is all, then…” Thranduil stepped away.

The healer scrambled up, her eyes wide. Her hands hovered around her mouth.

"Did I do something wrong?” she asked.

Thranduil shook his head.

"Of course not, Miss. They will be looking for you. You should hurry along."
"It's Lassiel."

"What?"

"My name. It's Lassiel."

"Well, Lassiel, I am glad you found your light. Please excuse me." Thranduil turned to walk away but stopped at the tug on his tunic.

He turned around with a frown. Lassiel was holding onto a corner of his garment.

The hand that held his tunic trembled, but Thranduil hardened his heart.

"Yes?"

"I just wanted to thank you. That is all," Lassiel said as she looked up. There was no longer the light that had enveloped her the moment ago.

"It is unnecessary. If you would excuse me," Thranduil said and turned away, pulling himself free of her grasp.

"Can we? Can we not…be friends?" she asked before he could walk away.

Thranduil did not turn to face her.

"Let me be very clear, Lassiel. There is no place in my heart for friends or anyone else. Not you. Not anyone." With that, Thranduil walked away as fast as his legs could carry him.

Unlike her, it wasn't only the grief that burdened him. Light within? He had lost it again when Eru took his mother and Elwing from him. Now, it was a struggle just to keep his head above the darkness that tries ever to drag him down. Friends? He didn't need any. He didn't deserve any.

---

**Egalmoth** (Sindarin, *Spike upon a flowered crest*)—Noldorin Elf of Gondolin, Lord of House of Heavenly Arch. He escaped the destruction of Gondolin but perished during the Third Kinslaying at Sirion.

**The Isle of Balar**—Island located in the Bay of Balar south of Arvernien. It was the home of Cirdan and Gil-galad after the destruction of Falas. It also served as a refugee camp for Sindar, Noldor, and Edain (Men) during the War of Wrath.

---

Chapter End Notes

Next: Chapter 32 Diadem. Next two chapters will explore Thranduil's greatest pain—what happened at Menegroth
Chapter Summary

Elrond brings something from the king that makes Thranduil relive his greatest pain.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

---

**Cirdan’s Manor. June 18, Second Age 144**

**THRANDUIL** packed his travel gear as soon as he returned to Lord Cirdan’s manor house in the White City. He wanted to be gone before the chains of duty and obligation had a chance to trap him.

In four days, every Elf in the realm will gather at the King’s Tower to celebrate the Summer Solstice. All through the month prior, the city was bustling with preparation. At Lord Cirdan’s manor house, just as the many grand houses did on many of the streets, a profusion of red and pink summer roses spilled over the white balustrades, a splash of color over intricate lattice and stone walls, perfuming the air. While the city had surprisingly few numbers of large trees, there was an overabundance of flowers, their sweet fragrances mingling with the aroma of herbs and the intoxicating scents of wines and liquors.

Everyone who lived outside the city walls, as far south tip of Harlindon to the north of Grey Havens, all seemed to have traveled to the White City. And Lord Celeborn, along with his wife, Lady Galadriel, had arrived two weeks ago leading many Sindar who lived in Harlindon. And, Lord Cirdan was here, too, and Aron had come as a part of Lord Cirdan’s escort.

“You are going away again,” Aron said when he saw Thranduil pack. “I believe Lord Cirdan and my uncle expect you to join them when they attend the king’s Midsummer Eve dinner at the palace.”

“Precisely,” Thranduil said. “If I am gone before they ask, then no one can blame me for shirking my duty.”

He was nobody from a kingdom that was now just a ruin, rotting away in the depth of the ocean. Yet, the elders still nagged him about duty and obligation as if he still mattered.

“Come, come, Thranduil. Will you not join us this year, my friend?”

“Go, go, Aron. Will you not leave me be this year?” Not bothering to look up, Thranduil grabbed his cloak. “Did you bring the sea barrel I asked for?”

“Yes. I was surprised that you asked for another one so soon. What did you do with the other two? You hardly had time off until now, and I see that those two barrels are gone already. If you don’t mind me asking, how have you been using them?”

Thranduil shrugged as he tucked his bow behind the pack.

“I do mind,” Thranduil said, curving his lips as he picked up his pack and headed for the door.

“What are you planning, Thranduil?” Aron blocked Thranduil’s path.
“Nothing that would hurt anyone. It would benefit, actually,” Thranduil said with a smirk.

“Come, now, elfling. You are not causing any more trouble, are you?” Aron frowned, his hands on his hips, looking every bit like his uncle.

“Me? Trouble? What do you mean, Aron?”

Aron shook his finger, his eyes narrowed.

“You are planning something! I know you.” Aron frowned. “Just because we are at Grey Havens, don’t think we do not hear, Thranduil. I heard about that incident on your first night at the barracks, and that one with the soup. Lord Lammaeg was furious with you. At almost every council meeting with Lord Cirdan or Lord Celeborn, the chief councilor mentioned that incident somewhere.”

“What does Lord Cirdan or Lord Celeborn has to do with my actions?”

“Hasn’t my uncle told you that how you behave will reflect on all of us? No matter how much you wish to deny it, you are the heir of House Arandur. You represent the last of Doriathrin warriors. You are our face, our honor, and pride.”

Thranduil grimaced as he turned away. He already had an earful from Lord Istuion on his return to the manor house during the first rest day he was allowed to leave the King’s Tower. Lord Istuion had been informed of the soup incident, and the elder Elf had spent the entire day talking about duty, obligation and being an example to other Sindar.

“Fine. The soup incident was my fault.” Thranduil admitted.

“Thranduil, please try not to cause any more stir. That thing about the boots...”

“That was not my fault,” said Thranduil indignantly. “They started it by putting holes in mine.”

“And I heard you retaliated by cutting off the entire soles of theirs.”

Thranduil shrugged. “They should not have touched my things.”

“How about that incident with the hair. What were you thinking?”

“The Noldo started it! He cut my hair. I wanted others to know that if they touch me, I will punch back.”

“More like a kick in the groin. According to what I heard, that cadet only cut one hand length off a front section of your hair while sparring with you. And, you. You shaved the entire front section of his head. The poor lad dropped out of the cadet training because he was mortified of being seen. I heard his parents were so outraged they petitioned the king to have you kicked out of Lindon.”

Thranduil shrugged and looked away. He heard more than an earful about that incident, too.

“You are exaggerating, Aron. It was only a thin line along the front,” Thranduil fingered the top of his hair line just above his forehead. “And he only took off few days to have a hairband made to cover the area. It is not like it is permanent. The hair will grow.”

“Then, you should not have acted the way you have when he cut off yours. He only cut the ends. You shaved him when you knew how sensitive we all are about our hair.”

Thranduil scoffed. It was true, indeed. If there was one vanity all Elves shared, it was the hair. Even those who had minimal knowledge of herbs knew all about the herbs and enchantments that kept
one’s hair healthy, shiny and tamed.

Of course, it didn’t apply to him. His hair was so coarse, thick and slippery. Glineth had officially declared that his hair was untamable. No matter what concoctions were used, no braids ever stayed put on his hair, and nothing could keep it bound. No matter how intricate the binding, within an hour or two, all types of bindings or braids came undone.

Only Lady Melian and his mother had been able to braid his hair and keep it bound until he needed to loosen them. And after Sirion, no one had touched his hair. No one had been able to tame it.

“I am sure the cadet did not mean it, Thranduil. You probably are the only one with loose hair during training.”

Although keeping one’s hair out of face was recommended during training, it was not part of the regulation. The right to wear certain braids or binding must be earned. Not wearing any braids or bindings simply meant the person did not have any particular skill, trade or ability that allowed her to belong to any organization. And all the cadets, as young as some of them were, wore at least a warrior braid or a hunter’s braid.

“I may be the only one without any braids, but Baraben did not cut my hair by accident, Aron.”

“You telling me that he purposely cut your hair?”

Thranduil nodded.

“That is hard to believe, Thranduil, that any Elf would intentionally cut another Elf’s hair against his will.”

“For you, maybe. You would never think of doing such a thing, but these are Noldor we are talking of.”

“Come, Thranduil. Really now. You are telling me that there is someone other than you who would dare to tamper with another’s hair? You who glued and hardened the great lady’s hair?” Aron laughed out aloud.

“I was only twenty!” Thranduil could feel heat infuse his face. “And that was ages ago. And I didn’t mean it.”

“What had you not meant? Eating the gift Lord Cirdan sent to Lady Melian or replacing it with adhesive gelatin?”

“I did not know it was for hair. It smelled like a sea jelly with honey. I only meant to eat little, but it was gone before I realized.”

“But did you had to replace the hair concoction with glue?”

“I did not know that the liquid I put in that jar would react with the remaining jelly and cause the hair to become sticky and hard.”

It was the only time Thranduil remembered seeing his mother angry. But the one who had the worst had been the queen. Lady Melian’s hair was longer than others, and the two attendants who were working on the queen’s hair had their hands stuck on the long tresses of their queen which hardened into a glossy mess. But it wasn’t just Lady Melian. She had shared the gift with other court ladies. And his mother who always wore the gray hood of the healer could not do so because her hair hardened while it lay glued to the side of her healer’s robe.
It had taken healers three days to make enough potions for everyone to dissolve the hardness of the hair so that the hairs could be washed.

Even Lady Melian had not been happy about it although the incident had made the king laugh. But there were too many angry ladies to be appeased. And as a punishment, his mother applied a generous amount of the tainted ointment into his hair. His hair spiked and hardened, Thranduil was forced to stand in front of the gates of Menegroth with a sign dangling in the middle of his hair for a week.

“You remember that spiked hair of yours?” Aron was practically crying; he was laughing so hard.

“Damn it, Aron. It wasn’t that funny.”

“And that sign your mother hung on the top of your head!”

His mother had hung a sign: ‘I am a bad elfling.’ Then, Thranduil had been made to stand at the gates of the Menegroth to greet all the returning guards who were out on patrol.

But all the guards had been his friends. After asking, “what have you done now?” they would solemnly lecture Thranduil for being naughty, but as soon as the ladies left them, the guards had laughed and thanked Thranduil for making their days interesting.

“You were a pretty little thing then. Handful you were, but no one minded. Least of all, Lady Melian. I think you were a comfort to the king and the lady after they lost Luthien. A little bundle of energy and light you were. You brought smiles to all of us. To hear you laugh and to see you running about that place...” Aron’s voice cracked, his eyes far away.

Pain, like drops of water, seeped into the cracks in his heart. Thranduil turned away. That was long ago now. That child no longer existed.

“Join us, Thranduil. There will be a public Onen Calad this year. We haven’t had one since the lady left us. And I know you haven’t had a private one since your mother left. I think it is about time, Thranduil.”

Thranduil looked toward the door avoiding the entreaty in Aron’s eyes. What Aron did not know, what no one knew, was that Thranduil no longer had any ember of light within him.

“Aron, do not ask me. Not Onen Calad.”

Aron patted Thranduil’s arm. But Thranduil glimpsed the sorrow in Aron’s eyes which his friend quickly hid. Instead, Aron smiled.

“I am not going to pressure you. Even if you are not ready for Onen Calad, join us anyway. Let’s get some prizes off these Noldor.” Aron said as he took the travel pack from Thranduil’s hand. “Do you not want to show these Noldor what a real skill with a bow looks like?”

Just as in Doriath, Noldor celebrated Midsummer with feasts, music, and games, but unlike Sindar, their competitions were fierce.

Doriath had archery contests and sword matches, too, but they were more for entertainment. The top prizes for winning such competition had been a crown of flowers made by the queen, dance or a kiss from a lady of choice. Most of the times, it was a time of camaraderie, to show off the brotherly bond among the warriors which ended up being a hilarious occasion to laugh and poke fun.

But here at Lindon, Thranduil saw that Noldor took these competitions seriously and attended these
competitions as if their reputations and pride were at stake. And, the prizes given out were not things of symbolic value. Rather, there were bejeweled daggers or swords, a gilded bow with gold arrows made by the best Elven smiths, even a small chest of gems.

But the only competition Thranduil knew he could win with certainty was archery. He hated to admit it, but his skills with swords and spears were just slightly above average at best. There were more than few cadets who were better skilled than he.

As for the archery, Thranduil knew there were many Sindar either under Lord Celeborn or Lord Cirdan who were better archers than any other Noldor in the city. And there was Farion and his friends. Some Nandor were even better skilled than some of the Sindar. Even if Thranduil did not compete, he was sure it would be either a Nando or a Sinda who would win.

It did not matter to Thranduil who won the competition as long as it was not one of the Noldor. Besides, Thranduil would rather sleep on a branch of his favorite beech tree in the forest and see the rising of the sun alone than to be swept along with a crowd of people who meant nothing to him. And, he needed the time to execute his plan before the Midsummer Eve’s dinner.

Thranduil reached for the pack in Aron’s hand. It was then that Lord Istuion walked in. Following behind him was Elrond, holding a velvet box. Thranduil bit down a groan.

“Greetings, Thranduil. His Majesty, King Gil-galad, requests the honor of your presence at the Midsummer’s Eve Dinner to be held at the Western Courtyard of King’s Tower.” Elrond offered the box in his hands to Thranduil. “As the rightful heir of your House in Lord Oropher’s absence, the king wishes to show his friendship to you, Thranduil.”

Thranduil had just returned from the barracks barely two hours ago. He had not expected the king to send out a separate invitation to him. And so soon. Thranduil glanced at Lord Istuion who looked at him placidly with a barely perceptible nod. But, Thranduil did not take the offered box in Elrond’s hands.

“I thank him for the invitation and the show of friendship, but I am already engaged for that evening,” Thranduil said, doing his best to be polite.

Elrond blinked. It was clear Elrond had not expected Thranduil’s answer.

“What he means, Lord Elrond, is that he gratefully accepts the king’s thoughtfulness.” Lord Istuion took the offered box still in Elrond’s hands. “And, of course, Thranduil will be delighted to attend the dinner.”

“I am not going, Lord Istuion,” Thranduil frowned at the Sindarin lord.

Istuion smiled although it did not reach his eyes, “Of course you are. As Lord Oropher’s son, you will do your duty.”

Thranduil glared at Lord Istuion but eventually turned his face away. The duty and obligation, the invisible chains, always had the mastery.

Lord Istuion opened the box Elrond brought. In it, cradled against the deep blue velvet fabric was a silver diadem wrought into a swirl of three beech tree leaves, the insignia of House Arandur. Thranduil’s breath hitched at the emblem that he had not seen for centuries.

“I will go, but I am not wearing that!” Thranduil said, feeling the heat rise suddenly to choke him. He marched away, banging the door shut behind him.
Thranduil walked down the steps; then, he was running, not caring that others who passed him looked at him strangely. He did not stop until he was just outside the walls of the White City. He followed the wall until it turned, hiding him from the view of the road and the battlement above. Few feet from the wall stood a row of trees, the only ones near the wall. His favorite oak stood alone, away from the rest of the trees, next to the stream of water that flowed out of a channel next to the South Gate.

But, Thranduil did not move towards it. Instead, he leaned his back against the white stone walls and closed his eyes. He crossed his arms around himself, trying to calm the tremor that ran through him. His breast heaved. His head hammered.

It was over two centuries ago, yet he remembered that day as if it just happened. He sucked in a long breath, turned toward the wall, his head onto the cold stones.

He should be over this. He promised he would not blame himself. This should be behind him. But, it was not. I will never be.

Thranduil did not realize he was hitting the wall with his fist until pain ripped through it. He opened his eyes to see his right hand, trembling still. The knuckles have torn, and red blood dripped from the open wound, dripping down his fingers as he spread them wide and looked at it as if for the first time.

Thranduil shook his head hard as the earth beneath his feet cracked open. He did not want to remember. But the darkness lunged from the dark abyss below and grabbed him.

Thranduil gritted his teeth as he watched the red blood drip down his arm staining his white tunic bright red. With a low moan, Thranduil slid down onto the ground, his hands clutching at his head.

His mother had tried for years to make him forget and for a while, in that land by the sea where his mother sang and Elwing laughed, as the sea turned golden in the light of the sun, Thranduil thought he could forget.

But the blue waters of Sirion turned red with blood, and Eru saw it fit to take away his sun and the moon. Thranduil knew then that he was not meant to forget, that the old sin would forever shadow him. It haunted him in the dreams, in the folds of white dresses embroidered with gold, in the sparkle of diadems worn by the nobles. But most of all, it was there in the bright red of Elven blood that stained the white marble floors and his small white hands. He will never be rid of these blood stains.

“Are you going to protect them?” Thranduil had asked.

“We are guards, are we not, little one?” the tallest and the fairest of them had said.

Liars! The treacherous liars, the whole lot of them.

Thranduil had trusted them. They were supposed to be the guardians, but they were demons. And like a naïve fool that he was, he never once doubted.

________________

Note: Hair concoction I am talking of is made of agar-agar which is made of seaweed and is a vegan substitute for gelatin. Gelatin can be used to tame hair and can also be used as an adhesive. What Thranduil unwittingly added enhanced the adhesive and the hardening quality
Chapter End Notes

Next chapter is a flashback to the First Age.

Chapter 33: Menegroth (This chapter was originally a part of Chapter 32 but due to length, I cut it into two parts)
Menegroth

Chapter Summary

Menegroth, Midwinter, Year 506, the day the iron claw clamped over Thranduil's heart to torment him through the long years of his life.

Chapter Notes

Warning: it is very long.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Menegroth. Yule, First Age 506

THRANDUIL dropped down onto the mossy underfoot and turned to the ancient beech tree that stood coiled on top of a large boulder. The tree’s many moss-covered roots wound around a huge rock shiny with moisture. Its silver gray branches were bare and reached toward the ten-story stone ceiling that opened into the dark sky.

There was no moon or stars tonight. Only the pale lights from the golden lamps hanging from the stone carved branches illuminated the garden.

"You miss her, don't you, Master Graybark?" Thranduil patted the tree's gray trunk. "I miss her, too."

The tree had barely spoken few words since the departure of Lady Melian, but Graybark let out a slow and low rumble. The grand old beech tree was Thranduil’s favorite even among all the beech trees in the Forest of Neldoreth and Region.

During summer evenings when most residents of Menegroth feasted in the forest outside with the king and the queen, his parents brought Thranduil to the Western Garden to sit on the branches of Graybark to watch the stars. His mother would sing while his father played his harp. Thranduil would sit amid the fluttering moonflies shimmering in starlight to hear his mother’s ethereal voice mingle with his father’s sonorous one. But that was a while ago. These days, Thranduil saw his father rarely, and his mother no longer sang.

Thranduil sniffed then looked up at the dark sky. A silver stream swooshed as it fell from the opening in the ceiling onto the glistening spires of rocks that sprang up all around a clear pool of water, flowing beneath the boulder where Graybark stood. The mist of water always created rainbows when the sun shone down. And when moonlight shone, there were silver rainbows that shimmered above the water mist. But today, there was none of that. It was gray like a forest expecting a rainstorm.
Thranduil whistled a soft tune, a special song Lady Melian taught him, to call the birds and little critters.

The nightingales had stopped singing when Lady Melian left Doriath and flew away never to come back along with the moonflies. But there were other small creatures and birds, but he could not find any of them tonight.

“Where’s everybody?” Thranduil mumbled then took out a pouch of the nuts, bellflower roots and slices of apples he had smuggled from the kitchen. Tonight’s feast will be the last until the spring. There will be no more of fresh fruits and vegetables to share with his friends until the season for berries in the spring.

Ever since the great lady left, the winter at Doriath had been long and harsh. Even within Menegroth where the weather had never touched any of the flowers or the trees, winter came.

Still, Thranduil loved winter and snow. And this winter, there was a lot of snow. He looked up at the dark sky. High above, a faint glimmer filled the opening. They shimmered in the light of the many lamps that twinkled like stars above Thranduil’s head.

Softly, they fell and landed on Thranduil’s lashes. The elfling laughed out aloud and opened his mouth, sticking out his tongue to taste the tiny flakes of snow.

So cold and so sweet.

He reached out to grab them. They looked like the pale white moonflies that used to twinkle like slivers of silver lace.

“What are you doing here alone, little one?” a familiar voice asked.

“Captain Himion!” Thranduil ran to the white-haired captain of the royal guards.

Before the Dwarven attack at Menegroth, Lord Galadhon commanded both the Royal and Palace Guards. After the Dwarven smiths slew King Thingol and Lord Galadhon, Captain Mablung took over the command of both guards, but he, too, perished under Dwarven ax. Now, Captain Himion headed the Royal Guards while Captain Farvael commanded the Palace Guards, both under Thranduil’s grandfather.

His mother had said that the king, Lord Galadhon, and Mablung were all together with his grandmother and the many who went away after the Dwarves attacked the city. They have all gone to the Hall of Mandos, and Lady Melian had gone there to be with them.

The captain lifted Thranduil up onto his arms.

“Aren’t you supposed to get dressed for the ceremony?”

“I don’t want to,” Thranduil said, puffing up his cheeks.

“And why not?” the captain asked when three young guards approached the captain.

They were in their full regalia as the members of the royal guards. But instead of the silver scaled armor worn by all the warriors, the three wore the gray leather armor worked into layers of silver leaves over a pale blue tunic. Their black capes were embroidered with silver stars and the device of the king, a winged moon.

“Thranarin, Aron, Durion.” The captain nodded to them as they touched their fist to their heart in a
military greeting. “Are you three here to escort the queen and the princes?”

“Sir! Just Eluréd and Elurín,” said Thranarin. “I believe Thranduil is supposed to escort the queen and Little Elwing.” His brother gave the captain a look.

“Ah, yes. That is so.” The captain looked up at Thranduil. “You were made the protector of Princess Elwing, weren’t you? How impressive.” The captain and the others exchanged looks, and they all cheered noisily.

Thranduil shrugged as if he did not care, but he was quite pleased.

This past spring, during the New Year celebration, Thranarin was officially named the protector of the twin princes. His warrior braid plaited with gold thread symbolized his new status. And Thranduil was given a title, too, as the protector of the little princess.

“But I am not a warrior yet. It is not official until I become a warrior,” Thranduil said and looked down at the floor dejectedly. If his mother had any say in it, he would never become one. And Thranduil knew, just as well as others did, that his father never gainsaid his mother.

“You will. In time,” Thranarin said, ruffling Thranduil’s hair.

“But nana wants me to study healing.” Thranduil pouted, looking up at his brother miserably.

“Don’t worry, Thranduil. Do you not remember grandfather’s words? The House of kings rule and the House of princes protect. For years uncounted, our house has protected the boundary of this realm. Now that there is no one from the House Galadhon left in Doriath to protect those in the royal house, it is now yours and my duty to protect the royal family while father and Uncle Amdir are out in the marches to safeguard the people in this realm.”

Silver-haired and blue-eyed, Thranarin was almost as tall as their father. In fact, he looked very much like their father. Thranduil smiled and reached up toward his brother. Captain Himion handed Thranduil over to Thranarin who put him down on his feet.

“That is, indeed, true. Lady Nimloth is the only one of the House Galadhon left in Doriath now. Your lady mother would have to accept that you and your brother are the only sons of princes left to guard the royal family,” Himion said. “You will make a fine warrior one day. Do not worry, little one.”

“Will I be able to join you and the king on the hunt next year then?” Thranduil asked eagerly. The Winter Festival started with the king leading the three-day hunt, a tribute to Lord Tauron. And tonight will be an offering to Aran Einior and his queen Elbereth, the Queen of the Stars.

Himion padded Thranduil on the shoulder. “All in due time, little one. We’ll see once you reach one century in age.” Then, the captain turned to Durion.

“If you can spare a moment, Durion, deliver a word to Captain Faervel to call in all of the Palace Guards back to the city. Fully armed. Have him send guards to the Hall of Melodies.”

“Sir? Tonight?”

The young warriors frowned. Thranduil looked up at the captain. Even he knew that most of the guards were off duty for several more days to celebrate the winter solstice.

“Yes. As soon as possible. Lord Arandur just got a word from the East Marches that Feanor’s sons are gone from Nan Elmoth.”
“I thought we didn’t want them there. Isn’t that good news?” Durion asked.

“Perhaps. We had them watched for days, ever since they camped at Nan Elmoth. One of the scouts thought it strange that there was so little movement although there were lights every night. He went in for a closer look and found the camp deserted except for few horses and crystal lamps left throughout the remains of the campsite. Lord Arandur didn’t like it. He just sent orders to the south and west marches to return to the city.”

“Is that necessary, sir? Even the Dwarves do not wage war during winter, and neither does the Dark Lord,” Durion said. “Maybe they were in a hurry on their way to Amon Ereb.”

“That may be true, but after the demand they made, Lord Arandur thought it best to be prepared for the worst. After what happened with the Dwarves…. We were so unprepared.” The captain glanced at Thranduil, then stopped.

“But we are spread thin on all our borders…” Thranarin frowned. “Is it not better that we work with them? My father said they are wise and knowledgeable. Perhaps it is about time that we join with them.”

The captain shook his head and smiled sadly.

“You are young. You think like your father and Lord Celeborn, Thranarin. If they had it their way, we would have joined hands with the Noldor and joined in the last battle. But look what happened.”

“But I agree with my father, sir. Had we all joined together, we may have won against the Dark Lord. Now, we are an island in the sea of darkness with no light to guide us,” Thranarin said. “And the shadow grows ever darker.”

“I have heard from the marchwardens that the fight at the borders has become quite brutal, particularly in the north marches,” Durion said.

“North like where the father is?” Thranduil asked his eyes wide. He leaned into his older brother wrapping his arms around Thranarin. “Is father in danger?” Thranduil did not understand much of what was said, but he knew that his father was fighting the creatures of Dark Lord up in the north marches.

Thranarin laid a protective hand over Thranduil’s shoulder, drawing him closer. He threw a scathing look to Durion who clamped up immediately.

“Lord Oropher in danger?” the captain laughed. “You mean the Orcs. I heard they fear even the sound of your father’s blade being drawn. Do not worry, little one. Even among our best warriors, there are few who could best your father.” The captain patted Thranduil’s golden head then nodded to Thranarin and Aron. “Why don’t you two take our little friend to the Hall of Melodies. I am sure our queen is waiting for him. And once the ceremony is over, gear up.”

“Starting tonight, sir?” Aron asked, his eyes wide. “Tonight is the winter solstice. I am sure we are not the only ones who celebrate it.”

“Lord Arandur wishes it. Just a precaution,” the captain said.

Thranduil looked up wide eyed. But Captain Himion patted Thranduil’s head with a comforting smile on his face.

“We are just being cautious. We do not want any more Dwarves sneaking up on us, do we?” He winked at Thranduil then nodded to the other warriors.
The three young warriors exchanged looks; then, they saluted the Captain before dispersing in their separate ways.

Thranduil grabbed his elder brother’s hand and looked up. His head only reached Thranarin’s waist. But he was no longer the shortest. Now, Elwing was the shortest person amongst all of them.

“Thranarin, are we in danger?” The elfling looked up at his elder brother. “Who are Feanor’s sons? Are they bad people?”

“Do not worry, little brother. Remember Lady Galadriel and her kin I told you about from Nargothrond?”

Thranduil nodded. Many delegates and warriors came from Nargothrond during the time of King Thingol, but Thranduil wasn’t allowed anywhere he could be seen by the outsiders. In fact, when Noldor visited, his mother took him and stayed out of sight until all delegates and the warriors from Nargothrond left the city. Lady Galadriel was the only Noldo Thranduil had met. And no one from Nargothrond came these days.

“Feanor’s sons are their kin. And so they are our kin. They have seen the light of the trees and learned from the Valar. That means they are wise and good. There is nothing to fear from them, little brother,” Thranarin said.

“But, Alqualondë,” Aron said and frowned as they headed toward the Hall of Melodies.

“Alqualondë was over half millennium ago, Aron. And none of us has seen anything with our own eyes. Maybe there was a miscommunication. We don’t really know, do we?”

“Something happened at Alqualondë?” Thranduil asked.

Known as the Swanhaven, Alqualondë was a seaside city of pearls built by Teleri who had left Middle Earth and settled at Valinor. His grandfather’s father, Lord Olwe, was the king there. But that was all Thranduil knew about the city.

“Nothing you need to worry about, Little brother. If anything, it is the Dwarves that should worry us. But no matter what, if something untoward happens, our warriors will protect you and everyone here. If you are alone and there is an attack, look for us. Understand, little brother?”

“I know that already!” Thranduil made a face. He had heard it many times, from the time he was a mere babe. Both his mother and father had drilled into him that the warriors are protectors and that he should look for them when help is needed. But Thranduil did not need to be told that. All the guards and all the marchwardens he had known in his life were his friends.

“But do I have to escort Elwing? Why can’t I come with you and the twins?”

“Why, Thranduil! How will you call yourself the Protector of the Princess if you are already shirking your duty?” Thranarin laughed.

“But Elwing is so annoying.” Thranduil crinkled his face. “She is always telling me what to do.”

“Is Little Elwing bossing you around, Thranduil?” Aron asked his eyes twinkling. “She is less than half your size, elfling. Use your big-elf voice on her,” he said.

“No, Aron. I don’t want to scare her or hurt her feelings. She is so little,” Thranduil said shaking his head. He looked up at Aron disapprovingly. “Didn’t Aunt Tinuel tell you never to treat badly those who are smaller than you, Aron?”
Aron widened his eyes. “Aye. Aye. ‘Tis so. I had forgotten what my lady mother had always told me.” Aron looked down at Thranduil with a sorry look on his face. “I have been a bad elf,” he said.

“There, there, it is all right, Aron,” Thranduil patted Aron on his arm. “We all make mistakes at times,” Thranduil said, feeling wise and older.

His elder brother shook his head with a smile.

“Bad, Aron. Bad.” Thranarin said, but his voice was full of laughter. “Mayhap we should harden your hair, Aron.”

“Aye,” Aron said. “And hang a sign on it, too.”

Both Aron and Thranarin laughed out aloud. Thranduil groaned and protested when they arrived at the Guarding Corridor, a smaller version of the corridor by the main gate.

Carved deep into the wet rocks, figures of fantastic beasts gleamed with the fire lights, flames thrown by the stone-carved dragons with ruby red gems for eyes and fangs carved in bones. They were enchanted so that anyone without Elven blood in their veins will be seized with dread and fear, their minds confused and muddled which was a dangerous thing as the shadows under the carved figures hid openings to the darkness below. One wrong step and they will find themselves thrown into a pitch darkness of twist and turns of a deep labyrinth that lay under the floor.

This was the last defense of Menegroth, built as a safeguard to keep the residents safe in the event an attack occurred before the main gates could be closed, just as it did three years ago. Because Elves created this enchantment and wove it into the building, its power still remained. During the attack by the Dwarves, many residents of Menegroth retreated to the deep chambers which were reachable only through this corridor while the Palace Guards led by Captain Mablung fought the intruders on the main floors and at the depth of the treasury.

At the end of the corridor was the Hall of Melodies. As soon as they stepped into the large, brightly lit hall, they were surrounded by the shimmering crystal melodies that trilled in the air.

Unlike the corridor, the hall was bright as if dappled in sunlight under a canopy of trees. Green vines clung to the stone walls, dotted here and there with pale white flowers. Golden lamps hung from the branches of carved stone beech trees. High above the ceiling, crystal lamps with a string of crystals and silver beads dangled and danced, singing in sweet voices, filling the hall with crystal melodies.

Several chaises upholstered in deep green silk stood on the floor inlaid with white pebbles dotted with green gems. There were several of the queen’s attendants there preparing for the ceremony which will start at midnight.

“There you are,” Glineth got up from where she was helping a healer in a gray garment place a golden diadem on the head of a small child with dark wavy hair.

“Thrandy!” the child called out and shaking herself free ran to the warriors.

Thranduil groaned as his brother pushed him toward Elwing who smiled widely in front of him.

The healer walked over, standing near a wall where the tapestries woven by Lady Melian were displayed. When the Dwarves attacked three years ago, they had stripped Menegroth of everything they could get their hands on, but they had not been able to get inside this area and the chambers above. The hall and the residences above were the only sections of Menegroth that had remained intact.
“Aren’t you two supposed to be here a while ago?” The healer whose face was hidden by a gray hood said, standing tall over the young warriors. She was only few finger widths shorter than Thranarin and was the tallest among all the ellyth in the room.

“We aren’t that late, mother,” Thranarin said with a smile. He grabbed Thranduil’s shoulder. “He isn’t even ready. And I don’t see the twins.”

“They were restless waiting for you and have gone walking with their mother.”

“Come here, Thranduil.” Glineth put a long silvery jacket she had on her arm around Thranduil and started to button up its many silver buttons.

Thranduil pouted up at his mother, giving her his best miserable expression.

“Nana, do I have to wear this jacket? It is so uncomfortable.” Thranduil pulled at the upturned collar.

“It is a beautiful tunic that took your lady mother whole of summer to make. Do you even know how long she worked the dyes to make it just the right color to match your eyes?” Glineth said. “Look how beautifully she embroidered the edges with the silver thread you so love?”

Thranduil did love the sparkle of the silver threads, but he didn’t care about that now.

“You look lovely in it. Why wouldn’t you want to wear it, elfling?” Lady Tinuel who had walked over to greet the warriors looked over Thranduil with a smile.

“It is not that, Aunt Tinuel. But, how am I going to run in this?” Thranduil looked down at the jacket which fell to his ankle.

Just then, Glineth placed a small silver diadem woven into three beech tree leaves on his head.

“Why do I have to wear this?” exclaimed Thranduil, now frowning deeply as Glineth fixed it over his golden head.

“The king made this for you when he commissioned the diadems for his children,” said Glineth.

“I wore mine, Thrandy,” the little girl said pointing to her delicate scroll of gold encircling her dark hair.

“Well, you can wear yours because you are a princess, Elwing. I am not a prince like Eluréd and Elurín.”

“But you are one of the king’s kin, Thranduil,” said a clear voice like a running brook.

A silver haired lady dressed in the same gossamer white dress as Elwing entered wearing a gold diadem with a large white stone in the middle, a more elaborate version of Elwing’s diadem.

Two young boys wearing pearlescent dress jackets followed behind, looking identical except that Eluréd, the elder of the twins, wore the golden clip which displayed his status as the king’s heir. Both wore the golden diadems with crescent moon design on them.


The queen turned to Thranduil.

“Your father and Lord Amdir are both princes of Doriath just as my uncle, Lord Celeborn, is. And along with them, you and your older brother are the only kin of the king left in Doriath.”
“But why do I have to wear a diadem when my ada is not the king. Elwing’s ada is,” Thranduil said stubbornly.

“But you are part of the king’s family. And, all the members of the king’s family have to wear a diadem.”

“But, my nana isn’t wearing one,” Thranduil pointed to his mother.

“Yes, Lady Arinariel, why are you still in your healer’s garment?” Nimloth said wrapping her arms around Lady Arinariel. “Am I ever going to see you in a normal dress for a change?”

Thranduil’s mother patted the queen’s hand.

“I received a word from Lord Arandur that Oropher will be arriving tonight from the north marches, bringing with him few…” his mother glanced at Thranduil and Elwing. “Few warriors he wants me to meet,” she said.

For a moment, Thranduil thought the ladies and even his brother and Aron looked rather grim and wondered why they didn’t look happy that his father was coming home.

“Ada is coming home?” Thranduil asked, excited at the prospect of seeing his father. His father had been away for a quite a while now. Thranduil could count on one hand the number of times he had seen his father since the attack by the Dwarves. And even those, just for few days before his father left again. What was worse, the few times his father was home, he spent most of that time sleeping rather than playing with him as his father used to do.

“Yes, Thranduil. He should be arriving any moment,” his mother beamed him a smile, not the bright sunlight kind she usually wore but Thranduil did not think much about it when he saw the twins pulling Thranarin toward the corridor.

“Ready, little ones?” Thranarin asked the twins who were practically jumping about the two young warriors.

“How come my brother does not have to wear a dress tunic and wear a diadem?” Thranduil pointed to Thranarin with a pout.

“How now, Thranarin? Why is it that you have not changed?” the queen asked, her hands on her hips.

“I am still on duty, my lady,” Thranarin cleared his throat. “Lord Commander wanted to make sure there are still enough of us on duty.” Thranarin sounded apologetic, but there was also a relief in his bright blue eyes.

“Is that so?” the queen narrowed her eyes as the young warrior shrugged.

“Duty before pleasure, I am afraid,” Thranarin said sounding regretful and glanced at Aron.

“And we were told to come quickly, my lady,” Aron added, clearly eager to be gone.

The queen shook her head, but she bent down to kiss her two boys.

“Nana! We are not babes,” Eluréd said his chin pulled up with a grimace while Elurín giggled.

“Yes, yes. You two are six-year-olds who think they are hundred,” the queen laughed as she let the
twins go. “Thranarin, please take the boys to have their phials filled at the fountain upstairs before taking them to their father. They were so busy playing; they forgot to fill them.”

“As you command, my lady. If you would excuse us,” Thranarin bowed gracefully, winked at Thranduil, as the twins eagerly pulled at the two young warriors.

With a sour face, Thranduil looked at the twins.

“Why can’t I go with the twins? Why do I have to stay here with the ladies?”

“Because, Thranduil, you have to protect Princess Elwing,” Thranarin said with a chuckle, his blue eyes twinkling with mischief. “It is your job to make sure she is safe, remember? See you later, little brother.” Thranarin laughed out aloud, then added warmly. “Don’t worry, Thranduil. We will come back after getting the phials filled. We will all go together.” With that, he left through an elaborately decorated door, followed closely by Aron, each of them holding onto the hands of the twin princes.

“I’ll stay with you Thrandy,” Elwing said and took hold of Thranduil’s hand. Thranduil looked up dejectedly at his mother who laughed. The queen and the rest of the ladies joined in the laughter.

“You are a big elfling now, Thranduil. You have to protect Elwing. I am counting on you,” Queen Nimloth said and kissed him on the top of his head.

It was sometime after the twins left that they heard it, a loud blast that shook the walls of the cave city.

“What is that?” the queen said as she straightened. The sound had come from the Great Gates, but the king, his court, and people were across the bridge in the Forest of Neldoreth in preparation of Midwinter Solstice. “I hope it is not Eluréd and Elurín getting into something they shouldn’t,” Queen Nimloth said with a frown. The twins were known pranksters.

“That hardly sounds like something two elflings would do,” Thranduil’s mother laughed. “And with Aron and Thranarin with them, they wouldn’t dare,” said Lady Arinariel, then frowned. “Those two young warriors are worse than the twins. I will check on them as I have to stop by my chambers before going to the infirmary. Oropher may have returned.”

“You are not leaving us, Lady Arinariel?” Lady Nimloth asked. “You will join us later, perhaps?”

“It all depends,” his mother’s face looked grave. “We shall see how our…guests… are. I will join you if I can,” she said then turned to Thranduil with a smile. “Take care of them, Arantaur.” With that, she, too, left the hall.

“Come, Elwing, let me fix your diadem,” Glineth said and took Elwing to the chaise.

“Come, sit with me, Thranduil,” the queen said and sat down on one of the chaises with Lady Tinuel when the walls of the stone cave shook. The ladies looked up.

“You are not leaving us, Lady Arinariel?” Lady Nimloth asked. “You will join us later, perhaps?”

“Come, Elwing, let me fix your diadem,” Glineth said and took Elwing to the chaise.

“Come, sit with me, Thranduil,” the queen said and sat down on one of the chaises with Lady Tinuel when the walls of the stone cave shook. The ladies looked up.

“Maybe we should call the guards,” Lady Tinuel said.

Thranduil looked out at the corridor. “I saw Captain Himion not long ago. I will go ask for help,” Thranduil said and ran out of the hall, ignoring the call after him.

There were usually guards posted just inside the Hall of Melodies, but not today. Thranduil turned toward the corridor that led to the Great Gates. There were always several groups of guards stationed there. The passages twisted and converged, a nightmare maze for those who are not familiar with Menegroth, but Thranduil knew every turn and every nook of this place.
It was then that Thranduil heard the clashing of metals and shouts.

Thranduil stopped and turned toward the corridor leading to the armories. If there were an attack, Captain Himion and the Royal Guards would be with the king who was outside Menegroth. But Captain Farvael and the Palace Guards were usually at the Guard Station near the armories.

Thranduil ran down a darkened corridor and ran headlong into a group of warriors. They wore gold plate armors with red tunics and capes. The capes had a device Thranduil had never seen: a flaming sun with a jewel in the middle. It was on a background of a star with eight rays and eight spikes embroidered in gold.

There were about twenty of them, tall and with eyes bright with light. They had naked swords in their hands. Two of them carried a torch.

“You are not our guards. Are you guards from Nargothrond?” Thranduil asked. “Are the Dwarves attacking?”

One with glossy black hair and darker skin than others looked down at Thranduil, his eyes on the diadem Thranduil wore.

“Are you one of the princes?” he asked looking down at Thranduil’s silvery dress jacket.

“You talk funny,” said Thranduil looking up at him. “I am not a prince. Eluréd and Elurín are.” Thranduil touched the warrior’s golden armor in wonder. He had never seen the warriors from Nargothrond although he had heard much about them from Thranarin and Aron.

“I am Thranduil Oropherion.”

The warriors looked at each other and shook their heads.

“My father is one of the marchwardens,” Thranduil said, his chin raised.

“Is that so? Is that why you are not afraid of us, little one?” The other warrior next to the dark faced Elf asked. He was tall and beautiful with a chiseled chin and deep gray eyes that glowed in the darkness of the corridor.

“You are Elven warriors. Why should I be afraid of you? Aren’t you here to protect?”

He did not fear the keen lights in the guards’ eyes. Some of the people he loved the most in the world had the glowing eyes. Glineth said that their eyes glowed because they have lived in the land far way where Valar lived. It meant they are wise and good.

“Did you come to help?” Thranduil asked.

“Warriors protect, is it not so?” the beautiful one said, curving his lips.

“My lords, we don’t have time for this. We need to find the queen and her children. And quickly,” another warrior said in Quenya behind the beautiful warrior.

Thranduil understood clearly, but he was forbidden to let anyone know that he spoke and understood Quenya.

“If you are here to guard, then the queen could use your help,” Thranduil said. He had heard that Nargothrond warriors were skilled and powerful. Even if Dwarves attacked, Thranduil could protect them all if he could get these warriors to the queen.
“You know where the queen is?” the dark faced one asked as he fingered Thranduil’s golden hair. Then, he turned to the beautiful one, speaking in Quenya, “Look, Kurvo, maybe this one is a freak like Tyelko.”

“Don’t call Tyelko feak, stupid. He has our grandmother’s hair, that’s all,” the beautiful one called Kurvo said with a slap on the dark one’s back. Then, Kurvo turned to Thranduil.

“Can you take us to the queen?”

“Are you going to protect them?” Thranduil asked.

“We are guards. Are we not, little one?” Kurvo said with a smile. “Come, elfling. Take us to your queen, and we will take care of her.” He urged when a clash of metals and shout came nearer. The Noldo held out a hand encased in a golden gauntlet. It had a fresh blood stain. Thranduil took the hand.

“This way. If you are hurt, my mother can help you. She is a healer,” Thranduil said and led them to the Hall of Melodies.

---

**House Galadhon**—Galadhon was the son of Elmo, Thingol and Olwe’s brother. Thus, he was Thingol’s nephew. He was the father of Celeborn and Galathil (father of Nimloth who married Dior and became the mother of Elwing). There is not much else that is known about Galadhon. In my story, as the member of the house of princes, Galadhon commanded both the palace guards and the royal guards. His house was responsible for the protection of the royal family while Arandur (Oropher’s father in my story and also a nephew of Thingol) commanded the marchwardens and was responsible for the protection of the realm. Celeborn had left Doriath before the Battle of Unnumbered Tears (leaving later would have been almost impossible as the world outside Doriath had fallen to Morgoth after this war). So, when Galadhon died trying to protect Thingol from the Dwarves, Galathil took over the command. But, he too died fighting the Dwarves when he encountered them on his way escorting Dior to Doriath.

**Eluréd** and **Elurín** (Sindarin, *Heir of Elu* and *Remembrance of Elu*)—Twin sons of Dior and Nimloth, king and queen after Thingol and Melian. They were Elwing’s elder brothers. During the Second Kinslaying by Noldor of Sindar at Menegroth, the twin princes were seized and abandoned in the forest to die.

**Lord Tauron** (Sindarin, *Forest Lord* or *Forester*, an epithet of Araw, known as Orome by Noldor, a derivative of Aromez in Valarian) Vala known as the huntsman of the Valar. He was the first of the Valar to find the Elves and named them Eldar. He led the Elves when they traveled from Cuivienen where Elves woke up to Beleriand.

**Aran Einior** (Sindarin, *Elder King*) Quenya name is Manwe Sulimo, King of the Valar. He is the brother of Melkor (Morgoth, the first Dark Lord) and husband to Lady Elbereth (Sindarin, *Queen of Stars*), known as Varda in Quenya.

**Nan Elmoth** (Sindarin, Valley of the Stardust)—Forest about 75 miles east of Menegroth. It is said that the trees here grew so tall and dark that they blocked the sun entirely. It was here that Melian enchanted Elwe (later known as Thingol). Later, Eol, father of Maeglin, lived there alone until he wed Aredhel (Fingon’s sister, thus, Gil-galad’s aunt) who wandered lost in this forest.
Kurvo (Quenya, skilled)—a name family members called Curufin, 5th son of Feanor. He was most like Feanor in appearance, temperament and skill. He was Celebrimbor’s father. He perished along with his brothers, Celegorm and Caranthir during the attack on Doriath.

Tyelko (Quenya, hasty, shorter form of his mother name Tyelkormo)—refers to Celegorm, the 3rd son of Feanor. He is said to be “fair” but I take that as having silver hair like his grandmother, Miriel, who is said to have silver hair (To me, this means that she had a noble Telerin blood on her mother’s side as she is a Noldo). But Feanor and his sons have never met her as she passed away at Feanor’s birth.

Chapter End Notes

Next. Chapter 34 Midsummer Night's Dinner. Elrond and Gil-galad discuss north expedition and Thranduil

NOTE: Chapter 33 may have been disappointing to some as there was none of the expected violence. But, it was originally written as a stand-alone story and the bloody part was written through Aron's perspective. As I have cut him off from being one of the POVs, that part got cut. And I just couldn't write it in the perspective of child Thranduil. But the incident will become clearer as the adult Thranduil will relive it time and again.
Midsummer Night's Dinner (1)

Chapter Summary

It is Midsummer's Night and love is in the air. Elrond can't avoid obligations.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

King's Tower. Midsummer, Second Age 144

ELROND threw the book he tried to read. Although Lord Istuion reassured him that Thranduil would attend the dinner, Elrond wasn’t sure. He couldn’t even do the one thing the king had asked of him.

With a sigh, Elrond got up to dress. He had sent all the servants down to the fields to enjoy the evening. If he had his way, he would just stay in his chambers until the sunrise when the king will give thanks to Eru, but the king expected him to be there at this dinner.

It was part of his duty as the king’s kin to sit beside the king and aid him in his endeavors. Elrond knew that, and he wanted to do the best he could. But this matter with Thranduil was wearing him down. For the past three months, he tried his utmost to be patient, but no matter what he did, Thranduil seemed unmoved. And it seemed to Elrond that more he let Thranduil be, less trouble Thranduil caused. Perhaps, it was best just to let this Sinda be.

But if he were to keep a distance from the Sinda, was he not letting the king down? Was he not being remiss in doing his duty and meeting his obligations? Elrond let out a long sigh, then trudged down the stairs and into the long, open corridor that led to the western courtyard.

“Lord Elrond!” A lady dressed in a shimmering, diaphanous fabric over a red silk stepped out from where she stood behind a marble column.

Ai, Elbereth, save me!

Elrond realized the mistake he had made, but it was too late. Too deep in his thoughts, he had forgotten why he hid out in his chambers since the morning. But wasn’t this part of King’s Tower had a restricted access? Elrond glanced at the guards by the entrance to the stairs. They stared back at Elrond, their eyes unrepentant and dancing.

The lady flipped her dark curly hair over her shoulder and glided over to Elrond.

“I have been waiting for you, my lord,” she said and offered a white ribbon embroidered with a red poppy flower in the red and gold thread.

“I am honored, Lady Fumella. But if I may be so bold, I believe Erfaron was looking forward to receiving your favor.” Elrond tried his best diplomatic voice, but the young lady was unmoved.

“He has no right over me. You are my choice this year,” she said, smiling up at him.

“Erfaron will be heart-broken.”
But the girl just shrugged as if it meant nothing. “We are not betrothed. I am not bound to choose him every year.”

But why me? Elrond could pull his hair out. Didn’t he have enough problems already?

Elrond squashed the groan that lurked inside him and ignored the waves of amusement coming from the guards. Elrond bowed low. It was Midsummer’s Eve and the choice of partner for the evening belonged to the ladies. It would be rude to protest further.

“You honor me, my lady.” He offered his arm as was expected of him. She tied her ribbon around his upper arm to show that he was taken for the evening. Then, she wrapped her hands around Elrond’s arm.

Elrond wished, hopelessly, that he could avoid meeting Erfaron tonight. Being one of Belegor’s closest friends, Erfaron never expressed it outwardly, but Elrond knew the cadet never liked him. After the Battle of Unnumbered Tears, many Elves considered Men inferior and untrustworthy. Although some made exception of the Edain from the rest of the Men, more than few did not bother with the distinction. And despite Elrond being Lady Idril’s grandson, he ultimately belonged to House Hador, not to House Finwe. And even now when he was an Elf, it didn’t stop some from seeing him more a Man than an Elf. Even if that were not so, Fumella choosing him would not endear him to Erfaron.

With a resigned sigh, Elrond walked into the Western Courtyard with Lady Fumella on his arm.

The evening air was crisp as the north wind cooled the heat of the afternoon as the sun started its slow descent into the west. All around the courtyard, the sweet scent of summer roses and the intoxicating aroma of tart peach wine were heady in the air mingling with the melodies expertly played on several harps.

As soon as Elrond stepped into the courtyard, a number of young ladies who stood near the entrance into the courtyard rushed over, all with a strip of ribbon in their hands. Fumella raised her chin as she leaned into Elrond. The Half-elven had to make an effort not to flinch away from her touch feeling the swirl of disappointments that rose all around him.

Although this happened every year, Elrond was usually prepared. For many years now, Lalaithwen chose him, relieving him of the need to hide out until the last moment when he had no choice but to make an appearance. But for the past few years, Lalaithwen had been unpredictable, making him guess as to whether she will choose him. And this year, he couldn’t blame her for not choosing him. With all the things that went on, he had not had the opportunity to talk to her since her return.

“Lady Fumella,” called a familiar voice.

Both Elrond and Fumella turned to face the king. The king’s gray eyes were sparkling with humor.

“How did you catch the Elusive Elrond? You are the envy of the ladies this evening,” said the king with a definite amusement in his voice.

Fumella giggled, her face flushed. “With luck and a well-made plan, my king. It is unfortunate that your majesty is off limits,” she said throwing a flirty look toward Gil-galad.

“Yes, yes. Very unfortunate,” laughed the king. “But, I make a terrible partner. That’s probably the reason for the rule,” the king said, giving Elrond a look. “As much as I hate to steal him away from you, will you spare us a moment, dear lady? I would like a word with my cousin,” said the king.

“Of course, your majesty,” the girl curtseyed prettily before turning to Elrond. “I will see you later,
my lord,” she said before moving away.

Elrond sighed watching the elleth go.


“Woo her? I haven’t had the time to speak to her after she returned from her stay with Lady Galadriel.”

“Oh, good. Maybe I could convince Lalaithwen to stay by my side this year.”

“Sire, you are off-limits. Even if that was not so, no one dares to approach you. Can you not yield Lalaithwen to me?”

Gil-galad shook his head, his eyes twinkling.

“Be you my cousin and beloved friend; I yield none who holds my heart.”

Elrond rolled his eyes, but his heart was glad to see that the king was in a playful mood. Gil-galad was only eighty-seven years older than him, a mere blink in the eyes of Elves, but the king seemed so much older and so much graver.

“Alas, there is nothing much I could do this year as I am already chosen. I’ll be lucky if I escape Erfaron’s wrath.”

“It is not your fault that his lady chose you. He knows as well as anyone that the choice of partner belongs to the ladies during the summer solstice. And as she is yet to be betrothed, she has a right to choose anyone.”

“Yes, I know that. But I have seen too many occasions where a heart in love abandoned reason. I’ve lost few friends over the years because a lady they have their hearts set chose me as her partner for the evening.”

“It is your fault for being so desirable, Elrond. There must be something in the blood of Men that stirs the blood of Elven maids. We have already lost two of our most beloved princesses to the houses of Men.”

Elrond raised his eyebrows. He had never seen Gil-galad this lighthearted. “You certainly seem to be in a happy mood today.”

“Ah, it must be the wine I am looking forward to.”

“Wine?”

“A very special reserve from my uncle’s vineyard, something he poured all his energy into when he was not working at the palace. He thinks it is the closest he came to reproducing the vintage he used to drink at Valinor. I tasted it when he first brought a barrel to me. It certainly is the finest I have ever tasted, but it is quite potent.”

“Are you serving that for the evening?”

“I wish I could. Unfortunately, he was able to make only one barrel.”

“That is hardly enough for all the guests. Maybe for the high table only?” Elrond looked about the courtyard. The high table was set up on a dais to seat twenty-four guests, twelve on each side of the
king’s chair. Facing them were four rows of tables seating twenty-four each.

“Yes, for the high table only. I wish I could have a bottle of my own to share with you, but there is not enough to spare. But, don’t worry, Elrond. I reserved a seat next to me for you.”

“That is unfortunate,” Elrond said. Captain Aron had informed Elrond that Thranduil refused to come unless he was seated at a certain table. “Thranduil will be seated at the farthest table from the dais, and as his warrior companion, I made the arrangements to sit with him.”

The king nodded. “That is unfortunate, indeed,” he mumbled. Then, he looked up, his face grave once again. “How are you faring with our Sindarin friend?”

Elrond tensed. If he was ever to get out of the obligation the king placed on him regarding Thranduil, this was it. Elrond took a breath and opened his mouth when the king turned away to look down at the training fields that lay before the courtyard.

All three fields were filled with people this evening, many sitting on a blanket or make-shift tables. Tonight, the king’s cellar was thrown open, and the food and wine will be served to everyone. After the dinner, there will be dancing and singing to be followed by Onen Calad.

“I am so glad I have you here, Elrond. I don’t know if I could deal with this young Sinda on my own. There is so much going on with the council. This expedition Lord Celebrimbor will take after the summer solstice is more than just about a treaty with the Dwarves. The cadets will be affected, too. And more so for you and the Sinda.”

Elrond frowned. “What do you mean?”

“Lord Gilmagor will give you more details after the end of summer, but be prepared to travel with Thranduil up north.”

“I don’t understand.”

“They found an Elven village up north, near where the Dwarves are. A village of Green Elves.”

“Up North by Dwarven villages? That is quite further up.”

“Yes. And there are dangers. We suspect dragons within the Dwarven ruins. We need to move the villagers south, below the river that marks our northern marches, but the villagers refuse to deal with our warriors. The council decided that we needed to send them representatives who could convince them to move.” The king stopped and looked at Elrond.

“I am not one of the Sindar, Sire. I doubt they will consider me as one of them.”

“But you are the only living descendant of King Thingol.”

“But I know nothing of Doriath, nothing of people who lived there.” For most of his life, it was Noldor who nurtured and educated him. What he knew of Sindar was through Lord Cirdan’s people who had never lived in Menegroth. And he had met even fewer Green Elves.

“That is why we are sending Thranduil along with you. Lord Celeborn volunteered to go, but his people did not want their lord anywhere near where there may be dragons. As they wouldn’t let me go either, the council thought it best that we send you and Thranduil, instead. But do not fear the dragons. Lord Celebrimbor and the Silmacil will deal with the worms. And a large part of north legion will accompany you and the cadets. And Lord Istuion and Captain Aron will go.” King smiled when he looked up at Elrond’s face. “They volunteered to accompany you and Thranduil into
the village. Although the cadets and north legion will be there, they will be stationed further away so as not to alarm the villagers.”

“I see.”

The king put his arm on Elrond’s shoulder. “I hope I am not burdening you too much, my friend. If I could find other ways….”

Elrond managed a smile. “It is my privilege to serve you, my king. I will do my best.”

Gil-galad gave Elrond a faint smile and looked away at the training fields full of people who were already singing and dancing below them.

Elrond bit down a desire to send out his senses to intrude on the emotions of the king. Gil-galad knew of Elrond’s ability and kept his feelings under tight control. The king was as difficult to read as Thranduil and other elders from Valinor who kept their emotions in tight rein. But Elrond didn’t need to read the king’s emotion to know that Gil-galad worried for him.

“Do not worry about me,” Elrond said and tamped down an urge to squeeze the king if such a thing was permitted. Gil-galad was still young, not yet three hundred years in age, yet there was so much burden on his shoulders. Elrond felt embarrassed that he had wanted to evade the one obligation the king had entrusted to him.

“I am sorry that I had to ask you to do this on top of befriending Oropherion. The Sinda is quite a handful, isn’t he?”

“At least he had not caused any stir since that hair incident,” Elrond said with a reassuring smile for the king.

Gil-galad shook his head. “Thank the Valar! I feared that I might have to send Thranduil back to his father. If you had seen how upset Lord Calel was! He stirred up all the councilors. If it wasn’t for Lord Gilmagor, I don’t know what I would have done. At least, Calel was manageable. Did you know how upset my uncle was after that soup incident? According to Lord Lammaeg, our friend was planning an attempt on my life.”

“You don’t believe that, do you?”

“Of course not. If I thought the Sinda could even entertain such a thought, I would not have kept him here. But, it would be nice to see Thranduil getting along. Have you made any progress?”

“He is difficult to reach.”

The king nodded, his face grave again.

“We will get to him, Sire. It has only been three months. Give him some time. No matter how thick the ice wall, it must melt, surely, with time,” Elrond reached out and laid a comforting hand on the king’s arm.

“Will five centuries be enough?” Gil-galad frowned.

“He will be a river by then,” Elrond laughed, trying to lighten the mood.

“River has its own problems.”

“In that case, we will deal with it then. We could always build bridges. I will do everything I can. I
promise."

It was then that Lord Cirdan and Lord Istuion walked into the courtyard with three younger Elves: Thranduil, Aron and Lady Silwen.

Elrond felt Gil-galad stiffen and suck in his breath. Almost immediately, it seemed to Elrond, the king built a wall around himself and put on armor as if he was readying himself for a battle. This puzzled Elrond greatly. Lord Cirdan was like a father to the king. There were love and respect between them that even Lammaeg couldn’t break, not that the councilor didn’t try.

“Welcome, my lords,” Gil-galad greeted Lord Cirdan warmly then nodded to Istuion, Aron, and Thranduil.

“My lady,” the king greeted Lady Silwen, somewhat coldly, Elrond thought. “It’s been too long,” he said woodenly as Lady Silwen bowed, her eyes downcast.

Elrond frowned as Gil-galad turned away from her.

The king smiled warmly to those around him, but Elrond saw the hidden robe the king wore above his armor, an invisible robe of sorrow like rain that comes silently in the grayness of early morning.

A fierce desire to protect the king rose from Elrond’s depth. Gil-galad was the only family left to him now.

Elrond wondered who the cause of Gil-galad’s grief was. He glanced at the newcomers.

Lord Cirdan was warm and gentle like summer sea breeze. And Lord Istuion was not different from his uncle in temperament even if he was the follower of Oropher and stayed distant. That went for Captain Aron as well.

As for Thranduil, well, he was another matter entirely, but Elrond knew Gil-galad well enough to know that the king could handle himself no matter how ill-mannered the Sinda may be.

Elrond glanced at the king and found that the king’s eyes grazed the lady. It was brief, but he saw sorrow there before the king turned to Lord Cirdan.

Elrond glanced at Lady Silwen. She was Lord Cirdan’s niece, a daughter of the brother of Lord Cirdan’s wife. Lord Cirdan’s wife had sailed to Valinor after the Great War. Elrond was told that she had lost her desire to live in Middle Earth after the death of her only son at the Battle of Unnumbered Tears. Lady Silwen lost her parents to that battle as well and was raised at Lord Cirdan’s house along with Gil-galad.

For a time, Elrond, as well as others, thought Gil-galad had feelings for Lady Silwen. They were never betrothed, but Elrond always felt there was something there between them. But the times during the great war was chaotic. And Elves did not enter into romantic relationships during the times of chaos and unrest.

Before Elrond could read anything from the lady, the king turned to Thranduil. The king’s face was serene as he greeted Oropher’s son, but Elrond could not help but notice the tightness of the king’s jaw.

“Are you enjoying the festivities?”

“No,” said Thranduil, looking away.
Elrond winced. But, the king smiled graciously at Thranduil.

“Is there something amiss? Perhaps I can remedy it?”

“No. I just don’t enjoy festivities,” Thranduil said nonchalantly.

“I am sorry to hear that. Perhaps there’s something we can do to persuade you to change your mind?” the king asked.

“I doubt it.”

Thranduil looked at the king, his eyes half closed and his chin raised, looking haughty and uninterested. Elrond held back an urge to whack Thranduil when Lord Cirdan laughed out loud and patted Thranduil’s back.

“Thranduil, if I did not know any better, I would think you lacked manners, my boy. But, that can’t be, my dear lad, because I know you have been well taught. Is that not so?”

There was a moment of silence as Thranduil met Lord Cirdan’s eyes. For a moment Elrond thought Thranduil would make a curt retort, or worse, walk away, but instead, the young Sinda put his hand over his heart and made a graceful bow toward the king.

“My apologies if I offended you. I was just answering your questions with no other intent,” said Thranduil and looked up with a face perfectly composed.

“No need to apologize,” the king said with a gracious smile. “If there is anything I can do to make the evening more enjoyable, please let any of my staff know. You are welcome here, son of Oropher.”

Thranduil bowed again and stepped back without another word. The king moved away with Lord Cirdan, leaving the younger Elves.

“You are looking lovely this evening, Lady Silwen,” Elrond said.

Elrond had known her ever since he had led a portion of Maedhros’ people to Isle of Balar before the War of Wrath. But she hardly ever came to the White City, and Gil-galad rarely visited Grey-Havens after the completion of the King’s Tower. It was only when Elrond visited Lord Cirdan that he was able to see her.

Silwen smiled, looking ethereal in her plain white dress. With her white hair, pale face and silver eyes, she looked like a seafoam under the moonlight. Unlike other ladies in the courtyard, she had no jewels in her hair, no silver or gold girdles on her waist. Only decoration she had was a cluster of small white shells threaded with silver string around her neck. Amongst the ladies of court dressed in vibrant silk of many different colors, she stood out like a moonbeam in the darkness of the night.

“How are you, Elrond? Silwen smiled warmly.

Elrond repressed the urge he felt whenever he saw her. Before the palace at Lindon was complete, everyone had thought Gil-galad would take Lady Silwen to be his queen. But once the palace completed and the building of the city finished, Gil-galad had turned away. It surprised everyone, even Lord Cirdan and there had been a time when there was tension between Lord Cirdan and the king. Elrond wasn’t surprised. Lady Silwen was like a daughter to Lord Cirdan who was her guardian. But no one can meddle into the decisions of two people on the matters of the heart. Only their guardians or parents had some say in the matter. In fact, any say by anyone else would be considered a very rude intrusion.
“You have not been here since they completed this palace,” Elrond said. “There have been many changes since the last time you were here. Allow me to show you,” Elrond offered his arm.

But before Silwen could take it, someone snatched his arm away.

“You are ignoring me, my lord,” Fumella said, pouty and fierce. She looked Silwen up and down as the Noldorin elleth wound her arms around Elrond’s arm like a viper.

Elrond felt mild irritation at the interruption, but he bowed to Silwen. “Excuse me, Lady Silwen. This is Lady Fumella, my partner for the evening.” It was the duty of the chosen to see to every desire of his lady partner during the evening.

“No, you are not,” Fumella hissed. “I am the chosen today.”

“Do not worry about me, Elrond,” Silwen smiled and excused herself, joining Aron and Thranduil who stood nearby.

Feeling his senses prick, Elrond turned to look at the direction of the king. Gil-galad was staring at the three young Sindar. Despite the plainness of their garments, or perhaps because of it, the three stood out. Smaller boned and pale of hair and eyes, Captain Aron and Lady Silwen looked like a pair of white butterflies in a garden full of colorful flowers. And Thranduil stood out no matter where he was and who he was with. For better or for worse.

---

**House of Hador**—Third House of the Edain (Men) established by Hador the Golden-haired who served Fingolfin (Gil-galad’s grandfather). Fingolfin gave Hador fiefdom in Dor-lomin. Hurin and Huor were Hador’s grandchildren by his first son. Hurin was Turin’s father and Huor was Tuor’s father (one who later married Idril and begot Earendil, Elrond’s father)

**About Marriage**—Elves marry for love and of free will (forced marriage does not work as rape will kill the victim). Sex means marriage so there is no such thing as a premarital sex (although I suppose they are free to flirt as long as they are not bound). Once married, they are married for life. Death does not resolve marriages. Also, most Elves choose their mates while still very young, soon after achieving the majority (which is 50 years in age). Those who marry late are considered to have strange fates or connected to ill chances. I guess this means our young Elven lords in this story have strange fates which, I guess, is true.

---

**Chapter End Notes**

Many of you are probably aware, but the previous chapter's description of Menegroth borrows heavily from Lay of Leithian, the story of Beren and Luthien. Most are my creations but the description of Corridor of Guarding is mostly from the Tolkien's description of Menegroth. I just wanted to make that clear.
Chapter Summary

Thranduil doesn't feel he belongs at the dinner. He wants to be left alone but a merry maid isn't having it.

White City. Midsummer 's Eve, Second Age 144

**THRANDUIL** sat with a goblet of wine in his hand, his back to one of the massive marble columns that supported a stone balustrade. The western courtyard was enclosed on the east by the central tower, north by Hall of Council and by open corridors on the west and south. All around the white stone rails, pink and red summer roses bloomed, clinging onto the intricate filigree designs of the stone structure.

The lords settled into discussing the matters of state while servants prepared the dinner tables. Left to themselves, Aron and Silwen had tried to introduce Thranduil to some of the people in the courtyard. Thranduil had wanted to stay for Aron and Silwen's sake, but he was not used to making pointless conversations with needless people. Once, long ago, he had wanted to grow up quickly so he could do what these people were doing: dress beautifully and talk elegantly of mundane things. But after a century of wandering the wild unknown, talking only when necessary, all these polite, meaningless conversations seemed senseless.

And for the first time, Thranduil realized how much he didn't have compared to these Noldor with their glittering gems and vibrant silks embroidered in gold and silver. He wanted to ignore it, but the Sinda did not miss that while the people maintained polite faces plastered with a smile, their eyes grazed Thranduil's face, hair, and dress jacket.

After tolerating just two introductions, Thranduil had excused himself, taking his goblet of wine and wandered out to a secluded spot in the corner of one of the corridors. From the height of where he was sitting, he could see the entire three training fields and the blue haze far beyond which Thranduil knew to be the Gulf of Lune. Even the people down at the training grounds were aglitter with gems in their hair and clothes.

Thranduil leaned onto the marble column feeling the coolness of the stone through his simple robe Glineth had salvaged. Lord Cirdan and his kin had chosen to be simple and plain. But it was one thing to choose to do so when one had enough riches. But for him and his people from Menegroth, there was no choice. Once, Sindar from Menegroth, too, had gems: luminescent pearls the size of plums, smoky obsidians, the blue lapis, rubies, emeralds, and his favorite, the white gems that glittered like stars. While those Sindar who did not live in Menegroth had time to gather their goods, his kin who fled Menegroth had nothing but what they had on their backs. What things of value they had that night had gone a long time ago in exchange for food, shelter, and arms. Thranduil clutched at the leather-bound chain around his neck. It was the only thing that remained to him, just pieces of what had been the most beautiful thing he had first seen.

The thought of Menegroth made his heart clench, his throat ache. Thranduil scoffed aloud and let out a dry chuckle.

*What did it matter? After what you've done, it was Eru's mercy that allowed you even this. You*
should be grateful. Thranduil clutched at his necklace harder. Besides, why would you want an approval from Noldor? Who cares what they think of you?

And yet, it was so much easier to think it, but not so easy to believe it.

'You have nothing. You are nothing.' Lammaeg's words rang in Thranduil's ear. Maybe that old Elf was right.

Thranduil shook his head hard to calm the fire that took sudden hold of him. That day, it had taken everything he had to hold onto his temper, to stop himself from striking that councilor down.

Thranduil took in a breath and looked around, trying to focus his turbulent mind on something else.

Everything about this place was built to perfection from the immaculate stone columns to the vast granite floors polished like glass. It was a beautiful palace with tall columns that allowed ample lights to stream through story-high windows. Thranduil pulled at the collar of his dress robe. It was a beautiful prison, yet prison nonetheless. And he missed the forest. As enchanting as the White City was, despite the vast amounts of flowers, bushes, and cypress trees, there was a surprising lack of grand trees in the White City. And Thranduil missed trees.

A hearty laughter mingled with a merry giggle made Thranduil look up. One of the warriors was passing with a lady in his arms. He was whispering something in her ear that made her laugh. They were whispering, their heads touching, then they laughed out aloud together, their arms linked. They passed Thranduil as the last stray of sunlight fell on the stone column where Thranduil sat. Thranduil was a child again, sitting on his mother's lap as she sat humming by a stone column carved like a large beech tree as sunlight streamed down from tall windows cut into the stone walls. The room was filled with light, and the scent of niphredil and herbs was all around. His mother laughed as his father whispered something in her ear. Her soft laughter mingled with his father's hearty one. And the sunlight was warm.

It was like a long, forgotten dream, and Thranduil closed his eyes and leaned back onto the stone column as a corner of his heart tightened.

Three new moons rose and fell since his father's departure, but no words had come from the East. Thranduil knew it was too early to expect news, but he waited nonetheless. He looked up at the sinking sun that bled everything deep red.

"Lord Thranduil?" A musical voice, cultured and delicate, made Thranduil look up.

A tall young lady dressed in a faint green, like a bud in spring, glided over to him. Strands of her glossy black hair were braided with gold ribbons and allowed to fall in rivulets behind her back. There was something familiar about her, but Thranduil could not place it.

"Why look so glum during such a joyous occasion, my lord? Do you not love summer?" she asked. Her voice was lyrical like a strum of a harp.

Thranduil frowned and bit down the first response that came to his lips. Reluctantly, he got off his seat as was expected.

"Oh, please don't mind me. I was just passing when I saw you. Will you not go? I believe the bell calling the guests to dinner rang just now. Come, my lord. I believe we are seated at the same table. The one farthest from the high table, is it not so?"

Thranduil blinked. He did not remember the young lady, yet she spoke to him as if they had been introduced.
"Do I know you? And don't address me that way. I am no lord."

The maiden's gray eyes twinkled as amusement lit up her angular face.

"You don't remember me, do you?"

"No," Thranduil admitted, the word dragged from his lips.

The girl's gray eyes widened for a split second then she laughed out loud.

"What is so funny?" Thranduil growled, drawing his eyebrows together.

He cursed inwardly at the heat he felt on his face. When he traveled with his father, there had been all Elven men. For over hundred years, he had spent with warriors. He was not used to dealing with ladies, especially young maidens. Lassiel was the first young Elven maid of similar age he had spoken to in a long time. But he had been comfortable with her, and the healer had not laughed at him.

"You are so serious. You are at Midsummer's Festival, not on a training ground. You should relax. You look like you are about to face a foe in a battle."

"What do you know of battle?" Thranduil snapped. But it did not faze the girl one bit. She laughed again.

"Nothing, of course. But I do know that warriors have that glum face when they are about to knock someone out. Why the battle face when there is much to celebrate?" she said and let out a chuckle.

"What do you want?" Thranduil said, willing his composure to return.

The maiden tilted her head, her hands behind her back. She looked up into his face.

"Blunt, you are. But I do not mind. I prefer it over the sweet nothings. In case you do not remember, I am Lalaithwen. Do you remember me now? From the library? The scrolls?"

It was then that Thranduil remembered the girl who dropped several scrolls on his head.

"Now you remember me." Lalaithwen smiled as she swung her upper body side to side. "I didn't know I was so unmemorable that you would have forgotten about me." She stepped closer to him, then brushed loose rose petals off his dress jacket, surprising Thranduil with her closeness.

_Do these Noldorin maids have no sense of personal space?_

Thranduil stepped back remembering how Lassiel clutched at his tunic. He hardly knew these Elvenmaids, yet they acted as if they knew him already.

Lalaithwen looked up, eyes wide and sparkling like a child's.

"Why are you sitting here all by yourself?" she asked. "Don't you want company?"

"No."

She seemed to wait for an explanation, and when he did not offer one, she asked again.

"Why not?"

Thranduil frowned at the Noldorin maid. Frustration bubbled up inside him filling him to the brim.
"Why should I tell you?"

"Because I asked?" she shrugged, looking up at him as if it was the most obvious thing in the world.

Thranduil raked his hair roughly and looked away.

"Lady Lalaithwen," he took in a quick breath. "If you don't mind, I would like to be left to myself."

If he could, Thranduil did not want to be rude to her lest his mother threw down the doors of Mandos to come and scold him. As gentle as his mother had been, she was a terror when it came to discipline, especially when it came to manners toward ladies and elders. But right now, Thranduil wanted to be left alone.

But instead of going away, the girl smiled brilliantly up at him.

"I'm sorry, but I cannot because, you see, I have just made up my mind. I choose you to be my partner at the festival." Then, she produced a white ribbon embroidered with golden stars.

It was now Thranduil's turn to look at the girl wide-eyed.

Thranduil knew about the right of a young maiden to choose a partner at Midsummer Festival. Days or months before the festival, many young Elven men who are interested in being her partner will woo her. She would make her choice at the festival by giving her chosen partner an armband embroidered with the sigil of her house if she had one or embroidery of something that represented her if she did not come from a noble house. Thranduil had heard of such custom, of course, but he was too young at Menegroth and the years at Sirion had been desperate where the celebrations had been kept to a bare minimum. Besides, there had not been Elves young enough to engage in such traditions.

"I cannot take that," Thranduil said. He knew that being chosen by any maiden was considered an honor, but if Gilmagor thought it inappropriate for Thranduil to know her, then he was sure her family thought the same. At any event, Thranduil was in no mood to entertain a Noldo, maiden or not.

"And, why not?" she placed her hands on her trim waist, her eyes narrowed.

"I hardly know you. In fact, I do not know you at all."

"Oh, that's all right. I don't know you either." Her face brightened, and she laughed that silver bell laughter again. "We can get to know each other. It is only for the evening. It is not like I am asking you to marry me."

Thranduil frowned.

I don't want to get to know any one of you, he almost said it out loud but managed to bite his tongue. That would have been rude. He could already imagine his mother's disapproving face.

"Well?"

When Thranduil remained silent, Lalaithwen raised her eyebrows, her gray eyes twinkling.

"Is that silence means you will reconsider?" she offered the embroidered lace. "If nothing else, I could guarantee you will not be bored."

"Lady Lalaithwen, let me be clear." But before Thranduil could say further, someone called.
"Lalaith!"

Both Thranduil and Lalaithwen turned. Belegor stomped towards them, then, he snatched the lace band off the girl's extended hand.

"You are not going to offer this to a Sinda." Belegor looked down at the girl, "especially not to this Sinda." Belegor turned blazing eyes toward Thranduil. Then, he turned back to Lalaithwen. "I thought you were going to give your ribbon to --"

"I changed my mind," Lalaithwen said, as she snatched the ribbon back from Belegor. "It is my choice who I give my lace to, not yours. You know that," she said coolly and raised her chin defiantly.

"Father will not like this," Belegor said, glowering at the maiden.

Lalaithwen shrugged. "As I said, it is my choice, not father's nor yours, brother."

"Brother?" Thranduil said, thinking out loud.

"Yes. My sister," Belegor said, blocking Lalaithwen from Thranduil's line of sight. "You are not to get anywhere near my sister, Sinda. No member of my house will associate with a dark elf!"

"Belegor! That is enough. He is a Sinda, not a dark elf," Lalaithwen looked up at her brother, frowning deeply. She pushed Belegor aside to step out from behind him. "What is wrong with you, brother? Where are your manners? I have never seen you behave like this. And even if he was a dark elf, the choice is mine," she said, unflinching and firm. "Thranduil?" she turned to Thranduil and offered the lace.

"I will be honored to be your partner, my lady," Thranduil said allowing his lips to curl up, his eyes boring into Belegor's dark gray eyes.

"No, you are not!" Belegor pulled his sister away from Thranduil.

"Belegor!" Lalaithwen pulled at her arm on her brother's grip. "It is only for the festival."

Just then, Elrond walked over.

"There you all are. Have you not heard the bell for dinner? His Majesty is already seated."

Thranduil looked at Belegor smugly.

"Lady Lalaithwen," Thranduil offered his hand to the lady who took it. "Be a good Elf and step aside, Belegor," Thranduil said haughtily, letting a placid smile hover on his lips.

"Why you…" Belegor fist his hands, his lips curled back, his teeth clenched. He took a step to grab Thranduil, but he was jerked back.

Elrond held onto Belegor's other arm.

"I don't know what is going on, but we are expected at the dinner tables. Don't cause any trouble, Belegor. You do not want to cause any commotion in the palace, against the king's guest."

Belegor's face crumpled with fury, but he shook off Elrond.

"Stay away from my sister, Sinda, or you'll regret it," he said. Then, Belegor straightened his jacket and walked into the courtyard. Elrond frowned watching Belegor walk away; then, he turned to
Thranduil and Lalaithwen.

"What happened?" Elrond asked.

"I do not know," Lalaithwen said. "I chose Thranduil as my partner for the evening, and Belegor tried to stop me. Have you ever heard of such a thing? I have never seen him behave so outrageously."

Elrond's eyes opened wide as he looked at Lalaithwen then at Thranduil.

"Well, Thranduil, you will be the envy of all cadets. She is a flower much coveted," Elrond said, but his eyes held a reservation that was not lost on Thranduil.

Lalaithwen gave a gracious curtsey to Elrond at the compliment. "Why, thank you, Lord Elrond," she said with a laugh.

"Will you give us some privacy, my lady? I have something to discuss with Thranduil before dinner."

Lalaithwen smiled. "I'll see you at our table," she said and tied her ribbon around Thranduil's arm, then followed after her brother.

"I didn't know you knew Lady Lalaithwen," Elrond said.

Thranduil had a distinct feeling that Elrond didn't approve, not that he cared for Elrond's approval.

"I don't know her. I think it was an impulse decision on the part of the lady."

"Knowing her, I could see that. But, do you know anything about her?" Elrond asked.

Thranduil shrugged.

"I thought not. Well, you know that she is Belegor's sister which also means she is Lord Lammaeg's daughter."

"Yes, I think I got that much."

"You also know how Lord Lammaeg feels about you."

"Yes," Thranduil said. He had not forgotten Lord Lammaeg. "Not much different from his son, but she seems different from those two."

"Yes, she is. She is kind and generous, much more like her aunt than her father or brother, I am told. Do you know who her aunt was?"

"As I said, I know nothing of her," Thranduil said with a resigned sigh. "Why don't you just go ahead and say what you wish to say, Elrond?" Thranduil met Elrond's hesitating gaze. There was definite disapproval and something else.

"Her aunt was the king's mother. King Gil-galad's mother and Lord Lammaeg were siblings. His Majesty is very fond of Lady Lalaithwen, and it would be unwise for you…"

"Unwise? Unwise to do what? Court her? You want me to stay away from her, is that it? Is she too high for me? I am a nobody from a dead kingdom, so the king's cousin is out of my reach? After all, I am just a Sinda, not a drop of Noldorin blood in me, unlike you." Thranduil smiled down at Elrond with cold fury. "Don't worry, Elrond. I am not interested in co-mingling my Sindarin blood with that
of a Noldo, any Noldo, for that matter."

Thranduil ripped the lace off his arm and thrust it into Elrond's hands and stomped away, down the stairs. He was in no mood to eat dinner, especially dinner with the whole bunch of Noldorin nobles who obviously think themselves above him or any other Sindar.

By the time Thranduil reached the bottom of the long stairs, he was calmer. He stopped at the last stone steps. If he had nothing to think of but himself, he would gladly walk away. In fact, he wanted to ride away from this stone city tonight and find his way to his father. Longing for his father and all others he had known since he was a child swelled up inside Thranduil like waves and crashed into his heart.

Thranduil took in a long shaky breath and shook the invisible chains that bound him to this place. When will he be free of them? Thranduil let out a long sigh and looked up at the sky. The red of the sinking sun receded, tinting the white stones of the courtyard into pale gold.

Now that he was calmer, Thranduil wasn't sure why he felt so angry. The girl meant nothing to him. He should not let this influence his behavior.

Before they arrived at the King's Tower, Lord Istuion had reminded Thranduil once again, that Thranduil's words and actions will reflect not only on his House and his father but on all Sindar. And Thranduil knew he should curve his tongue. He knew that, but sometimes he could not stop himself in time. But actions had more serious consequences than mere words.

Thranduil vigorously raked his hands through his hair. If he left now, his empty seat would make it glaringly obvious of his absence. The invisible chains that bound him to this place tugged.

"Damn it all!"

Thranduil fisted his hands, gritted his teeth but turned and trudged back up the stairs, back to the western courtyard.

Well, I guess now I will get to taste the councilor's fine wine that I worked so hard to acquire. Thranduil comforted himself.
MAIRON looked up at the terrace above the Star Field. Beyond the open corridor lay the western courtyard. The Maia had kept his senses honed on Thranduil and Elrond, but with so many voices, it was hard to tell what went on up there. It was too bad that this body was not important enough to be invited as one of the king’s guests.

“What holds your interest?”

Mairon turned and found Rodwen standing next to him, stretching her neck out to look over the terrace. “What are you looking for that you didn’t even know I was waving at you?” She threaded her arms around Mairon’s arm and looked up at him with a playful glint in her eyes. Mairon felt the warmth spread inside him. He looked down at Rodwen and ruffled her hair.

“Just curious what the king and his guests are doing,” Mairon said.

“Could it possibly…Is it who and not what?” Rodwen fluttered her lashes knowingly with a large smile on her face. “One of the noble ladies, perhaps? Hmmm?”

“No one interests me,” Mairon said.

“Yes, I know. That is, except for Lassiel. When are you ever going to ask her?”

Mairon frowned down at Rodwen. He had forgotten that the Elf he possessed had been in love with this mouse of a healer. Whenever he slacked his control over the body, he found himself wandering outside the healing ward. But what was the most frustrating was how his heart misbehaved whenever he glimpsed the young healer. He had tried, but Mairon could not control the body’s reaction to the young Elven maid. It embarrassed him, so he found it easier just to avoid the healer whenever he could. And it wasn’t difficult to avoid her as the healer seemed uneasy near him as well.

“I know. I know. It is not my place to speak to you about her. But you worked so hard to get into this officer program to be near her. I have been waiting, but you have not said a word about her after joining the program. Can you blame me if I am curious? We have been very patient, but mother and I were hoping this was the year you finally ask her,” Rodwen said. “You are probably the only cadet who is still unmarried and the only cadet without a partner tonight.”

“Are you here to berate me?” Mairon frowned down at Rodwen.

“Forgive me, brother dear. But I know how hard you have worked to get here, and it seems nothing is happening.” She pouted, looking up at him through her lashes, looking contrite. “I was only worried for you.” She leaned into Mairon. “I wouldn’t be here after Summer, and there will be no
“Are you going somewhere?”

“Oh, that’s right, you were not there when Lord Celebrimbor came to ask father.”

“Lord Celebrimbor?”

“He is going up North to negotiate with the Dwarves, taking many jewel smiths with him. It is a great opportunity for us to learn.”

“But, why is he taking you? North is not safe. Why would he take any women up there?”

Mairon knew just how dangerous his Orcs were right now. And there were plenty of them up north although he had sent the majority of them out east and further north to look for a new location to build his base and to find food for breeding. Because so many Orcs were lost during the last war, Mairon had put the Orcs to breed. And when they are in that state, they are frenzied beasts, unpredictable and dangerous. Orcs didn’t require constant feeding like Men, but they needed to consume large amounts of flesh before they can breed. Breeding required energy and energy required meat whether fresh or rotten, as long as they were not burned. Mairon had wondered whether Elves knew this. After the War of Wrath, Elven soldiers picked up a new practice of burning the dead bodies of Orcs making them unusable as meat. The few raiding of the villages in the North had been ineffective, producing no hostages and no dead bodies for Orcs to consume. But Mairon had not cared. He had plenty of Orcs further east if he needed them and those Orcs were breeding well enough.

But as weak as they were in their current condition, Orcs were unusually cruel and relentless in their frenzied state. And someone like Rodwen… Mairon shook his head. Elven maidens were Orc’s favorite meat. Unlike the mortal maids, Elven maids were not useful for breeding. They died when forced, but their flesh provided more power to the Orcs. Melkor used to feed his strongest Orcs with the flesh of Elven maids. Only rarely did his master kept Elven slaves for amusement, mostly to break them, some to seduce them. Mairon had never understood the perverse pleasure his master derived from them.

“You cannot go up there, Rodwen. Not now.”

If he were up in the North, one word from him would stop the Orcs, no matter how frenzied they were. But he was far from the North. Without being in his original body, the distance was too great for him to control the beasts from where he was.

“We will not be alone, brother. Many of the jewel smiths under Lord Celebrimbor were warriors once, and the whole of North Legion are accompanying us.”

“You do not understand.”

“And Lord Celebrimbor has his own warriors. And he said some special warriors would accompany us. His lordship assured mother and father that we would be safe.”

“But why does he needs you there?”

“I am lucky to be chosen, brother. He believes we need to show the Dwarves our skill so we can exchange artisans. Lord Celebrimbor will take some with him into the Dwarven villages, and some of the Dwarves will be asked to come to our camp so we could share our methods with theirs. It is a chance for us to be friends with the Dwarves again.”
Mairon didn’t care for the Dwarves. They were a stubborn race who reminded him too much of his former master, the stony, stoic and stern Vala Aule.

“It’s madness. You do not understand the dangers that exist.”

And the Orcs were not the only threat. By now she will be well enough, maybe even able to fly. And she was not alone. At any other time, Mairon would not have cared, but something told Mairon that Celebrimbor would be of use to him. The Noldo was one of the vital pieces. Mairon wasn’t sure exactly yet how or why. Foresight was part of his ability as a Maia, but it was just a glimpse, and he could never be sure what it meant. But Mairon was sure that Celebrimbor would be as useful to him as Thranduil will be. Until he was sure, Mairon did not want the Noldo killed. And Rodwen. He did not want Rodwen hurt.

“Are you angry with me because I have made the decision without telling you?” Rodwen looked up; her eyes clouded with concern.

“Would that stop you? You will go where Lord Celebrimbor goes whether I said yay or nay.”

Rodwen’s cheeks turned red. She grabbed them with her hands.

“Is it that obvious?” she asked, looking up at him with her eyes wide.

“I am your brother, Rodwen. I can tell.”

“Oh,” she looked down. “I never told anyone, not even mother and father.”

“Do you know how Lord Celebrimbor feels?”

Rodwen’s cheeks tinted deeper red. She hung her head, then shook her head.

“Rodwen…”

“No,” Rodwen shook her head harder. “I do not want to know. I know that I am not worthy.”

His mind flooded with the swirl of emotions from Rodwen. Mairon had known that Rodwen harbored deep feelings for Celebrimbor. She was young, and her mind was fully open like many of the younger generation of Elves around him. At first, Mairon had tried to influence Rodwen, attempting to steer her away from Celebrimbor. He had known that although Celebrimbor admired Rodwen’s talent, the Noldo’s feeling was just that and nothing more. But the more Mairon tried, the more Rodwen resisted. Her feelings for Celebrimbor ran deep, and it was not within his power to change it.

“Nonsense!” Mairon said, sudden heat rising in his chest. He grabbed Rodwen’s shoulders. “It is he who is not worthy of you. You….you are…” Mairon searched for the words and before he could form any coherent thoughts, words he had never used before poured out of him. “You are the kindest, gentlest, the most beautiful creature I have ever known,” he said firmly.

Rodwen blinked up at Mairon. Then, her face brightened as if sunlight fell on it. She smiled broadly. Then, stepping forward, she wrapped her arms around Mairon.

“Thank you, brother. That is the nicest thing you have ever said to me.”

Mairon hugged her back. His chest felt tight and warm. Feelings that he could not describe filled him. Mairon closed his eyes and breathed in the warm honey scent of her. And he realized that he meant every word.
Rodwen pulled away, and Mairon let her go reluctantly.

“I’m going to remind you of what you said every time you try to yell at me,” Rodwen laughed. “Come, brother. Lord Celebrimbor is waiting for you.” She beamed him a bright smile. “You must have made an impression on him.”

Rodwen grabbed his hand and led him through the crowd. Mairon had not expected to see Celebrimbor again for a while.

“There you are,” Celebrimbor smiled widely and got up from the table where he sat and walked toward Mairon. “It is good to see you again.”

“The pleasure is mine, my lord.” Mairon bowed low.

“Please, let us not be too formal. It is midsummer. Walk with me.”

Mairon respectfully followed Celebrimbor as he walked toward the boundary of Star Field where few trees that existed in the White City stood.

“Is it true that you planned to take Rodwen up North?”

“Ah, you heard that already?” Celebrimbor turned to look at Mairon. “You do not approve,” he said looking down at Mairon. “You fear for her?”

“She is my sister. And I have been up North if you have forgotten, my lord. There are Orcs and maybe even worse things.” Mairon pulled back, realizing that he cannot speak too knowingly.

“Yes. There are worse things. Like dragons,” Celebrimbor said, then frowned. “You are not surprised.”

“Everyone knows the north is infested with Orcs and the creatures of the Dark Lord. Dragons were one of them so why should I be surprised if there are dragons. And if so, isn’t it more reason to not go. At least not take Rodwen.”

“Let me assure you; we will be well protected. And the ladies who will accompany me are well skilled both in the arts and swords even if they have never seen a battle. It is important that I bring our smiths, and especially women, to show Dwarves that our intention is in peace and not in war. I worked with them when I was at Nargothrond. If there is one thing I know that we share, they protect their women from touching blood as we do.”

It was then that Mairon remembered what he had learned upon entering the White City. Elves did not put much value in the prowess in war. It was the skill, honor, and courage that were admired. The killing, the taking of life whether good or bad, was considered a necessary evil in the times of need. Although Elven women were strong and skilled as Elven men, they did not engage in war as staining one’s hands in blood, whether to hunt or to fight, was something to be avoided. In fact, many Elves believed that killing took away their power to create and heal. For the members of the royalty and the nobles, being a warrior was a requirement as it was their job to protect the realm and the people within it. But for the regular citizens, those who chose to become a warrior did so because they did not have any other skill or interest. Becoming a warrior gave them the skills and duty to protect others in their villages.

Among the Elves, the most honored occupations involved nurturing, growing, teaching and healing. And baking. Apparently, baking bread was a holy thing among the Elves. And most of those jobs were done by Elven women. And loremasters, gardeners, and singers were valued above the swordmasters, warriors, and hunters. Clearly, the Elves had their priorities screwed up. Mairon
planned to change that once he took control.

“With due respect, my lord. I mean not to gainsay you, sir. But Rodwen has no skill with weapons of any kind. And if there are dragons, taking young maidens with no skills in battle would only hinder other warriors.”

“You need not worry, cadet. Rodwen and other younger staff will be left inside our border surrounded by North Legion. As for those who will accompany me to the Dwarven city, we do not plan to engage the dragons until winter comes when the worms will be slow. Until then, we plan to negotiate with the Dwarves, exchange ideas, learn from them, and to convince them to fight with us. With our combined effort, we should be able to take the worms, fire-breathing or not.”

Mairon was surprised. How did these Elves know that the winged variety, unlike the wingless ones, were susceptible to cold? It was something his master tried to correct, but the War of Wrath happened before anything could be done.

“Why do you say dragons will be slow in winter? Didn’t Dagor Bragollach occurred during winter?”

“Yes, the Battle of Sudden Flames occurred during a winter evening. It breached the Pass of Aglon and forced my family to flee our home to Nargothrond,” Celebrimbor said, his face grave and his eyes dark. “But the dragons of that time were different from what we expect to face at the Dwarven ruins. The winged ones, apparently, are slow during winter. We believe that they have delved into the Dwarven ruin for warmth. We plan to flush them out into the cold to eliminate them. But before we do that, we will spend time working with the Dwarves. By the time you and the cadets come up North, any dangerous ones will be—”

“Cadets will be up North?”

Celebrimbor laughed. “Ah, I forgot. You have not been informed yet. Yes. Instead of doing your field training at Grey Havens, Lord Gilmagor plans to take the cadets up North after Harvest Festival.” Then, Celebrimbor looked down at Mairon with amusement in his eyes.

“I see you are thrilled. You think you can protect Rodwen and fight the beasts all on your own, do you not, young one?” He laughed out loud.

You have no idea. But Mairon hid his smile. If he was going to be up North, it changed everything. Thrilled was putting it mildly.

“It is good to be young. You always feel invincible when you are young.” Celebrimbor smiled again. “Now that we got that out of the way, there is a reason I wanted to talk to you. You are talented, and there is no reason for you to continue as a soldier for too many years once your duty as part of the noble class is satisfied. When you graduate the officer program, if you want to, I would like to recruit you into the city guards. I have the command of the city guards and can choose some as my personal guards among them. I wanted to know if it was something you were inclined to accept.”

“I would be more than honored, my lord.” Mairon bowed low. Things were going better than he could ever hope.

“Good. I am glad,” Celebrimbor said and beamed Mairon a smile before he said his farewell and disappeared among the crowd.

Mairon looked up at the star-strewn sky. Somewhere Melkor was watching over him. Oh, the things he could do. Within the White City, he did not dare leave his body for fear of detection. But up in the
North, with the limited Elves about and the darkness all around, Mairon will have more freedom.

The Maia clasped his hands together in glee and looked about him when someone slapped his shoulder.

“Have you gotten your healer to say yes?” Cellon grinned widely. “I don’t think I have seen you this happy since the first time Lassiel said hello to you. Or, are you that eager for the king’s wine?”

Just as he said so, several servants carried barrels of wine down the stairs and sat them on a long row of tables set up against the stone wall supporting a terrace above. Behind the last one of them, followed a figure dressed in a pale silver dress robe, cut in the somewhat older style and not quite fitting. Despite that, the Elf was breathtaking with golden hair that glowed like streams of melted silver in the starlight. Behind him followed another ravishing creature with hair dark as midnight. She was a beauty even among the Elves although she wasn’t as beautiful as his Rodwen.

“Is that Lady Lalaithwen next to our friend there?” Cellon said next to Mairon before he raised his hand above the crowd. “Oropherion! Here!”

Thranduil looked up, but he walked down the rest of the stone steps with hardly a hint of recognition, holding his head high as if he was a king and all the people around him were his subjects. It amused Mairon to no end that this Sinda acted as if he had the most when he had the least.

“Well, you cleaned up nice, Oropherion. Clothes do make an Elf, does it not?” Cellon slapped Mairon’s arm, flicking his head towards the Sinda, smile full bright on his face. “Why are you down here with us when you could have the best of the king’s wine?” Cellon said to Thranduil.

The blond Sinda did not reply, but moved onto one of the wine barrels and picking up a goblet filled it with wine. Cellon turned to the Elven maid.

“Well, well, Lady Lalaithwen. Am I to believe that you have chosen him this year?” Cellon pointed to Thranduil who had a lace band around his upper arm. “If you were anyone else, I would have been surprised, but then you are you,” Cellon said. “But that also means poor Elrond is hounded by other ladies. Who caught him this year?”

The Elven woman laughed, a burst of tinkering laughter bright and ringing. Whoever named her knew what she was about.

“Fumella,” Lalaithwen said, then laughed again.

Cellon’s merry face looked shocked. “What? Poor Elrond. How could you, lady, leave him to such a fate. Do you know what Erfaron will do to him?”

“I am sure Elrond can handle himself,” said Lalaithwen when Thranduil returned to them with two goblets of wine, one on each of his hand.

“Cellon, if you are getting wine, get it from that barrel,” Thranduil gestured toward the last barrel closest to them which looked rather dirty and grim compared to other barrels lined up on the table. Most of the people who have come to get their goblets filled were lining up behind other barrels, avoiding the dirty one.

“What’s so special about that barrel?” Cellon asked. “It looks dirty.” He grimaced.

“When did you judge something by its appearance?” Thranduil said. “Never mind then. Do as you wish,” the Sinda said and turned away.
“Don’t be so dry, Thranduil. Let’s taste how good it is,” Cellon said and snatched one of the two goblets in Thranduil’s hand.

“Hey! Get your own,” Thranduil said with a frown.

Lalaithwen touched the other goblet in Thranduil’s hand.

“Isn’t this for me, Thranduil?”

She looked up at the blond Sinda with perfect poise. Thranduil frowned down at her. Mairon saw irritation in Thranduil’s eyes, but instead of the expected barb, the Sinda sighed and relinquished the goblet to her. Without a word, he turned back to the dirty barrel to get another goblet of wine.

Cellon and Lalaithwen looked at each other then laughed out loud.

“Oh ho!” Cellon’s face brightened when he took a sip from the goblet in his hand. “You must taste this,” he handed Mairon the goblet. “This is the best I have ever tasted. I am going to get myself and my wife one,” Cellon said and excused himself. Lalaithwen followed after Thranduil.

Mairon frowned. This wasn’t good. If Thranduil was to fall within his grasp, the Sinda must suffer, and he must hate. Thranduil must not be allowed to assimilate into life at the White City, and he must not be allowed to make friends. Well, except love. Mairon looked at Lalaithwen. He thought back to *Golim and Eilinel*. Yes. Love had its uses.

---------

**Baking**—By baking, I mean baking of lembas which were made only by women, Yavannildi, who tended the special corn with which the bread was made. It was a custom among the Elves that only Elven Queen kept and distributed the lembas. Melian, the queen of Doriath, held this recipe from Yavanna, a Vala. Galadriel learned the recipe from Melian.

**Dagor Bragollach** (Sindarin, *Battle of Sudden Flames*)—Fourth battle of the War of Jewels at Beleriand (FA 455). Morgoth broke the 400 year siege of Angband by sending out rivers of flames that destroyed the highlands of Dorthonion. Morgoth used Dragons for the first time in this war. Finrod (Galadriel’s eldest brother) would have been killed, but Barahir rescued him, earning him a promise which later led Fírod to risk his life (and get killed) to help Barahir’s son, Beren. This was also the war which led Fingolfin (Gil-galad’s grandfather) to challenge Morgoth to a single combat which led to his death.

**Pass of Aglon**—A pass between Dorthonion and the west of Himring in the northeast of Beleriand. Celegorm and Curufin (Celebrimbor’s father), two sons of Feanor, fortified this area until the Battle of Sudden Flames breached it and forced Celegorm and Curufin to flee to Nargothrond where Finrod was a king.

**Lalaithwen** (Sindarin, *Laughing Maiden*, or *Maiden of Laughter*)

**Golim and Eilinel**—Golim was one of the twelve men who survived the Battle of Sudden Flames and Eilinel was Golim’s wife. He was a warrior under Barahir, heir of House Bëor and father of Beren (Luthien’s husband). After the war, he joined his lord, Barahir, and became an outlaw and hid from Morgoth for several years. But Sauron’s spies found that Golim came often to his old house to look for his wife. Sauron used this to lure Golim, captured him and by promising to reunite him with his wife, obtained the location of Barahir’s hideout. Barahir and all his warriors were killed except for Beren who was away at the time of the attack. After obtaining the information he wanted, Sauron promptly killed Golim to “reunite” Golim with Eilinel who was already dead.
Chapter End Notes

Chapter 37: Being King--Gil-galad and Silwen. And the king confronts Gilmagor regarding Elrond's instruction

I have been trying to be more consistent in posting the chapters, but I am still struggling to adjust to my Fall schedule. Bear with me. I hope to post weekly as soon as I get my bearing. As always, thank you for reading and commenting.
Chapter Summary

Gil-galad faces Silwen after saying farewell to Cirdan. Opportunity comes to confront Gilmagor regarding the training of Elrond.

Chapter Notes

I almost missed this chapter. But this comes before the White Jewel of Valinor which will be up next week. Now that my schedule is cleared, look for my posts on either Thursdays or Fridays. Thank you all for reading and for your comments.

King's Tower, September 6, Second Age 144

GIL-GALAD embraced Lord Cirdan warmly. Lady Galadriel and Lord Celeborn have already said their farewells and were talking to others.

"I wish you didn't need to leave so soon," said Gil-galad, taking in a whiff of sea breeze on Lord Cirdan.

"Celeborn and Lady Galadriel will be here with you until the Harvest Festival is over. And, I am sure the work of ruling will keep you busy enough," laughed Cirdan, his warm laughter like ocean waves dappled in sunlight. "My people would not rest until they have paid their respect to Lord Ulu. And there are much to do before winter arrives."

"Yes, I am aware of that. It is the only reason I am letting you go," said Gil-galad with a smile. "You must promise me to visit often."

"Will do, my boy. Will do."

Lord Cirdan patted Gil-galad's shoulder. The elderly Sinda was the only one who still treated Gil-galad as he had always done. And somehow it comforted the king.

Gil-galad looked about, hoping for the last glimpse. It had been almost a century since he saw her last. He didn't know when he could see her again.

"She will be following in the rear, riding with Captain Aron and my people."

Gil-galad felt his cheeks sear. Even after years he spent learning to hide his feelings, somethings he could not hide. But then, this was Lord Cirdan.

"Ereinion, sometimes we think we are doing what is right for others, but no one can know what is right for them except themselves."

Gil-galad swallowed hard but looked away. He found that Lord Cirdan looked deeper than the most.
"Do not burden yourself needlessly, my boy. You have enough on your shoulders as is. Take care of yourself." Lord Cirdan squeezed Gil-galad's shoulder before turning to mount his horse.

Lord Cirdan saw further, but the elder lord did not know the things Gil-galad knew.

After Lord Cirdan's escort moved out of the courtyard, Gil-galad bounded up the stairs, waving away the servants. He had a morning meeting coming up, but for few minutes, he wanted to be alone.

Just as he hastened past a long open corridor that led to stairs leading to the royal quarters, Gil-galad stopped. Among the many green granite columns, he glimpsed strands of white hair flitting in the wind. Part of him told himself to move on and not stop, but his body moved as if he had no control over it.

Silwen was leaning against the stone balustrade, her pale hair dancing with the wind. She was a vision of wind and waves, a flutter of cloud on an ocean.

Gil-galad's heart hammered. He could barely speak, his throat tightened and parched. But he found himself standing next to her.

She looked up, startled like a rabbit in a forest.

"My lord?"

"Lady Silwen." Gil-galad inclined his head and took a quick glance at her. She had lowered her head, and he could not see her eyes.

"How do you fare, Lady?"

"Well enough," she said softly, her head still downward. "How do you fare, my lord?"

"Well enough," Gil-galad replied and placed his hand next to hers on the stone balcony.

The morning sun tinted the white stones of the palace warm gold. The green granite columns took on a golden hue, and warm silence surrounded them both, the autumn sun brilliantly rising.

Her hands were on the top of the stone railing. Such lovely hands, things of clouds and wind like her, yet made of steel and heart, the same hands that had mended his hurts and wiped his tears. The hands that held and warmed his cold ones. He wanted to hold her hands again, pull her into his arms and kiss her again, but he did not dare. He did not trust himself.

Her hand was so close; he only needed to stretch his finger, and he would touch her. But she seemed like she was of another world. So close yet so far. Gil-galad glanced at her hands as the voice that tempted whenever he lay down to sleep, whispered again.

*Take her hand, fool. One century. One decade. Even one day. Is it not better to have shared a moment with her than not at all?*

But the image of his mother, pale and fading, would not let him go. Yes, it would be good for him, but would it be right for her?

"Silwen," he called, the name he had not spoken in almost a century.

"My lord?"

She looked up, her pale silver eyes searching his face, her emotions carefully guarded. Gil-galad's
heart ached knowing he had changed her. Once, she had been carefree as the winds of the ocean.

"Lady Silwen! Lady Silwen!"

Gil-galad turned and saw Paddirwen, Silwen's handmaid, running down the corridor toward them.

"Paddi, slow down," Silwen moved swiftly with an elegance lacking in the other Sindarin maid. When she saw Gil-galad, Paddirwen tried to stop but flopped her arms as her feet stepped onto the hem of her dress. Before Silwen or he can get to her, however, the maid fell over, her face flat on the stone floor.

"Oh, Paddi. Are you hurt?" Silwen tried to lift the woman up.

Gil-galad shook his head, unable to prevent his lips curling up. The young woman was the most skilled of hand among the Lord Cirdan's household. She wove and made the most beautiful fabrics and garments, but unlike most of the Elves who were graced with the elegance of movement, Paddirwen lacked grace with her feet. Apparently, all the grace Eru gave her were taken from her other parts and given all to her hands.

He moved over and lifted the Sindarin maid from the floor as he had done many times once he had grown big enough to do so.

"Oh! your majesty!" Paddirwen squeaked, her hands grabbing her nose. "Hello," she said, her smile wide and brightening her sea-gray eyes.

"Hello, Paddi. Good to see you again," Gil-galad smiled back, realizing how much he missed the people with whom he grew up, especially Paddirwen who had watched over him and Silwen when they were children. While Lord Cirdan's household had been in Lindon for three months, his duties and obligations had been such that he could not make time to see any of them.

"You still remember me," the maid's eyes filled with moisture.

"Of course, I remember you, Paddirwen Haradoriel. Do not think I forgot you or others because I have left Grey Haven."

Paddirwen grabbed Gil-galad's face and squeezed before Gil-galad could step back.

"Oh, Lady Silwen was right. You did not forget us. We still love you, too. You will always be our Little Ereinion."

"Paddi," Silwen gently pulled the maid's hands away from the king's face.

"Oh! Oh!" the maid took her hands away, her face red and her eyes wide.

"I am glad you still think of me as your Little Erenion," Gil-galad gave her a reassuring smile.

"There you all are!"

It was then that Captain Aron walked over, his steps hurried.

"Your majesty," the captain gave a formal military greeting.

"Captain," Gil-galad nodded, tamping down an irritation. He didn't know why he felt it. He didn't have any animosity toward Lord Cirdan's grandnephew, but since the Midsummer's Eve dinner, the Sindarin captain grated on his nerves.
"Excuse me, sire," he said, "I am here to escort Lady Silwen." The captain smiled warmly then turned to Silwen. "My lady, my warriors have already left the King's Tower. They wait for us at the city gate."

"Please excuse me, your majesty," Silwen said and bowed, taking the captain's offered hand.

"Of course," Gil-galad said and stepped aside to let her pass. He fisted his hands hiding them behind his back.

"Please come and visit us," Paddirwen said before following Silwen and the captain down the corridor.

When they turned a corner, Gil-galad ran up the stairs to the royal chambers. From his rooms, he had a clear view of all the sides of the King's Palace. At the balcony that faced the courtyard leading to the main gate, he saw the Sindarin captain helping Silwen onto her horse. Just as the captain and Paddirwen's horse moved ahead, Silwen stopped. For a moment, Gil-galad thought she would turn around and look up at him. But she stood there, on top of her horse, unmoving.

Gil-galad's heart hammered. If he ran down now, maybe he could…but the captain turned around and came back for her. Soon, she was gone, out of Gil-galad's line of sight. Gil-galad decided he didn't like the captain. Not at all.

The king walked toward his desk and grabbed the elaborately carved box gilded in gold. He needed to remind himself why he made the decision he did. He took out the key he held around his neck and tried to fit the key into the keyhole. After trying few times, he dropped the key and the box. He leaned into the desk as his chest heaved. He was drowning and unable to breathe.

*Why does it hurt so much?*

Warm drops fell onto the desk. For the last century, he had been busy structuring the new kingdom. The governing of the people and building of the city had taken most of his time and freed his mind of the thoughts of her. He thought he could bear the separation. But seeing her again, a burning knife stabbed at his heart.

*So weak. Why am I so weak? It was my decision. I chose this.*

He flung the golden box. It crashed against the wall and fell onto the granite floor. Despite the violence with which he threw it, the box remained unscathed. It will not break, nor will it burn. It was made with an enchantment to hold secrets.

Taking a quick breath, he furiously swiped away the moisture from his eyes. When he first made the choice, he knew the decision would hurt, but he had not known how deep it would cut him.

He looked around the sumptuously furnished room, with the white marble columns and story-tall windows arched and decorated with white wood. This was meant to be a home for both of them. He dreamed of raising children here with Silwen, children they would hold onto and never send away. Now, it was a prison, a gilded cage for the lone bird in chains of duty and obligation.

Gil-galad leaned into his hand.

A knock at his door made him look up. Gil-galad let out a long breath and schooled his features. He was taught better than this. He was the king. Taking a seat behind his desk, he cleared his throat.

"Come!"
A servant appeared.
"Your Majesty, Lord Commander is here."

"Bid him enter," Gil-galad said and stood up as Lord Gilmagor entered.

"I have a word from Celebrimbor. I thought you would want to know," Gilmagor said as he entered the king's chamber and thrust a crumpled paper in his hand.

"How is my cousin doing up North?" Gil-galad asked.

"He is talking with the Dwarves. Apparently, once Celebrimbor set up his furnace and had his smiths to work them, Dwarves took notice. As Celebrimbor planned, the sounds of their hammers have drawn them."

"Celebrimbor had worked with Dwarves before. He knew what he was doing."

"There's more. Celebrimbor thinks he could convince them to not only allow him and his warriors down in the ruins but provide guides as well."

Gil-galad opened his eyes wide. "That is excellent news! I have not thought it will go so smoothly or so quickly."

"Celebrimbor is persuasive if nothing else," said Gilmagor. "That is why I am here. We will have to send Thranduil and Elrond up earlier than we planned."

"But the Harvest Festival is not for another two weeks. Aren't the cadets involved in the festival? Besides, Lord Istuion and Captain Aron left with Lord Cirdan just now. They wouldn't be back until after the festival. And, that Green Elf we found among the recruits was sent up north just a few days ago."

While training the recruits, Elrond had found that one of the three Green Elves came from north beyond the boundary of Lindon. Elrond had brought the information to Gilmagor. Farion, the young Green Elf was brought to the king. But he had been as stubborn as his people. But after Thranduil was informed of the situation, both Elrond and Thranduil convinced the young Elf to return home to talk with the elders in his village. Even if Farion was unsuccessful, they thought Farion could introduce Elrond and Thranduil, easing them into a position to convince the people in the village.

"Celebrimbor thought it best to relocate the villagers before they flush out the dragons now that we need not fear war with the Dwarves. Even if the cold will affect their ability to fly, it may not lessen the potency of their fires. Even with the North Legion there, there could be casualties."

Gil-galad nodded. If they did not have a need for an excuse to send in their North Legion, then the faster they moved the villagers, better it was for all of them.

"But Lord Istuion and Captain Aron."

"Elrond and Thranduil would have to do without them. They are young but capable. I think they can manage. In any event, I will escort them myself with four other cadets. The rest could follow later as scheduled."

"Four other cadets? The Green Elves will not allow Noldor into their village. Are the cadets Sindar?"

"No, they are the two I have in mind to train myself. I want to test them, but to disperse any presumptions on the part of the cadets, I have decided to take their warrior companions with me as
well.

Gil-galad felt sudden heat rise to his head as he realized what Lord Gilamgor was saying.

"Master, am I to believe that you will not choose either Elrond or Thranduil as your pupil?"

Gilmagor nodded.

"If I may ask, why? What is wrong with Elrond that you will not train him? Does my sight deceive me? Because to my eyes, there is none who can defeat Elrond when it comes to swordplay. Cadets may think Belegor is better, but Elrond is the better swordsman in all ways except showmanship."

"He is."

Gil-galad relaxed the muscles that he had tensed.

"Then, you do understand my puzzlement why you wouldn't train him."

"Elrond is a good enough swordsman as is. There is nothing more I can teach him."

"I find that hard to believe, master." Gil-galad thought Elrond well skilled, but he had seen his master wield his swords. Even Captain Astalder, masterful as he was, could not compete with Lord Gilmagor.

"You mistake me, Ereinion. Elrond will be one of the finest swordsmen in Middle Earth; I agree. But, he will not be the best."

Gil-galad felt heat consume him. "I believe you underestimate him."

Gilmagor waved his hands in front of him. "Calm yourself, Ereinion. I was not talking of Elrond's ability. If we are talking of ability alone, I agree with you wholeheartedly. But it takes more than an ability to reach the top. Natural talent must be combined with heart, determination, and iron will. When they exist in harmony, then you can climb the heights of Taniquetil."

"And you doubt that Elrond possesses those traits?"

Gilmagor smiled. "The ability, determination and will, Elrond has. But his heart is not in it. And that makes all the difference.

"You think Elrond will not make a good warrior?"

"I did not say that, Ereinion. He will make good enough warrior and he doesn't need me for that. His skills were influenced by Maedhros and Maglor. They were two of my brightest students beside Glorfindel and Ecthelion."

"But he has been with them for so few years. Just fourteen years. And the time he learned to wield sword even less."

"If you think so, then it is you, Eirenion, who underestimate Elrond. You forget his Edain blood. Men learn quicker than us. Maybe it is their limited lifespan, but when they burn, they burn brighter."

"And yet, you do not think him worthy of your instruction."

Gilmagor let out a long sigh.

"It is not the matter of worthiness. Elrond makes a better councilor than a warrior. He is level-
headed, knowledgeable and wise."

"All the qualities a warrior needs as well." Gil-galad countered.

"But he rules with his heart. He is a better ruler than a general. In fact, Thranduil would make a better general than Elrond.

"What does the Sinda have that Elrond lacks?" Gil-galad shouted, then winced realizing he spoke louder than intended.

"A warrior needs heart, it is true, but in the heat of the battle, when the time is dark and needy, a general must be able to decide quickly, and at times, ruthlessly. There will be times when he must act with calculating accuracy before he can think. Thranduil can. Elrond thinks first with his heart." The Lord Commander moved over to a window. "I am not saying it is a fault. Those two complement each other as two warrior companions should. One for action, the other for thought. It is rare that one person has both qualities. That is the whole idea behind the pairing of the warriors."

"But I don't have a companion. And neither had my forefathers."

"You are the king. You have both the generals and advisers at your command. Besides, all high kings I have served had both qualities, except Feanor maybe."

Gilmagor's eyes clouded as he looked away out the window.

"All I am saying is that Elrond does not need to waste time learning further. He knows enough for his use. Instead, allow him to train as a councilor. He will be happier, and at the council, he will be your staunchest supporter."

"But you know as well as I, master, that our first job is to protect the people. Our word for "guardian" is not synonymous for the word prince and lord for no reason. He must be a surpassing warrior before he can be a councilor. You made sure I was both the king and the warrior. I want the same opportunity for Elrond. There is Lord Finwe's blood in his veins. I want Elrond taught alapentë."

"Alapentë? The Great Strike? You are aware that even among us, only the ones with great power can wield it even if they managed to learn it."

"You taught it to me, and I understand that you also taught it to Celebrimbor."

"Celebrimbor was born in Valinor, under the light of the trees. You were born with the power of the kings in your veins, Kings who were born in Valinor."

"So is Elrond. He has Idril's blood, my uncle's blood. Don't forget he also has a blood of Maia. If anyone can, he can."

Gilmagor frowned and stared at the king. Gil-galad met Gilmagor's intense stare. He gave up his love and freedom to meet the duty and obligation required of him. His wish will not be dismissed. He was the king and he will be obeyed.

"Is this a command?" Gilmagor asked after a moment.

"It is."

Silence flowed between them.
Gilmagor broke the gaze and bowed. "As you wish. You know how much it takes to learn that. If Elrond is willing, then I will teach him. If that is all, Sire, we will be leaving for the north within the week. Any other orders?"

Gil-galad picked up his chin but shook his head.

"Just out of curiosity. Why Thranduil? I thought his skills were average at best."

Gil-galad didn't care whether Thranduil was selected or not; the Sinda was given enough. But the king was curious what Gilmagor had seen in Thranduil. It was obvious to him that his swordmaster wanted to teach Thranduil, yet chose not to.

Gilmagor smiled, surprising the king.

"You haven't seen his skills lately. If you look out to the corner of the Sun Field after the midnight hour, you'll understand. Since the day he had come to Lindon, through rain and storm, he had been practicing alone at night. He has not missed a day. Even without talent, a strong will can sway the favor. And let me assure you, he is not without talent."

"Then, why not teach him? I see that you wish to."

"He does not want to learn from me," Gilmagor said and laughed out loud. Then, his face darkened. "And, there is much darkness in him. Much anger."

Gil-galad felt cold sweep his back at the look in his master. Then it came to him. Did he do the right thing keeping Thranduil in Lindon? The king wondered whether the dark seed that he was warned of referred to the son of Oropher.

Lord Ulu (Sindarin, Lord of Waters) refers to Vala Ulmo. He is a close friend of Manwe, lord of the world. Along with Vala Manwe and Vala Aule, they were the main architects of the world.

Mount Taniquetil is the highest mountain in the world. Located in Valinor, it is where the hall of Manwe and Varda is located.

Guardian—word for a guardian in Quenya is cundo. It also means lord, prince or a leader

Alapentë (Quenya, great strike)—a special technique taught to the most powerful of Noldor which allows the warrior to fight foes much greater than his height. (my invention)

Chapter End Notes

Chapter 38: White Jewel of Valinor--Thranduil's necklace and about his mother
White Jewels of Valinor

Chapter Summary

Two days before he is scheduled to leave for the north, Thranduil finds himself wondering if he could forgive and forget. He seeks strength from the only light he has, his necklace.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Star Field. September 10, Second Age 144

THRANDUIL leaned onto a young tree next to him. After the five-laps run around the entire training fields, the heat of the afternoon sun was stifling. It was even more so as they had been training since the sunrise without a rest or a meal.

All around him, the cadets were on the ground groaning, clustered under the shades thrown by the few trees outlining this corner of the Star Field. He, too, was tired, but not overly so. He was the only one standing. Even Elrond who was usually in perfect form sat slumped, leaning against a tree trunk. Other cadets were on their backs.

All those punishments had their uses, I guess.

Even after his disciplinary runs around the training fields ended, Thranduil had continued to run before sunrise every morning. It helped him clear his mind.

With a wry smile, Thranduil stretched to relax his muscles. He was glad that the cadets left him alone under the scant strip of shade thrown by the young tree.

It didn’t last, however.

“Move over,” Cellon gasped as he practically crawled over next to Thranduil.

“Go somewhere else,” Thranduil said, unwilling to relinquish the shade.

“Have some pity, you cold bastard,” Cellon said as he sprawled on the ground on top of Thranduil’s feet. “I am too tired. Too, too tired to move anywhere else.” Cellon’s breath was rough as the sea in storm, his chest, angry waves. “You’ll have to hurl me from this spot to make me move.”

Not too tired to prattle. Thranduil almost said it aloud, but instead, he pulled out his feet and moved out of the shade.

Officer Bellion walked over to them. Despite following everything the cadets did, the Noldorin officer seemed unaffected.

Thranduil straightened along with Elrond who managed to get up despite the exertion evident on his face. Other cadets tried, but barely.

“At ease. You are dismissed for the overdue meal. Line up here in two hours. We will talk about the
upcoming field training.”

Everyone plopped back onto the ground when the officer left.

Thranduil looked down at Cellon who sat leaning on the tree.

“Why don’t you come and sit with me,” Cellon tapped the ground next to him.

“I rather not,” Thranduil said and turned when his foot was pulled under him. It was only his reflex that prevented him from falling flat on his face.

“Do that again, and you wouldn’t be attending the field training,” Thranduil growled at Cellon who had yanked his foot.

Cellon waved his hands in front of him, his eyes wide, his laugh nervous. Among all the cadets besides Elrond, Cellon was the only one who still approached Thranduil freely. These days, few challenged or approached Thranduil, especially after they realized that Thranduil did not make idle threats.

“I advise you to think with your heart if it exists somewhere inside you. You hurt me, and you not only lose the only friend you have among the cadets besides Elrond, but you'll also have to answer to my Ithiliel. And, if you did not know, my Ithiliel and Lalaithwen are the best of friends.”

“And? Is that supposed to deter me?”

Ithiliel was Cellon’s wife. Cellon had dragged Thranduil on more than one occasion to his home during their rest day. His wife, a willowy Noldorin woman with laughing eyes, could outtalk her husband any day. Thranduil had never met anyone who talked and laughed as much as these two. When Thranduil returned home, mostly tipsy as the couple drank as much as they talked, he couldn’t get the buzz of their voices out of his ears for a day or two.

Thranduil sighed but sat down next to the talkative cadet. Cellon inched over and tried to put his arm around Thranduil’s shoulder, earning a glare. Cellon rolled his eyes but dropped his arm.

“Are you sure you are a Sinda, you frigid Orc? All the other Sindar I know are warm and friendly.”

“Then, go be friends with them.”

“I am friends with them,” Cellon laughed, his amber eyes lighting up. “You are coming tonight, yes? Tomorrow is a rest day. You have nothing to do except to pack for the travel. If you didn’t know, Lalaithwen is coming,” Cellon said and wriggled his eyebrows as if that would tempt Thranduil.

“And I made sure Belegor isn’t invited.” Cellon’s eyes shone like a jewel.

“Unfortunate. Less reason for me to be there.”

“Oh, come, come, you cold bastard. Who will feed you the tree mushrooms you like so much, hmmm? Or that potent wine you love? You and Elrond are leaving in two days. The ladies wouldn’t get to see you until Spring, and even I wouldn’t see you until the new moon.”

“Praise Valar!”

“You are going to miss me until the rest of the cadets arrive at the north marches,” Cellon promised. Then, he gave Thranduil a sly look. “Don’t you want to give Lalaithwen a goodbye kiss? Six months may not mean much, but a maid as beautiful as Lalaithwen, there are many suitors. And she is adventurous.”
“She is of no interest to me.”

Cellon narrowed his eyes.

“I cannot imagine you pretending affection for a lady when there was none. You danced with her all evening during midsummer, and her laughter rang through the night. She sent you bread she baked.”

“She laughed of her own accord. And I danced with her because I was her partner and was obligated. Even then, it was for Belegor’s sake.”

Cellon frowned.

“That does not seem fair to Lalaithwen. Belegor is an ass, but his actions are his own. I know that I am not easy on Belegor either, but he is not as bad as you think. It is important to him to be the best.”

“Who isn’t?”

“Have some understanding heart, you demon. He tries harder than others because he wants to surpass his brother and make his father proud.”

“Brother?”

“Aye. Belegor had an older brother. A brilliant warrior who died defending Lord Fingon, I believe. He grew up listening to how great his brother was. I don’t know the whole story, but I heard that Lord Lammaeg and his wife had Lalaithwen and Belegor to fill the void left by the loss of their only son. Belegor tries hard to fill that void.”

“For someone who cares not for Belegor, you seem to know much.”

Cellon laughed. “Did you not know? Erfaron is my brother-in-law. He is a close friend of Belegor. And I have nothing against Belegor if he would just leave my friends alone. He likes to boast, and I like to put him in his place,” Cellon laughed again, then sobered. “Still, it is Orc of you to use Lalaithwen. If she finds out that you were taking advantage of her to get at her brother…”

“She thought I was funny.” Thranduil shrugged.

“You told her?” Cellon looked outraged.

“I did.”

“Ai! You are an idiot. No wonder you are wifeless at your age. Why am I surrounded by idiots?” Cellon shook his head. “My other friend is too afraid and you too bold. Ai! Ai! I fear for Lassiel, indeed.


“Yes, yes. The healer. My friend has been in love with her for as long as I can remember. He was supposed to ask for her hand after getting into the cadet program, but he is stalling. Idiot! Both of you!”

“Which friend?”

Cellon had many friends. As far as Thranduil saw, the Noldo considered anyone who can walk and talk his friend.

Cellon narrowed his eyes and stood up.
“You are not interested in her, are you? My friend is about to ask her. Soon, I believe.”

“Which cadet?”

“I am not going to tell you. He won’t like it that I have even talked of it. But he had his heart set on her for years. He went through a tough ordeal a year ago while hunting up north. Besides losing mobility for few months, the ordeal left some wounds in him. He changed after the incident. He is no longer happy and carefree as he used to, but I am sure he will be himself soon.”

“Lassiel does not need anyone with wounds,” Thranduil said, realizing too late that he said too much.

“What is this? What do you know of Lassiel” Cellon pulled up his eyebrows up to his hairline.

Thranduil turned away. “Nothing. I know nothing of her.”

Cellon shook his head. “Do not talk of those you do not know.” He gestured toward Thranduil. “Come, let’s go and have something to eat. I could eat a whole deer!”

Thranduil grimaced. “What are you, a starved Dwarf? You go ahead. I want to rest first.”

“You will do as you wish no matter what I say,” Cellon threw his hands, then left Thranduil.

Relishing the silence, Thranduil leaned back onto the tree trunk, letting the soft music of the tree embrace him.

So much loss.

Sometimes, Thranduil forgot that Noldor had lost much during the past age. Thranduil remembered back to the tear-stained face of the healer. She had lost her brother, too. Apparently, Belegor did as well. Thranduil did not like the Noldo and Belegor’s father even less, but they, too, have lost their loved ones. Thranduil’s heart clenched. Maybe his mother was right; they were all the same. Maybe the grief had changed them, too.

Still, they are Noldor.

“These people here in Lindon are not the same Noldor who attacked us at Menegroth and Sirion… Do you understand, Thranduil? Do not lump all Noldor together as one.”

Lord Istuion’s words echoed in Thranduil’s mind. Although he hated to admit it, Thranduil knew there were good people here: Elrond, Captain Astalder, Cellon and his family, even the officers who trained them. They were stern but fair, except Gilmagor maybe.

Thranduil sighed as he leaned his head back to rest it on the trunk of the tree. He wished it was easy to just forget. To forget, maybe to forgive and perhaps to be forgiven. But every night, the images of his brother, his neck spewing blood as the Noldorin sword sliced through it, filled his eyes; the screams of the queen and the wailings of the twins filled his ears; and, the thick smoke of Queen Melian’s tapestries burning filled his lungs.

Thranduil grabbed at his left chest as it clenched tightly.

*How could I forget? How could I forgive or be forgiven?*

He had given up being forgiven. But could he really forget those terrible sounds and sights that hounded him every night?
“When you let go of the winter, spring will come. I promise you, my son. But first, you must want it.” His mother’s words swelled up from the depth of his memory.

Thranduil closed his eyes tightly and grabbed at the necklace he wore. The image of his mother falling, her golden hair bright under the sunlight as she fell like an Autumn leaf, her blood staining her gray garment red.

Forgive them? How? They killed her, his gentle mother who, even after she lost her first-born son to a Noldorin blade, had admonished Thranduil for saying he hated the Noldor.

“Hate is a poison in your drinking well, Arantaur,” his mother had said. “It harms not only you; it harms those who love you and those you love. It is a worse thing than a guilt. Let it go, my son. Hate only breeds hate.”

Carefully, Thranduil took off the necklace and peeled off the thin leather strip and smiled at what lay underneath. It was a row of seven white gems on a mithril chain. He fingered the bright white gems of uncommon brilliance that sparkled like stars under the dapple of sunlight. It was a prominent part of an elaborate necklace once, but all were gone now to feed, clothes and arm his father’s followers. These seven gems were all that was left of his mother’s legacy.

The bright white light of the jewels calmed his turbulent heart as if his mother was with him. In it, Thranduil felt his mother’s presence, her gentle touch, and her quiet love.

*Mother, give me the strength to forget.*

Somewhere in his heart, he felt his mother smile, a patient, loving, but also waiting. Thranduil sighed and smiled.

*And, maybe to forgive. Maybe.*

He did not dare ask for forgiveness, but the light of the gems twinkled and brightened his heart.

“What’s this!”

Someone snatched the necklace right out of Thranduil’s hand.

Thranduil shot up. Belegor pulled back, out of Thranduil’s reach, the white necklace gleaming in his hand.

“Belegor! Don’t do this,” Thranduil said as his heart began to beat, faster and faster as the heat wrapped around him. Thranduil held onto the feeling of the light the necklace had given him just a moment ago, but seeing his mother’s necklace in the hands of one of the Noldor burned him.

“Give it back, and I will let you walk away. Belegor!” Thranduil took in a long breath to keep himself in control. “Please.”

Thranduil wanted to hold onto the light, but it was fading fast.

“These are no ordinary gems. You ignorant lot cannot make gems like these. Where did you get it, Dark Elf?” Belegor asked, frowning down at the sparkling rows of gems in the chain.

The darkness nipped at the back of Thranduil’s neck. He could feel himself losing control.

“Just give it back to me,” Thranduil said, struggling to sound level. He thrust his empty palm forward. His heart hammered faster.
Belegor frowned and stepped back again. “Where did you get it? It can’t be yours.”

“Return. It. Now.” Thranduil ground his teeth as he fisted his hands.

But, Belegor stepped back further and put his hands behind him.

As soon as the light of the necklace vanished behind Belegor, whatever force that checked Thranduil disappeared.

Thranduil growled and pounced.

But, Belegor sidestepped and blocked Thranduil’s hand reaching for the necklace. In one smooth motion, Belegor bent to one side, then swung a punch, knocking out Thranduil’s breath.

Thranduil grabbed his face where pain bloomed. He looked at his hand and saw blood.

Boiling anger sizzled through Thranduil’s veins and took from him the last bit of control. Thranduil let out a feral growl and flew at Belegor.

Thranduil grabbed Belegor’s neck and hurled him down onto his back. In a blink, Thanduil sat astride Belegor and pummeled the Noldo and let him have it all.

“You just couldn’t leave me alone! Could you? You piece of crap!” Thranduil spat with each strike.

Something whipped through the air. Thranduil’s back exploded into sharp pain, stopping Thranduil.

“Get off him this instant!”

A sharp command brought Thranduil his reason and sanity. Breathing like angry beast Thranduil glared up at Gilmagor who stood above him with a sheathed sword in his hand ready to strike again. There was a ring of cadets all around him and Belegor.

It was then that the young Sinda realized that his fists were bloody with bright red blood. He looked down at Belegor who lay under him, groaning. Belegor’s face was a bloody mess.

Frowning, Thranduil got up and moved away from Belegor. As much as he disliked Belegor, he had not meant to go this far. Thranduil tried to calm the wildly beating heart and the heat that had taken hold of his body.

“He stole a necklace!”

Belegor sat up when Thranduil moved away. The young Noldo wrapped his bleeding face with one hand and pointed the other at Thranduil, still clutching the necklace.

“It belongs to me!” Thranduil said through clenched teeth.

The calm that he tried to hold onto vanished the instant Thranduil saw the necklace in Belegor’s bloody hand. Thranduil went for the jewelry, but a sharp pain behind his knees made him tumble onto the ground with a groan.

The pain was blinding, but Thranduil clenched his teeth and swallowed another groan.

“Lord Gilmagor, please! There is no need to hurt him,” Elrond stepped forward from among those gathered. He helped Belegor up. Then, he stretched out his hand toward Thranduil. Thranduil slapped it away.
“I will not tolerate the uncivilized behavior in my cadets. You will behave like an intelligent, educated Elf or I will treat you like witless, wild Orc if you insist on acting like one. Do I make myself clear, Thranduil Oropherion?”

Thranduil glared up at the sword master, rubbing the back of his legs. There were thousands of things he wanted to say, but he pursed his lips and bit his tongue.

“Well?” the sword master’s word was like a whip.

Thranduil nodded once, then turned away. He had not wanted this, but he couldn’t stand seeing the necklace covered in Noldorin blood. But Thranduil knew any further outburst from him would cost him dearly.

“And, you, Belegor,” the sword master looked at Belegor. “You are not to accuse someone of a crime without proof.”

“But, I have proof. Look for yourself, my lord. This is a jewel from Valinor.” Belegor who has scrambled up opened his palm.

Gilmagor thrust his hand toward Belegor, and the young Noldo handed the necklace to the sword master.

Gilmagor took the gems and wiping off the blood, examined it. As he turned the gems over his hands, his face paled.

“Where did you get this, Oropherion?”

Thranduil lifted his chin and looked back at the sword master.

“It is mine. That is all you need to know,” Thranduil said.

Frowning dark gray eyes met and held his eyes, but Thranduil glared back at Lord Gilmagor. The keen light in them had ceased to affect him for some time now.

“Lieutenant Gwendir!” Lord Gilmagor called, his eyes still on Thranduil. “Brief the cadets on our upcoming field training. I will take Thranduil and Belegor with me.” Then, he turned to Elrond who stood aside. “You come, too.”

Soon, four of them were in front of the king. After being advised by Lord Commander, Gil-galad dismissed all others except for the four involved Elves and Lord Lammaeg who insisted he had a right to be there as the father of Belegor if not as the chief councilor to the king.

After Elrond was asked to relay what happened to the king and the chief councilor, the necklace was handed over to them to look over.

“It certainly is not something from this land,” said Lammaeg. “Even from Valinor, this quality of stones is rare. But it is not only the quality of the stones. I have never held stones of this shape although they look familiar to me.”

“I have seen this necklace, my lord,” Gilmagor said. “This is a portion of a larger, more elaborate piece. The seven tear-drop diamonds that used to hang on the front of a larger piece. They are the only ones of its kind I have seen.”

Lammaeg’s face darkened.
“Yes. I remember now. Lady Elenwe wore them,” the councilor said. “A wedding gift from her lady mother or was it the queen?”

“And, at Gondolin, I have seen it worn by her daughter Idril,” Gilmagor said.

Lammaeg turned dark eyes to Thranduil. The young Sinda glared back at the councilor, holding his chin higher.

“You arrogant dark elf, there is no way this could belong to you,” Lammaeg growled.

“Watch your language, Lord Lammaeg!” Gil-galad frowned at his chief councilor.

“Thranduil is not a dark elf, Lord Lammaeg. He is a Sinda from Doriath!” Elrond said, frowning at the councilor.

“Sinda or not, no real Elf would do anything violent as to hit another Elf bloody!” Lammaeg said pointing to Belegor’s bloody face.

“Are you sure of that, Lord Lammaeg? I know of Noldor who have done much worse,” scoffed Thranduil as he watched everyone gathered turned red at his words.

“You are out of line, Oropherion,” Gilmagor warned, his eyes hard, his words like ice.

“You all have already decided I am guilty. How much worse can it get?” Thranduil challenged.

Gil-galad sighed.

“Thranduil, we are not trying to gain up on you. We are just trying to find out how you came by the jewels. These are no ordinary gems, which I am sure you are aware.”

“Many things were lost during First Age. Mayhap, he found them?” Elrond said quietly. “He couldn’t possibly have stolen them, my lord. That is ridiculous. Thranduil is many things, but he is no thief.”

“I did not ‘find’ them, Peredhel,” Thranduil said through gritted teeth as he turned to Elrond. “It was given to me by my mother.”

“Your mother?” Lammaeg said. “And how did your mother come by it?”

“Maybe his mother stole it,” Belegor said.

What little control Thranduil had snapped as fire erupted from his head and pulled him into the dark, fiery chasm.

“You little Orc shit! How dare you blacken my mother’s name!” roared Thranduil.

Thranduil flew at Belegor. Forgive and forget? Not until he ripped that foul, Noldorin mouth off that Orc with his bare hands! But before he could grab Belegor, his arms were snatched from him. Thranduil bucked as both Elrond and Gilmagor held firmly to his arms and pulled him away.

“Do you not see, my lords? He is violent and unfit. Certainly not an officer material. How do we know he is telling the truth? He grew up near where Lady Idril settled at Sirion. There was an opportunity.” Lammaeg looked at Thranduil with disdain.

“How dare you, you filth!”
Thranduil snarled at Belegor ignoring Lammaeg. He didn’t care that they thought him a liar or a thief. But, how dare Belegor besmirch his noble mother’s name? Thranduil strained to get at Belegor. He was going to choke the life out of that filth.

“Thranduil, stop this!” Elrond pleaded, clamping his arms harder around Thranduil’s arm and shoulder, trying to hold Thranduil back. “Acting like this will not help you. Please, Thranduil, calm yourself.”

“Yes, Thranduil. Act like an Elf, not an animal,” Belegor said.

Thranduil loosed a mighty roar, shook off Elrond and Gilmagor and lunged at Belegor.

Something whistled in the air, and Thranduil felt a sharp pain on the back of his head before he fell heavily onto the floor, his hands clutching at Belegor who cried out as the Noldo fell backward with Thranduil on top of him.

Chapter End Notes

Next: Chapter 39 Demons and Guardians--Lord Istuion is brought in to answer questions regarding Thranduil's mother and the necklace
Gilmagor makes a decision and Lord Istuion, designated guardian of Thranduil, is called to the Great Hall to answer questions regarding the necklace and Thranduil’s mother.

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

Great Hall. September 10, Second Age 144

GIL-GALAD watched, unsure what to do. Everything had happened at once. Belegor’s shocking accusation hardly registered in Gil-galad’s head when Thranduil lunged at Belegor. Gilmagor and Elrond were thrown back when Gilmagor’s hand moved with lightning speed.

Thranduil fell forward taking Belegor down with him, Sinda’s hands still clutching the front of Belegor’s tunic. Belegor’s cry echoed through the Great Hall as he was thrown down onto his back with Thranduil on top of him.

As soon as the bodies of the two cadets hit the floor, the door to the Great Hall crashed open, and the royal guards burst onto the scene, their weapons drawn.

Gil-galad stood there frozen when his uncle gestured to the guards and pointed to the blond Sinda sprawled on the floor. Elrond helped Belegor up, then hovered over Thranduil, checking over the Sinda. Gilmagor walked to the body on the floor and looked down at Thranduil who remained still like a broken doll on the stone floor.

“Lock him in a cell!” Lammaeg ordered the guards. Two of the four guards who had burst into the hall approached Thranduil.

Gilmagor lifted his face. His gray eyes glinted with a fierce light, a sight terrible to behold.

The guards faltered and stepped back. They turned to Gil-galad, obviously unsure what to do.

“Your Majesty, we cannot have violent Elves like this Sinda walk around Lindon,” Lammaeg said. “He is mad! Can you not see, Sire? Look what he did to my son? Doesn’t that require punishment? Will you allow a mad Elf to roam among the people outside, train with the cadets who are supposed to be the best of our youth?”

“Your Majesty, if I may.” Gilmagor moved over to Gil-galad. “I haven’t known Thranduil Oropherion for long. But, I can tell you that I have never known Thranduil to lie. He is usually too honest, sometimes brutally so. If he did wrong, he would be the one to tell you so, to your face. He is arrogant like that. I don’t know why this necklace is in his possession, but Thranduil I know is too damn proud to steal.” Gilmagor sighed and continued. “He is impetuous and hot-tempered. It makes him do and say stupid things at times, but he is no liar.”

“Then, tell me, Lord Commander.” Lord Lammaeg who had been examining his son, turned to the sword master. “How did Thranduil come by the necklace? You yourself identified it as something...
Lady Idril wore at Gondolin. I certainly remember it being worn by Lady Elenwe when she married Lord Turgon.”

Gilmagor pursed his lips, looked away at Thranduil who lay on the floor still unconscious.

“I do not know,” Gilmagor said after a moment of silence. He turned to the king. “If you would, my lord, you should speak to Lord Istuion. If the gems really did belong to his mother, surely Lord Istuion would know. Did you not send a messenger after him the day he left with Lord Cirdan?”

Gil-galad nodded as he let out a sigh and a brief prayer of thanks to the Valar for giving him the foresight to send a messenger after Lord Istuion soon after the news from Celebrimbor. He had thought it prudent to inform Thranduil’s guardian of the change in plan. Lord Istuion had turned his horse around and had returned to the White City, choosing to accompany Thranduil rather than to travel to Gray Havens.

Now, Gil-galad was relieved that it would only be a matter of hours not days to hear from Lord Istuion.

“Yes. That would be a good idea. Please send for him.”

“In the meantime, your majesty. Thranduil should be kept in a cell to cool his head,” Lammaeg said.

Gil-galad nodded.

“Sire!” Elrond protested, his gray eyes fierce with disapproval. “He should be sent to the infirmary to be looked after, not to a cell.”

“He is only knocked unconscious. If anyone needs to go to the infirmary, it is my son. Thranduil will wake shortly, but when he does, will he behave in a civilized manner?”

“Had your son behaved in a more civilized manner, Thranduil may have,” Gilmagor said.

Both the father and the son flushed red at Gilmagor’s words.

Lord Lammaeg’s eyes flashed. “It was Oropher’s son who beat my son bloody, not the other way around, Lord Commander. And it is Thranduil’s guilt that is being questioned, not my son’s. And if it weren’t for my son, we wouldn’t have known that this Sinda had one of the royal jewels.”

“Enough!” Gil-galad gestured the guards toward Thranduil.

The best way to end this dispute was to conclude the matter as soon as possible, Gil-galad decided. Keeping Oropher’s son at Lindon was becoming more a hassle than its worth.

“Take him to the cell. Keep him there until he awakes and is calm,” Gil-galad ordered.

The guards nodded, then each picking up Thranduil’s arm dragged him out of the Great Hall.

“Sire! You can’t just have Thranduil put in a cell when we do not know what the story is,” Elrond protested.

“What is there to know? He had something that didn’t belong to him,” Belegor said as he straightened.

“That is enough out of you, Lammaegion.” Gilmagor threw a dagger glance at Belegor who clamped his mouth shut. “You are dismissed. Have your injury examined, then return to the training field.”
Belegor looked toward his father, and thankfully, Lammaeg nodded back in agreement. Gil-galad was glad. The king did not want any more inflammatory comments. It was getting complicated as was.

“Sire, please. Is confinement necessary?” Elrond protested again.

“It is just until I speak with Lord Istuion, Elrond. Mayhap it will do him good to cool down in a cell for a little while. Just until I speak with Lord Istuion.”

Gilmagor frowned mightily at that but seemed resigned to Gil-galad’s judgment for which the king was grateful. Elrond looked on Gil-galad pleadingly, but the king turned away.

*The Sinda is unconscious and cannot contribute anything anyway,* Gil-galad reasoned, remembering the volcanic heat from Thranduil before he jumped Belegor. Gil-galad had never seen such anger and hatred in an Elf. The king had heard of such anger. His own *grandfather* had challenged Morgoth out of great wrath. But Gil-galad had never heard of Elf attacking another Elf out of rage and hatred. Even the attacks on the Teleri and the Sindar were out of a desire to recover Silmaril and not out of hatred for other Elves.

*It was the right decision for the safety of all,* Gil-galad comforted himself.

Lord Lammaeg excused himself to accompany Belegor to the infirmary. As they were about to move away, Gilmagor spoke.

“One more thing Lammaegion.” Gilmagor’s voice was grave but firm. “When you return to the training field, please inform Lieutenant Gwendir that you will be unable to accompany Thranduil and Elrond up north. Tell him to inform the next cadet who will ride in your stead.”

‘Sir?’ Belegor looked lost.

Realizing what his master meant, Gil-galad felt sorry for Beleg. He knew how hard Belegor had worked to be chosen.

“What is this?” Lord Lammaeg asked.

“As you are aware, Councilor, I am taking Thranduil and Elrond up north the day after tomorrow. No matter the outcome of this incident that will not change. The matter with the Green Elves is too important. I had planned to take four other cadets up with me, as a precaution, you understand, as we will be traveling without guards and the speed is necessary. But I see now that Belegor will need time. He can ride with the rest of the cadets.” Then Gilmagor turned to Belegor. “You are dismissed.”

“Sir!” Belegor saluted and left the Great Hall. But Lord Lammaeg did not follow his son.

Instead, the Chief Councilor glared at Gilmagor. It was obvious to Gil-galad that his uncle understood if Belegor did not. The temperature in the room went down a notch as silence flowed. Elrond looked as lost as Belegor was as he looked at Lord Lammaeg then at the Swordmaster.

“I thought you did not let your personal feelings interfere.”

“I did not. You will know that if you see with reason.”

“I see perfectly fine. Skill, bravery, determination. They are all there. Yet, you will choose the deviant over your own kin?”
“It is more than that.” Gilmagor sighed. “We’ll talk of it later. This is not the time nor the place.”

“Unless you change your mind, I do not see how we can come to an understanding. You are making a mistake, Lord Commander.”

“That is for me to judge.”

Lammaeg’s face didn’t change, but having known his uncle since he was a child, Gil-galad didn’t miss the flicking of the robe sleeve as Lord Lammaeg straightened the lines of it. His uncle was incensed. Gil-galad’s head hammered.

“Well, it certainly is. Please, excuse me, Your Majesty, while I look to my son’s ‘unjust’ injury.”

With that, Lord Lammaeg left the hall after his son.

“Is this necessary?” Gil-galad turned to Gilmagor once his uncle disappeared behind the doors.

No matter how often they clashed, ultimately, his master and his uncle were friends who drank together once the heat of their clash at council meetings dissipated. But, Gil-galad had seen how a doting parent could become unreasonable when a matter dealt with their children. His uncle would not take this matter lightly, and the king was sure Gilmagor knew this as well.

“When you know you have made the right decision, you have to take a stand, no matter how difficult it is. I did not decide this lightly.”

It was then that Gil-galad realized that the swordmaster had another cadet ready. Belegor must have been walking a very thin line.

“My lords!” Elrond’s call brought them back to the problem at hand. “Shouldn’t we talk about Thranduil? He is in a cell!”

Gil-galad sighed. Why can’t problems happen one at a time? Gil-galad moaned inwardly. It seemed that when things occurred, they piled on, one after another.

Gil-galad sighed again but turned to Elrond.

“You disagree with my uncle, Elrond?” the king asked.

“I do not know Thranduil enough to make a judgment, my lord. He usually keeps to himself. But, if you ask me only of my own belief, I do not think so. He is difficult to understand at times. I agree that he is arrogant and proud, but I have never seen him being devious or unfair. As Lord Gilmagor said, Thranduil is more at fault of being brutally honest than the other way around.”

Gil-galad turned to the sword master. “Did you know Thranduil’s mother when you were at Sirion?”

“Alas, no. We never formally met. I don’t even know how she looks like. She always wore a healer’s hood in a way that concealed most of her face. And she kept away from most of us, speaking only to Lady Idril. And now that I think of it, I do not remember seeing her talk to anyone directly except Lady Idril. But the time being what it was, I did not pay much attention to her. Only thing I can say is that although Oropher never came to visit us, or allowed us to visit him or his people, his lady wife came bringing with her some of Oropher’s people who brought food and supplies to help us settle in Sirion.”

“So is it possible that Idril gave the necklace to Thranduil’s mother in gratitude?”

“Absolutely not.” Gilmagor shook his head. “The gems are not only rare, but it would have had too much emotional significance to Lady Idril for her to have given it away.”
“I don’t understand then what is your thought, Lord Gilmagor. You don’t think Thranduil lied, but you also don’t think the necklace could have belonged to him, then…” Gil-galad stopped.

Gilmagor shook his head again, his face dark and worried. “Let us wait for Lord Istuion. Maybe he could bring some light to this matter,” he said gravely.

“Elrond, do you remember anything of Thranduil’s mother or the necklace?” Gil-galad asked.

Elrond flushed.

“I am afraid, I don’t remember much of my time at Sirion. Lady Idril sailed long before I was born and I remember only my mother’s face. All others are just fragments of images and feelings.”

“You were a mortal at that time and just a child. It is to be expected,” Gil-galad reached out and squeezed Elrond’s arm. He hoped this matter did not bring Elrond any bad memories. The king was sure the memories were not pleasant although Elrond had never talked of it.

It was then that Lord Istuion was announced and ushered into the Great Hall. As the Sindarin lord approached where Gil-galad sat, the chief councilor slipped in behind Lord Istuion.

Istuion bowed respectfully to the king. He was one of only handful of Sindar in Oropher’s service who did not begrudge a show of respect to Gil-galad.

“I apologize for asking you to come on such short notice, Lord Istuion. I have some grave matter that deals with Thranduil.”

Gil-galad didn’t miss Istuion tense visibly. The king wasn’t surprised. The last time the palace had sent for Lord Istuion, it was to attend a council meeting on Thranduil’s behalf where Lord Cael had wanted to banish the blond Sinda for cutting off his son’s hair.

“I wish to ask about Thranduil’s mother,” the king said.

That caught him off guard, the king noted.

“Lady Arinariel? There isn’t much I could inform your majesty. What can I assist you with, Sire?” Istuion said, his voice guarded.

“Hasn’t she been with Lord Oropher for a long time? I thought you knew her well.”

“She was a healer, a very good one. But she kept mostly to herself. Only people who really knew her were Oropher, Lord Arandur, and Queen Melian. Our queen was very fond of her. Especially after Lady Galadriel left Doriath, Lady Arinariel and the queen were inseparable.”

“What do you know about her family?” Lord Lammaeg asked.

Istuion turned to look at the councilor then back at the king.

“May I ask why I am asked these questions about my lord’s lady wife?”

“Please forgive us. But, we are just trying to find the truth. Thranduil was found with this.” The king handed the necklace of gems in his hand to Istuion. “These are gems of uncommon beauty and brilliance. This quality of diamonds is rare even in Valinor I have been told. Have you ever seen it?”

“No, I have not,” Istuion said.

“Thranduil claims it is from his mother.”
Istuion frowned. “If he says it is from his mother, then it is so.”

“But, how did such rare gems from Valinor come into his hands, or hers if what he claims is true,” the councilor said.

Istuion’s gentle gray eyes turned to granite as he turned to the councilor.

“Thranduil is not a liar.”

“Then, explain to me how he came by it,” Lammaeg said coolly.

Istuion pursed his lips and took in a big breath. After a moment’s silence, he said gravely. “I cannot.”

Lammaeg’s eyes gleamed, his face bright.

“As you can see, Your Majesty, even Thranduil’s guardian cannot explain.”

“But, Thranduil is not a liar. I have never known him to lie,” Istuion said, his voice tight, his brows furrowed.

“We are not saying that he is a liar, my lord. We are just trying to find how he came by the necklace,” the king said gently. He had no wish to anger Istuion. Although he is a Sinda and a close friend of Oropher, Lord Istuion commanded respect from many Noldor who knew him, besides being Lord Cirdan’s nephew.

“Maybe Lady Arinariel brought it from Valinor,” Istuion suggested.

“His mother is from Valinor?” Lammaeg asked.

“Yes, she came with Lady Galadriel.”

Gilmagor and Lammaeg glanced at each other then frowned.

“What is her relationship with Lady Galadriel?” the councilor asked.

“I do not know,” Istuion said. “Lady Arinariel was a healer under Lady Galadriel’s service, and Lady Galadriel considered her a friend. That is all I know. None of us was told of her family, and none of us asked. Oropher loved her, and that was enough.”

“Was she a Noldo?” Gil-galad frowned. He couldn’t imagine Oropher with a Noldorin wife, but if she came with Lady Galadriel, it was likely.

“I…” Lord Istuion looked hesitant. “I am not sure. As I said, we did not ask.”

“So what do you know?” Lammaeg said, his voice scathing. “And if she was just a healer and nothing more, she could not have afforded such gems as those.”

“I may not know her, but if Thranduil said he received the necklace from his mother, then he received it from his mother,” Istuion said with such conviction, no one doubted that the elder lord believed it.

“Then, maybe it is his mother who stole…”

“Lammaeg!” Gilmagor hissed, stopping Lord Lammaeg from saying further.

“Careful, Lord Lammaeg,” Gil-galad growled with a warning glance to his uncle. He did not want
this matter to get out of hand. It was already becoming a bigger matter than he wanted.

Lord Istuion went rigid. His silver eyes glinted like a sheen on a naked blade as he turned them toward the chief councilor.

“If you have ever known Lady Arinariel, you wouldn’t dare even suggest…”

“How would you know? It seems you know nothing of her although she has been with Oropher for centuries,” Lammaeg countered.

“I do not know much about her. It is true. But, if you have ever met her, you’ll know that she was the kindest, noblest and the gentlest lady there ever was.”

“I’ll have you know, Lord Istuion, that this necklace was given to Lady Elenwe at her wedding and was given to her daughter, Lady Idril, who wore it at Gondolin,” said Lammaeg, but Gilmagor stepped forward in front of Lammaeg.

“Please excuse us, Lord Istuion,” Gilmagor said. “We do not want to insinuate anything, but if you can forgive our intrusion, we would like to know if Lady Arinariel knew Lady Idril well, maybe even from Valinor?”

“I do not know,” Istuion flushed. “I did not meet Lady Idril, and I was not in Lady Arinariel’s confidence so I cannot say anything about that.”

Istuion looked about the Great Hall then. “Thranduil may know of this as he sometimes accompanied his mother when our lady went to visit the Noldor. Where is Thranduil? Shouldn’t he be here? We are discussing him, after all.”

“He…he is in a cell,” Elrond said, looking very apologetic.

Lord Istuion’s face which had remained calm throughout the questioning turned pale and cold, reminding Gil-galad of a winter forest.

“Your Majesty! You would imprison Oropher’s son without first determining the truth?”

“He attacked my son!” Councilor Lammaeg said before Gil-galad could reply. “Your violent ward beat my son bloody.”

“If your son behaved anything like you did just now, then I am not surprised. If Thranduil had not, I would have,” Istuion said.

“How dare you!”

“How DARE YOU!” roared Istuion surprising everyone in the room. As far as Gil-galad knew him, Istuion was a soft-spoken Elf who rarely raised his voice nor looked upon anyone with a frown.

“Is it not enough that the boy is traumatized by the horrors he witnessed as a child? He lost his mother, brother and grandfather to the swords of Noldor. Now, you accuse him of thievery and lying?”

Lord Istuion’s eyes were fierce as he scanned the room to rest on Lammaeg.

“And now, you insult his mother.”

The Sindarin lord turned his blazing eyes to the king.
“Despite my misgivings, I have done what you asked of me. You asked me to convince Lord Oropher to let his son stay here so that he can become a bridge to our two kin sundered by the horrors committed by Feanor’s sons. I did as you asked, going against the wishes of my lord and friend because I believed in the greater good it could bring. But, how is throwing Thranduil in a cell, over a crime that is not even proven, going to do that? If you cannot trust him, then how is he to trust you?”

There was so much grief in the eyes of the Sindarin lord, Gil-galad’s heart was rendered in two.

“It is true that he is insufferable at times. Believe me, Your Majesty, Thranduil is a handful. I know. But the boy is burdened with much grief and sorrow. I know that does not excuse all of his behaviors, but if you treat him as a miscreant first before giving him a chance, then miscreant he will be. Please, I beg you, Your Majesty. Give him a chance, and you’ll see the noble and generous heart that beats below the coat of thorns he wears.

You cannot hope the relationship among Noldor and Sindar to change by just expecting only us to change, for Thranduil to change. You must change, too,” Istuion said looking at the king, then at others. “Have you, lords, any one of you stopped to consider for even for a moment that this necklace, however unlikely it may seem, does actually belong to Thranduil? Instead of thinking about the various ways in which his words cannot be true, have you just trusted him and gave him the benefit of the doubt?”

Gil-galad could not hold the Sindarin lord’s gaze, and he looked away.

“I thought not,” Istuion looked up at the ceiling and sighed. The sound, like a stray wind in the midst of winter, chilled Gil-galad and he was sorely sorry to have brought this grief to the Sindarin lord.

“That may be so,” said the chief councilor, his voice much subdued. “But even you admit that his behavior is insufferable. Are we to tolerate that? He is not the only one who suffered. Many of us who lived through the First Age suffered, too. And Thranduil was not the only child who witnessed violence. Elrond and his brother were only six years old when they were taken captive by the kinslayers, but you do not see Elrond behaving in such manner as your ward,” said Lammaeg.

Gil-galad felt Elrond bristle beside him. But before his cousin could speak, the king took hold of Elrond’s arm. As much as he hated to put Istuion through it, it was something the king wondered himself. The First Age was tragic for most of his people. It was true that Thranduil was a child, but so was Elrond. In fact, his cousin was younger at Sirion than Thranduil was when Menegroth was attacked.

Istuion’s face hardened.

“What do you know of Thranduil?” asked Istuion. “It is true that Lord Elrond and his brother were taken when they were children, but it is my knowledge that the kinslayers have done right by them. Elrond and Elros may have witnessed the horror of Sirion, but their demons turned out to be the guardians. At least, the twins have learned to trust under Feanor’s sons. But what has Thranduil learned?” Istuion’s voice went up a notch. “To him, Feanor’s sons were guardians. When they came, Thranduil thought they were guards, and like all Elven children who were taught to trust their guards, he trusted, but Thranduil’s guardians turned out to be the demons who betrayed his trust and slaughtered his family in front of him.” Lord Ishuion’s voice trembled as his voice rose higher. “Do you know what that does to a trusting child, councilor? It plunged him into a dark abyss and almost killed him. It took his mother and Lady Elwing years to bring Thranduil out of that darkness, to plunge him back into it again when Sirion…”

Lord Istuion’s words trembled to a stop, his eyes shimmered. There was so much grief there, Gil-
galad could not look upon the elder lord.

Silence swept the stone walls of the Great Hall as everyone averted their eyes as the rough breath of the Sindarin lord came in fast and rapid like a small storm. Istuion looked up at the ceiling as his breathing slowed, then he continued in a voice much calmer.

“Do not compare one person’s tragedy to another, Councilor. It may seem to all that they are similar, but it isn’t. To Lord Elrond, the demons turned out to be the guardians, but for Thranduil, the guardians turned out to be the demons, and that made all the difference.”

Istuion straightened, returned the necklace and looked directly at the king. “As I said, I do not know much about Lady Arinariel. You should seek that from Lady Galadriel as it was she who brought Lady Arinariel to Doriath.”

________________

Gil-galad’s grandfather, **Fingolfin**, was the high king of Noldor during the most of First Age. When Morgoth broke the Siege of Angband in the Dagor Bragollach (Battle of Sudden Flames) when dragons were first introduced, many Elves died, and many parts of Beleriand destroyed. In “wrath and hate” Fingolfin rode to Angband alone and challenged Morgoth in which duel Fingolfin perished.

*There is no known incident of Elf attacking another Elf except for the kinslaying by Feanor and his sons (attack on Menegroth and Sirion) and that of Eol killing Aredhel (Turgon’s sister who died to protect her son from Eol’s poisoned dart) when he tried to take his son with him to death (he had a choice to die or live in Gondolin and Eol chose death). For this crime, Turgon executed Eol by throwing him off a cliff. Eol’s son Maeglin is the only known betrayer of Elves for being captured by Morgoth and giving up the location of Gondolin in exchange for Idril and the lordship of Gondolin. But in none of these cases, killing of Elves by Elves was done out of hatred for another Elf.*

**Elenwe** (Quenya, *Star person*)—Wife of Turgon (Fingon’s younger brother, thus Gil-galad’s uncle) and mother of Idril. She was known as the only pure Vanya known to have accompanied Noldor in their flight to Middle Earth. While crossing Helcaraxe, she perished. Turgon never forgave Feanor and his sons for this loss. Elenwe passed her golden hair to Idril, making Idril one of the few Elves in Middle Earth with golden hair of Vanyar.

Chapter End Notes

Next, Chapter 40 will be up next Sunday due to Thanksgiving. Have a great Thanksgiving and thank you all for reading and especially for the reviews. Thank you so much.
Lady Galadriel tells those gathered the story of Thranduil's mother.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

**GIL-GALAD** ordered the guards to bring Thranduil back to the Hall when the Sinda wakes. It was then that Lady Galadriel glided into the Great Hall. The king was glad that Lady Galadriel was in the King's Tower and could be summoned quickly. Otherwise, this inquiry would have taken days. No matter what his uncle may say, it wouldn't do to keep Oropher's son in a cell for days on end. And the king did not wish to bring more grief to Lord Istuion.

"Thank you for coming, my lady," Gil-galad said formally, with his hand on his heart.

She may be married to a Sinda, but Galadriel was now the only surviving member of the House of Finwe in his father's generation. Of the four who remained in House Finwe, Galadriel was the eldest. And unlike Elrond and himself, she was born of Aman, and the light of the trees still burned brightly in her eyes despite the centuries of sorrow and grief. At least, Gil-galad thought so even though he had heard that Galadriel's light diminished much after Nargothrond was lost.

The lady regarded the group gathered in the room.

"You did not specify why you needed me, my lord. What is this all about?" Galadriel asked.

"Excuse us, my lady, but we needed your assistance to verify something."

Gil-galad showed her the gems in his hand.

"Are these familiar to you, my lady?"

Galadriel took the bright white gems on the silver chain and fingered the stones that glittered like stars. Her eyes misted and for a brief second, it seemed to Gil-galad that her white fingers trembled.

"Yes," Galadriel said, her voice a bare whisper. "The Seven Stars of Valimar. There is only one set of these in all of Aman although these gems are one section of a larger necklace."

Galadriel's lips trembled, and Gil-galad was surprised to see a flicker of sorrow that darkened her light blue eyes. Although he had not known the lady for long, having met her briefly at the Isle of Balar before she moved to Nenuial with Celeborn and their followers before settling in Harlindon, Gil-galad had never known Lady Galadriel to betray any emotion even during the most heated debate in a council.

"Those gems belonged to Lady Elenwe. Is that not so?" Lammaeg asked.

Galadriel looked up from fingerling the bright stones in her hand.

"Ah, yes. Elenwe had one just like it."
Lammaeg's face was serene, but Gil-galad noted the gleam of triumph in his uncle's eyes.

"I do not understand, my lady," Gilmagor who stood next to the king said. "What do you mean by 'she had one like it'? Is this not hers or was there another? I thought you said the necklace is the only one of its kind?"

'Indeed, Lord Gilmagor. There is only one of this necklace, but this is not the same one as the one Elenwe wore. That one is an imitation made with Elven-made stones. These," Galadriel picked up the gems in her hands, "are mined from the Holy Mountain itself. These gems are from the necklace made for the elder sister who commissioned a copy for her younger sister whom the lady loved very much."

Both Gilmagor and Lammaeg frowned.

"But, Lady Elenwe was the only child. She had no siblings." Gilmagor said.

"Yes. Elenwe was. But, the necklace was not made for her but her mother and her mother's elder sister. Both ladies gave their respective necklaces to their daughters."

"Lady Elenwe's mother and her elder sister? And their daughters?" Lord Gilmagor and Lammaeg looked at each other; then, their faces held such amazement, Gil-galad who had never been to Valinor was puzzled. He was sure Elrond and Istuion felt same as he.

Gil-galad looked at his uncle, then at his swordmaster. Their faces, wide-eyed and pale of face, turned grave.

"It makes even less sense." Lammaeg frowned down at the gems in Lady Galadriel's hand.

"My lady, could you tell us about Lady Arinariel?" Gilmagor asked.

Galadriel who had been fingering the gems looked up, her eyes narrowed, a deep frown on her forehead.

"Arinariel?" she asked.

Gil-galad was surprised at the sharp tone to her voice. Her eyes which had misted with sorrow turned guarded.

"Thranduil was found with this necklace in his hand," Gil-galad said with a sigh. "He said his mother had given it to him."

The lady pursed her lips and remained silent.

"We asked you here so you could tell us about Thranduil's mother," Gil-galad explained.

Galadriel remained silent for so long that Gil-galad feared that she wouldn't say any more.

"We hoped that you could tell us, my lady. Lord Istuion said you brought Thranduil's mother to Doriath before she married Lord Oropher."

Galadriel closed her eyes briefly before she opened them again.

"But if you have this necklace, shouldn't Thranduil have said something although I am not surprised if he did not. Thranduil is intensely private just like his parents." The lady shook her head, letting out another sigh. "And he may have wished to protect his mother. But, then, I do not understand why you need to ask me about his mother? Even if I wish to tell you, I cannot as I have sworn to keep her
name a secret. Thranduil, however, is under no such restriction. Where is he?" Galadriel looked around the room. "I am surprised that Thranduil has allowed any of you to touch this necklace...."

Then, the lady went rigid. She picked up her golden head, and her blue gaze probed each of the Elves in the Great Hall. Gil-galad felt her mind brush his before he could close himself off.

"You have taken this from him...and ..." Galadriel's blue eyes flashed dangerously as others cowered under the lady's irate gaze. When her eyes found Lammaeg, the councilor flinched and stepped back away from her.

"You dare accuse the grandson of my uncle of such demeaning act such as..." she pursed her lips, her eyes flashing.

Gil-galad felt dread grab hold of his heart. He glanced at Lord Lammaeg and Gilmagor whose faces were drained of blood.

"I apologize, my lady. We have not intended for this matter to go as it had. But we had limited information, and we needed to verify the identity of his mother. That is why we sought your assistance." Gil-Galad tried to explain.

"But you said Thranduil verified for you, that he said it was from his mother. Were not his words enough?"

"Please forgive us but I recognized the necklace as those belonging to Lady Elenwe. I did not know that there was a copy. But if I may, my lady, were you saying the necklace belongs to Thranduil?" Gilmagor asked.

"Of course. It belonged to his mother. It is natural that her son should have it now that she has passed from this world."

"Preposterous!" Lammaeg sputtered. "You are saying that she is...that she is lady Altananoire's daughter. How is that possible? There are no Vanyar who are known to have returned from Valinor! If she were here in Middle Earth, then some of us would have seen her, and we would have known of it."

"Are you calling me a liar, Lord Lammaeg?" Lady Galadriel's icy blue eyes flashed again.

Lammaeg paled visibly.

"No. No, my lady! All I am saying is that all Vanyar left middle earth and none of the pure-blooded Vanyar has ever returned here. Lady Idril's mother, Lady Elenwe, is the only known pure blooded Vanya to have left Valinor. And we all know that she died at Helcaraxe and never reached Middle Earth."

Lady Galadriel looked down at Lammaeg quietly which gaze the councilor could not withstand. He turned his eyes away.

"I guess you suppose that whatever record someone has made of the accounts of our flight is accurate? Then how do you account for all the variances to the stories, councilor? How about missing pieces? Those histories are written by those who gathered information. It only tells the story of the few who had seen or heard, but not all that are recorded are the truth. There are things that are not told because very few know of it or because those who know did not have a chance to tell it. Lord Oropher and my husband fought in the many of the great wars in Beleriand, but none of it has ever been recorded. The fact that they are not known, does it make it untrue then?"
"If you would, my lady," Lord Gilmagor sought permission, and when Lady Galadriel nodded, he continued, "Maybe if it was some other Vanyarin lady, I could understand, but it seems someone would have noticed her if she was here in Middle Earth all these times."

"Even when she was in Doriath which was closed off to all Noldor and where none knew who she was? Even then, she carefully kept away from most people. Only ones who knew of her were my uncle, Oropher, Celeborn and I. I didn't know, but Lord Arandur had been friends with her father when they were young and journeying into Beleriand. He recognized the likeness, and she had told him all. But, beyond him and Oropher, there was only my lord husband and I who knew although I have a suspicion Queen Melian knew."

"But why the secrecy?" Lord Gilmagor asked.

"It was her way to atone for disobeying Valar and her family so that she will not drag her family's name with her into exile as she was strictly forbidden to follow. But Elenwe was like a sister to her as she had grown up with no siblings except her cousin. And…" Galadriel hesitated, but with a sigh, she continued, "I knew this only later when she came to me, but Elenwe was with child at the time of the travel. She did not tell Turgon out of her love for him, for she knew how conflicted he was and how unhappy he would be to remain in Aman when all others of his family were leaving. And Turgon who should have known was too wrapped up in the preparation to leave Valinor to notice. Thranduil's mother was a healer. She had disguised herself as Elenwe's handmaid to follow us, but only until we departed Aman. But when she found that we were preparing to travel through the Helcarax, she feared for Elenwe's condition and for the love she bore her cousin, she defied the Valar and her family.

Of all of us, she alone left the blessed land out of love and concern for another and for nothing else. And for that, she had paid a dear price." Galadriel's eyes were deep wells of centuries of grief. "Valar punished her most unfairly by taking Elenwe away at Helcaraxe."

For a moment, Gil-galad thought he saw defiance amid the sorrow reflected in the eyes of Lady Galadriel.

"Devastated and unable to return home, she came to me. Idril, who was the only one who knew of her presence beside myself, was sworn to secrecy for her sake."

The king who had been listening quietly along with Lord Istuion and Elrond cleared his throat.

"I am sorry to interrupt, my lady, but may I ask who Thranduil's mother is? It seems you three who are from Valinor know, but as you are aware, Elrond, Lord Istuion and I are not familiar with the family connections in the Blessed Land." Then, he turned to Elrond. "Do you know?"

Elrond shook his head. "Lady Elenwe is my foremother, but I know nothing of her, and there is no mention of her family in any record that I know of."

"I would like to tell you, but I am sworn to secrecy as Idril had been. But under the circumstance… Lord Gilmagor…" Galadriel turned to the swordmaster, then to Lammaeg. "I suppose you can reveal it even if I cannot. But I must ask that her true name never be spoken, and this story never mentioned outside this room. Please. For her sake."

Gil-galad looked around the room and took his hand over his heart. Others followed.

"Lady Altanarore is the Lady wife of Lord Ingwion, son of Lord Ingwe, the high king of all Elves in Valinor," Gilmagor said. "That would make Thranduil's mother the grand-daughter of Lord Ingwe."
Gil-galad gaped at his Lord Commander unable to keep his mouth closed. That was unexpected, but it answered Thranduil's bright coloring and his mesmerizing features. The Hall was quiet as others absorbed the new information.

But weren't the Vanyar supposed to be noble, peaceful and full of magic? Thranduil seemed none of those things.

"My cousin took pains to hide her identity for the sake of her family, and I expect all of you to honor her wish unless Thranduil decides to share that information," said Galadriel. "But where is Thranduil? Shouldn't he be the one to tell you this?"

"Forgive us, my lady. We had no idea," Gil-galad sighed. "We were just trying to find answers."

"He was violent and …" Lammaeg clamped his mouth shut when the lady threw him her fierce gaze his way.

"Treated like a common criminal, I don't know if I would have acted with any less violence," Istuion said quietly.

Just then, as previously ordered, two guards entered, escorting Thranduil between them. The young Sindar stopped in front of the king and scanned the room.

Gil-galad who had taken back the necklace from Lady Galadriel offered the string of gems to Thranduil who snatched it up from the king's hand.

"Let me apologize for doubting your words, Thranduil…" the king began, but Thranduil cut him off.

"If you are done, do I have your permission to leave now?" Thranduil said, his voice icy enough to freeze over an ocean.

Gil-galad sucked in his breath. He had made a mistake, so he will bear this, Gil-galad told himself. The harder it was to do it, better to do it quicker, Gilmagor always said. "Thranduil, I…" Gil-galad extended his hand in apology.

"Is there anything more you want of me, your majesty?" Thranduil snapped, his words like claws over a tender wound.

"Why, you insolent…" Lammaeg started but stopped at a gesture from Gil-galad who sighed and shook his head at Thranduil.

Thranduil snapped his neck downward, then turned, but Lady Galadriel held onto his arm.

"Thranduil, you need not be so rude," the lady said. "The king is trying to…"

Thranduil snatched his arm from the grasp of Lady Galadriel before she could finish her sentence.

"You are nothing to me. I need not listen to you." With that, Thranduil turned and left the hall.

"You see! You see how insolent he is?" Lammaeg said watching Thranduil disappear behind the door that closed after him.

Lady Galadriel's eyes brimmed with much sorrow.

"You do not understand the grief in his heart, Lord Lammaeg." Her voice was quiet and thrummed with emotion. "In his mind, we are the people who have taken away his family and the world he knew and loved and now we tried to take from him the only things that sustain him."
"His dignity and pride," Elrond said, his dark eyes reflecting the sorrow in the lady's eyes. Lady Galadriel bestowed him a warm smile.

"You understand much, my young lord," she said. "Sometimes, the understanding heart is all that is needed to help heal a lonely and broken one" she said softly and held Elrond's gaze.

"If you would, your majesty, I would like to be excused," Lord Istuion said suddenly and took his leave. Lord Gilmagor and Lammaeg and Elrond followed suit, leaving Galadriel alone with the king.

"I believe, I am no longer needed here," Lady Galadriel said.

"Thank you for coming, my lady," Gil-galad said gravely. "I have done badly, haven't I?"

Galadriel shook her head and smiled.

"You are doing the best you can. Do not be too hard on yourself, Ereinion. You are barely over two decades older than Thranduil, yet you have so much on your shoulders. I don't think anyone could have done better. As to Thranduil, he will require much patience. He is young, and the tragedies he faced lay heavily over him. Thranduil is like a deep forest in winter. Trees are stark and bare. The wind is relentless and cold. But given enough sun and time, green leaves will sprout, and flowers will bloom. Then, so different the forest will be from what it had been, it will surprise you. Just remember, Ereinion, one cannot hope for trust without an understanding heart. And trust must be earned. It is not something that can just be given."

Gil-galad nodded. Then, bent his head, his hand over his heart.

---

**Nenuial** (Sindarin, Lake of Twilight)—refers to Lake Evendim which is located east of blue mountains. Some accounts of Tolkien state that Galadriel and Celeborn crossed the Blue Mountains and lived by this lake. In this story, Galadriel and Celeborn lived there prior to Celeborn accepting fiefdom under Gil-galad and settled at Harlindon.

**Valimar** (Quenya, Dwelling of the Valar)—known as the city of many bells, it is located in the heart of Valinor where dwellings of Valar and Maiar are located. The two trees, silver and gold, grew just outside the city on the mound of Ezellohar.

**Taniquetil** (Quenya, high snow peak)—highest of the mountains of Pelori which Valar raised to protect Valinor from outside forces. It is also the tallest peak where the palace of Manwe and Varda is located.

**Vanyar** (Quenya, Fair)—highest of the High Elves and the first of Elven kind to be awakened. They are also known as Fair Elves (as opposed to Noldor known as Deep Elves and Teleri known as Sea Elves). Vanyar are the first and the smallest clan of Elves and all of them traveled to Valinor and never returned to Middle Earth (except to fight in the War of Wrath with the army of Valar). They are also known as spear-elves as it was their weapon of choice (as opposed to Noldor's sword and shield and Teleri's bow and arrows). Considered the fairest, wisest and the noblest among their kin, Vanyar are beloved by Manwë and Varda amongst all kindred of Elves. They live in Mount Taniquetil near Lord Manwe and rarely mingled with other Elves.

**Ingwe** (Quenya, Highest, chief)—King of the Vanyar and the high king of all Elves.

Chapter End Notes
Next Chapter 41 Dark Fire--Mairon sees opportunity
Finding Thranduil wide open, Mairon sees into Thranduil's memory of Sirion, the day he lost his mother.

King’s Tower, September 10, Second Age 144

MAIRON took one look and knew the time had come. Thranduil emerged from the King’s Tower like a wounded beast. The Sinda’s blue-green eyes were alight with fire and hatred so palpable, Mairon could feel them even at a distance. Whatever fiery emotion the Sinda had before this did not compare, and Mairon knew he could not let this opportunity pass.

Millennia of experience dealing with people of Middle Earth had shown Mairon that he could influence people’s minds when they were in their most emotional state whether that was anger, grief or love. When the emotions boiled over, they were vulnerable, even the Elves who were considered the wisest. And among the varied emotions, Mairon found the anger the easiest to manipulate. And the more wounded they were, more destructive they became.

Keeping his distance, Mairon followed Thranduil. After leaving the steps of the palace, Thranduil broke into a run as if he could not contain the fire within him.

There were many people on the ground of the palace, those preparing for the Harvest Festival and the cadets and officers on their way out of the palace to spend the upcoming rest day with their families. But, Thranduil seemed not to notice any of them. Mairon picked up his pace to keep up with the blond Sinda who disappeared among the throng of people on the Western court.

Fortunately, despite the many people in the similar uniform, it wasn’t difficult to notice the flash of the golden head among the crowd of dark-haired Elves. Mairon stood looking down the stairs that led down to the training fields. The training fields were emptying quickly as the warriors eager to see their families hurried up the steps of the Star Field.

“I guess he is getting off this time, too, with just a slap,” a voice said behind him. Mairon turned around and saw three of the cadets approach him. Erfaron walked up to stand next to Mairon and looked down at the figure of Thranduil running across the Moon Field toward Sun Field.

“What did you expect? His majesty is obligated to give him protection. The king is fostering the Sinda to be trained and educated here,” Baraben said.

“But he punched Belegor bloody? That kind of violence against another Elf should be punished, do you not think so?” Erfaron looked at Mairon then at others.

“I have to say, Belegor asked for it,” Glingaeron said. “He accused Thranduil of stealing. I would not have stood for it if anyone called me a thief.”
“It is because you do not know much about gems, Glingaeron. That necklace was made of gems that were not ordinary. I should know. My uncle is a jewel smith. Dwarves are skilled, but no one but our craftsmen from Valinor can cut jewels of such brilliance.” Baraben looked down at Glingaeron, then turned to Mairon. “What do you think? I heard Lord Celebrimbor was quite impressed with your jewelry work. You did work with him before starting the cadet program, did you not?”

“Those gems were, indeed, gems of rare quality,” Mairon said with a nod. “Definitely beyond the skill of the Dwarves.”

“You see?” Baraben said, lifting his chin. “Think about it. How would a Sinda have gems like that? No offense to your family,” Baraben nodded to Glingaeron, “but even you must admit Sindar are unlikely to own such rare gems.”

“Unlikely, maybe,” Glingaeron said, his eyes tight, “but not impossible. He is from the royal family of Doriath.”

“Royal?” Baraben sneered. “You mean a minor princeling. I heard his father was one of the march wardens of Doriath, only distantly related to King Dior who was Elrond’s grandfather. And even that, Thranduil’s father was obviously not a good march warden since Doriath fell during his watch. And, as a son of a march warden, how would Thranduil have access to the stones of such quality?”

Mairon felt Glingaeron struggling to keep his emotion in check. Glingaeron shook his head.

“I don’t know. But you can’t just claim it is impossible because he is a Sinda. And you cannot accuse a person of being a thief just because he has something valuable, no matter how unlikely, without any other proof than that.” Glingaeron shoved Baraben and walked away.

Baraben snorted watching Glingaeron pass him.

Erfaron patted Baraben’s back. “He’s a Sinda; what did you expect him to say?”

Along with Thranduil, Glingaeron was one of only four Sindar in the officer training. And three of them, including Glingaeron, was from Grey Havens, sent by Lord Cirdan among the best of the youth of Grey Havens.

Despite it being unspoken, Mairon had seen the divide between the Noldor and Sindar. The third kin-slaying was only two centuries ago. It brought a deep rift among the Elves.

Of course, Mairon had known about the attack on Doriath. While he was Melkor’s lieutenant, he had spies out on all the realms in Beleriand. He had especially made sure to keep an eye on Feanor’s sons. When Mairon received a report of a movement by Feanor’s sons, gathered to strike Doriath, it had been a surprise even for Mairon. He had not expected Feanorians to strike at their distant kin, nor had Mairon expected Feanor’s sons to attack during the holiday celebration when such attack would be least expected. Having seen how occupied Elves were by their ceremonies, Melkor had used that against Gondolin as well. But this attack on Doriath by Feanor’s sons had not been a surprise to his master.

“Ah, Mairon, Mairon. The time has come. The moment I have been waiting for,” Melkor said as he rubbed his hands, his dark eyes gleaming like Simarils in his crown. “Time to reap what I have sown.”

“Should I send more troops, master, to Doriath? Once the battle between the Noldor and Sindar are done, we could sweep up whoever remains. Isn’t that why you sent Glaurung to Nargothrond, to attack Doriath when the opportunity arises? Although the fool has gotten himself killed, I have
stationed enough Orcs near the western and northern border of Doriath."

But his master smiled and shook his head.

“Not yet. Not just yet. For now, we will just watch. Doriath has lost its teeth, but it still has its claws, and our armies have not fully regained its prior strength after the last battle with the Noldor. And if we were to move now, it will only force the Sindar and the Noldor to ally together.” Melkor flashed Mairon a bright smile. “Besides, Doriath must fall by the hands of Noldor. A wound given by the hand of kin will hurt more than any wound I could give it. And the divide that will come will be useful later.”

“But what of the Feanor’s sons? With their combined strength, Doriath will have no chance against them, I think. Even if one or two of the Feanor’s sons fall, there will be some who will survive the battle.”

“True.” Melkor nodded. “You go, Mairon. But do not make a move until the Noldor have slain Doriath with their hands. Once the sons of Feanor have the silmaril in their hands, crush them as I have no more use for them. They should be weak after engaging Doriath. Same for the Sindar if they were to come out the victor in this battle. I will have a reinforcement ready. But,” Melkor stepped closer and looked into Mairon’s eyes, his dark eyes flaming like black fire. “Should Feanor’s sons prevail, and the Sindar escape with the jewel, let them go and do not engage.”

“I don’t understand, master. Isn’t this the perfect opportunity to crush them all?”

“Mairon, Mairon. You must learn to see further, my Little Firecracker. Until we find all of them and purge Beleriand of their kind, there will be Elves in Middle Earth. They are like insects. No matter how much you crush them, there will always be ones that you couldn’t get. But, if they were to fight among themselves, well then, you can just sit back and watch them kill each other. As long as the Sindar have the Silmaril, Feanor’s sons will not be far behind. The more damage they cause their kin, the better for us. What have I taught you?”

“Blood begets blood,” Mairon said and smiled widely.

And his master had been right. Even after two centuries since the last bloodshed at Sirion, there was tension between the Noldor and Sindar. On the surface, everything seemed peaceful. They were civil to each other, but the capital city of Lindon was divided. Although Sindar outnumbered Noldor five to one, the city was mainly occupied by the Noldor. And the king and the ruling council consisted mostly of Noldorin nobles. On the other hand, most Sindar lived outside the walls of the city or at Grey Havens or Harlindon ruled by Sindarin lords. Those few Sindar who resided within the walls of the White City lived clustered together. Mairon had seen a block divided by one street. One side occupied by Noldor dressed in their vibrant silks and the other by Sindar in their muted colors. Although it was only a street that divided them, they rarely crossed the street to the other side.

When Baraben and Erfaron moved away, Mairon headed down the stairs to the training fields, keeping his eyes on the Sinda who was heading toward a corner of Sun Field.

At the end of the Sun Field was a vast area full of stones and rocks, rocks that were used to build the city. Some of them were unearthed to make the training fields, Mairon learned. A valley cut deep below the rock-strewn slope making it impossible for anyone to approach the White City from this side. Thranduil’s golden head disappeared among the large boulders that were strewn all over the sloped area at the edge of the training fields. Mairon hesitated briefly before following Thranduil. The path sloped dangerously, a drop of several stories.
Is he trying to kill himself? Mairon wondered as he followed behind, clinging to the rocks. Even if his body died, Mairon would not, but he needed this body for a while longer.

At the edge of the rocky cliff, Mairon looked about. He couldn’t find a glimpse of Thranduil anywhere. Then, he heard a sound of rock hitting a rock.

Careful not to be seen, Mairon crawled over the cluster of rocks. Sunken from the edge of the Sun Field, surrounded by tall boulders, there was a small clearing just at the edge of a cliff. Mairon was sure that even from the top of the King’s Tower, they couldn’t be seen. Maybe that was why the Sinda chose this place. Thranduil picked up one of the large rocks and hurled it over the cliff. Seeing how wide the clearing and the number of rocks piled beneath the cliff, Mairon realized this wasn’t the first time Thranduil had been here.

Thranduil’s face was contorted, his jaw tight, his eyes aflame with dark fire. And with the sight of him, Mairon was hit with the boiling heat. But what’s more, the young Sinda’s mind was wide open.

Letting his power flood the body he occupied, Mairon reached in. Inside Thranduil’s head was a raging storm. Myriad of memories and feelings intertwined and howled, churning the vast sea of emotion within Thranduil. Amid the turbulent swirl of emotion and thoughts, Mairon found one that dominated.

Mairon saw a terrace built on a high cliff by a white tower. Three Noldorin warriors dressed in red armor were near the stone steps that led to the tower. On top of the stairs, near the cliff’s edge stood a majestic young woman with dark hair, clothed in white. On her neck, she wore a marvelous necklace with a bright white gem, his master’s gem. The silmaril.

A golden-haired Elven youth was on the ground kept there by a redheaded Noldorin warrior who had his armored foot on the youth’s head. The Noldorin warrior shouted something, then moved away from the blond youth. But as one of the Noldorin warriors pulled out his bow and aimed his arrow towards the young woman, the golden-haired youth jumped onto the archer.

White Tower of Arvernien, May 25, First Age 538

<9:40AM> “Run, Elwing! Run!”

The blond lad shouted at the top of his lungs as he jumped onto the Noldorin archer who tumbled over with the youth on top of him. The other Noldorin warrior picked up the blond youth off the archer, then threw him onto the ground. The warrior helped the archer get up, then drew his sword facing the blond youth on the ground.

An arrow flew out of nowhere and pierced the warrior’s hand holding the sword. The Noldorin warrior dropped the sword with a groan. And before they could react, another arrow struck the archer on his helmet, throwing him down onto the ground.

Everyone turned toward where the arrows came.

A warrior in a blue and silver scaled armor stepped forward into the clearing with his warbow drawn, another arrow nocked. He aimed it at the redhead.

“Captain Himion!” the blond youth called out once he sat up.

“Thranduil! Get behind me. Now!” the captain shouted in Sindarin to the youth.
The Noldorin warrior whose hand was pierced with an arrow darted from where he was, then stood blocking the redhead from the path of the Sindarin Captain’s bow. The Noldorin warrior broke the arrow and pulled out the arrow from his hand, his eyes trained on the Sindarin captain. Captain Himion pulled the string of his bow taut.

Just then, behind the Sindarin captain, an Elven lady in a healer’s gray garment came forward and laid her hand on Himion’s bow. The captain lowered his weapon. She wore a long hood that hid her face completely.

The redhead took one look at the Sindarin captain and back at Thranduil, then he aimed his sword at Thranduil neck as the youth tried to get up off the ground.

“One move, Dark Elf, and this child dies,” the redhead said in a hesitant Sindarin.

Himion aimed his bow at the Noldorin warrior who stood shielding the redhead when the healer rushed out before the Sindarin warrior could stop her.

“No! Please, don’t hurt him,” the healer knelt next to Thranduil and drew the youth into her arms, placing herself between Thranduil and the redhead’s blade.

Thranduil, with his eyes wide, pulled at the woman.

“Mother? What are you doing here?” Thranduil asked in Sindarin, wiping the blood that dripped down to his eyes.

The healer pulled off the deep hood of her healer’s gray garment. A hair of glittering gold dipped in sunlight poured out from the gray hood brightening her entire person. Pure light glowed about her, making her shine like a jewel under sunlight, too bright to look upon. Even among the Elven kind, she was fair beyond measure with eyes like the blue-green waters of Aman.

“Please. He is my son. Still a child. Will you not spare him, son of Feanaro?, ” the lady said. She laid her white hand on the blade of the sword and pushed away its cruel tip with her gentle hand.

The redhead’s gray eyes widened as he took a step back. Then, he frowned at the blonde lady in front of him.

“You! But, how?” the redhead looked lost as he looked at Thranduil’s mother, then at Thranduil. “I see now why he speaks Quenya,” the redhead shook his head then looked up.

Thranduil looked up also and saw that Elwing had almost reached the top of the tower.

“Astarno,” Ambarussa called out in Quenya to the Noldorin archer who had gotten up and stood, his bow trained onto the Sindarin captain. His left cheek had a deep cut and was bleeding, dripping down onto his armor. “Can you shoot?”

“Yes, my lord,” the archer said.

“Shoot down the woman up the tower. Thornadur, you kill this Sindarin archer.”

“No! Please, stop. There is no need for any more killing. Has not enough blood spilled this day? Please, Ambarussa. Stop this…” The healer let go of Thranduil and grabbed the redhead’s steel clad hand.

Thranduil turned and called out in Sindarin to Captain Himion.
“Himion, roll right! The other archer is going to shoot Elwing!”

Himion rolled to his right, barely missing the dagger that flew towards him. As soon as the roll was complete, the captain released his arrow toward the Noldorin archer. Himion’s arrow struck the archer’s hand. The bow fell, but the archer had already released his arrow.

Everyone turned to the top of the stone stairs where Elwing had been. She was nowhere to be seen.

Before Himion turned back to face the redhead, Thornadur who had thrown his dagger at Himion while still standing in front of Ambarussa roared and rushed forward with his sword high in the air.

Sindarin captain scrambled up and blocked the Noldorin warrior’s sword with his bow, but the Nodorin warrior was quick. He sliced the bow in two and kicked Himion in the stomach. Himion stumbled backward.

Thornatur raised up his sword for the final kill when Thranduil’s hand flashed. The Noldorin warrior swiped away the dagger Thranduil threw at him. But the distraction was enough. Himion turned aside, then ran his long dagger through the Noldorin warrior.

Himion turned back toward Thranduil. It was then that the redhead backhanded Thranduil so hard that the young Sinda was thrown back and hit the ground.

“Please, don’t do this!” the healer grabbed the hand that struck her son, but raising his hand holding the sword, Ambarussa whacked the healer, the force throwing her down onto the stone paved floor.

“My lady!”

Himion ground his teeth. Grasping his long dagger, Himion sprinted toward the redhead when the captain saw Thranduil got up and grab his long dagger on the ground. With a shout, Thranduil rushed at the redhead.

And everything happened at once.

“No, Thranduil!” Himion cried out when he heard a wind whistle and saw arrow leaving the archer’s bow. It was headed directly toward Thranduil. Himion did not think and thrust his body to block the arrow’s path to the child.

“Oof!” Pain and the force propelled the captain back and he fell to the ground just a few steps shy of reaching Thranduil.

Grabbing at his left shoulder shot through with an arrow, Himion looked up and watched in horror as Lady Arinariel got up and pulled Thranduil’s arm as the youth swung his long dagger.

The action jerked Thranduil’s aim and the young Sinda’s dagger missed the redhead who swung his own sword.

“No!” Himion rushed towards Thranduil, but he was still two strides away when Lady Arinariel threw herself between the redhead’s sword and Thranduil, pulling Thranduil into her embrace, her back towards the thrust of the Noldo’s sword.

The blade shone in the sun as it struck the gray garment. The lady gasped and let go of Thranduil as her golden head fell backward and she fell like a petal in the wind, a spark of starlight in the darkness of a midnight storm.

Something hot grabbed hold of Himion as he roared. He, picked up his sword and plunged it deep
into the redhead. The old Sindarin warrior watched his eyes filled with horror as the redhead’s eyes opened wide, filled with shock, but those gray eyes were not looking at him, but at the body of the lady in gray by his feet.

Himion pulled out his sword and the redhead crumbled into a heap next to a white light in the gray garment as she faded like a dusk into night.

The old Sindarin captain looked down at the two fallen figures, one red and the other golden. The same red blood that stained the lady’s gray garment began to stain the red and gold armor of the redhaired Noldo. And that same red blood dripped from the tip of the Sindarin captain’s sword.

The captain stumbled back as if his legs could no longer support him. His chest heaved as the sword slipped and dropped out of his hand onto the ground. His eyes on the two fallen figures before him, captain’s knees hit the ground.

“Naneth! Nana!” Thranduil’s anguished scream filled the small courtyard as the youth grabbed his mother. Her blood stained Thranduil’s hands and garments red as the youth shook his mother’s silent body.

Himion looked up to see an arrow trained on him. The Noldorin warrior called Astarno had threaded his bow and it was aimed directly at the Sindarin captain. Himion stood up.

“I’ll kill you!” Thranduil screamed and sprang up from beside the body of his mother. The youth picked up his fallen long dagger and moved toward the Noldorin warrior. Astarno moved the bow toward Thranduil but before he could release the arrow, Himion moved. The captain snatched the dagger away and with a swift kick to the back of Thranduil’s legs threw the young lad onto the ground. Then, Himion blocked Thranduil’s fallen body with his and faced Astarno.

“I am the one who killed your companions. Kill me, but leave the boy. He has already lost so much,” Himion said, his gray eyes looking into the gray eyes of the Noldorin warrior.

Astarno pulled the bowstring taut as Himion stood facing him.

The Noldorin warrior stared down at the Sindarin captain, then looked down at Thranduil who struggled to sit up. The youth was bleeding from his head and his left arm. His pale skin looked stark under the red of the blood stain and the black bruises that were everywhere.

“The boy’s mother is dead. Do not take any more from him. Let him go, please,” Himion said. “The child’s father has already lost one son at Menegroth along with his own father. This child has not done anything except to try to defend those he loves. He is innocent.”

What Himion said must have reached the Noldorin warrior. The Noldo’s stance faltered.

Instead of letting the arrow fly, Astarno let go of the tension in his bow and let the weapon drop to his side. The Sindarin captain and the Noldorin warrior regarded each other. Their eyes were filled with the same gut-wrenching sorrow.

As they regarded each other silently, a white bird with bright starlight on its long white throat circled their heads and let out a long single cry. Both warriors looked up at the bird as it circled over their heads. As they watched, it flew toward the West when a deep horn rang out from the ocean.

“Lord Cirdan’s ships are here,” Himion said to no one particular as he watched the Noldorin warrior crouch down to wrap the fallen body of the redhead in his cloak.

Thranduil finally sat up, groaning softly. When his eyes beheld the Noldorin warrior picking up the
dead body of the redhead, Thranduil’s face turned red, contorting hideously.

“Murderer!” Thranduil got up again, then looked around for a weapon. Himion wrapped his arms around the young Sinda and held him firmly.

“Let him go, Thranduil. He is not the one who killed your mother.”

“He’s a Noldo. All Noldor are murderers!” Thranduil screamed.

Himion turned to the Noldorin warrior.

“Take your dead and go quickly. There has been enough blood shed this day.”

It didn’t take the Noldo another word as he hoisted up the body of the redhead and without another glance, sprinted away.

“No!” screamed Thranduil as he bucked within the captain’s arm. “I’ll kill you, you Morgoth’s filth!” Curses poured out of Thranduil’s mouth as he fought to pry open Himion’s arms that held him captive in an iron clasp.

“Kill him, Himion. Kill him! Don’t let him get away!”

The elder Sinda turned Thranduil to face him, then shook the youth roughly.

“Listen to me, Thranduil. Think of your mother. Would your lady mother want more blood? Would she want you to taint your hands with the blood of your kin? Don’t you understand that she wanted to protect you from this bloodshed, protect you from being stained with blood?”

Thranduil’s bloody face streaked with tears crumpled.

When Himion let him go, Thranduil fell to his knees.

“I hate them! I hate them all!” Thranduil’s anguished scream mingled with another sound of a horn from the sea.

Sun Field. September 10, Second Age 144

When Mairon found what was useful to him, he pulled back. It was one thing to glimpse into one’s open thoughts, but it was another thing to linger. Mairon knew well that it was only the extreme emotional state that prevented Thranduil from knowing that someone had peeked into his mind. But if he explored for too long, even at this agitated state, Thranduil will sense him, and Mairon did not want that.

As it was, Mairon had found what he was seeking. The Noldorin warrior, the one called Astarno, Mairon knew him. And it seemed the timing was perfect as well. The road up north, there would be no guards, just eight of them in a forest.

Mairon smiled darkly. He would see blood in the Sinda’s hands soon if everything went as planned. And once his hands were tainted with the blood of kin, there would be no turning back for Thranduil.
Gondolin (Sindarin, *Hidden Rock*)-The hidden city of Turgon (Gil-galad's uncle and Elrond's forefather on his father's side). It was secretly built and kept hidden from all until First Age 510. Found through the treachery of Maeglin, Turgon's sister son, Morgoth attacked it in the morning when the sun was rising in the Midsummer as Elves gathered to give thanks to Eru. So, Gondolin, the most beautiful Noldorin city of the First Age, fell during Midsummer while Menegroth, the greatest Sindarin city fell during Midwinter.

Glaurung-First of the dragons of Morgoth. He is known by many names: Great Worm, the Worm of Morgoth, the Golden, and the Deceiver. He is also described as the Father of Dragons. He led an army of Orcs and destroyed Nargothrond. He also used his power to erase memory of Nienor bringing about the tragedy of the Children of Hurin (the story of Turin)

Silmaril (Quenya, *radiance of pure light*)-Jewel Feanor created which housed the light of the two trees of Valinor. There were three of them. Vala Varda hallowed the jewels so that no mortal or evil hands could touch them. Morgoth's desire to possess them and Feanor's desire to reclaim them led to the fall of Noldor and brought doom and grief for Noldor and Sindar.

Chapter End Notes

Next Chapter 42: Astarno--Hearing the name of Astarno, Elrond is brought back to the times he shared with Maedhros and Maglor. (Most likely, I wouldn't be able to post this until next Sunday. Busy week coming up.)
Chapter Summary

Finding themselves about to face wargs, Elrond remembers the day he first saw these creatures back in Beleriand where he was with Maglor.

Chapter Notes

Sorry this is late. I dislike not keeping my word, but I have so much work that needs to be completed before the new year, I could not take a break. I am squeezing this here and hopefully, I can squeeze another episode before the year is over (I had to break this chapter into two episodes). But I cannot promise. If I am unable to find time, then I will put it up as soon as I can in the new year. I wish all of you a wonderful holiday. Thank you all so much for reading and especially for your reviews. Your enthusiasm and support helped me through one of my most difficult times. I don’t think I could have found the strength to go on after my mom’s death this summer if it wasn’t for this writing and the wonderful encouragement that kept me going. Thank you so much.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Woodland near River Lune. September 21, Second Age 144

“ELROND, stay close,” Thranduil said as he slowed his horse to wait for Elrond who stopped to admire the flaming copper-red leaves of a beech tree.

Elrond looked up, surprised to hear the Sinda speak. Thranduil had kept silent and to himself throughout most of the ride north. Elrond could not sense anything from Thranduil, but the half-elven noted that Thranduil seemed unusually tense as his eyes scanned the area around them.

The afternoon sun was waning and the trees around them, young and no thicker than Elrond’s torso, cast long shadows over the overgrown thickets and bushes.

After scanning the area, Thranduil looked back. Lord Gilmagor was leading the cadets with Lord Istuion in the rear. They have left the last guard station this morning and have been traveling through the rocky plains of tall grasses and just entered the woodland where young beech trees dotted the area among the thickly grown vegetation. Ahead, the flaming red leaved trees grew dense and cast deep shadows. To the east, the edge of the forest fell sharply into a deep valley leading to a wide moorland to River Lune.

Thranduil rode forward to Lord Gilmagor.

“My lord, we should go around the forest,” Thranduil said.

Lord Istuion who had been riding in the rear moved forward. “I agree, Lord Commander. We are
“Yes, I am aware of it,” said Gilmagor taking out a map from his pouch. “They have been trailing us since late morning when we entered the plains. I have thought them just a pack of wolves, but now, I do not think so.”

“Are they Orcs?” Erfaron asked, his hand sliding over to his sword.

“It’s about time,” said Oron. “We are prepared. Let them come.”

“Yeah!” the three cadets beside Elrond and Thranduil shouted their agreement.

“It’s not Orcs,” Thranduil said. “They are too disciplined and silent to be Orcs.”

“What you say is true, Oropherion,” agreed Lord Gilmagor. “We would have been attacked already if it were Orcs. They are not very patient,” he said. “Unless they are controlled by their master. But even then, you can hear Orcs from miles away. No. Certainly not Orcs. Our guards patrol this area all the way to the river. If there were any sight of Orcs around here, the guards would have known.”

“I agree with Thranduil. We should go around the forest, Lord Commander,” Istuion said. “The east end of the woodland is a sheer cliff. If these creatures push us toward it, we will have nowhere to go. And the trees of this forest is too young to be used as a cover while providing plenty of hidden areas for the enemy to ambush us.” Lord Istuion glanced at the eastern edge of the woodland which sank into a deep valley, a high cliff running along River Lune.

“We could go around toward east, below the cliffs and follow the river,” Istuion suggested.

Gilmagor shook his head as he showed the map to Istuion.

“The cliffside follows the river all the way up north to where the River Lune flows from the great waterfall. According to the map, the Elven settlement is above that cliff, near the waterfall, but we would have to ride further up north for another day before the cliff edge of the valley becomes gentle enough for us to climb.”

“How about circling the forest on the west side?” Istuion asked.

“West is flat, but the ground is strewn with loose rocks. It is dangerous for the horses. We will have to slow down significantly,” Gilmagor said. “However, it is a shorter distance than going around to the east.”

Just then, from the west came a deep howl followed by several answering calls.

“Well, maybe not the west.” Gilmagor turned to Thranduil. “What do you think, Oropherion? You have passed through this region, have you not?”

“It has been almost a century since I passed through here. But If I remember correctly, there are boulders and hills near the river, enough to give us cover, yet the area is open enough for cadets to fight. If we take a stand in the forest, cadets’ movements will be restricted by the trees and the bushes. They are not trained to fight in a closed area. If they are what I think they are, the beasts will have a feast day inside the forest.”

“It is not like we have never hunted before,” Erfaron said with a frown. “We can deal with a couple of wolves.”

“These are no ordinary wolves,” Thranduil said with a fleeting glance to Erfaron.
Gilmagor frowned and faced Thranduil.

“Are you suspecting what I am suspecting?” Gilmagor asked.

“I am. They are too careful, too disciplined to be mere wolves,” Thranduil said.

“Lord Istuion?” Gilmagor turned to the elder Sinda.

Lord Istuion nodded.

Gilmagor shook his head again. “I didn’t want to believe that there were gaurhoth or wargs within the boundary of Lindon.”

Elrond was surprised. Werewolves or wargs? Elrond had not heard those words since the First Age.

_Amon Ereb, June 1, First Age 540_

**ELROND** fingered the soft leaves which had fuzzy hair on them, silver in color.

“It’s pretty,” Elrond said. “The loremaster said that our forefather had a hair of silver. Have you ever met Lord Thingol?” Elrond turned to his foster father who sat crouched next to him and his brother sifting through the bushes.

Maglor smiled. “No, I have not had the privilege.”

“How come Elros and I do not have silver hair?”

“Because we have more of Lady Melian’s blood in us,” Elros said looking up from pulling up a plant. He picked up his chin proudly.

Maglor laid his big hand on Elros’ head, but Elros pulled away.

From Maglor, Elrond felt an ache, like a heartbeat, so brief it was. Maglor smiled again, his smile not as bright as before.

“That’s right, Elros. There is powerful Maiarian blood that flows in your veins.”

“Is that why we can talk to each other without speaking?” Elrond asked.

“Elrond!” Elros shook his head. Elrond looked up wide-eyed. He did not realize it was to be a secret.

“Ah! You two learned to use _sanwe-latya_, have you?”

“Sanwe-latya? There is a word for it?”

“Of course, elfling. Did you think you invented it?” Maglor laughed. “Ability to exchange thoughts is inherent in all sentient beings. But not all people can use it equally. The stronger you are and more close you are with the receiver, it becomes easier for you to share your thoughts. As twins, it would be especially easier between you two.”

“Can I use it to share thoughts with you?” Elrond asked.
Maglor’s eyes clouded.

“I have never heard it used between Elves and Men,” he said.

“Oh,” Elrond dropped his head. Were he and his brother so different from the Elves? But Maglor’s hand fell onto his head and padded it warmly.

“But you are not just any man-child, are you, Elrond? As Elros said, a powerful blood flows in your veins. You may grow up to be more powerful than any of us,” Maglor said. “You are the great-grandson of Lady Luthien who put the dreaded Dark Lord to sleep, the one who with Beren cut out the Silmaril from Morgoth’s iron crown. You and your brother are the scions of the great lady and the Edain. What can you not achieve if you will it so?”

Elrond looked up. Maglor was smiling, his face warm like sunlight. Elrond smiled back. It was then that the ground where they were gathered trembled.

Maglor got up. A horse with a rider approached them from the castle on the hill. Although they were within sight of the castle, they were about a half league away at the mouth of woodland.

“My lord!” the rider called out even before he pulled his horse to a stop before Maglor. “Warg riders, my lord.”

Maglor’s calm face betrayed nothing. “How far?”

“Half a day’s ride. We just received a missive from the outpost at Ramdal. The army…” The Rider glanced at Elrond and his brother. “There’s more. Your brother bid your haste return.”

Maglor nodded. Then, he frowned up at the rider.

“But why did my brother send you, Astarno, for a simple message?”

Captain Astarno’s face was calm. “We suspect some scouts may have escaped our vigilance.”

“I see.” Maglor’s face tensed briefly as he surveyed the area around him. Elrond got up from where he crouched and looked around, mimicking Maglor. At the mouth of woodland sunlight shone brightly, but as the wood thickened, the trees cast dark shadows. Elrond looked up at Maglor, his heart beginning to race. But when Maglor turned to face Elrond and Elros, there was a smile on his face.

“Well, boys. I think we have to cut this outing short. Should we race to the castle?”

“Yes!” Elros rose up, excitement evident in his bright face.

Maglor whistled for his horse which had been left to graze where he will.

“Come, Elros and Elrond.” Maglor held out his hands. But instead of holding Maglor’s hand, Elros ran to the rider.

“Can I ride with you, Captain Astarno?” Elros held up his hands to the rider.

Astarno glanced at Maglor, then looked down at Elros.

“I am sorry, elfling. But I am on my way to check on the guards posted at the boundary of this woodland,” said Astarno.

“Awww,” Elros turned to Maglor. “Can we not wait for him?”
Maglor smiled, but Elrond felt the sharp ache in the heart. He wasn’t sure why he felt it, but Elrond knew this pain he felt was not his, but from his foster father.

“Why don’t you do a quick sweep, Astarno? We will wait for you. I am sure the guards could handle themselves. Mayhap we can race to the castle together to see who can get there faster,” Maglor said, dropping the hands he held out to the twins.

Elrond grabbed Maglor’s hand.

“And we will be faster than you, Elros. Right, atar?” Elrond said. Maglor looked down at Elrond and squeezed his small hand. His foster father’s eyes were shiny bright. Warmth like a blanket heated by sunlight enveloped Maglor as he rubbed his thumb into Elrond’s hand in his grasp. This was the first time Elrond had called Maglor ‘father.’

*He’s not our father,* a wordless shout entered Elrond’s mind, and a feeling of disapproval flashed into his head.

Elrond looked at Elros. Elros’s disapproving eyes met his. Elrond swallowed hard knowing his brother will have more to say about this later.

Elrond pouted and leaned into Maglor’s hand. Elrond liked Maglor even if his brother did not. As far as he was concerned, Maglor was more of a father than his own father had been. And as for their mother, had she not abandoned them? Elros believed that their mother would come one day to fetch them. But Elrond knew better. Their mother was never coming back for them.

Just then, a wind changed. Both Astarno and Maglor turned sharply toward the woodland.

Astarno jumped off his horse, holding a bow in his hand already threaded with an arrow. And in Maglor’s hand, there was a naked sword.

“Take my horse, my lord. The boys!” Astarno sprinted toward the woodland and disappeared among the trees.

Elrond found himself lifted off his feet and on the back of Astarno’s horse with Elros seated behind him.

“Hold on, you two. Do not let go of the rein. Understand?” Maglor pushed the rein of the horse into Elrond’s hands. “Remember what I taught you. Keep your self low and hold on. The horse knows where to take you. Go now!”

“But…how about you?” Elrond asked although his heart thumped so fast it hurt.

“I will be behind you. Go now, little ones.” With that Maglor whispered something to the horse and it shot forth.

Elrond turned back to see Maglor standing there with his sword drawn, watching them. His horse appeared from the far edge of the woodland.

“Elrond!” Elros shouted from behind him as his brother’s fingers dug into Elrond’s side. Elrond turned as the horse took a sharp right to avoid colliding with a shadow that was coming at them from the left.

“Aaaak!” They shouted in unison as they held on, Elrond onto the neck of the horse and Elros clinging onto Elrond as things blurred around them as the horse picked up speed.
Then, suddenly, the horse stopped and reared, braying loudly. Elrond’s face smashed into the neck of the horse. Elros’ body rammed Elrond on the back. Then, the pressure on his side and back fell away when the horse began to run again.

“Elros!” Elrond turned around just as Elros tumbled onto the ground, but the horse was moving so fast, Elros was left far behind. Elrond pulled at the rein still clutched in his hands. “Stop! Stop! We have to go back for my brother!” he shouted to the horse.

The horse eventually did stop, but when Elrond turned the horse around, he could not see his brother. Elrond urged horse faster and saw with relief Elros getting up, but before standing up on his feet, Elros fell back onto the ground.

“Elros, I’m coming!”

Elrond could see Elros struggling to sit up again. Elrond managed to steer the horse toward Elros when his brother raised himself up on his side, but he seemed unable to stand up.

“Hurry. Elros is hurt!” Elrond urged the horse, but before Elros could be reached, the horse slid to a stop, snorting loudly. Just behind Elros, a creature loomed. Elrond had never seen one like it before. It was a size of a horse, but it looked more like a picture of a wolf he had seen in a book, except its eyes were red, and its mouth was full of dagger-like teeth. Thick bluish fur surrounded its muscled and wide shoulders. It rose up silently like a shadow and skulked behind Elros. And the creature was not alone.

Elrond wanted to call out his brother’s name, but no sound came from his mouth. He couldn’t move any part of his body as he shook. Elros lifted his face toward Elrond then frowned, then he turned to look behind him as the creatures growled baring their teeth. There were three of them.

“Hiya!”

A loud battle cry and the sound of hooves beating on earth brought Elrond out of his stupor. It was Maglor on his horse. Two of the three creatures turned to the Nodorin warrior. Maglor drove his horse near the creatures, then jumped up high in the air sailing above the two of the beasts. His sword gleamed brightly as the warrior landed on the back of the beast that stood over Elros. In one smooth motion, Maglor plunged his sword deep into the head of the beast. The warg didn’t even utter a sound before it fell where it stood. Maglor flew up and landed lightly next to Elros. He picked up Elros in his arm and held out his sword in front of him.

The two wargs rushed in, one from the left and the other from the right, but Maglor jumped out of the way. However, despite their overgrown size, the beasts were agile. Instead of crashing into each other, they turned sharply and positioned themselves back on each side of Maglor. Growling menacingly, they circled the Noldorin warrior.

“Atar!” Elrond called out to Maglor. One of the beasts turned toward Elrond.

“Ride, Elrond!” Maglor shouted. “Go! Ride!”

But Elrond did not want to lose any more family. Elros was all he had. He had just learned to love someone other than his brother. How could he leave them? If he left them now, how would he be different from his mother and father who had abandoned them?

Elrond kicked the horse’s side to urge it to go forward toward Maglor and Elros. One of the beasts broke off from circling Maglor and blocked Elrond. Elrond’s horse shied, brayed loudly and reared. Elrond held on, refusing to let go.
Then two things happened at once.

Another horse rode up. Captain Astarno jumped, his sword gleaming like starlight in his hand. At the same time, Maglor’s sword flashed. Elrond heard the steel song, the singing of the swords as two swords whistle past each other leaving two bright arcs that disappeared in an instant.

The two beasts fell, both split into two. But before Elrond could see more, Astarno landed behind Elrond and pulled him into his arms blocking any further sight of the creatures.

**Riverside near North. September 21, Second Age 144**

The sun was sinking leaving a red streak in the sky. Lord Gilmagor had led the cadets down into the valley. They found a row of boulders on top of a small hill standing between the river and the cliff, in the midst of flat moor just before the fens by the river. Lord Gilmagor ordered the cadets to prepare for the night.

“They will wait to attack in the dark. We better be ready,” Lord Gilmagor said.

The horses are let loose, instructed to go further up north following the cliffside. If these were any other horses, cadets would have worried for them. But these horses were bred from the horses brought from Valinor, those brought by Feanor’s sons in the hijacked ships. Maedhros had given some of them to Fingolfin when the eldest of Feanor’s sons conceded his kingship to his step-uncle. And these horses were bred from them. They understood instructions and could follow them.

“Can you believe it? Werewolves and wargs? At this time and Age? I thought they were only in the stories,” Erfaron said as he sharpened the stakes using the branches they had picked up at the woodland.

“Have you forgotten, Erfaron? There is even a kinslayer living in these parts,” Oron said next to him. Elrond’s ears perked up. A kinslayer? His heart began to drum. Elrond had heard that Maglor was alive, wandering the vast Arda. Ever since he had become an Elf, Elrond had tried to reach Maglor with his mind, but there had been no answer. And he could not ask about Maglor. It was never said, but the talk of kinslayers was a forbidden topic inside the White City.

Could they be talking about Maglor? Elrond wondered, his heart suddenly hopeful.

“What is this? Where have you heard that?” Elrond asked.

“You have never heard it? Cadets were talking about it just before we left the White City,” Oron said. “Erfaron, you even commented, if I remember.”

Erfaron shrugged. “Who cares about one kinslayer. They are forbidden to enter Lindon. That is all I care about.”

“But what is this about a kinslayer living in these parts? Is that true?” Elrond asked.

“I do not know if it is true, but the word is he lives just a league away from the village of Green Elves. To think that Green Elves have been hiding a kinslayer. Who would have thought?” Oron
chuckled.

“They may not have known,” Erfaron said. “Didn’t they say his place was hidden?”

“Who is ‘they’?” Elrond needed to know where this story originated. How is it that he had never heard about this?

Oron and Erfaron looked at each other. “You know?” Erfaron asked Oron, but the cadet shook his head. Erfaron faced Elrond. “Everybody was talking about it at Cellon’s place the day…” The Noldo glanced at Thranduil who sat sharpening the wooden stakes quietly, his back to the cadets. Erfaron tipped his head toward the blond Sinda and made a motion with his fists.

“Why did you not come, Elrond?” Oron asked. “I think almost all the cadets were there except Belegor and you two.” Oron’s eyes flitted toward Thranduil before landing on Elrond.

“Do you know who this kinslayer is?” Elrond asked although he didn’t think the cadets would know.

Oron looked at Erfaron.

“It was a Quenya name. Cellon did say it once.” Oron frowned, scratching his nose.

“Makalaure?” Elrond offered. “Kanafinwe?” His foster father was known by his Sindarized name ‘Maglor,’ but his Quenya name was Kanafinwe and Makalaure, which was Maglor’s mother name. But among his brothers, he was called Kano. “Kano?” It was unlikely anyone outside his family called Maglor this, but Elrond asked anyway. Hope filled his heart, and it thrummed loudly.

But Oron’s face was blank. “Noooo,” he shook his head. “It was more like Ass—something. Asta—.” Oron looked at Erfaron.

“I didn’t pay too much attention,” Erfaron said with a shrug.

“Astarno?” Elrond swallowed hard.

“Yes! That’s it. Astarno. That was the name,” Oron said with a bright smile.

CRACK!

A loud snap made the three cadets turn as Thranduil shot up from where he sat. A broken wooden stake fell from the Sinda’s hands.

----------

**Amon Ereb** (Sindarin, *lonely hill*)-- the highest point in the southern plains of East Beleriand. It stood alone within sight of Gelion. On top of the hill, Caranthir (4th son of Feanor) built a stronghold which he fortified with the help of the Green Elves. It guarded eastern passage into the southern part of East Beleriand. Feanor’s sons withdrew here after the Battle of Unnumbered Tears. After the third kinslaying at Sirion, Maedhros, and Maglor, the two remaining sons of Feanor brought Elrond and Elros here. But after only two years, Morgoth drove them out, and the Feanorians wandered without a home base ever since.

**Sanwe-latya** (Quenya, *thought opening*)—exchange of information, perception, emotion or memory from the mind of another. It is said that at one time all sentient beings could use this form of
communication but as language developed, the ability to use this diminished. Only those with powerful minds whose souls are dominant over their bodies can use this easily (like Valar and Maiar and some powerful Elves). Two minds must share some close affinity toward each other before this ability could be used. The mind must be open as it cannot be done forcefully (the reason why Melkor could not read the thoughts of another against their will)

**Ramdal** (Sindarin, *wall’s end*)—cluster of low hills in East Beleriand. It was located few miles away from Amon Ereb and marked the eastern end of Andram, the Long Wall, that ran westward for many miles. In my story, Maedhros had erected a watch tower here to watch for Morgoth’s army. From the tower, one could watch north and west for the movement of Morgoth army before it reached Amon Ereb giving Maedhros enough time to evacuate the people from Amon Ereb. Maedhros would have known that he could not face the army of Morgoth alone.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter 43--part 2 of Astarno: Elrond hears the exchange between Maedhros and Maglor and learns about why his mother will never come back for them
Gathering Darkness

Chapter Summary

Elrond wonders about Thranduil's reaction and remembers what Maedhros and Maglor said about Astarno as the cadets ready themselves to face the beasts tracking them.

Chapter Notes

Happy New Year, everybody! Just a quick note: I made a mistake of mentioning Earendil doing a heroic deed (Maglor talking to Elrond in Chapter 42) but that didn’t occur until after end of the War of Wrath in FA 587. (This is what happens when I make changes at the last minute.) Anyway, this is replaced with the talk of the deed of Luthien instead.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

ELROND dug his feet into the ground, refusing to cringe at the searing heat he felt, but the other two cadets flinched back when Thranduil turned to face them. The blond Sinda was terrible to behold.

The blood red of the fading sun drenched Thranduil’s silver-gold hair in dark red, and the Sinda’s eyes shone with black heat. Thranduil glared at them as if he will burn them into ashes where they stood. Elrond felt, rather than saw, Erfaron’s hand grip the hilt of his sword.

Elrond sensed Thranduil struggle to control the fire thrashing inside. Although his face remained icy, the deep red shadow flickered behind his eyes and the heat in them robbed Elrond of his breath even though Thranduil stood several strides away from him. Elrond took a step toward Thranduil, but the Sinda took in a breath, turned without a word, hoisted up the bundle of stakes he had been carving and stalked down the hill.

Oron let out a breath.

“Did we say something wrong?” Oron turned to look down at Thranduil as he descended to the bottom of the hill where the other two cadets were busy piling dry bushes in the shallow trench they had dug around the bottom of the hill.

“Who knows what goes on that arrogant head of his, Son of Orc!” Erfaron swore, glaring at Thranduil’s back. “I would like to give him a good whack one day.”

“Keep it down,” Elrond said, laying a hand on Erfaron’s hand still holding onto the hilt of his sword. “We do not want to fight among ourselves while preparing to face an enemy.”

“I like it not, but it is hard to say otherwise when the Sinda behaves thus.” Erfaron glanced at Elrond then at Oron. “Don’t tell me I was the only one offended?”

“I thought he was going to strike us down,” Oron said. “Maybe the Sinda does not think of us as his
companions. Can he be trusted to fight beside us and protect our backs?"

“Oron! You are exaggerating and your words needlessly divisive,” Elrond said frowning.

“Well, the Sinda behaving the way he is isn’t inspiring much confidence in him,” said Erfaron. “Can you blame Oron if he thinks so?”

“No, Elrond is right,” Oron said, his voice grave. “I should not have said such a thing about a fellow cadet.” Oron turned to Elrond and bowed his head. “I apologize for my words.”

Elrond sighed. “I am sure you did not mean them, Oron.”

Oron nodded back, then turned to walk back down to his warrior companion.

“The fault lies with your warrior companion, not with Oron,” Erfaron said and followed after the other cadet.

Elrond let out a sigh. He wondered how many cadets felt that way about Thranduil.

Lack of trust. That was a terrible thing. If warriors who trained together cannot trust each other, how could they face enemies together?

Elrond knew some cadets disliked Thranduil, but this was a first time he heard anyone doubt Thranduil’s integrity as a fellow warrior. Elrond wondered if it was Oron’s personal view or something the cadet heard. Elrond did not know Oron well, but the Half-Elven did note that Oron who used to be closer to Cellon was now one of the followers of Belegor. It was nothing unusual. Belegor had many followers, but it seemed to Elrond that Oron changed after joining the officer program.

Elrond looked down at Thranduil at the bottom of the hill as the Sinda spread out the carved stakes all around the edges.

Looking at Thranduil, unease darkened Elrond’s heart. A dread glided down his spine like a water snake on the surface of the water.

There was murder in those blue-green eyes.

*Such hatred.*

Elrond shivered, suddenly feeling cold. How is he to reach Thranduil? If the task had seemed mountainous before, it seemed almost impossible now. The mountain he needed to climb loomed before him, its cliffs covered with mists of snow and ice. And Elrond felt small looking up at the mountain’s impossible height.

*What has made you like this, Thranduil? What have you seen that hardened your heart and made you hate so?*

Elrond’s heart clenched. Could it be the talk of the kinslayers?

People talked of Maedhros, his brothers, and his warriors as if they were some depraved monsters. But how much did anyone know them? Maedhros and Maglor, the leaders of those kinslayers. And Astarno, one of their captains. People labeled them demons and murderers and shunned even the talk of them.

When Elrond had joined Gil-galad back in First Age at the age of twenty, he had given only a brief
statement as to how Maedhros and Maglor raised him and Elros but had not spoken of them since. Elrond had felt the anger and the shame of the other Noldor around him. He had not wanted his foster fathers judged by the people who blamed them still, people who didn’t know the generous, noble and compassionate side of Maedhros and Maglor.

Elrond bent down to pick up the broken stake Thranduil dropped, then frowned. The broken edge of the stake was crushed into a pulp as if by a great force.

It came to Elrond that it wasn’t just the talk of the kinslayers that made Thranduil react. It was the name Astarno. Thranduil recognized the name. Did Thranduil meet Astarno? What has Astarno done that elicited such response from Thranduil? It was only by chance that Elrond heard little of what happened at Sirion and Menegroth. Maglor never talked of those incidents. And Elrond and his brother had not asked. Could not ask. And Elrond had not remembered many details of his childhood. But ever since meeting Thranduil, pieces of memories that Elrond thought he had forgotten had begun to surface.

Amon Ereb. August 10, First Age 538

“Ohhh!” Elrond could not keep his mouth closed. He had never seen so many books in one place. The few books he had at home had been gifts from strangers who came from across the sea in their big white boats.

Gaping, his heart aflutter, Elrond looked around the round tower lined with wooden shelves built to fit the curves of the stone tower.

“Isn’t this amazing, Elros?” Elrond said as he turned to his brother. But Elros was already rummaging through a large chest just behind the desk that sat opposite the door.

“It’s not here,” Elros said. But Elrond knew that already by the feeling of disappointment he felt from his brother.

“Maybe we could just ask them.”

Elros rolled his eyes and shook his head, but didn’t bother to say anything. Instead, Elros looked around the library. On the walls, there were weapons and shields mounted on wooden boards. There were several swords among them, but none was the one they were looking for.

“Elros…”

“Look upstairs, Elrond.” Elros moved over to the door once he looked around the entire first floor.

“Where are you going?”

“To his bedroom.”

“But…”

“Just do it, Elrond.” Elros rolled his eyes again.

“I don’t want to be here on my own. Don’t leave me here alone,” Elrond whined as Elros opened the door ajar to look out.

“Stop being a baby. You’ll be fine,” Elros said. He turned toward Elrond. “If you get caught, tell
them Captain Astarno said it was okay.”

“But we’ll get the captain in trouble.”

“You won’t, Elrond. He said we are free to go anywhere.” With that, Elros slipped out of the door closing the wooden door behind him.

Elrond pouted at the door forlornly but walked toward the center and climbed up the curved stairs up to the second level. It was built on a narrow ledge wide enough to hold the bookshelves and a passage of one full grown adult to walk freely around the shelves.

There were more swords mounted on the wall here, but Aranruth was not among them.

Elrond sighed and looked down when he saw a book on the floor. It was bound in pale gold leather and leafed with silver. Elrond opened the book, and his eyes widened. It was a drawing of a plant. Pretty letters were written beneath the picture. It was a Quenya word. Although he understood Quenya, Elrond and his brother grew up speaking Sindarin with their mother. And after they have learned their way around the castle at Amon Ereb, Maglor thought it proper that they should be taught how to read and write Quenya. Elrond traced the elegant script with his finger and eagerly turned to next page, all thoughts of Aranruth forgotten, when the door to the library opened.

Elrond slid down onto the floor although he did not know why he was hiding. Elros said it was all right, but somehow Elrond felt he was doing something wrong. Elrond lifted his head carefully and looked down through the elaborate steel railing.

There were three Elves. The tallest one of them had a flaming red hair. A thin gold circlet tamed the luxurious red waves which were kept off his face by two elaborate braids.

“How many?” The deep voice belonged to Maedhros.

“Too many.” The grave voice that followed behind Maedhros belonged to Captain Astarno. “Entire Arvernien is crawling with them. But Sirion is too deep. And they do not have boats. I do not think they will risk crossing the river,” the captain said.

“Which means they will come from North through East Beleriand when they do come,” Maglor said.

“Astarno,” Maedhros commanded. “Double the guards posted at Ramdal and set up dedicated guards to watch the pass between Andram and Taur-im-Duinath as well. I do not wish to take any chances. And take a team to look for a way to cross River Gelion and map out a route.”

“As you command,” the captain saluted and left the library.

“Nelyo, is it wise to go across River Gelion? The Green Elves, they may have heard what happened at Sirion.”

“The Orcs are running rampant in the whole of Beleriand, Kano. I doubt they have heard anything…. And even if they did, we do not have much choice. Diminished we are, after the loss we took at Sirion. This hold is not strong enough to meet the dark tide. Morgoth does not know of this place, but he will soon enough. He will not rest until he cloaks this land with his shadow. The darkness will eat away all that we have built here, and we are alone, an island in a vast sea of darkness. We cannot face him, weakened and weary. We must seek a new harbor to weather the storm.” Maedhros sounded tired. “And Kano, you take a team and sail down River Gelion. I want to make sure the passage is safe before sending the twins down the river…”

“No,” said Maglor. “We should not send them back now. All roads are covered in darkness, even
down the river. And the boys, they need us, and we need them, brother.”

“Kano, what can we do for the children? They are better off with *Artanaro* (Gil-galad).”

“Why? Because Gil-galad is the kin to the twins? They are our kin, too, Nelyo. We can raise them as well as that boy, perhaps better than he as we have experience raising our brothers while he does not. And neither Cirdan nor Gil-galad has asked after the twins.”

“You heard Astarno. Morgoth’s creatures occupy Arvernien now. Like shadow wall, they stand, feeding on all that is bright. All birds flying between the Bay of Balar and East Beleriand are shot down. They have no way to reach us.”

“That is more reason we cannot send the boys away, especially when we are unable to coordinate the children’s safety with those at the Isle. Do you not see, brother? Valar meant for us to find the twins. We are meant to care for them.”

“Do not talk to me of Valar, Kano. What have they done but stay silent and unmoving while we suffered, while all those innocent people in Beleriand suffered and still suffer.” Maedhros sank into the chair behind the desk and leaned onto his hand. “And as for the boys, there may be family…”

“What family? Their father wasn’t even around. Their mother abandoned them. You heard Astarno. She jumped into the ocean, Nelyo.” Maglor’s voice trembled as it went up. “She jumped rather than give up the jewel. If she valued her children, would she have done that? Leave her children behind? What kind of mother does that?”

Elrond had never heard Maglor sound so upset. He was always so calm and warm. Elrond’s heart began to beat faster and faster. Did their mother abandon them? Was she never coming to get them? Elros believed so firmly that their mother was going to come for them one day. Elrond’s eyes filled with tears as his heart tightened painfully.

“She was threatened, Kano. Did you not hear? Ambarussa told Astarno to shoot her down.”

“You know Astarno as well as I do. He may have tried to appease Ambarussa, but he would not have harmed her. This is the same Astarno who almost got himself killed trying to fight Tyelko’s warriors, the ones who took those twins at Menegroth. Astarno tried to prevent them. Do you know how badly he was hurt? He still came to me, in his condition, to ask me to stop Tyelko’s warriors.”

“Yet, he defended them when I would have them banished for what they did to those children.”

Maglor’s voice was quiet. Elrond had to strain to hear.

“But Astarno was right. Banishing them would have meant their death. Morgoth’s creatures were everywhere. Where could have they gone? No matter what they did, they were loyal to Tyelko. His loss grieved them, and the blood lust was on them. Through damnation, blood, and fire, they had followed us, given us their hearts and souls. Who were we to judge them?”

“But those children, Kano. They were mere babes, no more than those two you brought.” Maedhros’ voice cracked, and his smooth baritone sounded shrill and broken. “What horrible monsters we have become? We are demons, Kano.”

Silence flowed as Elrond’s heart beat loud and furious.

“The tragedy at Menegroth, the fault does not lie entirely with you, Nelyo,” Maglor said after a moment of silence passed. Maglor’s voice sounded subdued and concerned.
“I am the one who gave the order,” Maedhros said, his voice flat and colorless.

“You tried your best to limit the loss. Both ours and theirs. You convinced our brothers to wait until Midwinter when you knew there would be fewer people in Menegroth. You did everything you could, Nelyo. How could you have known there were still that many warriors inside the caves or that the newcomer would rally the guards at the gate?”

“I should not have sent in Moryo and Kurvo so deep inside the cave. I had hoped that if we could capture the queen and the princes, Dior would break and will negotiate with us.”

“It was a good plan. If we were successful, we could have made the exchange with minimal loss on both our sides,” Maglor said and let out a sigh as if to empty out his soul. “We had underestimated the Sindar, and we paid for it with the lives of our brothers. It was not you, brother. It was the Doom that was working against us. How could we have known that their warriors were called back or that their legion had not gone too far from Menegroth before turning back.”

Maedhros remained silent. For a long time, they did not speak, and Elrond wondered whether he should let them know he was there when Maglor spoke again.

“But no matter, I am not sending Elrond and Elros away. They have just now started to sleep without nightmares. They have only now gotten used to us and being here. I am not going to disturb their peace again by sending them away somewhere they have never been. No, brother. I am keeping them, and you will not stop me.”

“Having them with us will taint them with our doom. Let the elflings go, Kano.”

“We call them elflings, but have you not seen that they are Edain, not Elves? The doom lies with us, not with them.”

“All who we touch are doomed!” Maedhros’ words cut through the air like a blade. “Have you not seen the Edain suffer? Do you think they would have suffered if they had not joined us?” Maedhros’ voice went up and hung in the air, sharp, biting, and cold.

Maglor did not reply, and deep silence settled between them until Maedhros spoke again. This time, his voice was calm but heavy with grief.

“They will one day leave us, Kano. No matter how much love you give them, they will not love you back. They can’t. How could they? How will you bear it then?”

“If it is the punishment Eru measured out for us… if at the cost of our hearts it can lessen even little of what wrongs we have done, will you not take it, brother?”

**Moor west of River Lune . September 21, Second Age 144**

As the light of the sun weakened, the clouds gathered, and the once brilliant Autumn sky turned gray. Over the river that ran south, a great cloud of mists gathered hiding all that lay under it.

Cadets completed their assigned tasks and gathered behind Lord Gilmagor who stood watching the valley where they had descended. The cliffside rose steeply all along the edge of the forest and stretched far into the north.

“My lord, we completed our preparations,” Elrond said. “What shall we do now?”
Lord Gilmagor turned to them. “Now, we wait. You’ll find that in battle, the actual moment of fighting is much shorter than we think they are. More than half of the time is spent waiting.”

“Waiting for what, sir?” Oron asked.

“Waiting for the right time, cadet. Timing is crucial in a battle as it is in all things. Now that we have some time, shall we do some learning?” Gilmagor turned to the cadets.

“But shouldn’t they be attacking soon?” Elrond said.

“Soon, yes. But not so soon.” Gilmagor smiled. “What have you learned about wargs and werewolves?”

“Not much,” said Erfaron. “They are used mostly as scouts because they are nimble and unlike Orcs are harder to detect for us as they can pass for other animals. But they can think and communicate and are wholly controlled by the will of the dark lord. But I thought these creatures were destroyed after the War of Wrath.”

“Apparently, not all of them perished,” said Lord Gilmagor. “I thought any remaining had migrated to the east.”

“Shouldn’t we position ourselves, my lord? The sun is almost but disappeared,” Gelir said standing next to Erfaron, his warrior companion.

“Do not fear. They will not attack until it becomes pitch dark. Unlike us or the Orcs who require starlight or moonlight to see, these creatures can see in the pitch darkness. They will wait until there is no light.” Lord Gilmagor looked up at the sky. “And there will be no stars tonight,” Gilmaor said and continued. “When they come, aim for their eyes as it will be the only thing you will see in the dark. And their eyes are one of the few places that are vulnerable. They have hides and furs thick as an iron armor so arrows anywhere else would be useless.”

Gilmagor turned to Thranduil. “Oropherion, you have fought these creatures. Have you not? I have read your father’s report he submitted to the king. You spent several decades up in the northern region of Misty Mountains. Anything you can tell the cadets?”

“As the Lord Commander said, their fur is like an iron armor, especially around their neck, shoulders, and sides,” Thranduil said.

“How do we kill them then?” asked Saldor, Oron’s warrior companion.

“Aim here,” Thranduil touched the top of his head. “There is a soft spot here. Plunge your sword here, and you can kill it instantly.”

“They probably wouldn’t lower their heads voluntarily for us to do that,” Oron chuckled.

“No. You’ll have to jump onto the top of its back to do that,” Thranduil said nonchalantly. “Easier way is to slide under and cut their underside although if you time it wrong, it will fall on you and bury you under its spilled gut. If the weight doesn’t crush you, its stench will. Better if you can stake them. Of course, if you are skilled enough, you can split them into two by slicing through the gap in their joints. But if you miss, you will risk breaking your swords.” Thranduil pointed to two spots, one behind front legs and the other before the hind legs. “Their joints are wide apart here, and the fur in that area is sparse as it is where they bend.”

“How could they bend those areas?” Gelir rounded his eyes, grimacing.
“Because they are not natural. They are bred to spy and scout for the dark lord. They are very limber and despite their size can fit through small openings because their bones are attached to their muscles like cats,” Thranduil said.

The sky darkened. Swirling mists swelled up from the river and mingled with the oncoming darkness.

“To your positions!” Lord Gilmagor’s command whipped across the approaching darkness. “Lord Istuion with me.” And with that, the cadets were plunged into the thick darkness of the approaching night.

__________

**Aranrúth** (Sindarin, *King’s Ire*)—King Thingol’s sword. It was saved from the destruction of Doriath and passed to Elros who became the first King of Numenor. It became the heirloom of the Kings of Numenor and was lost when Numenor was destroyed.

**Taur-im-Duinath** (Sindarin, *Forest between Rivers*)—Forest that lay between rivers Sirion and Gelion. It covered most of the land south of Amon Ereb. The forest was thick and dark and even Orcs did not go there except few Dark Elves who wandered there.

**River Gelion**—River east of Amon Ereb that separated East Beleriand from Ossiriand where Green Elves dwelled. It is said, Gelion was swifter than River Sirion although it was less wide or deep.

Chapter End Notes

Next: Chapter 44—The Call: Thranduil hears the call of the darkness that closes all around him.
The Call

Chapter Summary

The cadets face their first battle. Thranduil plunges into action.

Chapter Notes

At the end of 2017, I passed 5000 hits and 200 kudos.

Thank you so much for your enthusiasm and encouragement. Special thanks to all the readers who have taken the time to comment. You make my day each and every time I read them. :) Thank you also for the kudos.

As a special thank you, I will be putting up some extra background stories throughout the month of January. They are part of this story that never made it to the final cut because I felt they didn't move the plot. Some are just teasers for Part 2 to come.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

THRANDUIL squeezed his eyes shut even though it was not necessary. The darkness was complete, and he could not even see his hands in front of his eyes. Thranduil took in a breath and focused on the heat inside him.

Astarno.

The name echoed in his head. After Sirion, Thranduil tried to convince Lord Cirdan to go after the retreating army of Maedhros, but the council had decided not to pursue. Thranduil had not understood. They had taken the twins, Elwing’s children Thranduil had hidden inside a cave before chasing after the three Noldorin warriors.

And those three warriors in red armor. Those three had taken from Thranduil his sun and the moon, never to shine again in Middle Earth. The grief of loss he felt at Sirion surged like a typhoon and crashed into his heart sucking the breath from his lungs. Thranduil gritted his teeth as the tidal wave of emotion threw him into the impenetrable blackness of the vast sea. Darkness closed all around Thranduil, calling him into its black embrace.

“Thranduil?”

A hand reached out in the darkness and grabbed his arm, pulling Thranduil out of the black sea.

“Are you well?” Elrond’s concerned voice whispered next to him.

Thranduil took in a lungful of air and shook off Elrond’s hand. How Elrond saw through the pitch darkness and found him, Thranduil did not know. But he took in a long breath to control his turbulent emotion. This was not the time to drown in his memories. He needed to focus.

As if Elrond knew Thranduil was back in control, the Half-Elven did not say anything further.
Thranduil took in a deep breath and sent out his senses all around, focusing on the minutest changes in the air around him.

Thranduil remembered back to the sword training with Captain Himion and his surviving officers. One of the first things they did once Thranduil was apt enough with his long daggers was to blind him.

“Your senses could fool you, Thranduil,” Captain Himion said. “Especially your sight. Do not rely on one sense alone. Use all. There may also be a time when you may not be able to use one or the other of your senses. Develop all of them so that if one is lacking, you could still depend on your other senses.”

Thranduil reached out through the darkness, his senses all alert now, every hair on his body standing on its end. He could hear the rough breathing of the cadets next to him and the slow, even breath of Lord Istuion. However, he could not feel Lord Gilmagor.

Thranduil opened his eyes to look ahead. Lord Gilmagor glowed as if he had an inner light burning inside him. The commander was the only one Thranduil could see in the darkness.

It was then that he felt a slight tremor under his feet. It was hardly discernible, so slight it was. Had his senses not been alert, he would not have felt it.

“They are coming,” Thranduil said.

“On your guards,” Gilmagor said. “They are coming from both east and west.”

Thranduil directed his senses toward the river. Sure enough, the movements were coming from both the river and from the valley where they had descended this afternoon. Thranduil’s heart clenched when he realized there were too many feet, much more than he had expected. He had anticipated about twenty at the most, but what he heard sounded more than thrice that number.

“That is no pack or two,” Gelir said somewhere far right. It was hard to mistake the fear in his voice.

“I thought they were mostly used as scouts,” Oron said. “I never heard of wolves or wargs attacking as a horde and in such large numbers.”

Erfaron cursed, and Saldor who was stationed farthest from Thranduil swore, his mumbled profanity doing little to hide the quiver in his voice.

Soon, the ground trembled and a loud rumble of sound resounded from both east and west. Along with the sound of feet thundering on the ground came a loud howl and growl of many beasts.

“Steady, cadets!” Gilmagor’s voice ripped through the darkness. “You are the scions of the great warriors of First Age. Show your fathers and forefathers what you are made of, lads. Do not let these beasts frighten you. Stand steady!”

Thranduil knew Gilmagor’s words were meant to arouse spirits and boost the cadet’s confidence. Battles were fought on two fronts, mental and physical. No matter how well trained, if soldiers hearing a battle cry of their enemies were seized with fear and left paralyzed, the battles were lost even before they started.

Thranduil felt the cadets tense and knew their hearts were in the grip of fear. Having faced these twisted beasts more times than he would like to remember, Thranduil knew these beasts warranted such dread, but he also knew that it wasn’t just the monsters that these cadets feared.
Gilmagor was capable and experienced. But he had, obviously, forgotten that for young and inexperienced cadets, fear of disappointing their fathers or forefathers only added to the pressure they already felt. The burden of meeting the expectations combined with the fear and anxiety gnawed away at their confidence. Thranduil remembered the first time he faced an Orc horde. His fear of disappointing his father, instead of helping, had made things worse.

“Great warriors, indeed,” said Thranduil. “Sons do not always take after their fathers. Shall we see who can down more of these creatures? If you can even get to one of them.”

“Thranduil!” Elrond hissed next to him, his voice tight and full of warning.

“Challenge accepted, Sinda,” Erfaron ground his teeth, first to take the bait.

Thranduil couldn’t help his lips curving up. He didn’t care for Erfaron, but Thranduil could not but admire the Noldo’s spirit.

“It hardly seems fair,” Gelir said.

“Just because you have more experience,” Saldor harrumphed.

“Let’s make it even then, shall we?” Thranduil said. “You four against Elrond and I. Whichever team brings down more wins. Losers do all the chores for a week. You think you could handle that?”

“Absolutely!” Erfaron said. “Oron, Gelir, Saldor?”

“Let’s do it!” Oron said.

“Aye!” said Gelir and Saldor together.

“Do you have to do this now, Thranduil?” Elrond whispered to Thranduil.

“Come now, Elrond. It will be fun,” Thranduil said, unable to stop the grin spreading in his face, thankful that the darkness hid it.

Whatever protest from Elrond was swallowed up as the red and glowing eyes filled the darkness of the night, fierce and terrible. And along with them, a sound of howling and snarling rose like a wild storm in the night.

“Ready!” Gilmagor’s command cut through the roar and the cadets took their positions. The pale form of Gilmagor pulsed as he stood like a pale pillar in front of them.

“Release!” Gilmagor shouted, and the arrows of the cadets sang.

Fast as he could, Thranduil’s hands moved, each arrow aiming straight for the red glow in the dark. There were so many of them, but Thranduil focused on shooting down as many of the red eyes as he could. Less standing, less he had to fight later.

“Fire Arrows. Ready!” Lord Gilmagor shouted as the first sets of the red eyes came near just a few strides from him. Gilmagor’s pale form shimmered.

“Ready!” cadets shouted in unison. Thranduil struck the fire stones, the standard army issue, he held in his left hand. A spark ignited the tip of his arrow just as five other fire-lit arrows stood ready from each cadet’s bow.

“Now!” Lord Commander shouted as soon as the first group of red eyes reached him.
As previously planned, four flaming arrows shot up toward the sky illuminating the area. Thranduil and Saldor aimed their arrows to the trench previously made by two cadets and filled with dry bushes and branches and soaked with liquor. The instant the fire arrows hit the ditch, the fire burst forth. Flames surged and spread. A circular wall of fire blazed around the stone island where the cadets stood. The beasts, mix of wargs and wolves, screeched to a stop, some veering off but too late. Few of them plunged into the wall of flame.

Lord Gilmagor’s hands sprouted two gleaming swords, and Lord Istuion held two long daggers. Both moved like dancers. Their movements, different yet alike, wove through the emerging beasts. Their swords, a glimmer of silver fire in the dark, sliced through the creatures in a deadly dance.

All the while the bows of the cadets sang, deadly music to accompany the lethal dance of the elder warriors. The air filled with the thick, sickening stench of blood, burning flesh, and fur.

The beasts pulled back.

Just outside the ring of fire, beasts loomed like shadows, big as horses and dark as the night. Their snarl rose, an angry sea in the pitch blackness of the night. Then suddenly, all sounds stopped as the beasts turned their backs and retreated into the darkness.

“Hold your arrows!” Thranduil shouted and stashed his bow behind him. Elrond followed, but more arrows whistled past. Thranduil glared at the cadets lined up left of him. But they did not stop until Lord Gilmagor’s command sliced through the air.

“Hold! Save your arrows. Ready for battle!” Gilmagor and Istuion moved back near the cadets.

“There’s more?” Gelir asked, his voice shaky.

“That was just first assault. Now we fight.” Thranduil said and unsheathed his sword. He turned to the cadets. “Now is the time to show me your skill and pride as Noldorin warriors. That is if you have any skill or pride.” Thranduil flashed them his teeth, challenging them with his eyes.

The cadets whose eyes wavered with uncertainty and fear hardened, their fear replaced with flames of anger.

*Be angry. Anger will save you when fear binds and hinders.*

Elrond cursed under his breath and glared at Thranduil. But there was no more time.

As the elder warriors stepped back, the fire that had blazed previously weakened. The black shadows turned as if they were one mass. A lone beast howled. And as if on cue, the beasts jumped over the diminishing flames, one after another.

The swords of the two lords sliced, cut and stabbed, but there were too many of them.

“Elbereth!”

Thranduil shouted at the top of his lung, expelling the breath he held. Fear knotted his stomach and tightened his muscles. No matter how many times he fought these demons of Morgoth, fear nipped at him each time he faced them. But, Thranduil reached into the anger he held deep inside. It had gotten him through many death-defying moments.

Thranduil ran down the hill, half growling, half shouting, aiming for a creature thrown back by Lord Gilmagor. Lord Commander stood his back to Lord Istuion, and they were surrounded.
A creature snapping at Istuion turned to face Thranduil. It hunkered down, then leaped. Yelling, Thranduil ran to meet it, throwing his body back to sail below the underside of the animal. Thranduil thrust his sword into the underbelly of the beast, cutting it open as he slid past it.

The Sinda rolled to the side and was on his knees when he felt a beast behind him. He thrust his sword up to block the snapping jaw, grabbed onto the beast’s fur, swung up onto its back and plunged his sword into its head.

He leaped off before the beast fell, flipped in the air to land on his feet.

Thrust, slash, leap, flip, plunge, block.

The air filled with the stench of the beasts and the blood. Thranduil moved through them, sinuous and deadly.

But, these were living creatures. No matter how experienced, unexpected things, deadly mistakes, happened.

Thranduil rushed, aiming to cut the beast into the half. He leaped, plunged his sword just behind the beast’s shoulder. As soon as his sword hit, Thranduil knew his aim had erred. But he was in the middle of a flip that he could not stop. He knew he could not hold onto his sword which embedded itself into the creature’s bone having missed the gap in its joint. If he did not let go, the force of his motion would either break his wrist, the sword or both.

Thranduil let go. He reached for his dagger as he landed on the beast’s back when he was knocked off by a mighty swipe from another warg.

Thranduil sailed backward and slammed violently against a boulder. His lung expelled air as pain exploded on his left shoulder and head. His head rang, and his sight darkened. Thranduil struggled to sit up, grunting, once his body slid down the boulder onto the ground.

Everything hurt.

When his eyes cleared, the warg stood over him, his sword still sticking out just behind its left shoulder. It snarled, its red eyes savage with fire. Thranduil fumbled for his dagger, but it was not in his hand or his sheath. The Sinda pawed his back and realized the bow was not there. Even if it was, it was not his bow. All the weapons they carried were issued by the army. His double daggers wouldn’t be there.

He had nothing. When the realization hit, Thranduil chuckled.

The warg growled, its lips curled back, teeth exposed.

“Let’s see whose anger is greater, beast. Mine or yours? You want to kill me? Do it. Do it now. I have no regrets!” Thranduil growled back.

That wasn’t quite true, but at least, Thranduil did not regret leaving this world. This world had given him nothing but pain.

“Get away from him, Seed of Morgoth!” Elrond ran up the hill, leaped up, stepped onto Thranduil’s sword still sticking out from the warg and flew onto the beast’s back.

When the warg lay dead, Elrond pulled out the sword embedded in the warg and threw it to Thranduil.
“Stop sitting around, Sinda! There are still more beasts.” With that Elrond turned and rushed to slay two wolves behind him.

Thranduil got up, snapping his dislocated shoulder back in place with a grimace.

“Yes, I was just sitting around playing with the warg which slammed me on a boulder. How remiss of me!” Thranduil swore out aloud.

Nursing his aching shoulder, Thranduil looked around. Lord Gilmagor and Lord Istuion, Thranduil knew they could stand their own, but they were surrounded by wargs and wolves and could not help the cadets. Cadets were holding their own, but barely. They were clearly overwhelmed.

It was then that Thranduil noticed Erfaron. He had made the same mistake. A snapped piece of Erfaron’s blade was buried on the side of the warg in front of the Noldo. It was apparent Erfaron’s sword hand was unusable. It hung limply on Noldo’s side while with the other hand he held a dagger out in front of him. Thranduil knew the dagger was not enough to defend against a warg, but he was too far from Erfaron to be much help. And other cadets were all engaged.

“Erfaron!” Thranduil threw his sword to Erfaron who looked up. The sword flew through the air. Erfaron threw away his dagger, leaped up and caught the sword. He turned in the air to plunge it into the warg’s head.

With nothing in his hand, Thranduil ran down the hill where he had buried several stakes. The fire inside the trench that had ignited the branches there was just flickering flames now, useful only as a source of light for the warriors.

As Thranduil was about to reach one of the stakes, a warg and two wolves blocked his way. Thranduil took out the wineskin attached to his belt, the ones rationed to each cadet. He leaped up to soar above the creatures, dousing them with wine. As soon as he landed next to the stakes, the beasts lunged at him. Grabbing one of the stakes, Thranduil stirred up the burning branches and flung them at the creatures. The warg and the wolves caught fire. They yelped, running madly as flames erupted on their backs and sides.

“Elrond! Douse the beasts!” Thranduil yelled to Elrond who was the closest to him. He continued to stir up the burning branches and threw them at the beasts.

Elrond looked up, saw the warg and the wolves flaming and running wild.

Once Elrond caught on, it was relayed to the cadets with surprising speed, and soon, many of the wargs and wolves were aflame. Even the ones that didn’t catch fire cowered and ran. Tide changed. Wargs and the wolves fled, a flicker of fire and smoke in the dark of the night.

Thranduil looked around, calming his breath. The ground as far as he could see in the faint light was covered with the bodies of the animals.

Lord Istuion, accompanied by Elrond addressed cadets’ injuries. Erfaron’s wrist was sprained, but not broken. Gelir’s left arm was torn, and Saldor’s leg was bitten, but his armor limited the damage, and the injury was minor. Oron, only one among the cadets, seemed unscathed.

Once their injuries were bound and medicated, the cadets were ordered to finish any animals remain living. Elven warriors killed cleanly, but in the frenzy of the kill, sometimes they missed the vitals that killed instantly. But, killing a helpless and injured being, whether animal or otherwise, was a harder thing than killing them in the heat of a battle. Regardless of how evil they are. No matter how necessary and how many times Thranduil had done it, it was and will always remain the most
difficult part of the aftermath of combat.

When they finished and piled the animals to be burned, the sky in the far east glowed pale. The sky cleared and stars appeared.

Along with the rest of the cadets, Thranduil moved toward the misty river. No one spoke. But each one of them was drawn to water to wash off the blood. Blood meant death and death meant darkness. The dark blood of the creatures bred by Morgoth more so than any other. Their blood was filth and corruption.

The moorland between the river and the site of the battle was wide and covered in thick mists. But the faint light rising in the east was enough to light their path. They washed in a stream of water. And once cleansed, they offered their song of thanks and praise to the Valar as the sun rose and the mists melted away.

Having called their horses, cadets prepared to leave. They gathered any unbroken arrows, weapons, and provisions that were scattered. Thranduil was able only to find his quiver containing few arrows. But his bow was broken, and he could not find his dagger. Thranduil was glad that he did not bring the twin knives his father had given him. Those were irreplaceable.

“Your sword,” Erfaron approached Thranduil and handed the sword Thranduil threw the Noldo. “I…” Erfaron seemed to search for words. Thranduil saw that Erfaron’s bow remained intact.

“If you are willing, I’ll trade that sword for your bow and arrows,” Thranduil said.

Erfaron’s eyes met Thranduil’s. Understanding passed between them. Erfaron handed Thranduil his bow and the quiver of arrows, stashing the sword into his empty sheath. He gave Thranduil a warrior salute before returning to his horse.

Once the fire used to burn the carcasses were contained, they left the stone isle at the moors. Lord Gilmagor left a message for the border patrols who were stationed a day’s ride away knowing the guards will see the smoke and come to investigate.

The Lord Commander’s face was grim, and Thranduil wondered if the commander worried over the unnaturalness of this incident. That many wargs and wolves, it was far from ordinary.

They rode swiftly, no one wanting to linger at the battle site. Thranduil noted that the four cadets who had been light-hearted and lively at the beginning of their trip were quiet and grim as the elder lords. Killing, even of evil creatures like wargs, was never an easy thing. And the night had been long and bloody.

It was not until they reached a waterfall that they stopped to have a meal and rest.

Chewing a piece of lembas, Thranduil walked up to the foot of the waterfall. The sound of water falling was deafening. The cliff was high here, and the water fell from the height of an eight-story building. The water plunged into a deep pool before splitting into several swift streams rushing between large boulders before running down south into the River Lune.

“Oropherion!”

Thranduil turned. Lord Gilmagor stood there.

“This place does not feel safe. We will not linger here,” he said. Then, the commander threw something to him. Thranduil caught it. It was a sword. One of the twin blades Gilmagor carried.
Thranduil looked up wide-eyed.

“You need a sword. I am entrusting it to you. Return it to me once we reach the north marches.”

Thranduil’s eyes met Lord Gilmagor’s. No warrior gave away his weapon lightly, even if for a short time. And this was not the military issue as had been the one Thranduil gave to Erfaron. This was Gilmagor's personal weapon. For a warrior, his weapon was his life and nothing less than complete trust would make a warrior relinquish his weapon freely.

Thranduil looked down at the sword in his hand. When the Sinda looked up again, Gilmagor had already moved away, back to the camp set up downstream.

Thranduil’s throat tightened as his nose stung. Despite the dire situation they were on, the elder Elf had seen, understood and approved. Thranduil had not sought approval. He thought he had not cared whether anyone approved of him or not, the least of all the Lord Commander. Yet, his chest expanded as long-buried warmth surged in Thranduil's breast.

“Stupid Crooked Nose,” Thranduil murmured, but he was immensely pleased. “What does it matter if he approves of me or not,” he said, but Thranduil knew it was not true.

His hand trembled as Thranduil pulled out the sword from its sheath. It was one long piece of metal slightly longer than a regular blade. It sang, a clear crystal note, as it cleared the silver sheath. Even under the bright sunlight, the sword glowed pale as if made of starlight. It was no ordinary blade. Not even a master Dwarven smith could make a blade like this. Thranduil swallowed. It was a thing of beauty, and for the first time in his life, he desired a thing a hand of Noldor made.

-------

Lembas (Sindarin, Journey bread)-- waybread of Elves made of special corn that grew in Valinor. Orome the hunter of Valar gave it to the Elves as a sustenance in the Great Journey west. Only women, called Yavannildi, made this bread. By custom, Elven Queens kept and distributed the lembas. Queen Melian learned it from Vala Yavanna. And Galadriel learned it from Queen Melian. It was very nutritious and kept fresh for a long period of time.

Chapter End Notes

Next: Chapter 45--Diverging Paths: Thranduil comes to a road where he must choose, the road to revenge or acceptance
Camped half day's ride from the village of the Green Elves, Thranduil finds himself questioning the paths in front of him.

North of Laiquendi village September 23, Second Age 144

THRANDUIL looked around at the pale face of the cadets. Muscles of their faces were tense and lined. Since the battle two nights ago, they have been moving nonstop since their short stop at the waterfall.

Thranduil looked up at the sky. It was a deep pool of black velvet dotted with sparkling jewels thrown haphazardly. Thranduil’s hand moved of its own accord searching his neck for the leather-bound chain. His hand found nothing. The Sinda repressed a sigh and comforted himself knowing that his mother’s necklace was in Glineth’s safe hands back in Grey Havens. It had been necessary to leave it behind to avoid losing it, but Thranduil felt colder without it.

As the night deepened, the cliff that kept pace with them on their left began to hunker down, no longer steep and unconquerable.

The cadets were silent, only the woeful whispers of wind and the soft tinkling of the silver bells woven into the manes of the horses disturbed the tranquil silence of the night.

When the incline of the cliffside became gentle enough for the horses, cadets dismounted and started the climb. The wind from the vast moor that lay in the east grew bitter as they ascended to the top of the cliffside.

“Ai, thank the Valar! A stream!” Saldor exclaimed when he reached the top, grinning wide for the first time since the battle.

The top of the plateau was, indeed, full of young elm trees and flowing between the row of the trees was a small stream.

“Mayhap we can rest here, Commander,” Lord Istuion suggested. “The young ones could use some rest.”

Lord Gilmagor nodded. “Lord Istuion, please look to the cadet’s injuries. They may need new dressing. I will survey the area. Thranduil and Elrond, take the first watch. Rest, set up camp.” With that, Gilmagor disappeared among the pines and birches across the stream.

Thranduil and Elrond glanced at each other. They exchanged nods, and Elrond took to a tree north of the glade where the rest of the cadets set up camp. Thranduil walked toward a cliffside where they had just climbed and jumped up lightly onto a branch of the tallest elm there.
Despite the brightness of the stars tonight, the plains and the moor that stretched below the cliff to the river were barely visible. Only the river shimmered like a silver thread in the darkness of the night.

The trees hummed softly, their music just a faint melody amid the chirping of the insects. This forest was young, and it had not learned the ancient songs Thranduil had often heard in the older forests. As the sound of cadets moving died down, the harmony of the night deepened adding into its symphony the tooting of the birds and the flurry of tiny feet over the dried, fallen leaves and tree branches.

If the forest and the creatures that lived in it were calm, then there was no threat. Thranduil closed his eyes and relaxed his muscles, taking in a lungful of forest scents, pine trees mixed with birch. Then he scrunched his nose. Elms didn’t smell as sweet. Regardless, he had missed the forest and its many sounds and scents. He leaned back onto the branch of the tree and allowed the sounds of the forest to envelop him.

“Thranduil!”

Someone broke into Thranduil’s tranquility.

“I’m to take over your post,” the elf called as he moved about somewhere below. “Thranduil?”

Loath to move, Thranduil thought of not answering when he heard the cadet moving away from him. The blond Sinda shook the branch on which he sat. “Here!”

Soon, a figure emerged through the branches. It was Saldor, his hair damp and smelling fresh.

“Anything?” Saldor asked once he climbed onto a branch next to where Thranduil sat.

“Nothing. It is a quiet night.”

“Quiet is good.” Saldor smiled. “I don’t think I could take another like the one we had.” Saldor looked away.

Thranduil stowed the bow he had lying on his knee onto his back and grabbed the tree trunk to get down to a branch below.

“Thranduil?” Saldor looked up. He ran his hand through his hair, then rubbed at the back of his neck. “How do you do it? You moved through those beasts like….” He seemed lost for words. “But then, you have no fear.” The Noldo looked away again. Saldor clutched at his bow and Thranduil noticed the whiteness of his knuckles. “It’s nothing,” Saldor said and looked down at his bow.

Thranduil glanced at the branch below. Then, looked back at Saldor who settled down on the tree branch which he just vacated. Saldor’s shoulders drooped.

“You are wrong. I was terrified,” Thranduil said.

Saldor turned to Thranduil, his eyes wide. The cadet shook his head. “But you seemed so…”

“No matter how many times I fight them, I am afraid each time I face them.”

“Then, how?” Saldor frowned, but his hand relaxed. “How do you manage your fear?”

“My father said to me once that courage is not about lacking fear. Rather, it is about doing what you need to do despite it. You stood your ground. That is what matters.”

Saldor met Thranduil’s eyes, then nodded. The Noldo smiled, and Thranduil realized how young
Saldor was. He was one of the youngest among the cadets.

Thranduil swung down onto the branch below when Saldor poked his head through the upper tree branch.

“Don’t wash near the camp. Go further down. There is a nice pool. Deep enough to dunk your entire body,” he said with a grin, then disappeared.

Thranduil jumped down onto the ground and looked up. It surprised Thranduil how these cadets, Noldor as they were, felt no different from the Sindarin warriors. They had the same fears and the same courage. The cadets had been afraid, but faced the beasts and stood their ground. And when he opened up to them, they, too, opened themselves to him.

His mother’s words came to him then.

*High Elves, Deep Elves, Grey Elves. Whether they are Vanyar, Noldor, Sindar or Nandor, those things, they are just words, Thranduil. It doesn’t matter whether we are dark-haired and gray-eyed or yellow-haired and blue-eyed. We are all Elves. We are all kin. We differ only when you want to see only that which differentiate us. But, if you open your heart and open your mind, you will see that we are all the same. We are all brothers and sisters. Even the kinslayers. Even if they have done the worst things possible. It is not up to you or me to judge them.*

“Thranduil!” Elrond called as Thranduil approached the stream. “Oron told me there is a pool further down,” the Half-Elven said. “I can’t wait to wash off the grime of the travel,” he said as they walked down the path strewn with pebbles which glimmered pale white under the starlight.

They walked in companionable silence until Elrond spoke. “How is your head? Or was it your shoulder? That warg threw some nasty punch, it seemed.”

“I thought I was just sitting around playing with the animal?” Thranduil said, rubbing his shoulder. It had been sore for a while, but the pain had calmed enough that he had forgotten about it.

“Well, you did sit around until I reached you. It looked as if you didn’t plan on getting up.”

“Get knocked against a boulder and see if you can get up as quickly,” Thranduil said and took in a quick breath. Better get this over with. “Thank you,” he said in a much lower voice.

“What?” Elrond said.

“Thank you for coming to my aid.”

“What was that again?” Elrond leaned in, his hand over his ears.

“Did your ears remain mortal?” Thranduil frowned and turned to look at Elrond. “I said thank you.” It was then that Thranduil caught the grin on Elrond’ face.

“You are an ass!”

“I was just making sure I heard it right,” Elrond chuckled. “I wasn’t sure if I will be able to hear something like that from you ever again.”

Sunlight glinted off a gold leaf as it glided in a slow arc. It fluttered in the air and shimmered under the light. The light was brilliant, the gold of the leaf almost white and bright. Thranduil squinted and...
turned away, but when he turned back for another look, it was no longer a leaf, but a hair of rarest gold. His mother’s head fell backward, her golden hair tumbling over the gray cloak. She was falling. Her body moved slowly as if it was suspended in the air and each movement took a breath before it went on. Thranduil shouted, but no sound came as he reached for her.

But she wasn’t there. Instead, an Elf stood there. A warrior. His eyes were filled with piercing light. His red cape draped over the golden armor fell open. In his hands was a bow. It was threaded with an arrow aimed at Thranduil.

“Shoot her. Astarno!” Someone shouted, and the name echoed.

Astarno. Astarno. Astarno…

The arrow flew at Thranduil.

Thranduil startled awake.

“Be calm now, Thranduil. All is well, young one.” Lord Istuion’s warm and mellow voice whispered beside him.

Thranduil blinked and took in Isution’s white hair glowing like snow under moonlight. Lord Istuion sat next to Thranduil who had taken a spot as far from the fire and other cadets. The elder lord smiled, gentle and warm. For a moment, Thranduil thought it was Aron, so alike the uncle was to his nephew.

“Would you like a drink?” Lord Istuion offered a cup in his hand.

“No,” said Thranduil and turned over, his back to the elder Sinda.

“Why didn’t you tell me you were having nightmares, Thranduil. When did it start?”

Thranduil closed his eyes. He wondered if he had screamed in sleep? He had been careful each night since they left Lindon, taking the latest watch and sleeping farthest from the cadets as he could without drawing suspicion, sleeping as little as possible. But it was inevitable that someone would have noticed. But Thranduil had not wanted Lord Istuion to know. Lord Istuion rarely kept any secrets from his father. For a moment, Thranduil was glad that his father was far away and could not be reached.

“Do not worry, Thranduil,” Istuion said as if he had read Thranduil’s mind. “Cadets were too exhausted to notice. This was not the first time, was it?” Istuion let out a long sigh. “When we return to Lindon, I want you to start soul cleansing. I will talk to Mistress Turien.”

“I don’t think it is necessary,” Thranduil sat up. He glanced at the other cadets lying near the fire. There were five of them. Thranduil did not see Lord Gilmagor amongst them.

“The commander is on the watch. I will be relieving him soon,” said Istuion. “And you need not worry about Mistress Turien. I know her to be discreet.”

“My lord, I can handle few nightmares. Do not underestimate me.”

Thranduil faced Lord Istuion. Istuion’s silver eyes, usually warm and friendly, turned into blocks of marble.
“Health of one’s soul is no laughing matter, Thranduil. The soul is the root of a tree. If there are worms that gnaw at the root, it must be addressed. A hollow tree does not only break easily, but it is also an easy target for the lightning. And a tree that catches fire will harm not only itself but the entire forest. You know this.”

“I can handle it,” Thranduil said, refusing to turn away from the probing eyes of the Sindarin lord.

“Then show me your light. It should be a simple thing.”

Thranduil turned away, breaking eye contact. Thranduil was aware that Istuion wanted to see the strength of his light. But even that, concentrating his light on the top of his palm, Thranduil had not been able to do for quite a while.

“I cannot,” Thranduil said, more a whisper than a reply.

Lord Istuion was silent for a while, and Thranduil wondered what the elder elf was thinking.

Thranduil turned to look at Istuion. The elder lord’s eyes shimmered. Alarmed, Thranduil straightened. “It is not your fault, my lord. It is mine. I should have been stronger.”

Lord Istuion shook his head. “It was my duty. I should have paid more attention.” Istuion sighed. “If anything should happen to you… Please, Thranduil. Indulge this old Elf. Will you not allow Mistress Turien to help you?”

Thranduil swallowed a lump that suddenly seemed lodged in his throat. Why was it easier to defy when the elder lord ordered him around, but not so easy when he asked thus?”

Thranduil bent his head. “I will do as you ask.”

Istuion reached over and lay his hand on Thranduil’s shoulder.

“I am glad,” the elder lord said then stood up. “I will go now to relieve the commander. Try to sleep more. Dawn will arrive soon enough,” Istuion said before disappearing into the trees.

With a sigh, Thranduil sat up and leaned onto a trunk of the tree next to him. His hand automatically reached for the necklace that wasn’t there. The dream came back vivid and real-like. Thranduil looked around. That kinslayer was supposed to live near here. Lord Gilmagor had said the village of the Green Elves was about half day’s ride south from where they were. That meant, that kinslayer lived somewhere along their path. Thranduil reached for the sword he had placed under his bedroll. The time had come for the revenge.

But, if he did this, it also meant he had to leave Lindon. Kinslayers were not welcome in Lindon. They were not welcome anywhere, in fact. It was said that all of them perished when the Beleriand broke. Some said they lived in an island far off Forlindon, the only part of north Beleriand that survived. But, no one would know as no ship went there.

Taking the sword, Thranduil got up and moved opposite where Lord Istuion disappeared. He crossed the stream, past a row of pines and far enough that he could not be seen from the campsite. There was a small grove surrounded by pine trees and birches.

Thranduil took out the blade from its sheath. The white sword glowed as if it was surrounded by white flame when the starlight hit it. Thranduil took in a breath as he grasped its handle. The blade felt so familiar in his hands as if it was made for him. He swung the sword, cutting air. It whistled a melodic tune.
That last remaining kinslayer. He was one of those famed warriors of the First Age, battle-hardened and skilled. Was he skilled enough to face the Noldo? Thranduil moved, swinging his sword in the Noldorin pattern. That elf will know all the movements of the Noldorin Style. Thranduil changed the pattern to that of the Doriathrin warriors. That technique, however, was more suited for double swords as they were developed with the use of dual daggers in mind. Thranduil wished he had his knives.

*Once we get to his village, I will have to ask Farion for a dagger to augment this sword.*

Then, Thranduil stopped. This weapon was a Nodorin sword, a sword given by Lord Gilmagor in trust. It seemed wrong to use this sword to cut down another Noldor, even if it was a kinslayer.

Thranduil looked toward the campsite. If he was to pursue this revenge, was he prepared to lose the companions? Thranduil had never considered any of the cadets his friends. He had never felt he was part of them. Until now. The shared experience of fighting together had brought him closer to the other cadets. Thranduil had not thought it would matter, but it did.

Thranduil lowered the sword. Two paths lay before his eyes. The first one he had sworn to himself that he will take if ever the road was shown to him. And that road stood clear and vivid in front of him now. But another path lay next to it, a path he had not foreseen. The first road, Thranduil knew where it led, and he had prepared himself to accept it, even the darkness and the ruin that awaited at the end. The other, however, he could not see the end and could not fathom what lay there. But his heart desired it and knew his mother would have encouraged him to take it.

Then, the sounds of the night suddenly stopped. Thranduil looked around. It was as if the insects and creatures of the forest all stopped in their track. The trees around him shuddered. Then, as if nothing had happened, the insects started to sing again, and the animals moved about.

Something was happening in the forest. It was far enough from here for the animals and insects to ignore it, but it was not so far that they didn’t feel it.

If it was one thing Thranduil learned, creatures in the forest felt things faster than his kind could perceive them. Thranduil sheathed the sword and lay his hand on the bark of the tree nearest him. These trees in this forest were young and did not speak as some of those that did in the Forests of Neldoreth and Region, but Thranduil had learned long ago how to read them. Lady Melian herself had taught it to him. The tree trembled when his mind touched it.

Thranduil took in a sharp breath.

“Orcs,” he whispered, then ran toward the camp.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter 46 The Elven Village
The Elven Village

Chapter Summary

The cadets face Orcs. Elrond and Thranduil find a child.

Chapter Notes

Sorry, this chapter is late. I have been away and left you a filler for you to read. If you were unaware, check out "Where the River Ends" which is the story of attack at Sirion.

Anyway, here is Chapter 46. Next one will be up Thursday.

North of Laiquendi village September 24, Second Age 144

ELROND got up. The sky was still dark, but something had woken him. The Half-Elven touched his heavy head. The images he had seen faded but the last part remained vivid as if he was there.

An elfling, few years shy of reaching majority, was crying as hideous creatures, twisted and dark with black beady eyes full of malice, crowded around him. The child clung to a severed hand as he whimpered.

Elrond looked around the camp. All was quiet. Only the sound of insects and occasional sounds of animals moving about disturbed the tranquility. He shook his head trying to shake off the unease he felt. He wasn’t sure if the image he saw was real or just a dream.

Feeling restless, Elrond got up and surveyed the cadets sleeping open-eyed, something they did when their bodies were alert. Elves cultivated this form of sleep whenever they had to sleep with their senses tuned around them.

It was then that Lord Gilmagor appeared at the edge of the grove where the camp was set up. He was frowning.

“My lord?” Elrond asked once Gilmagor was near enough.

“Something is not right. Do you feel it, Elrond?” Gilmagor asked.

“Sir?”

“Something is happening. There’s something dark above the trees,” the lord commander said.

Just then, Thranduil burst into the campsite.

“There’s trouble,” said Thranduil.

“What have you seen?” Lord Gilmagor asked the blond Sinda.
“Orcs. At the village. They will need our help,” Thranduil said, his usually calm demeanor flushed.

“How do you know this?” Gilmagor asked.

“I thought most of the Orcs are stragglers. The few that tried to attack were easily fended off, I believe,” Elrond said remembering back to the recent attack on the villages north of the White City.

“These are no stragglers. They are many and well-armed,” Thranduil said.

“How do you know this?” Gilmagor frowned.

“Trees,” Thranduil said. “What does it matter. We need to move now. They are in danger.”

“They?” Gilmagor and Elrond said together.

“The villagers, the Elven village. Please, they need our help.”

Gilmagor frowned and looked at Thranduil steadily. Elrond wasn’t sure what to think, but the lord commander turned to Elrond.

“Elrond, wake them up and get ready to depart. Thranduil, go get Lord Istuion and gather the horses on your way.”

Thranduil nodded and hastily went away.

Within a half-hour, they were on their way. Dawn was still hours away. With the growth on the forest floor still abundant, it was not safe for the horses to run through the forest, but Lord Gilmagor’s faint light led them through the darkness of the woods, a mere glimmer of light in the midst of the dark shadows of the night forest.

A streak of red painted the sky in blood as dawn rose when the forest floor took a dip slowing the cadets. The forest thinned as the land fell into a gentle slope. At the end of the hill was a thick cluster of fir that stood just before a river. Tightly packed firs were growing just above a bank of a fast-flowing river. From the top of the hill where they stood, Elrond could see the river rush to his left where it fell over a cliff in a haze of mist. Far beyond below the cliff, Elrond could see the River Lune flowing southeast into a horizon where the sun was rising.

Gilmagor raised his hand and the cadets clustered around him. “We will have to be quiet. Those cluster of fir marks the boundary of the Elven village. They may not welcome us there.” Gilmagor pointed to a group of fir trees standing about two stories tall. They grew dense like a wall, their green boughs linked as if woven together.

“Ready your bow but keep them off your hands. We do not want to put their guards on edge,” Gilmagor said in a soft whisper. Cadets strung their bows as they moved forward, then stashed them behind their backs, their eyes alert.

The trees here were older and thicker. Elrond inhaled the scent of pines and fir, then wrinkled his nose when he detected something foul in the air.

Gilmagor raised a fist. Without a sound, the cadets got off their horses. With a faint jingle, barely detectable to ears other than those of the Firstborn, the horses moved away. Without turning his head, Gilmagor pointed to his right. Elrond and Thranduil moved over to the far right of Gilmagor. In twos, the cadets spread out, their weapons ready.
The forest was silent. There was no sound of birds tweeting, insects chirping. Not even a rustle of leaves. Elrond could hear his own heart beating loud and clear. He glanced at Thranduil, afraid Sinda could hear the harsh sound.

Thranduil’s face was blank, his forehead furrowed. His eyes looked away as if he could see something Elrond could not. Then the Sinda closed his eyes, his head tilted as if he was listening for something. Then Thranduil shot forward with surprising speed between the fir trees. Elrond followed, almost crashing into the blond Sinda when Thranduil stopped suddenly. Elrond stepped forward then gasped out aloud.

In front of him was a clearing with a tall fir tree in the middle which had been topped over, smashed in several areas. The remnant of rope ladders was strewn all over, mostly covered in red blood, some in black. Many of the trees inside the clearing were toppled, their trunks smashed. The floor of the clearing was littered with green and brown leathers, ripped into pieces and drenched in blood with what remained of the bodies. It was evident that Orcs feasted here.

Bile rose, burning Elrond’s throat. He had never seen such carnage like this. His eyes stung as he emptied the content of his stomach. Elrond looked up when nothing more came up. Thranduil stood immobile next to him, his face dark, his eyes burning like gems on fire.

Then, suddenly, Thranduil growled. He bared his teeth, and a guttural sound, almost animal-like in its raw intensity, bellowed from his mouth as he sprinted away.

“Thranduil!” Elrond got up on his shaky legs and ran after his warrior companion.

Thranduil rushed out of the central clearing into the forest when Elrond heard a loud cackle, laughter of a predator in front of a prey. Then, Elrond saw them. Several Orcs were huddled around something.

“Wait!” Elrond warned, but Thranduil pushed off a rock and sailed through the air, a streak of pale gold.

Thranduil’s bow was already nocked with an arrow. The Sinda’s hands were a blur as an arrow after arrow left his bow even before his feet hit the forest floor. With a bound and a leap, Thranduil sprinted towards the huddled orcs at a breakneck speed. Three fell to his arrows before Orcs realized what was happening. And by the time they turned, Thranduil was upon them, flaming white sword in his hand, slashing left and right before the foul creatures had time to right themselves or grab a weapon.

Then, as suddenly as he sprang, Thranduil stood still, frozen.

“Thranduil!” Elrond shouted when he saw a group of three Orcs appear between the trees and moved toward Thranduil, their swords raised. Elrond loosed his arrows to down the two, but the third Orc was upon Thranduil swinging his huge ax. The Sinda didn’t even look up, but his sword arm moved just once, cutting off the Orc’s head before the creature could reach him.

When Thranduil’s eyes did not leave whatever it was in front of him, Elrond sprinted over to see. The Half-Elven gasped at what lay before him.

In front of Thranduil was an elfling. His light brown hair was crusted with dirt and blood, his face covered in mud and soot except for a track of tears down his face. He was holding onto a severed hand, tight onto his chest. His brown tunic was covered in red blood. He looked barely past thirty-five summers at the most, no more than a child and too young to be facing such horrors.
“Ai, elfling!” Elrond cried out when an ear-piercing screech sounded to his right.

Thranduil grabbed hold of the child with his free hand and slashed away arrows as he moved his body protectively around the elfling. Elrond did the same to stop the arrows flying at them.

Between the trees, dark shapes, growling and screeching, rushed at them. Elrond got up to stand before Thranduil and the child with his sword drawn. But, as soon as the Orcs stepped out of the shadow of the trees, they fell, one by one, their necks pierced with the Elven arrows.

“Pull back!” Gilmagor commanded as he stepped next to Elrond. Lord Istuion joined on Elrond’s other side.

“Take cover while we survey the area. This is not a work of a small group of Orcs. There must be more. There are not enough of us here to face them,” Istuion said as he ran after Gilmagor who disappeared among the fir and the pine trees.

Thranduil swooped the child and moved back behind a wall of the cadets who had their bows drawn. Except for Erfaron and Oron who had no bows, the cadets moved behind trees and boulders and waited.

Leaving his post in the front to Erfaron and Oron, Elrond moved back to where Thranduil crouched behind a tree with the child in his arm. The child huddled within the Sinda’s arm without a whimper.

When Elrond approached them, Thranduil let go of the child, but the elfling clung to Thranduil.

“You are safe. This is Elrond. He is a friend,” said Thranduil in fluent Silvan as he pushed the child toward Elrond.

The Half-Elven wondered at the softness of Thranduil’s voice. Elrond had never thought Thranduil capable of such warmth, but in the Sinda’s voice was the tenderness of Spring and the warmth of Summer.

“Hello, little one. We are guards. We wouldn’t let any harm befall you,” Elrond said in hesitant Silvan.

Elrond knew and spoke fluently most of Doriathrin and all other dialects of Sindarin from Falathrin to Northern dialects spoken by Mithrim and Edain. He also knew all forms of Quenya spoken by his foster parents to those spoken by Noldor from Gondolin who used Sindarized forms of Quenya. Both his foster parents and Gil-galad had spared no expense when it came to his education. However, among all the dialects and languages he had learned, Elrond had the least chance to practice the Silvan dialect. So instead of saying further, Elrond smiled. That had always worked, whether they were old or young, Elven or otherwise. But the elfling stood there, hunched over, clinging to the gruesome object in his hands, his dark gray eyes wide, his lips tight.

“I wouldn’t hurt you. Here, here, child,” Elrond cooed. The child seemed to relax his muscles. Instead of hunching, he straightened but hung his head, his hands clutching firmly onto the severed hand.

“Here, let me take that from you. It is all right. You can let go now.” Elrond reached over to take the severed hand in the child’s hand, but the child flinched and shrank away. Elrond reached out with his senses. But, all he could feel was a swirl of emotions jumbled together, incoherent and jarring, flashes of dark shadows in the thick of gray mists.

Elrond stood unsure what to do when Thranduil who was watching silently walked over. He sat down in front of the child, one knee in the dirt, bringing himself down to the elfling’s eye level.
Thranduil’s usually stern and icy eyes were warm and open. Elrond felt a keen ache from Thranduil as the Sinda opened his mind to the child.

"Your mother tried to protect you, has she not? She tried to shield you from those monsters." It was spoken so softly in Silvan that for a brief moment, Elrond thought the elfling did not hear, but the boy's gray eyes brimmed with tears as he nodded ever so lightly. "I know you don't feel very brave now, and you think you have failed her, but you did not. You survived. She did her best to protect you. If you wish to do right by her, then you must continue to survive, or all that she has done would be naught. You wouldn't want that, would you, little one?"

The boy shook his head. Tears fell and made fresh tracks down his dirty face.

Thranduil took out a piece of linen from his pocket that was used as a towel and issued to each cadet. He placed the cloth on his hand and offered it to the child.

"Let her go, little one. Let her rest now. You must be brave and learn to stand on your own two feet. I will help you if you let me," Thranduil said.

The elfling heaved a big sob and slowly let go of the hand he clutched. Thranduil took it and gently wrapped it up in the linen. The boy shook, then he threw his arms around Thranduil and pour out his grief.

Thranduil didn't say a word, did not offer any words of comfort. Instead, he allowed the child to cry in his arms as he sat there unmoving, his eyes dark and unfathomable. Elrond’s eyes misted as the claw of the sorrow leaped off the child and assaulted his senses with the pain of grief too great for a child to feel.

The sun was climbing the sky when the two elder lords returned.

“Those Orcs must have been left behind to cover the horde’s track.” Lord Gilmagor looked away behind the fir trees where he had gone before.

“Is that even possible?” Oron asked.

“This was a well-coordinated attack,” said Lord Istuion. “They didn’t burn down the trees the way they usually do. Most of the trees were smashed down. They must have brought trolls.”

“The North Legion is stationed across the river. If there were burning of the trees here, it would have alerted them,” said Gilmagor.

“I thought villages of Green Elves are hard to find. How did these beasts find this place? If the attack was coordinated, doesn’t that mean that they knew exactly where this place was and planned the attack?” Erfaron said as he paced where he stood.

“Yes. Villages of Green Elves are hard even for us to find. We knew of this place purely by chance.” Gilmagor sighed and shook his head. “We have to send someone to inform the North Legion of this incident. By the looks of it, the Orcs consumed the dead bodies. We must find that horde and destroy them before they have a chance to breed.”

“Who will you send?” Elrond asked as he looked at the other cadets. It was evident to him that the road the messenger had to travel could be deadly.

“I will go,” Lord Istuion said. “This will be too much for any one cadet, and we cannot spare more
than one. And, the road is unfamiliar as there’s the possibility of encountering a horde of either Orcs, wargs or both.” The Sindarin lord turned to Lord Gilmagor. “And the cadets need you here in the event any of those creatures return.”

Gilmagor stood silent.

“We shall all go,” Gilmagor said after a while. “There is no reason for us to stay here now that there is no one to save,” the lord commander said gravely. “We’ll do what we can for the dead, then we will cross the river. Some of our warriors should be stationed across the river not too far from here.”

“Is it safe? What if Orcs come back?” Gelir asked.

“The trail is cold. It seems they have left the area before the sun rose. At any event, they will not attack while the sun blazes in the sky.”

The sun scooted to the west by the time the cadets gathered what remained of the residents of the village. There weren’t much of them left. Instead of the individual grave, cadets dug a large one after wrapping the parts of the body scattered around the village with green fabric found in one of the flets before burying them. Elrond and Thranduil also dug a small grave for the child’s mother.

“What is your name, little one?” Elrond asked once the Song of Parting ended and the cadets gathered to cross the river.

“Galion,” the child said.

“Hello, Galion. I am called Elrond, and this is…” Elrond pointed to Thranduil standing next to him.

“I know,” the child said. “Thranduil. You are Thranduil Oropherion,” the elfling said looking at the blond Sindar.

Elrond felt Thranduil stiffen. The Sindar grabbed a low-lying branch of a tree which stood beside him.

“How did you know that?” Elrond asked.

“My brother told me. The one with the silver-gold hair like the moonlight.”

Elrond frowned, keenly aware of Thranduil’s hand which fisted tightly over the branch as it trembled lightly.

“Your brother?” Elrond had to ask as dread spread inside him.

“Farion. My brother Farion told me of him. And he mentioned you although I just remembered,” the child said. “Farion went down the flet with father to fight. He said…he said…”

Tears brimmed over, but Galion wiped them away, his lips firm.

"You are very brave," Elrond said, touched by the child's bravery in fighting off the tears.

"But, I didn't do anything. I didn't know how to fight, had I known how to fight, I might have..." he looked down at his feet. Tears fell onto the dirt in front of him.

"It was not your fault, Galion. Only the Orcs are to blame," Thranduil said firmly, "You will not let grief claim you because if you do, you are letting those foul creatures win and making your mother's
sacrifice into nothing. Do you hear me?” It was spoken softly, but his voice cracked at the edges.

The child nodded, then wiped away the tears with ferocity.

They found a row of large boulders near the river where the river narrowed before it fell roaring over a steep cliff. Using these rocks, the cadets crossed the river. The sun sank once they were on the other side. Aware of how exhausted the child was, Lord Gilmagor allowed the cadets to set up camp to rest and eat once they crossed the river. For the first time since they were on the road, Thranduil was sitting near the fire next to the child. As Elrond had never seen Thranduil sitting near the fire, Elrond walked over and found the reason why the Sinda was so near. The child was asleep, his hand clutching onto Thranduil’s tunic.

"The child looks exhausted," Elrond said looking down at the elfing.
"He should be." The impassive mask was back on Thranduil, and his voice was cold.
"Is he injured in any way? Have you checked?"
"Yes. And, no, he is not injured."
"How did you know about his mother?"
"I didn't."
"But, you seem to know exactly how..."
"Peredhel!" Thranduil interrupted with a look of impatience. "What do you want?"
"Nothing. I want nothing," Elrond sighed. "I just wanted to know if the child is all right."
"He is not, but he will be," Thranduil said with a steady gaze into Elrond's grey eyes.

Elrond sighed. For a while, it seemed as if Thranduil was warming up to the cadets. But this Sinda in front of him was not the same Thranduil Elrond knew last night. Something had changed.

Thranduil pried open the elfling’s palm gently and loosed himself before walking away. Galion whimpered. Elrond padded the elfling softly.

“Hush, little one. Everything is all right. You are safe,” Elrond whispered, singing a soft tune Maglor used to sing to him when he was troubled. Galion relaxed as his breathing steadied.

Elrond looked up and saw Thranduil walk to Gilmagor who was standing at the far edge of the camp. The Sinda handed a white sword to the lord commander, showing another sword which Elrond recognized as one Thranduil salvaged from the wreckage of the Green Elven village.

Although the lord commander’s face was carefully blank, Elrond could not help the feeling that Lord Gilmagor was not pleased.

It was almost dawn when Elrond got up to take his turn to watch. The camp was quiet except for the chirping of insects. When Elrond approached the side of the river, he found Gelir.

“Gelir? Where’s Oron? I thought I was replacing Oron.”
“Oron went to show Thranduil where the kinslayer lives.”

“What?” Elrond almost dropped the lamp he was holding.

“I was answering the call of nature when Oron asked me to mind his post for a while.”


“Not that long ago. They went toward the waterfall.”

Elrond turned and ran toward the waterfall. The roaring of the water covered all the sounds when he went near the cliff. His head throbbed mercilessly as Elrond waved his lamp around him.

“Thranduil! Oron!” Elrond called out, but the sound of the roaring water covered his voice. It was then that he saw a flash of gold in the middle of the boulders over the cliff where the water fell.

Elrond jumped lightly over one boulder than another.

“Oron?” Elrond landed lightly next to the cadet who stood there. Elrond thrust his lamp to look closer when the cadet pushed Elrond.

Elrond opened his mouth to shout, but the cold water rushed into his face and mouth as he fell into the depth of darkness.
The Hunter

Chapter Summary

Thranduil confronts Astarno

Chapter Notes

I had to divide this into two parts. Part 2 this weekend.

North of the River. September 25, Second Age 144

MAIRON laughed out aloud. The roaring of the water swallowed up the cruel mirth, and it was as if nothing had happened.

Too easy.

Mairon sighed, quite pleased. He reached out to the Orcs stationed below the waterfall. The shell of the body he occupied limited his ability to use sanwe-latya over great distances. But the Orcs and Wargs were close enough now. They were all under his control and within easy access while he remained in this area. He reached out with his mind. The Orcs cringed with fear.

Master? The Orcs groveled low onto the ground unsure where to face.

Through the eyes of the Orcs, he saw a figure bound, hands behind his back. His blue tunic covered with golden leather armor was dripping wet. The long dark hair covered his face, but Mairon knew him.

Show him a good time, but I want him delivered whole and intact, not a hair missing. Do you understand?

As you command, my lord. The Orcs groveled once again before their images faded.

He didn’t mind them tormenting the Half-Elven somewhat, but he didn’t want to be deprived of the joy of torturing the little mixed-blood himself. If the little Half-Elf was traumatized before he had a chance to do anything, it would not be as enjoyable.

Mairon whistled a soft tune he had learned at the White City. He looked up at the sky which seemed to brighten. He had much to do before the sun came up.

Mairon looked down at the cadet he had knocked out. He had hoped the wargs would at least injure if not kill one of the two elder Elves but the wargs had been surprisingly unreliable. At least the creatures managed to force the cadets to travel around the cliff to the north. By diverting the cadets around the cliff, Mairon had given the Orcs enough time to feast on the villagers. It was close, though. He had not expected the cadets to be aware of what went on in the village or move as quickly. Mairon had hoped to put Thranduil into action by placing him near where Astarno was. But
the blond Sinda had been unpredictable. Mairon had not expected the Sinda to suddenly warm up to these Noldorin cadets.

The mists over the river were thinning. Mairon gazed at the other side of the river where the fir and pine trees were still entrapped in the gray haze of the morning mists.

The kinslayer was well skilled, probably a better swordsman than Thranduil. But, having spent the past few months with the blond Sinda, Mairon was not worried. Anger can overcome skills if the wielder was resourceful, and Thranduil was resourceful if nothing else.

THRANDUIL followed the river upward until he found a stream that flowed down from North a league from the destroyed village. Remembering back to the descriptions Gelir and Oron gave, Thranduil located a group of fir that grew over a large boulder once the stream became shallow. Although there was a cluster of fir here and there, there were three fir trees that grew over a large rock that jutted out of the shallow stream. Leaving his horse to feed on the clump of greens that grew abundant near the waterway, Thranduil climbed up the boulder and came face to face with a giant thorn bush. He almost reached into it, then noticed the red flowers. The blood thorn.

It took him a while before Thranduil was able to locate the small house built against a large rock half buried on earth. Thranduil slowed as he approached the house. There were flowers growing by the window. And to the sunny side of the house, there was a small plot of land surrounded by a low fence where several vegetables were grown.

When he felt no movement and no sound all around the house, Thranduil sat down on a nearby rock. He ran his hand through his hair when he heard it.

A sound of metal hitting stone rang through the forest.

It was not too far from the house. With his hand on the hilt of his sword, Thranduil headed toward the sound.

The wood was thin. Most of them were pine, tall and dark. The floor of the woods was covered with the browned pine needles, so thick that it was like a thick carpet of animal fur.

Thranduil stopped when he saw him. A tall, dark-haired elf was mining a rock quarry from a massive boulder near a small creek. Thranduil did not remember Astarno’s face. The kinslayer had worn a golden helmet that covered most of his head and Thranduil had been busy confronting the redhead. But the Elf in front of him was definitely too tall to be one of the Nandor.

When Thranduil approached, the Elf stopped and turned.

Thranduil sucked in his breath. It was the same Elf he had seen in the White City, almost a year ago now, the one in hunter’s leather armor who had a little daughter. She had reminded Thranduil of Elwing.

The Elf put down the pickaxe in his hand.

Thranduil moved closer, his heart rattled in his chest. The hilt of the sword he held in his hand dug into his hand and tore his skin, but Thranduil ignored it.

“Do you know who I am?” Thranduil asked as the Elf watched him with eyes that were surprisingly steady. The Noldo looked as if he had known all along that Thranduil was going to be here.
“No,” he said. “I do not know your name, but I know you, and the day I saw you last autumn at the White City, I knew one day you will find me.”

Thranduil swallowed hard. His hand holding the hilt of his sword ached and trembled.

“You. You killed my mother…”

“Actually, no. I wasn’t the one…”

“But you were there!”

The Elf sighed, then nodded. “Yes. I was there.”

“You were one of the Feanorian soldiers who… who killed…who…” Thranduil stopped and sucked in a breath to calm his trembling body.

“Yes. I killed.” The Elf dropped his head.

“Why?”

“Why?” the Elf frowned as he looked up. “I served the House of Finwe. My father and brothers served it before me. You are a warrior, are you not?” his eyes dropped to the leather armor Thranduil wore. “You don’t have warrior braids, but you are wearing the king’s uniform. If you are a warrior, then you must know that you are ruled by your lord’s command. Sometimes we may not agree with it, but honor and loyalty dictated that we follow without question. It was so with me.”

“Even if it was wrong?”

“I swore to follow Lord Feanor, then his sons. I swore an oath and followed it through death and fire although it led me to the road of doom and grief.”

“And you have no regrets?” Thranduil asked, his voice hoarse and barely audible even to his own ears.

The Elf laughed, dark and terrible.

“No regrets? No, Elfling. After what we had done…what I had done, there can’t be anything but.”

Thranduil took the sword out of the scabbard. “Then you should not have any regrets in leaving this life.”

The Elf stopped laughing and looked into Thranduil’s eyes. The light in the Noldo’s gray eyes dimmed and turned dark but not with fear.

The Elf looked at Thranduil with unfathomable eyes filled with centuries of sorrow.

“You will become a kin slayer to avenge a kin-slaying?”

“I will become whatever it takes to avenge my mother, my brother, my grandfather, my aunt and all other friends and family you took from me!”

“T’ took?”

The Elf shook his head.

“You including me among the Feanor’s sons and their followers, I can accept. I was one of them. But why include all Noldor? Many who are in the White City are blameless. Many were victims themselves…”

“I do not care! They are Noldor. They are all one and the same. Enough talk! Take out your sword, kinslayer!”

Thranduil took a position, his sword raised to strike. Even if the Noldo refused to fight, he would strike him down. He will kill. But, his legs felt weak. His legs and arms shook. The salvaged sword in his hand trembled in front of him. Thranduil bit down hard on the back of his teeth to ground himself.

But the Elf in front of him stood back. He didn’t even look towards where his sword lay but kept his eyes on Thranduil.

“You would call all Noldor kinslayers when many of them had not done any harm to you or your kin?” the Elf asked.

The images of Cellon and his smiling face, the warmth in Elrond, Gilmagor’s sword given in trust, Mistress Taurien’s twinkling eyes, even that of young Saldor’s head that poked through the tree branches raced through Thranduil’s mind, but the Sinda shook them away.

“I don’t care. All Noldor are one,” Thranduil said, more to convince himself.

The hunter in front of him frowned.

“That is unfortunate. A few decades earlier, I would have gladly given you my life if it was what you wanted of me. But now... My daughter is still too young to survive on her own, and my wife is too deeply attached to me to survive should I die now. And you are still too young. No,” he shook his head. “If one day, you want to take my life, I will yield it, but not today.”

“And you think you can just dictate that!” Thranduil lifted his sword. “Get your sword or I’ll strike you down where you stand.” He pointed to a sword leaning against a pine tree near the stone quarry.

“I am not going to fight you.” The Elf stepped back from Thranduil.

“Prepare to die if you will not fight!” Thranduil let out a yell and charged.

The Elf stood still, his eyes never leaving Thranduil as the young Sinda charged towards him. With a battle cry, Thranduil lifted his sword high in the air to smite the Elf in front of him.

One strike would be enough. One strike and the Elf in front of him would crumble in a heap as his mother had done, fall away like Elwing had gone. How long had he waited to do this, to find this Noldo and to strike him down?

One strike.

Thranduil lunged.

The tip of Thranduil’s sword slid past the Elf’s shoulder aiming for the Noldo’s neck. The hunter did not move a muscle. The kinslayer’s dark gray eyes were filled with sorrow immeasurable as Thranduil’s blade slid under his chin.
Thranduil’s blade hung there in the air just a breath away from breaking into the Noldo’s skin.

The sword in Thranduil’s hand shook, and the Sinda gripped it harder. The tip of Thranduil’s sword broke the skin, and a red gash appeared on the Noldo’s neck, but the blade would not go further. The Noldo still did not move. The sword in Thranduil’s hand trembled and grew heavier. Thranduil had to grip the hand holding the sword with his other hand to prevent it from shaking. Breath gushed like a harsh winter wind, and Thranduil’s body shook. Thranduil lifted his eyes to glare at the Noldo whose eyes were fixed onto his. The Noldo’s gray eyes were full of compassion.

“I…I am going to kill you. I will. I WILL kill you…” Words came unbidden, half broken but his sword arm would not thrust.

The kinslayer’s eyes were full of sorrow.

“You are no killer, Elfling. I had known it when I looked into your eyes. There are shadows within you, but they have no hold over you yet.”

“You don’t know me!”

Thranduil gritted his teeth. He just needed to thrust his blade, just one thrust, but his arms would not budge.

“Aaargh!” Thranduil cried out aloud. Pulling his hands away, he tried again for that final thrust. But his hands refused to make that final movement.

“Damn you, Noldo!” Thranduil gritted his teeth, but the sword dropped from his hands and clattered onto the ground.

Thranduil looked down at his trembling hands.

Why? He couldn’t understand it. Why couldn’t he kill? He wanted it. His heart wanted it. It was not as if he had never killed. He had killed so many Orcs, goblins, and other dark creatures.

“Killing is not an easy thing,” said Astarno as he picked up Thranduil’s sword and offered it to Thranduil. “It has nothing to do with courage or even skill. It is not at all like killing Orcs or other dark creatures. Killing a fellow Elf, especially one without a weapon, goes against everything we are as Elves.”

Thranduil sneered loudly.

“That didn’t stop your people from killing women and children, from taking the two young princes of Doriath and having them murdered. They were mere children, weaponless and weak!”

The Elf let out a long sigh as he placed the sword on the ground in front of Thranduil. The Noldo looked away for a moment before turning eyes dark with grief back to Thranduil.

“That was done by the warriors who followed Lord Celegorm. They were Celegorm’s sworn brothers in arms. They saw him die at the hand of your King...”

“Celegorm killed the king!”

“Yes, they killed each other. And the Celegorm’s Elves were grieved, and bloodlust was on them. I know that does not excuse what they have done... Lord Maedhros, when he found out about the young princes, he tried to find them. He made us comb that entire wood but...”
“And, Elwing. You tried to shoot Elwing!”

“That was a direct order. Even then, I would not have killed her.”

“Liar!” Thranduil screamed, then with one swoop, he picked up his sword and swung. But the Noldo stepped away from the tip of the blade. Thranduil gave a chase, but the Noldo stepped just behind the point of Thranduil’s sword. As swift as a pair of birds, they raced over the floor of the forest, the kinslayer running backward, his eyes never leaving Thranduil as the Sinda followed after him, his sword at ready. The Noldo’s feet barely touched the floor as if they had wings on them.

“Fight me! Fight me, damn you!”

The hunter stopped when they have made a wide circle back to where they had started. Thranduil stopped two steps away and grabbed a low lying tree branch with his free hand.

“As I said before, elfling, I am not going to die today. There are those I must protect. But, even if I were to fight you today, you cannot best me. Your skills are better than many at your age, but I have been fighting for centuries before you were even born. And I may not look it, but I have been instructed by the greatest sword master of the Noldor. You wish to kill me? Come back when you are better skilled, young one. I give you my word as a warrior that I will still be here when you come back.”

“And, you think I will trust you? Trust your words?”

“Elfling! Look into my eyes, and you will know that I speak true.”

“I don’t believe you! I don’t believe anything you or any Noldor would say to me.”

Had he not trusted them once? Trusted because they were guards and warriors? They were supposed to protect. That was how he was taught, taught to trust Elven warriors. But that day, that cold winter day when the snow turned red with the blood of his brother and kin, Thranduil had learned not to trust, and he wasn’t going to trust now.

“Then, that is another reason I cannot die today,” the hunter said.

“Well, you just try and stop me,” growled Thranduil, and the Sinda let go of the branch he held.

The sudden movement drew the hunter’s attention. The distraction was all that Thranduil needed. The Sinda jumped, his knee smashing into the Noldo. The hunter stumbled backward, his back hitting the pine tree behind him. With his sword, Thranduil struck.

The hunter grabbed the blade with his bare hands.

“Do not do this. The road you have chosen will only lead you to ruin.”

“I don’t care!” Thranduil hissed into the face in front of him as he strained against the strength of the hunter.

“Elfling, you are still so young. There is so much life in front of you. Do not do this.” The hunter’s eyes glistened with moisture. “The agony of the road you wish to walk is not something I would wish on anyone.”
“Stop talking!” Thranduil rammed his body into the Noldo. The hunter’s grip on the blade slackened and the steel bit into the Noldo’s shoulder.

“Aaargh!” The hunter yelled, then gritted his teeth to muffle the sound.

“Stop it!” A high-pitched voice screamed.

“Ellariel, no!” Another voice shouted.

The hunter’s eyes widened as he looked behind Thranduil’s shoulder, then he moved with a speed Thranduil did not foresee. The hunter pulled Thranduil into his arm, letting the blade sink into his shoulder, taking Thranduil by surprise. Then, the hunter turned pushing Thranduil against the tree encasing the Sinda between himself and the tree trunk.

As soon as the hunter did so, he let out a gasp and fell into Thranduil’s arm. On the hunter’s back, there sprouted an arrow.

A woman screamed somewhere several leaps away.

“Don’t hurt my ada!” A young child ran to the hunter and clung to the Noldo’s leg.

Open mouthed and wide-eyed, Thranduil pulled out his sword that had penetrated the hunter’s left shoulder. The hunter stumbled back, grabbing at the wound. Red blood seeped through his fingers. But instead of looking at Thranduil, the hunter turned away from the blond Sinda.

Thranduil saw behind the shoulder of the Noldo an elleth, her bow threaded with an arrow running toward them with a swiftness of a deer.

“Beril, no. Don’t hurt him. Please,” the hunter said, his voice feeble as he fell to his knees in front of Thranduil.

“Get away from him!” The elleth drew her bow, aimed at Thranduil. The woman’s eyes were wide, rimmed red as she glanced at the Noldo who slumped further as he tried to reach for the arrow behind his back.

“Don’t. If you love me, Beril, let him go,” the Noldo murmured. “Please, my love.”

The woman looked at Thranduil warily, then back at the Noldo.

The hunter fell forward. The woman gasped, dropped her bow, and rushed to the hunter’s side.

“Don’t hurt my ada!” The little girl looked up, her arms wide open. She stood there as if to protect
the hunter, her dark eyes wide and brimming with tears. “Why are you hurting my daddy? Warriors are supposed to protect and not hurt people. That’s what daddy said.”

The child’s words rammed into Thranduil’s head, the force of it knocking out the wind from his chest. He had said those same words once as a child.

Don’t hurt them! Why are you doing this? Why are you hurting them? You are supposed to protect them! You are warriors.

He had shouted those words as he watched the Noldorin soldiers strike down Thranarin and Lady Nimloth’s ladies who tried to stop the soldiers as they dragged away the two princes and the queen. And now this child was saying those same words. At him.

The shock of hearing those words spoken to him came at Thranduil like Morgoth’s hammer. Thranduil felt his chest burn for lack of air.

Thranduil staggered back. His legs shook. He looked at the child’s eyes. Her wide eyes were filled with horror and disbelief, and in the midst of those raincloud eyes, Thranduil saw himself reflected in them. His pale-yellow hair was disheveled, his eyes filled with dark flames. The one who was reflected in the child’s eyes was not an Elf. He was not his mother’s son. His mother would not have recognized him.

“I…” Thranduil did not know what to say. Did he really want this child to feel what he had felt back at Menegroth? Even if she was the child of his enemy, he did not wish that on her.

“Go away!” the child screamed. The tears brimmed over and fell down her face.

Thranduil backed away, then turned. There was no strength in his legs, and Thranduil stumbled. He walked, or maybe he ran, he could not tell and was unsure where he was going. His stomach churned, something bitter rose up through his throat constricting the flow of air.

He walked on, his legs heavy. Everything around him seemed covered in thick mist, and he could not see where he was going. He wasn’t sure how long he went on, walking through the forest, his mind dazed.

You weak fool!

Thranduil thought someone shouted. He looked up startled as a bird, black as night, flew off from the nearby branch. It screeched as it flew away and as if in answer, the sky rumbled as dark clouds blocked the sun.

A sudden rain poured over his head. Lightning flashed, and thunder rolled across the sky.

Weak? Yes, he was. He was too weak to defend those he loved, too weak to fight the temptation of the darkness when it mattered. He was weak.

Why was he like this? He sucked the life out of everything he touched. To think that his mother had wanted him to become a healer. The bitter irony of it tickled him, and Thranduil laughed out loud. His hollow laughter rang through the forest. Losing balance, Thranduil stumbled and fell. His knees hit the water. Thranduil was vaguely aware he was kneeling by a stream, knee deep in water. He looked about, his eyes unseeing.

He wanted to disappear, fade away into nothingness. Maybe then no one will be hurt because of him. The hurt in that child’s eyes radiated inside his heart. After the agony of seeing what those soldiers did, how could he do that to another child? If those soldiers had been a monster in his eyes,
to that little girl, he was the monster now.

Thranduil buried his head in his hands. The grief he had felt at what happened at the village fell on his head like pouring rain. The look of absolute loss on the face of young Galion, Thranduil knew he was responsible for that. It was he who had convinced Farion to return home. Just as it had been he who had led those kinslayers into the Hall of Melodies. And it was he who had led his mother there at the cliff by the white tower at Arvernien. He had killed them all. He had known it all along. It was his doing, his darkness that drove him.

Revenge? That was only an excuse, Thranduil realized. An excuse to satisfy the burning need inside him to kill. He needed blood, and Astarno was near. Maybe it was always that. Just a reason to kill, to satisfy the hate that burned inside of him. It was his darkness that called out for the blood. It had never been about his brother or his mother. Never about Dirnenion or Farion or all other warriors lost at Menegroth, Sirion and in the wilderness. Revenge was never about them or for them. For Thranduil knew deep inside that his mother never wanted blood. She would never condone what he had done or tried to do. Even his brother. Both had been gentle souls. And even the warriors, all the Sindarin warriors who died at Sirion, they had not killed to revenge their lost kin, but to protect what was left of them.

As if he was reliving that day, Thranduil heard his father’s voice ringing out clear to those gathered to fight Noldor at Sirion. There had been many who were not warriors who had wanted to fight, to return what Feanorians had done to Doriath. But his father had rebuked them.

*Look at you! When have we become so eager to kill one of our own kind? This is not about revenge but about protecting one of our own. We are not leaving to fight Orcs or some goblins sent by the Dark Lord. It will be the red blood of kin that will be spilled this day. Do you think any one of us really want this? Do you think I want this? We will fight because we have no choice. We are warriors. It is our duty to fight and to protect. Each one of you has your own duty, your own obligations to meet. Do your job and let us do ours.*

Now, those words came back to Thranduil as if to rebuke him. His father had lost so much more than he had, yet, his father had not wanted revenge. He had fought only to protect, to do his duty.

But what had he done? Thranduil groaned, grabbing his hair. He had wanted revenge, wanted to see the Noldorin Elf bleed to satisfy his need to see someone pay for all he had lost. He was putting all the blame on that Noldo to forget his own part in the guilt. Even after all those teachings his mother had tried to impart to him, Thranduil had refused to see, refused to hear. And now, he had become like a monster, no different from the kinslayers whom he hated.

Like the storm that raged inside him, the wind picked up and rain pelted him. And maybe because of it, Thranduil did not hear the movement behind him until it was too late. When he picked up his head, it was to see the blur of movement. Searing pain registered, but the darkness grabbed hold of him, and he heard and felt no more.

-------

When consciousness returned, the world was moving upside down. Thranduil’s head swayed, and the world swayed with it. The pain in the back of his head throbbed. His throat was parched and dusty. But it didn’t matter. Thranduil closed his eyes and allowed the darkness to swallow him once again.

-------
When he came to the second time, he was thrown over into a dark corner like a sack of unwanted things. The stench and the screeching were familiar, but Thranduil did not pick up his head for a look. He wasn’t sure how much time had passed or what time of day it was, but he didn’t care. It didn’t matter anymore.

“Why we carrying him?” someone spoke.

The black speech grated on Thranduil’s ear, but the Sinda lay there like a dead kill, his eyes closed. Let them feast on him if they will, but he wasn’t going to do anything to make it easier for them.

“The filthy Elf has strong legs. Let him walk,” someone else added. “He weights like a dead troll.”

“Shut up! The others are here with the package. Maybe if you hadn’t knocked him so hard, he would’ve wakened up by now. Master wants him unharmed. So, get!”

“We should let the package carry him. He looks strong enough,” the one who had spoken first suggested.

“Yeah, Sharku. Let him carry the other one.” More than one of the voices agreed. And soon there was a shuffle of new feet, light, not at all like the heavy footfall of the Orcs.

“Unhand me, you filthy creatures!” A familiar voice growled.

Thranduil opened his eyes wide.

“Elrond?”

Chapter End Notes

Chapter 49 Captured will be up next weekend.
North of the Lower River Lune. September 26, Second Age 144

**ELROND** pulled the wet cape close around him with his bound hands. The Orcs had stripped Elrond of everything that was of value, including his armor, the gold brooch with a matching ring from the king, and the most important, the dagger Maglor had given him as a parting gift. But, they let him keep the cape and the tunic he wore under his armor. Elrond bitterly regretted bringing the dagger with him to the north, but he had never been parted from it. He had always kept it hidden in his boots for an emergency. Maybe if he had not gutted that Orc when he first crawled out of the pool, the dagger might not have been in his hand, but Elrond had not known then that there were more of them.

As soon as the Orc fell, Elrond had been knocked unconscious. When he awakened, rain poured, and thunder rolled. His hands were bound and tied to a warg.

The wargs which had provided a ride to the five Orcs who captured him had dumped all of them below a low rising cliff and disappeared to the east as the afternoon sun came out behind a thick cloud. The Orcs took shelter under the overhang provided by a large boulder jutting over the cliffside. Having been half-dragged and half-running to the verge of collapse to keep up with the running warg riders, Elrond had fallen onto the ground too exhausted, his body soaked in sweat, rain, and mud. But too soon, the sun sank, and Elrond was roughly pulled up. He had a mind to just lay there but the bulky Orc, taller and crueler than the rest, had whipped him until the Half-Elven had staggered up.

With the sinking of the sun, the temperature had dipped. Despite it still being Autumn, the northern air was biting. Elrond cursed silently at his human blood as he gritted his teeth to prevent them from chattering. Elrond couldn’t stop his body from shaking, however. The drenching rain just as the last light of the sun was extinguished had chilled him to the bone although it had washed off the mud and blood from him.

Elrond wondered if the cadets were looking for him. And, who was the one who had pushed him?

With the disappearance of the sun, it seemed as if the Orcs perked up as they ran through the forest with renewed strength. The bulky Orc had a thick leather cord wrapped around Elrond’s neck. Elrond had to keep pace with the Orc or risked being dragged again. They ran through the dark forest with the light from the torches held by one Orc who ran in front of the bulky Orc. Two ran on each side of Elrond and the bulky Orc and the last one behind them. Elrond had always heard that the Orcs were unintelligent and gawky creatures who did not think but did as commanded. But the look of these Orcs made him doubt those words. The Orcs formed a tight ring around Elrond. Elrond had never heard of such discipline among the Orcs unless… *No. It couldn’t be.*
According to what he had learned, the Orcs were disciplined and deadly when they were controlled by their masters, ones who ruled over them, such as the lieutenants of Morgoth. The great war destroyed most of these leaders among Morgoth’s army. As far as Elrond knew, Orcs were scattered and weak. But, then there was the attack at the village. Lord Gilmagor obviously thought it well coordinated just as that attack by the wargs.

When the night deepened, they stopped when a group of four Orcs, skin dark with green undertone with crooked legs, greeted them. They were much shorter than the stouter Orcs who had kidnapped him.

“Sharku has been waiting for you. You have the package?”

The bulky Orc yanked the leather rope he had tied around Elrond’s neck forcing the Half-Elven to stagger forward.

“Master said not to spoil him,” hissed the shorter Orc after he glanced at Elrond’s face and tunic torn by the rocks and debris when he was dragged over the grounds of the moor.

“You see any limbs missing?” the bulky Orc jeered at the shorter Orc. “We showed him a good time, that is all. Haven’t we, boys?” the Orc threw a glance at his four companions.

“Yeah! Yeah! Good time! Good time!” cheered the bulky Orc’s companions banging their swords to their iron armor.

The shorter Orc snatched the leather rope and pulled Elrond. The cave they took him had a high ceiling and was dry. Elrond was grateful for the warmth despite the dread knotting in his stomach. He had seen the Orc horde and had learned much about them, but facing them at the village the day before had been the first close encounter Elrond had with these horrible creatures. Both Maedhros and Maglor had been overprotective and had not allowed Elros or Elrond anywhere near Morgoth’s creatures.

Elrond was led to a group of Orcs shouting something to the one with sunken yellow eyes. Behind him stood the largest Orc Elrond had ever seen so far. It had a twisted scar knotted across his face as if someone had axed his face long time ago. One of the Orcs who had greeted them was whispering something onto the yellow-eyed Orc who looked up as the group shouted something.

When Elrond walked in, Orcs crowded around him.

“Let the package carry him. He looks strong enough,” someone said as others grabbed at Elrond.

“Unhand me, you filthy creatures!” Elrond shook his body away from the Orcs when a dark shape that was sprawled on the floor suddenly sat up.

"Elrond?"

The half-Elven opened his eyes wide. The figure’s head glinted pale silver from the faint light of the torches.

“Thranduil?” Elrond’s stomach knotted half in relief and a half in dread.

“What happened? Why are you here?” Thranduil tried to get up but swayed.

“Are you hurt?” Elrond ran over to Thranduil.

“No. Just dizzy. I think they hit me rather hard on the head,” Thranduil said, then looked up.
“Something happened to the cadets?” Thranduil’s eyes widened as he sucked in a quick breath. “Are they…?” Thranduil’s voice cracked.

“No.” Elrond shook his head. “At least, I don’t think so.”

“Then, how come you are here?”

“Those five captured me.” Elrond pointed to the five Orcs who were standing just inside the cave but outside a ring of others who were huddled around the yellow-eyed one and talking amongst themselves.

“You let five Orcs capture you?” Thranduil frowned with disbelief in his eyes. “Five?”

“I was dazed!” Elrond snapped. “I was pushed over the waterfall. I couldn’t get out from under roaring water. I was choking, damn it. I had water in my lungs!” Elrond found that he was no longer cold.

“Was there Orc-raid at the camp?” Thranduil asked wide-eyed.

“No.” Elrond took in a long breath. He didn’t know why he felt so rattled.

“Then, who pushed you over the waterfall?”

“I…” Elrond could not say. He could not bring himself to believe that it was Oron. How could it be? He will not believe it. He refused to believe it. “I do not know.” Elrond glanced away.

“You are not making sense. The camp was not attacked, but you were pushed over the cliff into the waterfall. What were you doing? Standing over the waterfall for a look or play?”

“Well, I didn’t slip if that is what you are suggesting.” Elrond tried to calm himself, but the words snapped out of his lips. Why can’t the Sinda ever say anything comforting?

“No? Just checking. With you, anything is possible.” Thranduil shrugged.

Elrond frowned. “What do you mean by that? I should be saying that about you. How did you get captured? Where were you?” Elrond narrowed his eyes remembering what Gelir had said. “Did you find the elf? The one called Astarno?”

“What is it to you?” Thranduil pulled back, his eyes which had been darting around the cave focused. Elrond could feel Thranduil pulling back, retreating behind his ice wall.

Elrond remembered the turbulent waves of grief he had felt from Thranduil in the dark just before the Warg attack. In that impenetrable darkness, grief immeasurable rose up, clawed his senses like a blade to a child’s skin. Although his eyes could not see, Elrond had felt the dark despair rose up like waves. Thranduil had been drowning in it.

“Did you meet him?” Elrond asked, his voice a wavering whisper in his own ears. Part of him wanted to know if it was true. If Astarno was there, then was it not possible that Maglor maybe was there, too? “Did you see anyone else there?”

Thranduil looked away.

A dread filled Elrond’s heart. “What did you do, Thranduil?” Then, something Maedhros mentioned many years ago rose up in his mind. “Why were you seeking Astarno? What has he done to you?”

Thranduil looked away but turned back to Elrond.
“What do you think happened? He was there at Sirion. What do you think happened there? Do you even remember?”

Yes. You abandoned me. Left my brother and me to fend for ourselves. You and my mother. Neither of you had come back for us. You broke your promise.

Elrond bit into his teeth to prevent himself from saying his thoughts out loud. It surprised him how much he remembered. He thought he had forgotten it all, forgotten and forgiven but something hot churned his stomach and boiled his blood.

“Elros and I were mortal children back then,” Elrond said instead.

Thranduil scoffed. “Of course. How could I forget? Memories of the mortals were short-lived.”

“It is a good thing that it is.” Elrond turned away from Thranduil and came face to face with that big Orc with a huge slash scar on his left cheek.

"Stop talking, you maggots!"

The Orc smashed its massive fist into Elrond’s face, throwing the Half-Elven against a wall behind him. The force of the impact robbed Elrond of breath.

“Leave him alone, you filth!” Thranduil shouted, trying to rise and teetering on his bound feet. The Orc swung around and backhanded Thranduil, throwing the Sinda against a wall behind him. Then, without bothering to look, the Orc grabbed the front of Elrond’s tunic.

"What is so special about you?" The Orc brought its twisted, scarred face close. Elrond almost gagged at the fetid odor. Something was dying and decaying inside the Orc’s mouth.

"Piss off, scar face!" Elrond spat at the orc.

The Scarface roared and grabbed Elrond's neck, lifting him off the ground. Elrond's face turned red as the air was cut off from his throat. He struggled to use his bound hands to push off the orc’s hands, but the beast was strong. The orc shook Elrond, knocking more air out of his lungs when he was suddenly thrown against a wall with the Orc sprawled on top of him.

Gagging, Elrond scrambled up and saw Thranduil balancing unsteadily on his bound feet and arms just behind the Orc.

"Hey ugly, is that all you got, Filth?" Thranduil chuckled. "You punch like a five-year-old elfling. That actually tickled."

The Scarface got up and punched Thranduil with such force that Thranduil lost his footing and fell back to the ground. The Orc picked him up like a sack of grain and hurled him back on the ground.

Thranduil rolled onto the rocky surface and rolled up into a ball. The orc picked up a roughly hewn club and rammed it into Thranduil's stomach. Thranduil groaned, but screwing his face up at the Orc, the Sinda laughed out loud.

"Too weak to use your hands? Need a weapon to help you out?" Thranduil jeered.

The Orc snarled but threw down his club. Then, fisting his huge hands, punched Thranduil as if he was a sack of sand to practice punches. The last blow to the head made a sickening sound and blood splattered onto the Sinda's fair skin. With a vicious growl, the Orc landed another punch on
Thranduil’s stomach.

Thranduil groaned but continued to laugh. Scarface unsheathed his huge sword.

"Let's see if you can still talk, Maggot, after I cut out your tongue!" growled the Orc.

Elrond opened his mouth to shout, but his throat burned and he couldn't say a word. As he struggled to moisten his burning throat, the Orc with the sunken yellow eyes walked in with an angry growl.

"Knock it off, Krud! Master wants them unspoiled."

"He meant for the black haired one, but this one," Krud took a handful of silver-gold hair and yanked it, pulling it hard enough to lift Thranduil's head off the ground. "He didn’t say anything about this one." Krud shoved his ugly face into Thranduil. The Sinda gritted his teeth and didn’t make a sound, his eyes flashing defiantly.

"You fool! Don’t you know that if the master wanted us to pick him up, he wants us to bring him alive? Now, get out and get ready to move!"

Krud looked disgusted, but with another vicious kick to fallen Thranduil, he walked away.

Elrond, having found his voice again, crawled over to where Thranduil was sprawled on the ground.

"Thranduil," Elrond shook the blond elf gently.

Thranduil groaned, then raised his body off the ground to sit up.

"Filthy creature!" Thranduil murmured as he spat out blood in his mouth. Then, he rubbed at his side where Krud had kicked several times before he left them alone.

“Could you try and not rouse these creatures?” Elrond sighed. “Do you want to get killed before we get a chance to escape?”

“Escape?” Thranduil let out a snort. “Did you see how many there are inside the cave?”

Elrond looked around. The Orcs were already moving out but even counting only those who were still in the cave, there was good two dozen of them.

“Eleven of them already left the cave, and I am guessing there are at least six outside as a lookout. And if you noticed, most of these Orcs are not slaves. They are warrior variety, the most vicious of their kind. Unless Lord Gilmagor brings other warriors, the four cadets will not be able to handle them.”

“I am sure they are looking for us. We will need to slow these creatures down, look for opportunities. I am sure there are things we could do.”

“Well, good luck with that.” Thranduil flung himself down on to the ground, then turned his back to Elrond.

Dread tightened a knot in Elrond’s stomach. Fear and despair he had suppressed slid out of his head where Elrond had locked them.

“You are not giving up! Thranduil I know would never give up.”

“You don’t know me,” Thranduil said.
“Then, make me understand. Show me. But don’t just lay there as if you do not care.”

“I don’t care.”

“Damn you! What is wrong with you!” Elrond shook the Sinda, but Thranduil had closed his eyes.

Two Orcs with crooked legs and crooked teeth came over just then. Somehow, there was nothing straight about these creatures.

“Move, Maggots! Get up!” One of them undid the rope that tied Thranduil’s feet, then attached a long rope over the bound wrists. Once done, he yanked Thranduil up, but like a broken doll the Sinda fell back down onto the floor as soon as the Orc let him go. “Get up, Maggot! We are not carrying you this time.” The Orc kicked at Thranduil, but the Sinda still did not budge.

“Get!,” the Orc yelled and slammed his iron-clad foot into Thranduil’s side, but the Sinda still did not move. The Orc took out his curved sword.

“I’ll carry him.” Elrond grabbed Thranduil and covered the Sinda’s body protectively with his. Elrond hurled Thranduil up then tried to throw the Sinda over his shoulder when Thranduil pushed Elrond away. With a sigh, Thranduil rolled his eyes then straightened to follow after Elrond.

All night they marched. Whenever Elrond or Thranduil stumbled, whips lashed out at them, hitting them on their backs, arms, and head mercilessly. Elrond took turns with Thranduil supporting each other as they stumbled in the darkness as the orcs who held their bindings pulled at their leash.

"Maybe the warriors are on their trail. These creatures usually don't travel this fast," Thranduil hissed as they jogged in the dark alongside their captors.

“I knew they will look for us. They will come for us, Thranduil. They will find us, and everything will be all right.” Elrond felt light shining in his breast.

“You really do think that, don’t you? You really think everything will be all right even after all that had happened.” Thranduil chuckled. There was no mirth in it, however.

“What is wrong with having hope?”

Thranduil did not say anything and looked ahead. Elrond thought the Sinda wouldn’t say anything more when Thranduil murmured, so softly that Elrond barely heard it.

“I don’t know what hope is.”

Elrond’s heart clenched. There was something in the way Thranduil said it as if his heart shattered with each word.

“We will survive this, Thranduil. We will walk away from this, and it will be like it did not happen.”

“What if I don’t want to survive?”

Elrond’s heart chilled.

Thranduil laughed, his laughter hollow.

“Why would you say that?” Elrond stopped.

A whip cracked over his back. Thranduil grabbed Elrond and pulled him back into the rhythm of the jog.
“Do not think about me. You just do what you need to do to survive.”

“I don’t understand why you would say something like that. Of course, you want to survive. Think about your father, Thranduil. He expects you to come back. Your friends and family.”

“They don’t need me.”

“It is not the matter of need. There are people who care about you. And those people who rely on you.”

“No one relies on me. And as for my family, I will see all of them one day, even if it will be many millennia later.”

“How about Galion. Remember what you said to him, that he must survive to do right by his mother who had sacrificed for him? Don’t you think you owe him to survive this? He will be waiting for you. He just lost his whole family. You said you will help him. Were you lying?” Just as you lied to my brother and me?

Just then whips cracked over their backs.

“Stop talking, scums!” orcs running behind them growled. “Move faster!”

The merciless whipping gave the two young elves no choice but to keep their mouth shut and move as fast as they could.

Languages of Orcs: Orcs used a mishmash of different languages. There is at least one writing by Tolkien where he stated that Melkor taught Orcs speech. The black speech is known to have been created by Sauron to be the sole language for all his servants in Mordor to replace the various Orkish and common speech used by the Orcs. But it seemed only Sauron and his top lieutenants, such as Nazgul and Olog-hai (elite battle trolls), used the pure form. Orcs desecrated everything they touched including languages, and Sauron did no succeed in unifying the language. I think the pure form of Black Speech is probably what Melkor taught his followers which Sauron later modified for his use.

The names of the Orcs I used are not related to the Black Speech. I found names made using Black Speech to be difficult to pronounce and too long so I made my own. None of the Orcish names, except for Sarku (Old man) is based on the Black Speech.

Chapter End Notes

Next weekend, Chapter 50
The Orcs

Chapter Summary

Captured, Elrond tries to find a way to motivate Thranduil to escape.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

North of the Lower River Lune. September 26, Second Age 144

ELROND stumbled as Orcs pushed him and Thranduil into a cavern once the sky began to lighten. The Orcs covered the entrance to the cave with bushes to block the stray sunlight. Only the somber flames provided by few torches threw a dim light making the shadows inside the cave scatter and shake.

Jutting walls inside the chamber formed pockets of corners. The Orcs thrust Elrond and Thranduil into one of those dark corners far back from the opening of the cave.

Except for the two fully armed orcs standing guard near them, the rest of the orcs huddled behind three large orcs, the yellow-eyed one named Sharku, scar-faced one called Krud and the bulky Orc who had delivered Elrond.

By the look of the rocks piled in a circle blackened by soot in the middle of the chamber, Elrond was sure Orcs had used this cave before. Just above the firepit, a thin stream of sunlight penetrated the darkness of the cave and sent a beam of light onto the walls of stone.

When the creatures were seated, smaller Orcs brought in a pile of uncooked meat. Sharku took out his dagger and skewered one large chunk, then started eating. Krud and the bulky Orc then grabbed for the meat. Each held onto what appeared to be the lower half of a skinned deer. Krud took one leg, and the bulky Orc took the other leg.

“Let go, cur!” Krud growled.

“You let go!” The bulky Orc growled back.

Krud and the bulky Orc butted their heads like two rams fighting, their hand holding onto the leg while their other hand reached for their weapons. The other Orcs standing behind the three, eagerly waiting for a chance to get their hands on the food, turned, the meat forgotten. They gathered around the two orcs, their eyes glassy with excitement.

“Fight! Fight! They shouted.

“Krud! Krud!” Some of the orcs started a chant but was met with a bigger chant of “Burog! Burog!”

“Silence!” Sharku swung his sword right down the two Orcs, and the Scarface and the bulky Orc jumped out of the way, each with a leg of the deer in his hand. “I’m eating, you louts!”
Krud and the bulky Orc glared at each other but turned to the meat in their hands. They tore into it with such ferocity Elrond turned away grimacing. His stomach heaved, but Elrond tamped it down. It was bad enough that the cave smelled as if meats were left to rot for a month. As soon as Elrond turned away, the rest of the orcs must have joined in the feeding as the sounds of crunching of the bones and tearing of the muscles rose tenfold. Combined with the fetid odor, the ravenous sounds of feasting roiled Elrond’s stomach making it difficult for him to breath let alone look. Elrond wondered how Thranduil could sit there with such a bland look on his face and watch those foul creatures eat.

“They are eating animals, aren’t they?” Elrond asked, not really hoping for an answer.

“How could you be so calm about it?” Elrond asked, but even as he asked, he realized there was nothing they could do.

Once the eating started, the two guards disappeared among the horde to join in the frenzy.

“Perhaps we could make a run for it,” Elrond whispered glancing at the entrance. “They seem quite occupied. If we could stay near the wall, by the shadows…”

“They may not hear as well as we do, but they see better in the dark than we can.”

“But they do not move as fast as we. Isn’t that so?”

“Who told you that?” Thranduil sneered.

“Well, look at them. Their armor alone would weight like a dragon hoard.”

“Do not be fooled, Elrond. Orcs can move surprisingly fast when necessary whether in their armor or not. Besides, the entrance to the cave is over a furlong from here, and there are more than thirty eyes. They could also have some of their soldiers stationed outside to be a look-out. Even if that were not so, without a weapon, how do you expect to cut your binding? They may look rough, but these bindings are stronger than they appear.”

“Well, we can’t just sit around and wait for them to deliver us to whoever their master is.”

Thranduil snorted, but he did not say any more.

“What is wrong with you? I have never seen you like this. What has happened? Thranduil I know would never just sit around and allow himself to be taken. I have seen you make what seems impossible possible. We could do this, Thranduil. We can escape.”

Thranduil leaned back into the stone wall and closed his eyes.

Looking at the Sinda, Elrond felt his body drain of all the energy in his body. Thranduil knew more about Orcs than he did.

*If the Sinda is so hopeless then maybe there is no hope for us.*

A shiver ran through him, and Elrond wrapped his arms around himself. Elrond’s heart began to pulse rapidly making his breath harsh and painful.

When he was with Maedhros and Maglor, they were on the constant move. Many times, they clashed with Orc horde. But Elrond had never been afraid. He had always known that his foster parents would protect him, and they had. He had never felt alone while he was with them and with
Elros. And when he saw Thranduil in that cave, despite the fear that ate at him inside, Elrond had felt relieved that he was not alone. But seeing Thranduil sitting there, uncaring and comforting, Elrond felt hopelessly alone.

“I don’t want to be eaten,” Elrond said more to himself than to Thranduil. He put his head down on his arms which were folded over his knees. When he felt eyes on him, Elrond picked up his head. Thranduil was watching him.

“I don’t think you will be eaten, Elrond. Whoever this master is, he wants you. The Orcs will not dare harm you until this master…” Thranduil sat up suddenly. “What do you know about this ‘master’?” the Sinda asked.

“Nothing. What would I know about Orc masters? By Belegaer! I don’t even know much about Orcs!” Elrond took in a breath to slow his heart which hammered in his breast. What did this creature that the orcs call master want with him? Whatever it was, Elrond knew it could not be anything good. All his nerves stood on end when he thought of it, and Elrond trembled inside.

“None of Morgoth’s lieutenants know about you. You were too young during the First Age, but if they do know about you, then you will be someone they will consider their enemy number one.” A dark look crossed Thranduil.

“Why would I be that?”

“You have within you all the blood of those who had opposed Morgoth. All of them.” Thranduil frowned. “You have to escape, Elrond.” The look of determination Elrond had seen in Thranduil was back. “They cannot have you.” Thranduil glanced at the orcs.

Orcs had finished eating and were spreading out, some to the shadowed corners and others in the center and near the cave entrance.

“Their master wants you, too.”

“I think I was only their secondary target who just happened upon them. No. You are their target,” Thranduil said, his eyes not leaving the Orcs.

It was then Sharku gestured toward the bulky orc.

“Burog, set guards.” Then, the yellow-eyed orc went behind a jutting rock and disappeared from Elrond’s view followed by Krud.

Burog gestured to four orcs. They moved closer to the cave entrance and stood at attention. Then, he walked further inside the cave. He kicked two other Orcs and pointed to the back of the cave. Grumbling, orcs got up and passed where the two elves sat. They disappeared into the blackness far right to the where Elrond sat with Thranduil. Burog came near the two Elves at the back of the cave shouting orders at a group of orcs lying on the ground under the shadow of the jutting walls.

Now that Elrond had time to look more closely, Burog differed from others. Unlike others who wore worn pieces of mismatched armor, Burog wore an armor that was fitted to his bulky frame. He also carried a massive, double-edged ax unlike the strip of curved iron that many orcs carried. Among the dark metal of his armor and dirt brown leather spattered with old blood, something sparkled in his belt and on his fingers.

“That filth has my dagger,” Elrond hissed under his breath. Thranduil who had been watching the two Orcs disappear into the back of the cave turned.
“Burog? Was it he who took the dagger from you? When?” Thranduil asked.

“When he captured me.” Elrond nodded, biting down the anger. The Half-Elven looked at the dagger. How could he allow these Orcs to take the dagger?

“And those rings, are they yours?” Thranduil seemed to scrutinize Burog. The Sinda seemed suddenly alert, his eyes sparkling like jewels by the pale light of the torches.

“Just the one on his pinky. It was from the king along with that brooch he is sporting,” Elrond said between clenched teeth.

“Hmmm.” Thranduil’s lips curved, and a new light danced in his eyes.

“What are you thinking?” Elrond whispered as he watched Burog come towards them.

Thranduil looked up at the orc with haughty calm when Burog stopped in front of them.

“Hey, ugly! Return my friend’s dagger, you thief,” Thranduil said as if he was a prince commanding the lowliest slave.

Elrond winced. *What in Utumno are you doing, stupid?*

Burog looked down at Thranduil, then laughed out loud. He padded his dagger in his belt.

“He wants this back, does he?” the Orc chuckled, then he bent down to look down at Thranduil. “Want to take this, dog?”

“Why, don’t mind me if I do,” said Thranduil getting up to his full height, towering above Burog.

The orc was twice as broad and muscled compared to Thranduil but was shorter by a head. With a placid look on his face, Thranduil extended his bound hands and reached for the dagger in Burog’s waist.

“Thranduil, don’t…” Elrond did not finish.

Burog rammed his massive fist into Thranduil’s cheek knocking the Sinda against the stone wall.

Elrond bolted upright, trying to get up on his feet when Burog turned and grabbed Elrond’s neck. The orc took out the dagger and ran it down Elrond’s cheek, down to his throat. The cold steel pressed into the skin of Elrond’s neck and drew blood.

Elrond glared up at the Orc. Whatever weakness he felt before had calmed replaced by burning fire in his breast. To think that Maglor’s dagger will be used against him. If only he had his sword….

Burog chuckled, then stashed the dagger back into his belt.

“Master wants you? But you are weak!” The Orc squeezed his hand that held Elrond’s neck. “Burog can snap your neck. So easy.” The Orc cawed.

Burog pulled on Elrond’s neck. The Half-Elven had no choice but to get up off his feet. His inside shivered as the calloused fingers dug into the soft skin of his neck.

“Get your filthy hands off me, you spawn of Morgoth!” Elrond’s inside hardened as heat exploded within his stomach. The churning darkness that was the Orc flowed through Burog’s hands. The intensity of hatred burned like a dragon fire and inside that was desire only to kill, to destroy and to burn all that was good. Elrond had always been taught that orcs are evil, but he had believed that there must be some good in them if they used to be elves, tortured and corrupted. But the Orc’s touch
revealed only darkness devoid of any spark of light. Elrond felt his insides shrivel at the thick darkness that oozed nothing but pure malice.

“You do not frighten me.” Elrond hissed through his clenched teeth.

“No?” the Orc cackled, his face twisting monstrously. “Now that's new.” Burog flashed his teeth which were sharp like fangs of wolves. “You never played with us. Burog will show you.”

Using his other hand, the Orc grabbed hold of Elrond’s bound arms and pulled at an awkward angle. The Orc only made a slight pressure on his movement, and Elrond felt searing pain between the joints of his shoulder. Burog was pressuring the nerve point.

“You see, slave. No damage if I keep the pressure like this. Master wouldn’t know.”

Burog squeezed, and Elrond’s veins sizzled like liquid fire. Elrond clenched his teeth harder, but every nerve in his body burned like lava that devours everything in its path. Elrond screamed.

“Burog!” someone shouted.

Suddenly, Burog yelped and let go. The Half-Elven dropped to the floor, trying hard to swallow the scream as the radiating pain slowed, then stopped. Elrond looked up.

Thranduil stood over the fallen Orc with a rock in his bound hands. But other Orcs came and surrounded Thranduil, their swords drawn, their teeth bare.

Burog stood up and touched the back of his head. Black blood oozed there.

“He’s mine!” Burog pushed away other Orcs, punching one nearest to Thranduil. The Orcs stepped back giving Burog room.

"If you were going to hit me, at least do it well, you filth! Ah, but that's right,” jeered Thranduil, throwing the rock away. “That Scarface, Krud was it? He did say that you couldn't hit properly to save your life. I guess he was right at least. You punch like a child.” Thranduil laughed.

Burog screeched loudly. Elrond grimaced as his sensitive Elven ears shook from the loud cry. The Orc rammed into Thranduil knocking the Sinda down. But Thranduil got up, kicked Burog between his legs. Burog howled. One of the Orcs stepped in, but Burog slammed his fist into the Orc. Turning to his companions behind them, Burog roared out loud. The orcs drew further back. Burog turned back to Thranduil then attacked. Thranduil deftly dodged the punches. But Thranduil’s hands were bound, and Burog’s hands were not. Worse, Burog had weapons, and Thranduil had not. The Orc took out his ax. Cornering Thranduil with his massive body, Burog rammed the head of his ax onto Thranduil’s stomach, then hurl the Sinda against the wall behind him.

“Burog, the master angry if packages hurt. We don’t want master angry,” one of the Orcs who stood around them said.

“Master wants them unharmed, Burog!” Sharku who came out from the other side of the cave wove through the Orcs to stand before the others.

Burog turned around, growled then backhanded the first orc who spoke. The orc was flung back against a wall as other orcs scattered.

“This not the end, Elf scum,” Burog growled. “Burog will show you.” He let out another ear-splitting screech then marched away.
Elrond took in a breath until his trembling muscles calmed from the pain, then moved over next to Thranduil who had slid down the wall and was sitting on the ground. Thranduil groaned and leaned back against a wall, his eyes closed.

"Are you all right? Why would you do that? Why would you bait him? It is only making him angrier and more violent. Can you just keep quiet? I have never known you to talk so much!" Elrond scowled at Thranduil. "He may come at you again."

Thranduil chuckled as he opened his eyes.

"I am counting on it," Thranduil smirked. Then he rubbed his stomach. "I had forgotten that these creatures are probably the same murderers who destroyed that village; killed Farion." Thranduil’s eyes glittered with eerie light. "If anyone deserves punishment, these creatures do."

Elrond shivered at the look in Thranduil’s eyes. If the gleam in the Sinda’s eyes could kill, they wouldn’t need weapons to fight the Orcs.

“How could you forget what happened to the village? What was so important that you forgot about the village and went after Astarno? What did you do?” Elrond did not want to ask, but dread spread inside him, and he had to know.

Thranduil looked away.

“Did Astarno deserve punishment? Did you seek him out to hurt him? Was that what you were doing?”

Thranduil turned and met Elrond’s eyes. It was cold and frozen.

“Oh, he deserved punishment. All kinslayers deserve punishment.”

Elrond’s heart tightened. If Thranduil had hurt Astarno, he wasn’t sure if he could do what the king had asked of him. Astarno had been a friend, a teacher and a protector who had watched over Elros and him during his stay with the Feanorians.

“And you, are you so innocent?”

“At least I did not kill other Elves,” Thranduil said.

Elrond relaxed. Astarno was alive, then. Elrond knew that Astarno was skilled with weapons, but if Thranduil sought him out to kill him, Elrond knew the elder Noldo would not have fought back. The guilt of what they had done at Alqualonde, to Menegroth, and to Sirion had lain heavily with Astarno as it had with his foster fathers.

“What they did was indeed wrong, but it is not up to you or others to meet out the punishment. Vengeance is a naked blade without a hilt, Thranduil. It cannot but hurt you as well.”

“Oh, the wise have spoken. Well. Well. Is that why you decided to love your kidnappers, call them fathers, the ones who killed your mother and your father’s people?”

“Do not go there, Thranduil,” Elrond clenched his fists. “You have no say in that, no right to say anything!” You left us behind! Elrond wanted to say, but he bit his tongue. He had forgiven his forefathers. He should be able to forgive Thranduil and his mother for abandoning them, shouldn’t he? It was not fair for him to harbor this feeling, this tightness in his chest that hurt whenever he thought of Sirion, of their mother.
Thranduil looked away, and Elrond dropped his head. Silence flowed between them like an invisible wall. And Elrond hated it, hated this distance that separated them. He wanted to reach out, but he could not.

The silence lasted for a while when it was broken by chanting and a loud screech. Elrond turned and saw that Orcs gathered, huddled around in a wide circle. Some took out their swords and waved them around in the air.

“Fight! Fight!” the orcs chanted.

Suddenly, several of the orcs stumbled back, and Burog’s large body landed on his back with a thud on the ground. But, before the other Orcs scrambled out of the way, Krud, the scar-faced Orc, grabbed Burog up, then punched Burog’s face. They cursed and threw punches at each other until both took out their swords. After bouts of clashing their swords, it became apparent that Burog was the superior swordsman. The hulking orc plunged its sword deep into Krud's belly, and the scar-faced Orc fell, his face on the ground.

Thranduil chuckled as Elrond watched wide-eyed, dread filling his stomach.

"You pitted them against each other?" Elrond turned to Thranduil.

"Don't tell me you feel sorry for the Orc?" Thranduil frowned.

"But, what makes you think the surviving one will leave you alone? Remember his warning?" Elrond asked as he watched Burog walk towards them, still holding the bloody sword.

"See that, filthy Elf? Burog stronger than Krud!" Burog slammed his sword against his chest once he was in front of Thranduil.

Thranduil shrugged. "I didn't say Krud was better with swords than you, Filth. I said Krud thinks you punch like a child. And, I guess he is right. You couldn't handle him just with your fists, could you, Burog?" Thranduil said.

Burog bared his fangs and snarled. Thranduil laughed, throwing back his head. Burog’s eyes bulged, and the muscles around them shook. He hefted his large ax high up above his head.

“Burog gut you like a pig, maggot!”

"No!" Elrond stood up in front of Thranduil blocking the Sinda from Burog’s sight. “Stop talking Thranduil!” Elrond hissed.

Burog stepped forward with a blow to Elrond’s head, knocking the Noldo onto the ground.

"Oh, go ahead, Burog," Thranduil chuckled looking up at the Orc with a dark glint in his deep blue-green eyes. "Your master wouldn't mind that you kill us before he had a chance to speak to us. I am sure your master is a kind creature who wouldn't mind your small mistake. Is it not so? I am sure your master will be very understanding."

The great Orc's face contorted hideously. Burog threw his ax on the ground with a thud, grabbed Thranduil, lifting the Sinda off the ground. With its massive hand around Thranduil’s neck, Burog smashed Thranduil against the wall then shook him. With the Orc’s hulking body blocking his sight, Elrond could only see Thranduil’s face, as it turned red, just above Burog’s shoulder. Elrond struggled to sit up.

"When my master is done with you," Burog hissed into Thranduil's face. "I am going to tear you
limb by limb, and will rip out each of your organs until you scream mercy."

The great orc hurled Thranduil against the wall. Once. Twice. Then picking him up again once more flung Thranduil against a wall with such violence that the wall shook. Thranduil slid onto the ground. Burog kicked Thranduil’s side viciously several times before walking back to join others who still surrounded Krud’s body sprawled on the ground. Sharku ordered others to take away Krud’s body with hardly a frown. When Burog approached Sharku, they talked as if nothing had happened. Elrond clawed his way over to Thranduil.

"You stupid ass! You’ll get us killed before we have a chance to escape!" Elrond hissed, more worried than angry.

But, Thranduil did not move from where he was sprawled face down on the ground.

"Thranduil! Thranduil!" Elrond called as dread spread into his guts. "Get up, you stupid Sindar! You are not going to die in here. You hear me!" Elrond shook the sprawled form of Thranduil before him. “I swear if you leave me now, I will never forgive you.”

"Shut up, Noldo! Let me get some wind in my throat," groaned Thranduil as he turned over, his eyes still shut tight, his teeth clenched.

"Valar help us! You could have been killed. Why do you insist on provoking these foul creatures? What makes you think they are reasonable? That thing could have just killed you and not care what his master will do later."

Thranduil’s body shook as a chuckle escaped his lips.

"No, Elrond. These creatures are bred to fear their master above all else. They will never risk angering their master, oh no."

With a groan, Thranduil sat up with Elrond’s help.

"But, what would angering them do except gather more attention? How is getting beaten up going to help us get away? Even if we get a chance to escape, our bodies have to be in good enough condition and strength if we are to escape." Elrond lowered his voice as a pair of orcs passed near them.

Thranduil gazed at the pair of orcs as they moved further into the cave.

Out in the center of the cave near the entrance, Orics clustered in groups on the ground. Soon, the irritating screech of orcs changed into loud rumblings as one by one they fell to sleep.

"You are right, of course. But, it was a chance I had to take. Unlike you, patience has never been my strong suit. So..." With a cheeky grin, Thranduil flashed Elrond what was in his pocket, then quickly hid it again as another pair of Orcs, the two Orcs who had disappeared into the darkness of the inner cave upon Burog’s orders came back from the back of the cave and passed them. The two orcs settled on the ground near a wall.

After watching the orcs fall asleep, Elrond turned his wary eyes toward the entrance where the four guards were standing. One was nodding off, but the other three were standing about talking amongst themselves. They were far enough away that the two elves could not hear what the three orcs were saying.

"How?" Elrond lowered his voice to a whisper as Thranduil again took out the small dagger from his pocket. It was Elrond’s dagger that Burog had in his belt.
"I have been hoping to get near him without him becoming aware of it," Thranduil chuckled softly.

“How did you know Burog would win against Krud? That Scarface looked bigger and more menacing. If Krud had won, you wouldn’t have had the chance.”

“Didn’t you see the armor and jewels on Burog’s fingers? The strongest ones usually get the most bounty. Krud looked tough, but if he couldn’t get the bounty off Burog, then he was obviously not as strong as Burog was. I wasn’t absolutely sure, of course, but I was pretty certain that Burog would win.”

Thranduil grinned, but his face contorted, then clenched his teeth.

Elrond frowned. "You are hurt!"

"My knee. It might be broken." Then, glancing at the Orcs by the entrance of the cave, he cut the rope that bound Elrond's hands.

"As soon as the Orcs by the door are less alert, go. I will cover for you." Thranduil handed the dagger to Elrond when the Noldo's hands came free.

*furlong--measure of distance equal to about 1/8th of a mile, or 220 yards, or 201 meters*

**Utumno** (Quenya, *Deep-hidden*), less commonly known by its Sindarin name, **Udun** (*Deep pit, Hell, Underworld*), was Morgoth's base of operation during the time of the lamps. Built by Melkor under the Iron Mountains, this was also where he first blighted the Arda "marring" it. It is here that Melkor first captured the Elves and altered them to create Orcs. In other words, Utumno is Hell in Middle Earth term.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter 51 next weekend.
THRANDUIL leaned back after thrusting the dagger into Elrond's hand. The pain from the knee radiated up his thigh, bit into his flesh, burning him with a viciousness of Morgoth's creatures. Thranduil took in a sharp breath and held down a groan. The sharpness of the pain, instead of dimming his senses, drew away the last remnant of the treacherous fog that had clouded his mind.

What am I doing? When did I give in so easily?

That part of him that burned fierce and proud reared up. He didn't want to slink to the door of Mandos, just another victim to Orc's cruelty. He had hardly done anything with his life. Worse, he had so much to atone for. He had no right to give up his life, to stop suffering until Eru dictated it so. And here, in front of him, was a chance for him to make some amends for the wrongs he had committed. It was also the chance to be who he was, a warrior, a guardian, the way he was meant to be. That little girl was right. His job was not to deal out punishment; it was to protect others from the fiends like these Orcs. If he were to punish, then it was to punish these Orcs who killed Farion and his people. Unlike Astarno who will be judged by the Valar, these Orcs were mired with the fate of Morgoth and beyond even the powers of Valar to change them. According to what Thranduil was taught, only Eru Illuvatar had the power to restore the light back to these fiends.

Elrond grabbed the ropes binding his hand, and Thranduil pulled away.

"Leave me. If you are to escape, you must be quick. The Orcs are on foot. They cannot hope to catch you if you escape this cave while the sun shines brightly outside."

Thranduil glanced at the other side of the chamber wall where a thin beam of light had reached the center of the cavern.

"You must be swift and stealthy. Put as much distance from here before the darkness comes."

Elrond looked away and scanned the center of the chamber where a cluster of Orcs lay on the ground. There were many Orcs to pass to reach the entrance.

"You need not go through the entrance, Elrond. Remember the two Orcs that went to the back of the cave? They were replacing another pair of guards that just came back from there. There must be another entrance, or they wouldn't have put guards on it. There were only two. Even with only the dagger, you can handle two."

Elrond was skilled with a sword. Thranduil was certain that two Orcs were no match for the Half-Elven despite the lack of a proper weapon. Thranduil glanced at the two Orcs who were lying nearest them, sprawled against the wall where the two guards disappeared.

"You should be able to pass those two without a problem," Thranduil pointed to the two nearest
Orcs.

Thranduil glanced at the entrance. The guards were leaning against the walls. Their eyes dull, their shoulders drooping. Three of them huddled together while the fourth sat down, his arms slack.

"Now, Elrond. Go now," Thranduil whispered to Elrond at his side.

"I am not leaving you."

Thranduil turned. Elrond's face was pinched, his lips a thin line. There was a familiar look in his gray eyes.

"Listen to me, Peredhel. I will only hinder you. I don't know if I can even stand on this leg, never mind keep moving with it."

"We'll find a way. I will carry you if I must, but I am not going to leave you here. I will not abandon you."

Another look entered Elrond's eyes, the look of reproach, the one that reminded Thranduil of his failure to keep Elros and Elrond safe, the same failure that had killed Elurid and Elurin. Like a burning dagger, it tore through Thranduil's heart. Thranduil looked away, unable to meet those gray eyes.

"Please, Elrond, listen to reason."

The guilt mingled with the pain in his knee stabbed at Thranduil. He glanced at the beam of light that had passed the firepit and was heading toward the wall where they sat. Slowly, but inevitably, the beam of light moved across the cavern floor. The more time passed, the less time Elrond will have to further the distance from here before the sun sets.

"Time will not stay for you, Elrond."

Without a word, Elrond reached for Thranduil's wrists again. Thranduil dodged the hand and grabbed the front of Elrond's tunic.

"Listen and listen well, you stupid Noldo," Thranduil hissed. "Opportunity comes only briefly. If you want to escape, it must be done before we get to the master. Mind you, this 'master' will have many more Orcs at his command as well as other fell creatures. Once we arrive, there will be no more chances. Do you understand?"

Elrond's gray eyes were steady as he met Thranduil's eyes. The Half-elven nodded.

"No, you do not understand!" Thranduil felt fear tighten his stomach. "If we are caught, it will not be the ropes alone that will bind us. If you go alone, there is a good chance. You can outrun them. But, with me, the chance of escape is almost none. And if I am here, I can provide distraction….

"How? By putting your life on the line? Just as you did to obtain this dagger? You said I was the primary target. Then, once I am gone, what will they do to you?"

"It doesn't matter."

"It matters to me. I am not going to let you throw away your life. After all that talk you had given young Galion, are you so ready to give up on life?"

The words stung.
"I am not. You heard them. They will not kill me. You can come back for me once you reach other warriors."

"I don’t even know where I am. And even if I make it to the other warriors, how am I to find you? With you injured and I no longer here, what guarantee is there that they will keep you alive?"

"Hear reason, Peredhel," Thranduil snapped. Thranduil struggled to tamp down the burst of heat he felt. He could see Elrond’s gray eyes harden with determination, so much like Elwing’s, Thranduil was afraid. He had never been able to win against Elwing’s stubbornness. And here he was, the last chance to do his duty that he had previously failed to do, the last chance to go down fighting, doing his job as his brother had, as his grandfather had.

Thranduil could hear Elwing's words: Please protect my babies. Keep them safe. It was the last words she had said to him. And he had failed her; had failed to protect her; had failed to keep her children safe. And it was not just them. The other twins, Elurid and Elurin, were lost because of what he had done at Menegroth. And now only Elrond remained. The Half-Elven was the reminder to Thranduil of all the Sindarin kings he and his family had failed to protect, their failure to meet their duty and obligation as the protectors of the realm and the royal house.

"I am begging you." A word Thranduil had never used, never thought he would ever use, came tumbling out of his mouth. "I beg you, Elrond. Please go. Give me this chance." Thranduil clutched Elrond's hands. "Please." If he failed now to protect Elrond when he had a chance to, how would he ever face Elwing?

But that same stubborn blood that flowed in Thingol, that flowed in Elwing, coursed through Elrond.

"I will not leave you behind. I will not."

Elrond's evening eyes turned hard with the look of determination Thranduil knew so well, the same look that Elwing had. Thranduil gritted his teeth as he grabbed the front of Elrond's tunic just as fear gripped him.

"Damn you! Don't you understand? I will not be the death of you! King Thingol died on my grandfather's watch and Lord Dior on my father's. I will not be the cause of your death!"

Elrond's eyes widened, then it softened as a look of understanding dawned on his face.

"Thranduil, I am not your liege lord as those before me had been to your family. You owe me no obligation or duty."

"Doesn't matter! I will not be the death of you!" Thranduil shook his head vigorously. "I will not have your death on my hands as I have others..."

The grief he had so carefully locked behind his heart flooded him now, and Thranduil's breath was knocked out of him. Thranduil let go of Elrond's hands and grabbed his head as the images of Menegroth flooded his mind. The spray of the red blood that drenched the white marble floor; the blinding smoke that choked the lining of his throat as the fire burned Lady Melian's tapestries; his brother falling, a speck of silver in the blackness of the smoke as the lights went out. And the wailing of the twins that cut through the knelling of the silver and crystal beads above the Hall of Melodies.

"I cannot have another die because of me. Don't you understand? I cannot have you die like others..."

He was drowning again, but warm hands held onto his shoulder.
"What others? What are you talking about?"

"They died; they all died because of me. I cannot let you die. Please." His throat tightened as the heavy weight of what he had done crashed into him, taking away his breath, opening the chest where he had kept his fears contained.

Hands grabbed Thranduil's face. Warm hands. Thranduil found Elrond looking into his eyes. Elrond's eyes were clear as evening sky and warm as a summer breeze.

"Who died?"

The question was asked with such gentleness Thranduil's eyes stung. Thranduil quickly looked away and pulled away from Elrond's hands. Breath came hard and fast. Thranduil gritted his teeth, struggling for control.

Damn you, keep it together!

Thranduil reached into the winter he carried deep within him.

"Thranduil?"

"It's nothing." Thranduil shook his head as the winter he held onto returned to freeze everything in its place. "Do not let your compassion for me hinder you. If it were the other way around, I would have left you without a second thought." Thranduil lifted his head to meet Elrond's eyes, willing the Noldo to see reason.

Elrond gazed into Thranduil's eyes.

"I don't believe you," The Half-Elven said after a while.

"You stupid…" Thranduil did not finish.

Sharku and Burog walked over to the middle of the chamber kicking at the orcs huddled on the ground.

"Get up, you worms!" Burog let out a screech which echoed through the cavern. All at once, there was chaos. The grating sound of Orcs speaking all at once filled the cavern.

"Dammit!" Thranduil cursed under his breath. He grabbed the rope cut from Elrond's wrists. "Wrap them around your wrist and hide your dagger."

"What's going on?" Elrond asked after slipping the dagger into his boots. And just in time, too, as the two Orcs who were sleeping near them jumped up and rushed toward the center of the chamber almost crashing into the young Noldo.

"I thought the sun hurts them?" Elrond asked as he watched the two orcs join others in the center of the chamber.

"It does, and it deters, but sunlight alone does not kill them. If in great need, they will risk it. Either that…Ai, they are coming this way." Thranduil hissed.

Sharku was pointing at them. Burog also turned then grabbed the two who almost crashed onto Elrond, kicked the sniveling creatures, then pushed them where Thranduil sat with Elrond.

Thranduil cursed. If Orcs found Elrond's binding was cut, they would be searched, and the injury and the beatings would have been for nothing.
"Can we fight our way out?" Elrond asked, his eyes on the two Orcs who approached, his hand sliding down his thigh.

"Not with my knee and just that little dagger of yours," Thranduil said and picked up all the remnant of the cut rope that had bound Elrond's wrists. He stashed the shorter pieces into his pocket but kept the longest of them. "Here," Thranduil wrapped the rope around Elrond's wrist best he could. "Hide your wrist from their view."

"Get moving, Maggots!" One of the Orc shouted as he approached Elrond.

When the Orc was few steps away, Elrond turned then lifted Thranduil up in his arms.

"What are you doing?" Thranduil whispered.

"You said to hide my wrists. I am hiding them," Elrond said, then turned to the Orc. "He is injured. I will carry him unless you want to carry him," Elrond offered Thranduil in his arms.

"I'm not carrying any filthy Elves!" the Orc said.

"Alright, then." Elrond shrugged, then moved forward as the two orcs followed behind him as others crowded around the two Orcs forming a box around the two Elves.

"You are learning fast," Thranduil whispered distributing his body on Elrond's arms to cover the Noldo's hands with his cape.

"I have a good teacher," Elrond said. Then he frowned down at Thranduil. "By Belegaer! Why are you so heavy!"

Thranduil wasn't surprised. He had not performed Onen Calad for some years, since the last time he was up north with his father's warriors. On top of that, unlike most other Elves, he was taller and broader.

"You weight like a Man, not an Elf. Did you not join in the Onen Calad this past Midsummer Festival?"

"No."

"At the least, you must have done a private cleansing every year. Otherwise, how could you climb up the tree branches and walk on the snow."

"Not all tree branches are weak, Elrond."

"Shut up! Keep moving!" One of the Orcs pushed Elrond making the Noldo stumble. Thranduil's bad leg hit the armor of the Orc on Elrond's other side who pushed Elrond back. Pain sizzled through Thranduil's leg.

"Damnable Fiends!" Thranduil bit down a curse, fighting the desire to cry out. He knew that any attention could work against them.

"Are you all right? Should I tell them you are hurt? Will they help?" Elrond looked around him.

Thranduil scrunched his face. "You are jesting, aren't you, Peredhel? Be quiet and gather the least amount of attention as possible. Don't even look them in the eyes. Just keep moving."

Once outside the cavern, Thranduil realized why the Orcs have waited. The sun had moved over to the other side of the rocky hill where the cavern lay and provided a cover of shadow.
"Did you see that, Thranduil? They have split their troop into two? The other group is moving north."

Sure enough, about twenty of them including the two orcs that had accompanied Elrond and Thranduil headed further north while another group of a similar number including Burog and Sharku came with the Elves and turned west.

"Do you think the Orcs are trying to mislead our warriors? Maybe they are tracking us?" Elrond said, his face brightening.

"Perhaps. Look away, Elrond."

Thranduil glanced sideways to see Burog shove two large Orcs toward the two Elves.

"Carry the maggots. Clear all their footprints!" Burog shouted.

"Why can't the maggots carry their own?" One of the Orc asked.

"Do as told, scum!" said Sharku. "Master's orders!" With that Sharku went forward to the head of the group and Burog headed toward the rear.

The Orc pushed Elrond roughly making Elrond stumble again. Thranduil tumbled onto the ground and groaned. Elrond stretched out his hands to soften the landing before Thranduil could warn him.

The Orc who pushed Elrond grabbed Elrond's hand.

"Where's your binding?" the Orc growled.

"The other one cut it so I could carry my companion," Elrond said pointing after the other group of orcs who had already moved out.

As Thranduil sat up, Elrond's eyes met his.

Even without words, Thranduil could tell Elrond's head was turning. The Noldo's hand slid toward his boots.

"Help me up," Thranduil grabbed Elrond's hand. There were too many of them and the odds of surviving too slim if they fought now. It was not the right time. But if the Orc proceeded to question Elrond and try to follow it up with a search, Thranduil needed to be on his legs to act.

It was then that Burog shouted from the back. "Move out!"

The Orc grumbled, then taking out another rope, he bound Elrond's hands before picking him up to place him on his shoulder. The other Orc did the same to Thranduil.

All through the afternoon, the Orcs did not rest, stopping only to take a breath before they ran again.

"Do you see that, Thranduil?" Elrond said when the sun was sinking behind a mountain that ran along with the Orcs. "That's the Blue Mountains. They are taking us back to the Blue Mountains."

"Isn't that a good thing? Aren't the North Legion by the mountains?"

"But I think we are further up north, much further up. I think…I think they are taking us to the Dwarven ruins," Elrond said. Thranduil frowned at the slight tremor in Elrond's voice.

"What are you not telling me, Elrond?"
"Dragons. There are dragons in there, Thranduil."

---

**A/N: In LOTR, Legolas is light enough to walk on snow without leaving a footprint. Onen Calad (Light Sharing) is my interpretation of how this is possible, that by emptying their souls, they actually lighten themselves, both physically and mentally, to be able to find joy in life despite all the grief they face through the long years. This is the power Elves have, the power to change themselves.**

In Tolkien's world, there is very few "magic" as it is in other Fantasy writing. Each race has specific powers. First and foremost is the power Eru Illuvatar has, the power to create life. Valar's power is their ability to enhance the creation Eru brought to this world. As for Maiar, their power is to command and serve the creation (this is why Sauron has a power to control the weather—cover the sky with dark clouds, for example). Melian's girdle that protected Doriath is, to me, her power to control the forest to confuse those who enter it. The power of the Elves is the ability to change themselves. Nothing specific is said of this, so I interpreted it as the ability to fill themselves with light, cleanse themselves of all the grief and sorrow giving them the ability to continue to live for thousands of years. Men's power is their ability to choose their own fate, leave the world entirely unlike Elves who cannot until the world ends.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter 52
The Ensnared

Chapter Summary

Gilmagor and Istuion find two cadets missing and one knocked unconscious

Chapter Notes

My original draft of the story had multiple POV's which I have been revising to just the four main ones. This chapter has its older POV (Lord Istuion's). I tried revising this but it would take a lot away, so I decided to keep it the way it is. I hope this is not jarring for some people.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Two Days ago: **River across Green Elven Village. September 25, Second Age 144**

**ISTUION** looked up to see Lord Gilmagor approach the rock where he sat. The Sindarin lord was facing the river. Although the river was not wide, the other side of the forest looked far away, fading within a gray mist.

Istuion bent his head toward the Lord Commander who returned the greeting in kind.

“Surveying the area still, commander? You do not sleep much.”

“Neither do you,” Gilmagor smiled faintly.

Istuion saw understanding in the Noldo’s glance. He supposed that the commander was no different from the other Elves his age. For those who lived through the First Age, peaceful sleep was a luxury especially after the carnage they had seen at the village.

“I just…” Istuion shook his head. He didn’t know what he felt. But something bothered him just at the edge of his mind. Istuion glanced at the direction of the camp.

“Something is there. Like those mists across the river…” Gilmagor said before Istuion could voice it.

“And if you look deep enough, you feel you could see,” Istuion said when Gilmagor hesitated.

Gilmagor smiled then nodded. “Precisely. I see I am not alone.”

“No, commander. I have been feeling it. Something is afoot. The wargs and now this. Green Elves are resourceful. I find it very troubling to see that no one survived except for that child.” Istuion shook his head and rubbed at the heaviness in his chest. He took a deep breath to calm the familiar ache.

Gilmagor placed his hand on Istuion’s shoulder but said nothing as he looked away at the mists across the river.
They stayed silent as a wind swept across the surface of the river. Mists swirled and dispersed revealing the tightly packed fir trees dotted with specks of black.

“Are those crows?” Gilmagor said. Istuion felt the commander tense as he scrutinized the distance over the river.

“Ravens, not crows, commander. Many Green Elves use them as their messenger birds just as Dwarves do. We used to have some of them in Mene… at Beleriand.”

“They look so much like Gorcrows and Crebain.” Gilmagor shuddered. “I do not have any fondness for those black birds.”

“Do not let them hear you say that, commander. They may share the same coloring, but they are quite different from those evil creatures of omen that you mentioned. Black their feathers are, but ravens are beautiful and proud birds. Quite intelligent, too. More so than the Dwarves, I dare say.”

Gilmagor smiled.

“If I am prejudiced about the birds, then so are you against the Dwarves.”

“Aye,” sighed Istuion. “It is an unfortunate effect of the bad experience.”

“So is my experience with the crows, I fear.” Gilmagor smiled, but it did not reach his gray eyes. “We should rouse the cadets. We have about three hours ride ahead of us.”

Istuion looked up. “I thought the legion was camped closer?”

“Actual distance is shorter. I could, perhaps, make it in less than two hours, but the terrain before us is quite treacherous. And the cadets are worn from grief and the prior engagements.” Gilmagor sighed. “The reason we camped here last night instead of pushing on wasn’t all because I didn’t want to push them in their grief. The cadets are not used to riding in the terrain like these. I have been told those hills behind us are riddled with steep valleys which you wouldn’t know are there until you get there. Apparently, the path is narrow and steep. We will have to be careful.”

“I see now why the Green Elves asked your soldiers to camp back there.”

“They didn’t want our troops too close to their village. Had they trusted us, we could have helped them. This could have been prevented.” Gilmagor’s hand clenched.

Istuion’s chest tightened. He covered his mouth with his hand and turned away to look across the river. Trust. That was always the problem. A bad experience broke down trust between kin, friends even lovers. And once broken, that trust which bonded them in the first place was so hard to put back together. If it was not for that first kinslaying, would Sindar have joined Noldor in their fight against the Morgoth? Would that have changed the course of the history? Istuion did not know, but he wanted to believe that things that are broken can be mended. He remembered back to the anger he felt, then the numbness when he learned of the loss of his sister. And it had been easy to blame all Noldor. It had taken him decades to sort out his own feelings. Having Aron with him, knowing that his own behavior will affect his young nephew had helped him to clarify his emotions with care, to see with more clear eyes. But, it had not been easy. When one was burdened with so much anger and grief, it was easier to get lost in it, to generalize and to stereotype. To blame. To forgive was hard, to forget was harder, but to trust, that was the hardest of all.

“I’ll go wake the cadets,” Istuion said and rose, leaving Lord Gilmagor.

The Sindarin lord walked back toward the camp and stopped when he saw the assigned guard post.
empty. The sun was rising. It was bright already, and the mists that covered the half of the river and all of the pines and fir trees across the water was receding leaving stray clouds. Rays of sunlight danced over the water, rippling it into a golden silk dress fluttering in the wind.

“Where’s Elrond?” Istuion murmured remembering that Elrond was posted to the last watch.

The Half-Elven should have been here since before dawn. Maybe Elrond was washing up before the other cadets? Istuion walked down toward the river.

Just at the edge of the river, the youngest cadet, Saldor, was standing with his bow out, aiming for the Ravens across the river.

“Don’t shoot them, Saldor,” Istuion called to the young cadet.

“But they are birds of bad omen, are they not, my lord? They are ill-favored.”

“What ills you about them except that their color is black? Do not label them evil because of their color. Judge them by what they do, for that is the better indication of their quality. How can the color of their feathers indicate their evilness when that is the color Eru gave them? Will you deem night evil because it is black? Then, you ought to deem yourself evil because your hair is black.”

“Forgive me, my lord. I did not think.” Saldor’s face turned red. “I just…I have always been told that crows are bad luck, that they are instruments of evil.”

“They are not crows, but ravens. They were probably used as messengers by the Green Elves.”

Saldor rubbed the back of his neck, the tip of his ears turning red.

Istuion smiled. His heart softened at the contrite expression on the young cadet.

“Do not worry, cadet. We all make mistakes. It is easy to think as you do when all you have known is what you are taught. What is important is not that you made such mistake now, but that you do not make it again. The world is vast, and there are many creatures in it. We must all learn to see first what they are about before passing judgment. But, sometimes old prejudices are hard to let go, even for an old Elf like me. Still, we shouldn’t be eager to kill things without having a good reason to do so.”

“Yes, sir. It was wrong of me. It wouldn’t happen again.”

“Good lad, Saldor. Go back to the camp. We will be leaving soon.”

“Sir!”

Istuion sighed watching Saldor walk away. Before he lectured anyone, he should take the advice himself. In his heart, he still held prejudices against the Dwarves even if he had let go of his anger toward those Noldor who were not responsible for the kinslayings.

Istuion looked about him. Insects chirped among the tall grasses, and the birds twitted at the edge of the woodland. The Sindarin lord took in a chest full of morning breeze listening to the music of the river and the dance of the wind. It eased, somewhat, the heaviness he felt. At the far right, he could hear the swoosh of the river as it fell into a valley below.

It was then that Istuion saw him. He was coming up from the direction of the waterfall. His golden armor glistened as sunlight hit it. The cadet was rubbing the back of his head, his face contorted in a grimace.
“Good morning. Oron, was it?” Istuion greeted the cadet. The young elf blinked with a start.

“Um. Yes. Good morning, Lord Istuion.” The cadet cleared his throat.

“Wanted to clean before others?”

“Ah. Yes. Don’t like crowds. Please excuse me. I am on a meal duty this morning.”

“Of course.” Istuion stepped aside to let the cadet pass. Then, called him again.

“Cadet, is Elrond by the waterfall?”

“Sir?” Oron turned.

“Elrond should have taken the watch after you. I thought maybe he was with you?”

“No. I didn’t see him.”

Before Istuion could ask further, Oron turned and sprinted away. Istuion watched Oron disappear into the grove, the site of the camp. These Noldorin cadets were different from the Sindarin ones. Not very respectful of their elders. Then, Istuion shook his head.

*You are judgmental again, you old fool!* Istuion laughed thinking about the brash self at that age. And, there was Thranduil.

With a sigh, Istuion turned to go when something flashed at the edge of his vision on the right. Istuion turned. A stream of sunlight fluttered about a thicket where several tall elms grew. The floor beneath the trees was thick with bushes with burning red leaves. Something sparkled there, something golden.

“My lord! Lord Istuion!” Someone called him just then. It was Saldor.

“What is it, Saldor?”

“Lord Gilmagor is calling everyone together. I haven’t been able to find Thranduil, Gelir or Elrond. Have you seen them, my lord?”

“No, I have not. I was just asking Oron the same thing.”

“Oron is at the camp. Will you not come?”

Istuion turned to the thicket. Sunlight gleamed over the leaves. *Just a light bouncing over the leaves and nothing more.* Istuion turned, then stopped when something flashed at the edge of his sight again.

Saldor turned to Istuion, frowning. “My lord?”

“Do you see something glitter there, cadet?” Istuion pointed, then started to walk toward the waterfall. Forest of elms and pine trees edged closer to the river, and his path was blocked by thickets of bushes.

“I don’t see anything,” Saldor said, but he followed behind.

The undergrowth of the forest floor was vigorous, but Istuion carefully threaded among the thickets.

“I don’t think any of the cadets would be here, sir,” Saldor mumbled next to him gingerly picking off
thorny branches that clung to his armor and cape.

“You are right. I am just being sure, I suppose.” Being sure of what? He didn’t even know himself. Istuion stopped. It was ridiculous. Why would any cadet walk around here among the thorny thickets? “You are right. Let’s go back.”

It was then that Istuion saw it again, the glitter among the red leaves. This time, it was just in front of him. Istuion reached in among the thickets. It was a brass leaf shaped like a beech tree leaf and used as a top layer of the leather armor to give better protection on vulnerable areas.

“Why is this here?”

Saldor who had come closer for a look shook his head. Then, his eyes widened.

“My lord, look!”

Under a pile of leaf next to the thicket, a slip of blue cape protruded. Istuion rushed over to remove the dead leaves. Saldor’s face paled as Istuion removed the leaves covering the body.

“Gelir!”

Istuion placed his hand over the area just under Gelir’s chin.

Saldor’s eyes filled with dread and moisture.

“Is he…is he…”

The young cadet did not complete his question, but Istuion knew what he was asking.

“No. There is a pulse. But very weak. We must take him. And quickly.”

Istuion picked Gelir up and was surprised at how heavy the cadet was.

Gilmagor’s face was grim as he looked over the young cadet’s body.

Istuion noticed Oron who kept his eyes on the ground. The Sindarin lord wondered whether he should ask Oron the questions that were raging in his head.

Gilmagor looked up.

“Where are Thranduil and Elrond?”

“They did not answer our call. Either they are not within the hearing range of our signal call, or they are unable to answer,” said Erfaron. “Should we use the horn, sir? Its reach is further, but I wasn’t sure if we should in the event it may alert any enemy that is near.”

“That was wise, Erfaron,” said Lord Gilmagor. “Send up black smoke and try our signal call one more time. But I do not want any one of you out of our eyesight.”

“Sir!” Erfaron moved away taking the other two cadets with him. Stationing themselves just inside the clearing where the camp is set up, each of the cadets sent out a call, a twittering of a bird to any others who may be listening.

“You should question Oron, commander,” Istuion said in a whisper.
When Gilmagor turned to him, Istuion continued. “Elrond was supposed to be the last one on the watch. But he wasn’t at the post when I went there. Oron was coming up from the waterfall, near where I found Gelir.”

“Why would Oron…”

“I am not accusing him of anything, commander. I just think you ought to question him. I feel he may be hiding something. How is Gelir?”

“This is strange. I don’t see any visible wounds, yet I cannot wake him. It is as if he is bound.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Neither do I. Whatever it is, I think we need to take him to a healer and quickly. It is not just his pulse. His fea…it seems like it is fading.”

“But, Thranduil and Elrond…”

“If we are to save Gelir, I don’t think we have time to wait. I will take Gelir to the legion. Please follow as soon as you find Elrond and Thranduil.”

“But, what if we do not find them?”

Gilmagor frowned. “I cannot believe they have gone far.”

“But whoever did this could have taken them, or worse.”

“I cannot believe that if such thing happened, we would not have known.”

“We did not know about Gelir.”

Gilmagor’s face darkened as he sat up.

“I should not have brought the cadets here.” Gilmagor’s lips thinned as he looked about him. “Send up the smoke, Lord Istuion. The moment the legion sees it, they will send troops here. Mayhap I can meet them halfway. If not and I push the horse, I may be able to get there in an hour and a half. Still, that is over three hours for me to return. If you find them, follow quickly; if not, expect me within that time. Something foul is going on, and I plan to get to the bottom of it. Will you prepare him for me?”

Gilmagor got up and motioned for Oron. The cadet chewed on his lower lip as he approached.

“You were posted as the guard just before Elrond, I believe,” Gilmagor said.

“Yes, sir.”

“Can you tell me anything as to Thranduil or Elrond. Maybe both?”

Oron swallowed.

“Oron, if there is anything you know, now is the time to tell me.”

The cadet tugged at his tunic just below his armor.

“I…I didn’t want to bring trouble to him.”
“Who?” Gilmagor frowned down at the cadet.

“Thranduil. He came by when Gelir and I were talking.”

“Are you saying Thranduil approached both of you to join in the conversation?” Istuion asked. He hoped he did not display too much disbelief on his face.

“Well, not exactly to join. He asked questions.”

“About?”

Oron looked pained. “A kinslayer.”

Istuion took in a breath. “What kinslayer?”

“There is the talk of a kinslayer living near the Village” Oron pointed across the river. “Gelir and I were talking when Thranduil asked where about that was.”

“And you told him?” Istuion clutched at his heart which tightened painfully as fear settled in his stomach.

“At the time we didn’t really think much of it. We were just curious, and I thought he was just like us. I didn’t think…” Oron hung his head.

“What happened then?” Gilmagor asked.

“Thranduil walked away toward the waterfall, and Gelir said maybe he was going after the kinslayer. I asked Gelir to mind my post and went after the Sinda. I wanted to talk to Thranduil and find out what he was trying to do, but when I got to the area with the boulders, Thranduil was standing in the middle of the river, on one of the rocks there.” Oron stopped.

“And?” Gilmagor prompted.

“That’s it. I don’t know exactly what happened, but I saw him standing there, then, I don’t remember. I found myself lying by the river with a terrible headache. I was walking up from there when I saw Lord Istuion.”

Gilmagor glanced at Istuion.

“Why didn’t you tell me this when I asked you about Elrond this morning?” Istuion asked.

“I wasn’t sure exactly what happened, and I wasn’t sure if Thranduil did go to look for the kinslayer. I wanted to give him time to return on his own accord if he wasn’t back yet. I didn’t want to accuse him of anything.”

“And Gelir?”

“I do not know anything about what happened to Gelir. As I said, I woke up not that long ago.”

“And Elrond?”

“I know nothing of Elrond.”

Gilmagor and Istuion exchanged glances.
MAIRON could not contain his anger. The weak fool ran. Thranduil could have finished the Noldo and his whole brood, the wife, and the child, but instead, the Sinda just ran away half dazed. Mairon spread his dark wings and soared through the air. The Sinda was useless after all.

Take him. Bring him along with the dark haired one. Mairon ordered the orcs standing ready below.

If the Sinda would not kill, then he will feed him to her, maybe let that Luthien's whelp watch as the Sinda was eaten alive. Yes, that would be something. Mairon smiled as the sky above darkened and the wind picked up. Maybe offering this Elven treat will loosen her up. She had been less than cooperative when she learned that Mairon held power over her three children. She had refused to pledge herself to Mairon's authority, refusing to recognize him as Melkor's successor. She could resist all she wanted. Mairon knew that as long as he had power over her children, she was his to command.

Mairon swooped down lower to get closer to his next target. The little Silvan boy had awakened, and the child was at the edge of the campsite, under a canopy of a tree to escape the rain that had come suddenly. He was watching the other cadets breaking the camp as the clouds rolled away. Mairon had sent the dark clouds after the Orcs to aid them in taking Elrond far from here as possible. Mairon could not help the smile that tugged although he couldn't really smile in this form.

He had not expected them to find Gelir's body so soon. But no matter. He had known what they would do once the body was found. He had made another plan in such event.

Mairon flew and sat on the branch just above the boy. Imitating the sound of the child's mother, Mairon whispered. He had gleaned the sound and the look of Galion's mother from the elfling's nightmares. The child was young, and his mind was easy to read.

"Nana?" Galion looked up, his eyes wide.

Come away, Galion. These are bad people. Run away! Hide!

The child got up, his hands on his mouth. He looked about him. Probably looking for the two faces he felt most comfortable with. Mairon smiled again. Those two were lost.

It was then that Istuion looked up while saying something to a cadet.

"Galion?"

The Sindarin lord's gaze came up to meet Mairon's. The Sindar's hand moved, but Mairon did not stay. Even without looking, Mairon already knew that Istuion's hands reached to grab his bow. The fallen Maia raised up the wind and just in time. As he folded his wings, an arrow sped past him. Mairon dived and caught the sight of the little Elven boy running into the wood. Istuion ran after him calling the child's name.

Run, little elfling. Run! Follow the shade to your doom! Mairon laughed. Let's see, old Sinda, if you can run. Catch that child, the child of the forest. Is your will or mine stronger, for mine will lead you astray!

Mairon cawed as he flew back up and spread his wings. He relished the freedom of choosing his own body, having all of his power within his grasp. But, he wasn't done with the Elven body yet. He had left the body only temporarily to access his power. It was possible only because the elf's soul
was fading and weak. It no longer required Mairon's presence to suppress it. But, the body was getting weak as well. There was not much time left, and Mairon planned to use that time as efficiently as possible. Maybe it was good that the body was found.

Feeling the wind beneath him, Mairon soared through the air until beneath him he saw the rider he was looking for. Lord Gilmagor's black hair streamed behind him as his gray mare galloped over the steep mountain path. The Noldorin lord clutched the body, his one arm cradling it tightly to his chest. Below the Noldo lay a deep valley where it separated the forested land above with the vast moor of the lower river. Just where the narrow path ended, cradled below the cliffside, several tents were pitched. A group of riders was coming up the narrow path toward the forest.

Mairon looked down at Lord Gilmagor. Despite the steep cliffs and the narrow path, the Noldo showed no sign of slowing his horse. Mairon could see that the warriors will meet Gilmagor in less than an hour's time if they were both allowed to move at their current pace. It was more than enough time. Feeling his power crackle around him, Mairon called all the Gorcrows and Crebain near him.

Like black clouds they came. The Noldorin warrior pulled his horse to a stop when the black-winged crows came buzzing like a swarm of bees. His white swords gleamed like starlight as they slashed, flashing like lightning. Mairon saw that the riders were turning a corner. They will soon be able to see Gilmagor and his horse.

Mairon flew directly at the horse, his claws outstretched with all the malice he had about him. The mare brayed and reared spooked beyond her endurance. The path was narrow and steep. The horse's braying echoed through the cliffside as the mare fell with Gilmagor atop her. The Noldo threw the body he held against him onto the ground. Probably the last act the commander thought he could do to save the young cadet.

"Well, thank you, Lord Commander," Mairon said as he took over the body. The body felt weak, but that was a good thing. He will sound more convincing. Mairon smiled as he looked down the cliff. There was no sign of the horse or Lord Gilmagor. The bottom of the cliff could not be seen covered by the canopy of the trees that grew there.

One child put to flee; two lords gone maybe; three cadets left to torture and grieve. Yipee!

Mairon rubbed his hands with glee then lay down on the ground as he heard the sound of horses. Soon enough, a group of Elven riders appeared from the bend in the path.

-------

Tolkien distinguished between the Ravens and its smaller cousins, crows. Ravens in Tolkien are friendly with the Dwarves of Erebor and spoke Westron. Crows, on the other hand, are called "birds of ill omen". There are Gorecrows and crebain (singular is creban) which were used as spies by evil powers such as Saruman in the Third Age.
Chapter 53 next weekend.
The Escape

Chapter Summary

Elrond and Thranduil try again to escape the clutches of the Orcs.

Near the Blue Mountains. September 29, Second Age 144

ELROND scratched his head as Thranduil threw him a knife glare. The Sinda clamped his mouth, then wiped away the remnant of the dark liquid from the corner of his lips. Thranduil probably hated him now for telling the Orcs about his injury, but the Sinda’s face had been whiter than the pale petals of the white flowers that dotted the grasses outside the White City.

He was only trying to help, but Elrond had not expected the Orcs to force feed Thranduil with that foul-smelling liquid. But whatever it was, even if it was Orc-made, it had brought some color back to Thranduil’s face.

Thranduil turned away from him and lay back against a damp wall, his eyes closed. An Orc had ripped the leg of Thranduil’s trousers to apply blood red ointment. That, too, had a smell of rotting flesh. Elrond’s skin crawled thinking about what they used to create such potions and salves. He wondered if Orcs had healers. Someone had to have made these ointments and potions.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t know they were going to do that. I didn’t know Orcs had medicine. I was hoping for a cup of water to give you. I did not expect them to manhandle you like that.”

Thranduil opened his eyes a crack. Elrond shivered at the look of murder in them.

“But, at the least, whatever they have given you seem to have worked. You look better.” Elron tried to smile but failed.

“I rather die than drink that foul stuff,” Thranduil hissed. “That is what they give their prisoners to perk them up so they can continue to torture them.”

Well, I didn’t know.

Elrond chewed his lip and looked down at his bindings. This time the Orcs had tied both his hands and feet, but they had not bothered to bind Thranduil’s feet. Maybe even they could see that the leg was in bad condition. It was swollen, its skin dark and puffy. Elrond hoped it wasn’t broken. Elves healed fast, but if a broken bone was allowed to heal without being set first, Thranduil could have a permanent limp. It was apparent Orcs did not care about that. More than few of the Orcs limped when they walked.

Elrond looked around the stone chamber. They had arrived here just before sunrise. When he first saw it, Elrond thought it was a crumbling hill of rocks until they were closer. Two massive stone columns were cut out of the rocky surface. Underneath was what remained of the stone gate. Even if it did not have the decoration of linear patterns adorning the columns, Elrond would have known that this was a part of the Dwarven ruins. Men did not know how to build these monumental stone buildings, and Noldor built stone structures over hills not under them. He supposed Sindar did, but they had not built anything significant this side of Blue Mountains.
The stone gate had crumbled leaving a crack large enough for Orc horde to pass through. Inside was a ruin of what must have been a grand entryway to the Dwarven Halls. There was a staircase at the center that led down, but it had crumbled, just a mess of rocks and earth which prevented any entry. The hall, however, had remained intact except for one corner where the several two-story tall columns had toppled.

The Orcs who had been running without rest for day and night for the past three days piled into the cave of the hall. After setting up guards at the door, they had promptly fallen asleep. Treated like a sack of grain, Elrond was tired from being tossed around on the backs of the Orcs. And they had not been given any food, not that he wanted anything from the Orcs.

Elrond glanced at the Orcs strewn about the hallway. Entire hallway was filled with the rumbling of the Orc’s breathing which sounded as bad as their screeches.

“Did you notice which direction the two guards went?” Thranduil who had remained silent asked.

“Yes. By those fallen columns,” Elrond said and looked across the room which lay farthest from where the Orcs had thrown him and Thranduil. The Sinda had told him to mind any pair of guards who were sent to the back. And Elrond had kept a careful eye on the movement of the guards. Apparently, Orcs always liked to have back door whenever they could.

“New guards replaced the two who came back about an hour or so ago, I think. It is hard to tell time here.” There was no stray sunlight to guide them inside this hallway.

“Good. I am glad you are noticing things more. Go, now Elrond. It is a good time to go. They are exhausted. Even the guards at the front are nodding, ” Thranduil said, his voice rough and scratchy.

“We can’t go now. You are in no condition to travel.”

“I didn’t mean me. You. You have to go.”

“I told you, I am not leaving without you.”

“Are you half-witted?” Thranduil's eyes flashed dangerously. But, Elrond met those eyes. If the Sinda wanted to do this again, he will. He can be patient.

“We are close to the base of the Blue Mountains. This will be the last chance you have, Peredhel. Do you not understand that I would make a lot of noise even if I managed to drag my leg around these fiends?”

Elrond shrugged. “I could carry you. It’s what? Three column length to that corner?”

“Each column is about two stories long, fool! Never mind that you would have to weave through the sleeping Orcs. One mistake and you have a whole horde to content with.”

Elrond met Thranduil’s glare with a shrug. After glaring at him for a moment longer, Thranduil scoffed out aloud. "And, they tell me I’m stubborn!" He shook his head, then he rolled his eyes with a resigned sigh.

"Cut your bindings, and help me up, stupid. I don't know why we even bother now. With me, we will be a pair of dead elves without going too far from here."

After making the quick work of the bindings, Elrond lifted Thranduil up. The Sinda was heavy, and his legs which had not been used for the past three days felt weak and unsteady.
Despite that, Elrond pulled Thranduil up. The Sinda’ body tensed rigidly, his face pale. But Thranduil did not utter a word as Elrond pulled the Sinda up onto his back. At first, it didn’t seem so bad. Elrond gingerly passed over the sleeping forms of Orcs, stepping around them as he weaved through the bodies strewn across the hallway. Even when he passed near the half-buried stairway, Elrond felt he could manage it. To avoid the clusters of Orcs lying on the floor, Elrond had to take a long way around near the entrance then back up toward the stairs. He was close to the fallen columns. The stone columns were massive up close, broken into round chunks. If he could just reach the side of the fallen columns. But with each step, Thranduil seemed to get heavier and his legs shakier.

“Valar help me, you are so heavy!” Elrond hissed as he stepped around an Orc sleeping by the fallen columns.

“You are welcome to leave me anytime. I wouldn’t hold it against you,” the Sinda said as if that was even an option.

Elrond gritted his teeth. He wasn’t going to give up that easily. Just a few more steps. Feeling Thranduil’s weight pulling him down, Elrond sidestepped an orc as the creature turned over. Elrond jumped back then felt his foot sink.

Elrond’s heart lurched as he turned. There was another Orc there. The creature turned over then opened his eyes. At the same time, Thranduil pushed off Elrond’s back, landing on the Orc. The Sinda smashed his good knee into the Orc’s mouth, then wrapped his arm around the creature’s neck, the other hand clamped over its mouth.

Elrond jumped onto the Orc’s legs to prevent the creature kicking then whipped out his dagger and bent over to strike the Orc; then, Elrond stopped. The creature’s eyes were wide. There was hate there but also fear. The dark eyes pleaded. It wanted to live. Elrond could feel the darkness that was the Orc, and a fierce desire for life. His hand that held the dagger shook, and Elrond pulled back. He got off the Orc.

Thranduil shot him eyes burning with reproach, but Elrond could not do it. It was then that the Orc kicked the dagger out of Elrond’s hand. Elrond jumped back. The Noldo stopped breathing as he lunged to grab the dagger just before it landed on another Orc. Letting out his breath, Elrond straightened; he heard a sickening crack. When he turned back to Thranduil, the Orc lay slumped against the Sinda whose face was red with strain. Elrond held his breath as both he and Thranduil looked around them.

The rumble of snoring continued all around them.

When Elrond moved over to pick up Thranduil, Elrond could tell the Sinda was furious. Thranduil pushed away Elrond’s hands. So, instead of carrying him, Elrond put his arm around Thranduil’s body to shoulder the weight of the Sinda’s bad leg. It was better anyway. Elrond wasn’t sure how long he could carry Thranduil.

With their shoulders linked, they moved over to the fallen columns. Behind the columns, the stone wall had crumbled and left a crack large enough for the largest of the Orcs to get through.

Once they stepped out of the wall, it was a natural tunnel. Air pocket in earth, maybe. It was dark and damp. The familiar stench of the Orcs, that of rotting flesh, mingled with the musty smell of wet earth hung in the air.

“They must use this tunnel much if it smells like them,” Elrond whispered to relieve tension. Elrond could still feel the heat of Thranduil’s anger even though it was softening.
Thranduil remained silent while they walked into the darkness. Elrond reached into himself to bring out the light within him. He lifted his free hand to release a small ball of light to chase away the darkness of the tunnel. Unlike the elders, it still required effort on his part. As they aged, the light emerged without effort, Elrond was told. For some, like those who had seen the light of Valinor, the light shone the brightest.

Elrond had always thought his foster fathers and their people the brightest people in all the world. He had not remembered the Noldor from Gondolin with whom he had lived before the event of Sirion. It was not until he met the other Noldor when he came to Gil-galad’s court that Elrond realized that the lights in his foster fathers had been the dimmest. It had also made Elrond realize how much guilt and remorse his adoptive fathers must have carried. As his thoughts strayed to Maedhros and Maglor, Elrond’s heart clenched.

“Never hesitate, Elrond,” Thranduil said breaking into Elrond’s thoughts. “Not when you deal with the creatures of the Dark Lord. These creatures do not have a will of their own. Save your pity for those who have their own minds, those who can feel pity. These creatures, they have naught but hate. They do not know mercy.”

“Why do they hate so much? What have we done to them?”

“Their hate has nothing to do with us. It is of their own making, the evil that was bred into them by Morgoth.”

“Orcs are not the only ones who know hate. There are many among us who hate as well.”

Thranduil stiffened. “You mean, don’t you?”

“No. I didn’t mean you specifically,” Elrond said feeling the heat on his face. “But I do believe what you just said, that it was Morgoth who sowed the seed of hate. But unlike the Orcs, we have a choice. We are not bound by it. We could choose to let it go.”

“Was it that easy for you?” Thranduil snorted. “Was it why you forgave them so easily?”

Even without Thranduil naming them, Elrond knew whom the Sinda meant.

“I forgave them because they tried to do right by my brother and me. They loved us, cared for us and gave us a home. We were children. We were alone. What should we have done? What would harboring hate do for us? What had it done for you?”

Thranduil took in a sharp breath but remained silent. The tunnel sloped downward, and they walked in silence. The tunnel ahead of them was pitch dark as if the light had never touched it. Elrond worried that he said too much. He didn’t want to make Thranduil defensive. If they died here, though, none of it would matter.

As the tunnel stretched on, a different fear settled in the pit of Elrond’s stomach.

“What if there is no back door? Maybe those two were just…I don’t know…wandering around, exploring?”

“Orcs don’t explore or wander about for no reason!” Thranduil snapped between his clenched teeth. “They always make sure to have a backdoor.”

The dark, narrow path they were trudging began to lighten as they turned a bend. Far ahead a light poured in. Strengthened by the light, Elrond picked up his pace. Thranduil’s body stiffened further, and his face was bloodless, but the Sinda kept up.
They stepped into a cavernous area flooded with sunlight. The floor was wet with water which dripped from the edge of the open stone ceiling several stories high. The dim ball of light Elrond had released disappeared into the bright sunlight.

“Ai, Valar,” Thranduil’s soft moan made Elrond look up at the sky following the Sinda’s eyes. The sun was high up in the sky, already starting to descend. With the sun setting earlier now, and Orcs active once sun weakened, they had only about four hours.

“We don’t have much time,” Thranduil hissed.

The two picked up their pace, cut across the sun-filled cavern into shadows, then Elrond stopped. Thranduil who had been looking down with an intense look of concentration looked up.

“There’s those two guards,” Elrond said then turned suddenly without thinking. Thranduil hissed loudly and gritted his teeth.

Elrond took out his dagger and glanced at the guards. But, the two guards did not move. Elrond was glad that Orcs did not hear as well as they did. Setting Thranduil down behind a jutting rock, Elrond crouched down next to him.

The two orcs stood few steps from a large hole in a stone wall. A massive granite boulder that formed a wall had a long crack, and at the bottom, there was an opening through which sunlight shone. The guards stood just inside the hole beyond the touch of the sun, under the shadow.

“How are we going to go pass them?” Elrond whispered.

“We have to kill them. Quietly,” Thranduil whispered back.

Elrond grimaced. It was one thing to kill them while in the heat of a battle. No matter how foul, Elrond did not relish sneaking behind an enemy. Thranduil looked at Elrond, then rolled his eyes.

“What did I tell you about not hesitating, Elrond? These creatures do not have mercy or any form of tenderness in them. They are bred to destroy. If you allow one of these orcs to live, then that would be one more creature that will kill, maim and plunder innocent people. They have no remorse, no compassion and definitely no mercy for others.”

“It's not that. It is just...to kill without giving them a chance to fight back. It seems unfair...”

Thranduil sighed. "This isn't about fairness. It is about survival. Do you think those orcs care about being fair to us?"

Elrond nodded. He understood, of course, but he still did not like it.

"I suppose so. But how do we go about killing them silently? We'll have to either kill them at the same time, or the surviving one will call for others," Elrond pointed to a calling horn hanging from the waist of each guard.

"We could lure one over and kill them one by one. That would be easier as I wouldn't be able to help you. I wouldn't be fast enough. Once one of them comes near here, you'll have to slit its throat. It is the easiest and most silent."

Elrond grimaced with distaste but looked up at the two Orcs who had their backs to them.

"Don't think. Just do it. Remember, these creatures have no remorse, no compassion, no humanity. Don't show any mercy."
Elrond took in a deep breath and weighted the weapon few times in his hand. He picked up a pebble half the size of his fist. With the precision of a trained warrior, Elrond threw it at one of the orcs and hid behind the rock next to Thranduil.

“What the …” The Orc that got hit cursed aloud. The Orc next to him cawed.

"The cave is falling on you, Axod!"

"Shut up, Broc!" Axod punched Broc. Soon they were brawling.

Thranduil rolled his eyes.

"I forgot to account for the stupidity of the orcs," Thranduil said dryly. He turned to Elrond. "Do you think you can sneak up to them and slay them before they realize what is happening?"

"I'll try," Elrond said. Crouching low to the ground, Elrond approached the two Orcs.

The first orc didn't know what hit him. But the second surprised Elrond with its speed as it jumped back. Taking out its iron sword, the Orc came at Elrond. But even with only a hand dagger, Elrond deftly sidestepped the Orc’s labored thrusts and lay several slashes. But the Orc’s armor was sturdy, and the dagger too short. Elrond could not get close enough to kill. The Orc realizing he didn’t have a chance, placed his back to the stone wall and swung out his sword rapidly keeping Elrond at arm’s distance. With another hand, the Orc reached for his horn and brought it to his lips.

Desperation knotted Elrond’s stomach when something whistled through the air and Elrond jumped out of its way. It hit the orc squarely on its face. The Orc staggered but a second. But the second was all that Elrond needed. With the precision of an Elven warrior, Elrond’s dagger sliced through the Orc’s neck. Blood, black as tar, gushed out of its neck. Broc made a strange gurgling sound as he fell.

Elrond grimaced then turned to see Thranduil lean against a boulder.

"Good shot."

"My leg is damaged, not my arm," shrugged the blond Sinda.

They quickly stripped the two Orcs of a bow and a quiver full of arrows, a dagger from Axod and a broadsword from Broc. When Elrond and Thranduil stepped out of the crevice, the afternoon sun shone brightly.

In front of them stood the Blue Mountains glowing in the afternoon sun. A wide meadow of grasses surrounded the jagged cluster of stones where the two elves emerged.

To the west lay a cluster of pines and rocks dotted here and there to the base of the stone mountains. To the south, the grassy meadow stretched far and wide before reaching the forest of elm, birch and pine trees.

Thranduil looked around then his face fell.

"Elrond," Thranduil shook his head. Desperation leaped off Thranduil and surrounded Elrond’s senses.

"We can make it!" Elrond said firmly, and he put one arm under Thranduil’s left shoulder. Thranduil pushed away Elrond’s hand and sat down.
"Elrond, to the south lay North Legion across the river. If you reach that forest, you will be safe. Trees are dense there, enough for you to travel through the trees. Unlike the forest near the cliff, the trees close to the mountains are older and sturdier. If you run, you will make it. But not with me. Not with my bad leg. Do you understand? As soon as the sunlight dims, Orcs will be after us. The mountain is too near. I am sure there is more horde in the mountains."

"Then, we better hurry. We have to cover much as we can," Elrond said and reached out to Thranduil.

Thranduil pushed away the hand and turned away.

"I can’t." Thranduil gritted his teeth. "The movements. They are too much."

Elrond sank down to inspect Thranduil’s leg. The black ointment the Orcs had put on the knee was all but gone. The swelling which had seemed calmed had worsened. The constant movement was probably making it worse. Looking about him, Elrond picked up two sturdy sticks, then he tore his tunic into strips and bound the knee tightly so it cannot be moved.

"When we get to the forest, we could find some herbs to lower the swelling and help with the pain," Elrond said. "I will carry you."

"If you carry me, we will not make it to the forest before the sun goes down. Do you not see that the meadow is close to two leagues before reaching the forest. Not only will my weight slow you, but it will also force you to leave prints for the Orcs to follow. They may not be great at tracking, but their night vision is great. Go, Elrond. I will not go. I will not put both our lives in peril."

Elrond could feel the resolution in the Sinda. A chill wind swept across the grasses leaving a low moan in the air. Its vast green waves shivered and Elrond shivered with them. The forest seemed so far away from here. Part of him wanted to run. Alone, the distance, wide as it seemed, he could easily cover before the sun sank. But, Elrond thought back to that time in the cave, waiting for the familiar faces that never came, of his brother waiting for their mother. He had sworn to himself that he will never abandon anyone, not while there was strength in his body.

"If you will not move, then neither will I." Elrond sat down next to Thranduil. "If you die here, then I will die with you. No matter what you say, I will not leave you behind."

Thranduil groaned and covered his head with his hands.

Elrond sighed and looked away toward the mountains. Then, he shot up.

"Thranduil, let’s go there." Elrond pointed toward the cluster of pines and rocks maybe half a league away from where they are. It was another league or so to the base of the mountain.

Elrond had visited the Dwarven Hall few times with Maglor when he was with his foster parents. While the relationship between the Elves and Dwarves had suffered after the incident at Doriath, Feanorians had always maintained a good trading relationship with the Dwarves. They needed the ores and the raw materials, and the Dwarves welcomed the gems Feanorians could pay them with.

"You want to go toward the mountain? The Orcs want to take us there. Why would you aid them?"

"Dwarves always have a secret door. This Hallway is obviously meant as their front door. There is another on the other side of the mountain, and if my memory serves me right, there is one midway up the mountain. I am quite sure that is the one they meant to take us."

"You have been to the Dwarven Halls? But, how could you be so sure? The one you want to find
may be the one the Orcs planned to use.”

“If they did, why would they rest here? If there were entrance just below the mountain, they would have pressed on while the sun was still low in the east.”

“Even if you could find their secret door, how will you get in? And even if we managed, what would that do? You said there may also be dragons.”

“Orcs and dragons, but there may also be the warriors of Silmacil.”

“Silmacil?”

“The king told me Lord Celebrimbor convinced the Dwarves to allow them into the ruins. Silmacil is with them. They don’t plan to flush out the dragons until winter comes, but they are going to explore the ruins to determine the location of the Orcs and the Dragons. Maybe we could find our way to the Silmacil.”

“Or we could get roasted by the Dragons. Better to deliver ourselves to the Orc’s master. At least we will still be pretty.” Thranduil scoffed.

“Would you rather we sit here and wait for the Orcs to come drag us there?”

Thranduil frowned and looked at the mountains.

“Out of the cooking pan and into the fire? At least they wouldn’t expect that,” the Sinda murmured.

“Come, Thranduil. It is a short enough distance for me to carry you and come back to erase my footsteps. Maybe leave a track or two that leads south. It will work! I know it will.”

“Ever an optimist, aren’t you?” Thranduil rolled his eyes, but with a sigh, the Sinda got up. “You throw away the certainty of safety for the certainty of death. I am with a fool, might as be one.” Thranduil held out his hand. “Let’s go then, fool.”

-------

League=3 miles
The Dwarves

Chapter Summary

Thranduil and Elrond meet Dwarves. Will they help?

Chapter Notes

Sorry, this one is a tad late--Easter, family, work...too many things. But here it is. Hope it is worth the wait. :)

Near the Blue Mountains. September 29, Second Age 144

THRANDUIL lay amid the grass, near a pool of water, one hand pressing down on his thigh hoping to slow the pain chomping its razor teeth up and down his leg. His jaw ached from the constant clenching, and he swiped at his jawline with his other hand. Few strides away, a gurgle of water whispered as it swished down a shallow creek to his left.

Elrond should be back soon. The Noldo had dropped Thranduil among the small patch of tall grasses growing where the water had pooled after the stream slid over a wall of large boulders. Elrond said he will clear away their tracks and return. Thranduil had lain here feeling useless and helpless.

The sky which had been bright blue was blushing, pale red creeping into the deepening blue. Too soon, the sky will turn red, and the Orcs will awake. Thranduil scanned the sky which was clear without a hint of clouds.

Valar are cruel.

The sky had been brilliant, too, on that day the blue waters of Sirion turned red. The pain in his leg flared, and Thranduil grimaced. So much pain and struggle. Will there ever be peace? Will he ever find peace?

Thranduil wondered where his father was. Had his father found his way to the vast forest? Had he found peace? His father had taken the warriors of former Doriath to wander the wild for over a century. According to Lord Istuion, his father had done that to relieve the anger and to escape the desire for revenge, to find peace.

Have you found peace, father?

Thranduil placed his hand over his heart. This anger and hatred he has, would he be able to let them go? He was sure that until he could, he would never find peace. Elrond’s words kept circling his mind: We have a choice. We are not bound by it. We could choose to let it go.

Thranduil wasn’t sure how true that was. Could it go away, this hate? This anger? If he chose to let go…But he didn’t know how. But one thing was clear. If he held onto this hate and acted on it, then he was no different from the Orcs.
Along with Elrond’s words, the face of that little girl, that Noldo’s child, flashed before Thranduil. How he must have looked to that girl’s eyes. Thranduil shivered. Had he killed Astarno, how would he be different from the creatures of Morgoth who killed out of pure hate? Only Orcs did that, Orcs and the creatures of the Dark Lord. Thranduil did not want to become a monster. That would make all the work and sacrifice his mother had made on his behalf into nothing; make all the sacrifices others made for his sake into nothing.

Thranduil squeezed his eyes shut, then opened them wide when he heard a movement to his left. A heavy footfall.

They were heavily armed. Thranduil could hear the heavy plate armor clanking as the feet moved. Surefooted, not the limping, heavy gait of the lowly Orcs. Perhaps warrior Orcs? But not many. Just three. Orc scouts, maybe?

Thranduil grabbed the bow he and Elrond had taken from the Orcs. Heavy armor could make the arrows useless unless he aimed the vulnerable areas like eyes and neck, the spots that will kill instantly if his aim was true.

The movement on his left came closer. Thranduil stopped breathing as the iron clad feet walked with definite stomp just a few strides away from where the Sinda lay unmoving, the bow ready in his hands. The heavy footfalls stopped.

Then, there was another sound, light feet running across the grass. This one from Thranduil’s right. It couldn’t be any other than Elrond.

Thranduil tensed, then being quiet as possible, he raised his upper body to take a look between the grasses.

Just across the creek, three Dwarves stood. Two were young with hair of hay with double braids in their beards. Each of them was carrying a large sack. Leading them was the tallest of them with a beard white as the clouds in summer. His white beard was long and lustrous with gold beads in the braids and was tucked inside his golden belt.

“Hail, Master Dwarves!” Elrond spoke before Thranduil had a chance to warn him.

An expletive came from the white-haired Dwarf before he growled, as that was how it sounded to Thranduil, in Sindarin. “What is your business here, Elf!” The Dwarf took out double-edged ax the blade of which was wide enough to cover one-third of the Dwarf’s height.

The two younger Dwarves let go of their sacks and reached for their weapons, one his hammer and the other his bow. By the way they changed their stances, Thranduil could tell they were experienced warriors, the white-haired one more so than others.

“We don’t want yer kind here,” grumbled the one holding a hammer in hesitant Sindarin.

“Believe me, Master Dwarf, I do not want to be here,” said Elrond. “We were captured by the Orcs and just escaped.” Elrond held up his empty hands.

“Orcs, ye say?” The white beard asked.

“Yes. There is a horde there in that rocky hill,” Elrond pointed to the hill situated behind him. The Dwarves’ faces turned dark.

“I don’t care where ye are from. We are going to cut ye down to our size,” the white-haired one said to Elrond.
Thranduil pushed away the grass and aimed his bow at the white hair.

“Try that, Dwarf, and I will skewer you like meat on a stick.”

The Dwarves turned. Elrond’s face paled as he moved to step in front of the white beard, his hands out in front of him.

“My friend is delirious. He is injured. The Orcs have tortured him.” Elrond said to the Dwarves.

“Threatening three armed Dwarves, laddie?” The white beard hefted his ax in his hands then looked down at Thranduil with narrowed eyes. “And in our land?” The Dwarf pointed to the wall of boulders to Thranduil's left. “In front of our door?”

Elrond moved back toward Thranduil and whispered in fluent Quenya.

“[Q]Stop it, fool. Put down your bow, or you’ll get us killed. These are no Orcs that we are dealing with.”

“[Q]We can take them. You have a sword and I a bow.” Thranduil replied back in kind, his eyes never leaving the white beard.

“[Q]Trust me, Sinda. We are weak now, and you are injured. We are in no condition to fight three well-armed Dwarves. Put the bow down! Maybe we could beseech them to help us.”

 “[Q]I will not beg them for help. I don’t want their help.”

But Thranduil lowered his bow. After the Dwarves attacked Menegroth, months after the death of King Thingol, his people had not had any contact with the Dwarves. Whatever friendship that had existed between the Elves and Dwarves died the day they killed their king and sacked Menegroth. Still, had he not just decided that he wouldn’t act out of hate? He will listen. There will be time enough to kill them if necessary.

“Ye listen to yer elder, laddie. And, that’s Orc bow. Not very good against our armor.” The white beard banged his steel breastplate. “No arrow can get through this Dwarven armor.”

“Elder? Him?” Thranduil pointed to Elrond. “He is not my elder,” Thranduil said. “I am older than he.”

The white beard shrugged. “Ye Elves all look alike. Hairless as a newborn babe and as skinny as a bony human lass. But I must say, I haven’t seen ones as dirty as ye.”

“What part of the ‘captured by the Orcs’ did you not get, old Dwarf!” harrumphed Thranduil. “Dirtier maybe, but still better to look at than you and your younglings!”

“I doubt me wife will agree, Elf!” the white beard countered.

“Featherless ravens look better than ye. Who wants to be beardless?” the one with the hammer said.

“Thranduil, stop talking!” Elrond glared at Thranduil then turned to the white beard. “Master Dwarf, there are Orcs on our trail. Soon, the Orcs will cover this strip of woodland to look for us. We fought once side by side against the Dark Lord. Will you not help us in our need?”

As soon as Elrond finished speaking, as if on cue, a horn blasted from the rocky hill.

“That’s the Orc horn. You hear that?” Elrond looked around the Dwarves as they, too, looked toward the hill.
Then, from the side of the mountain in front of them, as if in answer, another Orc horn rang out. The deep sound blared and shook the air all around.

Thranduil looked up at the mountain. Halfway up the mountain, a wide gap appeared, and Orcs poured out, running directly to the small patch of woodland where he was with the Dwarves and Elrond.

“They are coming. At least two scores of them or more,” Thranduil said and looked about him. The clump of tall grass was only large enough to hide Thranduil. It was not big enough space to hide the two grown Elves.

“Please, help us,” Elrond pleaded. “I have known Dwarves since the time of Beleriand when there had been peace and friendship between our people. Long ago, with loyalty and fierceness greater than the dragons, Dwarves braved the dragon fire to fight beside us. Will you not remember and be a friend again? My friend is injured. His leg may be broken. If you help us, our people will not forget your kindness.”

“You speak prettily, but who can trust the words of Elves,” the white beard said.

“Neither do I trust the words of Dwarves,” Thranduil shot back.

“It was yer people who took advantage of our great talent. Killed our smiths.”

“ Took advantage? We punished those who cut down our king out of greed!”

“Ye mean the Elves deprived our people of honest pay,” the white beard said gripping his ax tightly to his chest. “They were just defending themselves, and yer kind killed them.”

“That is a lie!” Thranduil felt the fire erupt in his veins. He got up, ignoring the pain radiating up his leg and took up the bow again, but Elrond grabbed it and pushed it firmly down.

“There will be plenty of time to kill each other later if you so wish, but right now, we have Orc horde to deal with,” Elrond said then turned to the Dwarves. “Master Dwarf, I could tell you are an experienced warrior. We are faced with the common enemy. Would it be wise to argue at a time like this? Divided, we will lose, but united we could hope to fight them off.”

The ground shook visibly now so much that even the Dwarves could not but acknowledge the approaching horde.

The white beard glared at Thranduil but turned to the two Dwarves.

“Pick up your sacks, Buri, Loni. We are leaving.”

The two younger Dwarves stowed away their weapons and picked up their sack. The white beard turned and walked away. The one with the bow, the one who had not spoken yet called after the white beard.

“But, Onar, they will die if left here. There is no place to hide. And the other one is injured.”

“Ye see me caring, boy!” the white beard roared, turned then stomped away.

“Come on, Buri. Nothing good comes from being involved with the pointy ears,” the one with the hammer said. He followed after Onar.

Buri turned back to Elrond, then threw a glance at Thranduil. He turned to look at the two Dwarves
who were hurrying away to a stone wall left of the wall of boulders.

“Come on, Buri!” Loni called in front of one of the boulders where water flowed down.

Onar whispered, just a mere movement of lips. A wall rumbled lightly then a large opening appeared.

The Orcs were close. The birds flew away, and the animals scurried away to their holes. Although the Orcs could not be seen yet, hidden behind the bushes and the boulders, Thranduil could hear them coming as their marching feet trampled over the dried leaves on the floor of the woodland.

The sun sank, and the darkness descended covering the wood like a black mist.

“I can’t let ye in without Onar’s permission, but there’s a crack behind a waterfall, on the other side of our door,” Buri whispered, then hurried after Loni who waited at the opening. They entered, and the opening disappeared as if the door had been an illusion.

Elrond threaded his arm below Thranduil’s shoulder.

“We better hurry.”

“You believe him?” Thranduil asked, trying to keep up.

Elrond directed Thranduil toward the waterfall. It was a shallow stream of water flowing over a large piece of boulder only about a story tall.

“He has no reason to lie to us.”

“He could waste our time.”

“By Belagaer! Can you not just trust that he was trying to help?”

“I trust no one. Especially a Dwarf,” mumbled Thranduil.

“That will be your undoing, Sinda. We are not solitary animals, Thranduil. We must live together and that means we must learn to trust.”

“Trust a Dwarf? The ones who refused to help when Orcs are coming?”

“Would you have helped them if they were the ones doing the asking?”

“I wouldn’t have turned them away, against Orcs! Maybe against other men or other dangers, maybe. But not against a swarm of Orcs or any evils of Morgoth.” Thranduil looked up at Elrond. “You doubt me?”

“No. I don’t doubt you, Thranduil. But you could have been nicer. Dwarves get insulted easily.”

“Ha! They don’t have a problem doing the insulting.”

“You called them ugly.”

“They are!”

Elrond rolled his eyes. “Beauty is only skin deep.”

“It isn’t just about looks. It is the way they say things.”
“And are you any better? You are not exactly the most diplomatic,” Elrond look at Thranduil with a frown.

“I say what is true.” Thranduil lifted his head to stare back. He didn’t regret anything. “I prefer to say what is without the false glimmer. I wouldn’t call it a fault.”

“But would it hurt you to say things nicely, Sinda? Well-chosen words can repay thousand debts. A kindly word may not help save a life, but it can bring a smile to those who need it. You say false glimmer, but if that glimmer can bring a spark of light, a little warmth and a smile to boot, is it not worth it? Besides, we were in the position of asking. Could you not allow yourself to supplicate, just a tad bit? Would it have killed you?”

Thranduil pursed his lips. Maybe it would have been best if he had allowed Elrond to deal with the Dwarves. But it was too late to take it back now.

When they arrived at the wall of boulders where water fell over to run down into the creek, it was dark. But the moon was full bright, and they did not have any trouble seeing under its silvery light. They sank down under one of the many boulders strewn about the area when they saw Orc soldiers through the trees. They were not running now but were marching.

“Stay here while I look for that crack in the stone wall,” Elrond whispered.

“Why? When I could be running about this wood infested with the Orcs.”

Elrond shook his head and rolled his eyes, but he moved away quietly.

The Orcs from the mountain stopped when three orcs from the direction of the hill approached them. One of them was Sharku.

“The package got away. Burog is after them, but master wants us to search the nearby areas as well.”

“Why we clean up your mess, Sharku?” grumbled the one leading the Orc horde from the mountain.

“Because master said so. Now get!” Sharku growled.

“Spread out and search every bush, every stone!” the leader ordered.

“One of them is injured. A bad leg. Couldn’t have gone far,” Sharku said. “I’ll lead them here. You take the rest and look for their trail in the East.”

“And their warriors?” the leader asked.

“Don’t worry about the Elf scums. Master took care of them,” Sharku said and cawed aloud. The Orc horde cheered loudly, then half of the horde broke off and headed East.

Thranduil grimaced as a dread filled him. Had something happened to the Elven warriors? What had happened to the cadets? Something terrible. Thranduil could feel it in his gut, but he shook his head. He will not let fear take him now. Not now when he needed to focus.

Instead, Thranduil took in a breath and silently tallied the number of the Orcs left behind. Under Sharku, the creatures began their search, poking their swords in the bushes and the grassy areas. There were twenty-five of them. Twenty-six counting Sharku.

“Dammit!” Thranduil cursed softly and grabbed a handful of arrows. If his leg was not injured, they could have fought their way out and made a run for it, but that was no longer an option. Even if his
leg had been in good condition, the number of the Orcs was large enough to overwhelm the two of them, especially when they were unarmored and weary.

“Look! Here!” One of the Orcs who was poking about the grassy area where Thranduil hid before, called over other Orcs. “There’s a track.”

Sharku and few others crowded the Orc.

“That’s no Elf track, stupid!” Sharku backhanded the Orc who had called him over. “These are too heavy!”

“But here. Someone dragged a leg with another supportin!”

Sharku bent over the area.

“Call the others back!” Sharku barked. Orc blew his horn.

The ground shook as the other Orcs who had just left turned back. From the south came an answering Orc horn and Thranduil knew without a doubt that even those that Burog lead south were coming back to Sharku.

------------

On Dwarven Names: Tolkien named his Dwarves from the list of Dwarf names shown in Poetic Edda, Old Norse poems. If you look at Prophesy of the Seeress (Chapter 1), you will find all the names Tolkien used (including the name ‘Gandalf’) in *Hobbit* as well as in *LOTR*. So, I used the same to name my Dwarves.

The argument between Thranduil and Onar is the one dealing with the death of King Thingol. Thingol hired Nogrod Dwarves to set Silmaril into Nauglamir (Dwarven necklace) The Dwarves, coveting both the jewel and the necklace, demanded, as the payment for their work, the very thing they were hired to make. This angered Thingol, and he ordered them out of Menegroth without pay. Dwarves killed Thingol, took the necklace and fled. Elves chased after them and killed all, but two survived who returned to their home and lied to their king leading to the Dwarven attack on Menegroth. They were all killed later which led to the destruction of Nogrod Dwarves. This event led to distrust and hatred between the two races that lasted through the Ages, except for that time in the Second Age when Celebrimbor worked with the Durin’s Folk.
Chapter Summary

The Dwarven Ruins

The Orcs find the two escaped Elves. Elrond makes a deal.

Beneath the Blue Mountains. September 29, Second Age 144

**THRANDUIL** fitted the bow with the arrows. He had eighteen arrows. He had to make every one of them count. Even then… Thranduil shook his head. He wasn’t going to think about what might happen, focusing instead on what he wanted. He wanted to live. He didn’t want to die at the hands of the Orcs. It was funny how this sudden desire for life coursed through him when the odds of survival were so much against him. Life was strange and damnable.

Thranduil scoffed as he aimed the arrow at Sharku. He wanted to kill that one first. Orcs without a leader were like a body without a head. If he could get rid of Sharku… Thranduil pulled back the string when a hand stopped him.

Thranduil looked up ready to strike.

It was Elrond. The Noldo shook his head.

“We are going to make a run for it,” Elrond whispered.

“Really, Elrond? And how do you expect me to do that with this leg?”

“We will wait until the Orcs move away, then I will carry you. I made a deal. We can hole up inside the walls until our warriors catch up to us. They are coming; I know it.”

Thranduil was almost tempted to tell Elrond what he heard, but there was so much hope in the Noldo’s eyes, Thranduil bit his tongue.

“There’s a possibility that no one is coming, Elrond.”

“They will! They would have known that we are missing. Lord Gilmagor will reach the North Legion and come look for us. Remember our rule? We do not leave anyone behind. I am sure they are not far behind our trail. They may even have heard those Orc horns. If we wait just a little while, they will come for us.”

“Ever an optimist, aren’t you, Peredhel?” Sudden anger and despair filled Thranduil then. “Stupid Noldo!”

Thranduil knew that any experienced warrior would know that Orcs did not keep prisoners. Mostly, Orcs held prisoners for sport, but no more than one or two days at the most. Lord Gilmagor would have known that. The only time they kept prisoners was at the command of their masters, and that meant the prisoners would face something foul and for an ill purpose.

“Better stupid than hopeless,” Elrond shot back.

“Hopeless am I?” Thranduil threaded an arrow.
He kept his eyes on the Orcs. The creatures were following the trail and heading directly to where he hid with Elrond.

“They are coming. What will you do now, Peredhel? If we move now, they will see us, and if we sit here, they will catch us. What will that crack in the wall do for us now?”

“Shut up. For once, Thranduil, just shut up!” Elrond hissed as he glanced at the Orcs.

Lifting Thranduil into his arms, Elrond backed away, staying low to the ground. But Thranduil knew it would be difficult for Elrond. He knew how heavy he was, but he also knew without a doubt that Elrond would not abandon him. Unless…

“Put me on your shoulder,” Thranduil whispered.

“What?”

“On your shoulder. It will make it easier for you to carry me and I can use the bow if necessary.”

It took some maneuvering as they needed to be quiet, but Elrond managed to pull Thranduil over his shoulder freeing Thranduil’s hands. This allowed Thranduil to keep his eyes on the Orcs and made it easier for Elrond to move. It was good that Orcs did not hear as well as Elves. Unfortunately, their night-vision was better than Elves.

“There! Behind the boulders!” One of the Orcs shouted.

Thranduil cursed out loud and started to shoot as fast as he could although being carried on one’s shoulder made it difficult for him to aim accurately.

Thranduil let fly arrow after arrow. They all hit, but not all of them fatal.

Elrond ran.

When Thranduil realized that Elrond ran past the waterfall, he turned to look. Elrond was running toward the boulder wall where the Dwarves disappeared.

“Where are you going? I thought we were going to hole up in the crack? We cannot hope to outrun them with you carrying me.”

“You think we could survive fighting that many Orcs?” Elrond said. “I don’t know about you, but I do not plan to die here, Sinda.”

“As long as you carry me, your chance of survival is nil.”

Thranduil took down five more Orcs as Elrond ran. Then, he cursed under his breath. The other half of the Orcs who had gone east returned and entered the wood. They rushed to join the other Orcs. Thranduil’s hand flew over the bow. He was running out of the arrows. It was only a matter of time.

When he realized that he had the last arrow in his hand, Thranduil fingered the arrowhead. It was not as sharp as the Elven arrowheads, but it will do. Thranduil knew all the precise locations that needed to be punctured for an instant kill. He also knew Elrond would not leave him as long as he was alive. Thranduil grabbed the arrow. One well-placed strike would do it.

“Elrond, I am sorry that I couldn’t protect you. Your mother entrusted you and your brother to me, and I failed you both. I…”

Thranduil did not finish as arrows sped past him, one after another, and hit the Orcs running ahead of
the others. Then, before Thranduil could react, someone jumped from the top of the waterfall onto
the first line of Orcs following close behind Elrond.

A white hair flashed in the dark, and a blade glinted in the moonlight. Did the Elven warriors find
them? The figure swung the blade, and as it shone in the light, Thranduil saw that it was a doubled
headed ax.

The warrior, too short to be an Elf, shouted in a language that was not familiar to Thranduil.
Although far from tall, the Dwarf was powerful. He swung the massive weapon as if it was just a
stick. With one swing, three Orcs fell.

“Khazad ai-menu!” someone cried as a figure sped past Elrond. It was Loni with his hammer. The
Dwarf swung his hammer, splitting skulls and mangling any Orc that dared to come within his reach.

Elrond let Thranduil down on the floor made of stone. It was then that Thranduil realized that they
were just inside the stone wall. Buri was standing by the opening with his bow. Elrond took out the
Orc sword then joined the Dwarves.

“Please, let me or give me more arrows,” Thranduil bit down the pain from his leg and reached for
Buri’s bow. “I can help.”

“Here,” Buri pushed a basket full of arrows into Thranduil’s hand, then taking out an ax from behind
his back, the Dwarf ran after Elrond.

Thranduil still did not like Dwarves, but he could not deny that they were brave. The Sinda
wondered what changed Onar’s mind about helping them, but there was no time to think further as
the battle raged. Thranduil tried his best to pick off as many Orcs as he could to give each fighter
some breathing room as Orc after Orc surrounded the four warriors.

Elrond cut, stabbed and sliced, his previous hesitation nowhere to be seen. Even with the clunky Orc
sword, Elrond seemed to dance among the horde as he cut down the Orcs with merciless precision.
Despite their greater numbers, the Orcs, seeing the skill and fierceness of the Dwarves and the Elf,
pulled back.

Letting his hand fly over the string of the bow, Thranduil saw that the Orcs that Burog led returned
and was entering the edge of the wood.

“Fall back!” Thranduil shouted, waving his arm to catch Elrond’s attention.

Elrond who caught Thranduil’s call and the gestures turned to the edge of the wood.

“We have to fall back. More are coming.” Elrond shouted to the Dwarves.

Taking the moment of Orcs falling back, the Dwarves and Elrond retreated. Thranduil released
arrow after arrow, trying to control the number of Orcs who tried to follow after the four warriors.

But the Orcs who had faltered previously rallied themselves as Burog joined them. And as the three
Dwarves and the Elf ran, the Orcs chased after them. Somewhere another Orc horn blew.

Thranduil’s hand moved without rest until the four ran into the opening.

Onar shouted a strange word, and the stone wall rumbled as a door descended from above.

Before it closed, however, one large Orc who had been in the front pursuing the four warriors
jumped and grabbed Loni’s shoulder. Buri grabbed Loni’s hand pulling him in, and Onar swung his
ax chopping down the Orc in half. But that was a mistake. The stone door ground to a halt as it caught on the body of the slain Orc. Due to the Orc’s size, the stone door would only come down halfway leaving enough space under the stone door for Orcs to crawl. And crawl under it, the Orcs did.

The screech of the Orcs filled the stone hallway as the Orcs swarm the open gap.

“Buri, the crossbow. Loni, the door!” Onar didn’t need to say any further as the Dwarf with the hammer smashed any that dared to emerge from the gap below. Elrond and Onar joined with their sword and ax. But the gap under the door was too wide. The Orcs kept coming. And the more they killed, the more bodies piled under the gap.

Thranduil stood, leaning against the stone wall, shooting down any who had escaped the hammer, ax and the sword. The screeches and the screams of pain thundered within the stone hallway.

Suddenly, Buri shouted from the alcove above the hallway.

“Onar, they are bringing a troll!”

Sure enough, the ground began to shake.

“The bodies! You have to push the bodies out!” Thranduil shouted.

As long as those bodies stood there propping the door open, they could not close the door. Thranduil remembered reading how secure the doors of Dwarves are. If they could close the stone door, they will be safe. At least, for now.

Loni and Onar strained until their faces turned red and puffy to push the bodies out, but the many other bodies of the Orcs that they had hacked piled by the door and they could not push them out as Orcs outside pushed the bodies in trying to get through the gap.

The ground shook harder.

Thump. Thump. Thump. The great footfall of the troll was coming near.

“Buri, the last defense!” the old Dwarf shouted.

“Are you sure?” Buri called down from above.

“Do it now! Move aside, Elf, unless ye want to be ground into a pulp!” the Dwarf said.

Thranduil frowned down at the Dwarf unsure what the stunted creature meant when Elrond who had moved behind Thranduil wrapped his arms around Thranduil’s chest and pulled him back into the hallway.

“What the…” Thranduil opened his mouth to curse when a large block of stone, one and half the length of Thranduil and as thick as one of the Dwarves, dropped down from above only about two strides away from Thranduil shaking the ground as if the earth will split underneath them.

Darkness filled the stone hallway as the loud rumbling of the stone moving filled the hall blocking out the screeches and the screams. Then everything fell silent.

The darkness was complete. Thranduil wasn’t sure if he was where he had been or if he was thrust suddenly into the blackness of a void.

The arms that encircled him from behind tightened around Thranduil. On his back, through the
thinness of his tunic, Thranduil felt the warm breath and the frantic beating of a heart and knew that Elrond was there behind him. For some reason, it comforted Thranduil to know that Elrond was there, that he was not there alone in that darkness. And for once, the shadows that circled ever around him stayed away.

Thranduil felt his muscles relax and he melted into the warmth of the embrace. There was something in the warmth that reminded him of Elwing, of his brother, and of his mother. It reminded him of something he had lost a long time ago, the warmth of a home and a family. Thranduil had not realized how much he missed all of them.

“Well, Mahal be damned!” Onar said, breaking the silence. Somewhere a brazier Thranduil had not known was there burst into a flame illuminating where they stood.

They were all standing in a large room with stone walls. Elrond moved away, letting go of Thranduil. Pain shot through his injured leg. Thranduil swayed, clutching at his leg which throbbed with the intensity of a heart under stress. He had forgotten the pain in the ensuing chaos.

“Thranduil?” Elrond clutched Thranduil’s other arm, steadying him from swaying.

“I’m fine.” Thranduil straightened biting down a groan.

“This,” the old Dwarf turned to Buri who had joined them and then to Loni, “is what happens when ye deal with the pointy ears. They make bags of everything.”

Onar shook his head. Then without another word reached into a wall. Another door opened with a low whistle.

Loni picked up his hammer and leaned it onto his shoulder. “Ye see, Buri. Ye let that Elf’s silver tongue sway ye, and this is what happens. We were supposed to just hide them for a while and now... All that talk about Azaghal and honor. For that measly dagger, we lost our door.” Loni shook his head, then followed after Onar.

“Master Buri, I am sorry that I dragged you into this. I…” Elrond sighed.

Buri shrugged. “I did not expect this to happen. And neither did ye. It is what it is. But now, we are stuck here together.”

“The door cannot be opened again?” Elrond asked.

Buri shook his head. “That was the last defense. It is permanent. Nothing will move that stone now, not even trolls. It is made to fit into the grounding stone. It is seamless.”

“Then how do we get out?”

“Onar intended for ye to remain here, but now that the door is barred, I don’t think he will stop ye from entering our home. The only way out will be through the ruins.” Buri pointed to the open doorway before approaching it. “Few had been allowed to see it. Consider yerselves lucky.”

Elrond supported Thranduil, and they passed through the doorway together. Then, both Elrond and Thranduil stopped, gawking at the scene before them. Ahead of them was a vast cavern with carved pillars of massive marble slabs. Many steps were carved into the stone which led downward disappearing into some sort of waterway. Somewhere high above vents must have been carved into the stone walls as the air was fresh and a faint light came down from high above throwing a golden sheen onto the watery surface.
The main source of light was stone braziers built onto each side of columns, but with only several standing, most of the cavern was dark. Majority of the stone columns were broken, many half-submerged into what appeared to be a lake big and wide enough to need a boat to cross.

It reminded Thranduil of the underground river that flowed under a section of Menegroth. During winter when the waters outside froze, they swam in the river and rode on boats, a gift from Lord Cirdan, carved into shapes of dolphins. But unlike Menegroth which had natural lights from several open ceilings and enhanced with thousands of golden lanterns, this Dwarven cavern was dark and damp. Thranduil wondered how the cavern would have looked in the days of glory. Although vastly different from the swirling curves of Elven structures, there was strength and beauty in the architecture.

Once everyone stepped out, Buri spoke under his breath, and the stone door behind them closed completely disappearing seamlessly into the wall so that no trace of doorway could be found.

From the landing where they stood, Buri turned left. The path led to a great bronze door that was as tall as a one-story building. Its bronze surface was embossed with a towering figure holding a massive hammer on his shoulder. Several lines were carved around the bearded face. When Buri went through the door, Elrond and Thranduil followed after the young Dwarf.

It was a large chamber, much brighter with several tall bronze braziers illuminating the space. There were several chairs carved in stone in the middle of the room. One wall displayed an impressive array of axes, swords and hammers. All of them were of the finest craftsmanship.

Through an open doorway on the far right, Thranduil could see that several rooms connected to the chamber.

“Why did ye bring them in here?” Onar shouted when Thranduil and Elrond walked in after Buri.

“Well, they could not get out that way,” Buri said.

“Go pack up,” barked Onar to Buri.

“Where are we going?”

“Do ye think those Orcs will just go away? They wanted these two. As long as they are here, we are in danger.” Onar glared at Thranduil and Elrond. “Ye bring evil here.”

“The evil is here already, Onar. That thing in the palace that is what is evil. And that one in the treasure chamber…” Buri frowned.

Onar waved his hand, one finger pointing up. Buri stopped talking, then began to move his hands. They continued to gesture at each other as if they were communicating.

“What are they doing?” Thranduil asked Elrond.

“Iglishmek,” Elrond whispered under his breath that could only be heard by Thranduil.

“What?”

“[Q] They are speaking in their secret language of gestures,” Elrond changed to Quenya.

“[Q] What are they saying?”

“[Q] I do not know. Dwarves guard their language as jealously as they do all their things,” Elrond
said. “I know few words of Khuzdul, but I never spent enough time with the Dwarves to learn any of the gestures they used.”

It was then that Loni walked into the chamber with three large sacks on his shoulders. He handed one to Buri and another to Onar.

“Grab more weapons. We will need them. There will be more Orcs,” Onar said.

Loni took the weapons from the wall leaving one sword. Onar turned to Elrond and threw a small bundle from his own sack. “After what trouble ye brought us, the sword and this should more than cover the price of the dagger. Don’t let anyone say we Dwarves are not generous.”

Onar grabbed a torch near one of the braziers, lit it and pushed one of the stone chairs aside. A tunnel opened up on the ground just wide enough for the Dwarves to crouch on their knees. Onar and Loni disappeared into the darkness of the passage. Buri picked up his sack.

“Find yer way across the water to the other side, to the crossroad where all roads meet. Ye will find us there or could pick up our trail. I’m not sure exactly what the condition of the hall across the water looks like as we never ventured that way, but avoid going toward the palace. Great evil resides there.”

“How do we know if we are going that way?” Elrond asked.

“Buri!” Onar’s voice thundered from below.

Buri flushed, then crouched to enter the tunnel. “May the light of Mahal be with ye,” the Dwarf said before he disappeared down the tunnel.

“Wait, how do we…” Elrond did not get to finish his question. The stone chair moved and covered the tunnel.

Elrond let go of Thranduil and tried to move the chair. He strained against it until his face turned red, but the stone chair did not budge.

“Forget it, Elrond. Even if you were successful in removing that stone, I don’t think I could crawl through that tunnel. Could you?”

The tunnel was tight. Even the Dwarves had to crawl. Thranduil shivered at the thought of having to crawl through an area that small and dark.

Elrond still struggled against the chair, but eventually gave up.

Thranduil slid onto the stone ground, unable to keep himself up on his one good leg. He grabbed the small sack Onar threw at Elrond. Inside was two brown lumps twice the size of his palm and a leather pouch filled with a liquid.

“You traded your dagger for this?” Thranduil asked.

Elrond’s dagger was a priceless treasure all on its own. Even without Elrond telling him of its value, Thranduil had seen that the dagger was made of rare gems, gems that were not from Middle Earth. He also guessed that the real worth of the dagger was not in the gems, but in its emotional value to Elrond. Thranduil had felt it when Elrond took back the dagger. The Half-Elven had caressed it with the same tenderness and longing as Thranduil had done with his mother’s necklace.

“Why would you sacrifice so much?” Thranduil’s throat thickened. He wasn’t sure if it was his
mother’s necklace whether he would have given it up to save anyone, including his own life.

“It wasn’t just for the food. It was also for our lives, for them to hide us inside their stone wall until Orcs were gone. It was the only thing I had that was of value that I could use to make the deal. I had no other choice.”

“No, Elrond. You had a choice. You could have left me. I was the only obstacle between you and the freedom.”

“I told you that was not an option.”

“Why? What am I to you? You don’t even like me.”

Elrond looked down at Thranduil. There was a look of surprise in Elrond’s eyes.

“You thought I didn’t know?” Thranduil scoffed.

Elrond sighed, then sat down next to Thranduil.

“You are right. I did not like you in the beginning although I am not so sure now. You are very different from me. And…” Elrond hesitated. “You are not exactly easy to like. But if the circumstances have been different, I think we could have been friends. Besides us being kin, I think, perhaps we could have grown up close. Maybe even close enough for me to call you brother.”

“Uncle.”

“What?”

“You would have called me ‘uncle’ if we have grown up together. You forget that Elwing was a sister to me.”

Elrond contorted his face. “I am not going to call you ‘uncle.’ You can forget about that. Brother maybe, but not uncle.” Elrond grimaced and shook his head.

The look of horror on Elrond’s face filled Thranduil’s chest with a warmth that was sudden and unlooked for. Thranduil thrust his head back and laughed out loud. He had a sudden urge to mess up Elrond’s hair as he used to, back in Sirion.

“Hahaha!”

Thranduil’s laughter rang through the empty chamber.

--------

**Khazad ai-menu** (Khuzdul. *The Dwarves are upon you!* ) Part of the battle cry of the Dwarves. One of the few Khuzdul (the language of the Dwarves) known to outsiders.

**iglishmek**— the secret language of gestures Dwarves used to communicate among themselves in silence. Dwarves guarded their language, Khuzdul, and did not speak it while in the presence of other races. They spoke in the other’s tongue, but when they wished to communicate among themselves in the presence of foreigners, they used the gestures.
Weakness

Chapter Summary

Mairon seeks an audience with Celebrimbor.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Noldorin camp near the Blue Mountains. September 29, Second Age 144

MAIRON moved his fingers under his blue cape. Power crackled at their tips. As Gelir’s soul weakened, its hold on the body lessened. It allowed Mairon to tap into more of his own powers. But, it also meant that his time in this body was shortening. Once Gelir’s spirit left the body which housed it, it would decompose. Slowly. But what was worse, some of the Elves, the ones with great powers, will sense his presence. With many of the Elves from Valinor crawling about this place, Mairon could not risk using the body once Gelir’s soul passed.

Using what power he could gather, Mairon held onto the soul. He had known that once he left the body, the life force remaining in Gelir’s soul would decline, but Mairon had not expected how quickly the soul faded. The call of Mandos was strong. Mairon could slow the fading of Gelir’s spirit with his own power, but it also meant that he could not leave this body again unless he wanted to leave it entirely.

Time was running out. And there was still much Mairon wanted done. For the past three days, Mairon had been at the fort built next to the river on the northern border. He had not been allowed to leave. Worse, he learned that the incompetent Orcs had lost Elrond and Thranduil inside the Dwarven ruin. When he learned of this, he had been wrathful and tempted to leave the body. And if it weren’t for the foresight that warned him that he still had a need of Gelir’s body, Mairon would have gone. But, now he realized Thranduil and Elrond were exactly where he wanted them to be.

Once Mairon was allowed to leave the fort, he volunteered to accompany the jewelsmiths in their travel to Lord Celebrimbor’s camp. From the river, it was a half day’s ride to the campsite where Celebrimbor set up several tents surrounding a large open forge. The entire campground was set high up on a flat hill. On the top of the dome-shaped tents, flags in the colors of red and gold, the colors of House Feanor, waved in the wind. Mairon was told it would take another half day’s ride to the nearest Dwarven city. According to the lieutenant who accompanied Mairon from the fort, they were just far enough away from the Dwarves to make them feel better and close enough for the smiths from both kindreds to gather to work.

As he had hoped, Celebrimbor did not turn him away when Mairon sought an audience.

“Go on, lad. His lordship is waiting for you,” the guard dressed in golden armor with red cape, the one Mairon had seen accompanying Celebrimbor before, motioned to Mairon to enter, raising one end of the tent’s flap.

When Mairon entered the main tent luxuriously furnished with red silk drapes and gold gilded chair and desk, Celebrimbor who was conversing with some artisans gestured for Mairon to approach once they left.
Mairon bit down a scoff at the great amount of red and gold silk in the décor. It was distinct from the blue and gold of the king who came from the House of Fingolfin. For someone who was a vassal of the king, Celebrimbor’s furnishings had none of the king’s blue color and silver stars. Instead, the emblem of a star with eight points and eight rays was embroidered in silver onto the red and yellow silks. It was the same emblem Mairon had seen on the shields of all the Noldor who followed Feanor and his sons. None of the flags that was displayed within the tent represented Gil-galad.

Mairon tamped down a smile. All vassals of a king, regardless of how high in their station they were, had their king’s colors flying alongside their own device. Even Mairon displayed his colors of red and black below that of his master’s flag of black hammer on white. Whatever reason Celebrimbor had in not taking the throne of Noldor, Mairon was sure that this Noldo was keenly aware of his position as the last heir of House Feanor.

“I am glad to see you are well, son of Amarthon. Your sister is not too far from here and will be glad to see you.” Celebrimbor gestured toward the seat in front of the desk.

“Forgive me for seeking you, my lord, and thank you for seeing me. The others at the fort would not give me any news of my fellow cadets. And I am heartsick for news.”

Celebrimbor nodded.

“It is understandable. I am sorry for the ordeal you have experienced, my young friend. The work here is too great, and I could not get away. I have been told you did not remember much. Have you remembered any other thing that could be of value to the warriors?”

“I am afraid not, my lord,” Mairon shook his head, then dropped his head. “I wish I could tell you more, but as I told the lieutenant, it was all I could remember. Even then, I was only vaguely aware that it was Lord Gilmagor who rode with me.” Mairon shook his head and covered his head with his hands. “I should have done more. I don’t know what but there must have been more I could have done. What if something terrible happened to the cadets…what if…”

A hand landed on his shoulder.

“It was not your fault,” said Celebrimbor who had moved next to Mairon. “No one blames you. You should not blame yourself.”

“I wish they had let me help look for the other cadets…”

“The search party was sent out two days ago. We should, hopefully, hear from them soon. And the cadets, young as they are, are well trained. And Lord Istuion is with them. He is but a Sinda, but I understand him to be one of the Doriathrin warriors, a skilled fighter and a hunter. Maybe he has led the cadets to safety. They are in a forest after all. They are not the wisest, but Sindar know forests, their knowledge of the woods is surpassed only by the Green Elves. We will know more once I receive a report from the search party.”

Mairon covered his eyes not wanting Celebrimbor to see the glee in his eyes. He knew already that the cadets were captured and Lord Istuion lost.

“You are right, of course. How is Lord Gilmagor? No one would tell me.”

“It is because we do not know yet,” Celebrimbor said, his voice grave and dark, as he returned to his chair. “They have sent for the healers from the White City, and I have been told that after recovering the commander, they are taking his body to the Grey Havens so that healers will meet him as soon as they can, but…” Celebrimbor sighed.
Mairon nodded, keeping his head down. Celebrimbor was of Valinor. Mairon did not want to take any chance of the Noldo seeing anything amiss. Any form of glee in his eyes could arouse suspicion.

“If you had not informed the warriors who found you…I shudder at what may have happened. Lord Gilmagor would, surely, have perished then and there. If he survives this, he owes you his life.”

“I wish I could have done more. It was all I could do to convince the guards to climb down the cliff and look for him. I wasn’t myself. I only had a vague sense that it was Lord Gilmagor who was riding with me. Had he not thrown me off his horse, I wouldn’t be here. He saved me. I will do everything I can, but, alas, I have no memory of how I got there.”

“At the least, you convinced the warriors to look for the commander. Even if the search delayed them from getting to the cadets, I think it was worth it. Otherwise, we would have lost Lord Gilmagor without any hope. If he passes from this world, it will be a grave loss for us here in Middle Earth. A great loss, indeed.”

“Have you heard from the two guards who were sent to the Elven village?” Mairon asked.

Despite the apparent shock the lieutenant who led the warriors from the camp displayed upon hearing Lord Gilmagor’s ‘accident,’ the officer sent two of his warriors on to the Elven village even while he ordered many of his Elves down the cliff to locate Lord Gilmagor. Two guards were small enough number for his Orcs to overwhelm even if the Orcs had difficulty seizing the cadets before the two showed up. In the end, the Orcs killed the two guards and threw their bodies over the waterfall before departing the area taking the cadets with them, just as Mairon had ordered.

Before telling the warriors about Gilmagor, Mairon thought hard whether he should tell the truth. In the end, he decided it would look less suspicious if he told them as much truth as he could. His experience had told him that lies worked best when cloaked with truths. And if there was any chance of Gilmagor recovering, or of the cadets returning, he wanted to make sure all his stories fit. Limited his time in this body maybe, he did not wish Elves to suspect even remotely that he had taken over an Elven body. Now that he knew how well he could hide in it, Mairon had another use for Elrond in mind.

“Haven’t heard anything from the guards yet. Neither could our birds locate them. It is why I have ordered the full search team.” Celebrimbor sighed. “Was it really true that the village was completely destroyed? I received the report of your statement, but I could not believe it.”

“Yes. We found no survivor except one child.”

Celebrimbor shook his head. “It is very troubling, indeed. There was no way for the Orcs to have known of the location of the Green Elves. They are uncultured and uncouth, but Green Elves are second to none when it comes to stealth. Their villages are notoriously difficult to locate even for us. For the Orcs to have found them and surprised them enough to demolish them, I find that hard to digest. Either the Orcs have progressed since the War of Wrath, or the Green Elves have degenerated in their only ability in which they surpass us.”

_Not so surprising when I had the map of the location of the village, my dear Celebrimbor._

Mairon kept his head downward. It had been so easy to get his hands on the information. He had wandered into Celebrimbor’s study during one of the dinners he was invited to the Noldo’s manor house during Mairon’s rest days. He had found it amusing how Elves trusted each other completely. All the vital information about the location of the army, the forts and the guards, including the location of the Dwarven villages and that of the Green Elves, were all there on top of Celebrimbor’s desk. It had been quite simple to look through them, walk back to the garden where Celebrimbor
entertained his guests. No one suspected him of anything. Why should they? As far as any of them were concerned, he was just one of the young cadets in training. Why would any Elven soldier betray his kin? Such trust amongst the Elven kind made it easy for Mairon to get all the information he needed and wanted.

“But enough of this talk. As I said, I wouldn’t know the details until I receive a report from the search party. Once I receive any message, I will call for you. Now, tell me, my young friend. What is it that you wished to see me about?”

Mairon looked up.

“I wished to ask to stay with you, my lord. The rest of the cadets would not arrive for another three weeks. The guards are not in need of me. With no Lord Commander and other officers for me to report to, I find myself at a loss. I was hoping, maybe, I could assist you in your work, or failing that, be allowed to help my sister in hers. I understand she is with other jewelsmiths near the village of the Dwarves.”

Mairon had wanted to return to the cave, or be near the ruin as possible, where he had been working on the new body. Forms of beasts he could readily become, but Mairon wanted a body strong and powerful. After the incident with that hound, Mairon promised himself that he wouldn’t take any shape that could easily be injured by any beast whether from Valinor or no. Taking his time, Mairon wrought a form strong, powerful, and fair, one armored with dragon scales. Of course, it did require sacrificing one of the dragonlings. That had upset her, but Mairon was sure she will come around. She occasionally ate the Orcs Mairon sent to bring her food. Sometimes more than several at a time. But, did he ever complain? He had always been generous to her. Besides, she had three more dragonlings.

If truth be told, Mairon did not understand her reluctance. He was the most powerful, next only to his master. In fact, Melkor appointed him to carry on his work. Why was she reluctant to serve him? All Melkor’s lieutenants respected power above all. And he was powerful. Maybe not as powerful as he could be as he currently lacked a physical body of his own. But once his new body was complete, he would gather the Orcs and build a new fortress to replace Angband.

After his talk with Eonwe, after the War of Wrath, Mairon had been unsure, afraid of what was to come. But the Maia was afraid no longer. He shall bring the Elves into his service and conquer the rest of the world.

“I suppose you are a jewel smith at heart. I see your eyes gladden at the thought of the feel of metals in your hands. Is it not so, young one?”

Mairon feigned a blush. “I am afraid so, my lord, although with all that had happened, I should not turn to my own joy, or be so eager to hold a hammer in my hand. But, I cannot help myself.”

Celebrimbor laughed. “It is a mark of a true artist. When our hearts grieve us, it is to our craft that we turn to sooth it. I am sure it is no different for you. I would be glad to have you. With your talent and my knowledge, maybe we could find a way to hold on to what little beauty that still remains.”

“Alas, my lord, if my meager skill could aid you in any way, it would be a great honor indeed.” Mairon bowed then noticed a golden pot on one side of Celebrimbor’s desk.

It was a white lily in full bloom, its delicate petals glinted silver. It was encased in what looked to be a crystal, many-faceted, but clear as glass.

“Ah, my flower. Is it not beautiful?”
“Isn’t this a summer flower? I find it strange that it is still in bloom.”

Celebrimbor laughed again, his hand hovering over the edge of the gold pot. “It is a flower that is dear to me. It grieves me to no end that it blooms so short a time before it fades. I have been trying to coax it to stay longer so that I may enjoy its beautiful bloom. Alas, it is not within my power to prevent the decay, however.”

Mairon wondered, then, at the regret and sorrow in Celebrimbor’s eyes.

“Ah, what I wouldn’t give to preserve its beauty. How wonderful it would be if we can prevent all the beauty of the things we have created from their eventual ruin.”

“But is there not beauty in their death as well? If things did not die, then how will there be new things?” Mairon found himself asking.

“You are young and do not yet know what it is to lose what is dear to you,” said Celebrimbor. “But, come. No more talk of loss. You shall meet your sister and be glad. I shall accompany you.”

It was dusk when they arrived at the Dwarven city. Celebrimbor did not take a company of soldiers as Mairon had expected. Instead, it was only two warriors in their red and gold uniform who accompanied them.

Having seen the great halls of stone with its many bridges and arches within the Dwarven ruins, Mairon had expected massive stone structures, but he was disappointed. The city was built within the rocky arms of the mountain. The entrance, guarded by heavily armed Dwarven soldiers, was three stories high, jagged and gray all around. Inside, several areas in the ceiling were exposed to the sky. The Blue Mountains, being made of chunks of rocks, side of the mountains were solid stone. Using the stone walls, Dwarves built stone structures all along the wall leaving a wide paved roadway in the middle.

At the entrance, Dwarven soldiers halted them.

“Weapons!” gruffed one of the guards whose beard was plaited into a neat braid and tucked into his belt.

Celebrimbor removed his sword without any protest and gestured for his guards and Mairon to do the same. Mairon could see, even if Celebrimbor ignored it, that the Elven guards were reluctant to part with their swords. Mairon handed his sword to the Dwarf.

“I thought we didn’t trust Dwarves,” Mairon whispered to Celebrimbor.

“Without first trusting them, we cannot expect them to trust us,” the Noldo said.

*Yes, but expecting them to break is enough to destroy it.* Mairon smiled inwardly.

As he followed Celebrimbor into the Dwarven city, Mairon wondered where Elrond and Thranduil were. All Orcs within the ruin had been aroused. Soon, there will be no place in the ruined Dwarven Halls where the two Elves could hide.

Chapter End Notes
A/N: On Dwarven ruins: The information on Dwarves were given way back in Chapter 15 King's Council and in Chapter 30 North Expedition, but I am placing this here for those who have forgotten. Early in the Second Age, around year 40, many Dwarves migrated eastward settling in Misty Mountains mixing with Durin's Folk. After the War of Wrath, the Blue Mountains broke when Beleriand sank, and the two major Dwarven settlements, Belegost and Nogod, were extensively damaged. Many of the Dwarves from Nogrod were killed after they attacked Doriath and those who survived moved east. Few Dwarves who survived the destruction of their homes and did not migrate settled near their ruins both east and west of the Blue Mountains.
Into the Darkness

Chapter Summary

Elrond and Thranduil navigate through the Dwarven ruin.

Dwarven Ruin. September 30, Second Age 144

ELROND woke up with a start. He looked around unsure where he was. Gray darkness swirled about him until he looked up. A faint light streamed down from far above the stone ceiling. Elrond sat up rubbing his stiff back. He wondered how Thranduil slept on the stone floors of the barracks and never complained. Ever since they had to leave Amon Erebor, Elrond had spent many years in the tents, but they had feathered bedrolls during cold seasons and a carpet of fragrant grasses when the weather warmed. Despite their constant move, Maglor made sure Elrond and his brother were comfortable and well cared for.

When something slid off him, Elrond saw that there were two capes piled on him. No wonder he didn’t feel any chills.

Last night, Elrond convinced Thranduil to stay and rest in the Dwarven chamber. They had washed for the first time since they were captured, taking turns at a stone tub attached to the room. Next to the tub Dwarves had built a well where buckets attached to a rope brought up fresh water and poured it into the stone tub.

They also washed the clothes they wore and the capes which were soiled with mud and splattered with blood. They hung wet clothing above the stone braziers to dry. They had to sleep naked on the stone floor covered with thin drapes they found, but they preferred that over sleeping with clothes that smelt of blood and Orcs.

“Never thought I would have to sleep inside a Dwarven cave. At least, there are none of them here,” Thranduil had said as they lay down, each on their corner of the chamber.

“They are not so bad,” Elrond had said. “Look how nice Buri was.”

“That one was strange as Dwarves go. I do not know of any Dwarf who uses a bow instead of a crossbow. They usually do not have the skill. He is not a typical Dwarf.”

“What of it? You are not a typical Sindarin, and I not a typical Noldor. Yet, we are still Elves, and Buri still a Dwarf.”

“My apologies. I didn’t know you were so fond of Dwarves.”

“I am not. I just don’t believe we should generalize. Who knows? In the future, your child might become best friends with a Dwarf.”

“Ha! And yours will renounce being an elf!”

Elrond rolled his eyes. “Do not say such a thing. Can you not be little generous? He helped us when he didn’t have to.”
“I suppose. It seems there is at least one person among the whole who isn’t as bad as the rest.”

The grudging admission had Elrond fall asleep with a smile on his lips.

Elrond looked over at the corner where the Sinda had chosen to sleep. There was no one there.

“Thranduil?”

Only silence answered back.

“Thranduil!”

Elrond’s heart hammered. Even at this age, Elrond disliked being left alone in the dark. It reminded him too much of Elros’ absence, of being abandoned in the darkness of the cave. And something else rushed back into his mind.

*What if I don’t want to survive?*

Elrond had put aside what Thranduil had said during their capture by the Orcs. The words suddenly came back and seized Elrond’s heart, chilling him. The empty eyes, the casual disregard, and then those words Thranduil uttered:

*Elrond, I am sorry that I couldn’t protect you. Your mother entrusted you and your brother to me, and I failed you both.*

Now that he thought of it, it suspiciously sounded like a goodbye.

“Thranduil!” Elrond ran to the bronze door of the chamber.

The spears that Thranduil had placed there to prop the gates to make it harder to open were still there. It meant Thranduil was within this chamber. Last night, they had searched the rooms to see if they could find anything to use. They found a room with herbs that were hung on a rack to dry. Elrond had found enough ingredients to make a simple poultice to calm the swelling in Thranduil’s leg. After they had washed, Elrond fixated Thranduil’s leg using the wooden stakes to prevent the leg from moving, to give it a chance to heal.

“Thranduil, answer me!”

Passing room to room, Elrond picked up his speed then stopped in front of the last door. It was the one Elrond thought least likely to find Thranduil. It was a library of sorts with charts and maps. Elrond remembered how Thranduil disliked being cooped up in the library teaching the children.

“Thranduil!” Elrond pushed open the door and stepped into the room.

The ceiling in the room was taller here than the rest of the rooms. High above a stream of sunlight threw a beam of light onto a large stone table. Thranduil, his hair glowing golden in the sunlight, was standing, looking at one wall. When Elrond entered, Thranduil turned. His eyes widened, then a corner of his lips curved up as his eyes filled with amusement.

“Is this a Noldor thing or a human thing?” Thranduil asked.

“What?”

Thranduil nodded toward Elrond. “Feeling comfortable, are we?”
Elrond looked down, then flushed. He had forgotten to put on his clothes.

“I have nothing to hide,” Elrond managed.

“Nothing to show, either,” Thranduil chuckled.

“More than you,” Elrond shot back.

“You wish, Peredhel!” Thranduil scoffed, then turned back to the wall. “Come, look at this. It looks like a layout of the Dwarven city although it is only for this level. It seems there are seven levels to the city.”

Elrond ran back to put on his clothes before returning to the room. Thranduil shook his head but continued as if nothing had happened.

“Second to the bottom is the widest, then the narrowest on the top.” Thranduil fingered a rune carved into the highest level. “What do you think this means?”

“That is their symbol for the king,” Elrond said “It must be the palace. We should avoid going there. And the bottom level is the mines. It is possible their treasury is there. This,” Elrond pointed to several circles carved on the layout, “must be the gates. I think we are on level five,” Elrond pointed to a line that connected the fifth box to the layout. “That means the main gate is on level three. If I remember, their main gate faced Beleriand.”

“I am guessing the ruined hall where Orcs kept us before our escape is the main gate on the east side.”

“That makes sense. Which means, we are here.” Elrond pointed to dots carved into several areas on the layout. “These must be the secret doors.”

“Doesn’t help us. We don’t know the words to open them.”

“True. But some of them may have been damaged during the destruction. Remember that crack Buri mentioned? It led to the chamber that we were in before getting into the ruin. Although you needed to pass through another secret door there. When I got to the crack, Buri and Loni were there. They were clearing out the area. I convinced Buri to let me talk to Onar.”

“Even if we find these doors, the destruction could have changed the layout.”

“It is still worth remembering the locations of the secret doors.”

“Then, let’s hurry,” Thranduil said. “I have packed everything I think will be useful to take. Are you ready?”

“Why do we need to leave here? We can wait here for the Orcs to give up and wait for our warriors. It will also give your leg time to heal.”

Thranduil shook his head. “And how do you expect our warriors, if they are on our trail, to enter and find us here? Besides, I don’t think it is wise to remain too long in one place, Elrond. Orcs under the command of their master do not give up easily. And I don’t want to be cornered with nowhere to run.”

“So, you have not given up on life? That is good. I was beginning to wonder if you wanted to live.”

“I had my reasons, but that is no longer relevant.” Thranduil turned away.
Elrond wanted to ask more but knew that the matter was no longer up for discussion.

“How will we cross the lake?” Elrond asked instead. “It is too dark to see across the water, but it looks quite wide and deep. Even if the ruined columns along the way could provide some footing, you will not be able to tread water with your leg.” Elrond looked down at Thranduil’s injured leg. “How does it feel?”

“Better. I will manage if I have something to cling to. I saw a wooden barrel in the next room.”

“I guess it can support you in the water. By the way, thank you for the capes. They kept me warm, but you didn’t need to give me yours as well.”

Thranduil shrugged. “I didn’t need it, and you shivered in your sleep. I remembered how Elwing used to get chills after swimming, especially during cold weathers. I never understood it, but Earendil was always ready with his cape for her.” Thranduil chuckled. “That is probably why she fell for him. Either that or all that hair he had. Hairy he was, your father.”

“What were they like?” Elrond asked, feeling the soft ache in his heart. “I don’t remember them. Especially my father. I don’t remember much about him at all.”

Elrond looked away at the map on the wall. It was strange how Thranduil knew more about his family than he did. The Sinda had met all of them, his grandparents from both sides of the family. Even his parents while Elrond hardly remembered anything of them.

“Earendil? He was like you, full of hope and annoyingly worried about others. But he was also different from you. He had this explosive laugh, like waves that rise and fall, overwhelming all. He would laugh at the stupidest things. Made Elwing laugh, too. Then they would both keel over, laughing like two idiots.”

Thranduil smiled, his eyes softened, mellowing into almost green of the budding leaf. The Sinda’s eyes looked far away, and a tender smile played about his lips. Elrond was surprised.

“I thought you would have hated my father, him being human and a son of Noldorin princess.”

“Oh, I did. I hated him. So typical of Noldor. He barged in then took what belonged to us as if it was his from the start. Just like how your people were. Among Pengo’s books, I even read somewhere that it was Lady Idril who received Elwing at Sirion when she fled Menegroth. Can you believe that? We were already there before any of the Noldor arrived. It was our people who helped the Noldor settle at Sirion, but you wouldn’t read anything like that in any of your history books. But enough. We need to get moving.” Thranduil stepped out of the room, dragging his leg. “I will empty out the barrel. You go pack.”

Watching Thranduil limp away, Elrond felt hope. Despite what the Sinda said, what Elrond felt from Thranduil was nostalgia, not hatred.

They didn’t have much to take, so it didn’t take long for them to go down to the water. Even with a stream of light from far above, corners of the lake were dark. Many stone braziers on the columns were black with no fire in them. As they moved through the water, the stone columns rose up dark and threatening.

Elrond released several balls of light to illuminate the darkness ahead as he pulled on the barrel which Thranduil held on to keep himself afloat.

“It looks as if no one passed through here since the destruction,” Thranduil said.
“Dwarves avoid water, I believe. They fear the sounds that water make.”

“Is that why I don’t see any fountains here? We had hundreds of fountains inside Menegroth. And no part of our city was ever this dark,” Thranduil said.

“You don’t suppose there is anything in the water,” Elrond whispered afraid to disturb the silence. “It is too dark and too quiet.”

“Why would you even say that?” Thranduil grimaced. "Hand me the sword.” Elrond had placed the weapons along with their tunics and capes inside the barrel to prevent them from getting wet. “Are we near anything solid? I don’t relish being in this water. This is ocean water, isn’t it?”

Elrond noticed that, too. The water was salty, not the freshwater as he thought.

“I think the seawater that broke the mountain must have gotten trapped here. Let’s hope nothing else got trapped here.”

They remained silent as Thranduil grabbed the Orc sword. Thranduil had insisted that Elrond take the Dwarven sword as it was paid for with his dagger. Elrond picked up his pace. More columns rose up, dark shadows that grew then shrank as Elrond’s lights floated up and down around them. Except for the occasional plop plop of water dripping onto the lake from above, only the sound of their bodies treading water disturbed the silence.

Elrond could not tell how long it had been, but it felt like they were in the water a long time when Thranduil whispered breaking the silence.

“I see steps.”

Elrond sent up his balls of light to illuminate a wider area. Sure enough, stone steps rose up ahead of them. With darkness so thick here, he could not see how far up the steps went.

“Ai, Valar! So many steps,” Thranduil mumbled a curse as they got out of the water onto the shallow steps of stone.

“Well, you wanted to cross the lake. It is this or go back,” Elrond said. “I am relieved to be out of the water. I was sure something was going to attack us.”

They put on the rest of their clothing they had placed inside the barrel and looked about. The steps ahead of them were wide. It rose up and branched into three paths at a landing many steps above. One went up further into the darkness. The ones on each side bent downward: left one was broken one-third way, the right path bent and disappeared into the water.

“I guess straight up then.” Using the wooden pole to support the weight of his injured leg, Thranduil started up the stairs.

In the silence of the darkness, the wooden pole hitting the stone steps rang out tap, tap, tap, breaking the silence. Up they went in the solemn darkness. All around them silence swirled among the tall arches and the wide stairs, the wooden pole in Thranduil’s hand the only sound. Tap, tap, tap.

When they came to the landing where the path diverged left and right, they decided to rest. They each took half of a slice of the bread. At least, Elrond thought it was bread. When they ate it last night for the first time, Elrond had been surprised. The dark lump tasted nothing like what he had expected. He assumed the loaves to be hard as a rock. Instead, the bread tasted creamy, felt soft and smelled like mead. In fact, it wasn’t bad. And after days without food and drink, it felt like a feast.
After their meager meal, they started up again. To fight the oppressive silence and the dark, Elrond started to sing one of the many songs in Quenya Maglor used to sing. Thranduil did not try to stop him, and Elrond kept it as soft as he could.

“There is something that puzzles me,” Thranduil said when the song finished. “How did you know I spoke Quenya? You would have known that it was forbidden in Doriath.”

Elrond smiled. “Actually, I only guessed that you understood it. I didn’t know you spoke it fluently.”

“How?”

“You probably don’t remember, but Lord Gilmagor and Captain Astalder occasionally slipped a word or two, even a phrase, in Quenya. You understood them; didn’t even notice that they spoke in Quenya. I didn’t notice it until later. And when I found out your lady mother was a Vanya, I thought you picked up few words from her.”

Thranduil looked up and met Elrond’s eyes.

“How much of my mother was discussed?” The icy tone was back chilling the air between them. Elrond made a mental note not to talk of Thranduil’s mother again unless the Sinda brought it up.

“Not much. Just her family.”

“Lady Galadriel?”

“She didn’t say too much, but Lord Gilmagor and Lord Lammaeg knew who she was when her relationship to Lady Idril was revealed.”

“Who else knows?”

“Just those who were in the room before you arrived: the king, Lord Gilmagor, Lord Lammaeg and Lord Istuion. And me.”

Thranduil frowned.

“Lady Galadriel commanded that no one speak of it unless you wished it known,” Elrond added quickly. “We all swore not to utter a word until you did.”

Thranduil nodded as his hand moved over his neck as if to look for something there. Elrond’s heart skipped a beat.

“Did the Orcs? Did they take…”

“No.”

“That’s good.”

They stopped talking, and silence seeped back into the darkness around them.

The necklace incident reminded Elrond of what the king had said the day before he left the White City.

During the Midsummer Festival, watching Thranduil dance with Lalaithwen, Lord Celeborn had commented that they made a lovely couple. The king who was very fond of Lalaithwen had not said anything at that time. And with Lord Lammaeg bristling next to the king, it was no surprise. Unlike the king, Lord Lammaeg had made it clear in no uncertain terms that Thranduil was not good enough
for his daughter. With Lord Cirdan and Lord Celeborn in attendance, it had made for a very uncomfortable after-dinner discussion. Elrond had thought that was that, but the night before Elrond left the White City with Lord Gilmagor, the king had asked Elrond about his intentions toward Lalaithwen. Elrond had been surprised. It was unlike the king, or anybody for that matter, to ask about one’s affair of the heart.

When Elrond had been reluctant to talk of it, Gil-galad had laughed and said, “You need not be so guarded. I have always hoped for the union between you and Lalaithwen. And if you have such intention, I suggest you not to dawdle, Elrond. I see Lalaithwen taking an interest in Thranduil. And while I have no intention, like Men do, of commanding you or Lalaithwen into any marriage against your will even if it is for the good of the realm, if an opportunity comes to forge an alliance to achieve what I wish, I will not hesitate to do so. Now that we know who Thranduil’s mother is, my uncle can be swayed, I think, if it comes to that.”

Elrond had not known how he felt about that. He cared about Lalaithwen and knew Lalaithwen cared about him, but he wasn’t sure how deep the feelings went. Elrond wondered if it would be a strange thing to ask Thranduil now how the Sinda felt about the lady. Elrond turned to ask, then felt the icy wall was back between them. Thranduil’s face was grim, his lips thin as he moved up the steps. *Tap, tap, tap.*

Elrond thought it better not to ask. At least, not now. Silence descended upon them again with only the tapping of the pole in Thranduil’s hand ringing against the stone.

*Tap, tap, tap, doom.*

Elrond and Thranduil stopped.

*Plap, plop.* Water fell down onto stone and into the lake. *Plap, plop, plop.*

Elrond held his breath, but no other sound was heard.

“Did you just hear that?” Elrond asked.

Thranduil stood rigidly, his ears perked up. “Let’s hurry up the steps. We have no other choice,” Thranduil said.

*Tap, tap, tap, tap.* They ran up the steps, Thranduil doing his best to keep up.

“I see something ahead,” Elrond said when he saw a golden gleam. “But what if we are going toward them?”

*Tap, tap, tap, tap, doom, doom.* There was no mistaking it now. It was a sound of drums. Orc drums.

Elrond put his arm around Thranduil to help him up the steps and arrived at a landing. The path diverged here into left and right again. But the sound of drums came from both sides. Ahead of them stood two bronze doors. One on the left looked like the one at the chamber across the lake with a carving of a figure with a hammer slung over his shoulder. The one on the right looked precisely like the one on the left except for the face turned the other way. But, the one on the right had no light around his head.

“Which one do we take?” Elrond asked looking up at the doors that gleamed golden in his white light.

“Your guess is as good as mine,” Thranduil said.
They could hear them now. Feet running over the stone paths. Doom. Doom. Doom.

Elrond pushed open the first door, the one on the right. It was filled with a rubble making it unpassable. Thranduil pushed open the left one. The left door opened into a corridor. Inside was pitch darkness, but the two Elves stepped in and closed the door.

Elrond sent out another ball of light as they stepped backward, watching the door. Thranduil strung the bow and hastily threaded several arrows while Elrond grabbed the sword and readied to fight.

DOOM. DOOM. DOOM.

They stepped further back into the darkness when the ground beneath them gave away. Elrond cursed out aloud as he and Thranduil tumbled down into the darkness below.
The Voice in the Dark

Chapter Summary

_Alone in the dark, Thranduil seeks Elrond and comes across a meeting he will never forget._

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

**THRANDUIL** bit down a hiss as pain sizzled through his leg. He could not help curses busting forth through his clenched teeth. Never had he uttered such string of colorful words. The numerous stone steps were bad enough, the tumble had shaken his leg. And now that leg burned. Thranduil stuffed his fist into his mouth. He bit his knuckles and tasted blood. The blinding pain was but a spasm. When it passed, Thranduil let out a breath and sank back. The muscles around the injury trembled. Feeling weak, Thranduil lay there in the dark for a while then looked around. It was pitched darkness. He couldn’t see even his own hands. Thranduil got up on his knees and felt all around him.

Nothing. There was nothing he could touch except the ground under him.

“Elrond?” afraid to make too much sound, Thranduil whispered.

No answer. It was as silent as it was dark.

“Elrond,” Thranduil called out a little louder. He didn’t dare shout, however. They had tumbled, but he felt he didn’t fall that far from the door. Maybe a fathom or less which meant the door was not far from where he was. When the thought struck him, Thranduil stopped moving and listened.

Silence. Only silence surrounded Thranduil. Whatever drums there had been, they were there no longer.

Thranduil took in a breath then stilled himself. He sent out his senses in the dark to search around him. If there was a movement, a sound, no matter how minute, he will feel and hear. With his senses alert, Thranduil felt around him.

He felt and heard nothing. It was as if he fell into a void. His heart boomed. It was the only sound he heard. Thranduil was sure of one thing, that there was stone beneath him, a stone floor that had been polished smooth except for occasional clumps of loose stones. Thranduil thought that strange, that there were loose stones on a polished floor. But then, this was a ruin.

“Elrond, answer me!” Thranduil took a chance and called out loud. His voice bounced from wall to wall then disappeared. They must be in a hall, and it must be vast if his voice would echo thus.

Thranduil got up, wincing. He could find neither the pole that had supported him nor the bow. He reached for the quiver which he had replenished with arrows he found at the chamber. His hand found the quiver still slung low on his hip, but there were no arrows there. And in this darkness, finding anything was impossible. Thranduil wished he had tried harder, had joined in Onen Calad. Maybe if he tried, he could have generated his own light to guide him in this darkness instead of
having to rely on others who had lights of their own. Maybe they should have just stayed across the
water. Orcs would not have been able to cross the lake. Maybe…. So many maybes. His life had been
full of them.

Thranduilo wandered in the deep, impenetrable darkness, unsure of his footing, unsure of anything all
around him. He couldn’t tell how much time passed.

“Elrond!”

Thranduilo called out aloud, not caring whether anyone heard him or not. It didn’t mean much for him
to survive this alone. He had lost Elrond once; in the midst of his own grief and loss, he had
forgotten about the twins until it was too late. He couldn’t make that same mistake again. He could
not, would not abandon Elrond again even if this ended up being the last thing he did in this world.

“Elrond! You stupid, Half-Elven! Answer me, damn you!”

The words swirled around him then echoed far away as if laughing at him.

“…damn you! …damn you!…you!”

The floor suddenly sank, and Thranduilo slipped. He slid down in the dark, his arms waving in the air
for anything to grab. When his hands felt a rock, Thranduilo held on, then climbed up whatever it was
that was there. His injured leg burned anew as if dipped in a fiery forge. On all fours, Thranduilo
clawed through the darkness. He did not stop until he felt too weak to continue on. A tremor
wreaked him then. He felt as if he was suspended in the void with nothing to hold him. Anger stirred
in his heart.

me so! You have taken my mother, my sister, and brother, my grandparents. Allowed the Noldor to
spill the blood of my kin. Took away the realm I loved, the king and its queen, all the people who
loved me, that I have loved. What more do you want of me? What more is there to take from me?”

The fire leaped off his heart and consumed him. And he blamed the powers for all his woes. Then,
the images of Menegroth that he could never forget, the smoke and the screams, were all around him,
the swirling echoes. Thranduilo grabbed his ears to seal out the wailing, the shouts and the clanging of
the swords. The darkness filled with the coppery smell of blood. Thranduilo opened his eyes wide and
saw his hands stained with blood, with his mother’s blood as she lay dying. Her golden light a mere
glimmer before it faded. There was no more light. Only darkness.

Hot tears filled Thranduilo’s eyes. He was damned. Suffering was his lot; he deserved every moment
of them. Thranduilo let out a shuddering breath; the fire smoldered. Thranduilo trembled, alone in the
darkness until the winter returned to settle and cool him with cold reason.

“And suffer I will. And bleed I shall always be. I have done wrong. People died because of me.
Good people,” Thranduilo admitted to the darkness. “But why make Elrond suffer? Do not let him
suffer in this darkness, do not let him die in this forsaken place full of death and ruin.”

Thranduilo closed his eyes. Eru and the Valar will not listen. They had stopped listening a long time
ago. And why should they listen to him? He had not done anything worthy for them to take notice.
He had wandered in the dark, his back to them. Refused to listen to their teachings that his mother
had tried to instill in him. He had never thought things through. He had ever just reacted to the things
that happened; allowed himself to walk the dark path. All he had done was to hate, to rant and to
delve into himself. Despite that, there had been people who had offered their hands, the hands he had
looked down in his pride and hate.
And now that he thought of it, Thranduil realized there had always been people who had given him encouragement and offered a helping hand through the darkness of his wanderings. There were obvious ones like his family and the Doriathrin warriors, but there were also people that Thranduil had never expected: Cellon who had given him a warm welcome that first night in the barracks; Captain Astalder and the Dwarf Buri who gave help unlooked for when Thranduil was in need; and even Astarno. Now that Thranduil thought back, had it not been for Astarno taking that arrow, it would have found its mark in Thranduil. So many people. How many others had there been, Thranduil wondered, that he had forgotten, had been unaware of, in his anger and despair, who had been kind to him, who had offered words of comfort, a small fragment of warmth in the depth of winter? He had allowed his fire and darkness to blind him to the warmth and the light the world offered. Eru and Valar had not been silent. They had been merciful; he just wasn’t able to see it. Thranduil had always thought he was alone. The whole of Lindon had felt like strangers, but he saw now that there were friends if he would but allowed himself to see. And amongst all of them, there had been Elrond from the beginning.

Thranduil got up.

“I will find you, Elrond. I will find you and save you.”

A new-found strength coursed through him. He felt something flicker in his heart. Even the pain in his leg seemed to subside a little. Thranduil started to sing, the songs he used to sing with Doriathrin warriors when they trained, songs that gave strength and courage in the midst of grief and loss. Although he could not tell which way he was going, he looked straight ahead. He sang loud and clear, his sonorous voice ringing through the darkness.

He couldn’t tell how long he had walked. Part of him feared that he may have passed unconscious Elrond without even realizing, but he hoped his slow progress and the loud singing will alert or wake the Half-Elven if he had lost consciousness. But what if Elrond could not hear him? The fear made Thranduil stop.

“Is that you?”

It was then that someone called. It was Elrond’s voice.

“Elrond? Is that you?”

“Follow my voice,” Elrond said.

Thranduil turned to his left, following the sound of Elrond’s voice.

“How did you find me?” Thranduil asked into the darkness.

“I heard you sing.”

Thranduil walked on and saw a dot of light appear far ahead.

“You see the light?” Elrond asked. “Follow it. I am here with the cadets.”

“Cadets?”

“Yes! They found us. I told you, did I not? They found us.”

The dot of light became bigger and as suddenly as it appeared, the darkness dissipated. Thranduil was blinded, and he turned away.
“There, lad. There. You are safe. “Ah, it is so good to see you again, young one,” said Lord Istuion. “Worried we were for your safety. I am relieved to have found you.”

Elrond laughed as he grabbed Thranduil’s arm to help him walk in deeper into a large chamber illuminated by the bronze braziers that stood as tall as the Elven warriors.

“How did you find us? How did you get here? Where are we?” Thranduil asked.

“What does it matter? We are here,” Istuion said. “We found you. You are safe.”

“Did you come with the soldiers?” Thranduil asked. “There are Orcs behind us.” Thranduil turned and pointed to the darkness he had left. He had expected to see a door or an opening but did not see anything behind him.

“It was there a moment ago,” he said, feeling unsure.

“You are safe. Do not worry,” Istuion said.

“That’s right. Listen to your elder. We will take care of everything. You two just rest and relax.”

Thranduil turned and saw Captain Arandur walk into the chamber. Behind him, a dozen Elven warriors followed. They wore the blue capes with flaming sword embroidered in white. Warriors of Silmacil, the elite soldiers of the king’s army.

“I am so glad to see you, captain,” Elrond’s face brightened.

“None of you has yet to tell me how you found us?” Thranduil said, grabbing at his knee. The pain sawed through his leg and made Thranduil wince. It was beginning to throb making it harder for him to think.

“Can’t even obey the command to rest and relax?” It was then that Lord Gilmagor walked in.

“Sir!” Elrond and Thranduil stood at attention.

“At ease. You, two. Now go with your fellow cadets. I will stay with the captain and help the warriors get rid of these vermin once and for all.” Gilmagor gestured behind him.

Elrond put his arm through the side of Thranduil’s injured leg and led him outside. Elrond laughed and greeted other cadets. They were all there, all four of them. Outside was not another chamber as Thranduil expected. Rather, it was a grove with stone ceilings open to the sky. There were beech trees and in between them a small brook ran across it. The scenery looked so familiar. Beneath the green leaves of the beech trees, white tents were pitched. In front of the tents was a long table laden with food. The scent of the freshly baked bread and bowls of still sour berries made Thranduil’s mouth water at the sight of them.

His leg throbbed and Thranduil hissed. Everything looked perfect, yet something bothered him. There was a strange scent in the air, a smell of smoke and sulfur.

Thranduil squeezed his eyes tightly then opened them again. The view had changed.

Instead of the dappled shades of the trees, there were flickering lights from the tall bronze braziers. And on the floor, there was a glimmer of gold, a flash here and there as the gleam danced under the flames. Thranduil had never seen so much gold, not even in the king’s treasury deep under Menegroth. There had been many gems, gold and silver in the treasury of the great king. Thranduil had been there only once when he accompanied King Thingol. After being scolded by his mother for
the hair prank, the king had tried to cheer Thranduil.

“I, for one, had the best laugh of my life. Do not let the ladies get you down, Little Spring,” the King had said as he hoisted Thranduil up in his arms. “Let me show you the new treasure I have in my treasury. It is a special gem which holds the gold and silver lights of the two trees in Valinor, Little Spring. Look!” It was the first time Thranduil had seen the Silmaril. And he had oohed and aahed forgetting all the admonishment he received from his mother.

Thranduil’s head pounded. He looked about the vast chamber. The piles of gold gleamed like ocean waves. Besides the chests brimming with gold coins, vessels and artifacts of all make and sizes, there were also armors glittering in silver and gems. There were coats of mail in shiny silver, helms in bright gold and axes and swords and spears. By the swirling patterns etched onto the gleaming surfaces of gold and silver on some of them, Thranduil could tell those were Elven made. And there were chests, great jars and vessels with golden runes filled to the brim with gems of various hues.

“Sssss! Pretty, pretty bbbirdie, already awake? Didn’t esssspect you to wake ssssooo ssssoon,” a hissing voice ran a chill down Thranduil’s back. The mounds of gold in front of him moved as if they were waves of glittering ocean.

Thranduil swallowed. There was power in that voice, something hypnotic and dark. Something evil.

“Who’s there? Show yourself!” Thranduil got up, the pain in his leg forgotten.

The mountain of gold rose up then slid down falling onto Thranduil’s feet. The Sinda had to jump out of the way to prevent being buried in the waves of gold.

“Little bbbirdie, issss thissss fear I sssmell?”

“I fear nothing!” Thranduil shot back.

The mounds of gold under his feet moved throwing him down. In front of him the waves of gold rose up like a tsunami, then like a waterfall smashing down onto a rock, the gold fell like the thunder of a waterfall. Out of it rose a creature Thranduil had never seen in his life. But no one needed to see a dragon to know what it was, and neither did Thranduil.

It was a monstrous face, beastly and beautiful. Its face was bigger than the size of two Elves combined and covered in scales like snakes except that the scales were the size of Thranduil’s fists. They shimmered like rubies. It was a small dragon as sizes went, not much taller than a two-story building, but longer like a giant snake. Thranduil had always thought dragons were bigger having read about Ancalagon the Black which was supposed to be the size of a mountain. Behind its back were wings, bat-like, but red as blood, and folded. And from its nostrils, smoke arose. The room was filled with the stench of sulfur.

Thranduil swallowed. He tried to think about all the things he knew of the dragons. But not much of the dragons were known except that they were cunning, dangerous and filled with evil spirits. Some said they were offspring of the spirits of Maiar Morgoth corrupted. The Dark Lord bred them to lead his armies alongside with Balrogs. They were intelligent and independent of thought, unlike the Orcs and wargs. Some were of terrible power and strength to cast spells. Thranduil wondered if this was the master who commanded the Orcs to bring Elrond.

“Pretty, pretty little birdiessss,” the creature crooned as it flicked one of its claws open. The claw was long, size of a dagger. The dragon turned and laid its claw on the body that Thranduil had not seen until now. The body was half buried under the gold. Thranduil’s heart thumped. Using the claw, the dragon flipped the body whose dark hair hid the face.
Thranduil took in a sharp breath. It was Elrond.

“Your friend? Elllrlond. The one you will ssssave, issss it not, Little Birrrdie?”

Thranduil felt a chill run down his spine. It knew Elrond’s name. For ones who can cast a spell, knowing the names of their victims was a way to control them. Thranduil berated himself for having called out Elrond’s name aloud. He had not expected this. He wondered now what else the Dragon had heard.

“Why do you call me Birdie when it is you who have the wings.”

“Wingsssss do not maaaake one a bird, doessss it, little one?” the dragon spread its wings wide, and like black clouds, they blocked the firelight. The dragon flapped its wings, and the powerful blast of wind threw Thranduil down onto the ground.

The dragon laughed, its hissing sound reverberated through the chamber shaking the walls.

“Can a bird do thissss? Do you not know that my wingssss are a hurricane? And, I am fiiiire! You think you know ssssuffering? It issss jusst the beginning. You lossst your mother and sisssster, your beloved kin? Doriath was lossst to you, and you weep at the losssss at Ssssirion? Oh, but there isss more. Now, you will know what death issss. What fearrr issss.”

-----------------

fathom=6 feet

**Ancalagon the Black** (Sindarin, *Biting Storm or Rushing Jaws*): The great dragon of Morgoth that he used to fight Valar's forces in the War of Wrath. Ancalagon was the first dragon with wings. It was of monstrous size, as a big as a mountain. When Earendil with help of the eagles defeated it, it crashed into the Thangoodrim--three volcanic mountains among the Iron Mountains where Melkor/Morgoth built his stronghold--destroying its towers.

**Balrogs** (Sindarin, *Demon of Might*): Lesser Maiar seduced and corrupted by Melkor into his service. They are shown as the great beasts of flames and shadow. Gandalf perished in Moria fighting one of them which hid in the depth of Moria in LOTR.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter 59 The Dragon
The Dragon

Chapter Summary

The dragon torments Thranduil and asks for something unexpected.

Dwarven Ruin. September 30, Second Age 144

**THRANDUIL** knew he was in trouble. Even if he had weapons in his hands and was at the peak of his condition, he doubted he could fight a dragon. He was not one of the famed warriors of the First Age. He had neither the skill nor the power. And having experienced the illusion this one weaved, Thranduil knew this one was powerful.

Thranduil looked about him looking for the way out of this chamber. Unlike the first chamber situated above the lake, this room seemed carved out of one enormous granite block. The walls were not hewn roughly of stone like other chambers. Rather, the walls of this room were polished smooth. Everything in the place seemed well maintained. Whatever may have happened to the rest of the Dwarven city, this chamber remained untouched.

Thranduil scanned all four corners of the room, but he could not see a door. Either this chamber had a secret door, or the door was buried under the mounds of gold.

“Caaan’t fiind a way out?” the dragon’s amused voice made Thranduil turn to the beast. The dragon pointed upwards.

High up, above the reach of Thranduil, there was a balcony and a set of bronze doors.

“Ennnvy my wingsss, yet?” the dragon purred.

“I envy nothing of yours, Deceiver!” Thranduil pulled up his chin.

“Deeeeeiever? You wronnng me, Little Birdie.”

“Do I? Are you not the seed of Glaurung, the greatest deceiver ever?”

“I give that honor to him who sssleeps above, not to my sssire,” said the dragon, its voice filled with scorn. “For beingsss who proudly call yourssselves the mastersss of your fate, you plaace blame everywhere but yourssselves,” the dragon snorted, sending out a cloud of noxious fume through the nose. “I have heard you currssse the Powerssss. And if you ssspeak of that human cub Turin, his misssfortunes are of his own making. Men blaaame their woes on my Lord Melkor, but their willssss were their own. It was not the curse but the man’sss own pride that drove him to his doom. And even for your kind, it was pride that drrrove them to rebel.”

“That was the doing of Feanor and the Noldor. They are no kin of mine.”

“Nooo? I thought all Elvesss are kin. Ahhh, but I forget, yoouu are one of the children of the Moon made invisssible by the firesss of the Sssun, are you not, Child of Doooriath? Did the Sun’s firesss burned down allll who you loved?” the dragon mocked.

The chamber filled with a blast of snow. Thranduil was a child again as he sat huddled within
Glineth’s arms. Somewhere, his mother sang weaving quiet strength, soothing the sobs of Elwing and those on the boats. On the pale gray shore of the hidden dock, there were lines of silver blocking the lines of gold. Through the mists of snow and wind, clashes of metal and shouts radiated through the dark chasing after them all the way down River Esgalduin. The crystal waters of Esgalduin had run red that night. And it was his fault.

Thranduil trembled.

“The eevilest deed of the eevil. Wasss it not, child of the Silver Treeee? And it was not the hannnd of my massster that made it ssso but of your own kind. The choice wasss theirs to stain their swordssss with the bloooood of their kin. Not my master’sss. You can call us deceiversss and liarsss all you want, but when it mattered, it was your kin that did the mosst evil. Our master’s will only affectssss us, his servantsss. Your willsss are your own. Choices you make are your own. Am I wrong?”

The dragon moved, snakelike, around Thranduil’s other side making Thranduil limp backward and away.

“And eeeven in the desssttruction of your home and family, I seeee you had a hand in it. I see your guilt, friend of Elrond.”

Bile choked through Thranduil’s throat. Shadows danced all around him.

“I was deceived. I was but a child…” And suddenly the weight of the guilt seemed heavier than it ever had. Like the great columns of stone, they piled one top of the other, pressssing down on Thranduil’s shoulders.

“Of courssse. It iss never your fault, isss it? The death of your brrrother, sissster, motherrr. The warriorssss who fought to ssssave you.”

With every word the dragon spoke, stone columns were added and Thranduil staggered under their weight.

“And it wasss not just your family, wasss it? There wasss family of others. Like your friend Elrrrrond, perhapsss?”

Thranduil’s knees hit the floor. Pain sizzled through his injured leg and wrested a cry from his lips.

“How many more diiied becaussse of you? How many of his faaamily got killllled becaussse of you?”

Shadows loomed around him coming closer. Thranduil’s breath roughened, each breath labored as if he had ran through all three training fields.

“Sssso many deathsss. And that wasss not our doing. Nooo. That wasss just purely you. Your decisionssss. Yourrr choicesss. You can blaaame othersss all you want, but there are thingsss that even the darkness of cloudsss cannot block.”

The columns pressed down, so heavy, Thranduil could barely keep himself up. He balled his hand and they bruised against the stone beneath him. Thranduil struggled to keep his head up. But the shadows moved closer and with the weight of a mountain clung to him everywhere, to his neck, his shoulders, and his back. Thranduil felt his back crack as he slid under.

*Things that even the darkness of the clouds cannot block*...
His arms gave, and his head touched the stone floor. Shadows laughed triumphantly. The weight made it difficult for him to even lift his head.

“There. You seeee? It is the weight of your ooown guilt. I have but given forrrm to the burden that you carry. Would you call thisss deception, Little Birdiee?”

Weight of my own guilt? Thranduil swallowed. *The choices I have made through my pride and hate. Things that even the darkness of the clouds cannot block.*

Thranduil lay prostrated on the ground. He could not sink any lower than this, could he? He was bowing down in front of the creature of Morgoth. How much lower can he go?

It was then that his memory stirred. Words he had heard long time ago kept circling in his head. Something he had forgotten.

---

**Forest of Neldoreth. April 15, First Age 476**

“**THRANDUIL,**” Glineth called, but Thranduil did not answer. Instead, he burrowed further into the clump of roots of the old oak tree. His legs were still too short to catch up to the boy. Thranduil wiped away the wetness on his cheeks. The elfling had been sure that the boy would play with him now that he turned eight, but that was not to be.

When the sound of Glineth’s slippered feet moved away, Thranduil crawled out from under the roots. The sky was gray with the cloud so thick you could not see the blue of the sky.

“Thank you for hiding me, Master Oak,” Thranduil said. “What is your name? I know Master Greybark who lives in the palace. Do you know him?”

Thranduil opened his mind to the tree, but only the sound of its music could be heard.

“You must speak more slowly than that, Little Spring. Trees can’t hear you if you speak too fast.”

Thranduil screwed up his plump face to look up at the towering figure of the beautiful lady of Doriath. Her hair, dark as earth after the rain, shone like a stream of a river under sunlight.

“You heard me?”

The lady nodded with a smile.

“So, you know that trees can talk?”

“Of course, I do. I talk to them all the time although I am surprised you can hear them. There is much of your mother in you, elfling.”

Thranduil opened his eyes wide then smiled widely.

“I knew I was right even though some trees do not talk to me. He is always telling me I imagined things when I told him I could hear trees talk.”

“Oh, who is ‘he’?”

“Turin. Even Nellas said so. She said music is not the same thing as talking.”

“Did she now? Nellas is wise and knowledgeable of many things in the woods, more so than many
others, but some things are beyond her ability. Still, I hope Turin learns much from her. She has much to offer him.” The lady looked up, and it seemed to Thranduil that there were clouds in her eyes. But when she turned back to him, Lady Melian’s eyes were full of stars like those of summer evenings. “At the least, are you getting along with him?”

Thranduil shook his head.

“She doesn’t play with me. He says I’m a baby.” Thranduil looked up at the lady, his grief filling his eyes.

“Is that why you ran away? Dearest little one,” the lady sat down beside him and pulled him onto her knees. “You must understand, Little Spring, that in his eyes, you are no older than a toddler, a child of fewer than three summers.”

“I am eight!” Thranduil said indignantly. “He is only twelve, only four years older than I am.” Thranduil puffed up his cheeks. “He is big but not so big as others.”

“Men age faster. Much faster.” Clouds came to her eyes again. “I am afraid he will grow up too soon. And like all Men, Turin has little patience with time.”

“When do I grow up? Why am I always the littlest?” Thranduil asked.

“In due time, Little Spring. But, I promise you will not remain little.” Lady Melian smiled. “One day, you will grow big and tall like this oak tree, and no one will ever think of you as little.”

“Are you sure?” Thranduil looked up at the lady with hopeful eyes.

“As sure as the light eternal that burns within us all.”

“What is ‘e-ternal’?”

“It means it will always be there even if you cannot see it. It is like the light of the sun behind the clouds. When it is cloudy, it seems as if there is no Sun, but behind the cloud, beyond our sight, the light shines still. That is what our light is like. It is one of those things that even the darkness of the clouds cannot block. It is special because it is the gift Eru gave us. Always remember that, Little Spring. The light within us will always be there even those times when you don’t feel it.” Then, she looked directly into his eyes. “Even when you don’t feel you deserve it.”

Thranduil felt something rush into him and he had been unable to look away from the light-filled eyes of Lady Melian until she pulled away.

She let him down on the grass and got up. Then, she smiled warmly. “But, come, child. I will show you how to talk to these other trees which do not talk to you.” She held out her hand, and Thranduil slipped his small hand into hers.

Dwarven Ruin. September 30, Second Age 144

**THRANDUIL** frowned. It was a long time ago when he had last seen Lady Melian. Yet, for some reason sound of her voice rang clear as if she just spoke.

*It is one of those things that even the darkness of the clouds cannot block….The light within us will*
always be there even those times when you don’t feel it. Even when you don’t feel you deserve it.

Could it be true? Thranduil was unsure, but a new strength coursed through him.

“Crawl!” the voice boomed above him. “You are not even a birdie. You are a worm. Squirm and crawl!” Power crackled from the voice of the dragon.

Thranduil fought the pressure in his head and raised his upper body from the floor. He fisted his hands and willed himself to pick up his head. The dragon’s command burned and pressed into his mind. But Thranduil resisted. Instead, his heart burned with great fire. This guilt was his, Thranduil admitted. But, he will not bow his head down to this beast because of it. If anyone existed who can exact such payment from him, it was Eru, Valar, and the people whom he had wronged. Not this beast. Not this servant of the dark.

“My sins are my own. My guilt is my own. I will have to pay for them, indeed. But that is not for you to exact from me, beast!”

Thranduil reached deep inside and searched himself, something he had not done for some time. He had not felt any light within him for so long, he had been sure there was nothing there. But deep within him, something stirred. He had not realized how many people had been there for him. Even Lady Melian. She had known even far back as when he was a mere child. He had not understood then, that she had given him a piece of her wisdom. He wondered how much more had he received from people unknowing and blind.

Gathering all his strength, Thranduil pushed off the ground, stood up, and faced the dragon.

“Well, well. You sssurprise me. And you not eeeeven one of the Nolllldor.”

“Do not underestimate the strength of my people, Eavesdropper!”

“Eeeavesdrop? Didn’t neeed to. I could hearrr you alllll the way down the halllll. Had you been whissspering as had been your friend, I ssstill would have heard you,” the dragon said, then using his claw rolled Elrond about as if he was but a sausage on a frying pan. The Half-Elven did not even make a sound.

“What have you done to him?” Thranduil asked feeling dread seep into him.

“Your frrriend is enjoying beeeing ressscued. You seee how he is sssmiling.”

The dragon rolled Elrond forward so the elf’s face could be seen. Sure enough, Elrond was smiling in his sleep.

“Anything in aaabundance could be a detrrriment. Even hope. It can maaake one cling to that which one ssshould let go.” The dragon laughed, its laughter terrible as it rang through the chamber and echoed around the room.

Thranduil looked around the wide chamber filled with mounds of gold. The tall arched windows were cut into the side of the walls, and the streams of sunlight burned the mounds of gold into the hills of fire. The white marble columns gleamed in the golden light. Lights shimmered over the silver and gold mails and swords. The great chests filled with gems and the clay jars and vessels piled with gold shone. The lights in the room were blinding.

“This is not real,” Thranduil said. “Stop playing with me as I see your deception.”

“My, my,” crooned the dragon. “The little birrrd from the witherrred Ssssilver Treee, you have
wanderred in the dark for long and your time in the darkness has given you the eyes of a wolf. Interesting.”

The room changed again. It was not at all the way it seemed in the beginning. The chamber was vast and the ceiling tall. But the carved stone arches were now crumbled and cracked, scorched with marks of fire, a mere rubble of what had once been. But what surprised Thranduil more was that the chamber was empty. There were no mounds of gold and no chests filled with gems. What had been a vast chamber of polished granite was just that-- an empty chamber of stone. The columns of marble were broken and blackened. Above, the ceiling was cracked and ruined leaving an enormous hole. Through this gap, Thranduil could see that most of the stone columns on the floor above had toppled over with some hanging like a bridge over the wide gaping ceiling.

“You seeee now, do you not?” The dragon withdrew into a corner, Elrond clasped in its one claw. And as it moved, Thranduil heard a sound of chain. There in the shadows of the corner coiled a chain as thick as tree trunk of many years. And as Thranduil’s eyes followed its trail, he realized that the chain was attached to the dragon’s foot.

“You are a slave, a thrall to whoever that resides at the palace, your master…”

“He is no master of mine!” the dragon growled. Its chest glowed red and the room filled with the stench of sulfur. Thranduil clamped his mouth shut. It wouldn’t do to anger the beast to spout fire. As far as Thranduil knew, no one survived dragon fire. In fact, it was said that a dragon fire can even melt metals.

“I thought a breath of dragons can melt even steel and iron.”

“The power that bindsss me is greaterrr than the materrrial that thisss chain is made of,” the dragon said.

The Sinda glanced at Elrond who lay unmoving under the claw of the dragon.

“What do you want from me?” Thranduil asked. “You want something in exchange for my friend.” It was not a question.

“I had not expected much, jussst some amusssement. But maybe there isss something. Help meee.”

Thranduil blinked, dumbstruck.

--------

**Turin** – son of Hurin (House of Hador) and Morwen (House of Beor), Prince of Dor-lomin, first cousin to Tuor, father of Earendil (Elrond’s father). Turin is the tragic hero of the tale of Children of Hurin. Raised in Doriath, Turin’s life was one tragedy after another as his life was cursed by Morgoth as punishment for Hurin who was captured at the Battle of Unnumbered Tears. The curse, combined with the arrogance and pride of Turin brought end to Nargothrond, death of Beleg and his sister as well as his own death.

**Nellas**—One of the Elves of Doriath who, at Melian’s bidding, became a friend and a teacher to Turin during his boyhood in Doriath. Even after Turin stopped coming to her, she watched over him.
The dragon makes an unexpected proposal requiring Thranduil to make a choice he is unwilling to make. But Thranduil may not have any choice.

Sorry, this is late. I will be away on an overseas trip this weekend. I will be gone for a week and will be unable to post anything for the next two weeks (there is usually too much work to catch up once I return). If I can find some time, I will try to post something for you to read (no promises, though) before I leave.

THRANDUIL frowned up at the dragon.

“Help you? What game are you playing?”

“Oh, it iss no game, child of the Waning Moon. I am assking for an equal exchange, your help for mine.”

“What can a beast of the Enemy ask from me? I certainly do not need anything from you, fiend.”

“Bold wordsss, boy!” the dragon roared, its chest brightening deep red. “This chain may bind mee to this chamber, but do not think I lack the power or ssstrength to burn you and your friend to ashesss. Then you will seeee how much of a fiend I really am!”

“Well, I am just burning up with anticipation. If no choice will you give me, why even ask?”

“Feverish are you to hear me? Then, beee silent and listen, child of withering Sssilver Tree.”

“Stop with these diminishing inferences to refer to my people. It is wearing thin.”

“And I ammm more than thinlly weary of your interruption, child. Time tickssss and grows shorter.”

“Fire away, then, beast!”

The dragon stopped to look down at Thranduil. It snorted out thin smokes from its nostrils. Maybe it was the dragon’s way of threatening him, but Thranduil did not care. Whatever it was, the beast needed him. Otherwise, he would have been dead already. Thranduil was sure of it.

“On the very top of thisss mountain, house of the of lordsss of Dwarves stands.”

“And?”

“Patience!” the dragon snorted another puff of smoke out of its nose. “There sleepsss the one I cannot name. He was my massster’s favorite, chief of his armiesss. When we essscaped Angband
after the war, I was carrying four eggs, the last four of the winged dragons conceived under my master’s ministration. My four beautiful children.”

“You are a mother?” Thranduil looked at the dragon wide-eyed. A she-dragon! A mother, no less. Thranduil wondered whether dragons had maternal instincts like other species. Did evil creatures love? He did not know that was even possible.

“I am,” she said simply, raising her head high. Even with the features of a dragon being so different from those of the Elven kind, Thranduil did not miss the pride in her snake-like eyes. “But, unwittingly I followed him here not knowing the ill purpose he had for me and my children.”

“So, the deceiver was deceived. How unfortunate,” said Thranduil.

“You ought to be glad that I am a mother and had learned patience. If not, you would be ashes now, Elf!”

“Since I am not, you obviously have a use for me. What is it that you want of me?”

“His body is being remade, stronger and more powerful.” The dragon ignored Thranduil and went on making a sound strangely like a grinding of teeth. “He binds my children’s strength to himself, entrancing them to his will. Once he wakes, when he is newly remade, he will become even stronger than he is now. And when that happens, it is not just my children and I who will be affected; it will also be you and your people.”

“What do you mean?”

“He is gathering his power, sending out his minions east to find a place where he could rebuild. His Orcs are set to breed, and they are multiplying like a wildfire left unchecked.”

“Does he plan to attack Lindon?”

Thranduil frowned thinking of the destruction of the village of the Green Elves. Gil-galad had his army, but many were still newly recruited, many were too young and inexperienced. The devastation of the last great war was less than two centuries ago. Thranduil wasn’t sure if his kindred were ready to face another war and destruction.

“I do not know. He does not share knowledge. But I do know that there aren’t enough Orcs here to assault any Elven fortresses. But with us under him, that may change.”

That would be bad, indeed. Thranduil remembered back to what he had learned about the terrible battle of Sudden Flames where the dragons were first introduced. It was a terrible loss for the Noldorin army even at the peak of their prowess and power.

“So, he controls you and your dragonlings?”

“We are not mindless creatures who follow strength like the Orcs. We are born of the Maiar, and our wills are our own.” The dragon picked up her head and held it high.

“But is he not your new master now?”

The dragon roared, and from her mouth, a column of fire shot forth. Even though Thranduil stood far from the flames, the Sinda was thrown onto the floor by the force of the blast. The heat of the flames alone singed the ends of Thranduil’s hair and skin. The chamber filled with the noxious fumes of smoke and sulfur making it hard for Thranduil to breathe.
“I told you he isss no master of mine!” The dragon moved closer, her head above Thranduil like a snak about to strike.

Thranduil sat up and coughed, his eyes tearing in the stench. When his throat and eyes cleared, he looked up at the dragon.

“So you and he are in conflict. Is that why you are in those chains? I still don’t know where I fit in all these.”

“I am getting to it, impatient one. In a matter of few dayssss, his body will be complete.”

“What do you mean by ‘body’?”

“Exactly what I mean. Body, the physical form empty of his ssspirit.”

“How is that possible? I thought a body cannot exist without a spirit?”

“You misssstake him for one of your kind. He is one of the Maiar. He doesss not need a body to live although he needssss a body to interact with those in this world, except, of course, those who are connected to him in sservitude.

“So, he is not one of the Balrogs.”

“Balrog?” the dragon laughed. “No. He isss more powerful. He is a ssorcerer, a necromancer. It is said he can change shapeesss and take over the bodies of lesser beingssss.”

“A necromancer? The Nameless Enemy?” Thranduil said with a shudder. There was only one servant of the former Dark Lord that he knew of that was known to change shapes and could call on the spirits of the dead. Gorthaur, the Abhorred Dread, the evil one who Luthien encountered in her quest to save her beloved human. Was it possible that this vile servant of the Dark Lord had escaped the War of Wrath? That would be a treacherous thing, indeed, for the Elves and other free people of the world.

“And what can be done with this terrible enemy if he is who I think he is. Even if he isn’t, what can I do against someone like that? Someone of such evil power?”

After all, he was just one Elf, not even one of the powerful Noldor. As much as Thranduil hated to admit it, he was one of the Sindar, the diminished people whose power and glory dimmed under Noldorin sun, destroyed into ashes under their bloody feet. Thranduil knew that the glory of his people will never again rise as brilliantly as it had before the intrusion of the Noldor into Middle Earth.

“There isss a possibility of defeating him because I happen to know that he, the ssspirit of the Nameless One, is not here. For a while, he was away, but recently he returned. Not to the cave of hisss chamber, but somewhere closssse. I can hear the Orccesss running about on his bidding, for none else would the Orccesss move with such efficiency. Whatever the reason he is staying away, ssomething is holding him, ssomething where he cannot tap into all of his power. But whatever is holding him back, once his body is complete, he will return. But until he doesss, there issss a chance.”

“Chance for what?”

“Chance to kill the body before he getssss a chance to re-emboby.”

“What does that do? Balrogs were spirits bound to their bodies and killing them, destroyed them entirely, but killing a body without a soul means nothing.”
“That is where you are wrong, Elf. The Nameless One is powerful, but the body he occupies limits the amount of the power he can wield. He can transform, but he must have his original body to do that. It is his physical form that binds. You kill the body, and he will just be a spirit unable to touch anyone except his servants whose wills are tied to his. And it will take time for him to make a new body that could contain all of his raw power, especially if he wants the body in the shape of your kind. Personally, I do not know why he prefers such a fragile shell of a body.”

“Which means even if we manage to kill the body, he will eventually rise again.”

“Yesss, but it will give time for my dragonlings to grow their strength so he cannot force his will on them.”

“But, I thought dragons have a will of their own. So how can he force his will on them?”

“My children are young. Until they are older, their will is not strong enough to resist him. And I have delivered them all to him. I did not know what he had planned. He took one of my children, drained her completely of life to fuel his sorcery and to strengthen the new body. Then he subjugated my remaining children to stand guard like ones of lesser creatures while he slowly drainsss them of their will. And the longer he keepsss them, more thrall to him they will become.”

The dragon roared, shaking the walls of the chamber, then lowered her head to the ground, slinking backward until her tails hit the corner.

“They need to be awaaaay from him until they become strong enough to withstand hisss will to dominate them. Once they are old enough, he will be unable to subjugate them just as he isss unable to command me.”

“So, what am I to do? Rescue the dragonlings?” Thranduil asked.

“The dragonlings will not heed you until their connection to his body is severed. The body diesss and the effect he wrought will die with it, and I will be freeee. This must be done before all the changesss he is weaving on the body isss complete. Once the new moon rises, the transformation shall complete, and the necromancer will return and re-embodiess. Once that happensss, no power can stop him. He will have his own power and that of my dragonlingsss and their complete obedience. Then, I, toooo, must submit as I will not fight against my own children. Kill the body before that happens, and I go free.”

“Free to burn other people in the world? Delay one terrible evil and free four dragons loose on the world. I do not think so. You take me for a fool?” Thranduil glanced at Elrond. “My friend would die rather than let that happen, and so would I.”

“Fool!” roared the dragon. “Then you would rather seeee him rise with four dragonssss by his side? Because once he re-embodiesss, he will have a powerful body with three dragonlings under his total control and I will be there with him. How would you like to have usss loose onto your world at hisss command? Do you think he will forgive the Elves and Men for their part in overthrowing our Lord? Do you?”

Her roar reverberated through the chamber shaking the walls. Thranduil was thrown down onto the floor. Fear shook him as Thranduil watched the red glow of the dragon encircling her entire body. It ignited the ruby red of her scales, and she looked like fire itself. She spread out her wings, and the chamber darkened. Thranduil was thrown to the wall as the tempest of wind roared along with the dragon as she took flight.

As she lifted into the air, the chain turned black. The dragon screamed as the chain became taut. It
came alive and swung the dragon around, throwing her violently against the wall. The ceiling crumpled and rubble fell down as the entire chamber shook.

Thranduil scrambled up then saw Elrond’s body just a few feet from him. Thranduil crawled amid the falling rocks and rubble, ignoring the pain on his leg, to Elrond.

The young Noldo was still asleep.

“Elrond! Elrond! Wake up!” Thranduil shook the Noldo, shielding him from the falling debris. But Elrond did not move. Thranduil dragged Elrond over to a corner where there was still a portion of ceiling remained intact and prevented debris from falling.

“Wake-up, stupid!” Thranduil slapped Elrond’s cheeks, but the Noldo remained slack in Thranduil’s arms.

“He willlll not awake.” The dragon who had been thrown down onto the floor picked up her head. “Only I can wake him. Do you not know? He doesss not doubt nor suspectssss. His heart is pure and full of hope. And the one who thinksss only of goodness does not seeee deception.” The dragon laughed. “Kill the body, and I will free Elrond. And you need not worry about usss. We will not stay while necromancer’s spirit remainssss. Without the body, he is weaker, but he still controlssss the Orcs and other thralls. My dragonlingssss are too young yet. I will take my young onesssss and go far from here as soon as I am released before he returnssss. Help me, friend of Elrond. Help me and help your friend.”

Thranduil glared up at the dragon. Pity rose in his heart, but at the same time, suspicion. Why was this dragon willing to tell him all these things? Even though he knew Orcs fought each other given a chance, dragons were servants of the dark. Maybe there was a power struggle between this necromancer and the dragons, but each was allied to the Dark Lord. Was it normal for them to tell each other’s secrets to their enemies?

“How could I kill the body?” Thranduil asked glancing at the unmoving body of Elrond.

“The Nameless One’s body liesss in the cave, at the top of the mountain, behind the throne room. The cave isss guarded by my dragonlings, but their firess are weak, and they are slow due to the spell on them. As a fleet-footed Elf, you should not have a problem avoiding them esssspecially if you can find something to distract them. It is only the four levelssss above you that you need to worry. Each level will be full of Orcs. Now that only a few days are left before the body will be ready, he hasss called all hisss servants to this ruin.”

“Wonderful! I will just limp my way up four levels, kill the hordes of Orcs and fight the three dragonlings. No problem, indeed.” Helplessness swept over Thranduil followed by the fires of anger.

“Ssspare me your sarcasm, Elf,” growled the dragon and flipped her long tail crowned with several spikes landing it suspiciously close to where Thranduil stood. “I can heal your injury. A sssip of my blood will heal your wound and will give your body ssstrength enough to resist dragonling fire.”

“Your blood? Aren’t dragon blood poisonous?”

“Indeed it isss, for one like your friend. But for you, for onesss with darkness as I seee you surrounded, you will survive.”

“You want me to drink your tainted blood?”

“Unlessss you want to limp up four levelssss of this ruin. It isss your choice. I do not care how you
achieve the body’s death asss long as it is done.”

“I have never heard it said that dragon’s blood healed anything.”

“I cannot force you to believe mee. I sssuppose you have not heard of the legend among Men, that the taste of my blood endowss the drinker with a power to understand all tonguesss of men, beasts, even Ainur? Although Men have it wrong. The blood can give power only if the blood wasss given freely. Why do you think the Nameless One wantsss mee. He wantsss more than just my ability to breath fire.”

“Is that true? I always supposed it a superstition. Even if true, how does the ability to understand all tongues help me?”

“Never underessstimate the power of a tongue, Little Birdie,” the dragon said. “But, the Men have it wrong. The blood enhancesss the ability of the drinker. It is not limited to the understanding of languagesss. It also healsss. Why do you think we are sooo strong?”

“I thought it was the amor of your body.”

“That, too, but our blood is infused with our Lord Melkor’s essence.”

“No wonder it is tainted.”

“Do not mock the power of Lord Melkor, child. He wasss the greatest of the Valar, the ssstrongest and the most powerful…”

“Who lost a war to the Valar and taken to the West in chains. He is the evil of this world, the scourge that brought sorrows immeasurable to our kin.”

“But, eeeeven you must admit he wasss powerful. And in our blood runsss part of that power.”

“More reason to reject it.”

“But without it, how willll you do what I asssk? I will exchange the freedom of my children for yoursss and for your friend’s. And for nothing else. It mattersss not how it isss achieved. Decide, Little Birdie.”

Thranduil swallowed. A terrible choice lay before him. The Sinda knew that in his current state, he did not have any chance of completing the task the dragon had set before him. But to drink the blood tainted with Dark Lord’s essence…even the thought of it made his stomach turn.

“What other effects would it have on me? Besides repairing my injury and giving me strength, what else?”

“As I said, it will enhance what you have. But I do not know as I have never given my blood to your kind.”

“Then, how do you know I will survive it?”

“Because, child, it bindss to the darkness. And I seee enough darkness in you. You will survive it. Now, open wide,” the dragon said. She took one of the claw into her mouth and drew blood and filled her bone-white claw. The blood was black as tar.

Thranduil turned to look at Elrond. The Noldo’s face was calm, relaxed and smiling in his sleep.

*Why do I have to make this sacrifice? What do I owe him? He is not even one of us.*
But Elwing’s face as she had looked upon Thranduil that day in Sirion flashed before him. And the jeweled dagger the Half-Elven sacrificed to save him.

But what if the dragon is lying? What if she is just trying to use me? Thranduil could not shake off the thought. Something told him that the dragon was not telling him everything.

“Even if this repairs my injured knee, I have no weapons. How could I fight all those Orcs? How could I kill the body which you said is covered with the strength of a dragon? It may be a wiser course to bring this information to the Elven warriors. They are near here, with the Dwarves. If they knew of this, they will clear this area of the Orcs and destroy the body.”

“Bring all your warriorsssss here? Think me a fool, do you?” the dragon thundered. Her breast glowed red hot. “The moment your warriorsss see the body and my dragonlings, they will not hesitate to kill them, both the body and my children. And the time isss short. He returnssss, and this little scheme will be over. Decide now, Elf!”

---------

A/N: The legend regarding the blood of the dragon (actually about eating dragon's heart and surviving the taint of the blood) exists in Tolkien's earlier work on Book of Lost Tales Part 2 on the earlier draft of the story of Turin, "Turambar and Foaloke”.

Gorthaur is the Sindarin name for Sauron meaning "Terrible Dread." He was called by many names. Among them, Nameless Enemy, Abhorred Dread, and Necromancer.
Chapter Summary

Mairon listens to a conversation that reveals some interesting information that he could use. It decides for him whether to return immediately to where his body lay in the Dwarven ruin.

Chapter Notes

Sorry, this is quite late. I just couldn't find enough of "me" time to do this. I will, hopefully, get to put up the next chapter soon.

Dwarven Settlement. October 1, Second Age 144

Mairon heard the wooden handle of the hammer in his hand crunch before he saw its handle go askew. He had known she would be trouble, but the Maia had not expected this.

We tried, my lord. But she wouldn't let us open the door.

Are you sure you checked everywhere else? Mairon growled.

The Orcs fell back, their backs almost touching the stone column behind them. They threw themselves onto the floor. Even though they were mere images, Mairon could smell the heavy scent of fear radiating from their sallow green skin as they trembled before him.

We searched everywhere, Master! Her chamber is the only ones we didn't look. She barred the doors so they would not open.

Access it through the upper floor!

We tried…but none returned. The Orc who spoke looked about ready to bolt, his lips white and trembling.

Mairon threw the hammer in his hand. The image of the Orcs, trembling and whimpering, dissolved as the connection was lost. The hammer hit the stone wall and fell onto the floor with a clang that reverberated throughout the stone chamber.

"Imbeciles!"

The tips of Mairon's fingers throbbed as power rushed into his hands. He will obliterate those ugly, inefficient creatures! The insufferable, good-for-nothings who can't even do what they were told!

But the main problem had been Uluch. She was raised on Melkor's knees, fed by his powerful hands, petted and praised. As the only she-dragon sired by Glaurung, she had been Melkor's favorite.

Master spoiled her. That was probably why she even entertained the thought of defying me. The
foolish beast!

But then, her sire was no different. Glaurung had his head in the clouds, so sure of his strength and power. That damnable beast listened to no one except Lord Melkor, and his beastly daughter was no different.

If he didn't want her blood, Mairon would have gotten rid of Uluch the moment he found her duplicity. But there was much of Lord Melkor's essence in her blood. And for his purpose, he wanted as much of her blood as he could. And the blood must be given freely for it to have the effect he was looking for.

The fallen Maia took in a breath to calm himself. It wouldn't do to lose his head at a crucial time like this. In few day's time, his body will be ready for him, stronger and more powerful. With the dragonlings by his side, she will surely kneel before him.

Mairon wondered if he should release this body now and return to the cave behind the throne room. It would be easy to devise some event where someone will find Gelir dead. The forge here was different from the Elven ones. It wouldn't look that strange for a curious young Elf to fall into some dangerous pit while exploring. But then, it would be a pity to leave this body when there was still some life left in it. The new moon wouldn't rise for another week. Mairon hesitated, but he did not trust Uluch. The fact that she didn't let his Orcs access the chamber said volumes. Mairon could feel it. She was planning something.

The Maia turned then almost jumped. In front of him stood an Elven warrior, tall and imposing. There was a frown in his deep gray eyes that shone with fierce light which had not diminished despite near millennia out of Valinor.

"Captain Astalder. Sir!" Mairon stood upright resuming the military form and greeting purely out of instinct than anything else.

"You know me, cadet?" The captain of Silmacil raised his eyebrows as his eyes scanned Mairon's uniform and the chamber.

"Only by reputation, sir. I do not think there are any one of the cadets who does not know you."

Astalder nodded, but the captain did not relax nor smiled.

"What were you doing?" Astalder asked surprising Mairon by the bluntness of the question. "Are you the only one in here?"

Mairon immediately gathered all his strength and power. He assumed the most innocent look he could muster.

"Sir?"

"Just before I entered, I felt a surge of something powerful inside this chamber."

Mairon winced inwardly careful not to tense any muscles. His long experience dealing with a variety of people had taught him to keep firm control over every part of himself.

"Please clarify, sir. If you are referring to the loud clang, I was just upset…"

"About?"

"It is personal, sir," Mairon said and held the captain's eyes. The few months of training with other
cadets had taught the fallen Maia that Elves respected the privacy of others and did not meddle in other's affairs unless asked.

"What happened in here?" Astalder asked, his eyes not leaving Mairon's.

"I threw my hammer. That is all. I am unsure what else you mean, captain."

Astalder scanned the area and fixed his eyes on the broken hammer on the floor.

"Are you the cadet who was with Lord Commander?" Astalder asked.

"Yes, he is, Captain Astalder," said Celebrimbor who had just entered the forge at that time. "He is Gelir, son of Amarthorn."

"My lord," Astalder bowed, his hand on his heart. "Amarthorn? You mean the one who was one of Lord Fingon's lieutenants?"

"Yes. Amarthorn hung up his sword and now trains city guards." Celebrimbor lay his hand on Mairon's shoulder. "My young friend here has his warrior father's talent as well as his artist mother's gifts. He offered to help me here in the forge while we look for the other cadets."

Astalder smiled although Mairon noted that the smile did not reach his eyes.

"Forgive me, son of Amarthorn. I have just received the word of Lord Commander. I am afraid I am bit on edge."

"I understand, sir. I will leave you two."

Celebrimbor nodded.

"If you will, cadet," Astalder stopped Mairon. "I would like to ask you about what happened. Will you spare me some time later?"

"Of course, sir. I don't remember any more than what I have already told the other officers, but if it helps, I will be happy to answer any questions you have."

"Thank you," Astalder said and turned to Celebrimbor.

Knowing he was dismissed, Mairon left the forge and went into the next chamber which held tools for the forge. The stone walls were thick and made it impossible, even with Elven hearing, to hear any sound from the next chamber. Fortunately, he was not an Elf but a Maia. He reached out with his senses into the next room.

"I am sorry about your uncle, captain. It was a shock even for me when I first heard about it."

Celebrimbor's voice was concerned and grave. "But I am surprised that you had a word so speedily. I thought you were deep within the ruins."

"I was. But I make it my business to be informed." Astalder's voice sounded cold to Mairon's trained ears although the captain kept it neutral and unconcerned. "How did this happen? The commander is not one easily misled."

"I do not know." Celebrimbor's voice was heavy with grief. "At least, I have a word that the commander's condition is stable. If possible, I would have given you a leave to visit Grey Havens, but I have been informed that the first snow will arrive soon. Apparently, winter starts early in these parts. My Dwarven smith told me they usually see snow within a day or two of the rise of the New
"I see now why one of the Dwarven merchants was offering to sell several fur-lined capes to my warriors." There was a trace of laughter in his voice, but it was only a moment. In a more subdued tone, Astalder asked about the village of the Green Elves.

"Is it true what I heard about the Laiquendi village?"

Celebrimbor let out a long drawn out sigh. "I am afraid it is true although I haven't seen it myself. The report said it was demolished. No one was spared."

There was a moment of silence until Celebrimbor asked. "Did you make any progress?"

"I have made plans to focus on two areas in the ruin: the throne room and the treasury. Dwarves believe some sort of power resides there."

Listening to the captain, Mairon was glad he had not placed his body in the throne room despite his temptation to do so. Foresight had been upon him at the time. He was glad he had heeded his own instinct.

"Were you able to find out what?" Celebrimbor asked.

"Not exactly. But my guess is the one in the treasury is most likely a dragon. They covet treasure by nature. I am unsure of the one in the throne room. It could be another dragon. I just hope it is not one of the balrogs. But whatever it is, Dwarves are deathly afraid of it."

"Were you able to find a path to them?"

"With the help of the Dwarves, we were able to dig through the collapsed main road, but we hit what appears to be a river. According to the Dwarves, it used to be the main road that connected the rest of the roads to the palace which sits at the highest peak among the mountains. We prepared several rafts. My warriors are ready to sail upward, but the Dwarves will not go further."

"You cannot blame them," said Celebrimbor. "Dwarves fear water. I believe it is one of the reasons why they have abandoned their city within the mountains instead of rebuilding. According to them, many sections of the old city are still under water."

Celebrimbor must have walked further away from the wall of the chamber as the sound of his voice moved away.

"But we need them still, my lord. Although they have provided maps, I do not know how much of the structure changed when the Beleriand sank. It would help us greatly if we have Dwarves accompany us."

"These people are stubborn, captain. It will take some convincing…unless you could find a path through their treasure chamber. Although they have managed to empty out the upper treasury, their lower treasure chamber where many of the more valuables were kept was swallowed up by the ocean water before the Dwarves were able to move its content. If we could find a way to get to those treasures, it can be used as a way to negotiate with the Dwarves."

"Treasure chamber under water?"

Astalder must have made some sort of face because Celebrimbor asked with eagerness in his voice.

"You have something, captain?"
"Have your lordship heard of a thing called sea barrel?"

"Sea barrel? I don't think I have."

"You have not visited Grey Havens, then. You should, my lord, find time to visit the port city at least once while you are in Middle Earth. The city itself is magnificent, but you could go there just for the amazing cuisine Falathrim developed. And if you are willing to venture out to the sea, you could try a sea barrel."

"What is it, this 'sea barrel'?"

"It is a barrel hand caved by Falathrim. They sealed the wood with enchantments to hold and replenish air. They use it to stay underwater for a long time. It is how they gather a variety of seafood from the bottom of the sea. It is not something they share with outsiders, but if requested through Lord Cirdan, I am sure the Sindarin lord will accommodate us."

"If you haven't noticed, Captain Astalder, Lord Cirdan and I are not exactly friends."

"I am aware of that. But, if it was a request from the king, Lord Cirdan will grant it, I am sure."

"Even if I manage to convince them to help, I doubt any of the Dwarves will be willing to ride a raft over water."

"There is another way," Astalder said, and the captain lowered his voice. Mairon edged closer to the wall. "The Dwarves have been holding back. I have sent some of my Elves to gather information and some have reported back about secret doors built into the ruin. Apparently, there are many but all of them require a special word to open them. I have tried to ask about it but none of the Dwarves are willing to talk about them. Many just flatly refused to even acknowledge their existence."

"You cannot blame them. If this was our city, would you have us share our secrets with the Dwarves?"

"I understand their reluctance, but if we could use these secret doors, I suspect we could reach our destination much quicker. In fact, the Dwarves need not share their secret words with us, just allow us to pass through them."

Mairon tilted his head. He had not paid the Dwarves any attention since he had arrived in the Dwarven settlement. He did not care for the Dwarves and didn't think there was anything they could offer him. But secret doors, that changed things. Maybe he could find his way to the palace without having to leave the body behind.

"We are not in a hurry to reach the inner ruins, are we?" Celebrimbor asked.

"I believe the earlier we reach the palace or the treasury, better it is. There is a possibility that the captured cadets are alive inside there. I took the liberty of reaching out to the lieutenant in charge of searching for the lost cadets. They believe the lost cadets are taken to the Dwarven ruins, further up North. According to the map of the layout, they may even be near the palace or the treasure room."

"I thought the tracks led east?"

"One of my warriors had accompanied the lieutenant. They located a trail running east and tracked a score of Orcs but there were no traces of the cadets. My warrior was able to find the new track and lead the lieutenant's team although it had taken them a whole day to retrace their steps. They are sure now that the track goes to the Dwarven ruin."
"If the Orcs have them, then you and I know that they are probably dead by now. It has been a week now since they were taken. Orcs do not keep prisoners."

"I suspect the Orcs took them there for a reason. Maybe they were ordered to do so in which case they wouldn't kill them until they get what they want. In any event, we cannot give up on them, my lord. Even if we cannot find them alive, even if it is their remains that we find, we need to find them. Let me remind you, my lord, that Lord Elrond is among them. And there's Thranduil. He is supposed to be the king's ward. The loss of the young Sinda may cause some bad blood with Lord Oropher and his followers."

Celebrimbor scoffed aloud.

"What can Oropher do to us? He left his son. He cannot blame us for his son's loss. It is not like it was our fault."

"The young Sinda was left to our care. I would think it is a matter not to be taken lightly, my lord. Also, if the king hears that his cousin is missing, I doubt he will stay in the White City and wait for news. He will want results, and I want to give him something when the king asks." Then, Astalder stopped abruptly. "But, he doesn't know, does he?" It was not a question. "Is the king even aware of what happened to my uncle, never mind what happened to the cadets?"

"I did send a bird to Lord Lammaeg. I do not know how much he has shared with the king."

"Do you not think it is wrong for you and the councilors to withhold information from the king?"

"He is still so young. We are only trying to protect him." Celebrimbor's voice turned sharp.

Mairon smiled.

"The king is no longer a child, my lord. It is about time we stop treating him like a child and let him be the king he was meant to be," said Astalder. "After all, he is Lord Fingon's son. If we but let him, he could be a great king."

"He is yet to prove that he is capable."

"How is he to prove his capability when his councilors keep him blind and deaf?"

"You are out of line, Captain!" Celebrimbor's words were icy.

"Out of line, my lord? I thought I was the one in the line. At least, I know what color I am wearing. Do you, Lord Celebrimbor?"

"That is surprising coming from the one whose house changes colors based on who is in power."

Mairon rubbed his hands with glee. His master had done a superb job of sawing discord.

"I beg your pardon, my lord. Our house always served the House of the Kings, not the designated color of one," Astalder said, his voice calm and revealing nothing.

"If I remember correctly, my grandfather was a king, yet you and your uncle were not with him."

"Then, maybe I should remind you that you were but a child then and do not remember that it was your grandfather who had left us behind to walk through the grinding ice. We did not abandon Lord Feanor. He abandoned us."

"Perhaps he didn't feel you were loyal to him. I was told only those who were not loyal to our House
"We refused to shed the blood of our kin. My uncle thought it would harm rather than help Lord Feanor in the long run and had advised him accordingly. If that was disloyalty, then I do not know what loyalty is."

After that, a long silence filled the space. Mairon wished he could see into the room, but he fought the urge to peek. After his encounter with the captain of the Silmacil, Mairon did not wish to make Astalder suspicious any more than the Noldo was already.

"Will you now refuse to obey my commands?" asked Celebrimbor after a while.

"You mistake me, my lord. You are the king's councilor and I am the king's soldier. The king gave you his authority to command us. When you command me as the king's servant, I shall obey."

"Then, let's complete what we came here to do, captain. I will talk to the Dwarves about the secret doors you mentioned. And if you will, you can arrange the matter about that sea barrel or anything that I can use to bargain with the Dwarves. Although I am aware that it will take time for the barrels to arrive, the possibility that they could recover the treasure the Dwarves deemed lost may convince them. As to the cadets who may be in the ruin, I will leave that matter to you and your Elves."

"As you will, my lord."

Hearing the sound of the captain leaving, Mairon busied himself looking through the tools in the chamber. He wondered if he would need to rid of this captain. It wouldn't be easy. Captain Astalder was a formidable warrior, and unlike in the forest, they were not alone. But, there was always a way, especially given that they were in the middle of the Dwarven settlement. Nerves were on the edge of both races. When nerves were sharpened, it was easy to push one or the other side.

But a dispute among the Elves and Dwarves now could harm Celebrimbor. For now, Mairon wanted to keep Celebrimbor safe. Something told the Maia that the last of Feanor's line could become useful for him. If not now, then later.

Mairon whistled as he picked up a new hammer and weighed it on his hand. But then, the captain could be useful, too. In fact, Astalder may just be the one to use against her.

---

**A/N:** Feanor, Celebrimbor's grandfather, became the King of Noldor upon the death of his father, King Finwe. When Feanor convinced Noldor to leave for Middle Earth in pursuit of Melkor who killed his father and stole the jewels he created (silmarils), Feanor's half-brothers, Fingolfin (Gil-galad's grandfather) and Finarfin (Galadriel's father) all followed Feanor. However, after forcibly taking the ships from Teleri (first kinslaying), Feanor, taking only those who were loyal to him, took the ships and abandoned Fingolfin and his followers (Finarfin returned back to Valinor upon hearing the Doom of Mandos). Fingolfin, his followers and those whom Feanor abandoned traveled three Valian years (close to three decades in Middle Earth time) through Helcarax to arrive at Middle Earth.
Crossroad

Chapter Summary

Thranduil has chosen and it comes with a consequence.

Dwarven Ruin. October 2, Second Age 144

Thranduil wasn’t sure if he had made the right choice. But, it was made. Whether good or bad, he had chosen. He took in a breath and looked about him.

From one of the many columns where he stood, Thranduil could see the crossroad. The wide square was illuminated with a stream of light from high above. Directly under that light, in the center of the square, was a stone structure about one and half Thranduil’s height. Made of polished white granite with silver veins, it sparkled under the sunlight as if there was a light within it. If it weren’t for the square designs on the structure, Thranduil would have thought Elven hands carved it.

Where are you?

Thranduil scanned the square where various roads converged. From the square, the roads lay in different directions each disappearing into the darkness. Thranduil was thankful that he had memorized the map of the layout. Without it, he doubted he could have found his way here. It helped, too, that the crossroad was located on Level Five, just above the chamber where the dragon was.

The dragon had boasted that her sense of smell was superior to any other creatures on earth. Of course, Thranduil did not believe everything the dragon had said about herself, but he hoped she was right about the Dwarves. Otherwise, Thranduil would not have known where to start looking for them.

Thranduil tilted his head, his ears listening for any sound of steel on stone. As he leaned to his side, Thranduil touched his right knee. He realized now that it no longer throbbed with pain. He wasn’t sure when the pain stopped. The pain had been constant all through his clambering up onto the floor above, with the dragon’s help, through the broken ceiling of the treasure chamber.

Thranduil stepped onto his injured leg, half expecting it to burn, but it didn’t. There was no strength in it, however. It wasn’t fully healed. Disappointment laced through him. Thranduil had hoped the sip was enough. If not… Well, it was too late now. The shadows under where Thranduil stood shivered and the Sinda shivered with them.

Had he made a correct choice? He had made so many wrong choices. Could he have chosen wrong? Taken the wrong path? He thought he had chosen a hidden path, but now fear gnawed within his breast. His past mistakes had caused grief to so many. He went over the decision made only hours ago.

“Here. Drrrink!” The dragon tilted her claw filled with dark blood. The young Sinda looked up and met the dragon’s eyes.
Her eyes were wondrous. A color of sun rising, sizzling, seething, a red ravishing. In the midst of the rising sun a dark sword stood. A black sword shining, flaming, flashing, a black burning. There was a promise of power beyond Thranduil’s deeply buried desires--power and strength; knowledge and wisdom; wealth and riches. The eyes inflamed and insisted.

“Think what you can do with the power I can give you. What is there that cannot be done? You can right all the wrongs done to you and your beloved family and friends. You can replenish the home that was plundered. They took from you, took and took and took. The Noldor and the Dwarves. You can give it all back to them. Life for life. Blood for blood. With the power and strength in your hands, nothing can stop you.”

Thranduil swallowed. A small part of his mind resisted. There were other ways. There were always options. He knew that, and all the knowledge he gained on his paths told him so, to withstand. Yet, his heart tightened and flustered. Desire churned and rose. A chance to get back at them all, to return blood for blood.

Thranduil’s heart beat faster and faster. He reached out for the claw. His hands shook as they grabbed the claw and he drank from it.

A sip.

The liquid burned as it went down his throat and Thranduil gagged, clutching at his neck. A slither of poison. He opened his mouth, and a thin gray smoke escaped his lips.

“More!” the dragon insisted. The more you take, more power you shall receive. Her voice echoed in Thranduil’s head, and a great thirst seized Thranduil. He clutched the claw like a man dying of thirst.

More. Yes, more! He wanted more. This precious, precious gift.

“Precious. My precious,” Thranduil murmured then grabbed the claw to drink from it again. Somewhere deep inside, someone screamed. A silent scream that shook his soul.

CLANG!

A sound of steel hitting rock reverberated through a stone wall reaching into Thranduil’s sensitive hearing and into his misted mind. A whiff of wind swishing away the mist. The she-dragon turned away, perking her ears, leaning toward the wall where the sound came.

Thranduil shuddered. It was as if a wind was sucked out of him. He felt lost suddenly as if he had been walking in a dream to be rudely awakened. He was standing in the mist-covered swamp full of reeds; he was lost, thirsty and filled with need. It was hard to see where and what he was doing. Yet, a part of him knew he was entrapped. It had been a mistake to look into the eyes of the dragon. He knew it in his head, but his body was slower to recover.

“What happened? What was that?” Thranduil shook his head to clear his mind, fighting the great thirst that held him, the great desire to drink with abandon. But he had fought such pains before; he had suffered even greater thirst and hunger before. But this thirst was of a different kind, one that sank deep within to torment his mind and to rouse his urges.

The dragon turned back to Thranduil. “Never mind them. It’s just Dwarves.”

“Dwarves?” Thranduil held onto the pale thread, weak yet visible.

“The three little doorkeepersss from across the water. Crawling about in their secret passagesss.”
“Three Dwarves?” Images of the Dwarf with a long white beard and the two young ones flickered across Thranduil’s hazy mind. Secret Passages? Somewhere in his mind, another path rose. Amid the mist and the reeds, glimpse of the hidden road swayed before his eyes.

“Now, where were we?” the dragon turned to Thranduil.

Thranduil shook his head. The thirst was overwhelming. The blood beckoned. But the mist thinned, and he could clearly see the swamp now, the darkness and the stench, and the pale path beyond.

The dragon thrust the claw containing the black blood.

Thranduil’s hands itched to hold the claw again, to drink from it, to quench his thirst. But the Sindar remain rooted where he stood.

“Why do you hesitate? Do you not sssee what a great gift I am offering? There isss none I know who wasss offered what I am offering. Unlike the dragonlingssss, I was fed by my master with his own blood. There are no more of usss whose blood can offer the potency that my blood can. It will confer you powerrr like you never had. It will enhance everything you have within you, imparting to you the great knowledge and ssstrength. In you, I see ssstrength, a great potential deep within. But potential is just that if it isss not tapped. None of what you have will matter if you do not have the knowledge to wield it. The power hidden within my blood can give you that. You will know what ssstrength is; what power iss. Many covet this knowledge, this power. Only chosen few are given thisss gift. Consider yourself lucky.”

“But is it really a gift? And what is the price for such a gift as this? I have never known anything to give power without demanding payment in return. And things that confer instant satisfaction always demand the highest pay.”

“You will reject power and knowledge beyond your wildest desires out of fear of payment? Great thingssss come with a price, and you get what you pay for. Thingssss that require great price are that much worth it. Will you not pay the toll to travel the ssstraight road that is tended and smooth? Why would you take the road ssstrewn with rocks, full of curvesss and unknown, when I am offering you the ssshortest rout to where you wish to go?”

“Because, beast, those wiser than I have taught me that true knowledge comes from the curves in the roads, from the rocks and pebbles. They may make me stumble and fall, bleed and cry, but they are the lessons that will guide and strengthen me, not what is at the end.”

“Puhahahaha!” the dragon roared with laughter, the smoke from her nose filling the chamber with noxious fumes. “Fool! It isss no wonder why my master thought the Sindar unworthy of his attention. Here you are too craven and afraid of price when I offer freely what many covet. Thissss blood, desired even by the Namelessss One, contains the potency of my master that you wouldn’t find anywhere else. Yet, you would reject it.”

“I had a sip. I thought sip was enough.”

“Mere expression, Little Birdie. What you had is barely sssuffice when you face my dragonlings. The more you consume, more power you will have. Now, look into my eyesss and you will sssee the power you are capable of.”

“Will you compel me rather than let me choose?”

“I’m just trying to make it eeeasier for you, Birdie,” the dragon purred. “I see the weakness of your people sssurfacing. This is why your people will never achieve the greatness of your sssuperior kin.”
Thranduil narrowed his eyes, clamping down on the spiking thirst that beckoned. And the anger.

Superior kin, indeed! Power-hungry slayers of kin!

But, Thranduil took in a sharp breath. To succumb to anger was to surrender to evil. Not now. Not when he was so close to finding his light again. But he was weary. Withstanding the will of the dragon sapped him of what little strength he had. Hurt and tired, Thranduil wasn’t sure he had the strength to fight the dragon’s powerful magic. Already, he could feel her power thrumming in the air. And the thirst was overwhelming.

“Even if I gain strength enough to spare, how will I kill the body encased in the dragon scales? I do not have a weapon mighty as the ones held by the dragon slayers of old.”

“Dragon slayers! Ha!” the dragon roared. “There are no slayers of dragons except cowards and tricksters who hide in the shadows to attack us unaware. They are cheaters, users of unfair and unjust advantage.”

“You talk of being unjust and unfair when your size and strength alone are an unjust and unfair advantage against us.”

“Blame it on yourrr god for making your kind sssmall and weak.”

“Small and weak we are, but we obviously are smarter than you, beast. In the end, we are still here, standing proudly under Elder King’s sky while you and your brood skulk in the shadows.”

“Well, Elf, the Wise and Enlightened!” sniggered the dragon. “Since you are sooo wise and knowledgeable, dooo the honors without my gift. But, here,” the dragon pulled away her claw. Then, pulling out one of her dagger-like teeth, she dropped it beside Thranduil’s feet. “Boastful child! Undeserving you are, but I, being the generous giver, I will give you a weapon you can use to kill the body. For it cannot be killed with just any old knife. But, I’ll leave it to you and your wit as to how you will achieve it. You fail, you and your friend as well asss all of your kin will burn in the fires of my darlingsss. For I shall endure either way.”

With the dragon’s words, the last remnant of the mists dispersed.

To say he had no regrets would have been a lie. Thranduil had chosen a different path, the one less traveled, thus full of unknown, but at least he will be walking it with his eyes open knowing full well where the road led rather than being compelled to go where he did not wish to go.

But, at the same time, this road required him to give up those things that he treasured as much as he did his mother’s necklace. Thranduil looked up at the light streaming from above.

Elbereth, guide me. Take pity on me, and if not me, then on Elrond. Help me so I can help him. Give me the strength to do this.

As if the fate had ordained it, the stone floor clicked softly just then, a sound of steel clad feet on stone. They were muffled, but to Thranduil’s sharp ears, they were evident, heavy and surefooted.

Thranduil swallowed, then pulling on his cape, he stepped into the shadows to wait for them to come nearer. Soon three figures approached the square. Each of them carried a large pack. And all three of them wore a hood that completely concealed their faces, but Thranduil knew them. They held their weapons ready in their hands and advanced gingerly toward the stone structure. They looked about as if they expected someone to jump them.
“Master Onar,” Thranduil called as he stepped out of the shadow and into the light with his hood pulled down.

The Dwarves were clearly startled, but they held out their weapons at ready. With deliberate slowness, Thranduil raised his hands to show that he held no weapons in his hands. His experience had shown him that when people were on edge, it was best not to make any sudden movements.

“Elf!” Onar gripped the ax tighter, taking a threatening stance. “What do ye want?” the Dwarf said looking around. “Where’s the other one?”

“With a dragon,” said Thranduil.

Both Loni and Buri opened their mouth and eyes wide, but Onar’s expression did not change.

“And ye escaped alone leaving yer friend to the dragon fire?” Onar’s question was filled with contempt.

“No, I didn’t.” Thranduil felt the heat rise in him but held himself firmly in control. He did not have the luxury of losing his temper. He needed their help, the Sinda reminded himself. “The dragon offered me a choice: a life of the body that lies at the palace for the life of my friend.”

“What body?” Onar asked.

“Up at the palace, a body of the Nameless One sleeps. It will rise more powerful with the New Moon. I am to kill it before it has a chance to rise.”

Onar laughed out loud.

“Ye? And how will ye accomplish that?”

“It will not be easy, but I know it can be done…with your help.”

Onar looked at Loni, then they guffawed. Then, Onar looked at Thranduil with a frown.

“And why would I help an Elf? Ye are no friend to us.”

“Because what sleeps above affects you more than me. If we fail, it will cost me a friend, a dear one at that, but for you, it will mean the lives of all your Dwarven friends and family. The thing has all the Orcs at its command and the dragons, too. There are dragonlings guarding the body. If it rises, who do you think it will strike first? Your people who live near this ruin or mine who live many leagues away from here?”

“What lies are ye spewing now, Elf?” Onar shook his head.

“It is no lie. I heard it from the dragon herself. Look!” Thranduil took out the dragon tooth which he had carefully wrapped in a piece of Elrond’s cape.

“Onar, it is a tooth, one sharp as a freshly honed blade,” Buri said.

“Pah! It be a sharpened piece of bone for I all know,” said Onar.

Thranduil held back an urge to knock Onar on the head. Instead, he unfurled the cape to show the rest of the tooth including its root where there was still a drop of blood in its groove.

“You see this. It is the black blood of the dragon still lodged in its crevice.”
“It could be some black liquid,” Loni said and poked his finger. “Awww!” Loni yelled, pulling back his hand with a jerk. The tip of his finger smoked then turned black.

“It is dragon blood. It will burn any who touches it unless the dragon gave away the blood of her own free will.”

“How do ye know so much about dragons?” Onar narrowed his eyes.

“Because she told me herself.”

“I don’t trust ye. I don’t trust your kind.” growled Onar. “My mother’s father and her brother were the jewel-smiths at yer king’s court. Both murdered by yer people. My mother was never the same after that. No.” Onar shook his head. “Even if what ye tell me is the truth, I will not help ye.”

“Then, do it for my friend. He is a Noldo. Your people traded with the people who raised him. They have never done your people any harm. Whatever gripe you have should be directed to me, to my people. I am of the Sindar, and I will take whatever blame you have against my people but help him whose people have always been friends to the Dwarves.”

“Noldor, Sindar, what’s the difference? Ye are all Elves, and all Elves are same. All are liars and killers!” Onar huffed. “Come, Loni and Buri, let’s get going.” Onar turned away.

Thranduil clenched his hands to control the urge to whack the Dwarf. His chest tightened. He wanted to shake the stubborn Dwarf and knock some sense into him. Then, it hit Thranduil. Onar was no different from himself.

_They are Noldor. They are all one and the same._

The words he had so angrily thrown at Astarno came back to Thranduil now. And with it, the young Sinda felt all hope vanish. Even if he trusted himself and his ability, even if there was strength in his injured leg, he could not hope to fight his way up four levels full of Orcs and what else. He had hoped he could convince the Dwarves to help him by taking him through their secret passages. But, now, the likelihood seemed far away.

_Elron! Elron! I failed you. Again._

Thranduil’s chest heaved as it filled with grief. He wanted to cry if he could. All his pride and dignity forgotten, Thranduil sank to his knees.

“You are right. How could you help me, a Sinda, when your heart is filled with rage, when it aches so fiercely whenever you think of them, your people, your family and friends who fell. It doesn’t matter what the reasons were back then. The fact remains that their lives were taken from you, and you suffered. How could you forget the anger and the pain you felt? How your heart must have burned when you looked upon me, for did I not remind you of the anguish you felt then? I cannot hope to understand your pain because I do not think others could understand mine of the days when the Noldor took from me my mother, my brother, sister and all those who I loved.”

Thranduil grabbed at his chest. His chest tightened as the iron claw that held his heart squeezed and made it difficult for him to breathe. His eyes stung.

“I, too, hated all those who were even remotely related to the people who killed my family. Noldor. All of them. Even the ones who had not done me or my family any harm. And, him, too, my Noldorin friend, in the dragon’s clutch. How could he call himself a Noldo after all that Noldor had done to him, his mother and his father’s people? I felt he abandoned the Sindarin side of him. And I hated him for it. And yet, he is my sister’s son, one whom I had promised to protect but failed to do
so. Despite that, he stayed with me when he could have left me with the Orcs. He gave up what was
dear to him to save me. I, who should have been the one to save him. Protect him.”

Hot tears of regret and remorse fell from Thranduil’s eyes onto the stone floor.

Someone held out a hand. Thranduil looked up. Buri had offered his hand. Thranduil took it, and
Buri helped the Sindar up onto his feet. Onar had his back to Thranduil, yet he had not moved. Hope
flickered within Thranduil.

“Help me. Please. I want to save him. And I cannot do this alone.”

But, Onar did not move.
Wants and Needs

Chapter Summary

Thranduil does not want Onar’s help, but he needs it. What will it take to convince a stubborn old Dwarf?

Dwarven Ruin. October 2, Second Age 144

THRANDUIL swayed on his feet but caught himself. The encounter with the dragon drained him. If it wasn’t for Buri’s hand, Thranduil did not think he could have gotten up onto his feet. The Sinda had hoped the sip of the blood would give him strength if not healing but the only thing he felt was the lingering thirst for another sip of the blood.

The Sinda looked down at the old Dwarf who had not moved from where he stood with his back to Thranduil. Maybe that was a good thing, Thranduil hoped. The words had come unbidden when he sank onto his knees. He did not mean to kneel nor say all that came out of his lips, but now that they were spoken, Thranduil realized how true those words were. He saw now how others must see him, unwilling and unable to forgive and forget. And just as he could not, Thranduil realized he could not expect Onar to do so either. But without the help of the Dwarves, the task at hand seemed nearly impossible.

Thranduil let out a sigh and placed his palm over his forehead. He needed to think. There must be a way to convince them to help. Nothing mattered now other than doing his duty. Even his pride meant nothing if he were to fail Elrond again. How would he able to call himself a warrior when he could not keep safe the one he had given his word to protect, not once but twice? His father had said that a warrior was as good as his word. A duty to protect came before everything else, before that of one’s own safety and pride. And had he not given his word?

Please protect my babies. Keep them safe.

Elwing’s last words to him were still fresh in his mind. When the new option had shown itself, Thranduil had hoped swallowing pride would be easier to bear than swallowing an unknown substance given by an evil creature, it surely would have had an unwanted effect in the future. No matter what the dragon had said, Thranduil wasn’t willing to pay the price where the payment, he suspected, was a complete surrender of his light. He thought he had lost all of it, but he realized now that the light had been part of him, and it was still there within him. He just needed to find it again.

But, first, he needed to convince the Dwarves to help. He thought it couldn’t be so hard. After all, as important as it was to rescue Elrond, there was a bigger consequence to think about. Thranduil had hoped he could convince the Dwarves of it.

“It is true. I cannot do this without your help. And this matter isn’t about just saving my friend but also about making sure we do not have another dark power to replace the one taken from this world.

“Onar, ye said so yerself that there is a terrible power in the throne room. What if what the Elf is saying is true?” Buri said. Loni shifted his feet glancing at Onar.

Onar still did not turn around, but he harrumphed loudly.
“Even if what ye said is true, what can we do about that? We here are only four, and there are a whole lot of Orcs.”

“Loni here dropped his hammer while we were crossing a damaged section of the passage. It drew a horde of Orcs!” Buri said. “The whole upper level is crawling with them.”

“You have access to secret passages. If we use them, we could surely avoid many of the Orcs.”

“But the two floors above us are extensively damaged. The waves came through the city mostly through the main entrance in Level Three. Some of our secret passages were unusable or filled with bats and spiders. Big ones. And the hallways are crawling with Orcs. Even we have not been up there after the Orcs came,” said Loni

“Maybe only Level Four and Three are occupied by the Orcs,” Buri said. “If we could clear the passage of the spiders and bats, maybe we could pass by some of the Orc hordes without engaging them.”

Thranduil shook his head. “According to the dragon all four floors above us are filled with Orcs,” Thranduil said and let out a sigh.

“It is a suicide,” Onar said. “I am not going to let my son and my young kin risk their lives. For Elves, no less! We will go to our settlement and warn the other warriors.” Onar gestured the young Dwarves to follow as he moved toward the center of the broadest road leading out of the crossroad.

“Where is your settlement?” Thranduil asked Buri who remained beside Thranduil.

“At the lower mountain near the river. About three to four days down the center road depending on what we encounter on the way,” said Buri.

“Three to four days?” Thranduil almost choked. “The New Moon is in six days’ time.” Thranduil shook his head. “That will not do. The dragon said we must destroy the body before the rise of the new moon. Even if you could arrive at your settlement in three days and return immediately, it will be six days when you return. We do not have the time.”

“Ye are assuming that the evil creature told ye the truth, laddie,” Onar stopped when the two Dwarves did not move from where they stood at the center of the crossroad. “When do those foul creatures tell the truth, eh?” Onar turned to the two younger Dwarves. “Let us go. Now that we know for sure that there is a dragon and what may even be something worse, we should put as many leagues between us and those creatures.” Onar hefted his ax to lean it on his shoulder and moved further down the main road.

“Are you so willing to take the chance that the dragon was lying?” Thranduil called out to Onar’s back. “Once the body rises, the dragon below will be used against you and your kin. The dragon and her dragonlings. How will you and your kin deal with them then? By the time you return with your warriors, you will not only have to deal with four dragons but also that evil creature up in the palace. I thought this was your home. Is it not why you remained? Because you refused to give up on your home? This is the chance to defend it from a threat that will grow bigger if left untended. If you will not do it for my friend, at least do it for your selves and for your home.”

Onar turned around and stomped his way back to Thranduil. The Dwarf looked up at Thranduil, the ax held tightly across his chest.

“Do not tell a Dwarf how to defend his own home,” Onar growled.

“Then, do your job!” Thranduil growled back. “Or are you too proud to listen to an Elf? Is that it? Is
your pride more important to you than the lives of your two young kin?” Thranduil gestured toward the two young Dwarves. “Or is it more important than your home? Believe me; I know about pride. I have an insurmountable amount of it. And I let it rule me at times. But, I have seen what terrible things the pride can do. I have seen it kill a king, destroy a realm and let a loving mother endanger her children.” Thranduil dropped his head. “And I have allowed it to convince me more times than I can remember into doing stupid things. But, even I will not allow it to rule me when it comes to defending my home. If I had a home, I would defend it with everything I got even at the cost of my pride, dignity and whatever else it would demand of me. I would think you understand that: what it feels like to lose a home you love. Even if it is this crumbling ruin. It is still your home. As for me, I don’t even have that.”

Onar glowered at Thranduil, and the Sinda returned it in kind. With anger came a new burst of strength.

“If you will not help me, then so be it. I didn’t expect much from Dwarves anyway. I will do what I can even if I have to do it alone.” With that, Thranduil turned and walked forward.

The road ahead was dark, and Thranduil could not see what was ahead. But he walked on resolutely. It was a stupid idea anyway, Thranduil tried to comfort himself. Why in Utumno did he think that Dwarves would help? Ugly, stunted creatures! Thranduil cursed to himself. It was then that Thranduil realized that he was walking without any pain or weakness in his right knee. He stopped to feel his knee with his hand.

“Elf!” Onar called.

Frowning, Thranduil turned to look.

“The palace is this way,” Onar pointed to a road behind him, opposite the one Thranduil took. Heat inflamed Thranduil’s inside. He wanted to knock the old Dwarf, but instead, the Sinda squared his shoulders, then walked across the crossroad where the three Dwarves stood, and passing them, took the road Onar pointed ignoring the old Dwarf’s snicker.

Let the old Dwarf laugh, Thranduil told himself. He is not worth my trouble.

As Thranduil walked down the road away from the light, the road beneath him trembled. There were many feet, iron over stone.

“Were Orcs on your trail?” Thranduil turned to the Dwarves. “Because they are coming.”

The Dwarves stiffened as they grabbed their weapons at ready. They stood with their backs to each other and craned their necks to see into the dark all around them.

“Where?” Onar barked.

“Here, they are coming from this side.” Thranduil pointed to the direction he was heading. “But they are still far enough. But not so far that I can’t hear their iron boots hitting stones.

“Buri, Loni, you two go on to the settlement. Take the passage parallel to the center road as far down as ye can. If ye don’t need to go around, ye should get to the settlement by the morning of the third day. Do not stop at the path until ye get to Duf. Let him know what is going on here. Tell him to bring everything he got.”

“Dâd, what about ye?” Loni asked. “I’m not leaving without ye!”

“Do as ye are told!” Onar gruffed. “I am not going to let this pointy-eared youngling roam about our
home without supervision. He obviously does not know what he is doing.”

“You forget, I am the one who picked up the sound of the Orcs,” Thranduil said and glared at the Dwarf.

“What else is for yer big ears if ye cannot hear?” Onar leaned his ax on his shoulder then stomped past Thranduil. “Ye didn’t even know which way to go. Now follow along, laddie. This way. And be warned. If I detect any falsehood, I will hew ye down like a lying Orc.” The dwarf turned around to fix Thranduil with fierce eyes. “Got that, Elf?”

Thranduil clenched his hands wanting to whack the Dwarf badly. He didn’t care for Onar, didn’t want the Dwarf leading him, didn’t want the favor from the Dwarves, especially this one. But a need and want were two different things. Thranduil bit his tongue knowing the words that hovered on his lips were less than kind and were more than enough to anger the old Dwarf.

Onar moved past Thranduil then stopped at a thick stone column built into jagged rocks at the edge of a bridge. Onar reached into a hidden grove, and a side swooshed open.

“Well, what are ye waiting for, boy? Are ye coming or are ye going to stand there like a troll without a master?”

I’ll wallop you like an Orc with his master hounding on his back!

The words leaped off his head, but Thranduil, with strenuous effort, kept it off his tongue. If the need didn’t drive him, Thranduil wasn’t sure if he could control himself. And if this Dwarf continued this way, he may have to murder this stunted creature on their way to the palace. Keeping his mouth firmly closed, Thranduil trudged after the old Dwarf.

“But, dâd …” Loni called after them, but Onar didn’t even bother to answer the young Dwarf. He waved away the two Dwarves, then entered the opening on the stone column without turning back for one last look.

Thranduil glanced at the two young Dwarves. Loni scowled mightily at Thranduil. “If anything happens to me dâd, I will find ye and kill ye,” Loni said.

Thranduil managed to keep silent but could not help rolling his eyes as he followed the old Dwarf. It was more likely that he would die before the old Dwarf from the explosion of temper.

Inside the passage was wide enough to accommodate two heavyset Dwarves to walk side by side, but the height required Thranduil to bend down. As soon as Thranduil stepped inside, the door slid shut. The Sinda took in a breath as complete darkness descended upon them. Ahead of him, Thranduil could hear the old Dwarf’s rough breathing and some sound wiping the stone wall. Then, the walls began to glow pale blue.

At first, Thranduil thought they were random patterns, then realized as he looked at it closely that they were runes, Cirth of Daeron, King Thingol’s minstrel and loremaster. The young Sinda traced the glowing runes remembering the many days he was taught to practice writing them. Although Tengwar replaced the writing system after it was introduced by the Noldor, Dwarves preferred the use of Cirth and adopted it in the writing of their language. It was part of Thranduil’s early education to be able to read and write those alphabets as older documents in Doriath were written in Cirth.

As they proceeded down the passage, Onar rubbed the wall with his hand. And wherever he touched, the runes glowed pale blue illuminating the dark passage. Thranduil looked behind him. The runes on the walls behind him faded and the darkness covered both the path and the walls
behind him. Out of curiosity, Thranduil rubbed a dark wall with his hand. But, nothing came of it. The walls were cold and grainy. Nothing unusual. Whatever it was, the lights were not meant to be turned on by anyone.

“Is this sort of Dwarven enchantment?” Thranduil asked. According to what he knew of the Dwarves, they were not very knowledgeable in the art of enchantments or magic as Men called them.

“Enchantment? What enchantment?” Onar scoffed as he rubbed his palm on a white crystal in his hand. Thranduil noted that as Onar brushed his palm over the wall, the blue lights of the runes glowed brighter.

“What is that crystal in your hand?”

“What is it to ye?” Onar said. “Worry about the spiders and bats. Some of the passages are infested with them. Be ready to fight.”

“And what am I going to fight them with?” Thranduil asked. The only weapon he had was the dragon tooth. Whatever weapons he had were lost in the darkness.

“What happened to the weapons ye carried before?”

“My friend and I fell in the dark and lost everything we had when we fell into the chamber with the dragon.”

“A warrior without a weapon is a wolf without teeth.”

“I’m sorry. I should have told the dragon to make sure to keep my weapons on me while she knocked me out to play tricks in my head. How remiss of me.”

“I don’t like the tone of yer voice.”

“Well, I don’t like your tone or the voice.” Too late, the words fell out of Thranduil’s lips.

Onar stopped, then turned a face scrunched into a deep frown.

-------

**Cirth** *(Sindarin, runes)—runic writing system invented by Daeron during Year of Tree 1300. Earliest Sindarin was written in Cirth until it was replaced by Tengwar, a writing system invented by Feanor. Cirth were adopted by Dwarves to write down their language, Khuzdul, because its straight lines were better suited for carving onto stones, metal and wood than Tengwar which contained many curved strokes.*

**Daeron** *(Sindarin, great)—minstrel and loremaster to King Thingol of Doriath. He is also known as an accomplished linguist who invented Cirth alphabet. Among the three greatest minstrels of Eru’s children, Daeron is considered the greatest with Maglor (Feanor’s second son) coming a close second. The other is Tinfang Gelion. Daeron loved Luthien for whom he composed music to which she loved to dance. However, she chose Beren and out of jealousy, Daeron betrayed Luthien and Beren’s love to King Thingol. When Luthien ran away from Doriath to save Beren, Daeron searched for her in vain. He never returned to Doriath afterward, lost in the far east beyond the Blue Mountains lamenting his love for Luthien. He was never seen again, and his fate remains unknown.*
Gil-galad accompanies Lord Celeborn and Lady Galadriel to the Grey Havens on their way to Harlindon. Seeing Silwen once again made him hope that maybe there was enough time for them to be together.

Chapter Notes

Probably not what you expected, but in my scheme of things, it belonged here.

Grey Havens, October 3, Second Age 144

GIL-GALAD stood watching the sea covered in the silver mist. Far to his left, the sky was brightening, a splotch of crimson and gold behind the darkness that was the lower half of the broken Blue Mountains. The king wondered how far the cadets have traveled up North. He still wasn’t sure if he did the right thing letting Lady Galadriel convince him to accompany the Sindar on their return to Harlindon. Instead of walking near ten days from the Grey Havens to Harlindon, Lady Galadriel and Lord Celeborn planned to take a ship down to Harlond, their capital city, a mere three day ride down the gulf.

Originally, Gil-galad had meant to accompany the cadets and the Sindar until the cadets broke off to head north, but Lady Galadriel suggested to Gil-galad to stop by the Grey Havens which was only a day’s ride away from where they were. For Gil-galad who had been looking for excuses to visit the Grey Havens, it felt as if Valar heard his prayers.

Throwing a light robe over his breeches, Gil-galad left his chamber in Lord Cirdan’s manor house made of white wood.

Like the Havens of Falas which consisted of the two cities, Brithombar and Eglarest, Grey Havens were two distinct cities, Caras Laurelin, City of Gold Tree, on the side of Lindon and Caras Tilperion, City of Silver Tree, on the side of Harlindon. But unlike the two cities located in Beleriand that were separated by a wide coast and a mountain between them, the two cities of Grey Havens were just a walk across the river which was possible as the River Lune widened into a shallow estuary where the fresh water of the River Lune met the salty waters of Belegaer.

Lord Cirdan’s manor house was constructed on a boulder of plateau just before the river plunged downward to meet the salty water. It was a massive ship made of pale silver wood. A tower shaped like a head of a swan stood at the prow and was the tallest structure in the Havens. It functioned as a lighthouse where a brazier made of silver metal kept a fire burning every night. From far, the building looked like a giant swan, its head held toward the sky, its wings spread out to touch the land on each side. The wings were actual gates and drawbridges, one on each side of the structure.

The Swan Manor, so called by the people of the Havens, housed Lord Cirdan’s household as well as the administration halls. And although few people knew of it, the structure was an actual working
ship that could sail if a need arose by flooding the estuary to allow the ship to sail into the gulf to the open sea. For that purpose, there was a dam built further up the river which also served as a permanent bridge for the times when the water level was too high due to tide or storm to walk across the riverbed to the other side of the Grey Havens.

Out on the extensive deck of the manor house, guards in Lord Cirdan’s white and gold armor stood. There was a group of warriors in blue and gold uniforms who mingled with Lord Cirdan’s guards, some sitting on the seats along the deck or standing, talking to the guards of the Havens. When Gil-galad stepped onto the deck, the guards straightened. With a nod to them, the king crossed the vast wooden deck toward the stairs that led down to a ramp over jagged boulders below. It led to a private beach and a cove that was accessible only through the deck of the mansion. When the king stepped onto a landing, his valet hurried after him with a cape and a towel in his arms.

“I won’t be long. Interrupt me only if necessary,” the king said to the valet as he took the towel ignoring the cape.

“Just a reminder, Your Majesty, there is the morning meeting with Lord Lammaeg…”

“Yes, Yes. I know. I will be back before the meeting.” Gil-galad stopped himself from rolling his eyes when behind his valet he saw an escort of soldiers in their blue and gold uniform rose up from where they were sitting and reached for their weapons to follow him. Gil-galad waved them away feeling a mild irritation.

This was Grey Havens. What had he to fear here? But Gil-galad knew that someone would be tagging behind out of his sight. With his uncle here, that was more certain than a guess. Lord Lammaeg always made sure there were at least two guards, all from Valinor, follow after him, especially when he was among the Sindar.

As if any Sinda ever threatened me. Gil-galad sighed. But the king knew it was no use arguing against his uncle on that point.

Gil-galad just hoped that his uncle would finally tell him what is happening and why had the chief councilor came here leaving the management of Lindon to someone else. His uncle had arrived unexpectedly just two days ago bringing with him several of the palace healers. When asked about them, Lammaeg had only given the king vague answers saying that once Lord Cirdan returned, he will inform the king of everything. Knowing it was useless to prod his uncle when he didn’t want to talk, Gil-galad had decided to wait.

As for Lord Cirdan, Gil-galad was curious as to where the Sindarin lord had gone. When Gil-galad arrived at the Grey Havens with Lady Galadriel and Lord Celeborn, they were greeted by Lord Cirdan’s steward and Silwen. They were told that Lord Cirdan had sailed taking one of his boats upstream. Even Silwen didn’t know where and why the Sindarin lord had gone.

“Going for a swim, Your Majesty?” The steward who had been with Lord Cirdan as long as Gil-galad could remember waved as the king passed.

Gil-galad smiled with a nod. This was what he liked about Lord Cirdan’s people who were just like their lord. They were informal, warm and friendly. No complicated formalities or pretensions. Even after he became the king, except for the use of honorifics, they still spoke to him as if he was just another young elf.

“Watch yourself, my lord. Although there is no wind, we have a high tide now, and the water is quite deep,” the steward warned. “And the fogs have not dispersed yet. I would stay near, my lord. Two people are diving at the Crescent Cove. As it is too early and there is no one about, it would be
best to stay near there. Maybe they could lend you a hand.”

The steward did not say more, but Gil-galad knew what the old Sinda meant. Although he had learned to swim at Lake Mithrim as a child, swimming in an ocean was a different thing altogether. On more than one occasion, Silwen or Paddirwen had to rescue him. Having grown up under Cirdan’s tutelage, Gil-galad could now outswim any Noldor that he knew, yet, he could not compare in skill to any of the Falathrim. These Cirdán’s people were fish in the water.

“Come now, Nimfindor. I am no longer an elfling. I swim better than my own guards.” Gil-galad raised his chin. The old Sinda grinned with a shrug.

“Better be safe than sorry, my lord,” the old Sinda said with a glint of amusement in his gray eyes. “Remember the last time you insisted you could swim better than Lady Silwen?”

“That was ages ago!”

Leaving the steward’s bright laughter behind him, Gil-galad left the ramp and jumped onto the boulders. The sun had moved over the mountains and threw golden glow over the gray mists which had thinned, just a wisp of clouds. From where he stood, he could only see the tips of the boulders that surrounded the Crescent Cove which lay hidden even from the view high up on the decks of the Swan Manor.

Gil-galad hesitated but a moment before moving toward the cove.

From the top of the boulders, Gil-galad saw fishermen further down the gulf preparing their boats for the morning catch, but otherwise, the place was quiet and empty.

The morning wind swooshed all around swirling the silver mist that covered most of the sea. But the fog had cleared the land and Gil-galad could see the white domes of the Silver City among the golden dunes. Unlike the pointed roofs and tall arched windows of Lindon, the buildings in the Silver City had the round domed roofs similar to what Gil-galad had first seen in Brithombar and Eglarest which had fascinated the king.

Hithlum, where Gil-galad was born, was surrounded by tall mountains capped with snow where bitter winds blew. Falas was a vastly different place. Instead of mountains, it was surrounded by high walls made of white stones. And when Gil-galad saw the buildings, he understood why one of the cities was called Brithombar which meant pebbly dwellings. The buildings in Brithombar were round and carved in white stone reminiscent of river rocks and pebbles. They stood clustered on the golden sands like water bubbles. Between the buildings, there were sand dunes covered in beach grass and white flowers. Among the domed structures, stretches of green vines dotted with pink and purple flowers mingled with the thorny bushes with rose-like flowers.

The buildings in the Silver City were very much like the buildings of Brithombar. And having helped Cirdan build the Havens, Gil-galad realized the wisdom of the rounded structures. With the sea so close, the round shape of the buildings aged better than the jagged and high-pitched roofs of Lindon. In only a century and a half, the many stone statues Gil-galad had gifted to the city were losing their features amid the wind and the waves while the round buildings seemed to glow more as they aged.

Gil-galad climbed down the jutting boulders. The high tide had drawn the water into the small alcove beneath the rocks where he used to hide during low tide. Now, only a small stretch of sand was visible. He jumped down onto the beach and curled his toes into the wet sand. It had been a while since he was able to do this. He closed his eyes and breathed in the salty air feeling the wind caress his cheeks. Feeling content, Gil-galad opened his eyes and looked out into the sea.
On the surface of the water, two balloons of red floated near the jutting rocks. Divers. The vivid red of the balloons showed clearly through the fading gray mists which swirled over the blue waters making it impossible to see where the sky ended and the sea began. At the edge of the beach, waves danced making the balloons bob. The balloons not only marked the position of the divers for others to see, but it also provided a temporary supply of air for the divers. These divers were obvious experts who didn't need Sea Barrels.

Gil-galad wondered if he should wait for them or get in the water. Although he wasn’t certain, he was quite sure who the divers were. The cove was not accessible from the sea or from the city due to the many jagged boulders that dotted the area surrounding it.

As he contemplated whether to wait or not, Gil-galad saw the surface of water shimmer with light as two balls of light emerged out of the water one after another.

Gil-galad’s heart pounded. For no one else did his heart beat so fiercely but for one. Even after two and half centuries he had known her, that had not changed.

Through the mist, she rose out of the water. A vision of water, wind, and wonder. As many women of Falathrim did during swimming, the ends of her white dress were gathered and threaded between her legs with the ends tied around her waist. They exposed her shapely legs as her dress clung to her curvaceous form. Her white hair which hung loose with strands clinging onto her face and clothes rose all about her like strands of white mist as the wind blew and dried them.

Gil-galad swallowed hard as his heart thundered in his breast. If Unien ever stepped out of the sea, the king was sure she would look like this.

Silwen tossed her hair about her, wiping the drops of water from her face with her hand, the other hand holding onto a bag she carried.

“My lady! My lady!” Paddirwen surfaced behind Silwen. “There are more oysters here.”

“Leave them, Paddi,” Silwen turned to Paddirwen, her back to Gil-galad not having seen him. “I think we have more than enough. The king wouldn’t be able to eat all of these. He is leaving tomorrow, Paddi.” She leaned into the water to take the bag in Paddirwen’s hand.

“But, his lordship has not returned yet. He can’t go until Lord Cirdan returns from his trip.”

“Lord Cirdan is expected to arrive today. And the king is scheduled to leave a day after.”

“But he can’t. He hardly had time to speak with us. And he didn’t say anything to us about leaving tomorrow.” Paddirwen pouted.

“His uncle told me last night, so I am sure it is reliable. Besides, the king is a very busy Elf, Paddi. We can’t…” she didn’t finish as Paddirwen who had risen out of the water saw Gil-galad.

The Sindarin maid smiled widely and waved her free hand excitedly.

“Your Majesty! Your Majesty! Look and see. Look! We got so many scallops and oysters you like.”

Gil-galad waved back, but his eyes stayed with Silwen who turned around wide-eyed as the king approached her.

Paddirwen shoved her bag containing the shellfish onto Gil-galad’s chest.

“Lady Silwen is going to make you the oyster porridge you like so much. And you know she makes
“Yes, I know. I missed eating them,” said Gil-galad his eyes scanning Silwen’s face.

Gil-galad and Lord Celeborn and his people had been in Grey Havens for the past four days. But Gil-galad had not had a chance to talk with Silwen since the first day when she welcomed him at the Swan Manor.

Even during meals, she sat far opposite the table as the lady of the house. But even that ceased when Lord Lammaeg arrived. Instead of joining them, she stayed away altogether. Silwen was there, Gil-galad knew. The king could see it in the way his bed was made or the way his food was prepared, just the way he liked them when he was with Lord Cirdan before he left for the newly completed King’s Tower in the White City. But he had hardly a glimpse of her for the past two days. And those two days seemed like a hundred.

“How do you fare, Lady?”

“Well enough,” Silwen said, lowering her head. “And you, my lord?”

“Could have been better,” he said. Silwen looked up, her eyes questioned, but she remained silent.

“Oh! Oh! Was anything amiss, Your Majesty? Lady Silwen looked over everything and made all the meals herself, just the way you used to like them.” Paddirwen looked up at Gil-galad blinking her eyes. “Has your taste changed, Your Majesty?”

“I liked them fine. I just miss the way they used to be served. With the red flower petals.”

What are you saying, fool! Gil-galad berated himself, but the words slipped out before he could stop himself. But it was he who did not meet her the last time he was in Grey Havens, over a century ago now. He had left the plate with the flowers untouched and left without an explanation to her. What could he have said to her? That war was coming, that he couldn’t be by her side, that it was all in a dream, that their time together was limited?

Silwen turned away, tamping down her hair to cover her ears, but not fast enough for Gil-galad not to notice the tip of her ears turning pink.

“Oh, we could do that for you, can we not, my lady?” Paddirwen turned to Silwen. “Although Lady Silwen does not decorate the plates with flowers as she used to.”

Because they were for me. Only for me, Gil-galad hoped although he knew it was selfish to think or want it.

The flower decorations on the plate of his food had significance only to himself and Silwen. It meant she could slip out to meet him that night. And with time, Gil-galad had learned to watch out for the colors of the flowers. Specifically, red flowers. They meant she missed him that much more. More importantly, it meant there was a high likelihood of her allowing him to kiss her, and if he was fortunate, she would cuddle up to him and stay with him to watch the stars until they faded in the approaching dawn.

Although it started as a secret way to communicate when they were children back in Falas, for Silwen to tell Gil-galad to meet in their secret hideout, it had evolved as they became older and their feelings deepened. It wasn’t that they had to meet secretly; it was just that once Gil-galad became the king, every maiden he met or talked to was scrutinized by his councilors, and Silwen wanted none of that.
“Are you going to swim, Your Majesty?” Paddirwen asked as she glanced at the towel in his arm. “We shall wait for you. We don’t want you getting swept away by the waves again.”

“Paddi, that was over a century ago.” With a look of nonchalance, Gil-galad shrugged off his robe and placed it on the sand along with his towel. He was careful to flex his arms and his stomach, keenly aware of Silwen’s fleeting glance. “I have been swimming every day, I’ll have you know,” Gil-galad said. Besides, he sparred with his guards every other day. He was at the top of his form and strength. “And let me remind you, Paddi, I beat Lady Silwen in archery and running last time I was at the Grey Havens.”

“That was after losing to her for almost a century and a half before that,” Paddirwen said with a wide grin. “But, I still wouldn’t bet against her when it comes to swimming.” Paddirwen slapped Gil-galad in the stomach. The king gritted his teeth and hardened his stomach muscles. The slap hurt. “It is going to take more than brute strength, my lord. Even our captain Aron couldn’t win against Lady Silwen.”

“Well, I think I could fare better than the captain,” Gil-galad said with a sniff. He took in a breath then puffed out his chest glancing at Silwen.

“Is that a challenge, my lord?” Silwen looked up at him coolly. Her eyes glittered silver as the sun rose to melt away the last remaining mists.

The sun was heading toward the center of the sky by the time Gil-galad sat down with Lord Lammaeg. He should have known better than to challenge Silwen. She was a seamaid, more a fish than an elf maid. Still, he had managed to make her laugh. Perhaps, this Age will last a long enough time that it will be worth it for Silwen to be with him. For the first time in a long while, he felt hope flicker in his heart.

“Lord Cirdan will be arriving soon. His horn it was that rang an hour ago.” Lord Lammaeg broke into Gil-galad’s thoughts.

“Yes. I heard. Lady Silwen explained it to me. And yes. Once Lord Cirdan returns, I will return to the White City with you.” Perhaps he could invite Silwen over to the King’s Tower. He never had a chance to show her around the palace.

“Good. I will hold you to it, Sire.”

“Will you now tell me why you are here?”

“As you will. Please know that I had only your best interest at heart and did not wish to subject you to unnecessary worry until I had all the information.”

“Just tell me, Lord Lammaeg. What has happened?”

“There was… an incident up in the north.”

“Has someone gotten hurt? I thought they will not engage dragons until it gets cold.”

“It is already cold up in the north. They expect snow to arrive with the New Moon.”

“That soon? The leaves have only just begun to fall here. No matter. What has happened that require
you to bring additional healers.”

“The village of the Green Elves… They were attacked.”

“Is the dragon already out in the open?”

“It wasn’t the dragons. Orcs.”

“Orcs? How did Orcs find them? And even if they attacked, surely, they were able to fend them off.”

“No one survived.” Lammaeg’s voice was grave and sounded far away.

“Excuse me? I thought you said ‘no one,’” Gil-galad laughed. It was ridiculous, of course. Without a word, Lammaeg dropped his head.

“No. How is that even possible? They are Elves, uncle. They are lightly armed and have few weapons, but they are considered the best archers in all of Middle Earth.”

Gil-galad shook his head. He could not believe that some horde of Orcs killed a village full of Elves. Elves!

“That is not the worst of it,” Lammaeg said, his voice grave, his eyes dark.

“How could anything be worse than losing a whole village of Elves?” Gil-galad felt lost. Numb.

“Lord Commander. The cadets…” Lammaeg’s hand that held the line of his robe trembled.

“What happened to the cadets, to Lord Gilmagor?” Gil-galad shot up from his seat.

“Gilmagor fell down a cliffside.”

Gil-galad shook his head. His ears buzzed and the words did not register.

“I don’t understand.”

“I don’t know exactly. Celebrimbor seems unsure himself. They found Gilmagor’s body…”

Gil-galad swayed, and Lammaeg moved over to steady him.

“Gilmagor is alive. Stable. That is why Cirdan left to bring him here taking with him his healer to meet the guard’s boat half way.”

“And Elrond, the cadets?” His own voice sounded far to Gil-galad’s ears.

Lammaeg let out a long sigh. The chief councilor shook his head as dread curled inside Gil-galad.

“They could not find them. It seems the Orcs took them.”

“Orcs! Orcs destroyed the whole village? Took captives? That is not what I know of Orcs.”

“Not the way you know of them, but if they have someone to command them, they can be capable of those and much more.”

“I thought all of Morgoth’s lieutenants were destroyed.”

Lammaeg shook his head. “I think we all felt it when Morgoth was stripped of his power. But, as of his lieutenants, we do not know. It is said that most of them were destroyed in the war when the
Beleriand sank, but some could have survived, I suppose, just like Orcs and dragons did.”

Gil-galad felt sick. Has the old evil awakened? Was this what his dream warned about? Was his time at an end?

It was then that a morning meal was served. Gil-galad looked down at the plate in front of him decorated with the petals of red flowers. His heart bled. History seemed to repeat, forced one to repeat, in more ways than one.

------

**Lake Mithrim**: the body of water in the southern Hithlum (Sindarin, *mist-shadow*) called Mithrim where the High Kings of Noldor resided (Fingolfin, then later, Fingon). Thingol gave leave for Noldor to settle there when they first arrived in Middle Earth.

**Havens of Falas**: consisted of two cities, Brithombar (Sindarin, *pebbly dwellings*) and Eglarest (Sindarin, *Ravine of the Forsaken*). Cirdan ruled over both cities which were enriched through association with Finrod of Nargothrond who helped in its fortification by making them into the great walled cities.

**Unien**: Maia of Ulmo (Vala of water/ocean). She is the wife of Osse, who is another Maia of Ulmo. Unien is called Lady of the Sea and considered by the Elves as the protector and bringer of calm seas.
Different Yet So Alike

Chapter Summary

Onar and Thranduil manage their way up to the Second Level of the Dwarven ruin. They reach the top floor.

Chapter Notes

This was so long I had to cut it. Sorry.

Level 2 of Dwarven Ruin. October 3, Second Age 144

THRANDUIL shouted to the Dwarf behind him. “Where? I don’t see a path!”

There were shadows everywhere. Under the faint light thrown by the flames from a stone brazier high above a gigantic column they passed several strides ago, Thranduil didn’t see any other way. As far as his eyes could see, there was nothing but stone walls on all three sides. Surely, they would be trapped. Thranduil slowed although he knew the horde was not far behind them.

Doom! Doom! Doom!

The Orc drums rang throughout the ruin. Fear knotted Thranduil’s stomach. The number of ironclad feet had swelled. More Orcs were joining the pursuit. And by the feel of the faint thump under his feet, Thranduil was sure the Orcs had a troll with them as well.

“Keep going. Turn right!” Onar who had caught up with Thranduil pushed the Sinda forward.

“But there is no path, you half-wit! We will be cornered!”

“Turn right!” Onar rammed into Thranduil propelling him onto the wall to the right. Thranduil braced himself, but instead of hitting a wall, he stumbled forward into a corridor surrounded by steep walls on both sides. What he had thought was a shadow of a column was a passageway. It was narrow, just wide enough for two of them to run side by side although Onar couldn’t keep up with Thranduil’s wide stride.

As soon as they entered the corridor, Onar reached for a lever on the inside wall. The walls rumbled as a flat piece of rock carved to fit the opening moved down from above. But instead of fitting neatly into the opening as all the previous doors did before this one, it fell with a loud thud, then cracked down in the middle revealing a gap large enough to be noticeable.

“Damn it! We have to make a run for it. There is an enforced door straight ahead. If we make it inside, we will be safe.”

“What if that is damaged, too?”

“That one has the last defense mechanism. We can permanently close the entrance. Now, move it!”
Onar barked. Thranduil did not need to be told twice.

Ahead a stream of light came from above and provided a faint glow in the darkness of the corridor. Far down the passage, the light fell onto two stone statues of Dwarven warriors heavily armed, one holding an ax and the other a hammer. They were meant to stand at the foot of stairs, it seemed, but a crack that ran through the floor of the passage had cut straight through one of the statues, and it fell leaning against the other. Behind it, one could see the stairs running up into the dark.

Thranduil and Onar ran down the alley toward the stairs. Once they got to the statues blocking the stairway, Thranduil jumped up onto the fallen statue and stepped onto the stairs. Then, he stopped.

Onar clambered up the statue with a huff and a puff and a whole lot of noise that only Dwarven kind can make. Quite a racket, really. But Thranduil did not have the strength to roll his eyes.

“Orc me!” Onar cried out adding words unfamiliar to Thranduil when the Dwarf finally jumped down the statue onto the stairs.

Whatever had ruined this Dwarven passage had taken a large chunk of the stairs. The part of the stairs that was covered in the shadow and could not be seen from the corridor was gone. From where Thranduil stood, he could see the landing. A large slab of granite, too rectangular to be natural lay several feet above him. The remanent of the stone stairs jutted below the landing. It was too high up for them to reach it even if Thranduil allowed Onar to climb up to his shoulders. If he could just grab the lower edge of the stone stairs, from there, he could reach the landing.

Thranduil looked about him. The corridor was narrow with walls of reliefs of Dwarven warriors carved on the walls.

“We can jump to the lower stairs,” said Thranduil. “We can reach the landing from there.”

“I can’t jump that! It is too high,” said Onar.

“We can. Just follow me.” Thranduil backed away, then jumped up onto the head of the stone Dwarf that was still standing, then flew at a wall to the left to propel himself up and grab the lower edge of the stairs. Thranduil pulled himself up then turned to the Dwarf below.

“Hurry. They are coming!” Thranduil grabbed the ledge with one hand and the other he extended toward Onar.

“I don’t have yer twinkle toes! I’m too heavy to do that!”

“Get rid of the sack and use the ax as a lever!”

“I’m not throwing away me goods, and me ax is not a lever!”

“You stupid Dwarf! Just do it unless you want to be an Orc meat!”

“Let any of them try,” the Dwarf growled. Onar turned around to face the entrance to the corridor his ax raised, his feet planted firmly on the ground.

“Don’t be stupid, you stubborn Dwarf. Throw up your sack to me and try it. Or are you so willing to provide food and boon to the Orcs?” The veins on his throat pulsed as Thranduil shouted stirring a keen hunger.

The ground trembled, and the walls shook. Loud thumping reverberated through the alleyway. Pieces of rocks and debris fell down with each shake.
“They have a troll with them. Do you not hear it? They will break in any minute. Jump, and I will grab you.”

Onar growled. Thranduil feared that the Dwarf will refuse to listen. But, Onar turned back to Thranduil and threw his sack which the Sinda deftly caught. Onar backed away.

It was then that the ground shook with a deafening crash. The narrow corridor filled with the screeching of the Orcs.

“Swing your ax and propel yourself up,” Thranduil instructed. “Don’t stop the swinging motion or the axehead will be too heavy.”

Onar let out a bellow as he took to a run. The Orcs ran toward the Dwarf with frenzy as if they had their master’s whips behind their backs. Onar swung his ax with a mighty roar, hitting ground to propel himself forward. Thranduil rolled away seeing the ax coming at him. The weapon hit the last edge of the stairs. The Dwarf dangled holding onto the shaft of his ax. Orcs rushed over and jumped up trying to reach for Onar’s feet to pull him down.

“Pull him down! Pull him down!” Orcs shouted as they crowded beneath Onar.

Seeing a troll enter the corridor, Thranduil leaned down and grabbed the back collar of Onar’s armor and heaved the Dwarf up. The alleyway was too narrow, and the troll bashed the sides of the walls and stamped over the Orcs in front of him to get to where Thranduil and Onar now clambered up to the landing of the opening.

“That stupid troll will be able to reach the stairs,” Thranduil said as Onar stowed the sack behind his back.

“Even if he manages to reach the ledge, that creature is too heavy to lift himself up,” said Onar.

Thranduil glimpsed at the crack on the ground. All the shaking and pounding the troll tolled on the walls as he ran over to the stairs seemed to make the crack wider. Thranduil wished he had his bow. He could make a quick work of the troll.

“Even if he can’t clamber up, the Orcs can use him as a bridge. I wouldn’t wait for him to reach here. Let’s go. This structure is unsteady, too.”

“We carved this hall. It will hold,” said Onar. “There’s a bridge outside the passage. It will take us to the first level where the king’s hall used to be. Once we cross, we can withdraw the bridge from the other side. I would wager that at the least, the first level is intact.”

“You didn’t account for the Valar and the sinking of the Beleriand,” said Thranduil. “This structure doesn’t seem that stable to me. Even if it were, I wouldn’t wait here for the troll to reach the ledge.”

Thranduil ventured into the opening. Unlike some of the passages they had passed, the ceiling was tall with walls lined with statues of Dwarven warriors twice Thranduil’s height. All the statues were holding a rectangular box constructed of bronze and decorated with various square designs. The boxes were connected as far as Thranduil could see in the darkness forming a long rectangular tube. Ahead of him, the passage led downward into the darkness.

“How come this passage does not have a door? And there are no glowing runes in here?” Thranduil asked looking around.

Without a word, Onar took out fire stones from his sack dropping a tightly coiled rope. Thranduil picked it up and handed it back to the Dwarf. Thranduil wondered what else the Dwarf carried in his
When they emerged from the secret passage at Level Four, the door had opened to a large chamber full of bats the size of cats. They had swarmed the two of them, and Onar had whipped out a chain from the sack. It had a claw at the end which he swung and brought down the bats which made it easier for Thranduil to dispose of them. The Sinda wondered what other things the sack contained. The bag had been quite heavy.

“Do you even have something to light with?” Thranduil asked. He wished he could make his own light as easily as others of his kin did. Then, they would not have a need for light. The veins in his right hand pulsed at the thought of light, and Thranduil grabbed it with his other hand to steady it. His injured leg had no longer bothered him, but Thranduil could feel something was not quite right with himself.

Onar reached into the wall behind the first statue and brought out a small stick wrapped in clothes on one end.

“Unlike ye, we don’t rely on singing or magic to make things work. We use our heads.”

Using fire stones, Onar ignited the stick and dropped it into the first box. A fire ignited then sped down the rectangular tube instantly illuminating the passageway all the way to the end. At the end of the corridor, there stood two warrior statues facing each other with a flat wall between them.

“Young people must use your heads a lot to come up the idea of lighting a lamp using a miniature torch. Ingenious, indeed,” jeered Thranduil.

“Never ye mind! Ye do not understand what is involved in building this place. The precise angle of the corridor to make the statues line up with the just right amount of tilt, the vents made to allow air to circulate to keep the fire lit. What do ye know? Ye have never lived inside halls carved out of stone.”

“I beg your pardon, Master Dwarf. I lived in the greatest cave city that was ever built in Beleriand. We had more lights built into the stone walls at Menegroth than the world had ever seen. Noldor’s Nargothrond was modeled after Menegroth but paled in comparison according to many who had seen both halls. And trust me, we never had to use a torch to light any of the thousands of lamps that hung there.”

“And who built Menegroth? Or Nargothrond? Not Elves, mind ye! It was all built by me ancestors, me mother’s and me father’s people.” The Dwarf raised his chin and puffed out his chest.

“Young people carved the stones to make Menegroth, yes. But, our people made it into what it was famed for. And what would you know of Menegroth? Have you ever seen it or been inside it?”

“No. But ye don’t need to be there to know. I knew Dwarves whose ancestors built the famed Elven city. They knew every part of Menegroth as if they built it themselves.”

No wonder, then, the Dwarves had been able to sack the city, Thranduil thought grimly. If ever he had a chance to build a city of his own, he will be sure to remember that.

The screeching of the Orcs rose. Both Onar and Thranduil looked down. The troll had reached the foot of the stairs. The creature jumped up to reach the edge of the broken stairs. He caught it, but it broke off. The troll fell backward on top of several Orcs. But, it got up and tried again.

“Let’s go before the Orcs swarm this place.”
“Have ye no ears? I told ye, this entrance can be permanently sealed,” Onar said.

“Onar, don’t!” Realizing what the Dwarf meant to do, Thranduil turned to warn, but Onar reached into the shadow of one of the stone statues and pulled something Thranduil could not see.

A loud rumble shook the stone walls followed by a thunderous thud as a large stone block dropped from the above. The ground where they stood quaked then the ground cracked into several long lines as the walls around them trembled.

“You fool, what have you done!”

“I know every stone of this place,” Onar said puffing out his chest. “My ancestors built this place. We Broadbeams and Firebeards are the most talented of all our kin. Our halls have lasted for thousands of years, withstood the armies of the Dark Lord. His creatures had never soiled our halls until the land was broken and our defenses laid bare. This corridor and many of the halls survived the destruction of the Beleriand. Believe me, Elf. It will stand!”

As if commanded, the rumble calmed, and the quake stopped.

“What did I tell ye!” Onar flashed Thranduil a triumphant smile, pulling up his chin.

Thranduil looked around him. The flames that were dancing on the bronze pipe steadied. The Sinda leaned his ears. Only silence reigned inside the passage.

“Let’s get going in case they break through,” said Thranduil.

“Trust me, Elf. No one can get through when a door is sealed. These corridors are specifically made to section off any intruders.”

“Didn’t stand much against the bats and spiders,” said Thranduil with a grimace remembering the spiders and bats that had infested passages.

“We knew the passages on the third level were damaged. I just didn’t know the extent of the damage.” Onar looked about him. “But this one is different. It is an important corridor that leads to the bridge to the King’s Hall. It is solidly built.”

“If you say so.” Thranduil turned and walked toward the two statues at the other end. The Sinda was sure the Dwarf noticed the cracks on the ground. Maybe it had withstood thousands of years, but a whole landmass had broken off and sank into the ocean since.

The passageway led steadily downward.

“I hope we are not going down a level,” Thranduil said.

Level Three had been a nightmare. Most of the corridors were broken, and the secret passages were practically non-existent or infested with spiders the size of the Dwarf.

If Onar had not seen fit to give Thranduil a sword from his sack, the Sinda was sure that they would not have made it out of the Level Three. Moreover, the racket they had made at the lower level had roused all the Orcs. In fact, it seemed all the Orcs were on a high alert and actively seeking the two of them.

“I told ye. This is the passage to the bridge. For someone with big ears, ye do not listen well. What do ye do with yer ears if not for listening?”
“Can you ever say anything nice,” Thranduil said between gritted teeth. His hand shook again. The hunger seemed to worsen every time Thranduil’s temper was aroused. And, the Dwarf was insufferable.

“I say what is true,” said the Dwarf. “My words not flowery enough for ye, Elf? Why should I decorate my words like Elves do? I say what is and how it is, not prettied up nor made vague.”

“Not asking you to ‘flower’ your words, Dwarf. But, what would it hurt to word things nicely…” Thranduil stopped then laughed out loud. Had he not had this conversation before? The exact words he had exchanged with Elrond except it had been Elrond who had said the words he just said to the Dwarf.

_Had I been so insufferable?_ Thranduil wondered. He could not but agree in the end. What patience Elrond must have had. The thought of Elrond made Thranduil hasten his steps. He had work to do and not much time.

“How ye gone mad as well as deaf, Elf?” Onar frowned as he tried to keep up with Thranduil’s wide stride. “Gnash teeth, then laugh like a mad person…” Onar mumbled.

When they arrived at the two stone statues, Onar reached for a lever on the side of the wall.

“Wait. What if the Orcs are waiting just outside? They may have been alerted that we are here.” Thranduil remembered the last time they emerged from a secret passage to find a troop of Orcs. Due to the thickness of the stone walls, they could not hear the sounds well enough and had not known that a troop of Orcs was passing just outside the door. They had to fight their way through them and had to run with a horde of Orcs trailing behind them.

“Not likely. The ones behind us will now have to go around to the next bridge which is further up. There are only two other bridges to the king’s hall beside this one. A chasm separates this part of the city and the rock formation on which the King’s Halls sit.

“But the Orcs there could have been alerted already.”

Onar looked less sure now. He shifted his feet.

“That is possible. And if they are familiar with the layout, they will know that this corridor exists. This one is not a hidden passage. It was used to dispatch warriors quickly to the other districts in the event invaders broke in.”

They both stopped and listened, their ears glued to the stone wall. But they also knew that what they could hear was limited by the thickness of the wall.

“It is either we stay here, or we take the chance,” said Onar. “There is no other way out of this except through the bridge. The passageway is now permanently sealed.”

“Why did you direct us here then? Did you not think about what could happen?”

“We were being chased. I didn’t have time to think!”

Onar pulled the lever. “Get ready.”

With a low rumble, the door slid open.

Outside, a bridge rose up then curved down to a massive gate. It was as wide as the passageway, and it connected the corridor to a large rock formation on top of which was built a magnificent structure.
The bridge ended at the stone head of an enormous carved Dwarf with a long beard whose open mouth was the gate. The beard was the part of the bridge.

“Is that…” Onar pointed, and Thranduil looked up.

On the bridge, close to the gate were Orc patrols, but that was not what Onar was pointing. High up on the pyramidal roof that rose above all others sat coiled a dragon.

The dragon wasn’t as big as the mother dragon Thranduil encountered. It was perhaps no more than twice the size of a horse. Its head was buried under one of its wings which were draped about in front of the creature. Unlike its mother, the dragon was bright yellow as if its scales were carved out of gold.

Thranduil’s throat constricted and his mouth felt dry.

It was then that one of the Orcs who turned to look towards them screeched loudly.

“We have to make a run for it,” Onar said and hefted his ax.

“Run through the Orcs into the king’s halls which will be full of more Orcs? Now, which one of us is mad?”

“Would ye rather we get back into the corridor? We will be trapped. I told ye, this is not a secret passageway. Orcs can open it from outside!”

The screech of the Orcs filled the chasm. Onar shouted as he swung his ax to behead the two of the oncoming Orcs.

Thranduil whipped out the sword the Dwarf had given him. He moved like water between the Orcs as he swung, slid and sliced. He was grateful that his leg supported him without pain, but each time he fought and drew blood, it made him thirst for the dragon’s own blood.

“Duck!” Onar who was few feet ahead of Thranduil shouted. Instinctively, Thranduil rolled as the sound of wings swept past him. Two of the Orcs flew past him and fell down into the chasm screaming. Thranduil stopped just at the edge of the bridge. The floor of the chasm was dark, and Thranduil could not fathom its depth.

ROARRRR!

From above a great roar emerged as a high-pitched sound of wings flapping made Thranduil look up. The dragon turned around in the air and flew back towards him as Orcs on the bridge ran away toward the king’s hall running past Onar.

Thranduil looked about him. Front of him lay the corridor and the dragon. Behind him, in the middle of the bridge, Onar stood. The Orcs stood just beyond Onar. The Dwarf stowed away his ax then grabbed a chain from his sack.

The dragon dived toward Thranduil its claws stretched out in front. Thranduil did the only thing he could. He grabbed the edge of the bridge and jumped off.

The dragon roared as it missed Thranduil. It flew up above Onar. Once the dragon passed, Thranduil swung himself back onto the bridge, but the dragon was already making a turn in the air.

“Elf!” Onar called. “Let it come at you.”
Thranduil met Onar’s eyes as the Dwarf swung about his chain.

Thranduil stood on the bridge, brandishing his sword. “Come and get me if you can!” he shouted to the dragon.

The dragon roared again as it swooped down when Onar threw the chain. Thranduil rolled toward Onar.

The claw end of the chain attached itself to the edge of the wing and the chain wrapped around it. With its one wing caught in the chain, the dragon crashed onto the opening of the corridor with a loud thud. The stone walls shook, and the sound reverberated around the open canyon.

The chain, however, did not keep the dragon down for long. Using its powerful jaw, the dragon tore the chain off his wing. However, when it tried to unfold its wings, one of the wings hung loose. The dragon let out an earsplitting roar, then its chest glowed red.

“Onar, run. It is going to spit fire!” Thranduil shouted when a loud rumble shook the walls and the bridge. Both Onar and Thranduil tumbled onto each other. The dragon wobbled as it let out a thin stream of fire missing the Elf and the Dwarf. The dragon spread its wing trying to take off, but the ground under the dragon crumbled taking the dragon down with it.

“Elbereth, help me!” Words unbidden came to Thranduil’s lips as he looked around desperately. The rock that had sealed the entrance to the corridor was speeding down towards them as the crack on the floor of the corridor spread all around the floor and the walls.

Grabbing Onar up from the trembling bridge, Thranduil ran toward the gate. But, the Orcs had raised the drawbridge that connected them.

“The damnable Orcs!” Onar shouted.

Thranduil scanned the rock formation on which sat the king’s hall. Its sides were steep on the top, but the slope eased as the base widened. And several feet down from the bridge, there was a ledge, an opening.

“Be prepared to jump!” Thranduil shouted through the noise. “Leave the sack. It is too heavy.”

“Why? We are done for. I am going to face me death like a warrior. I’ve done all I could.”

“We are not done yet. I am not done yet,” Thranduil shouted. “I am not leaving this world until I free Elrond!” Thranduil strapped the sword tightly to himself and took out the dragon tooth.

The rock crashed onto the bridge. With a loud creak, the structure pitched forward.

“Jump!” Thranduil threw Onar forward with all the strength he had.

---

**Menegroth** (Sindarin, *Thousand Caves*)—Underground stone fortress of the Sindar built by the Dwarves of Belegost on the rocky hill on the banks of River Esgalduin. This is where King Thingol ruled Sindar with Queen Melian at his side.

**Nargothrond** (Sindarin, *Underground fortress on Narog*)—underground fortress commissioned by Finrod (Galadriel’s eldest brother) and built by the Dwarves of Nogrod on the banks of River Narog.
Finrod was inspired by Menegroth and built the fortress to keep his people safe from the forces of Morgoth during the First Age.

**Broadbeams and Firebeards** refer to the Dwarves of Belegost and Nogrod respectively. They are two of the seven clans of the Dwarves. They originate from Mount Dolmed which is a part of Blue Mountains. The most famous clan of the Dwarves are Longbeards, also known as Durin’s Folk who are originally from Mount Gundabad, part of Misty Mountains. Thorin and the company are Longbeards.
Thranduil and Onar struggle to make it up the slope.

**THRANDUIL** jumped onto the rocky slope striking the rock side with the dragon tooth. The bridge slid forward and crashed onto the cliffside below the gate with a deafening boom.

“Orrrc meeceee!” Onar’s shout disappeared among the clamor of stones hitting rocks as debris flew all over.

Thranduil tried desperately to find something to grip as he slid past the Dwarf who seemed to have found a handhold among the rocky slope. The dragon tooth cutting through the stone surface slowed the descent, but it did not stop Thranduil from sliding downward as the tooth cut through the stone. Thranduil thrust the tooth further into the rock and managed to stop when the Dwarf slid past him, shouting in foreign words, and clawing against the slope. He was followed by showers of debris and rocks. Thranduil snatched the first thing he could get his hand on, the Dwarf’s beard.

The stones rolled down the slope, hit his head, hands and face, but the Sinda hung on. The Dwarf below him bellowed out words Thranduil could not understand. Dust and debris fell, an angry brown cloud that screamed and swallowed everything else.

When the things above him cleared, Thranduil looked down. The Dwarf was dangling, his beard in the Sinda’s hand. The Dwarf’s head and face were bleeding, and so was Thranduil’s hands.

“Not my beard, ye stupid Elf!”

Onar’s face was red and puffy. Despite the indignant look on his face, Onar felt behind his back for his battle axe and the sack which were still hanging behind the Dwarf. The weight of the Dwarf in armor with his weapon and the sack was like a dragon hoard. Thranduil’s arm felt stiff with pain. The Sinda bit into the back of his teeth. Thranduil looked up his other hand holding onto the dragon tooth. The half of the tooth, the size of a long dagger, had bit into the stone. It had left a long groove on the rock where the tooth had sliced through the rocky cliff. That tooth was all that was holding both himself and the Dwarf’s weight. If Thranduil had any doubts as to the effectiveness of the dragon tooth, he had it no longer.

The Dwarf squirmed under him. “Let go of my beard!”

Thranduil glared down at the Dwarf.

“You want me to let go? Because I will if you insist,” said Thranduil. “Now shut up so I can think. Let go of the sack.”

“Not letting me sack go. If I die, I die with me things!”

“Then, shut up!”

Thranduil gripped the tooth harder and looked about him.
Where was that ledge? He hoped they didn’t slip too far from it. But when Thranduil looked up and found the ledge, he could not but groan with disappointment. They had slid far below the ledge than Thranduil had hoped. The lip of it was barely visible from where they were hanging. The climb up would be a nightmare even if they could manage it.

“Damn it!” With suppressed curses, Thranduil looked about him. Maybe there was another ledge around here. The Dwarves would have had more than one opening on the hillside. Thranduil hoped and prayed.

The Sinda looked up at the bridge. It leaned precariously on the slope looming like a dark cloud above them. It groaned heavily, creaking like a worn, rusted armor. Thranduil could see the deep cracks running through the front trestle where the bulk of the remaining bridge was leaning against. And it was slipping further down the slope. Towards them.

“Let go, ye stupid Elf! That bridge is about to fall off any minute, and we are directly in its path. If I fall now, I will go to meet me maker before me body is crushed under the stone of me ancestors. If I die before they fall, I will be entombed in stone, the way we are meant to go.”

“Whether you die before being crushed or crushed before you die, you will be crushed all the same, you stupid Dwarf. Stop squirming and let me think for a minute.”

“Laddie,” Onar’s voice calmed. The wistfulness of its usually grating sound made Thranduil looked down. Onar continued. “We cannot survive this, laddie. Just let go. I am sorry about yer friend, but ye and I, we are warriors. This was hopeless from the start.”

“Just give me a minute, Dwarf. Let me think just for a minute. Maybe there is another ledge here somewhere. I saw the one above us, but that one is too high up now.”

“Ledge?” the Dwarf said then pointed toward his left foot, “ye mean like that one?”

Thranduil looked down. To his right the slope of the cliff widened. Far below, there was another ledge jutting out from the cliffside. By the look of perfectly cut rock, it wasn’t a natural formation. Although the drop was significant, Thranduil was sure he could toss Onar toward there, and the Dwarf would be able to catch the ledge. The slope was less steep over the ledge, the descent would be slow enough for even the Dwarf to keep his grip.

“Why didn’t you say something!” Sudden heat swept him, and Thranduil felt strength surge in his arms as the blood throbbed in them.

“Ye don’t want to go there! I don’t want yer kind go there!”

“You rather die broken and buried? If you fall to your death, I will get in there without you. Do you hear me, you stupid ass!”

Onar grunted. “I can’t reach it from here anyhow.”

“I will toss you in that direction….”

“Nobody tosses a Dwarf!” Onar roared as he glared up at Thranduil.

“It’s either that or fall down to your doom. Choose, Dwarf!”

As if in encouragement, the bridge creaked loudly. The cracks on the rocks holding the bridge widened as the structure shook sending down clouds of debris and rocks.
“Decide now because I swear I will hold onto you until the bridge collapses. You will die on the top of the rocks, broken. And I will survive to piss on you!”

“Curse ye! I don’t thank ye for saving me.”

“I don’t care what you think!”

Onar glared up at Thranduil then, pulled his beard with his two hands to straighten himself.

“Swing me!”

“What?”

“Swing me over to that side, and I will jump,” said Onar.

*What is the difference?* Thranduil rolled his eyes, but he had no time to think further. The bridge shook, then slipped down further on the slope with a loud groan. Debris of stone and dirt rained down onto their heads. Gathering strength in his arms, Thranduil let out a roar as he swung the Dwarf toward the ledge.

Then, came the rest of the bridge. Thranduil pulled out the tooth from the stone and rolled toward the ledge when a piece of rock the size of his head flew down the slope coming straight at him. He did the only thing he could. Thranduil swung the tooth. The rock split into two, but the piece struck him on the head. The cliffside slipped from his grip, and Thranduil tumbled down the slope, the rush of the debris falling all around him. Thranduil flailed his arms trying to sink the tooth into the slope when a piece of rock falling struck his hand holding the dragon tooth. The tooth flew off his hand. The dragon tooth bounced off the rocky cliffside and plunged downward.

Thranduil lunged for the dropped tooth. He knew that without that dragon tooth, everything was lost. His outstretched hand wrapped around the tooth.

*This can’t be the end. It can’t.* Elwing’s face flashed before him, then Elrond’s.

**ELROND!** Thranduil cried out with his whole being.

---

**Dwarven Treasury. October 3, Second Age 144**

**“ELROND!”**

The call ripped through Elrond’s mind as if a hunting horn blared shattering the silence of an early morning forest. The Half-Elven jerked awake.

“Thranduil?” Elrond sat up. It was dark, and something noxious attacked his senses. Sulfur and fumes. The odor burned the lines of his throat. Elrond swerved as the shadows around him spun making him dizzy. His stomach churned. The Half-Elven closed his eyes tightly then opened them wide.

“Yes? You need something?” Thranduil turned and faced Elrond with that placid look on his face.

“You called me,” Elrond said. The Half-Elven scrutinized the Sindar’s face. The call had been urgent,
rushed. Desperate. But there was naught but look of tranquility on the face of his warrior companion.

“No, Elrond. You called me. Isn’t that so, Saldor?” Thranduil turned to the young cadet sitting next to him.

“Aye. You called out Thranduil’s name and sat up. Did you have a bad dream? Was your warrior companion bothering you even in your sleep?” Saldor grinned widely as Thranduil rolled his eyes beside the young cadet.

Elrond looked around. Thranduil and Saldor were sitting by the edge of a river, their feet dunked all the way to their knees. Sunlight glittered off the surface of the river which flowed like melted silver. Somewhere birds chirped.

“Catch it! Catch it! Erfaron, it’s coming your way!” Gelir shouted.

Further in the water, Erfaron swung about his spear when a fish, its scales glittering like a polished Doriathrin armor, slapped Erfaron’s face before it plunged back into the water. Oron who stood at the edge of the river laughed.

“One of the best of Noldorin warriors bested by a fish!” Thranduil quipped.

“You think you could do better?” Erfaron challenged.

Thranduil stood up. “Step aside, please. And watch the professional do it.”

Elrond watched as Thranduil walked into the river and took the spear offered by Erfaron. A smile tugged at Elrond’s lips. Thranduil was really trying.

Once they left from the ruin, Elrond spent the nights talking with Thranduil. Yes, it was true that those were mostly of mundane things, but the fact that the usually reticent Sinda opened up to him, that Thranduil willingly engaged in small talks with him as well as other cadets had moved Elrond deeply. The shared experiences did do wonders. Elrond had heard other older warriors say such a thing, but to see it happen before him, Elrond could not ask for more. The Half-Elven understood now why cadets were sent to do their field training during the harshest of the weather. Facing the difficulties together, it bound the cadets in their shared misery.

Thranduil lunged, but the Sinda had underestimated the fish. It jumped into Thranduil’s arms surprising him. Thranduil let go of the spear to try to catch the fish with his bare hands. It wiggled, then jumped out of Thranduil’s hand. Oron caught it, but the fish wiggled itself out of the grasp, slapped Oron then Thranduil, throwing both warriors into the water. Erfaron who had been watching the two warriors struggle with the fish laughed out loud. Thranduil and Oron surfaced, then they exchanged glances. With speed too quick for others, they each took Erfaron’s feet slamming the laughing cadet into the water.

“Hey! You can’t do that to my warrior companion!” Gelir jumped into the fray.

“Water fight!” Saldor got up and ran toward the four cadets thrashing in the water. “Come on, Elrond. Don’t let them have all the fun!” Saldor called.

Elrond laughed and got up to join when someone cleared his throat.

“Captain Astalder, good to see you, sir. How did the things fare in the Dwarven ruin?”

“It wasn’t much of a fight,” Astalder said with a shrug. “Just a young dragon controlling the Orcs. We made a short work of them. The Dwarves were very grateful. Talking of the grateful Dwarves,
here.” The captain reached into his pocket and brought out a dagger. “This is yours, is it not? I remember seeing you holding it once.”

Elrond’s heart skipped a beat as he took back Maglor’s dagger. He had thought it lost to him forever. “How? I had given it to one of the Dwarves who helped us.”

“The three Dwarves? We met them in the ruin. They helped us find the dragon lair. When we paid them in gold, the older one gave me this saying it seemed important to the one who had given it to him. Now that he has enough gold, he said he didn’t need the dagger. When I saw it, I knew it belonged to you.”

“Thank you,” Elrond said swallowing down a lump in his throat. “This means so much to me.”

“Well, I am glad things all worked out.” Astalder smiled widely then looked up. “Thranduil,” the captain said with a nod.

“Sir,” Thranduil who was drenched head to toe saluted the captain as Captain Astalder waved to them and moved away.

“Your dagger. You got it back,” Thranduil said.

“Yes. You don’t know how much this means to me. It is to me like what your mother’s….” Elrond stopped. In his excitement and joy, he had forgotten about not mentioning Thranduil’s mother.

“I am glad. I knew how much it meant to you,” Thranduil said without skipping a beat. The Sinda’s face was placid, not a trace of anger. Not even a frown.

That’s strange. As soon as Elrond thought so, Thranduil frowned.

“We shouldn’t talk of my mother,” Thranduil said.

It was what Elrond expected, yet there was none of that icy wall he had felt before. Thranduil had been trying, it was true. He talked to other cadets and tried to be civil with other Noldorin warriors. The Sinda was even polite to Lord Gilmagor. But the matter with his mother was something else. Something about Thranduil’s reaction bothered Elrond.

Elrond thought back to the last time Thranduil and he talked of the Sinda’s mother at the depth of Dwarven ruin. Before that, Thranduil had talked openly to Elrond, even spoke of Elrond’s parents and the old times with wistfulness. Yet, as soon as the topic turned to his mother, Thranduil had reverted, distant and cold. That was only a couple of days ago. Could one change so much in such a short time?

“Thranduil, how do you really feel?” Elrond asked. “I know you are trying, and I am glad to see you getting along with the cadets, but…”

“Then, what are you worried about, Elrond?” Thranduil laughed then slapped Elrond’s back. “You worry too much, my friend. Come! We have finally caught our lunch.” Thranduil walked over to the campfire the cadets had readied to cook their catch.

Everything seemed perfect. But Elrond could not push away the strange feeling he felt. There was something about Thranduil that just didn’t seem right. Elrond didn’t know what it was. Thranduil was acting just the way Elrond wanted him to behave. But, that just was it. Thranduil had always been an enigma to Elrond. And here Thranduil was, perfectly behaved and clearly predictable.

Elrond stood next to Thranduil who had scooped down to add more wood to the fire. Elrond reached
out with his extra senses to feel Thranduil’s emotion. It was something Elrond refrained from doing. He had always been able to read other people and their emotions. As he grew older, his ability had grown with him. It was something only Elros knew of when they were children. Later, Maglor and Maedhros had come to know of it or at least suspected. Now, only Gil-galad knew. It wasn’t really a power or anything, just a sensitivity of sorts which allowed Elrond to read people’s true emotion. Of course, it helped him to decipher people’s true intentions as well. But, it didn’t work on everybody. Some Elves guarded their minds against other’s intrusion. Thranduil was one of them. And when their strength surpassed Elrond, the Half-Elven could not glean their guarded emotions even if he tried to force it, not that he would ever force anyone.

Elrond tried his best to control this ability so as not to encroach into other’s privacy. But, something told Elrond he needed to know. Even as he allowed his senses to flood him and surround Thranduil, Elrond expected the Sinda to block it.

Elrond took in a sharp breath. Thranduil’s mind was open wide. No guards, no walls. There was nothing. No emotion. It was as if Thranduil’s mind was a blank scroll. Elrond blinked. Is this even possible?

The other four cadets joined them carrying two large fish still flapping their tails. Elrond reached out to the cadets, letting his power flood him now. Saldor, Gelir, Erfaron, then Oron. Guilt tugged at his conscience. What was he doing? When did he intrude on other’s feelings like this? But, something urged the Half-Elven on. Something was not right. Elrond scanned each of the four cadets.

Nothing. There were no emotions. No feelings.

Elrond pulled back and looked at the cadets gathered around the campfire. They were laughing. Thranduil, too, smiled as he took a portion of the fish and handed it to Elrond.

What is going on here?

Elrond stepped closer to look at the cadets more closely. The forest darkened as if the sun sank suddenly. The sound of laughter disappeared along with the sound of rushing water and the chirping of the birds. Elrond stood alone in the dark.
Time is running out. The day of the New Moon approaches and Thranduil still has a way to go.

Dwarven Ruin. October 3, Second Age 144

THRANDUIL fell. His heart pumped wildly. Thranduil reached for anything he could hold onto. Anything.

Elbereth!

“Laddie!”

As Thranduil flailed his arms for a grip, Onar shouted as something whipped past Thranduil. Almost instinctively, Thranduil snatched it. The skin of his hand tore and burned as his hand slid down the length of a rope, but it slowed him enough to drive the tooth in his hand into the side of the cliff.

Once he stopped, Thranduil looked up. The rope came down from the opening above him. Onar peeked down from the ledge.

“I got ye!” Onar said, then he disappeared into the opening as the rope was pulled in. Thranduil looked down. Below him was something murky and flowing. Maybe water?

Once his turbulent heart calmed, Thranduil climbed up, and it didn’t take long for the Sinda to reach the ledge.

The building shook once more as the pieces of the bridge smashed against the side of the slope. The clamor died down, but Thranduil lay panting on the stone ledge. When he sat up, Onar was leaning against the frame of the opening. What Thranduil thought was a landing was only a ledge of a window cut on the side of the cliffside.

Thranduil looked down. A thin ray of light came down from above and threw light onto the broken pieces of the bridge which lay over a shallow waterway. Thranduil looked up. They had fallen quite a way. He couldn’t even see the gate from where he was. Up above further down to his right, he saw another bridge looming high above and saw a stray of light throwing a reddish glimmer on the gold trims of the bridge.

“There is natural light?” Thranduil asked. He had not realized it when he first beheld the King’s Hall. Things have happened so quickly, and Thranduil had not had the time to look at anything closely.

“There’s opening near the ceiling on the other side of the King’s Hall. We used mirrors to reflect the light from there to light this area. Once the sun sets, the light will be replaced by the lights from the braziers.”

And the sun was setting. As they sat and watched, the stone walls above tinted red as the shadows deepened. Another day was passing. Thranduil remembered the dragon’s warning: Each day as the day of the New Moon approached, the danger would rise tenfold. She had made it clear to Thranduil
that when the Nameless One returned to his body, there was no hope for Elrond.

“Time is running away from us,” mumbled Thranduil. Something dark gnawed at a depth of his stomach. He had never given much thought to the passage of time. Never once in his life, Thranduil had felt there was not enough time. Even when he was trying to learn the Noldorin patterns for Lord Gilmagor, he had never felt this sick feeling in his stomach that time was running out. But now, time seemed to slip through his fingers like a handful of water that he wanted to hold onto but couldn’t contain.

Thranduil turned away from the sight outside. Inside was a long hallway carved in stone. It was unlike other halls and chambers they had passed through. The walls were rough-hewn with layers of recesses on both sides of the walls. The recessed walls contained stone boxes decorated with runes; some were carved with the images of dwarves in their full armor holding axes and hammers in their hands. The place was dim, lighted only by a pale blue glow of the runes carved everywhere, the walls, on the stone boxes and on the lips of the recesses. The ceiling was rough with a cluster of crystals growing out of the rocks that made the roof of the hallway. Thranduil saw that they were the same crystals he had seen in Onar’s hand. Thranduil leaned over to look at one of the crystal clumps closely. It thrummed with a soft hum. The Sinda noticed that several pieces of the crystal broke and lay on the stone boxes decorated with glowing blue runes. Where the crystals were, the runes glowed brighter.

“Are these crystals the reason why the runes here continue to shine unlike those in the passages?” Thranduil asked remembering the secret passages. The glow of the runes there had faded after few moments. But here, the constant glimmer of the runes provided enough light to see in the dark.

Onar harrumphed loudly but did not answer. Instead, he asked, “For someone who tried to keep alive, why would ye jump? For a tooth no less.”

It was obvious to Thranduil that Onar wanted to change the subject. That was fine by him. Thranduil had no desire to pry.

“Because without the dragon tooth, all these troubles we went through would mean nothing,” said Thranduil. “I can’t kill the one without it.”

“The dragon tooth? Unless the body is clad with dragon scales, any good Dwarven sword can pierce any armor.”

“The Nameless One has taken the scales of one of the dragonlings. Not just any sword will penetrate his body. Dragon tooth is one sure weapon against it.” Thranduil carefully wrapped the tooth in the strip of clothes and stowed it away.

“Even dragons with scales have a belly which is bare or where the scales are thin enough to penetrate. Still, I am glad we got rid of the guarding dragon,” said Onar. “Can’t imagine having to deal with the dragon along with all the Orcs.”

“That was only one of the dragonlings. Not a full-grown dragon.”

“How is that not full grown? It was a size of a boulder.”

“You have obviously not seen its mother,” Thranduil said dryly. “Nor have you heard about the dragons flying around during the War of Wrath.” Thranduil wondered what Onar would have said if he knew about Ancalagon the Black which was so big, it broke a mountain when it was struck down by Elrond’s father.
“I have seen the dragons of the last war although only from a distance,” Onar raised his chin. “I am older than I look,” he said. “When we saw the dragons, although far to the north of us, we closed our gates and sealed them. Before the dragons, we fought the Orcs returning from south Beleriand and prevented them from joining in the main battle. If it wasn’t for our efforts to clear the area of the Orcs, I doubt those Elves and Men who lived near our mountains could have crossed River Gelion without much opposition.”

“Elves and men?”

“Aye, Men and Elves armed like they were going to battle except they took their womenfolk with them. Months later, only the Elven warriors came back led by that tall one with the flaming red hair. The strange thing is none of the Men and none of the womenfolk, except for the few who fought alongside them, returned with them. We thought that odd, but it was what it was.”

Thranduil shivered. He knew exactly who Onar referred to—Maedhros. All Elves Thranduil knew who had red hair all belonged to the line of Feanor. His mother’s killer was red-headed as well. And the Men must have been the Edain under Maedhros and Maglor, the two surviving sons of Feanor, Elrond’s kidnappers, killers of his family and kin, Lords of kinslayers. Blood pumped into his heart and tightened his chest. Thranduil’s arms throbbed with a dark need, a need to spill blood.

“Are ye all right? Ye look pale.”

“I’m fine!” Thranduil snapped as he got up and jumped down the ledge of the window. The drop was farther than Thranduil expected. He looked up afraid Onar would be stuck up on the ledge. The Dwarf looked unfazed, however. He threw down his sack, then jumped before Thranduil could open his mouth.

The chamber trembled slightly as Onar’s hefty weight hit the ground.

“Are you all right?” Thranduil frowned down at the Dwarf on the ground who scrambled up with surprising speed.

“We are made of stone, boy. This does not hurt us the least bit,” Onar pounded his breast armor.

“Well, good for you. Be ready. There should be two more dragons guarding the body.”

“Two more ye say?”

“Or three. The one that fell, it may come back to join its siblings. Dragons heal quickly, and I don’t think falling among the rocks is enough to kill it.”

“If there are already two more, how are we even going to make it near this body that you seek? Although now that ye mention it, the heat of that dragon fire was weak. My armor would have been enough to withstand it, at least for some time.”

“We don’t want to kill the dragonlings, just avoid them. If your armor can withstand the dragonling fire, would your shields also be effective against it?”

“It would be if we had a shield.”

“Don’t you have one in your sack?” Thranduil pointed to the Dwarf’s sack on the floor. “

“What do ye think me sack is? Enchanted? How would this bag contain a shield?” Onar picked up the sack.
“I don’t know.” Thranduil shrugged. “You seemed to find things inside it whenever we need something.”

“Laddie, ye been listening to too many stories. But, if we need it, there are many shields in the King’s Hall. The walls are decorated with shields and weapons, that is if they are still there.”

“I suppose, we wouldn’t know until we get there then. Well, lead on,” Thranduil said then stopped. “We should hurry. Only three days remain until the evil one returns to claim the body. Once his spirit returns to the body, we have no chance against it.”

“Well, if it weren’t for the Orcs and such, it would have only taken half day’s walk. And now, it seems we have to go back up again. At least we are directly under the King’s Halls. It should just be a matter of hours although I don’t know what awaits us there.”

“No matter what awaits, we will overcome it. I thank you for saving me,” Thranduil said.

Onar cleared his throat before Thranduil could continue. The Sinda turned to the Dwarf who seemed to look at anything else but meet Thranduil’s eyes.

“Well, we are even now, Elf,” Onar said. “I don’t owe ye anything.”

“Never said you did.” Thranduil frowned, but he could understand. He would hate having to owe anything to a Dwarf, especially to this Dwarf. “You accompanied me when you did not need to. I don’t think I would have made it this far without you. And for that, I thank you.”

“Ye don’t get it, laddie,” Onar looked up at Thranduil now, his eyes fierce, his chin raised proudly. “Ye have your reason, and I have mine for being here. Ye saved me, and I saved ye. We are even now. We don’t owe anything to each other. We are not friends and never will be. Understand, Elf?”

“Clearly.” Thranduil turned away from Onar. He knew all that Onar said and knew them to be true. Yet, a corner of his heart clenched. Thranduil didn’t know why. It was stupid really. Why should he care what the Dwarf thought? But the truthfulness of the statement stung him. Then, Thranduil chuckled to himself. Dear Valar! This Dwarf was so much like him, it unsettled him. Thranduil wondered if that was how he looked in other’s eyes: prideful, sharp-tongued, and reticent. Thranduil let out a sigh remembering the scathing remark he made to Lassiel.

There is no place in my heart for friends or anyone else. Not you. Not anyone.

At the time he said it, he had not given it much thought. It was the truth. It had not mattered to him how others may feel about what was said. To be at the receiving end, though, it made him realize things he had not thought of before. What a terrible thing it was to say such a thing to the young healer who only wanted to be friends with him. Thranduil realized now and regretted the words. Perhaps, when he returned to Lindon, if he survived this, he could remedy it.

“What is this place?” Thranduil frowned toward the darkness of the hallway. The place had a strong odor, a mix of cedar and camphor mostly. But there was some other smell Thranduil could not identify. With the pale blue glow from the recessed walls, the heavy, thick scent in the air gave the whole place a strange feel to it.

“This place has a strange smell,” said Thranduil as he looked around the walls filled with rectangular stone boxes.

“Do all ye Elves talk so much?” Onar harrumphed again.

Me? Talk too much? Thranduil would have laughed had he not wanted to whack the Dwarf.
Thranduil kicked the small rock half the size of his fist in his path. It flew over the stone floor and hit a clump of the crystals. The crystals shattered and the broken shards spread on the floor.

In silence, they walked on and came to another hallway running across the one they were on. Thranduil craned his neck to see right then left. Both ways looked exactly the same as the hallway they have walked. Both sides stretched into darkness, the blue glow of the runes eerie in the silence of the corridor.

“Which way?”

“I do not know,” said Onar. “I have never been down this deep here. There are cellar and armory just below the King’s Hall. And below that, the resting place of our kings. We are obviously even further down.” Onar’s voice sounded grave.

Thranduil glanced down at the Dwarf. Onar’s face was tense, but the Dwarf did not hold his ax up. He didn’t expect to be attacked, that was certain, but something bothered this old Dwarf.

“What is below the resting place of your kings?”

“The Hall of the Dead.”

“Hall of the Dead? You mean like the Hall where the spirits go?” Thranduil frowned down at the Dwarf who looked up to meet Thranduil’s eyes.

“I don’t know about the spirits. This is where we keep the dead.”

“You mean you keep the dead bodies here? Why?” Thranduil looked around the recessed walls. “Is that what those stone boxes are for?” Thranduil grimaced. “Why would you want to keep the bodies in the stone boxes? Don’t you want them buried in the earth, so they can nourish other living things in Arda?”

No Elf would want their body held in a stone box and kept underground where there was no sunlight. A body without a soul was just a part of Arda. Inside the earth, the empty body can become a source of nourishment for other plants. In fact, after they buried their dead, his people spread seeds over it, green grasses, flowers or trees. Over his mother’s grave, his father had planted beech tree seeds. Had Beleriand survived, a copper beech tree would have grown over his mother’s grave.

“Mahal made us out of the stones. It is fitting that we return to it. But, then, what would an Elf know about death. You live forever.”

“Not forever. Nothing lasts forever, Dwarf. Not us, not stones.”

Onar didn’t say anything. Instead, he walked on resolutely. “We just need to look for the stairs leading to the upper level.”

The hallway curved, and they continued their walk in silence. More corridors looking exactly the same as the ones before converged and twisted away to both sides. The path seemed to stretch on. Thranduil could not believe the number of stone boxes the place kept. So many.

Having walked through the corridors full of the dead for quite some time, Thranduil looked down. Shards of shattered crystals were on the ground. They had walked a quite a distance so it couldn’t be the same broken shards, could it? As he passed, he gathered the broken shards into a shape of a circle.

“What are ye doing?” Onar asked.
“I fear we may be walking in a circle. Just wanted to make sure. We should mark the paths that we have taken.”

“There are too many different paths. And they are hard to tell apart from each other.” Onar looked about him.

“Do any of the runes give you any idea of the directions?”

“They practically say the same thing, wishing the dead a good journey, of meeting their ancestors. Nothing to tell the directions. I have heard that the Hall of Dead is like a maze, but I see now that it was not an exaggeration.”

“Are there no secret passages on a wall or something?”

“Why would we build a secret passage to the Hall of the Dead?”

“I don’t know. Why do you build stone boxes for the dead?”

“Ye have a problem with the way we deal with our dead?” Onar stopped walking and crossed his arms, frowning up at Thranduil.

“No. I just want to find a way out of this place, Master Dwarf. Nothing more.”

“As I said, the burial chamber of the kings is the lowest level I have ventured here. I am not familiar with this place. And there are many passageways. Mayhap we should separate to look for the stairway up.”

“Is that a good idea? If we separate, how can we communicate once one of us find the way?”

“There is only one way in or out of this place. There should be two stairways, one up and the other down. Not sure about the downward stairs, but the one leading up to the burial ground of the kings should have an iron gate with grilled bars. I have been to that one from the upper level. If you see a way down, don’t go there. It will only lead more deeply into the Hall.”

“If I find the iron gate, how do I open it?”

“There are three levers, but don’t touch them. Only a Dwarf knows which one and the other two will kill ye. If I get there before ye, I will keep it open. Meet me up at the King’s burial chamber. If ye arrives there before me, then wait.”

“Your people built a trap onto the gate to the Hall of the Dead?”

“Every Dwarf knows where he is from. The gate is to keep out intruders.”

“Why would anyone want to get in here?”

“What else? The treasure! Most of the Dwarves are buried here with the greatest work they had made in their lifetime.”

“I am surprised Orcs have not already ransacked this place.”

“They wouldn’t know of it. Only a Dwarf would be able to find the door from outside. From inside ye just need to know what we are.” Onar turned. “Ye go that way, I will go this way. Mark on the floor like the way ye did with the crystals so that we will know that path was taken.”

With that, Onar walked away and turned a corner. Thranduil wasn’t sure if it was a good idea to
separate, but obviously, the Dwarf didn’t care to ask what Thranduil wanted. The Sinda sighed, then turned to the hallway opposite where Onar had gone.

---------

**Ancalagon the Black** (Sindarin, *Biting Storm*) the greatest winged dragon of Morgoth which was unleashed during War of Wrath. It is considered the largest, a size of a mountain. When the flying dragons were unleashed, Valar’s forces were pushed back until Earendil came with the Eagles. With the help of the Eagles, Earendil (Elrond’s father), riding on the flying Vingilot with the power of Silmaril on his brow, killed the Ancalagon bringing victory to Valar’s host.

**Vingilot** (Sindarin version of Quenya Vingilótë, *foam flower*) Built by Cirdan and Earendil, this ship is considered the fairest ever built. It was swan-shaped ship made of white birchwood with oars of gold and sails of silver. This is the ship Earendil reached Aman with Elwing to plead help from the Valar that led to the War of Wrath and the downfall of Morgoth on Middle Earth. With the power of Silmaril and the Valar, it flew to the aid of the Valar’s troops when the flying dragons were unleashed by Morgoth.

*Regarding Men and Elves Onar had seen, he is referring to the time Elrond and Elros led them out of Ossiriand where they were hiding with Maedhros and Maglor (FA 552 when they were 20 years old). Elrond led non-warrior members of Maedhros and Maglor’s people to Gil-galad and Elros led the Edain under the Feanor’s sons to join in the war with the host of Valinor. They would have traveled together (and Maedhros’ warriors would have accompanied them to make sure the twins get to their destination) across East Beleriand along the north of Andram, the Long Wall, and crossed Sirion to West Beleriand where the host of Valinor camped. The Valar’s army and the Morgoth army fought along River Sirion for forty years. Elrond would have left the Elros and Valar’s army to travel south along River Narog to Bay of Balar to Gil-galad. (*This detail is my addition, not in Tolkien)*
Silmacil ventures into the ruin in search of the cadets and the dragons

Level 5 of Dwarven Ruin. October 4, Second Age 144

MAIRON sensed the presence first. Even in this body, his senses were sharper than those of the Elven warriors.

They had left the Dwarven settlement early in the morning, before the rise of the sun. It hadn’t mattered. The inside of the mountain was dark although it did not affect Mairon’s sight.

Throughout the day, the craftily carved openings in the ceiling brought in sunlight in thin streams drawing patterns of rippled gold over the dark water as four rafts, each holding ten Elves, glided over the black surface of the water.

But, too soon, the lights from above thinned then disappeared throwing them into the murky darkness. With the disappearance of the daylight, the warriors who were humming in unison fell silent. Only a faint sound of water flowing and swishing filled the dark void. Yet, the warriors seemed unfazed by the darkness in the ruin that clung to every corner and crevices.

Mairon glanced at the calm surface of the water sensing the creature stir with each stroke of the poles that guided the rafts against the flow of the river.

The fallen Maia wondered whether he should say something or not when Captain Astalder who was riding in the frontmost raft raised his hand then fisted it. All the Elves stopped rowing. In the darkness of the Dwarven ruin, the Elven warriors glowed like stars in the night.

The captain’s pale form pulsed. Without turning, he pointed to the right. All the rafts made an immediate turn to the right.

“What is it, captain?” Celebrimbor standing in front of Mairon at the head of the second raft called out. In the silence of the dark, Celebrimbor’s voice rang out clear as a working hammer in a smith’s forge.

“The stairs,” the captain said. If Mairon had been anyone else, he might have missed the slight tension, a coiled spring, in it. “We have to take the stairs, my lord. The river ends here. The water falls from the floor above,” Captain Astalder continued. “And, I believe, it would be best that we move out of the water now.”

Celebrimbor frowned, then looked down at the water. “Yes. I see.”

The surface of the water was calm, but Mairon could sense the movement underneath the raft.

Using a long pole, two warriors from each raft pushed their water vessel toward the right side. It was then that Mairon saw the pale form of stairs that rose up in the midst of the darkness. Captain Astalder stretched his right hand when the surface of the water heaved lifting the raft where Mairon stood. The warriors in the raft immediately moved toward the edge balancing the wooden vessel.
“Nuisance!” Celebrimbor mumbled. He turned to Mairon. “Come, Gelir. The captain will take care of this.” With that, the Noldoin smith jumped up and flew through the air to land lightly on the stone steps that jutted out of the water. The two warriors who always shadow Lord Celebrimbor followed behind. Mairon jumped up to land lightly next to Celebrimbor.

The fallen Maia had no intention to aid in any way, but he took out his sword as was expected of him and stepped toward the rafts on the water.

Celebrimbor placed a hand over Mairon’s sword.

“No need. You will only hinder them.”

Mairon looked toward the rafts. The Elven warriors shone like moonbeams in the dark. They stood on the rafts like carved stones. None of them moved, and they held no swords in their hands, nor bows.

“Why are they not…” Mairon frowned.

“Shhh. Just watch,” Celebrimbor said. With a wave of his hand, the Noldorin lord sent up several balls of light over the rafts.

Just then, a sound of wind splitting water shattered the silence. Water rose like a dark wall. One of the rafts flew up. The one Celebrimbor had ridden.

The six warriors left on the raft did not jump off. Instead, they crouched at the edge of the raft, three to each long end. The six soldiers moved in unison as if each knew exactly what to do. They shifted their weights, turning their bodies in a coordinated movement to land the raft back on the water with a thud.

Mairon could not help but admire the almost cold precision of the Elven movements as well as the graceful execution. Although no command was uttered, the warriors moved like one cohesive unit like a flock of swans in the night lake.

Something dark shot up from the water, a tentacle as thick as one’s thighs. But before it could even touch the nearest raft, one warrior from the raft on the left and the one from the right jumped across each other as their hands flashed. A shriek issued from the depth of the water before the murky water foamed and churned.

The surface of the water whistled and split. Like an angry sea in the midst of a storm, the river heaved spitting water drops. A creature, a tangle of tentacles and glint of bluish-white flesh shot up from the water. Two of the rafts flew up in the air. The warriors on them sprang up at the same time. They landed back on their rafts as they turned and straightened in the air. But, a tentacle snapped one of the rafts. Steel glinted. The logs of a raft separated and landed with a thud on the water. On each log, Elven warriors landed on it. In the hands of the soldiers were a spear, its tip shone under the balls of light floating in the air.

A blur of light. One after another. A steel song cut through the dark, and in a blink, the creature was no more.

Silence, again, settled in the darkness as if nothing had happened.

Mairon’s heart leaped. What perfect soldiers they were. What would it feel to command warriors of such caliber? Mairon pressed his hands together. He wanted them. The Maia coveted the Silmacil like a dragon coveted gold. To have these soldiers under his command. What could stop him? What could he not achieve with an army of such warriors as these?
“I hope you do not plan to abandon the City Guards for the Silmacil?”

Mairon looked up to see Celebrimbor’s lips curl wistfully. “They are impressive, are they not?”

“I would never abandon you, my lord. You have the forge; they do not.”

Celebrimbor’s face broke into a full smile. “I certainly do.”

Celebrimbor gathered his lights, then turned to skip up the stairs as the warriors of Silmacil gathered the rafts and the loosened logs.

“My lord,” the captain called. “We should leave the young cadet here. Two of my warriors will remain here to watch the rafts. I want Cadet Gelir to stay with them. We will be facing Orcs and what else in there. I think he would be safer here than with us.”

“Captain, we have already discussed this. If it wasn’t for my young friend here, we might not have convinced Lord Hanar to open up about the secret passages or to send some of his warriors to meet us at the crossroad. Remember how stubborn those Dwarves were?”

And it was true. Celebrimbor had been worried as to how to bring the matter of the secret passages to the leader of the Dwarves without letting it known that Astalder’s Elves knew of them. The Noldorin lord feared that the Dwarves may think they were spying. It was Mairon’s ingenuity that brought the Dwarven lord, Lord Hanar, to speak about the secret passages.

Mairon being an Ainur had no trouble understanding the language of the Dwarves as he comprehended all tongues spoken by all sentient beings. With the stealth of the Elf’s body he possessed, combined with his Maiarian senses, it didn’t take much for Mairon to find out about the passages and how to access it.

And it was easy for Mairon to maneuver Celebrimbor and his Dwarven smith to the front of the secret passage just as two Dwarves emerged from it surprising everyone. The negotiation with the Dwarven lord had gone quite smoothly after that. Celebrimbor had been grateful enough to concede when Mairon requested to be part of the expedition team.

“He certainly helped. I am not questioning that. But we are talking of his safety. He is yet young,” the captain insisted.

“If Lord Gilmagor thought him unworthy, then he would not have brought the cadets here in the North.”

“Let me remind you, if I may, my lord, we lost five cadets already.”

“But you are here with your warriors.”

“They had Lord Commander.”

“But he was not with them when they were taken. But you are here, with us, and with the three squads of your finest warriors. I would think that enough to rid us of the Orcs within this place. Don’t worry captain. I will personally make sure the cadet is safe. Now, let’s go. As you said, we do not have much time to waste.”

Celebrimbor turned and continued up the stairs.

Gelir turned to follow Celebrimbor when Captain Astalder grabbed his elbow.
“Stay close,” Astalder said. “Do not wander.”

“Of course, Sir!”

Feeling the captain’s eyes burning the skin of his neck, Mairon followed after Celebrimbor. The Maia had known that Astalder had kept a pair of eyes following him while they were in the Dwarven settlement. He wasn’t sure what the captain thought, but Mairon took special care to keep a low profile. On more than one occasion, the Maia was tempted to glance into the Captain’s head. But even when he slept, when Elven minds were more open, the captain kept firm control over his mind making it difficult for Mairon to glean any information.

For now, he will stay silent and obedient. He still had three more days before the rise of the New Moon, and from where they were, it was only a day’s walk to the Palace.

The stairs led to an arched hallway with massive stone columns.

When the members of Silmacil came up to the hallway, they separated. As if previously arranged, two warriors guarded Celebrimbor on each side of the Noldorin lord. Captain Astalder led in the front along with another member of the Silmacil. Celebrimbor’s two guards took up the rear. The rest of the Silmacil disappeared into the shadows of the hallway.

“Where did the others go?” Mairon whispered realizing that he was not to make a sound.

“They will scout the area to make sure we are not surprised,” Captain Astalder said without turning to look.

In the darkness of the hallway, they walked. The Elves glimmered pale like moonlight on water. Mairon was glad his body was born of Middle Earth and was not expected to glow like these warriors who were of Valinor and still carried the light of the two trees within them. Mairon wondered, though, why they allowed themselves to glow in the dark when they were capable of hiding their light. In this darkness, they were easy targets.

“Is there a reason for the glimmer?” Mairon asked.

“Have you not been taught tactics?” Celebrimbor asked. “This is your chance to learn ‘Rose and Thorn’ in person.”

Mairon understood then. The battle strategy had been part of the cadet training. Rose and Thorn was a method of using an attractive bait to lure an enemy while hiding one’s true strength. When a rose bloomed red and fragrant, it was easy to forget the thorns that surrounded it.

They walked on when the captain stopped suddenly.

“Light!” Captain Astalder whispered a command and as if the cloud blocked the moon, all lights extinguished as one. Astalder grabbed Mairon’s elbow and pulled him behind a column.

Ahead, a wall to their right shook, then a small part of the wall swooshed open. A pale blue light invaded the darkness of the hallway. It was a moment before the blue light within the door faded away.

Mairon felt the captain’s hand reaching for the hilt of his sword when a small figure peeked out of the open door of the wall.

Slowly, one then another figure came out of the door into the hallway. The door on the wall swished closed. The two figures were short and were carrying a large sack on their backs. One of them
fumbled in his sack taking out a glass bowl attached to a chain. He filled it with a handful of glowing crystals from a pouch, but as soon as he did so, they were surrounded by naked blades.

The captain stepped out from the behind the column. At the same time, several balls of light the size of palms rose above the heads of the warriors brightening the hallway.

Five warriors stood surrounding two Dwarves, one holding a hammer and another a bow.

"Greetings, young masters, we do not mean you harm," said Captain Astalder to the two Dwarves who frowned up at the Elven warriors.

One of the Dwarves was quite hefty with arms the size of Elven warriors’ thighs. The other was stocky as all Dwarves were wont to be, but this one was rather thin, almost willowy if any Dwarf would allow the term to be used to refer to him. Both had their weapons out in front of them, their stands ready for a battle. They looked about, their eyes silently sizing up each Elven warrior surrounding them.

"It was not our intention to surprise you. We saw you emerge from the walls, and we weren’t sure who you were at the time. Please forgive us."

The captain waved the Silmacil away, and the warriors stepped back behind their captain.

"May I ask where you are coming from?" Astalder asked the Dwarves.

"What is it to ye?" the Dwarf with the hammer said as he weighed the weapon in his hand. He glared up at the captain. "This is our home. We come and go as we please."

"No one is saying otherwise, Master Dwarf," the captain said.

"Why are ye here in our city?" The hefty Dwarf asked. "Armed and ready to kill?"

"Are ye trying to rescue…" the smaller of the two Dwarves started.

"Hmph," the Dwarf with the hammer cleared his throat cutting off the younger Dwarf. He turned to his companion and made a hand gesture.

Mairon raised his eyebrows. He understood all tongues as only one of Ainur could, but he had not seen such hand gestures before. However, it wasn’t difficult to understand what the Dwarf meant. The Dwarf with the hammer was telling the younger one not to talk too much.

Mairon grimaced. He didn’t understand the reason for having different languages among different people to express the same things. Why did these different races of people speak different languages? Mairon could not fathom. Dwarves and Elves looked and acted differently. What need they have for a different tongue? It prevented effective communication. When he ruled the world, he will make sure there is only one language among all the sentient beings so everyone would be able to understand each other. It would eliminate miscommunication altogether. If he had the power, Mairon would instill in each creature the same ability he and other Ainur shared: the ability to communicate and understand all tongues. It was unfortunate that he didn’t have such power.

Captain Astalder looked down at the two dwarves and said in a grave voice. "Several of our cadets were taken by Orcs. We believe they were taken to a dragon. If you have seen any of Elves here, we will be grateful for any information you could impart to us."

"Orcs don’t keep prisoners." The Dwarf holding the hammer said ignoring the look of entreaty thrown by the one holding the bow.
“You speak truly, Master Dwarf,” Astalder said then turned to the younger Dwarf with the bow in his hand.

The Dwarf tried unsuccessfully to stow the bow behind his back. He was looking away, clearly avoiding the captain’s eyes.

“Even so, if it was one of your own people, would you give up without at least trying to find out what happened to them? Even if it is their bodies that we must collect, you understand why we cannot just give up and go home. Please, if you know anything…”

“We will not answer any of yer questions before we speak to our people,” the one holding the hammer said.

“But it will be another day before you reach the settlement, and we cannot wait.”

“That is yer problem,” the hammer holder said.

“We have only seen two of them,” the one with the bow said.

“Buri!” the one with the hammer glared at the younger Dwarf.

The captain glanced at the hammer holder, then at the smaller Dwarf. With his hand over his heart, he bowed to the Dwarves.

“Master Buri. I am called Astalder. Nice to meet you and your friend.”

“Cousin,” the bigger Dwarf said.

Captain smiled down at the hefty Dwarf who frowned mightily.

“Cousin? That is a strange name,” the captain smiled, his eyes glinting in the light of the hovering spheres that provided light in the darkness.

“His name is Loni,” Buri said.

“Master Loni. Master Buri. We would be very grateful if you can tell us about the two Elves you met.”

“Not saying anything,” Loni said pushing Buri behind him. “Ye better let us go.”

“Of course,” said the captain stepping aside. “You are not our prisoners. I just want to find our people. They should be wearing a dark armor as black as their hair. It would be hard to find them in this dark.”

“Well, then the two we met are not them,” Loni said. “We only met two young Elves who wore a tattered blue tunics. And only one of them was dark haired. The other had a yellow head.”

The captain nodded. His face revealed nothing. “And the dark-haired one was as pale as the moon; was he not?”

“Not this one. He was darker skinned than the blond,” said Buri.

“I see. They are only two of the seven we are looking for. At least, it is good to know that those two are healthy and well.”

“Hmph! I would hardly say they are well. The blond one was limping, and he abandoned his friend,”
Loni said stowing away his hammer and crossing his arms.

“Not abandon, Loni,” Buri said. “He said the dragon wouldn’t let his friend go unless he did its bidding.”

“Dragon, you say?” Celebrimbor who had remained quiet until now stepped forward and looked at the two Dwarves. “What did it want from them? Is this the Dragon in the treasury? Because that is where we are headed. Lord Hanar has given us permission to enter so that we can eliminate the dragon and rescue our cadets who are lost.”

“Ye got permission from Lord Hanar?” Loni asked as he glanced at Lord Celebrimbor then at the captain.

“Yes,” the captain said with a smile. “Lord Hanar sent Commander Duf with Dwarven warriors through the secret passage to meet us at the Crossroad. But he sent us through the Main Road as it is the quickest way.”

“Commander Duf will be at the Crossroad? Ye know about the passages?” Loni narrowed his eyes, pulling away from the captain.

“Of course. How else would we know about the secret passages and about the Crossroad where the main road meets all the roads that lead to every hall in the city? In fact, we were told that Lord Onar of the East Gate is the only one who is still alive that knows every road that leads to the palace and the treasury. If we meet him on our way, we are to seek his help. Do you know anything of Lord Onar?”

*The wily Elf!* Mairon almost admired the captain.

Most of what the captain said was true. Unable to deny the existence of the passages, the Dwarven lord admitted that they existed, but claimed that the passages were too narrow to accommodate the Elven soldiers. In fact, he insisted that it was faster to travel over the water if that was possible. And as his people do not travel over water, Lord Hanar had promised to send his commander and soldiers through the passages to meet with Celebrimbor at the Crossroad. And instead of maps that Celebrimbor asked, they were given only a verbal direction. And when the Dwarven lord came to bid them a safe journey, Lord Hanar had mentioned his old cousin who lived by the East Gate to the city. Not that the Dwarf would help, but rather that despite knowing all the roads, the old Dwarf would not help them, therefore, they had been advised to avoid confrontation with Onar at all cost.

The captain was making a wild guess as to Onar the Dwarf, based on Lord Hanar’s statement that his cousin lived with his son and a nephew.

“Loni, if they know about uncle, then, it must be true,” the younger Dwarf said. But Loni seemed unconvinced.

“If what ye say is true, then why is there none of my kin to guide ye?”

“As I said, we came over the main road, Master Loni. I am sure you are aware the road is now a river. Your people would not ride in the raft with us. But the river flows from the higher story, and we will have to walk these halls. If you could lead us, I am sure we could get to Commander Duf quicker.”

“Lord Onar sent us to talk to Commander Duf,” Buri said. “The dragon, it said something about a dark power in the palace. The blond Elf went to destroy it.”

“Buri! Don’t’ talk anymore,” said Loni. The Dwarf turned to the captain. “Ye said Commander Duf
will meet ye at the Crossroad? We came from there. We will take ye there. The quickest route is through the passages."

“Thank you, Master Loni. We will be grateful. But, what is this about a dark power in the palace?” The captain and Celebrimbor exchanged glances.

“As I said to ye, we talk to Commander Duf first,” said Loni as he turned and opened the passage behind him.

Mairon wondered what Uluch may have said to Thranduil and Elrond. And what was this about Thranduil leaving Elrond behind to go destroy a dark power at the palace? They were obviously referring to him, Mairon knew. Had she betrayed him? And why was the injured Sinda willing to leave Elrond behind to go kill a power? Mairon grimaced. Uluch must have offered Thranduil a deal that the Sinda could not refuse.

_Ah, yes. Her blood. Who could resist that?_

He had almost lost to her, drunk on her blood and weakened by the power he used to make the new body. Thankfully, he found before it was too late that the blood gave her power over the ones who had tasted it. Maybe, it was time to get back to the palace.
The Battle

Chapter Summary

Elrond encounters Uluch. The Dwarves and Elves attack the dragon.

The Treasury. October 5, Second Age 144

"ELLL-ROND."

The voice called through the thick fog, always just beyond Elrond's sight.

"Where are you?" Elrond was tired. It felt like he walked around for days, following after the sound of Thranduil's voice calling to him.

"You are not Thranduil, are you?" Elrond turned about looking for the source of the sound. "You are not him. And this. This is another dream, or maybe it is an illusion. Just a figment of my imagination."

Elrond plopped on the ground. He couldn't see the floor; the fog was so thick. He sank his head between his knees. He needed to think for a moment. He realized that he will not catch whoever was calling to him, leading him on through this thick fog filled place.

At least, it wasn't so dark. Elrond could not tell how long he had wandered, but he had been trapped in a void, darkness that blocked everything. He wasn't sure if he was awake or asleep, but he had kept going until he stumbled into this place of gray shadows. Instead of a black void, it was a pale mist that swirled and danced all around him.

And with the fog, the acrid smell of sulfur and heat that had choked him had dissipated. But, an unusual scent lingered in the air. He couldn't identify it when Thranduil had called to him. At least, his voice did.

Elrond closed his eyes. Whatever or whoever was doing this didn't mean to kill him. Otherwise, he would have been dead already. He had no weapons and no armor. But, this thing or person knew Thranduil if it was using the Sindar's voice.

"Stop playing with me and show yourself. I am tired of this game," Elrond said lifting his head.

"Elll-rond. Ssstar dome."

The voice changed. It was no longer Thranduil's clear baritone. It did not sound threatening, but there was a strange intonation to the throaty voice low and husky. Dangerous.

"Whoever you are, if you are not a coward, face me!"

It was then he heard it. The sound of iron grating on the stone floor, a heavy chain.

"Sssooo different, and yet sooo alike," said the voice. "There is strength in you, a strength of a different kind, but perhaps more potent. Thranduil, you called him. Vigorous Spring. Interesting namesss, you Elvesss have. Vigorous Ssspring and Ssstar Dome."
The wind rose and swept away the fog. In front of Elrond was a mound of chains. Not of iron or steel. Not copper or bronze or any metal that the Half-Elven had ever seen. It gleamed in the gray light, black as night and huge as stone columns.

On top of that mound of chains sat a woman. Her face was rosy as if flushed. But it was not her rosy coloring that drew Elrond's eyes. It was the long and lustrous locks of vivid and rich red like the color of rubies that were on Maglor's dagger. Elrond had never seen the hair of such rich and vibrant red, redder than the ginger red of Maedhros which had surprised him and his brother when they first saw the eldest son of Feanor.

The woman lay reclined on the top of the mound of chains as if it was the throne and she the queen. And she was beautiful.

"Who are you?" Elrond asked when he found his voice.

The woman raised her arched eyebrows. Her eyes were golden like the sun. She sat up and leaned forward.

"You. You see mee?"

Elrond frowned. "Well, you are in front of me. Why shouldn't I see you?"

She got up and slinked down the pile of chains, her graceful movements almost hypnotic like a snake gliding over water. In a blink, she stood before Elrond. The Half-Elven stepped back when he saw that the woman was naked under her hair, her skin creamy rose like the pale pink flowers that grew wild on the hills of Ossiriand. Elrond turned his head away feeling heat sear his face. He fumbled to unhook the cloak about him. He offered it to the woman. It was tattered and stained, but maybe she didn't have anything else to wear, Elrond thought.

She laughed, the throaty sound echoed around Elrond. For a moment, Elrond thought it sounded like a roar of a beast.

"Afraid of a bit of flesh? So prim and proper, you Elvesss!" she laughed again. Then, she reached out and placed her hand on Elrond's face before he could turn away.

"Ssstill. You are different," she said as she turned his face this way and that.

Elrond refused to keep his eyes on her. The woman stepped back, then walked around Elrond.

"You are not like your friend at all. Ssso cold that one. Ssso insolent, untrusting and unwilling. As cold as the one who sssleeps above. But, you." She stepped closer.

Elrond bit into the back of his teeth to prevent jerking away from her.

"You can ssssee me like the way my master could. Your heart is freee, unfettered and unjudging. It isss unfortunate there are not many like you."

She leaned, took a handful of Elrond's hair, and brought it to her nose. Her sun yellow eyes burned and beckoned. Elrond turned away, feeling his cheeks flame and his heart thunder in his breast. She was dangerous. He could feel it. And from her rose a heat that seemed to scorch his skin. She was like the fire itself.

"If…ah…if you will, my lady," Elrond swallowed and cleared his throat looking away and up at the ceiling. He noted that the roof was damaged. A portion of the upper floor could be seen through the half-crumpled ceiling. They were in a large chamber with no windows or doors, but high above,
through a window somewhere in the upper floor, sunlight streamed through and reached where they were.

"What day is today?" Elrond asked, suddenly aware that he had not seen sunlight for some time.
"Where am I?"

"Doesss it matter? Another day passes, and I am still in chainssss. At the start of the seventh day of Autumn, when the new moon rises, little after midnight after tomorrow, he will rise, and I shall fall."

"I…I don't understand," Elrond shook his head. He had no idea what the woman was saying, but something dark tightened the pit of his stomach. Something was happening, something bad. "Who will rise? Why will you fall?"

"He, the one who has chained me." Her stance, previously confident and smooth, faltered as she glanced at the pile of the black chains. The massive pile of linked metal rings seemed to grow smaller as it reached her ankle.

"Why has he chained you?"

"To enslave my children and me." She let out a growl, low and threatening. "But he will not succeed." She spoke as if she was certain, yet there were shadows in her eyes.

"Who is he, and who are you? You are not one of us, nor are you human."

"Oh, you think?" she sneered as she straightened. "Who would want to be a human, the weakest of all creaturessss." She held up her head and looked down at Elrond like a goddess. "I am Uluch, the one and the only one of my kind. There issss no one like me, and there ssshall be no one else like meee."

"I thought you said you have children."

"Yesss. But none of them have been given what I had been given."

"What is that?"

"The essssence of my master."

Elrond felt a sinking feeling in his stomach, but he felt compelled to ask.

"And, who is your master?"

Uluch's eyes glowed like the sun, flaming and shining, sizzling and seething. Elrond wanted to look away, but he couldn't. In her eyes, there was something alluring, beseeching and oh-so-demanding.

"You know, do you not, Dome of Starsss? The greatest of the Powersssss, the mightiest of all the creationssss, the God-King Emperor of All Arda."

Something hot rose in Elrond's stomach. She was talking of Morgoth, the Dark Lord who had destroyed lives upon lives of Elves and other free people in this world. It was because of Morgoth that Maedhros and Maglor suffered, all their people destroyed, their brothers doomed and cursed.

"He is no more. He is no king of Arda! He is the Deceiver, the Usurper, the Destroyer of all things beautiful and good in this world!" Elrond said.

"Liesss!" Uluch growled. "What dooo you know of my master? You know nothing, Elf!"
"He killed women and children! He marred this world, brought sickness and decay, fire and ice. He twisted Elves and Men to make those horrible creatures to use them as their servants. He twisted Eru's creation into something ugly and terrible."

"Ssso," Ulruch straightened, lifting her face proudly. "Am I ugly and terrible?"

"No. You are beautiful, but you cannot be his creation… He does not have the power to create…"

"My master made it possssible for me to exisssst. He brought the union of the sssspirits of fire and his essence so I can exist."

"Spirits of fire?" It was then that Elrond realized that her name, Uluch, meant 'she-dragon;' "You… you cannot be…"

"Oh, but I can."

Before Elrond's eyes, Uluch grew. Scales, deep wine colored like rubies of richest red, covered her skin as her body stretched and grew into enormous size. Her head grew horns and expanded twice Elrond's height.

Elrond faltered, and stepped back, feeling his legs weaken beneath him. He had never seen an actual dragon. He had read all about them, had read the stories of Turin Turambar and Glaurung as well as the Battle of Sudden Flames when Morgoth first introduced dragons. But, he had never expected to meet one in person. And, here it was. Elrond blinked up at the great creature.

She was terrible and beautiful, dark and fiery.

Elrond could not speak although his mouth was open. He had thought it would be monstrous, and she was. Still, there was unmistakable beauty in her.

"Will you call mee a monster now, Sssstar Dome, as all otherss of your kind? Or do you seee more deeply as you had when you first beheld mee?"

"You are beautiful, but your master was a monster, the primordial evil."

"Whaat do you know of my massstter!" Uluch roared. Her voice was deeper now and rang through the chamber. "You dooo not know him. People ssssay terrible thingsss of him, but he raised mee, gave mee home, nurtured me. Made me into whooo I am. He loved mee. Do you understand, little Elf? I am who I am because of him."

She lowered her head to glare at Elrond and growled. Smoke rose from her nose and filled the air with the stench of sulfur and fire. "And if anyone sssay ill of him, heee will have to deal with mee."

Elrond had been ready to fight the dragon with bare hands if he had to, but all strength went out of him. Part of his heart he had guarded carefully ever since arriving at Lindon tightened. Images of his foster fathers, Maedhros and Maglor, came to Elrond. The Half-Elven rubbed at his heart which throbbed painfully.

The world did not love Maedhros and Maglor. They were the sons of Feanor. They murdered their kin, first the Teleri, then the Sindar, and later even the Noldor. They shed the blood of their own kindred, the evillest and the vilest of deeds committed by Elves against other Elves. They were the destroyers of his mother's people, they were the reason why their mother was lost, the reason why Elrond and his brother were separated from the people of their birth. Elrond had all the reasons in the world to hate them, but he could not. Elrond could never hate the two eldest sons of Feanor.
Elrond's throat thickened. His heart ached as it always did when he thought of those two who were lost to him now. To the world, they may be the vile murderers, but to Elrond, they will always be the sun and the moon, the mother and the father, his nurturers, teachers, and guardians. They had protected him and his brother, taught them, loved them without asking for anything in return. It was Maedhros and Maglor who taught Elrond the joys and sorrows of the world, the value of unconditional love and trust.

"He may be what he may be, and the world may hate him, but you will love him nonetheless," Elrond said.

"Hoom!" Uluch let out smoke and pulled back. She settled down next to the chains. "You sssurprise me, little Elf. In more waysss than one."

Then, she turned her head and tilted it as if she is listening.

"What is it?" Elrond asked.

Uluch suddenly rose up, her claws which had been hidden before came out as she clutched the stone floor. They dug into the stone and left deep grooves on the floor.

Uluch hissed. "He is here."

"Who’s here?" Elrond looked about. He did not hear any sound.

"NEVER!" Uluch roared suddenly making Elrond jump. She was answering some unknown and unheard question. Elrond tried to listen, but even with his Elven hearing, he could not hear anything.

Uluch stalked about the empty chamber as if she would rip the head of anyone near her. Elrond retreated to one of the few columns in the room knowing instinctively not to disturb her.

It was not long after when Elrond felt something moving beyond the walls. Uluch spread her wings and flapped shaking the walls. The Half-Elven was thrown onto the floor by the storm-strength of her wings. Uluch's eyes which were sun yellow glowed with fiery heat.

"They have come. Your people and the Dwarvesss with their axesss and hammersss. They have come to kill mee. Let them come!" the dragon growled as she raised her long torso.

Her belly glowed red. Elrond took cover, rolling away from her. Something told him to stay far away from her as possible.

It was then that with a slight rumble, a small section of the wall in front of the dragon slid upward revealing an opening. Before Elrond could see anything, however, the dragon roared. From the dragon's gigantic mouth river of fire streamed forth and scorched the corridor in an instant. Fire and smoke filled the passage.

Elrond's heart froze. Were Elven and Dwarven warriors in that tunnel? The Half-Elven could not imagine them surviving such fire attack. Even at the distance he was from the passage that opened, the heat from the fire scorched his skin.

"You…you killed them…" Elrond could not say anymore. The words choked in his throat.

It was then, another door slid open. This time it was from the wall behind them. Uluch turned as if she expected them and spit out another fire stream. The chamber filled with smoke. The acrid odor of sulfur and heat attacked Elrond choking his throat and stinging his eyes. Smoke thickened.
But what came did not come from the tunnels, but from above. The first volley of arrows sang, the familiar sound of wind songs, as the arrows whipped through the air. Elrond could not see anything in the smoke. Only his warrior instinct allowed him to avoid them as they rained down onto the chamber. But one could avoid Elven arrows for only so long. One of them cut across Elrond's cheek, another at his arm, and another at his thigh. Elrond barely avoided the one that flew at his head, fell backward as his foot tripped over something on the ground. Elrond hit the ground. He rolled and crashed into something hard. The gray shadows blinded him, but Elrond found the stone column. Scrambling up, Elrond hid behind the column and looked out.

Within the thicket of the smoke, Elrond saw the familiar red glow above him. Uluch was about to spit fire, this time toward the ceiling.

"Move away!" Elrond shouted at the top of his lung. "Dragon fire coming!"

"Earendilion? Is that you?" Someone shouted from above. "We are coming. Stay hidden!"

Stay hidden? Where was he going to hide? But he had no more time for thought. As soon as Elrond moved away, a column of fire erupted. Fiery red flames, leaping and hungry, blazed through the remains of the ceiling.

The chamber exploded into a cacophony of rubbles falling followed by shouts on both sides of the chamber. The entire room shook as if a bear hibernating shook itself awake, roaring to face an intruder.

Within the gray shadows, the clang of hundreds of swords rang through the room followed by flashes of steel. It was the Dwarves. Only Dwarves would make so much sound when they fought.

Fear tore through Elrond as the column in front of him shuddered as the ground trembled under his feet.

Uluch's roar rose like angry waves, shaking the walls like ocean storm shake stray ships. A glimmer of red moved through the gray shadows as flashes of silver fought against it. Along with the roar of the dragon, screams filled the chamber.

As Elrond tried to see what was going on, something flew at Elrond and hit the column with such violence the stone column shook. Elrond rolled away just in time. The thing hit and slid to the floor next to Elrond. It was a mass of steel armor and blood. Elrond clawed his way to the figure who was too short to be an Elf. The Dwarven warrior lay broken, his steel armor soaked with blood. The Half-Elven yanked the warrior's helmet off, to see how much damage was done. The Dwarf glared, his eyes unseeing.

"Rest now. Lord Aule awaits," Elrond whispered as he grabbed the Dwarf's steel encased hand. He knew no one could help the Dwarf now.

It was not the first time Elrond had seen someone pass from this world. As soon as Elrond was old enough, Maglor had conceded to Elrond's desire to work with the healers. And although the healers had tried to guard Elrond from those warriors who were too deeply wounded to recover, they could not protect him from finding death. Maedhros and Maglor and their people were surrounded by enemies on all sides. It was hard to escape from seeing death despite how fiercely his foster parents tried to protect him and his brother from it.

Elrond watched as the Dwarf's eyes glazed and faded.

"Be at peace, Master Dwarf. May you find your way to Lord Aule and your ancestors."
Elrond closed the Dwarf's eyes shut. He did not know the words Dwarves used at times like these, but Elrond knew Dwarves believed that they returned to Vala Aule who was their maker. Elrond wiped his eyes. No matter how much death he saw, each one seared his heart, each one left a mark on his soul. It didn't matter if they were Elves, Dwarves or Men. They were all Eru's children in the end. Even the Dwarves. Each life was a precious gift given by Eru.

But there was no time to think further as the column next to him shook. Elrond stepped away unsure which way to run when the dragon let out an earsplitting scream. From above stars shone. At least, Elrond thought they were stars until they moved with lightning speed, one after another.

A blast of wind threw Elrond, and the young Noldo tumbled over the ground. With the wind, the smoke cleared. What Elrond thought stars were Elven warriors gleaming in their silver and blue armor—The Silmacil. The flashes of their swords circled the dragon like beams of light. Uluch cried out.

There were Dwarves by the feet of the dragon, hewing at her legs. As the Elven warriors fought the dragon, The Dwarven warriors stepped back, their golden shields at ready. The dragon's body glowed red, and the silver lights dispersed and fell back behind the wall of golden shields. Uluch let forth a stream of fire, then she whipped out her wings raising a gale. The Dwarven shields held, but Uluch twisted her body and her powerful tail snapped across the shield wall. The Elven warriors jumped away, but the Dwarves were not fast enough. The ones who met the power of her tail flew against the walls. Many scrambled up, but as many lay unmoving.

The Elven warriors shouted a battle cry then flew up the length of the dragon's body like beams of starlight. But, Uluch screamed another stream of fire. The Elven warriors jumped away, but the fire caught two of the warriors. With a high-pitched scream, they burned away into ashes like a dry leaf crumpled into dust. Uluch took off with a mighty swing of her wings throwing the other Elven warriors off their feet. Many of them were blown away and smashed against the chamber wall.

One of them who wore a red cape tumbled near Elrond.

"Earendilion!" The warrior shouted when he saw Elrond. It was Celebrimbor. "Stay, there!" he shouted when the dragon screamed. The black chain glowed suddenly then swung the dragon around. Everyone took cover. The Dwarves retreated to the passages behind the doors. The Elven warriors jumped away to the edges of the chamber away from the dragon.

Uluch crashed onto the stone floor. She writhed as if in great pain. All the Elven warriors jumped at the same time toward her as if they had coordinated the movement previously.

"Leave her alone!" Elrond cried, but his voice was swallowed up by the Uluch's roar.

Celebrimbor ran toward the dragon, he held a weapon that was rare among the Elves. It was a doubled edged blade built into one hilt. It was a massive weapon almost the length of Celebrimbor's body, unlike the typical dagger such a weapon was made into. Celebrimbor turned the weapon in his hands as he neared the dragon. The blades turned like a windmill and blurred into a stream of silver light.

"Wait, my lord, don't! Please!" Elrond shouted after the Noldorin lord, but Celebrimbor flew up onto the dragon's head and sank his weapon into the dragon's eye.

Horrific scream shook the chamber. Black blood gushed out of Uluch's eye. The Dwarves who had moved into the secret passages poured out with a battle cry and attacked the dragon's body, hewing at her legs and wings.
Uluch howled. Her scream tore through the walls.

"Let her be!" Elrond cried out, but his voice was lost among the clamor and shouts.

Elrond's eyes filled with tears. Why did they have to fight and kill? Why couldn't they all just get along? Uluch didn't seem like an evil creature. But, Elrond knew he could not stop this. Too many had already died. Too much blood had spilled already.

DOOM! DOOM! DOOM!

The chamber filled with a volley of arrows and the piercing sound of Orc drums.

"Take cover!"

Celebrimbor's shout brought Elrond out of his sorrow-soaked mind. Before Elrond could look up, he was thrust aside. In front of him stood Celebrimbor.

Swoosh swoosh swoosh

Celebrimbor's weapon sang as the Elven lord turned the weapon in his hand. Its blades blurred into white light. The Orc arrows flew all around but did not reach Elrond and Celebrimbor.

"Earendillion, be ready to run. The passage to your left. Silmacil will cut out a path for you."

Just as he said, the Elven warriors lined up forming a wall to the Orc arrows. They were in pairs: one to cut down the arrows as they reached them and another shooting the arrows at the Orcs who were crowding the upper floor balconies and the open doors. The ceiling had collapsed fully, and only the walls of the floor above stood.

"Hurry!" Celebrimbor urged Elrond who looked about him.

"Where's the captain?" Elrond asked. He had never seen Silmacil commanded by anyone other than Captain Astalder.

"Later! Go now!" Celebrimbor shouted. The Dwarves moved away from the dragon with their shields held over their heads. There were so many arrows the ceiling looked black with Orc arrows.

It was then that the chains around the dragon's foot exploded.

"YESSS! YESSSS!" Uluch laughed, her laughter roared above all other clamors. "I am free. FREEEE!" Uluch roared.

Like a sleeping giant that awoke from slumber, she sat up from where she lay prostrated on the floor. Her scales glowed red, and she let out a firestorm all around the chamber.
The Shield

Chapter Summary

Thranduil finds a way out of the Hall of the Dead. But will he be able to open the gate?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Hall of the Dead. October 5, Second Age 144

**THRANDUIL** picked up a shard of crystal, one of many lying broken next to the stone boxes. It hummed softly glowing pale white on his hand. Out of curiosity, Thranduil brought the shard closer to the runes of the stone box. The runes glowed brighter blue where the crystal shard came near.

The Sinda picked up several chunks of the loose crystals at his feet and put them away in his pocket arranging the rest of the shards into an arrow to mark the path he had taken.

Although he still thought not staying together was a bad idea, Thranduil relished the peace and quiet of being alone. He just wished it was anywhere but here, in the chamber full of dead Dwarves.

Thranduil sighed and rubbed at his parched throat. His legs were dulled stone and his mind a hollow tree trunk, but Thranduil walked on. He could do with a sip of that smelly drink Onar had given him few times they were able to rest. Anything, really, to sate the thirst if not so much the hunger.

It felt like days since he had a decent meal. Still, he couldn’t complain. Compared to the decades Thranduil had spent with his father and his warriors up at the cold north, this was a garden party at the King’s Tower—just a nuisance. While everything had been scarce at Sirion, it was not until Thranduil joined his father in mapping the barren north that the young Sinda had learned what hunger was. It had given him a new appreciation for the value of forest full of trees and animals.

The Sinda looked up and found that the passage ahead was dark. Unlike the hallway he had been walking, there were no alcoves. Both sides of the corridor were hewn stone made smooth by time. But more importantly, there was no blue glow about it.

Thranduil swallowed. While he relished the solitude, he hated the dark and the gloom. There was so little light in this place. Wandering this ruin, time seemed to eat through the walls like the worms that crawl about in the black crevices.

Thranduil wished he could see the light again, to feel the sun on his skin, to smell the scent of trees, to see the stars and the moon shine and chase away this sticky darkness that seems to ooze in all the corners of this Eru forsaken place, this darkness that sticks to his skin and whispers in his ears.

The young Sinda hesitated before stepping into the dark. But, the corridor was a passage Thranduil had not seen before. If he was to find a way out, Thranduil could not avoid the darkness.

Taking out the dragon fang, Thranduil ripped a strip of the cape and tied the tooth onto his right hand. If he slipped in the dark, he did not want to take the chance of dropping it. Then, tracing the wall with his left hand, Thranduil stepped into the blackness.
Thranduil sucked in a breath as shadows clung to him. He turned to look behind. The blue haze of
the runes was fading as he walked further into the black void.

Soon the darkness swallowed him. Thranduil wondered if he could generate the light of his own. It
had been so long ago that he had been able to do it. He searched inside him. He had felt a spark
within him when he was fighting the dragon. He reached inside for that spark of light. Lady Melian
had said all Elves had it even when it cannot be felt.

As he reached inside himself, something slithered away from Thranduil’s probe. Midnight scales
glinted as it coiled around the tiny spark blocking the light within the depth of Thranduil’s being.
Startled, Thranduil pulled away.

“What the…?”

Thranduil stopped walking and leaned into the wall. He took in a breath and calmed his frantic heart.

In the dark, his heart sounded like Orc drums. Thranduil shivered.

It’s nothing. It is only your imagination, Thranduil repeated to himself.

“I. Am. Thranduil. Nothing will change that. Nothing,” Thranduil said it aloud to the darkness
emphasizing each word.

The chill did not leave him, and Thranduil trembled. Was the light denied to him? Were his sins too
heavy, the clouds too thick? Thranduil grabbed his heart. The dragon fang he had tied to his hand
stabbed and bled him. His heart tightened with sorrow, stinging his nose and aching his throat. But,
with sorrow came anger also.

Thranduil fisted his hand around the fang. He struck the stone wall and clawed a deep groove on the
stone. He took out one crystal shard. The clear mineral seemed to pulse in his hand. The line he had
gouged on the wall glowed blue in the blackness. If the light was not allowed to him, then he shall
make his own.

Sparks flew as Thranduil scratched the wall with lines and patterns. Soon, the dark corridor filled
with bluish light which faded once he moved further into the passage. The blue glow wasn’t much of
illumination, but it was enough for Thranduil to see his way.

He walked on until the corridor came to a dead end.

Through the faint blue light, Thranduil saw that the ceiling had collapsed. The rubble of stones and
dirt filled it completely. Dismayed, Thranduil turned back and walked toward the other side of the
corridor. There was probably nothing on that side, but he had been carving the walls of his left only.
Maybe, he missed something. It was just wishful thinking, but it didn’t hurt to walk on the side he
had not looked carefully.

Just as his hand brushed the wall of the other side of the corridor, he saw a light flicker.

There was a gap on the side where the wall touched the rubble.

Putting the crystal away, Thranduil cut through the rubble. At first, it seemed like a hopeless task, but
the fang was surprisingly helpful in cutting through rocks and debris. Soon, he cut out a hole wide
enough to pass through.

The passageway behind the collapsed ceiling was bright with light thrown by bronze braziers built
into the walls. And behind the braziers stood a floor to ceiling grilled iron bars. And several steps
Thranduil ran toward the gate, then groaned. Each iron bar was thick as Dwarf’s arm and polished smooth. Even with his two hands, Thranduil could not wrap them around the bar. Worse, iron bars were slick with some sort of oil. His hands just slipped right off the dark metal.

“Dwarves! Why would they make a gate in front of the doors?” Thranduil cried out in dismay. Who robbed dead people of their treasures?

Thranduil plopped on the ground, then shot up again when he saw levers.

Inside the grills of the iron gate, there were three levers. Each one was made of different materials: metal, wood, and stone.

Onar had said only one will open the door. Others would kill him. Thranduil was sure that Dwarves had nothing to do with the trees. But either the metal or the stone could be related to the Dwarves. It was one or the other, but which one?

Be patient. The Dwarf will be here. Let’s not take unnecessary risk. Thranduil’s rational side warned.

Thranduil took in a breath and sat back down on the ground. He shook his body of tension.

I can be patient. Sure, I can. Just imagine I’m Elrond.

Thranduil leaned onto the wall and plastered a smile.

“Everything will all work out. Have hope. Onar will be here really soon.” Thranduil tried to imitate Elrond’s tenor.

But time ticked on. Thranduil got up and glanced at the levers.

Metal or the stone. One or the other. The Odd didn’t seem so bad the more he thought of it. Thranduil scrutinized the walls and the ceiling that lay before the iron bars. The firelight from the braziers threw dark shadows.

Thranduil fingered the stone lever. Valar Aule made Dwarves out of rocks, Lady Melian had said. The more he thought about it, the more he felt he was right. What else could it be?

Thranduil pulled down the stone lever, then crouched down to jump if anything happened.


Followed by a loud click.

The metal bars shook. Thranduil smiled.

That was easy.

Thranduil stepped back waiting for the gate to lift when the floor beneath him caved with a bang.

Thranduil jumped up and grabbed the iron bar. But it didn’t hold him. He slid down the slick metal.

“No, no, no!” Thranduil cried out and struck the iron bar with the dragon fang. But the metal was too slick. The white fang slid across the metal surface as Thranduil slipped down the slippery metal. The Sindar wrapped his legs around the iron bar and struck the dark metal with the dragon fang putting all his weight into it. The tooth bit into the metal bar, not as easily as it did stone, but it tore through the
thick iron, embedding the fang into the metal. Thranduil hung on to the tooth.

“Demented Dwarves!”

Whoever heard of people building a death trap beneath their doors? At Menegroth, Thranduil’s people had built a labyrinth under the floor of the corridor leading to the Hall of Melodies, but that was to protect the residents from the intruders.

Thranduil looked down. There was a gaping hole underneath. The metal bars disappeared into the darkness below, the depth of which Thranduil could not see. A whole section of floors beneath the gate all the way to the bronze doors was gone.

Then, Thranduil saw that the floors had not disappeared. Instead, on each side of the two walls, a large slab of stone floor hung, half on one side and the other half on the other. They creaked loudly as if they were held together by rusted metal hinges.

Thranduil looked behind him. He had slipped down the metal bar. His head was at an eye level with the surface of the floor which was several strides away from the metal gate. It was too far away for him to jump. And even if he could, Thranduil wasn’t willing to leave the dragon fang where it was.

“Why didn’t you just wait, stupid,” Thranduil mumbled to himself. “What are you going to do now?”

Thranduil hung there as silence surrounded all around him settling like a mist.

Where was this confounded Dwarf? Why did the Dwarf wanted to separate? Maybe that stunted creature wanted to leave him behind…

Thoughts, dark thoughts, slithered out of the recesses of his mind and coiled around his head and neck. The young Sinda vigorously shook his head. Dwarves were unfriendly and ungraceful, but they had been an ally to Elves against the Dark Lord all through the First Age.

“They are as loyal as they are stubborn,” Thranduil’s grandfather had told young Thranduil once.

But that was centuries ago before they killed King Thingol in their greed and folly.

“Damn it!”

Thranduil clenched his teeth. His arms were aching. He wasn’t sure how long he could hold on and time seemed to go so slowly. So very, very slowly.

With pain, something hot rose inside him. Thranduil reached for the sword the Dwarf had given him. He banged it against the iron gate. The clamor shattered the silence of the corridor and rang out filling the passage with a loud boom.

Clang! Clang! Clang!

If Thranduil was unlucky, Orcs will hear, and will be waiting for him if he managed to get out of this damnable Hall of the Dead. Or they will come with their arrows and shoot him dead while he hung onto the dragon tooth.

But, if he was lucky, then Onar will find him. Whichever it was, one or the other will happen. Anything was better than waiting silently.

Clang! Clang! Clang!
Thranduil could not tell how long he pounded on the metal. He struck again and again until his arms felt dead and ready to fall off his shoulders.

“Stop that racket, ye stupid Elf!”

Thranduil smiled before he turned to glimpse Onar put down his sack on the floor. He could kiss the Dwarf if he could.

“Ye are going to raise more than the dead with that clanking. Didn’t I tell ye to wait? Yer ears just decorations?”

“Are you going to help me or not?”

“Why should I help ye? I have done enough of that already.” Onar crossed his arms looking in no hurry to move. “What right do ye have to make a demand of me?”

“Either help me or kill me…”

“Or what? What do ye think ye could do, laddie?”

Thranduil took in a breath. Arguing wasn’t going to help him.

The young Sinda let out his breath one mouthful at a time remembering the words he told the Dwarf not so long ago. Bit of glitter went a long way, Elrond had said.

“Forgive me, Master Dwarf. I am at a dead end. Would you be so kind as to help me?” Thranduil said as sweetly as he could muster although he could not help clenching his teeth.

Onar uncrossed his hands.

“Now, that’s better. It wasn’t so hard, was it?” Onar said as he began to paw the wall where the floor opened. “Now pull yerself up a little, or ye will get smashed between the rocks, laddie.”

Just as Thranduil pulled himself up wrapping his legs around the metal bars, the two slabs of rocks that formed the floor pulled up to meet seamlessly with the floor plates in front of the bronze doors.

Grumbling, Thranduil let go of the dragon fang. He had to shake it several times to loosen it from the metal. It had gone through the metal bar leaving a hole.

Onar came over and fingered the hole the dragon tooth had made.

“You are far from polite yourself, but you expect manners from others. Is that not hypocritical?”

“I am old. It is to be expected. But ye are a wee lad.”

“Ha! What part of me looks small to you, Dwarf?” Thranduil narrowed his eyes looking down at the Dwarf. Onar barely reached his chest.

“I meant young. Ye don’t got brains? Is yer head decorations just like yer ears?”

“I’ll have you know, I am probably older than you.”

“Yes, in years, most likely. But I know ye Elves. The old ones are not like ye.”

“Like what?”
“Like this,” the Dwarf gestured at Thranduil. “Not a word of thanks for saving ye. Rude and ungrateful like the young ones these days. Not offering anything to the one who saved ye.”

“You know I have nothing.”

“Not nothing,” Onar pointed to the dragon tooth in Thranduil’s hand. “Nothing much, indeed. But, I wouldn’t mind having that.”

“You didn’t give me anything when I saved your life,” Thranduil reminded Onar. “Besides, I need this to finish that body in the palace.”

“I don’t need it right now, laddie. And I did get ye something although I am just loaning it to ye.”

Onar harrumphed, then he picked up something besides the sack that Thranduil had not noticed until now. It was a shield. It was tall and wide enough to hide most of Onar behind it.

And it was a thing of beauty. Curved around the edges coming to a slight point at the bottom, it was one piece of thick silver metal inlaid with gold in runes all around its rim. It was polished smooth and shone white with light.

“I went off on my own to look for this,” Onar fingered the fine patterns carved alongside the runes. “It is one of the twin shields, The Dwarven Shields of Thekk. Along with the king’s armor, this is Master Thekk’s greatest work.”

“Thekk? I have never heard of him,” said Thranduil as he picked up the shield in his hand. It was surprisingly light despite the thickness of the metal and its size.

“It is very light. Will this hold against a dragon fire?”

“That is silver steel ye are holding. The precious metal from Khazad-dum. It is worth more than all the treasures that used to be in the treasury.”

“Silver steel? You mean mithril?”

“Aye. I believe that is what ye Elves call it. It isn’t surprising ye never heard of Thekk. Unlike Telchar, Master Thekk made things only for us. He was the king’s armorer and weapons master, the master smith of Broadbeams (Belegost). Among us, he is famed for his armors and weapons as Telchar was among the Firebeards (Nogrods). Have ye heard of Telchar at least?”

“Of course, I know who Telchar is. I was there when our king gave Dragon Helm to Turin. It is said Telchar the Dwarven smith made it. Although I have to tell you, it was a hideous looking thing.”

Thranduil grimaced remembering the frightening looking creature that had glared at him from the top of the helm where it got its name. The dragon at the treasury looked nothing like it. Despite her monstrosity, there was a beauty to her.

“How come I have to give up the dragon fang when you are only loaning the shield to me?”

“Because the shield is not mine to give. I borrowed it, and it must be returned. But in its stead, I will return yer friend’s dagger.” Onar took out Elrond’s dagger and handed it to Thranduil.

“Deal. But not until I am done with my mission.”

“Didn’t expect anything less,” Onar said as he helped Thranduil fasten the shield behind the Sinda’s back.
“How about the gate?” Thranduil gestured toward the iron bars.

Onar reached for the levers.

“I already did that. Don’t…”

But Thranduil did not finish. Onar reached under the stone lever then pushed a stone brick under it. The metal bars sank to the ground leaving a faint metallic sound.

“Why didn’t you just tell me levers are not what opens the gate.”

“I told ye not to touch the levers.”

“You said the other two will kill.”

“And they will. It is only because ye touched the stone one that ye are alive. If ye touched any other, ye would be dead now.”

“Are you telling me, I would have survived even if I fell?”

“Ye are alive, aren’t ye?”

“Only because of the dragon tooth.”

“No. Even if ye fell, ye would have dropped to a guard station.”

“Why would your people even make such a thing? Wouldn’t all Dwarves know the correct lever anyway?”

“It is not for our people. My people know not to disturb the dead and their treasures. No Dwarf would dare rob the tombs of the ancestors. The trap is for strangers.”

Thranduil pursed his lips. They stepped past and stood before the double doors.

“This is not the first time I have seen these doors.”

It was the same two bronze doors Thranduil had seen when he and Elrond fell into the dragon chamber. Both doors were carved with a towering figure with an enormous hammer slung over his broad shoulder. Each one looked away from each other and was an exact replica except that the one on the right had a halo of light around his face.

“It is for precaution. To prevent foreigners from wandering around our home.”

“So suspicious, are you?”

“We trust no one who is not one of us.” Harrumphed Onar.

Opening the bronze door with the halo of light around the figure’s head, Onar went up the stairs.

“Why not the other door?” Thranduil was curious.

“We always follow the light of Mahal,” Onar said. “Enough questions, Elf. Now, come along!”

The stairs led to a vast chamber full of light coming from the many tall arched windows built high up around the chamber walls.

Center of the chamber was an altar of sorts, a roundtable carved of white marble. On it, arranged in
circles were several stone boxes, not the plain ones seen inside the Hall of the Dead. These were made of black marble with flecks of gold. Runes inlaid with gold were carved onto the rims and decorated with an elaborate seal in different designs. Even without Onar telling him, Thranduil could guess that these were stone boxes that held royal remains.

Onar approached one of them and kneeled after making some elaborate gestures.

Ignoring Onar, Thranduil sauntered over to one of the many streams of sunlight that came through the windows. Thranduil closed his eyes and stood underneath the light, feeling the warmth of the afternoon sun on his skin. He had missed this warmth. This light.

A sweet song swept across his conscious. One he had not heard in over two centuries wrapped around his senses. Thranduil opened his eyes wide.

“Can’t be.” Thranduil turned and ran out of the chamber following the music. He knew this music well, the beloved song of the Forest of Neldoreth. Thranduil’s heart swelled with remembered joy and the warmth of his childhood that had been ripped away prematurely.

“No!” Onar shouted behind him, but Thranduil’s mind was focused on the sound of the music.

The chamber opened to a balcony. Beyond it was a broken bridge. Across the bridge, under the bright sunlight, there stood a side of the mountain carved into a gigantic figure of a man with the hammer slung over his shoulder. Growing next to the statute was a copper beech tree of great size and age. Its leaves were blazing scarlet like the setting sun as if the whole tree was burning under the sunset.

Beneath the broken bridge was a bottomless chasm. But, the gap between the two broken bridges was not so bad. For Elves, at least. Running over the remains of the crumbling bridge, Thranduil jumped over onto the other side.

The Sinda sank his feet on the green grass and ran his hand over the earth, the grass and the graceful gray limbs of the tree. He leaned his head onto the smooth silver trunk losing himself in the music and the scent of the tree. His heart filled with longing whispering like a stray wind over treetops.

“Get over here now!” Onar roared from the other side of the bridge rudely interrupting Thranduil’s greeting.

Thranduil frowned as he turned to look at Onar. The Dwarf’s face was red and puffy.

“How over here, or I swear on all my ancestors that I will leave ye locked in this level so ye will rot! Upon Mahal, mark my words, Elf!”

When Onar called upon their patron Vala, Thranduil knew Onar was serious.

Reluctantly, Thranduil jumped back over the bridge to land at Onar’s side.

“What…” Thranduil was not allowed to finish.

“Ye do not. Ever. Go there. Understand, Elf?” Onar poked Thranduil’s chest with each word. “That place is sacred to us. Us! It is not for foreigners. Got that, Elf?”

“It is just a tree with a handful of earth. The only place I have seen the earth in this entire forsaken place.”

“Not up for discussion!” Onar harrumphed loudly then marched away.
Behind Onar’s back was another shield, same shape and design like the one Thranduil carried but grander. The entire shield was decorated in gold with gems in the shape of a hammer and an ax crossed in the middle, the same sigil Thranduil had seen in one of the more elaborate stone boxes on the marble slab.

“Come along, laddie. “The New Moon will rise an hour and a half after the midnight of the 6th day of Fading as ye Elves put it. Today is the 5th day.”

“Already? We have been down there that long?” Thranduil’s heart trembled. “We have tarried too much. We must hurry.”

-----

Telchar—Dwarf smith of Nogrod known as one of the greatest smiths of Middle Earth. He is known to have made Angrist, Narsil (Aragon’s broken sword remade into Anduril), and the Dragon Helm of Dor-lomin

Zirak/Gamil Zirak (Khuzdul, old silver/spike)—Nogrod Dwarf also known as Zirak the Old, he is the master smith who trained Telchar.

Dragon Helm—refers to helm forged by the Dwarven smith Telchar who made it for King Azaghal, king of Belegost Dwarves, the Broadbeams. Azaghal gave it to Maedhros for saving his life. This then was passed to Fingon, who gifted it to Hador when he made Hador first Lord of Dor-lomin. It was a steel helm with a head of a dragon (modeled after Glaurung). It was said to be enchanted to protect its wearer from wounds and to struck fear into the wearer’s enemies. It passed to Hurin then to Turin when Hurin’s wife Morwen sent it to Doriath when she sent Turin there.

Khazad-dum (Khuzdul. Dwarven Mansion) is known better by its Sindarin name, Moria (Dark Chasm), as it was so called by Gwaith-i-Mirdain (Order of Jewel-smiths founded by Celebrimbor). But, Dwarves considered the Sindarin name derogatory. I guess it is the difference between the two races in how they saw the place.

Mithril (Sindarin. Brilliant light gray) Known also as ‘silver steel’ or ‘Moria-silver,’ mithril is a rare metal stronger than steel but much lighter in weight. It was also very rare and was worth more than ten times the price of gold. Moria (Khazad-dum) was the only place known to have the vein of this precious metal. Longbeards (Durin’s Folk) became fabulously wealthy due to their monopoly of mithril which was coveted by all the races for its strength and beauty.

Chapter End Notes

Just wanted to add a quick note here to thank featheredmoonwings who sent me my very first fanart based on my story. It is on her tumblr page, the-red-butterflies, under the title ‘You Stupid Elf.” It depicts the scene with Elrond and Thranduil when they were captured by the Orcs. Check it out, everybody. Big thank you to the artist. :)
The Race

Chapter Summary

Mairon races to the King's Hall.

Chapter Notes

This chapter is very long. Sorry, it took a while to post. I have been sick for the last week and still recovering.

Please read the time label carefully as the time flows backward in this chapter.

This chapter was written while I was playing around with story structure. I kept the structure when revising because I felt it added to the tension. Please let me know if it was successful or not. Thanks.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Level 4: Side stairs to Level 3. Pre-dawn. October 6, Second Age 144

MAIRON called the power that slept deep within him.

*Come now! In the name of Lord Melkor, I call upon you!*

Mairon commanded the Orcs, trolls and the dark creatures that slept within the ruin reserving the bats and the spiders. The secret passage which opened onto the Level Four had been strewn with slain bats and spiders, but Mairon knew there were many more in the dark places of this ruin. With the Silmacil’s attention fully on the Dragon, there was no one to detect the use of his power.

Doom! Doom! Doom!

The Orcs that had retreated up the stairs to the Level Three swept down the stairs. Like roaring waves of a black ocean, Orcs swept into the hall, their drums warring with the roar of the dragon.

The Dwarves who were behind the Elves, took out their shields to meet the Orcs. The waves of Orcs crashed onto the stone walls that were the Dwarves. The Elves and Dwarves were jammed between the Dragon on the right side of the hall facing the cliff and the furious waves of Orcs from the stairway on the left side of the hall. The combined army of Elves and Dwarves had hoped to use the stairs to reach Level Three where the Great Hall was located, but they were now trapped. Behind them was the chamber full of dead bats where the secret passage from the Crossroad had opened onto.

Mairon flattened himself on the wall by the stairs. He needed to get to the Palace. But, he wasn’t ready to leave just yet. In this body, Mairon needed a guide. Fortunately, the two Dwarves Mairon was looking for were fighting near him. There were still many Orcs on the stairs, but they were of no concern to the Maia.
Once he was within the walls of the palace, Mairon could destroy the three bridges that linked the
King’s Hall with the rest of the Dwarven city. No one would be able to enter unless they had wings.
It was precisely the reason why he chose the place to restructure his body.

The hall filled with the screeching of the Orcs, the shouts of the Dwarves and the Elves all of which
were drowned by the roar of the dragon. With the cry, the hall filled with a stream of fire. The
Dwarves, Orcs, and the Elves all took cover. The chamber filled with smoke and the odor of burning
flesh and metal.

Uluch spread out her wings although the ceiling of the hall was not high enough for her to take
flight. And the cliffside was narrow, not enough room there for her to extend her wings until she
reached the floor above.

Uluch flapped her wings and shook off the Elven warriors. Then, she struck the side of the cliff with
her claw which embedded itself onto the stone. She still clutched the Elf in one hand who seemed
knocked unconscious.

Without seeing further, Mairon knew what the dragon intended. The race was on. But, he wasn’t
done yet. He wasn’t going to let her win.

“The Dragon!” Mairon called out. “It is trying to escape!”

The Silmacil who had taken cover when Uluch stretched out her wings, ran after the dragon.

“We must stop the dragon from getting up to Level Three,” Loni shouted to the Silmacil. “The hall
above is open to the sky!”

The Elven warriors jumped up onto the dragon, but the creature slithered up the cliff.

Seeing the dragon slowly but surely climbing up the cliff, Mairon called on the bats which he had
reserved. They poured out of the crevices, screeching like cats on fire. They swept up from the
bottom of the chasm like a black cloud. Almost instantly, they filled the open cliffside flying into any
and all in front of them, the dragon, Dwarves, Elves, and Orcs.

Some of the Dwarves took out a hooked instrument attached to a long chain and grabbed onto the
dragon while others kept the bats away from the heads of the other warriors.

“Fall back!” someone shouted.

Suddenly, a shout arose from the stairs leading down. The Dwarves who were fighting the Orcs let
out a cheer. Mairon craned his neck to see. The rest of the Silmacil who had gone after the dragon
into the treasury arrived with Celebrimbor at their head. Behind them were the rest of the Dwarven
army. The combined army of the Dwarves and the Elves crashed onto the Orcs splitting the hordes to
carve their way to the dragon.

“Here! This way!” Mairon called to the young Dwarves who had been pushed back against the base
of the stairs by the Orcs. They were separated from the rest of the Dwarven army just as Mairon had
commanded.

“You want to go seek your father, then come with me,” Mairon pointed to the stairs which were now
empty of the Orcs who now crowded into the hall pushed onto the Dwarves by the new group of
Silmacil and the Dwarven warriors.

Loni and Buri hesitated when the ground shook. Mairon looked up to see the Dragon had fallen back
to the hall surrounded by a thin line of Silmacil as Celebrimbor and the newly arrived Dwarves faced
the Orcs and the bats.

The hall filled with the screeching of the Orcs, the shouts of the Dwarves and the deadly Elven songs of steel.

“Whether you come with me or not, I am going to find my friend up at the palace. If you help me, that would be great. If not, then so be it,” Mairon ran up the stairs then smiled when he heard the heavy steel-clad feet behind him. He turned and saw the two Dwarves following him up the stairs.

“Let’s hope most of the Orcs are below us,” Loni said as they stepped onto the entrance to a great hall.

The hall on the Level Three looked empty. It was a vast hall with columns of stone thick as towers carved to hold the two levels above. Part of the hall had crumbled when several columns broke. It had left a wide gap between the mountain wall and the hall leaving a steep chasm open all the way to the mountaintop. From the entrance, Mairon could see red dawn rising through a wide hole in one side of the mountain. Under the brightening day, Mairon saw the pyramidal roof of the palace far above aglitter in red gold.

On Mairon’s right, there was an arched gate constructed using stone bricks glazed in gold with a bas-relief of dragons and horned goats which stood three stories tall. Although the gate withstood the destruction, the ground was mostly gone leaving only a narrow bridge-like pass to what remained of the Great Hall.

For a moment, Mairon was tempted to leave the Elven body and fly up to where his body lay.

“It seems the Great Hall is empty,” said Buri sounding relieved.

“This way,” Loni said and pointed to the darkened area of the Great Hall. “There is a passage to get to the King’s Isle without going up to the Second Level. ‘Me dad told me of it. If he had been able to use it, they would have been able to get to the bridge of the palace without detection.’

“I am sure he is there already, Loni.” Buri flashed a smile at the other Dwarf who nodded back grimly.

Mairon doubted it. His Orcs had occupied the entire three levels once he had seized the palace.

The fallen Maia looked up at the brightening sky. This day had to pass before his body could be complete. If he retook his body before the New Moon, all the work he poured in would become void. That young Dragon would have been wasted for nothing.

Mairon looked down toward the stairs. The roar of the dragon and the sound of the fierce battle was evident. If the Dwarves and the Elves could hold off Uluch, then he had nothing to worry about. Up there, there was only Thranduil and one old Dwarf. As for him, Mairon had his best Orc warriors there waiting for him.

“Let’s go then,” Mairon said and followed the two Dwarves.

---

**Level 4. Near Midnight. October 5, Second Age 144**

**MAIRON** plunged his sword into the Orc. Its face twisted as it made a choking sound. The Orc’s
knee hit the ground with a thud.

_The ugly creatures._

Mairon straightened, wiping the black blood from his blade. Once he had Elven warriors under his command, he would not need these weak, twisted creatures. Under him, all Men, Elves, Dwarves and all other sentient beings that occupied this land shall be united. He shall bring order and peace to this world. Everyone would be safe. No war and violence shall mar this world ever again. There shall be no more ugliness. He, the greatest Maia of all, shall bring peace and order to Middle Earth, and everyone shall love him.

With that thought, the face of Rodwen flashed before him. Yes. He shall have her as his consort. Through her, the Firstborns shall know his mercy and his grace. But until that day comes, Mairon had work to do, and he needed the Orcs.

Mairon wondered what his master would think. But his master had given him free reins. It was up to him to order this world until his master returned. Part of him wondered if Melkor will ever return, but Mairon pushed that aside. _He will return_, Mairon told himself. Once Melkor returned and saw the world perfectly ordered, a place where everyone worshipped the great Vala, then…

Mairon ducked before swinging his sword to block another Orc in his path. He had not revealed himself, and the Orcs did not know him in this body. Despite that, they were not capable of harming him. Before Mairon could act, the Dwarven ax flashed, and the Orc fell. Loni nodded to him before turning back to fight another Orc.

Stepping away from the fallen body, Mairon looked about the great hall. He had managed to slip past a thin line of Silmacil. The hall was filled with Orcs, Elves and Dwarves all jammed into the hallway before the stairs that led up to Level Three.

“Behind you!”

A blade sang past Mairon’s face. The Maia pulled away from a blur of steel. He turned to find a sword stuck on a large Orc behind him who fell forward, clutching the blade stained with black blood.

Astalder strode past Mairon to pull the sword out. He wiped the blade on the Orc’s armor before turning to Mairon.

“I told you to stay close,” the captain said. “This is not a training session, cadet. Keep behind the line.”

Mairon knew better than to argue although he needed to get away from the Elven warriors. Even if the Orc tried, it would not have been able to kill the body while Mairon held it. But the captain would not have known that. Mairon obediently moved behind the line of Elven warriors. It did not matter. Soon enough, she would arrive. She could give these warriors a fight they deserved. Soon, it would be chaotic enough for him to get away undetected.

ROAR!

Just then, a piercing roar like a crack of thunder broke through the noise of the battle shaking the ground and the walls of the hall. Everybody, including the Orcs, stopped fighting. Mairon could not see the eyes of the Dwarves through the thick steel helmet they wore, but by the string of curses that broke, he knew the Dwarves were aware to whom the roar belonged.

The Orcs pulled back leaving the hall through the stairs on the left side of the hall as suddenly as they
The Silmacil who wore golden helms high crested with a sharpened point that almost looked like a blade of Dwarven ax-head pulled down their helmet’s front which Mairon had thought was part of the decorations on the helm. It was a visor which covered the head entirely leaving only a slanted opening where eyes were located. They also pulled down the back part which fitted around the back of the neck which covered the gap between the helmet and their plate armor.

It was a different design of the armor than the one the cadets wore. They were the ones Mairon had seen on the warriors of the First Age during the last war.

When the roar died down, some of the Dwarves proceeded to chase after the Orcs up the stairs.

“Leave them!” Astalder shouted to the Dwarves. “Prepare to face the dragon. It’s coming!”

As if on cue, the columns on the right side of the hall, the one open to the deep chasm, shook. The sudden wind rose as a howl of gale swept across the hall. Strong as the wind was, the Dwarves were like stone statues. While Elven warriors hunkered down near the floor, the Dwarves stood firm as if carved of rocks. They reached backward for the shields they carried behind their backs and linked them together to form a wall. The Silmacil moved behind the wall of Dwarves.

Just as the wind died down, a giant hand with claws like daggers encased in the ruby red scales appeared from the cliff edge. With a shriek and a powerful beat of wings, the dragon slid her way onto the top of the cliff. Her wings were only half open as the passage was too narrow for her wings to open fully.

The wind died down as the Dragon folded her wings, one wing covering her other hand. The Silmacil moved as if one, taking out their bows which were already threaded with steel arrows, the ones specially made to pierce armors.

Mairon suppressed a sneer. Arrows were not very effective against Uluch’s scales. There were not many weapons left in this world that could harm a dragon.

*Remember our bargain.* Mairon reminded the dragon. *Unless you want to taste the Elven blades again,* Mairon said to Uluch’s mind noticing that the dragon’s one eye was glazed and filled with black blood. That one will eventually heal, but it will take time. She had promised him her blood, but she had not yet given her fealty. *I can aid you or damn you. Remember, Uluch. Orcs and others are still mine to command.*

The impudent creature did not answer. Instead, she opened the wing that hid her other hand and pushed it forward.

“Hold!” Astalder’s command rang through the chamber as he held up his hand. The Silmacil lowered their bows.

Clutched in the dagger-like claws was long black hair wrapped in a tattered blue cape.

“What are ye doing, Elf?” Loni said to Captain Astalder. “There is no bargaining with the beast.”

Captain Astalder did not reply. Instead, he stepped toward the Dragon.

“What do you want?” the Noldorin captain asked the dragon.
“Truce—!” The dragon growled as she opened up her claw.

The disheveled hair, dark as midnight, stirred. Elrond picked up his head, but the Dragon withdrew her hand again, closing her claw, moving her wings to hide the young Elf again.

Mairon frowned. In that one word, Mairon knew Uluch meant to betray him.

Mairon stepped forward, his sword out.

“She is trying to use Elrond as a shield. We cannot trust her, captain.”

The dragon turned her remaining eye toward Mairon. Mairon knew she knew him the moment their eyes met. He saw it in her remaining eye which flamed like the sun behind the lid that narrowed into a slit upon seeing him.

He stepped forward and pointed to the folded dragon wing.

“Let him go, you foul beast!”

“Get back!” One of the Silmacil who was nearest him jumped at the same time Uluch’s breast glowed red like rubies in flame.

Mairon was thrown across the chamber as the Eleven warrior who had pushed him away screamed when the flames consumed him. The pungent fume filled the hall, and the warrior disintegrated like dust.

The loss of the Silmacil warrior was unfortunate, but it had the effect Mairon had wanted.

The line of Silmacil who had pulled back upon their captain’s shout attacked in unison. Swords sang, and the white lights circled the dragon who roared like thunder, her breath fires of anger and anguish.

*How do you like the taste of the Elven blades, the ones forged in the heat of Valinor?*

Uluch’s scales were almost indestructible. Almost. Dragons were the ultimate weapons his master had created to counter those weapons Noldor brought from the land of the Valar. But unlike the swords which are at the peak of their strength at the moment of their creation, dragons required time to develop although they became stronger, smarter and more indestructible with age.

Had she been older and stronger, Uluch’s scales could have withstood the Elven blades even those forged in Valinor. But she was still young and untested. And those blades in the hands of Silmacil were sharper and more lethal than the finest Dwarven blades made during the First Age. Mairon was sure that the bulk of Silmacil still carried those Elven blades forged with the metals in the fires from the land of Valar. According to what Mairon had seen, the few Elven smiths that remained in Middle Earth had neither the materials nor the skills to forge what they once had.

Mairon bit down a smile. She needed to suffer. Her betrayal was evident in her actions. Whatever doubt Mairon had of Uluch and her loyalty vanished the moment she recognized him and made her move. She meant to unseat him. He was sure of it now.

The Dwarves who had their shields linked and ready pulled their shields apart and ran after the Elves.

Uluch let out a horrifying scream as the lights of Silmacil crisscrossed over and around her imprisoning her in the grille of sword slashes.
MAIRON could not help but notice.

The Dwarven commander, the hefty Dwarf who was as wide as he was tall, was obviously displeased. His face and ears turned red, the color of his long, braided hair, when the Elven warriors stepped out of the secret passage.

“Commander Duf, it is good to see you again” Celebrimbor greeted the Dwarf commander.

The Noldorin lord probably did not intend to show his emotion, but Mairon noted the Elf’s furrowed eyebrows as the Noldo assessed the number of Dwarven soldiers. There were only about fifty or so Dwarves.

“Is this all you have brought?” Celebrimbor asked. “You are aware we will be facing a dragon and maybe even a Balrog.”

“I’m aware,” said Commander Duf, his voice ringing in the gloom of the ruin. “Another group comes. On their way.” Then the Dwarf looked squarely at the Noldorin lord. “But neither do ye have many with ye.”

“These are the Silmacil, our most elite warriors. Each one of them equals at least ten of our finest,” said Celebrimbor picking up his head. “A lot is at stake here, commander.”

“And what makes ye think that our soldiers are not our finest?” Duf glared at the Noldorin lord.

Celebrimbor nodded with a faint smile. “I did not mean that by any means. We are grateful for your assistance although you must admit that it is your home that we are defending.”

“The help we did not ask for,” Duf said.

“But a help which you need,” Celebrimbor added with a patient smile. “As I said, it is not only a dragon we are dealing with. Is it not so?” Celebrimbor turned to the two young Dwarves who had led them through the secret passage.

Commander Duf turned his flaming eyes to Loni and Buri who squirmed under the commander’s fiery gaze. “And how come you two were leading the Elves through the passage? Where’s Lord Onar?”

Before they could speak, however, Lord Celebrimbor stepped between the Dwarven commander and the two young Dwarves.

“Yes, we are very grateful to these young Dwarves who led us through the passages in the walls. If it wasn’t for them, I doubt we would have made it here in such a short time.”

The commander’s face puffed up as if he had drunk something bitter.

Loni frowned glancing at the commander, then at the Captain Astalder.

“I must admit, they wouldn’t hear of taking us through the passage until they heard how Lord Hanar and you would have allowed us.” The captain faced the Dwarven commander with perfect poise.
“You and Lord Hanar were quite right that the passages were tight, Commander Duf. I admit, I thought that Lord Hanar directed us to travel over the water because your people did not want to show us the passage. But now that I have walked through it for over almost a day inside it, I regret convincing these two youngsters to take us through that tunnel even though it did get us here quicker than planned. From now on, we leave it to your wisdom, commander, when it comes to this city of yours.”

“Hmph,” Commander Duf cleared his throat loudly. “We encountered Orcs on our way, did ye?” the commander asked the captain of Silmacil.

“No. We were fortunate. We met these two soon after leaving the waterway.”

“It is good then that ye took the passage, captain. We had to go around the waterway, and the portion of the passage was damaged and had to leave it. There were Orcs just outside the tunnel.”

“I hope you didn’t lose anyone,” Lord Celebrimbor asked looking concerned.

“Nah! They ran like the cowards they are upon hearing our war cry.” The Dwarf laughed out loud.

Mairon smiled. The Dwarves will never know that the Orcs had been ordered not to engage any of the Dwarves or Elven warriors. He wanted to give them a clear way to the treasury. At the least, until she had her lesson.

The Dwarf seemed somewhat appeased. He turned again to the young Dwarves, but his voice was gentler.

“Well, out with it. Where is Lord Onar?”

“He has gone to the palace. With one of their Elves,” Loni pointed to the Silmacil. “The Elf said something about one who sleeps in the palace, about how it will use the dragon to burn our home,” said Loni.

“Did he say what this thing is?” the commander asked.

Both Buri and Loni shook their heads.

“Just that it is dangerous once it wakes,” Buri added glancing at the captain.

The captain of the Silmacil was looking about as if he was listening for something.

“Why is it so quiet?” Captain Astalder said suddenly. “You said Orcs were surprised. Our young friends here said there is something powerful sleeping at the palace. Orcs obviously know we are here, yet there is no movement.”

“Well, hmph, we are a formidable company. The craven creatures know not to bother us,” said the commander. “I have about another two hundred warriors coming from outside the East Gate and half of that number coming through the West Gate. It is hard to move many through the tunnels. The passages are not designed to move an army. Maybe ones coming through the West Gate are engaging all the Orcs,” Commander Duf said.

"Um..." the two young Dwarves exchanged glances. Mairon frowned. They seemed to want to say something but hesitated.

“If so, we should hear some sound, should we not?” the captain said.
“Have ye looked around? Our walls are thick.” Commander Duf walked toward one of the columns and banged it.

“Even if we cannot hear the sound, we should feel it, but I do not. It is as if they are waiting for something. I don’t like this.” Astalder frowned.

“What do you suggest, captain?” Celebrimbor asked as he, too, looked about him.

“We should attack as soon as we can. The more we wait, the more time we give it to prepare.”

“But we just got here. We covered the three-day distance in two days. Ye sailed here, but me Dwarves need time to rest. And shouldn’t we send someone to scout out this dragon?”

“I agree, captain,” Celebrimbor said. “We should get some information before we attack.”

“With due respect, my lord, I would not recommend it. Dragons are known to have a sensitive hearing. And they are highly intelligent. Make a wrong move, and it could discover our presence here. And the secret passages, they are not silent. If we could detect the doors opening, so will the beast.”

Buri coughed just then. All turned to look at the young Dwarf.

“The treasury where the dragon is supposed to be is near here. The floor of that chamber is half broken.”

“How do ye know that?” the commander asked the young Dwarf.

“The passage from our post at the East Gate runs through the ceiling of this level. It crosses the chamber just above the treasury. The passage was damaged, and a portion of the floor which had slats for air circulation was wide open. Through it we saw the room below and below that the dragon. I… I saw the creature and… I jumped making Loni drop his hammer.” Buri’s face turned red as he looked down his boots.

“So you have seen the dragon?” Captain Astalder asked.

“Just a glimpse. We were attacked by the Orcs before we could look more closely,” said Loni. “The section of the passage we were passing were exposed and open to the chamber at Level Four. There were a few Orcs there. We made quick work of them, but two of the Orcs got away.”

“How big was the dragon?” asked Celebrimbor.

“Quite big. About the size of Mahal statue at the King’s Isle?” Loni looked at Buri, and the younger Dwarf nodded in agreement.”

“How big is that?” Astalder frowned down at the two Dwarves.

Commander Duf pointed to the white marble structure in the center of the crossroad. “Twice as tall as that and three times wider.”

Mairon looked at the white marble structure which glittered under the late morning sun. It was at least a story high and wide as two hefty Dwarves.

Celebrimbor smiled. “That’s not too bad.”

But Astalder’s face remained dark. “How large is the treasure chamber? Is it big enough for the dragon to fly around?”
“Indeed, the chamber is large enough for the dragon to take flight. But with its size, it wouldn’t be able to move well about it.” The commander ran his hand over his braided beards.

“Then, we will attack it at the treasury,” Astalder said then turned to the young Dwarves. “Were the opening on the ceiling of the treasury wide enough for the dragon to fit through?”

Loni shrugged.

“I suppose so.”

“If the dragon were to fly up the opening, where could it go?” Astalder asked.

“That chamber is open to the cliffside. It is too narrow for it to fly up, though. Unless it can climb, it wouldn’t be able to get out that way although if it makes it up to the Level Three, it could fly all the way up to the palace. The other entrance leads here, but it would have a hard time with the many stone columns,” Commander Duf said. “It could try, and the entire floor above will squish it like a bug.” The commander laughed again.

“Then, how did it get there in the first place?” Astalder asked. Frown deepened on his face.

“Who cares. The important thing is it is there, and we need to kill it,” said Commander Duf. “There are two passages into the treasury. We can have my Dwarves coming through the east side to enter the treasury from one wall, and we could attack it on the other.”

“There's a problem." Loni glanced at Buri. Both looked worried now. "I am afraid the side passage to the Eastern Gate is sealed shut, commander,” Loni said. “We had to prevent the Orcs from trying to get in.”

Loni turned to Astalder. “It was your people that brought the Orcs there. If it weren’t for them, we would still have the door.”

Commander Duf frowned mightily at that. “I need those soldiers. I need them inside.”

"But if they are coming from outside, then they wouldn't be able to enter. Not through the east entrance,” Loni sighed.

“Loni, the crack!” Buri said suddenly. “Remember the crack on the wall of the waterfall on the other side of the door?”

“Ah!” Loni’s face lightened. “That dark-haired Elf came through there. Yes!” Loni turned to his commander. “There is a crack on the wall to the sealed chamber. It is hidden behind a waterfall. It is only big enough for an Elf to get in, but it can easily be widened by our hammer. Once they get to the chamber, they can enter through the secret door on the wall.”

“Well then. You two get to the east post and lead them to the east door of the treasury.” Commander Duf looked up at the light falling on the white marble structure. “They should be arriving by the East Gate in a few hours.”

“But, what about me dad? I want to go after me dad who has gone to the palace,” Loni said.

“That is all good and all,” Celebrimbor broke in. “With them so far away, how could we coordinate the attack? If we do not attack at the same time, it wouldn’t be as effective.”

“Ye have yer way, and we have our way to contact our soldiers,” said Commander Duf. “Ye think we have no way to communicate with our kin within our city without sending a messenger? We are
far more advanced than ye Elves think,” said the Dwarf holding up his head high. “Just watch us. We will tell ye when my soldiers on the east side are ready to attack.”

“But, commander, me dad. He may need our help. He said to tell ye to bring all the soldiers we have. I need to get to me dad,” Loni said again.

“I’ll send some of the warriors after yer dad, lad. Don’t worry. Once the ones coming through the West Gate are here, I’ll dispatch them. West gate is nearer to us. They should be here soon enough.”

“But, I want to be with them when they come,” Loni insisted.

“I, too, commander,” Buri said. “I go where Loni and me uncle is.”

“Alright, lads.” Commander Duf threw his hands up in the air. “I won’t hear the end of it from Lord Onar if I prevented you two from him. Fine. Fine.” He gestured for two other Dwarves. “Then, tell these two the location. And hurry up about it. We should attack before the day is over.” He turned to his officer. “Let others rest while we wait for them.”

“I suppose, we have to wait, too?” Celebrimbor said and looked at Astalder. They stepped back from the Dwarves.

“We still need to go after Thranduil,” said Astalder. “We can’t just wait to attack the dragon.”

“The blond Elf?” Loni asked. “He said something about having to do something before the New Moon.”

“New Moon? What is this?” Commander Duf asked.

Mairon frowned as Loni told them about having to kill a body up in the palace before the New Moon. Flame of anger rose within him, and Mairon tamped it down firmly. He could not lose his head now.

Both the Elves and the Dwarves looked up at the sky above the white stone. All of them knew the time of New Moon was only a day away.

“[Q]Elrond is more important, captain,” Celebrimbor said changing into Quenya and lowering his voice. “The Sinda must wait.”

“Let’s divide the force, my lord. One to the treasury, another to the palace. No matter how many Dwarves are here, Orcs would outnumber us. We can divide their force into two. Entire Silmacil on one dragon is wasted. Think about it, my lord. Why are they so far apart? I feel the dragon is a distraction. The real threat is in the palace.”

“Even if that is so, Elrond is with the dragon. He comes first.”

“I am not saying that we leave Elrond and the dragon, my lord. We attack both. I think we have enough Silmacil and the Dwarves to do so. Whoever finishes first will come to back the other.”

In the end, only twelve of the Silmacil led by Captain Astalder were to go with Loni and Buri to meet the warriors coming through the west gate then to head up to the palace. They were to send down half of the Dwarves to Commander Duf taking only fifty of the Dwarven soldiers to the King’s Hall.

While the discussion went on, Mairon thought hard about how he could go with Captain Astalder’s group.
“Dragon. I don’t think we have ever learned how to fight a dragon,” Mairon said after a while.

Both Celebrimbor and Astalder turned to look at him. Then, they glanced at each other.

“I’ll take him,” said Astalder. “It is probably safer than being in a closed chamber with a dragon.”

“You don’t know what you may face up there,” Celebrimbor said.

“[Q]I could, maybe, leave him within one of the passages if I sense danger,” Astalder said in Quenya, and he and Celebrimbor exchanged glances.

Mairon smiled inwardly.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: The arched gate on Level Three with gold glazed stones is based on the Ishtar Gate of Babylon built by Nebuchadnezzar, one of the great wonders of the ancient world. Of course, this one is gold and not blue. But, I hope it gives you an idea of how I imagined it to look.
Prisoners

Chapter Summary

Only one more stairs to go before reaching the Throne Room, Thranduil hears a mournful singing of an Elf, one singing in Silvan tongue.

Chapter Notes

Warning: Violence, death, mayhem. I try, of course, to avoid any unnecessarily violent scenes, but some are necessary. This warning will apply to next two chapters as well as I had to cut them into three parts. Thank you so much for all your reviews and kudos. :)

King’s Isle. Pre-dawn. October 6, Second Age 144

THRANDUIL looked down the long, narrow stairs behind them. It was dark and oppressive here. The walls seemed to close around him. With the unease, the pain on his eye returned as well as the tightening all about him as if he was caught in an iron snare full of daggers.

Thranduil stretched trying to shake off the dull pain in his eye and all about his body. But more importantly, to shake off the scream that had woken him.

For the first time in days, Thranduil and Onar had slept after the Dwarf declared that there was a horde of Orcs just outside the Hall of the Dead. According to Onar, the door to the Hall of the Dead stood just across a small courtyard to the King’s Hall and would alert everyone when it opened.

Onar had proposed a rest as the Hall of the Dead was impregnable and thus, safe. Thranduil didn’t think he could sleep, but as soon as his back touched the smooth marble wall, the Sinda had promptly fallen asleep until he was startled awake by a sudden pain in his eye. Somewhere far inside him, the dragon screamed.

*Kill him. Kill him now! He is coming!*

Even now, fully awake, the dragon screamed somewhere within his mind.

“Well?” Thranduil prompted and winced at how sharp his tone was.

Thankfully, Onar did not seem to notice as he looked out intently through a hole on the wall in front of them. Although Onar declared that somehow the whole horde had disappeared while they slept, the Dwarf thought it prudent to use a servant’s door.

The Dwarf grinned, then put back a small piece of rock to cover the hole.

“Ye see, I made this when I was a wee lad,” Onar laughed as he pushed the wall. “This place used to be full of servants and guards back then. Hanar and I used to sneak into the cellar using this servant’s
stairs from the Hall of the Dead. We would tell our mothers that we were going to pay respect to our ancestors, then sneak into the cellar this way. I never thought then that I would use this to look around for the Orcs.”

The slab of rock in front of him swung, and the Dwarf disappeared leaving a wall in front of Thranduil.

“Onar?” Thranduil stepped onto the place where Onar had stood. “Onar?” he called out as he touched the smooth wall.

Thranduil looked back at the narrow stone steps that were cut into the side of the wall. The stairs had ended at this wall in front of him. Thranduil sighed. Why couldn’t Dwarves build normal doors like normal people?

The stone wall swung open, and Onar peeked in.

“What are ye waiting for?” The Dwarf held the wall open.

The part of the wall Onar held swiveled shut with a soft creak once Thranduil stepped out into a dank room with no windows. It was filled with a pungent scent of something sweet and acidic.

“What did you keep in this cellar?” Thranduil sniffed the air. It was different from the aroma of the king’s cellar in the White City which was filled with herbs, salted meats of all kinds as well as barrels of wine.

“King’s ale.”

Thranduil frowned. “Ale?”

Onar looked at Thranduil then scoffed. “Let me tell it to ye in terms that ye Elves would understand,” the Dwarf said. “A wine made of grain instead of fruits or flowers,” Onar said. “The way a real drink should be made.”

“What is so real about fermented grain?” Thranduil frowned down at the Dwarf.

“Ye obviously never tasted one.” The Dwarf shook his head. “Thought as much.”

Massive barrels made of wood lined the walls. But, except for the large barrels that could not be moved, most of the chamber was empty.

The room led to an open doorway. From where he stood inside the chamber, Thranduil could see into the next room where a flickering torch at the far wall threw a red glow onto the stone floor.

“This way,” said the Dwarf pointing to their right. “There’s servant’s stairs …”

“Shhh!” Thranduil held up his hand to stop the Dwarf.

Along with a faint sound of iron grating on stone, there was a sickly odor of rotting flesh. Thranduil grimaced. There were Orcs about. From what he could tell, it was a fair number of them, enough to be concerned. And there was a troll among them. Thranduil leaned his ear. Yes, definitely a troll. Then the Sinda frowned. There was a smell of Dwarves which wasn’t a surprise, but there was another scent in the air that was neither Orc nor a Dwarf. But it couldn’t be.

“Stay here. I want to check something.”

“What is there to look? There is the kitchen, next to that is an armory and guard quarters. I am sure
there are Orcs there even if there are none in front of the King’s Hall. We could avoid them by going through the servant’s stairs. It leads directly to the throne room. Isn’t that where ye wanted to go?”

“Yes, but I want to check something. There are Orcs and trolls, but something else, too.”

“Let’s not take unnecessary risk, lad. We are so close.”

Thranduil hesitated. Something pulled him toward the open doorway, but he was so close to getting to the throne room. Getting all the way here, to get captured by the Orcs, so close to his goal… Thranduil took in a breath stilling the dull pain in his eye and body. Onar was right.

With a resigned sigh, Thranduil turned to follow, then stopped.

Someone was singing. In Elven tongue.


Onar frowned this time.

“Ye are hearing things,” Onar shook his head. “Yer ear,” he pointed to his ear, “isn’t very good.”

“Are you telling me you cannot hear that?”

Mournful melody whispered in the air, a trembling trill that cut through the sound of chains grating on stone coming from the kitchen.

Overwhelming sorrow. Like a mother deer lost, caught in the misty morning forest looking for her lost young. The melody cut through the gloom of the ruin and tore through Thranduil’s heart.

Thranduil listened for a while ignoring Onar who paced where he stood masking the quiet sound with the creaking of his armor.

Thranduil moved toward the open doorway.

“Where are ye going, laddie? We cannot go through there without facing the Orcs.”

“I know this voice. I have heard this voice before,” Thranduil’s heart thumped like a war drum. “I need to look. There is something not quite right. Stay here.”

“I don’t like it. But, if ye are going, I am coming with ye,” Onar said holding his ax at ready.

“No. I don’t want to take the chance of being detected. And you are not exactly quiet.”

Onar frowned up at Thranduil, but the Sinda glided over to the open doorway waving the Dwarf away.

“Fine! Do as ye will. I will go up and see how things are at the Throne room. Come up through there,” Onar pointed to narrow stairs carved onto a wall on the far corner of the cellar. The stairs led to a blank wall just like the stairs from the Hall of the Dead. “Just push the right spot.” Onar stomped away making Thranduil cringe at the noise the Dwarf made.

Thranduil rolled his eyes, then turned to the doorway. It was not that Thranduil thought Onar would cause any problem. The old Dwarf was more careful than he was, but the Dwarf was far from stealthy. The sound of his footfall was like crunching on ice, even the way he breathed sounded rough as if the Dwarf ran through the entire forest.
Flattening himself against the wall, Thranduil looked out of the doorway. Like Onar said, it was a kitchen. The ceiling of the kitchen was much taller than the cellar. Carved out of a large cavern, several metal beams crisscrossed above to brace the cavern wall and to support a gigantic fireplace built in the middle of the room. The roof above the fireplace was open to a sky which seemed to pale with coming dawn. Besides several large pots and piles of barrels, there were several tables strewn about the kitchen.

Stone walls twice Thranduil’s height separated the kitchen from the chamber beyond, but the metal beams rose high above the walls running over to the next rooms.

The singing was coming from a room outside the kitchen, beyond the walls. Thranduil looked around the kitchen.

There were several small figures hunched over the pots. Clinking the chains, someone shuffled near Thranduil. He was hunched over and skinny like an old human, but he had ginger curls splashed with gray. His braided hair and beard were ragged and dirty. Although hunched and bony, it was no Orc but a Dwarf.

When the Dwarf turned his face to the firelight, Thranduil sucked in his breath. The Dwarf’s sunken eyes were scabbed over. Someone had ripped out the eyes. Besides the blind Dwarf, there were four others who looked as dirty and worn as the blind Dwarf.

“Hurry up, slave!”

An Orc slammed the wooden door at the far side of the wall open. He was a hunched, bedraggled creature. No doubt a slave Orc. Slave, he may be, but he was lording over the chained Dwarves. With his knotted whip, he whipped other Dwarves there.

“Work! Work! Where’s that barrel?” The Orc limped over to the blind Dwarf who shuffled his way into the doorway to the cellar.

“Hurry! Hurry! You hairy worm!” The Orc kicked the blind Dwarf into the cellar where Thranduil was. The Dwarf fell onto the ground. The Orc stepped into the cellar kicking the fallen Dwarf. The Dwarf didn’t utter a word, didn’t fend off the attack but scrambled up.

Thranduil really did not want to get involved, but his hands moved of its own accord. The Orc did not utter a sound when the dragon fang found the vital point behind the Orc’s neck. Before the Orc could fall, Thranduil picked him up then silently stuffed him inside a large pot sitting just outside the cellar door. The blind Dwarf stood there as if he was waiting. When Thranduil turned, the four Dwarves were standing there watching him.

“Ah, I…” Thranduil, feeling he needed to say something, opened his mouth. But, the Dwarves turned away from him and went back to whatever they were doing.

Thranduil blinked unsure what to do when the voice who was singing screamed. “Noooooo!”

Thranduil jumped onto the table nearest him, then jumped up to grab hold of the lowest beam.

Someone bellowed followed by a deafening crash. The sound shook the walls and the ground. Thranduil pulled himself up and ran over the metal beam toward the sound.

Below him, a group of Orcs was gathered around an iron cage which had been thrown onto a wall. Beside the upturned cage was a cave troll over twice Thranduil’s height. The troll’s torso was four times as wide as Thranduil, a tower of muscles and thick grayish-green skin. In the troll’s hand, he clutched an Elven woman.
By the slightness of her frame and the dark brown hair, it was evident that she was one of the Green Elves. The brown leather armor she wore over her green tunic was splattered with black and red blood. The woman had put up a fight. There were bruises and slashes on her face which was fading. She had been here for a while, several days at least. Thranduil took in a sharp breath when he recognized the woman.

It was Beril, Astarno’s wife. The kinslayer’s woman.

Thranduil turned to the cage. Where was Beril’s daughter? The Noldo’s child she may be, but she was just a little girl, too young to be exposed to monsters like these. Thranduil bit hard onto his back teeth when he spotted a body inside the battered cage. The bastard couldn’t even protect his family? Sudden heat swept through Thranduil. His heart pumped hard. Thranduil held his breath afraid the Orcs could hear him. There were too many Orcs in the room. Several dozen at least.

Flattening himself onto the metal beam, Thranduil glanced at the iron cage.

The Orcs dragged out a body from the cage. The prisoner’s face was covered in a clump of dark hair, disheveled, dirty and bloodied. It was obvious that before he was placed in the cage, he had been injured. Badly. Something sharp stabbed at Thranduil’s heart. He didn’t love the Noldo, but such ending was not what Thranduil wished on anyone.

“He breathes. Take him back to others.” Bulkiest one, the tallest Orc with double-edged ax behind his back, lifted his head and issued a command.

Thranduil tightened his hand around the dragon fang when he recognized the Orc’s face. It was Burog.

Thranduil scrutinized the body they were dragging away. Among the mess of dark hair, Thranduil saw golden leather armor and underneath it a blue tunic. Sindar’s heart stopped as he realized that the prisoner was not the kinslayer. The uniform was that of a fellow cadet.

“Me sorry,” the troll raked his bald head with his other hand.

“Sodden head!” Burog yelled at the troll. “Master wants them alive, you good for nothin’ piece of crap!”

Burog grabbed a chain rope from one of the tables in the room and started to whip the troll.

The troll hunched over with one hand over his head while he still clutched the Elven woman with the other.

“Hand her over!” Burog commanded.

The troll released her from his grasp and the woman fell over onto the floor as if her own legs would not support her. She looked dazed as if she was unaware of where she was.

But when one of the guards came to pick her up, before anyone could blink, Beril kicked the guard’s groin throwing him off her. She scrambled up, half clawing, half stumbling. But Burog snatched her long hair, yanked her head back violently. The Orc dragged her back and thrust her into the hands of another pair of guards.

“Put her with the rest!”

It was then that Thranduil saw another cage there in the darkness where the light from the torch did not touch. Inside were two Elves bound and gagged. Thranduil sucked in his breath to calm his
frantic heart as he recognized Saldor and Erfaron. They were disheveled and bloodied, but their wounds did not look as bad and had already healed unlike…Thranduil’s heart froze when his gaze fell on the cadet the Orcs had just thrown into the cage. Thranduil wasn’t sure if it was Oron or Gelir.

The cadet lay there unmoving. Beril was shoved in after him. She kneeled next to the cadet and lifted his hair. The face under the hair was almost unrecognizable.

A flash of the old memory, of the Orc cave and the smashed body of Direnion, passed before Thranduil’s eyes.

Thranduil clenched his fists and tried to calm his fiery breath. He wanted to jump down right now, kill the guards and free the Elves no matter that the chance of survival was nil. Thranduil panted as his heart beat like the flutter of hummingbird wings. Thranduil closed his eyes tightly and leaned onto the cold metal beam trying to think.

Cool reason returned as his breath calmed. The only way to get rid of this many Orcs and have a hope of freeing the prisoners was to find the one who controlled them. Leaderless Orcs were just a number and not much else. He needed to get to the Throne Room. If he died fighting all these Orcs alone, it wouldn’t help anyone.

Thranduil clenched his fist and his teeth. He will have to come back for the cadets and the woman. I’ll come back for you, Thranduil promised silently as he sat up and turned away.

“Burog!” Someone else walked in just then. “Move everyone out!”

“But, commander, the sun’s comin…” the Orc who spoke did not finish. He found a sword in his gut. The other Orcs stepped back as Sharku took out the sword and wiped it on the bod as it fell.

“Bridge raised after the horde left. No one can enter,” Burog said as he gestured the Orcs to leave.

“Master is on his way,” Sharku said. Then, he turned to the cage. “What happened to the Elves,” Sharku growled.

“Lump took the she-elf, and the stupid maggot smashed the door on Lump’s hand to stop him.”

“Lump hurt,” the troll whimpered behind Burog.

“And you smashed the cage with him in it?” Sharku’s eyes flashed. The troll cowered. “He was already injured, you idiot! Master wants the Elves alive. He will hang you upside down after gutting you.” Sharku growled.

Lump wrapped his head with his two long arms and shrank away from Sharku.

“Stupid troll,” Sharku cursed. “Where’s Stump, Grump, and Bump?”

“Sent them to bridge. To guard. They will return. Sun coming up soon,” said Burog.

“Keep them there. Master will bring clouds. But, until then, remind those stupid asses to stay out of sunlight. I don’t want them turned to stone like those three in the Throne Room. The stupid trolls.” Sharku leveled his sword on the troll’s neck. “You make sure those Elves are not dead. Understand? No hurting Elf.” Then, Sharku turned to other Orcs. “Everyone out! Double the protection at the bridges.” Then, he turned to Burog. “Burog, you with me. Cannot afford to screw up any further.”

“Lump go?” the mountain troll pointed himself and looked around him as the Orcs cleared out of the
“Lump, stay!” Sharku ordered. “No hurting the Elves!” Sharku poked the troll here and there with his sword.

“Lump stay. No hurt Elf.” The troll walked toward a corner and sat down.

Sharku grabbed a key from the wall, then thrust it onto one of the Orcs. “You stay and make sure Lump doesn’t touch Elf.”

Thranduil sank down back on the beam. If only one troll and a guard will remain, maybe he could free the prisoners, stash the cadets safely in the Hall of the Dead before heading to the Throne Room. As Thranduil shifted his weight, the metal beam creaked. Sharku looked up. Thranduil flattened himself against the beam holding his breath.

“You four, stay here with him. I am not taking any more chances. Make sure the prisoners stay put.”

When the sound of clanking Orc armor subsided, Thranduil looked down below. Lump sat on the far corner of the chamber near the wooden gate to the kitchen. Picking up a rope chain from the floor, the troll whacked the chain against the floor shaking the ground with each hit. Two of the Orcs stood near the cage where cadets were, several strides from the one who stood just below the beam where Thranduil was. A table stood between them. The remaining two were talking, leaning against the wall near the troll.

The woman suddenly stood up and shook the bar of the cage as Thranduil calculated the distance of the Orcs to each other.

“He needs a healer. Medicine,” Beril pleaded.

“Shut up, maggot. Soon, none of you would need anything, kekeke,” the Orc laughed as his other companion banged the bars of the cage with his sword.

Thranduil took out the Dwarven sword with his left and held onto the dragon fang on his right. Taking in a quick breath, Thranduil jumped onto the shoulder of the Orc just below the beam. The Orc looked up. Thranduil’s right hand made an arc beheading the Orc where he stood.

As his feet hit the ground, Thranduil jumped up toward the table, pushed off the table with one hand to turn in the air and landed few strides before the two Orcs in front of the cage. The two Orcs rushed at him from Thranduil’s right side. Thranduil ducted the swing of the first Orc thrusting the dragon fang into the back neck of the beast, and as the Sinda turned, he stabbed his sword into the second Orc’s head. Both fell instantly.

Thranduil turned to face the remaining two Orcs as he caught Lump get up wounding the chain in one hand and picking up a spiked club on the other.

The two remaining Orcs ran toward Thranduil. The Sinda ran around the table.

“Too slow! Are you Orc or are you troll?” Thranduil jeered keeping one eye on the troll.

“Kill you, you filthy Elf scum!”

After several turns around the table, Orcs cursed, foaming in their mouth, their eyes flaming like a tree on fire. Thranduil ran toward the troll who whirled the chain lumbering toward him. The Orcs sprinted after him. The troll raised his chain high in the air for a strike. Thranduil slid under Lump’s wide-open legs striking both heels of the troll as he slid under the beast.
One Orc screamed as Lump struck him with the force of the whirling chain.

“Ow,” the troll yelled as he fell onto the smashed Orc.

“Thranduil!” Saldor called out when the Sinda straightened.

Thranduil stepped toward the cage noting that one Orc had escaped the troll. Both Erfaron and Saldor had their bindings off now. Saldor held the bars of the cage, his head glued to the opening, his young eyes excited. The Elven woman sat hunched over Oron who lay unmoving. Erfaron sat next to them.

“The headless one has the key to the cage,” Saldor said, then his eyes widened.

Without turning, Thranduil raised his left hand to block the remaining Orc’s sword, then turning, ended the last Orc stabbing the dragon fang into the Orc’s neck.

“Watch out!” Saldor cried.

Thranduil jumped aside as a spiked club smashed where he had stood. The troll stood before him. Thranduil had not expected the troll to be able to stand, but the troll limped towards him dragging the chain in one hand and a spiked club on the other.

Thranduil glanced at the troll’s heels. It was covered with iron strap. One of the iron straps was slashed open and covered in dark blood, but the other remained intact. Thranduil had never seen such covering on a troll before.

The troll swung the chain and shook his club. Thranduil was too quick for the troll, but the Sinda needed to be close to the troll to use the dragon fang. The dwarven sword wouldn’t be able to cut through the troll’s thick hide except on few vulnerable areas.

Because he was faster than the troll, Thranduil knew it was a matter of time. He will get the troll, but it would take time, the time which he did not have.

“Stop!” Thranduil held out his hand. “You want to be gutted and hung on the top of the mountain? What did your master say, Lump? He said not to hurt Elves.” Thranduil pointed to himself. “Elf!”

Lump growled baring thick yellow fangs.

“Look what you did. You killed the guards, and now you want to hurt Elves when master said not to do that. No hurt Elves!”

The troll looked at the dead guard, the ones he smashed. The hand that held the chain lowered.

“Lump, sit!” Thranduil commanded as if he was the master of all the world. “Don’t hurt Elves!”

The troll lowered his hands, then his head. Then, he sat on the ground. “Lump no hurt Elf.”

Erfaron looked up when Thranduil stepped into the open cage. The Noldo didn’t need to say a word. Thranduil knew Oron was no longer with them. Erfaron picked up Oron’s unmoving body, and Saldor helped the woman out of the cage.

Beril picked up her face. Her face crumpled upon seeing Thranduil.
“You!” Beril’s eyes, dulled with grief, flashed. “It’s your fault!” she screamed as she flew at Thranduil. Saldor grabbed her from behind, keeping her encased in his arms.

“This is Thranduil. He’s one of us,” Saldor said, his eyes wide.

“You did this!” Beril’s eyes were red and filled with tears as she screamed in Silvan. “If you had not come, then he wouldn’t have been hurt. He would have…” the tears brimmed over and fell down her face. “My daughter. You killed her!” Beril screamed. “You killed her when you harmed him. The Orcs had never been a match for him. He would have kept us safe. He would have kept us safe. He always did.”

Thranduil’s breath was knocked out of him as the realization of her words sank in.

“He is not the enemy. He is the one who just saved us,” Saldor said to the woman, then turned to Thranduil. “She is a Nandor. She speaks a different dialect. Don’t blame her, Thranduil. She is grieved by the loss of her daughter. I don’t think she is herself. She doesn’t mean what I think she is saying.” Saldor turned to Beril. “It’s all right. Don’t speak now. Thranduil is our companion. He is going to help us escape. Once we get away, everything will be all right.”

Beril, however, was not listening to Saldor. Her eyes bore into Thranduil, and the pain in them shook Thranduil to the core.

“I tried. I tried to protect her, but those monsters…” Beril’s lips trembled. “Her blood is in your hands! You! You did this!” She screamed, her heart shattering, the bond of a mother and her child breaking into pieces as Thranduil’s had when his own mother passed.

Beril’s wailing ripped through Thranduil’s heart. The iron claw around his heart clamped painfully blocking air and the cold reason of the moment before. The ice that was his heart shattered into thousand pieces. How many pieces could it break? How is it that he could still feel? Thranduil dropped his head, feeling his knees weaken. Something dark shot up from his depth. Another innocent life was lost because of him. Another heavy chain landed on top of the many that pressed down on him as Thranduil let out a trembling breath. How many lives will he claim? How much more innocent blood will he spill?

“Please,” Saldor’s face crumbled as Beril shook within his arms and broke like a sandcastle under the waves of overwhelming grief. “It will be all right. I promise. We will keep you safe,” Saldor’s said as his eyes filled with tears. “You said you have someone you love to get back to. He needs you. Don’t give up.” Saldor held the woman as she cried like the one whose heart was torn asunder.

Saldor looked up at Thranduil. “Whatever terrible thing she may have said, don’t mind her, Thranduil. She lost her child. To the Orcs.” Tears brimmed over his eyes, and Saldor wiped them away.

The young Noldorin cadet reached out a hand to squeeze Thranduil’s arm, probably meant to reassure him, but Thranduil could not be comforted. Saldor didn’t understand Silvan, didn’t know its full meaning. Nor did he know what Thranduil had done. Would Saldor be as kind if the Noldo knew that Thranduil had tried to kill Beril’s husband? If he knew that if it wasn’t for Thranduil, that little girl might be alive today?

“What’s all the racket, Lump?”

The door opposite the entrance to the kitchen opened, and two Orcs walked in.
The cadets fight. Onar joins and Thranduil goes to the Throne Room.

Saldor and Erfaron turned when the Orcs entered.

"Lump, kill the Elves!" One of the Orcs said. "Master no more Elves need."

"Eh?" the troll lumbered up from where he sat. "But, Sharku…"

"Master no want Elves now!" the Orc said, and he took out his sword.

Saldor let Beril go and picked up an Orc sword on the floor.

Erfaron lay Oron's body down to lean him against a wall and joined Saldor.

But, Thranduil could not move, the burden was too much. Heavy were the chains as they pressed down on Thranduil shaking his knees, dimming his senses. The cold clarity of the moment ago faltered under the weight of the heavy grief and guilt that wracked him.

Saldor and Erfaron met the two Orcs blocking their ferocious attacks with composure and skill. Exhausted and tired the two cadets were, but they were well trained Elven warriors. The Orcs could not land any blows, but while the cadet's skills were top notch, both cadets lacked the field experience. Orcs could not touch them, but neither were any of the cadets able to bring down the two Orcs quickly as the two Orcs were experienced fighters who fought adopting their stances as the cadets delivered blow after blow. The four warriors, the cadets and the Orcs, exchanged blows and circled each other looking for openings.

The troll growled as it rose up from where it sat near the door. It looked at the Elves, then at the Orcs. The troll picked up its club and the chain and glanced at Thranduil. A deep frown sat on its beastly face as it lumbered toward Thranduil.

The Sinda looked on, but his feet and arms had no strength in them, and he could not speak. He felt like he was just a wandering spirit, watching but unable to interfere.

"Laddie!" Onar burst through the door from the kitchen. Lump turned toward Onar.

"Axes of the Dwarves!" Onar shouted running past Thranduil. He swung his ax at the troll.

Despite its big size, Lump was quick, it pulled back but not until Onar's ax landed on its arm.

Lump cried out. Although its hide was thick, and the ax glanced off without cutting through its skin, the force must have hurt it. The troll scrunched his face and let out a fierce growl. Trolls were not the
smartest creatures, but they were strong and fierce when angered.

Onar gathered himself, then charged, this time aiming behind the troll’s knee. The troll turned, its club met the Dwarf ax and at the same time swiped the Dwarf with his fist. Onar flew across the room and hit the wall with a thud.

Saldor and Erfaron who had finally managed to kill the Orcs turned to face the troll who stood behind them. Raising their Orc swords, the two cadets let out a battle cry. Saldor took the left side and Erfaron took to the right side of the troll. Saldor landed a blow on the troll's left arm followed by Erfaron's powerful swing on the troll's right.

"Ow!" Lump cried out. "Bad Elf!" Lump picked up his chain and the club. When the troll whirled the chain about him, Saldor and Erfaron faltered unable to get close. The troll bashed the ground trying to smash the cadets.

"Help them!" Beril cried. "Are you going to let them die, too?" She ran to ransack one of the dead Orcs for a weapon.

Beril's words whacked the Sinda awake from his stupor. This was no time to wallow in guilt. That time will come later. Thranduil took in a long breath and willed his muscles to pick up the sword and the dragon fang. Thranduil darted forward.

"Saldor, block the door!" Thranduil pointed to the door where the Orcs had entered. Then, he called the Dwarf. "Onar!" Thranduil had seen the Dwarf scrambling up from where he fell.

"Aye!" Onar answered picking up his ax.

"Onar, attack left side. Erfaron, throw the table to troll's right. Aim for the head!"

Erfaron jumped back from where he stood to land near the table. With one kick, the Noldorin warrior threw the table toward the troll.

Onar attacked from left, the hand that held the club.

Lump blocked Onar with his club and struck down the table with his chain. Thranduil jumped at that instant onto the troll's back and buried the dragon fang deep into the troll's spine. The normal sword would not have been able to penetrate the thick skin of the troll, but it was a baby skin under the dragon tooth. The troll fell onto the ground with a thud.

Erfaron, Onar, and Thranduil looked at each other and let out a breath.

Thranduil! Erfaron!" A desperate call broke the relieved smile amongst them.

Thranduil turned to see Saldor and Beril fighting the Orcs by the door trying to stop them from entering the room.

Onar, Erfaron, and Thranduil glanced at each other, then at the troll. Three of them picked up Lump's body.

"Ai, he is heavy!" Erfaron grunted as they dragged the troll's body toward the door. The door was about to give as Orc axes splintered the wood, breaking it into pieces. Saldor and Beril tried to brace the door with whatever they could get, a pile of weapons racks. Both of them jumped away as the three warriors dragged the troll to block the door, effectively sealing the entire doorway.

"It is not going to keep them," Erfaron said. "The walls. They are not that high."
"This way," Onar said and opened the door to the kitchen.

Saldor ran over to the body of Oron.

"Saldor," Erfaron called but stopped as his voice cracked. He swallowed and dropped his head. Thranduil looked away. He could not speak. He didn't have the heart to tell Saldor the truth.

"It's all right, Oron. We will get you to a healer as soon as we are out of danger," Saldor said as he carefully picked up Oron's body.

"Hurry. They will climb up that wall soon," Onar said as the shouts of the Orcs rose outside the chamber wall.

The Elves ran after the Dwarf who led them through the kitchen to the back of the cellar.

"Where are the other Dwarves?" Thranduil asked. The kitchen was empty.

"I let them into the Hall of the Dead."

"Why couldn't they let themselves into the Hall before? I thought those were servant's stairs. Wouldn't they have known of them?"

"Aye. They knew of them. But, when we left our homes, we sealed the Hall of the Dead so our ancestors would not be disturbed. We didn't want to take the chance of the Hall getting robbed. It can only be opened from within unless you have a key."

"Then, how did you…"

"I have one of the three keys that open it," Onar said as he took a key on a string around his neck.

It was a silver key with a white crystal wrapped in a wire of mithril and shaped into three prongs of odd shapes. Onar brought the key on the wall and moved it about at the height of his head until the crystal in it glowed humming softly. He pushed the spot, and a hole appeared. When Onar placed the key in the hole, it clicked, and the door swung open revealing the narrow stairs which Thranduil and Onar had used before.

"Go all the way down," Thranduil told the cadets who walked in without hesitation. However, Beril shrank away.

"I cannot go in there." Beril shook her head vigorously.

Thranduil understood. Nandor did not like being surrounded by stones. They were the children of the forest and sky with grass and earth beneath their feet. Even Glineth who loved Thranduil's parents never slept within Menegroth. She always went home to sleep in her flet built on a beech tree across the river at the Forest of Neldoreth. And unlike this Dwarven ruin, Menegroth was a vast cave full of light, with a grove of trees and flowers, a place where the ceiling was so high one didn't realize there was a ceiling.

Onar turned to her.

"Girlie, either ye come in, or I'll have to leave ye out. I will not have our Hall of the Dead soiled with the blood of Orcs."

"No. I rather die here." The Nandorin Elf stepped back away from the door. The Orc clamor rose behind them. Thranduil knew they didn't have much time.
"Beril," Thranduil spoke in Silvan. "These Orcs will not let you die in peace. They will rape you, torture you, and maim you before your spirit can leave your body. Is that how you want to die? Even if you manage to kill yourself before they can lay their hands on you, your body will be violated beyond what you think could possibly happen."

Thranduil offered his hand. "If you just go down these stairs, the hall is large and airy. It is a better place than the chamber you were before. If it is a death you seek, then die like an Elf, not as an Orc slave."

Beril shuddered as a tear fell down her face. Her eyes narrowed which flamed with hatred.

"I am not going to die. I am going back to find him. He lives. I could feel it. And when I do, you will be sorry for what you did." She slapped Thranduil's hand away but stepped into the door then ran down the steps after the cadets.

"I don't think she likes ye," Onar murmured as he closed the door.

"That is an understatement," Thranduil said as he watched Beril disappear into the Hall.

"Ye could have said it more gently."

Surprised, Thranduil looked down at the Dwarf. "You understood that?"

"They lived nearest to our mountains than any other of yer kind. We traded with them."

"There was no time to perfume the words. She would have argued with me." Thranduil turned back to the wall as Onar pushed his key one more time into a hole that couldn't be seen.

"Sometimes, what is the most effective is not always the best, laddie. It may save them, but they will hate ye for it."

"It doesn't matter. It will keep them alive. That is all that matters."

"At what cost? At the cost of yer heart?"

Thranduil took in a sharp intake of breath. His eyes stung. Was it possible that this Dwarf understood him?

"Does this door have a permanent seal?" Thranduil asked as he reached for it. Anything to calm the pain that flared. Onar pushed his hand away.

"Don't touch that. If ye seal this door permanently, we cannot use it. We'll need this door if ye want to use the servant's stairs to the Throne Room."

"But, what if the Orcs…"

"Don't worry. They didn't see us. Even if they did, they wouldn't know where the door is. I've locked it. It wouldn't open from the outside even if they manage to find the door."

Onar put the key away.

"But, I need to go now."

"We should wait, laddie. Our warriors should be here. If Duf left as soon as Loni reached him, they should arrive here by noon today."
"How do you know?" Thranduil asked. "How are you so certain what day it is when we can't even see the sun or moon in this place? We were underground for a while. Maybe the time has passed more than we thought. Maybe…" Thranduil stopped to take in a breath. It was no time to sink into fear or panic.

"Trust me, Elf," Onar stood in front of Thranduil and looked up at him, his arms crossed on his chest. "Time is something we know a lot about, something ye Elves would never understand. Our every building, the very rocks in our city, keeps time. And I am telling ye, it is the morning of the sixth day. About an hour after the midnight tonight will be the New Moon. If what ye told me was not a lie, then, we have about eighteen hours to accomplish what ye said ye will do."

Thranduil turned and looked at the wall where the hidden door lay. The dragon was silent now, but her scream, quiet as it was at the moment, it remained branded into Thranduil's mind. The Nameless One was on his way. Whether the Nameless One was the necromancer, or worse if Thranduil's guess was right, didn't matter. It was clear from what she had said that Thranduil was no match for this creature who is coming. Whatever it was, Thranduil needed to kill the body now. The longer he waited, the more dangerous it became.

"I cannot wait. It must be done now, soon as I can."

Onar opened the hole on the wall and looked out. "Just wait until the Orcs are gone. And I will come with ye."

"I think you need to stay here," Thranduil said. "Even if your friend Duf is coming with an army, how will he enter? All the bridges are raised, and the Orcs are guarding every bridge. If this fortress is impregnable as you said, someone has to lower the bridges for them."

"There is a passage from the Main Hall on the Third Level that goes directly to the North Bridge. From there, there is a passage that connects to the Hall of the Dead. It can't be opened from outside without a key, but Duf has the second of the three keys. He will most likely send a small party of warriors in through there to open the bridges. Even if he does not, we can open the bridges once the army arrives to occupy the attention of the Orcs. We just need to wait until Duf arrives…"

"But what if he doesn't."

"He will. I know Loni and Buri. They will not rest, and Duf will not let them down. We Dwarves, we take care of each other."

Thranduil thought of the five Dwarven prisoners in the kitchen. They didn't look cared for. But, Thranduil bit his tongue.

"Do I need your key to access the door to the Throne Room?" Thranduil asked instead. "Do you need the key to open the door from inside the Hall of the Dead?"

"I don't need the key to open the door from the inside of the Hall of the Dead, but from outside, aye. That's why I came back for ye. I realized ye could not get through the door to the Throne Room without me. King's Isle is a fortress. It was built as our last stand in the event of an attack from the outsiders. It's built solid like all our things," Onar pounded his armor. "Nothing can penetrate it unless ye can fly."

"Or climb," Thranduil added.

"Only if ye are a crazy Elf like ye! How many would risk death to jump onto steep cliffside like ye, eh?"
"It's good that you sealed the Hall of the Dead with all the treasures… If this is your fortress, then how come your treasury is outside the King's Isle?" Thranduil asked. That was strange, indeed. "Wouldn't you want to place your treasury in the most fortified place?"

"Hmm! The Orcs should be gone now. Let me see," Onar promptly looked out the hole."

"Wait. Your treasury. That one by the crossroad is not the real one, is it? The real one is beneath the Hall of the Dead."

Why else would the Dwarves, in their hurry to leave the home that was breaking apart, take the time to lock the Hall of the Dead so no one could enter from the outside?

"I don't know what ye are blabbering about, Elf!" Onar's ears turned red as he straightened to frown up at Thranduil.

The Sinda shrugged. "What do you think I will do, Dwarf? Steal your gold? I would be lucky if I can escape here with my life."

"Even if that was true, and I am not saying it is, it's all underwater now. No one can get to it," Onar said.

*How poetic*, thought Thranduil feeling the weight of the sword in his hand.

The Dwarves had ransacked Menegroth's treasury when they had attacked Doriath after killing King Thingol. But, they never got to use any of the wealth that they took. All the fabulous gems, precious metals and priceless jewels they had taken were all dumped into the river. It was amusing to learn that Dwarves' own treasures were now under water as well.

"Come now. The Orcs are gone. We should take a few more with us. Those Elves. They were good with swords."

"This is a matter that requires stealth. We cannot hope to fight our way through everyone. There will also be dragons."

"Then, that is more reason to wait and have more number on our side."

"It cannot wait. Whether it is eighteen hours or more, I need to get this matter done as soon as I can."

"Be reasonable, laddie. There are Orcs in the Throne Room. Big ones. Once Duf arrives, we will have plenty of time to do what you need to get done. It will be safer with more of us to help ye." Onar turned. It was what Thranduil expected Onar to say.

"Master Onar, thank you. And, forgive me." Thranduil bowed respectfully. He may never see the Dwarf again. It was the only thing he could think of to show his gratitude.

"What?" Onar turned to face Thranduil.

Leaning all his strength into the sword handle, Thranduil whacked the Dwarf squarely on the side of his head.

"Wha..." Onar shook his head. Thranduil grabbed the helmeted head and banged it on the wall snapping the Dwarf's head to the side. Onar swerved, and Thranduil caught him to lay him down carefully on the ground. He should have known better to think that one hit was going to be enough to knock out a Dwarf.
Moving quickly now, Thranduil took the key from Onar's neck.

"Thranduil!" It was then that at the end of the stairs Erfaron appeared followed by Saldor.

"Take care of the Dwarf for me," Thranduil said noting that Onar groaned, his eyelids fluttering. The Dwarf was already recovering. He was, indeed, a tough warrior.

"Wait! Where are you going?" Erfaron ran up the stairs with Saldor behind him.

Thranduil swung open the door, then reached over to pull the lever. Then rolled under as the huge stone slab fell onto the place where the door had been.

Knowing the noise of the permanent seal on the door may draw the Orcs back, Thranduil ran up the stairs leading to the Throne Room.

It was better this way. If he took others maybe four of them would have fought off the Orcs better, but Thranduil had known that this was a suicide mission from the start. The chance of surviving this was slim. Even if he survived, the chance that he may lose one, two or three of them was high. He did not want to take any chance of losing anyone. He could not allow anyone else to die because of him.

Inside the passage was dark. Thankfully, like the servant's door at the cellar, the door pushed open silently.

Thranduil stepped into the firelit chamber. When he saw the vastness of the room, Thranduil groaned. It was bigger than the royal chamber at the Hall of the Dead. The servant's passage opened near the massive double doors made of bronze which was carved with the figure of their patron Vala, Aule. Beside the double doors were stone statues of Dwarven warriors, one holding an ax and the other holding a hammer. Lining each side of the walls were various shapes and sizes of shields with varying designs on them.

At the far end was a dais made of wide stone steps. On the very top sat a beautifully sculpted throne made of gold. Behind the throne was the side of the mountain with Vala Aule carved onto it. At the angle where the Throne Room was, you could only see a few red leafed branches behind the statue which hid the bulk of the tree.

The golden throne was intact, but the left side of the throne, behind the throne, was an opening. It looked as if the side of the mountain collapsed onto the Throne Room. The entire ceiling above the throne was gone and morning sunlight poured into it illuminating the throne as if the stone chair was dipped in a melted gold.

Under the sunlight, surrounding the golden throne were three stone carvings of trolls. Thranduil blinked realizing those were not carvings but cave trolls.

*Those must be the three trolls Sharku mentioned.*

Thranduil wondered what happened to those three. He had seen trolls turn to stone only once. That had been a disaster. He had almost burned down the entire strip of forest.

It was actually an accident. Thranduil had only meant to shoot an arrow tied with a rope between a troll's legs. The Sinda had aimed to snatch the hunk of meat the troll was about to eat. He was going
to use it to lure the creature. Was it his fault that the troll chose that moment to squat down? The arrow had found, instead of the intended target, a hole on the troll's behind. Unintentionally, Thranduil had found another hole beside eyes, ears, nose, and mouth that his arrows could penetrate.

The shocked troll had screamed something horribly and ran through his own firepit making the rope catch fire. It was the first time Thranduil learned how fast a troll could run. It had taken all night for Thranduil to run around trying to bring down the shrieking troll with fire on his butt. And the entire troop had to scramble to contain the forest fire as well as fight the whole family of trolls, eight in all, that gathered upon hearing the terrified screams of one of their kindred. The whole fiasco concluded when the sun rose and the trolls that they could not kill, including the one on fire, turned to stone. Miraculously, while several got injured, none of the warriors received a mortal injury. However, about a third of the small forest had burned during the night. It was the first time his father had been truly angry with him.

Staying behind the towering columns which stood in a row on both sides of the dais forming a wide aisle, Thranduil moved toward the throne. Unlike the dais, the rest of the hall was illuminated with bronze braziers that stood on arched legs in front of many of the columns. It was a grand place, even grander than Gil-galad's palace, Thranduil thought, even though it felt less bright and more grim. For their diminutive size, the Dwarves seemed fond of gigantic things.

When Thranduil was halfway to the Throne, the bronze gate behind him creaked open. Thranduil flattened himself against one of the many columns. Six Orcs walked in. They were not bent or crooked creatures. They were heavy set, large and well armed. Thranduil recognized Sharku at their head followed by Burog on one side and another familiar Orc on his left. Other three were unfamiliar.

"Where's master?" One of them asked.
"He's coming!" Sharku's words were sharp. "You kill the Elves?"
"Don't get it. Why he want them in the first place." Another asked.
"Don't know," growled Sharku. "You want to ask him?"

That shut the other one from talking further.
"Yeah. You ask him, Dyr. Those maggots! Had lots of trouble bring them here alive."
"You only brought one she-elf," Sharku said.
"We tried, but their women fight as fiercely as them warriors. It was kill them or be killed."
"Excuses!" Burog shouted.
"You want to know what other excuses I have," the one who spoke took out his sword.

Burog took out his ax and swung it about him. "Come, dog! Bring it!"

With speed rare in Orcs, Sharku whammed both their heads with the tip of his sword.
"What part of 'Master will be here' did you not get, you good for nothing curs! He'll gut you for losing those two Elves and that dragonling. I will carve you myself before the master comes!"
"The dragon. The golden one is still missing," Dyr said. "That was not our fault."
Sharku stopped, then he sniffed the air. "What's this?"

"What?"

"Don't you smell it? Elf. Why do we smell Elf here where there shouldn't be one," Sharku said as he looked around sniffing.

"Probably Burog. He's been down there with the Elves, kekeke," Dyr laughed.

Thranduil cursed softly. That Sharku was sharper than the most Orcs Thranduil had dealt before. He looked about him. There was nowhere to hide. There was no furniture or opening other than the ceiling and the gate and he was far from the servant door. Thranduil shrank into the shadow thrown by the column although part of him knew that darkness did not provide any barrier to the Orcs. Thranduil pressed his back onto the stone wall.

A sound of steel grating on stone stopped Thranduil from moving. It was so light and so comfortable behind his back, Thranduil had completely forgotten about the shield behind his back.

Sharku and Burog took out their weapons.

"Come out, come out, little Elfie. There is no escape from here… kekeke," Dyr said as he too whipped out a long spear with a wide blade.

Resigning himself, Thranduil took out his sword and the dragon fang. Thranduil stepped out onto the main aisle.

The other three Orcs took out their weapons.

Sharku grinned widely when he saw Thranduil.

"Well, well, there you are, Yellow-hair. Where's your companion?" Sharku asked, his yellow eyes glinting in the firelight of the braziers.

"What is it to you, No-hair? Where is your master?" Thranduil asked.

"Oh, he's coming. But you wouldn't meet him. He decided he don't need you no more."

"How unfortunate," jeered Thranduil. "I was so looking forward to meeting him."

The Orcs spread out, keeping enough distance from Thranduil, but keeping the ring tightly all around the Sinda. These were no mindless Orcs.

Good for them, but bad for me. Thranduil glanced back toward the dais full of light.

Thranduil moved backward toward the throne trying to avoid being surrounded.

When his foot hit the stone, Thranduil knew he was at the foot of the dais.

Let's see how willing you are to step into the light. Thranduil grinned as he stepped onto the stairs.

As Thranduil went up the stairs into the light, a shriek pierced his ears. Thranduil turned to look. Two young dragons lumbered out of the opening behind the throne. One of them, the ruby red one like its mother, stopped at the entrance and sat down under the sunlight as if it was about to take a nap. The reddish-gold dragon, however, stepped forward onto the middle of the dais then roared at Thranduil.
Dyr and Burog cackled as Sharku grinned evilly.

Treasure in the water—When Dwarves attacked Doriath, they emptied out its treasury. However, Beren, Luthien's husband, receiving the news of what the Dwarves had done, attacked the army of Nogrod Dwarves with an army of Green Elves and Ents, the battle known as Battle of Sarn Athrad. At this battle, King Naugladur, Lord of Nogrod Dwarves, was killed along with most of his army. As he lay dying, Naugladur cursed all the treasures taken from Doriath. Beren, saving only the Nauglamir, the Dwarven necklace with Silmaril, cast all the treasure into the River Ascar which was renamed Rathloriel, the Goldenbed.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: I want to thank featheredmoonwings for another of her fabulous drawings (this time of Silwen and Gil-galad) based on my fanfiction. Check it out at her tumblr page: the-red-butterflies titled "Old Love" based on chapter 64 of "What It Means to be a King."
The King's Isle

Chapter Summary

Mairon arrives at the King’s Isle.

Chapter Notes

Long, difficult week. Couldn't stay up to post until now. :P

Near King’s Isle. October 6, Second Age 144

MAIRON was incensed.

The more he thought of it, the more it inflamed him. The Maia paced as he watched the two young Dwarves dig through the rubble of dirt and rocks. Uluch had betrayed him. After all he had done for her. How was it even possible?

Leaving the Dwarves, Mairon walked back into the bend in the passage. Quickly, the Maia contacted the Orcs to kill the cadets and any other Elves taken prisoner. He had no Elrond to use them on, and no Uluch to feed them to. And Mairon could not afford any more of his plans to go awry. If any of the prisoners lived, there was always a chance of one of the Elves escaping or seeing Gelir’s body within the King’s Isle.

Once the command was relayed, Mairon walked back to the Dwarves.

“Can we not go around?” Mairon asked drumming his fingers on the hilt of his sword.

“The North Bridge is just behind this rubble,” Buri said. “I could see the light behind it, and the debris isn’t much.”

“Instead of standing there asking, why don’t ye come and help?” Loni said, his back to Mairon.

“I don’t dig.” Wasn’t that the job of the Dwarves?

“Then, shut yer trap.”

Mairon fisted the hands crackling with power. Through their slow progress to the King’s Isle, Mairon had thought more than once of leaving Gelir’s body. But, every time, something held him back. Until his own body is ready, he will need this form to engage with others. And until he is at the King’s Isle, he needed these two Dwarves.

Mairon took in a long breath to calm the swirling power within. His own divine form was close, and Gelir’s spirit was fading returning more of his native power to him.

Mairon scoffed and let the Dwarf’s terse words slide. For now.
This hefty Dwarf reminded him much of his former master, Vala Aule.

Aule was gruff and terse, one who criticized more than he praised, so different from his spouse, the always smiling, and always chattering Yavanna. The thought of Lady Yavanna made Mairon flush.

Image of Rodwen’s smiling face hovered before his eyes as the image of Yavanna lay over it. Mairon realized why Rodwen felt so familiar. There was something in Rodwen that had reminded Mairon of Yavanna. The Vala who loved all things that grow, Yavanna had always been kind to him, offering comfort, a shield to Aule’s unfair nitpicking. She encouraged and comforted when Aule forbid and criticized. It was strange how these two Valar who were so different, who loved different things, were joined as mates. Those two were like night and day, like the sun and the moon, like the Dwarves and the Elves.

“Well, are we there yet?” Mairon asked the Dwarves.

The hefty one threw him a scathing look.

Mairon glared at the big Dwarf. He disliked that one. He will kill that one first when the time came to dispose of them.

“There!” Buri laughed as the mound of dirt, rocks, and debris the Dwarves were picking at crumbled revealing an opening.

Light flooded the passage as the two Dwarves widened the opening before Mairon.

“What did I tell ye. I told ye that we could do this,” Buri said and flashed Mairon a wide grin.

For a moment, Mairon was reminded of his former master after a hard day at the forge when Lady Yavanna would glide in with her birds and flowers about her, dirt on her face and on her bare feet. She would laugh and chatter like those pesky birds of hers leaving dirt prints on the pristine marble floors of the forge. Aule disliked dirt, disorder, and mess, but the usually silent and grave Vala would break into a rare smile upon seeing her.

Mairon followed the Dwarves and stepped out into the open. They were at the edge of the cliff. The King’s Isle loomed ahead of them across the wide chasm that separated this part of the Dwarven city from the King’s Halls. The passage lay just below the bridge the Dwarves called North Bridge.

“All the drawbridges are up,” Loni said.

The stone bridge was there, but it was only two third way to the gate. Remaining one-third of the way must be passed through a drawbridge which served as a gate. There was no way to get into the King’s Halls unless the drawbridge was lowered.

Loni gestured to Buri whispering to the younger Dwarf in their own tongue. Mairon pretended not to hear or understand. They were talking about a secret passage into the Hall of the Dead that ran from the cliffside below the North Bridge to the statue of Mahal, the name Dwarves had given for Vala Aule.

‘But Loni, didn’t ye notice the bridge at the Mahal’s Grove is broken? Even if ye get to the statue, we wouldn’t be able to cross into the Hall of the Dead.’

‘Don’t ye worry. I have been here with dad before the Orcs came. Remember that time when you went to deliver a message to Lord Hanar? We made an extension to the bridge. It only looks broken to those who don’t know how to use it. The only thing I worry is that the door that opens to the Grove is locked. But, if dad took this path to enter the King’s Isle, then, maybe he used his key and
left it unlocked. If it isn’t, then it will be a short trip.’

‘I guess it’s worth the trip. I don’t think we could get in any other way.’

‘Ye stay here with the Elf. Me dad would not want an Elf at Mahal’s Grove. If the door is locked, I will return soon. But, if the door is open, I will scout out to see if I can find dad, and see if I can lower the bridge.”

“I want to come with ye. It is dangerous to go in there alone.’

‘Nah, it is the safest place I know. And I don’t want that Elf anywhere near the Hall. And who knows what stupid things the Elf will do if left alone. Just stay put for a while.’

Mairon looked across the wide chasm where he could see the large tree with a wall of the mountain carved into the image of…is that supposed to be Aule? Mairon almost laughed at the bearded face of the stocky giant holding a hammer slung over one shoulder. The figure looked more like Tulkas with the warlike Vala’s wide muscled shoulders with his messy golden hair and beard. Mairon wondered what his former master would think if he saw what the Dwarves had done to represent him. The carved version of Aule looked more like a gigantic version of a Dwarf.

But the physical form of Vala Aule that Mairon knew looked nothing like it. Aule was trim and svelte, his flaming hair cropped close to his head. In fact, Aule was prim and fastidious to a fault. The Vala’s forge was always arranged with everything in its precise place. Although Aule kept the forge and his halls open to anyone who wanted to learn, once they entered it, they were expected to meet the rigorous and exacting standards the Vala imposed on everyone. Even Lord Manwe who was the king was expected to follow the rules within Aule’s Halls. Only Lady Yavanna was an exception.

In fact, Yavanna was the lone exception in Aule’s ordered world. Trailing dirt, flowers and leaves, she would come like an unexpected Spring shower, mess up his forge and his tools. But to Aule’s eyes, Yavanna could never do wrong. And, in time, Mairon, too, had come to love her, even her constant laughter and chatter. But when it mattered, she had chosen to stand with Aule, betraying Mairon’s trust in her.

Mairon grabbed at the heart that pinched as his breath came out shallow. The unfamiliar ache made Mairon frown. That had been so long ago Mairon didn’t think he could even remember. He didn’t think he had any more feelings left to feel, but this weak body did not know that. Mairon looked toward the King’s Halls where his own form lay. At least once he was in his own body, Mairon would not feel this pain.

“Is that supposed to be Vala Aule?” Mairon asked, if nothing else, to distract himself. He let out a laugh that he didn’t feel.

“What are ye laughing at, Elf?” Loni growled. “Are ye laughing at our Mahal?”

“I never knew he had a beard.”

“Of course, he has a beard. He carved us out of his image,” Buri said.

“And what would ye know about Mahal or how he looks,” Loni said. "We know him the best, we who were made by him.” Loni raised his chin proudly.

It was so like these lower beings to think that their god looked like them, that they knew what their god was like. Men were like that, too. These lower beings will never understand that bodily forms were just a raiment to Ainur, used by the Valar and the Maiar to better communicate with them. And when Ainur took a physical form, each took on a body which they felt represented them. Even then,
their forms, one of majesty and power, were such that these children could not imagine or imitate them. And who can imitate the flame hair of Aule which marked all of Aule’s followers?

Mairon ran his hand through his hair which was far from the color he favored. Black was Lord Melkor’s color, not Mairon’s.

“Indeed. How would I know about Aule? It was just something I noticed. I had not bothered to look at it more carefully until now.”

“What do ye mean ‘until now’? Ye could not have been here,” Buri said.

“Ah, my mistake. I could not have been here.” Mairon smiled back at Buri.

Buri and Loni exchanged glances.

That was his mistake, Mairon admitted to himself. But it wouldn’t matter. These two would not survive to matter. Mairon turned away to look down at the chasm.

From above, sunlight fell onto the roofs of the palace. The roofs glittered like mounds of gold. All that sparkle had been useful in luring the dragons into this ruin.

Uluch was intelligent and difficult to fool, but she had a weakness for things that glittered and shone. And even she had heard of Dwarven hoard in their treasury. And there was no better way to fool someone than to give them the thing they wished to believe to be true. As Lord Melkor said, “Give them what their heart desires, and they will believe because they wish it to be so.”

“I will try to find a way to open the bridge. Stay here with Buri and don’t do anything until I return or lower the bridge. Got that, Elf?” Loni looked up at Mairon then stomped away to a narrow ledge cut into the wall of the chasm. Despite their clumsy gait, the Dwarf was surefooted and soon disappeared out of Mairon’s view.

“Let’s just wait. It is good that we have some sunlight,” Buri said as he put down his sack and sat down.

Mairon looked up at the sunlight over the King’s Hall. He will need to get rid of that. The sun would hinder his Orcs.

Somewhere from within the King’s Isle, a roar was heard. Buri got up onto his feet.

“What was that?”

“A dragon,” Mairon said and lifted his voice in a song. The fallen Maia sang with his Elven voice, lilting notes soft at first, but soon it rose like a storm.

The sky rumbled, and the clouds gathered. The wind picked up. The sky overhead darkened as if the Sun lost its light.

“Stop singing,” Buri moved over to Mairon. “It looks like a storm is coming.” Buri pulled Mairon under the bridge. “I don’t see the Orcs on the ramparts, but they are in there. They may hear ye. They are known to be surprisingly good at hearing. I wonder what that roar was. It didn’t sound like the dragon we fought. Besides, that dragon should be coming from below, but this roar came from the King’s Isle.” Buri walked near the edge of the chasm. “The roar sounded weak.”

Mairon laughed out aloud. Buri turned to look at him with a deep frown on his face.
“That is because it is a dragonling, not the mother. One of the two left to guard the body. Obviously, there is an intruder.”

Through the eyes of the Orcs, Mairon saw the glimpse of the golden hair. There was no Dwarf anywhere within the Throne Room. Mairon laughed again. There was that weak fool with the six of his best Orc captains. If the Sinda thought he could get rid of these six as easily as he may have done with other Orcs, he would find himself quite surprised. Pulling the corner of his lips up, Mairon looked up at the roof of the palace looking for the dragon whom Mairon had commanded to watch over the bridges.

But, there was no sign of the third dragon.

“How…how do ye know that?” Buri turned to Mairon.

“Oh, it is not hard. I understand all tongues. Even dragons,” Mairon smiled letting his power flood the body. Gelir’s spirit, still clinging to the body, shivered as his silent screams filled Mairon’s senses.

Buri’s eyes widened as he stepped back.

“Yer eyes. It is so big…and glowing…”

“Oh, just so I can see you better, Little Dwarf.”

“And your voice…it’s changed.”

“To sing, Little Dwarf. To sing.” Mairon smiled as he stepped closer to Buri.

Mairon grinned pulling back his lips to reveal the sharp back teeth. Mairon called the Orcs. It was easy to throw this little Dwarf into the chasm or embed his sword into the Dwarf’s gut, but the Maia disliked having his hands stained with blood. He had Orcs for that.

“And your teeth…they are so sharp.” Buri’s voice trembled.

Like lava flowing deep inside the mountain, fear oozed out of the Dwarf, his wide-eyed face like pale stones of Lindon. Mairon wondered what Buri would say if he shed this Elven body in front of the Dwarf.

Above them, the bridge rumbled as the Orcs marched over the bridge. Buri shrank into the rocky cliff taking his eyes off Mairon. The Maia pulled himself together. It was not the time yet to reveal himself, at least not to the Dwarf. For now, it was enough that the Orcs knew him.

Mairon walked up the bank onto the stone cliffside by the bridge.

“The Orcs, they will see you,” Buri whispered.

“Well, we are not going to get inside the King’s Isle by hiding under the bridge,” Mairon said.

Mairon expected Buri to run and go look for Loni. What harm could one Dwarf do anyway? But when the Orcs marched over to Mairon and surrounded him, Buri took out his ax and ran up the bank, yelling a battle cry.

Mairon rolled his eyes. He hated the stupidity of these creatures who didn’t know when to quit. He had been willing to let Buri live. The Dwarf was harmless. And Mairon did not want to reveal himself to the Dwarf although he had been tempted to do so just now. What he needed to do was to get inside the Throne Room and move his body.
Mairon hated to admit it, but he did not have the strength to face the combined strength of the Elves and the Dwarves. The ones currently in the ruin, Mairon could handle them. There was only Silmacil inside the ruin now and less than four hundred Dwarves. What Mairon feared was for others to discover Mairon’s presence. And worse, what if the Valar came for him? It was barely over a century since they had taken his master in chains. It was too early to reveal himself.

Ever since the cadets came to the north, Mairon’s plans had gone wrong. That Sinda made a mess of a lot of Mairon’s plans. For some reason, Thranduil never behaved the way Mairon wanted him to. But the Maia had expected that. Thranduil was a wild card, difficult to predict and control. But Mairon had not worried because he had Elrond. At least, Mairon thought he had Elrond. Having kept a close attention to Thranduil and Elrond, Mairon had known that Elrond was the key to controlling Thranduil. The Sinda was good at hiding his feelings, but Mairon had seen the effect the Half-Elven had on Thranduil. A deep sense of duty tied Thranduil to the Half-Elven. And Mairon knew the reason. One of the things Mairon did at Lindon was to study the family relationships. Kinship was important to the Elves. In his spare time, Mairon had learned as much as he could about the kinship among the important Elven families. The more he knew about the Elves, the more weapons Mairon had at his disposal.

Unfortunately for him, while Mairon anticipated trouble with Thranduil, he had not expected Uluch’s betrayal. Defiance, yes, but not outright betrayal. It was an unfortunate side effect of free will, but betrayal? Never had the creatures his master engineered ever betrayed him. Most of them were not capable of treachery against their master. Now, Mairon was the master. Uluch should not have been able to betray him.

Buri’s ax met one of the Orc’s sword. The Orcs growled, their fangs glinting.

“Don’t kill him,” Mairon commanded, letting his voice strike the Orcs’ minds, silently controlling them to submit to his will.

The Orcs stepped back.

“Fight! Why aren’t ye fighting?” Buri stepped back to Mairon’s side, his ax raised. Buri eyed the Orcs, growling, looking fierce unlike the moment before.

Watching the Dwarf, a new idea formed in Mairon’s mind.

“Why should I fight them? I have nothing against them,” Mairon replied to Buri then addressed the largest Orc.

“Take us to the King’s Hall,” Mairon said.

“But, these are Orcs. They are me enemy and yers.”

“Not mine. They gave us a reason to enter.”

Buri frowned. Mairon could see that the Dwarf was struggling to understand.

“Why do you think we came here? To this dark ruin? Do you really think we came all the way here just to rescue few cadets?”

Buri’s eyes widened. Mairon saw the trust in them falter. Mairon smiled as he was reminded of his master’s words.

Separate them. Isolate them. Let them doubt each other. United, they are formidable but separate, they are weak. Melkor’s words rang in Mairon’s head. His master was always right.
He would not conquer Elves today, but one day he will. It would not hurt to place a wedge between the Elves and the Dwarves. Friendships among different races hindered his own work. There was a reason why his master spent time and effort to sow distrust among the different races.

“I thought we were friends,” Buri’s face crumpled. “Our people fought side by side with yer people once…”

Trust was such a fragile thing. You needed only to remind the other how different they were. When they focused on their differences, they easily forgot about the core similarities they all shared, that they were all children of Eru.

“You didn’t think we Elves would care about hairy, stunted creatures like you. You are nothing like us,” Mairon said as the Orcs circled them.

Buri’s eyes filled with moisture.

“I helped ye, helped yer friends…”

“And?” Mairon shrugged. “I am letting you live, am I not?”

Buri picked up his ax and aimed the blade at Mairon. One of the Orcs struck Buri with the back of his sword. Buri swerved and fell to his knee as one of the Orcs reached for him.

“Buri!”

Just as the Orc was about to pick up Buri, Loni attacked the outer rim of the Orcs swinging his hammer.

“Kill that one,” Mairon pointed to Loni. The Orcs surrounded the hefty Dwarf. Loni fought furiously, swinging his hammer, smashing any Orc that came within his reach.

Buri shook his head, then got up. When he saw Loni fighting the Orcs, the younger Dwarf picked up his ax again, and let out a battle cry. With a powerful swing, Buri cut down the Orc nearest him.

Mairon stepped back with a grimace when a spray of black blood landed on his face.

“I’m coming, Buri!” Loni shouted as he tried to cut a path to Buri, but there were too many Orcs. More than a dozen for each of the two young Dwarves.

Mairon smiled faintly, wiping away the blood. The Orc horde Mairon had sent to defend the dragon should be returning soon. There was no longer any reason to help Uluch fight the Elves, but he didn’t want her dead. Not yet, at least. Mairon needed her blood. And now that the blood was promised to him, he will make sure she survived until he could drain her. But he needed her to wreak enough mayhem. The Elves needed to think that all this was her doing. The Orcs were ordered to fight just hard enough to distract the Elves and Dwarves so that once Uluch became too exhausted to breath fire, she could escape.

Mairon watched as several Orcs jumped Loni. The Dwarf fought valiantly, but the Orcs were under Mairon’s control and did not fear death. Bashed and bleeding, Orcs jumped onto Loni, hanging onto the Dwarf’s arms and legs. Loni pushed back, throwing the Orcs off him, but there were too many Orcs. One after another, Orcs jumped onto Loni. Strong and skilled Loni was, but the Dwarf could not take the weight of several Orcs.

Loni went down.
“Loni!” Buri’s anguished scream rose above the screech of the Orcs.

Mairon turned away with a scoff and walked into the King’s Hall silently commanding the Orcs to kill the hefty Dwarf while letting the slighter one live.

For now, Mairon had several things to do before Uluch arrived. He needed to finish the song to complete his command over the clouds and winds. Already, the sky brightened as his clouds dissipated. The Orc horde will see to the Dwarves and the Elves. They had been commanded to hold off the Elves and Dwarves sparing as many Elves as they could.

Mairon looked up at the sky. If it was a matter of just a few hours, he wanted to wait for his spells to complete. It had taken him decades to make this spell and if he was to take possession of the body before the spell finished, all that time would have been a waste. But, a whole day had to pass before the rise of the New Moon. And Thranduil was inside the Throne Room. Thranduil the unpredictable. Thranduil the wild card. Mairon didn’t want to take the chance. He could deal with a failed spell. It would set him back a decade or two. But if he lost his body...No. He could not allow that. That would set him back centuries, maybe millennia.

Mairon stepped onto the courtyard. The Orcs bowed low, half groveling half shrinking away, giving Mairon a wide berth.

“Send a squad to guard the path below the bridge. There is a secret passage under it. If anyone emerges, kill them.”

The Maia looked toward the King’s Hall where the Throne Room lay. There were six of his best warriors and two dragons in the hall. They would keep Thranduil busy if they haven’t already killed him.

It was unfortunate, Mairon mused. Thranduil was intelligent and resourceful. He would have made an excellent captain for Mairon’s warriors. There were enough shadows in the Sinda for Mairon to manipulate. But Thranduil was an unexplored forest. Much could be gained from it, but it was wild and dangerous. And for now, Mairon needed people whom he could control absolutely.

--------------------

**Aule** (Quenya, *invention*)—known as Mahal to Dwarves, Aule is one of the Valar, the Smith of the Valar. Among the Valar, he is one of the eight considered the greatest of the Valar known as Aratar. He created the substance of the world (mountains, continents, rocks, gems, metal, etc.). Along with Manwe (King of Valar who created air and sky) and Ulmo (created the sea and all water), Alue contributed most in the creation of the world. Noldor learned most from him while in Valinor. Dwarves call him ‘Maker’ as Aule created them.

**Yavanna** (Quenya, Giver of Fruits)— also known as Kementari (Queen of the Earth), she is responsible for all things that grow on earth. After Melkor destroyed the Two Lamps that used to light the world, Yavanna sang, with the help of Nienna’s tears, into creation the Two Trees which were considered her greatest creations. Out of the fruit and flower of the Two Trees, Sun and Moon were fashioned.

*All who came from Valinor who later turned against Valar had some contact with Aule: Sauron and Saruman (both were Maiar under Aule) and Noldor who had learned most from Aule. Melkor (Morgoth) was a Vala of similar power as Aule who took an interest in the deeps of the earth.*
**Ainur**—refers to both the Vala and Maia

**Mairon (Sauron)** was seduced by Melkor long before the Elves awoke. He was at Almaren, the first home Valar made in the world, before the time of the Two Trees, and long before the birth of the Sun and the Moon. Mairon spied for Melkor until Melkor destroyed Almaren and destroyed the Two Lamps, the predecessor to the Two Trees. After Yavanna made the Two Trees and Varda made stars, Elves awoke in Middle Earth. But, long before Elves came to Valinor, Mairon left the land of the Valar for Angband which he kept secure while Melkor was taken by Valar and kept as a prisoner in Valinor.
The Confrontation

Chapter Summary

Thranduil faces foes too great for him to face alone.

Throne Room. October 6, Second Age 144

**THRANDUIL** winced and blinked away the blood dripping down his head afraid to lower his defenses. The Sinda glanced at the dead body of one of the Orcs. He had managed to finish one off, but it had cost him.

The Orcs were surprisingly coordinated. Dyr with his spear and the other one with the chain and a spiked ball worried the Sinda the most. Others needed to move closer to him to land a blow, but the one with the ball and Dyr who wielded a spear could reach him at a distance. Although there were only five of them now, the Orcs jumped on Thranduil together.

Thranduil avoided the swords and the axes, but the ball would come at him unawares, followed by the spear. So far, Thranduil was stabbed at his arm, leg and on his waist. He almost got skewered on his head. He had barely escaped the spear thrust but not until Dyr left a deep cut across the side of his head just above his eyes. The blood from the wound kept bleeding into his eyes which was a nuisance. Thranduil disliked head wounds as even a small cut produced a large amount of blood.

The Sinda glanced around him for the dragon fang. He had managed to sink the fang into one of the Orcs, but Dyr’s spear had stabbed his shoulder almost lopping it off. To avoid it, Thranduil had stumbled back onto Burog whose ax struck his hand. The dragon tooth had flown off Thranduil’s grasp. The Sinda wasn’t sure where it landed. He was attacked one after another and did not have a chance to look.

Thranduil licked his parched lips as he surveyed the room, keeping his shield up. The Orcs kept a tight ring around him, always just a few steps out of his reach.

More than once, Thranduil lamented the lack of armor. Not having the armor made any slip on his part painful and dangerous. He had leather greaves and vambraces, and just a thin blue tunic and ragged leather leggings.

“Getting tired, Elf?” Sharku cawed.

“Hardly. I am just getting started,” Thranduil replied, curling his lips.

The Sinda looked back behind Sharku at the dais. The dragon stood there under the flooding sunlight. It made it impossible for Thranduil to get to the dais. The Sinda had hoped the dragon would follow him out onto the hall, but it did not. It roared and flapped its wings and flailed its many horned tail about. Occasionally, it threw a stream of fire to prevent Thranduil from getting near, but it would not leave the dais.

It forced Thranduil to face the Orcs on the floor of the hall. Trying his best to avoid being completely surrounded, Thranduil moved to one section of the hall with the column to protect his back. More than once the image of Onar and his powerful ax flashed across Thranduil’s head. He could have
used Onar’s skill with the ax about now. Someone to watch his back. Or Elrond. Elrond was an expert on a sword. Together, they would have been able to handle these Orcs. Alone, Thranduil wasn’t sure he could survive them.

Thranduil clenched his fist around the shield. Although using a shield did not come naturally to him, Thranduil hoped it would make up for the lack of armor. He didn’t have any other weapon anyway. Many Noldor preferred a shield on the one hand and a sword on another. But, Thranduil, having been trained in the Doriathrin style since his youth, preferred having weapons in each of his hands.

Burog’s ax came at him from his left, pushing Thranduil to his right. But Sharku’s sword waited for him there while another Orc whirled around his blade on the right. Thranduil bent backward instead of moving right. Having already received three cuts from the spear as Thranduil tried to avoid the ax and the swords, Thranduil knew Dyr will come at him again. He just wasn’t sure which direction. He couldn’t keep his eyes on all five at once.

As Thranduil bent backward and pushed his body off the floor with his hand to flip, Thranduil saw the spiked ball come at him from his left. Thranduil swerved right to avoid the iron ball when a sword attacked from the right, then another from the left. Thranduil barely avoided the blades and the spear but was too late to see Sharku’s foot which aimed at Thranduil’s middle.

Breath was knocked out of his lungs as Thranduil flew through the air and hit the column with a thud. Thranduil slid to the ground when an iron-clad foot smashed down onto Thranduil’s sworded hand.

Thranduil swallowed the scream and struck the foot with his shield. Sharku screamed and kicked the shield away. Ignoring the pain, Thranduil crawled up the steps behind him, toward the light, when an earsplitting roar came from ahead of him followed by a stream of fire. Thranduil turned to the right, his arm over his head.

“Aaaaak!” Searing pain blasted through Thranduil’s left side as the fire engulfed him. Thranduil rolled down the steps onto the floor beneath the dais. The fire extinguished, but the pain sizzled through his skin. Sizzling and crackling, air fuming. Black smoke rising. Red pain seeping. Heart weeping. Skin melting, burning, and charring.

The odor of burnt flesh and hair permeated the air around Thranduil. The dragonling fire didn’t even come close to that of its mother whose fire scorched Thranduil’s skin even from several leaps away from it. Still, it was fire. Still, it burned.

“Kekekeke,” the Orcs cawed as they pulled back.

The yellow dragon slithered down the steps, its scale-covered long torso scratching the marble floor and the steps as it did so. It sounded like steel scale armor grating on a stone.

“Tasssty morsssel,” it hissed, its gold scales flashing under the sunlight, shining, flashing, red growing.

The ruby red one who had sat in front of the mound of rocks got up also and lumbered down the steps. The Orcs pulled back further.

“Mine!” the golden one snapped its mouth to keep away the ruby red dragon.

Thranduil sat up, hastily pushing behind the strands of hair on his face to see better. He could not move his left arm which felt heavy. He glanced at it. Although it had sizzled with pain on contact with the dragon fire, he no longer felt pain except stiff heaviness. His whole left arm from the
shoulder down was charred, its edges angry red and black except where half burnt vambrace remained. With a trembling hand, Thranduil touched the left side of his face. The cheek to the jaw felt leathery and charred under his touch.

The two dragonlings snapped at each other on the steps of the dais. Thranduil sat up and scoured the floor. He had no tooth, no sword, and now no shield. Thranduil looked up at the bright light of the morning.

As Thranduil watched, a thunder rolled, and the dark clouds gathered blocking the light. The whole chamber was thrown into gray darkness. Was this the end?

The five Orcs who had retreated to the back of the hall avoiding the light under the dais and the area below the steps, moved forward when the sky darkened.


Dyr picked up his spear and loomed over Thranduil with an evil grin spreading on his shallow green face.

“He’s mine!” Burog pushed Dyr aside.

“Not a chance, Burog!” Dyr pushed Burog back.

Thranduil looked up at the open sky above the dais ignoring the dragons and the Orcs.

*Help me, Elbereth, Starkindler, beloved of the Elder King. Help me.*

Thranduil prayed which he had not done in a long time. Why was it that he never prayed until everything fell apart when there can be no help without a miracle? And Thranduil did not believe in miracles. He had not done anything worthy to hope for a miracle.

And who was there to help him now? Dwarf Onar and the cadets were sealed in the Hall of the Dead; Elrond dreamed in the clutches of the dragon; and, the rest of the cadets… Lord Gilmagor… Lord Istuion… Galion. Thranduil’s throat tightened. If the cadets were captured, Thranduil could guess what could have happened to all of them.

It was then that the clump of thick black clouds parted, and a stream of light fell on Thranduil. The dragons and the Orcs stopped their bickering and came toward the Sinda.

Thranduil looked up at the pure ray of sunlight. Darkness was starting to dissipate, and a stream of warm sunlight fell onto his face.

Was this Eru’s last mercy for him? So that his spirit will make his final journey in the light? Thranduil’s breast filled with warmth as his heart thumped loudly.

*Have you not forsaken me yet?*

Something hot coursed through Thranduil’s heart. A deep hunger settled in his stomach. And with the light, a new understanding dawned on him.

*Eru is with us always, even when you do not think so,* his mother had said. *He is there in the face of an unexpected friend, in a help unlooked for. You only need to hold the hand when it is given.*

Was it that simple? Just to hold the hand? Thranduil thought back to the myriad of faces. Besides all
the beloved faces, there had also been others, ones he had not asked for: Elrond, Cellon, Astalder, even Lord Gilmagor, Onar and the Dwarves, without whom Thranduil knew he could not have hoped to get this far.

Thranduil let out a dry laugh which choked on his throat. He was always so slow to learn. He had always thought himself to be a fast learner, but when it mattered, it seemed he did not progress. He saw now that all through his journey, Eru, in his infinite mercy, had sent him help. These Noldor and Dwarves, the ones whom Thranduil would have considered his enemies, they had given him a lending hand when it mattered.

Even Astarno. Without him fighting back to prevent Thranduil killing him, his hands would have been stained with blood, blood of a fellow Elf. He would have become a slayer of kin, the cursed, the hated, the monster. He would have become one of them. And with the understanding came the reality that Thranduil had shunned, had refused, stubbornly, to see. That not all Noldor were evil. That not all Dwarves were evil. That there was no one group of people more evil than another. One or two, or some did not represent the whole, nor stained the whole. For in the end, were we not all Eru’s children? And suddenly, all the hatred in his heart seemed senseless.

*Help me. One more time. I will try. I know I can not change overnight, but I will try. Help me, please.*

Thranduil wasn’t sure how praying would help, but it was the only thing left to him. But, the reality was, this was his last moment. Thranduil wanted to get up, but his legs were heavy, and he couldn’t get up. Still, using his good hand, Thranduil straightened his dirty and half burnt tunic. If he was to die here now, at least he will die facing his enemies, for was he not a scion of two great families? He will not die like a coward.

Burog and Dyr came and stood over Thranduil, stopping just outside the ring of sunlight. They frowned down at Thranduil, their faces puzzled. But, Dyr raised his spear aiming for Thranduil’s neck as the dragons slithered up to the top of the dais behind Thranduil on the steps.

Thranduil opened his eyes wide, glaring at Dyr when something whistled behind his head.

Burog roared, his ax flashing. Dyr stumbled back, an arrow stuck on his shoulder.

Thranduil turned toward the dais where the arrow came.

Thranduil could not help but open his eyes wide as his insides shivered at the familiar armor of the warrior. The two dragons turned back toward the dais, and both let out a stream of fire.

“*Utúlie’n aurë!*” the warrior cried and darted between the dragons with incredible speed.

The dragons were too slow and the warrior too fast. Deftly, he moved past the dragons, then he flew over the steps to let loose several more arrows. The Orcs scrambled away knocking out the arrows with their swords and axes and dived behind the many columns. Grabbing his shoulder, Dyr, too, hid behind one of the columns.

His golden armor glowing like the ray of sunlight, the warrior walked over to Thranduil. He raised the visor of his golden helm and Thranduil was surprised again.

It was Astarno.

“How is it you are here?” Astarno asked, his eyes scanning the room.

“I should be asking you,” Thranduil said hesitating when Astarno offered his hand.
Reluctantly, Thranduil took the hand. Had he not just said to Eru that he will try? If this was the help Eru offered, who was he to refuse?

Astarno helped Thranduil up.

“Where are your weapons? Why were you sitting there?”

“Can’t you see that I have been burned?” Thranduil snapped, throwing his arm to Astarno and turning the left side of his face toward the Noldo. Was he blind?

“I don’t see any injury,” Astarno said, his eyes quickly skimming over Thranduil.

Thranduil looked down at his arm, then gasped. Although dirty and covered in the black shoot, his arm was fine as if nothing had happened. He touched his face and head. Part of the head was sticky with blood, but the wound that he received was no longer there, and the skin of his face felt normal. The slashes on the arms, waist and the leg were all gone.

How? Then, Thranduil remembered the Dragon’s words, “It will enhance everything within you.”

What did she mean by that? Thranduil thought he will become powerful, or even faster or smarter. Healing had been the last thing Thranduil had expected. His mother had the power of healing, but that power had never been his.

“Do you know how to use a bow?” Astarno eyed the dragons which slithered down the steps toward them.

Do I know how to use a bow? Thranduil glared at the Noldo. “I am a Sinda.”

Without another word, Astarno thrust the bow into Thranduil’s hand, then handed him the quiver full of arrows. Then, the Noldorin warrior took out his sword.

“Stay back. Keep away from the dragons. Their range is short, but the fire is potent,” the Noldo said. No kidding!

Thranduil grimaced when a ball on a chain flew to where they stood. Both Elves jumped back out of its reach.

Thranduil threaded the bow, quickly belting the straps of the quiver around his hips. The dragons slithered back up the steps. Thranduil wasn’t sure if the dragons had a limited area of mobility or not. It seemed to him that they never strayed too far from the dais.

Thranduil sent out arrows toward the dragons. He wanted to see if the dragons will follow him down to the hall if he threatened them enough.

“Don’t waste the arrows. Concentrate on the Orcs. The dragons are slow. We’ll deal with them later,” Astarno shouted as he moved away from Thranduil.

Thranduil turned back to the Orcs. The Noldo was right. They needed to get rid of the Orcs first.

The spiked ball followed after the Noldo. Thranduil used that time to send out several arrows toward the Orcs to keep them behind the columns as he moved over to his Dwarven sword. The bow was great, but it was bigger and heavier than what Thranduil was used to and prevented him from moving freely. And the Orcs were heavily armed and skilled making it difficult to shoot them down.

Astarno glided between the Orcs, a golden light among the dark armors.

The one with the ball and the chain was the first to go. When the ball came, Astarno jumped at the
same time, sailing high above the spiked ball, he flipped, his sword slicing the chains. The Orc stumbled at the loss of the weight. The Noldo flipped in the air landing behind the Orc. A flash of his sword and the Orc crumbled, headless.

Thranduil kept the Orcs from crowding Astarno until Burog came at him. Thranduil threw the bow down and faced the Orc. He was tougher than all the Orcs he had ever encountered, but the dagger in Thranduil’s hand found its mark in the end.

“Who’s laughing now, Seed of Morgoth!”

But Burog laughed, even as the black blood spurted out of his neck.

“You will burn, Elf. You will burn, and your world will burn! For he rises! Kekekeke!” Burog laughed even as he fell forward.

Thranduil’s skin crawled as he watched the Orc pass, his green skin turning dark as the evil spirit within him sighed then dispelled.

“Sinda!” Astarno’s urgent call made Thranduil look up just in time to avoid Dyr’s spear. As Thranduil blocked Dyr’s spear, the Orc’s eyes widened. The Orc’s chest sprouted a sword. As Astarno removed his sword, a firestream shot forward. Both Elves jumped back.

Astarno jumped up. His sword glinted as if there was starlight on it. Astarno let out a shout, and the sword gleamed a white stream of light. Thranduil watched in awe as Astarno jumped back and forth over the yellow dragon. A stream of bright lights crisscrossed over the dragon. The yellow dragonling screamed. The ruby red one screamed along with it and threw a stream of fire, but Astarno landed, rolled and was back down the dais.

At the same moment, the sky rumbled, and the clouds gathered. As the darkness descended into the Throne Room, the yellow dragon fell with a thud.

“We were not to kill the young ones,” Thranduil said as he watched the ruby red dragon hover over the fallen yellow dragon and tried to shake it awake. It let out a low moan as if lost what do do.

“What was that? What kind of technique is that?” Thranduil asked remembering the mother dragon. She wouldn’t like that. But, there had been no time to stop Astarno.

“It is called alapentë. It is a special technique taught to warriors to fight foes bigger and stronger than they,” Astarno said as he turned his sword in his hand.

“The Great Strike? I have not heard of it.”

“It is only taught to select warriors. Not everyone can generate enough power to use it. It takes a lot out of you,” Astarno said, and Thranduil noticed that the Noldo’s breath was rougher than it had when he had dealt with three of the Orcs.

“I don’t think we should kill the remaining dragonling. Its mother wanted me to free them. Not kill them.”

“It is evil. Any dragon allowed to grow will only cause mayhem to others. It is young, and I rather not kill it, but it will only get more dangerous and cunning as it grows.”

“But if its mother comes…”

“She would have heard the scream of her young if she is near. She will come, and I will face it.”
“You will not survive it. She is much stronger, much bigger and more powerful.”

“It does not matter,” Astarno said. The way the Noldo said it sounded familiar. Thranduil studied Astarno. The Noldo’s face was grim, cold and distant.

“How did you get here?” Thranduil asked.

“Climbed. I have been here a few times before when these walls were shining with the wealth of the Dwarves. I had been an envoy from Lord Maedhros.”

Thranduil grimaced as the name he had not heard in a long time grated on his ears.

“Don’t worry, Sinda. You will have your revenge. I am the last of the kinslayers, and I will get my deserts here. This shall be my tomb, this dark ruin full of evil creatures where no sunlight reaches.”

Thranduil gazed at Astarno as the Noldo looked away. It was then that Thranduil noticed the hollow gray eyes, empty, ashen gray of winter ocean. He knew that look, the look of utter loss. Did the Noldo not know that Beril was alive?

Although he knew, Thranduil asked. He wanted Astarno to suffer. How could this be enough? For him to lose his daughter was not enough for the many Thranduil had lost in the hands of the kinslayers.

“What about your wife and daughter?”

The effect was immediate. The empty gray eyes glistened, and the light in Astarno’s eyes faltered. The Noldo’s chin trembled as he struggled to control his emotions. His jaw locked as his breath roughened. The loss was too recent, too raw.

“They…are gone. The Orcs…they captured my little…” Astarno could not say. He was silent for a moment. Although most of his head was hidden behind the golden helm, Thranduil could see the muscles of his jaw tremble.

Thranduil’s heart pulsed, pain seeping through his carefully iced heart.

“Beril…she tried to rescue her, but they had her in their grasp, demanded Beril to submit. They… they…” Astarno could not finish, but Thranduil did not need to hear the rest. He knew well what Orcs were capable of.

Thranduil’s heart lurch. Who said enemy’s pain would gladden his heart? Astarno’s pain did not delight Thranduil. Sinda’s chest tightened, his heart drowning. Thranduil knew that pain, knew the weight of it, the feel of it, the shape of it. Thranduil could taste it and feel the heavy aura of it surrounding the Noldo. And Thranduil’s chest tightened with it, his shoulders drooped with the weight of it. The color of it was the same no matter it was for the enemy or not. Even if Thranduil hated this Elf, this Noldo, the pain of this Noldorin warrior didn’t feel any different, didn’t lessen Thranduil’s own. Why had he wanted it in the first place? Thranduil questioned. Did he really want anyone to feel such pain?

“Beril lives,” Thranduil said, his voice half a whisper.

Astarno turned to him, He blinked as if he didn’t understand or heard.

“What?” The Noldo shook his head.

“Beril is alive,” Thranduil said it again, a little louder this time.
Astarno shuddered, then with speed too quick for Thranduil to react, the Noldo grabbed the front of Thranduil’s tunic and pushed him hard against a stone column.

“Do not lie to me, boy! Torment me with anything else, but not about her! They killed …” Astarno’s lips trembled unable to say the name of his daughter. “And Beril, she let go of her bow heeding the lies of those cursed creatures. Her mother’s heart knew not how Orcs will lie and give hope where there is no hope. And I….Ai, Valar! Doomed I am…Cursed and forsaken, I could not save them.”

“It’s the truth,” Thranduil looked at Astarno calmly. “She was captured by the Orcs and brought to the ruin, but they had kept her alive along with two of the cadets. I rescued them. They are in the Hall of the Dead, safe.”

Astarno let go of the front of the tunic.

“She lives?” His breath came out rough as his frozen gray eyes came alive again. “Why? Why would you tell me this?”

“It is you I want dead. I have nothing against your family. How did you even manage to survive when you couldn’t protect them?”

Astarno dropped his head.

“They came just after you left.” Astarno shook his head. “I wasn’t myself. I didn’t feel them. And Beril was too worried for me to be vigilant. They grabbed my daught…” Astarno’s voice cracked. “I couldn’t help them.”

“Why did they spare you?”

You should have been killed, not the child. You are the kinslayer, the doomed, the cursed. She was innocent.

“They didn’t. They dragged Beril away, but several Orcs remained and tortured me. I am sure they meant to kill me. But before they could, a warrior saved me. Beril’s young cousin, from the village, came looking for Beril. He was followed by a Sindarin warrior.”

“A Sindarin warrior?”

“A white-haired warrior of skill and experience. I suspect one from Doriath by the way he moved. To think that a Doriathrin warrior saved me…Life is strange that way.”

“What is he called?”

Astarno looked up. He shook his head. “Don’t know. Never asked and he never asked me. He dressed my wounds and helped me heal, but he never asked any questions. I think…I think he knew or guessed, at least. I left them sleeping once I healed enough to move. I dug up my old armor and came here. I heard the Orcs talking about their master at the Dwarven ruin. I never expected Beril to be alive. I knew better than anyone that Orcs do not keep prisoners, at least not for long. I wanted to take this master down…before I followed her. I deserved everything, but they…they were innocent.”

“The boy, Beril’s cousin from the village, his name is Galion?”

“How did you know?” Astarno frowned when the door to the Throne Room opened. Thranduil picked up a sword on the floor. Astarno and Thranduil turned to face whoever came in.

In stepped a figure armed in gold and blue armor.
“Gelir?”

The cadet walked in and looked about him.

“What are you doing here? Are others here?” Thranduil asked as hope flared in his heart. If the Elven army were here, then everything would be all right. Elrond would be saved if he wasn’t already. Still, he needed to kill the body. He had given his word. Thranduil looked about the dais for the dragon tooth.

Gelir pointed to the red dragon and said something in foreign words as he eyed the body of the dead dragonling on the dais. The red dragon who had been trying to shake the yellow dragon awake turned suddenly then disappeared behind the mound of rocks behind the throne.

“Were you talking to the dragon?” Thranduil asked. “How do you know how to do that?”

Astarno put his hand in front of Thranduil and pushed the Sinda back.

“Something is not right,” the Noldo said. Stepping in front of Thranduil, Astarno addressed Gelir who walked down the aisle to the Throne. “Hail, son of Amarthon. Do you remember me?”

“The hunter,” Gelir said. He looked over Astarno in his golden armor. “So, you are one of the Feanorian warriors. I thought there was something different about you. A kin slayer in the cloth of hunter has now revealed himself. To think that the Sinda would stand with a kin slayer? Even I have not foreseen that.” Gelir snickered.

“Gelir, what the hell are you talking about? How come you are here alone? Were you captured with others?” Thranduil asked.

“Silence!” Gelir commanded.

It wasn’t spoken aloud, but Thranduil was pushed back by some unknown force. The Sinda staggered back.

“I will deal with you later. You have messed up my plans for the last time, Whelp of Doriath!”

Gelir stood up erect, then raising his arms, the cadet sang. An unearthly voice rose in cadence filling the empty hall.

The dark clouds overhead churned followed by lightning. Thunder cracked. Astarno and Thranduil looked up. The wind picked up and the two warriors staggered. They grabbed each other for support when the lightning flashed and crashed onto the three stone trolls. The stone cracked and fell away as the trolls came alive.

Somewhere below them, a roar rose, louder than thunder. It cracked and shook, a scream of anguish as the wind rose like an angry sea. Something was coming. And fast.

----------

_Utúlie’n aurë!_ (Quenya, _The day has come!)_ The battle cry used by Fingon’s army at the Noldor’s last battle of the First Age, the Battle of Unnumbered Tears. I am not sure what battle cry Maedhros’ soldiers would have used, but this one seemed to fit as it is saying the day of reckoning is here. For Astarno, this was the day of reckoning for his past sins as he had come here to die fighting.
Uluch hears the scream of her young and in blind rage and agony rushes to the King’s Isle.

Dwarven Ruin. October 6, Second Age 144

**ELROND** shook off the overwhelming drowsiness when the thunderous roar shook the walls holding him prisoner. Elrond wiggled himself out of the wedge where he had been. The walls shook, and another roar reverberated around him.

Elrond’s mind flooded with the cries of the dragon. She was in a lot of pain. He wasn’t sure whether it was injury or something else, but he could feel the agony coming from the dragon like a dense fog, encircling him, choking him.

Somewhere from above, a scream echoed down the chasm. Uluch roared like thunder shaking the stone walls of the ruin bringing down rumbles. She shook her body as if she was a dog shaking off water from its drenched fur. The stream of white that contained Uluch’s lower body broke off as bats large as cats rushed toward the Elven warriors crashing into them as if they cared not if they lived or died. Elven swords met the black clouds of bats. The streams of the light all around the dragon faltered.

Like a loaded spring, Uluch jumped onto the cliff letting Elrond go as she used both claws to cling onto the cliffside. Using both hands and feet, she clawed up the cliffside as if she was a water strider gliding over the surface of the water. Elrond slid over Uluch’s shiny scales, trying to cling to anything he could get his hands on until his hands wrapped around one of the many spikes on Uluch’s body. Elrond hung on.

“Elrond!” Someone shouted his name as something whistled past Elrond’s face.

Elrond turned in time to watch a warrior jump onto the dragon’s back, clinging onto a thin rope that shone in the dark. He swung himself up onto the many spikes behind Uluch’s back.

Uluch roared as the chasm widened. She spread her wings then turned once in the air.

“Elrond!” the warrior called again as the Half-Elven, unable to keep his hold, fell.

Elrond sucked in a breath flailing his arms.

*Dear Valar! Is this it? I haven’t done anything yet. There are so much too see, so much to learn…*

The warrior jumped off the dragon and flew toward him, grabbing him into his arms.

“Got you. I got you,” the warrior said. Elrond looked up wide-eyed.

It was Astalder.

Elrond looked up above the captain. Astalder was holding onto a fine chain of white metal which
shone like a spider web glistening in the morning light.

“Hold tight, Elrond. We are in for a ride,” Astalder said, grabbing Elrond’s hand to place it on the chain.

The winds screamed past them as Uluch’s powerful wings cut through the darkness that had suddenly descended on the ruin, murky darkness that seemed to seep into every crevice of the stone walls.

Each time the dragon turned in the air, the chain swung. Elrond held on. His heart pumped wildly, but Elrond reassured himself. He was with the best of the Silmacil. What was there to fear?

From above thunder cracked as the dark clouds thickened. Uluch roared once again then sped up the mountain toward the golden-roofed structure.

“This doesn’t look good,” Astalder shouted to Elrond. “We may have to jump when we get the chance. Be ready. We may encounter Orcs. More than we could handle.”

Elrond nodded.

The dragon flew toward the island at the top of the mountain. Uluch circled the isle once before heading toward the largest tower that stood on the very top courtyard. The back portion of the structure was broken. The side of the mountain had fallen onto it. The opening of the mountain was filled with dark clouds like a thick cotton swaddling. It blocked out all light from outside.

Uluch flew over the courtyard and slowed over a roof of the largest tower.

“Now, Elrond. Jump!”

Elrond and Astalder jumped off onto the roof rolling to lower the impact of their fall. Uluch didn’t seem to notice them, or she didn’t bother with them as she sat down on the roof. Then, she moved downward.

Elrond and Astalder ran to the edge of the roof to look.

Just ahead of the tower was a side of the mountain where a gigantic statue of a man holding a hammer was carved. The mountainside had caved onto the tower leaving a large hole on the side and top.

Uluch stepped down onto the head of the statue to enter the tower. The portion of the tower was completely broken, and the part of the ceiling was open. The opening was wide enough to just fit Uluch.

“We have to get in there,” Elrond said. “She is exhausted and wounded. But more than that she is raging with grief and anger. I don’t know what she is capable of.”

“We have to be careful, Elrond. Whatever it is, there is something very powerful in the chamber. I don't know if there is a power source from which the dragon gets more strength or if there is something other than the dragon in there.”

“But Thranduil is down there.”

“How do you know?” Astalder tried to see into the chamber, but the broken section of the ceiling hung down preventing them from seeing into the hall below.
“I don’t know. I just know. I feel him. Just trust me. He’s in there. We have to get in there, captain.”

“Elrond, if you have not noticed, we are inside a fortress. There is only us, and Thranduil if what you say is true. The Silmacil and the Dwarves should arrive soon now that they have no dragon to deal with. All the bridges are raised except for the one in the middle which is broken. They wouldn’t be able to get in until we lower the bridges.”

“But, Thranduil is alone and in danger. We have to help him. Please, captain.”

Astalder frowned, then nodded.

“Let’s get down first. This way. I saw, while riding the dragon, that there was a section that touched a lower roof. There!” Astalder pointed.

They moved toward the back of the roof where the tower touched a roof to another tower below them.

Elrond marveled how Astader had time to scope the area below while they were barely holding onto Uluch. Following the roofline to a series of lower roofs, they found a way down to a courtyard when Elrond saw two scores of Orcs coming toward where they were.

“The Orcs will get to the tower before us. We cannot allow them to enter,” Elrond said.

A roar of the dragon shook the tower just then. The great roar rang through the courtyard and shook Elrond, its rumbling sound hollow as if a heart was breaking.

“The dragon must be calling them,” Astalder said as he watched the Orcs pick up speed toward the main tower. “If you want to save Thranduil, we must stop the Orcs from entering the tower.”

“But the dragon. How is Thranduil to face the dragon. Alone? By the time we fight off all the Orcs to reach the gate…” Elrond’s chest filled with despair. Strength went out of his hands and legs. He was so tired. It seemed as if he had been in the darkness for a long time wandering and lost.

“Look at me, Elrond,” Astalder grabbed Elrond’s shoulders. “I know you are tired. You have been in this ruin for quite some time. Your spirit is at its lowest. But, this is not the time to give in to the darkness. He is not alone. You and I, we are here. We will help him. The dragon is wounded and weak. Thranduil is cunning. Let’s hope he will find a way to keep the dragon entertained until our army comes.”

“Cunning he is, but Thranduil’s tongue is a thorn the dragon may not find amusing. The Sinda may goad her into eating him if I know Thranduil.”

Just as if to prove Elrond’s words, the dragon roared again, this time louder and filled with red heat. Astalder glanced at the tower.

“I am sure the lad is not a fool who has a death wish.”

Elrond glanced at the great tower, his heart thumping loudly. He wasn’t so sure. Although Thranduil had seemed more himself the morning they woke up at the Dwarven ruin, all through their captivity, the Sinda had seemed unstable. Elrond wasn’t sure how much time had passed since the last time he saw Thranduil, but he could not have changed in the meantime, not while they were in the darkness of this ruin.

Elrond looked down at the courtyard that led to the central tower where they wanted to go. On each side of the center tower stood two massive buildings. They were at the lower roof behind one of the
stone statues that lined the edge of the roof. These same stone statues were built all around the edges of the building running to the center tower then to the building across from where they were. Just in front of them, on top of a pedestal carved out of limestone, there was a statue of a Dwarf lying as if he was on a top of a bier. Two massive braziers stood at the head and the feet of the stone Dwarf. Flames danced red and bright on each brazier throwing reddish light onto the marble courtyard.

“Beside those forty Orcs, there are several more on the ramparts and outer courtyard. Not counting the ones I cannot see, I am guessing at least sixty,” Astalder said. “I will try to carve a way through the Orcs into the tower. While I do that, you will sabotage the bridges.” Astalder pointed to the bridges on each side of the Isle.

Elrond saw that the main bridge was completely gone. But there were two smaller bridges at opposite ends of the Isle. Each was operable from the top of the rampart which stretched out from the two buildings on each side of the main tower like two arms.

“I do not know how quickly the Silmacil and the Dwarves can get here. But, remember, Elrond. If the bridge is not lowered, they will not be able to get in. I will try to draw as many Orcs to me while you go lower the bridges. I saw only a few Orcs on the ramparts, but you don’t know what you will find once you get there.”

“I am not going to let you face these beasts alone.” Elrond shook his head fisting his hands.

“That’s an order, cadet. Someone must lower the bridges. Otherwise, none of us is going to leave this Isle alive. And I will be damned if I am going to lose you again after coming all the way here.”

Then, Astalder frowned at Elrond. “Dear Valar, you are practically naked. Do you have a weapon?”

Elrond looked down at his torn tunic and leggings. Except for the vambraces and the greaves, everything had been taken from him. Elrond took out the Dwarven sword he grabbed from the dead Dwarf just before Uluch snatched him.

“This will have to do. It is Dwarven steel.” Elrond weighted the sword in his hand.

“Dwarven steel is as good as it comes in Middle Earth. Here, take this.” Astalder took off his helmet and put it on Elrond’s head. Then unstrapping a belt full of daggers, strapped it around Elrond. “Hopefully, this could also act as armor,” Astalder murmured as he secured it around Elrond’s chest.

“Aim for the necks, eyes, the underside of their arms. Their armor is thick so don’t waste them elsewhere.”

“But, you’ll need them.” Elrond touched the helmet then the daggers.

“I would give you my armor, but it is fitted for me, and you’ll not be comfortable enough to move freely.” Astalder said as he fixed the helmet onto Elrond’s head. Then, the captain took hold of Elrond’s shoulders. “I know where your heart lies, Elrond. But what we want is not always what is best. Right now, you need to focus on the bridges, then surviving until the army arrives.” Astalder looked deep into Elrond’s eyes. Unlike the smile on his face, his bright gray eyes held steel in them.

“Survive, Elrond. If not for yourself, then for your king. That is your duty. Your loss will wound him most severely. Understand? Wait until their attention is diverted. Stealth, not confrontation.” Astalder squeezed Elrond’s shoulders and held Elrond’s eyes again as if to drive the words into Elrond’s mind.

Elrond felt his chest tighten. He nodded unable to say a word.

Astalder gave Elrond a bright smile before he ran toward the edge of the building closest to the main
tower. The Orcs were near the gate of the tower when Astalder let out a battle cry then jumped down on the midst of them.

Astalder’s feet hit the ground with a loud boom. The ground cracked where the captain landed throwing the several Orcs off their feet. They flew off and crashed onto the other Orcs. The creatures scrambled up and faced Astalder as the ground shook with the aftershock.

Elrond crouched and held on as the buildings all around shook. The Half-Elven could not but gape realizing the power of this warrior. He had read about the incredible feats of the Noldorin warriors of the First Age. They had sounded so incredible. He had seen his stepparents, Maedhros and Maglor, practice and seen their astonishing speed and strength, but this was the first time Elrond beheld an actual display of power.

Astalder glowed white untainted by the reddish glow of the firelight. Smiling brilliantly, the Captain of the Silmacil greeted the Orcs who stumbled back away from the warrior who glowed pale white amongst them.

Captain Astalder spread his arms. A sword in one and a long dagger sprouted from another of his hands.

“Spawns of Morgoth, shall we dance?” The captain leveled his sword toward the Orcs. Astalder curled his lips flashing his teeth that shone in the light.

For a moment, Elrond thought the captain looked like a white mountain cat who had just found his prey.

The Orcs pulled back. Two of them ran toward the gate when the captain threw the dagger in his hand. The dagger was attached to a fine chain. It flew and hit the back neck of the one Orc then the other before the captain pulled it back circling it all around him. The Orcs dispersed giving the captain a wide berth.

Elrond had never seen anyone use such a weapon before. The Half Elf glanced at the battlement above him when he saw, behind the Orcs gathered around the captain, more Orcs running towards them. Elrond’s heart filled with dread.

There were too many Orcs. Elrond hesitated despite the captain’s order. No matter how good the captain was, he was only one Elf, and there were many, many Orcs.

Elrond fisted his hands. What he wanted was to fight beside Captain Astalder. But, he had a job to do even if his heart wanted to stay.

Please hear me, Elbereth, Lady of Stars who hears all. Watch over him.

Elrond sent up a silent prayer to the Lady of the Stars before he jumped up onto the rampart leading to one of the bridges. The faster he finished his job, faster he could join the captain.

“Wait for me, Captain Astalder,” Elrond said as he swung himself onto the rampart.

On the battlement was several Orcs, they were drawing their bows, looking down at the battle that was taking below.

Elrond threw three daggers at the three archers farthest from him, then ran to meet the Orc closest to him. He didn’t stop as he sliced the Orc in front of him, turned to dodge an arrow as he slipped under a wagon piled with rocks, then jumped up onto the rampart to crash back down onto another Orc letting his sword sink into the Orc’s neck.
Elrond did not stop as he slid past the Orcs with their bows out, chopping off their hands as he passed them. They can’t do harm without hands, can they? He didn’t look back. He wanted to finish his part as soon as he could so he could join the captain.

The battlement ahead seemed empty. Elrond smiled. This was turning out to be easy.

At the end of the rampart, there was a wide-open space surrounded by three giant stone warriors hunched with their axes and hammers. Left most one was cracked and had fallen on its side. In front of them, there was a stone box with the front side open showing a massive winch wound with chains. The stone box holding the winch was almost broken, but the winch remained as the drum consisted of reinforced steel. It was somewhat like the one Elrond had seen at the Amon Ereb except that the mechanism at the castle at Amon Ereb was made of wood. If Elrond remembered it correctly, all he had to do was to knock out the brake that held the chains which kept the bridge pulled up. The weight of the bridge would do the rest.

Elrond took a step toward the winding mechanism when one of the giant statues standing just behind the winding mechanism moved. The Half-Elven jumped back when he realized one of the stone statues was not stone nor was it a statue. Elrond swallowed as a troll twice taller than him, and three-time as wide lumbered out of the shadows.

Elrond had never seen a troll this close. From far, they didn’t look so big, but now that one stood before him, Elrond found himself gaping up at it.

“Grump! Grump!” It chanted as it banged the floor of the rampart with its club. The floor shook snapping Elrond out of his momentary stupor.

Elrond picked up his sword. The troll was big, but its stance was open. With a loud cry, Elrond charged. The troll was not only big, but it was also slow. Elrond’s blade landed a blow on its thigh and behind one knee before it even had a chance to lift its club.

The troll growled as it swiped where Elrond landed his blows.

“Grump aww,” the troll said.

Elrond moved around the troll and slashed behind the troll’s other knee, then on its stomach before jumping onto the stone box holding the winch. Despite the repeated thrusts and slashes Elrond landed, none of it wounded the troll or left a mark on its tough skin.

The troll struck the winding mechanism. Elrond jumped away before the troll’s club could touch him.

“Bad Elf,” it said.

“You talk?” Elrond frowned.

“Grump no like,” it smashed its club on the winch again.

“Uh, I wouldn’t do that if I were you,” Elrond said seeing that the weight of the winch and the battered state of it loosened the mechanism from where it sat.

“Grump! Grump!” the troll pounded on the ground harder. “You no master. No tell Grump.”

“I know I am not your master,” Elrond eyed the area around him. He was at the edge of the battlement, and the troll now stood blocking the rest of the rampart from Elrond. “But, I am telling you for both our sakes that if you keep doing that, you will break this battlement into pieces.”
“You no tell Grump!” the troll swung his club missing Elrond again. But, his blow landed on the stone statue that was standing. The statue rocked back and forth.

“Oh no!” Elrond ran toward the troll as the statue tilted and fell onto the winch.

With a loud crash, the floor around the winch collapsed as Elrond flew through the air and smashed his helmet into the troll’s head. The troll fell backward with Elrond on top of him. Elrond rolled over to the battlement as the troll groped the air before it, too, fell.

Elrond looked down at the floor below. The entire pulley system fell apart loosening the chains. With a loud boom, the bridge dropped onto the existing portion of the bridge shaking the whole structure. The chains fell into the chasm below. Elrond watched the entire process wincing as the bridge cracked and the shaking stopped.

“Well, thank you, I think,” Elrond said to the troll sprawled down below. The Half-Elven rubbed at the front of his head. He was sure his head had a bruise if not a crack despite the helmet. “Never headbutt a troll,” Elrond made a note for the future as he ran back to the courtyard.

MAIRON winced when he heard the dragon’s roar. It was Uluch. He expected her but not this soon. He had hoped to get rid of these two nuisances first and have his body moved out of this ruin. And the bulk of his army was out with the Dwarves. Right now, there was only little more than a hundred Orcs within the King’s Isle, and that only because he didn’t want to leave his body unprotected.

He looked up at the dais where the Kinslayer and the Sinda were fighting the three trolls.

Where was this dragonling? It was so slow? Mairon needed the dragonling to take his body and fly away to the next Orc den. This palace had been the most secure of all the Orc dens he had established. The Maia had hoped to rest here until his spell was done. If he could just hold out until the spell was complete, that was most ideal.

Mairon realized now that bringing the cadets into the ruin had been a mistake. But he had not foreseen Uluch’s betrayal and the cadets…Thranduil. Mairon ground his teeth. His carefully formed plans had been ruined. The wargs were supposed to keep them longer, supposed to have left them more crippled. Then, that sudden move, riding through the night to get to the village of the Green Elves, had the cadets arriving at the village almost a day ahead of schedule. The shortened time had taken away the opportunity to set up the trap within the village as Mairon had planned.

Tamping down the bad feeling in his stomach, Mairon called the dragonling to hurry away with his body. If he was back in his body, taking care of all of them was not a problem, but he had wanted to avoid that route if at all possible. And he certainly did not want to let go of Gelir’s body while its life was still left on it.

High above, the ceiling trembled.

Mairon grimace then looked up at the ceiling that shook. Uluch was here. He could feel her. She was wounded and weak, but her anger was palpable. She will put up a fight. Mairon silently called two scores of the Orcs remaining in the Isle. The power he can wield while within Gelir’s body was limited, but it was enough to defeat Uluch in her condition. Still, it wouldn’t hurt to have extra Orcs around. He glanced at the three trolls fighting the kinslayer and the Sinda. It was time to call back all the Orcs he had sent out of the palace.
The fallen Maia called all the Orcs fighting the Dwarves back to the Isle. Then, he grimaced again. Through the eyes of the Orcs, Mairon saw that the Dwarves and the Silmacil had decimated the Orcs. Only a few had survived. Too few. And they were pursued by the Dwarves and the Elves who were now in a hurry to reach the palace.

“Damned insects!” Mairon cursed as the ruby dragonling appeared out of the cave behind the throne, clutching the sarcophagus which held Mairon’s body.

“Go on! Now! Fly!” Mairon commanded the dragonling.

Even if Gelir’s body died, it didn’t matter. Unlike his own body, its demise did not affect him. The Elf’s body, the Orcs, and everything else in this ruin were dispensable. His body was not.

The dragonling moved over to the edge of the wide opening and spread its wings to fly away, then stepped back with a hiss. Uluch filled the opening behind the throne. Her one good eye that flamed like the sun mellowed into soft yellow upon seeing her young.

Seeing Uluch’s one eye still pale and glazed, Mairon made a mental note to create weapons as potent as those Noldorin blades which were enchanted to leave a lasting effect on the beings his master shaped.

Uluch came further into the Throne Room catching the notice of the trolls and the two Elves who halted their assault on each other to regard the dragon. But Uluch paid them no mind. She stretched out her hands toward the dragonling as if to sweep it into her embrace.

But the dragonling hissed as it stepped back away from its mother.

Mairon smiled. As long as his body lay sleeping, the spell still bound the dragonlings to him. No amount of her ‘motherness’ was going to break that. The spell had taken Mairon years to master. And, as difficult as it was to make, it was as potent.

The dragonling screeched as it spouted fire at Uluch. It hardly made an impact on the mother dragon, but Uluch roared that shook the walls reverberating through the vast hall.

*Does it break your heart, Uluch?* Mairon asked. *As you have broken mine by your betrayal?* Mairon laughed.

*You don’t have a heart!* Uluch screamed into Mairon’s mind.

*Tut, tut, tut. My dear Uluch, what do you know of hearts? You are a beast.*

*Beast I am. But, my heart beats within my breast. You! You don’t even have one!* Uluch turned to Mairon and let out a growl. The tree trolls blocked the dragon.

Mairon laughed out aloud.

*I suppose you are right. The Valar had ripped it out of me with their false compassion and sympathy. Come, Uluch. You and I, we are on the same side. Are we not bound by the love for our Lord Melkor? We shouldn’t be fighting. Look what the Elves did. Your precious Elves have killed one of your young.*

Mairon pointed to the yellow dragon on the dais.

Uluch’s eyes widened as it took in the body of the dragonling on the floor. It opened its mouth, but
no sound came. Then, its eye flamed as it let out a roar of anger red as fire and its ruby red scales.

Like a wounded beast, Uluch lashed out at the two Elves with her powerful claws. The two Elves jumped back each separating away from each other.

At the same time, something boomed outside the gate shaking the floor. Mairon turned toward the gate. His Orcs were being attacked. He could see the Elven warrior in his gold and blue armor his silver sword like a stream of light.

‘Damn these insects!’ Mairon turned to the dragonling. “Go now! Fly! Go!”

The dragonling spread its wings and ran toward the opening when Uluch turned. Her tail knocked the sarcophagus out of the dragonling’s hands as the young beast pushed off the ground. Uluch sent out a gale of wind throwing the dragonling out of the mountain opening.

“Noooo!” Mairon screamed watching the stone casket fly through the air to crash onto a stone column. The casket crumbled and the body slipped out.

Mairon ran to the body to drag it out of the rubble. These insects, these good for nothing creatures are ruining his plans.

Another loud boom rang through the hall. And Mairon knew the bridge was lowered. Behind the bridge, he could hear the sound of the Elves and Dwarves running through the stone pathway to clamor toward the King’s Isle.

“Damn these creatures! Damn them all!”
Entrapment

Chapter Summary

The vengeance of the dragon. Help comes to Astalder and Elrond. Thranduil faces Gelir.

Chapter Notes

The Holidays are coming which means there may be a week or two that I may be unable to update. I am going to try and hope to wrap everything up before Christmas. But I am not making any promises. :)

Thank you so much for everyone who left me a comment, kudos or both, and for the many who continued to read. Thank you so much.

THRANDUIL. Vigorousss Sssspring!

The call came unexpectedly. It crashed onto Thranduil like a tidal wave, grabbed him and robbed him of breath. At the edge of vision, he saw Astarno fly through the air, smash against the chamber wall, his armor half torn by the claw and stained with blood. The three trolls lay dead by her feet, half of their heads bitten off or clawed into shreds.

Yooou wronged mee!

Thranduil looked into the flaming yellow eyes. It was seething, burning, calling. Demanding. The heat from it encircled him, kept him prisoner.

Thranduil tried to move, but he could not. Something dark within him rose to wrap around him, giant arms, snakelike and shadowy. Thranduil’s muscles strained, stretched taut, about to snap. His mind filled with fire, flaming, dancing, all-consuming.

“I did no such thing!” His tongue was too heavy, but Thranduil managed.

Sssilence! I have you now. You have consssumed my bloood, and now I know your name. Yooou belong to mee now.

“I belong to no o…oof!” The muscles of his mouth stiffened. His mouth closed shut of its own accord.

Asss you took from mee. I will take from yooou. But, I won’t kill you. No. That would be toooo easy. I am going to take from you what makesss you, yooou.

The dragon’s eyes flamed like the sun, seething, sizzling, red ravishing. The black sword in her eyes flashed and flamed. Thranduil could not look away even though everything inside warned him.
Black clouds swept around him forming fangs as it floated toward Thranduil.

Chomp, chomp, chomping, it came. Black teeth flashed and gnashed. It dug its dark fangs into Thranduil.

The Sinda grabbed his head. His head was bursting, cracking into two. All sounds disappeared. Everything swirled into clouds of fog. He was in a void where no sound and no form existed.

Everything spun around. All was a mist. All was fog and silence.

Thranduil opened his eyes wide as his lungs emptied of breath. Time flew backward in his mind as a jar emptied of its content: the dragon’s eyes blazing in his head; the mother dragon’s scream; the stone trolls moving as the thunder cracked overhead; Gelir walking into the Throne Room; the yellow dragon screaming; the golden armor of Astarno…

Something screamed. The air was suddenly back in his lungs as the dragon roared and shattered the silence. The mists swirled and thinned. Thranduil swerved. The room was spinning. Thranduil fell onto the floor. His stomach heaved, and Thranduil threw up the content of his stomach which wasn’t much.

Dazed, Thranduil looked up and watched as the dragon thrashed, her massive form encased in lightning.

Gelir?

The Sinda blinked his eyes unsure what he was seeing was true. Over the head of the dragon, dark clouds bloomed like growing shadows. Lightning crackled and thundered surrounding the dragon. Gelir stood in front of the dragon, his arms raised. The hall was filled with music that was both beautiful and terrible.

Is Gelir fighting the dragon? Alone? How is he able to do that?

The thoughts brushed his mind when the dragon screamed into Thranduil’s head interrupting the Sinda’s thoughts.

Kill the body now!

It snapped Thranduil back. He looked around for the dragon fang that he had dropped. He was looking for it. He had glimpsed it when … Thranduil shook his head. His memory was a blur, his thoughts in pieces as if something had taken a bite out of his memory.

Now! Do it now! The voice screamed as the dragon roared again.

The chamber heaved as if the walls will crack. Something urgent filled Thranduil’s chest. The Sinda looked around the room when a gleam of gold caught his eyes. It was a golden armor, at least pieces of it. Was Silmacil here helping him? Thranduil’s head ached. He went over to the one with the golden armor. The metal plate armor was shredded. The body under it moved and sat up with a groan. The visor hid the face, but Thranduil felt he knew who it was although he could not remember.

“Are you all right?” Thranduil offered his hand.

The warrior groaned and nodded. “Barely. Thankfully, the armor did its job,” the warrior said pawing at his bloodied chest and pulling apart the pieces of the shredded armor. Despite the blood, his wounds didn’t look deep.
It was then that Thranduil saw the dragon tooth next to where the warrior had fallen. Thranduil picked it up.

“You need to get out. This dragon is too powerful. Whoever Gelir is, he is not who I thought he was. We better leave while we can,” the warrior said picking up his sword.

“No. I need to kill the body. I need to get to the cave behind the throne.” Thranduil shook his head.

“You mean the body that the dragonling brought out?” The warrior pointed to one of the columns behind the dais. “It is hidden behind there. Gelir sent it up there.”

Thranduil sprinted toward it.

“Where are you going, Elfling? You need to leave!” The warrior followed behind.

Ignoring the warrior, Thranduil ran to the column giving a wide berth to the dragon and Gelir who seemed not to notice them.

*Where did Gelir obtain such power to fight the dragon?* The thought passed through Thranduil, but the need to kill the body pushed everything else aside.

The pillar the warrior pointed stood behind the throne holding up what remained of the ceiling at the dais. Underneath the elaborately carved designs, hidden under the shadows, hung what looked like a huge egg. It was covered in shiny black scales, snake-like. It looked like an enormous seed or a dragon egg although Thranduil had never seen anything like it. It hung, hidden behind the width of the column under its shadows. If the warrior had not told him where to look, Thranduil would not have been able to find it.

“**ELROND!** I told you to take care of the bridges!” Astalder shouted without turning to look at the Half-Elven who had jumped into the fray.

“I did. At least one of them is lowered,” Elrond said as he swerved to avoid a sword trying to lop off his arm, twisting to strike the Orc.

The ground trembled. And the Orcs that surrounded them moved away out of the range of the two Elve’s weapons.

“Should we run for the gate?” Elrond eyed the doors to the main tower behind them.

“The horde is too close. The door must be pulled closed from the inside. With these many Orcs this close, we wouldn’t be able to close the doors in time. Especially with those two to aid the Orcs.”

Elrond groaned. Behind the Orcs who pulled back as to take a breath, two trolls were running toward them.

“Well, the odds against us just increased,” Astalder said dryly. “And I was so glad the archers moved away.”

“Archers?” Elrond looked up at where the Astalder was looking, the battlement opposite the one he had been on, but there were no archers there. There were certainly many arrows on the ground, most of them broken.
“Where are they? I didn’t bother with the other bridge. I forgot about the archers. But I don’t see them now?”

“They were there, but something drew them away to the front. Let’s hope it’s the sight of our troops.” Astalder grinned then frowned. It was just a passing thing, a slight drawing of the eyebrows, but Elrond felt it. It was brief, but it was enough.

Elrond’s heart thumped as his eyes roamed over Astalder.

“You are hurt!” Elrond said when he spotted red blood on Astalder’s arm. A spot on the arm where the shoulder armor ended and before the vambrace began, there was a broken arrow protruding from it.

“One of the archers was skilled enough to target the weaknesses in my armor. I wish we had a skilled archer with us. He would have made short work of the trolls. Where are the daggers I gave you? It wouldn’t be enough to stop them, but we could blind them.”

Elrond bit his lower lip. In his enthusiasm to return to Astalder, he had forgotten to retrieve the daggers.

“Ah well. We’ll just have to dodge the trolls. I think I have just enough power for one more alapentë. I was reserving some strength to use when we get into the hall.”

“Alapentë?”

“Something I am going to make sure you learn. We’ll talk of it later. For now,” Astalder pointed toward the feet of the trolls. “Aim for their heels. It is their one weak spot below their waist. Anywhere else, it would be like hitting iron armor. Cut off the heels, and they wouldn’t be able to stand.”

Just as Astalder finished speaking, the two trolls lumbered into the courtyard. Behind them, another thirty or so of the Orcs arrived adding to the twenty some Orcs who still remained standing in the courtyard.

“Damn, the odd is getting worse,” mumbled Astalder who seemed to lift his sword with less ease than before.

Just then, the roar of the dragon shook the tower.

Elrond turned to the gate behind them. The dragon sounded as if it was in a lot of pain. The sky above them was churning, dark clouds thundering with lightning. Something bad was happening inside. Elrond didn’t know why he thought this. But, something made his skin crawl.

“We need to get in there, captain. I feel we need to get in.”

“I would love to as well, but if we go in now, we will be taking all of them with us. If you have not noticed, the doors are ornamental. The tower is not a place meant to take the last stand.

**THRANDUIL** looked up at the oblong egg covered with the black dragon scales.

“How did the body get there? I thought it was in the cave behind the throne.”
“Did you not see the dragonling bring out the stone box?”

Thranduil shook his head. He couldn’t remember. Somehow, his mind seemed hazy as if he just woke up and he couldn’t really tell what went on. Only one thing was clear as if it was branded into his head. Thranduil needed to kill the body.

“Maybe you were concentrating on the fighting,” the warrior said. “At any event, Gelir sent it up there.”

“Gelir? How did he do that?”

“I know it not. I am still trying to understand. What I know for sure is that he is not who we think he is.”

Thranduil frowned. He didn’t quite understand what the warrior was saying. His mind was wandering the misty forest. If he looked hard enough, Thranduil felt he could see, but right now, he didn’t have the time.

“Never mind. I’ll cut it down. Kill it if I can,” said the warrior.

“Use this,” Thranduil handed the warrior his dragon fang. “It is a dragon tooth, it will penetrate.”

“I have my sword. It can penetrate dragon scales if my alapentë is strong enough. You keep the fang. You don’t have any other weapon.” The warrior scanned Thranduil.

“I must have dropped it,” Thranduil said realizing there was only the dragon fang in his hand. “If you can, do it now.” Thranduil looked about him. He didn’t see any of the weapons he had previously. Thranduil reached inside his greaves and sighed with relief when he felt the handle of Elrond’s dagger. It was one thing he did not want to lose.

“Is this really necessary?” the warrior looked at the dragon and Gelir still battling behind them. The dragon had ripped the lightning that surrounded her, the force of it throwing Gelir who slipped across the dais to the edge of the tower which was a cliff. The steep and jagged edge of the tower faced the mountainside which was separated from the King’s Isle with a dark abyss running between them.

“We could escape, let those two fight. I want to go find Beril.”

Beril? Thranduil frowned when the thunder boomed overhead.

“I need to destroy that first. That is the master.” Thranduil said feeling his head ache as if it will crack. The body needed to die.

The warrior hesitated only a moment. “Step back,” he said.

Thranduil stepped back from the warrior as the Noldo scooted down low on the ground. Something powerful cracked around the warrior when he yelled, then jumped up, his sword flashing white in the darkness.

“Nooo!” Gelir screamed. Thranduil turned then swerved as something shot past him.

Gelir crumpled where he stood.

The egg burst with a loud boom throwing everything on the ground into the air. The dragon swerved, then she stepped back thrown by something powerful. Enormous energy surged and hurled everything in the chamber off the ground. Uluch fell back as the floor crumbled behind her. She
clutched the air, but the floor broke apart behind her and took her down with it.

*Kill him! Kill himmm!* The dragon roared as she disappeared into the abyss.

The force of the blast threw everything in the room soaring including Thranduil. The Sinda flailed his arm groping for anything he could hold as he was thrown back toward the chasm.

The throne, in pieces now, flew toward Thranduil as his body hurled toward the edge of the cliff. Thranduil drove the fang into the stone floor at the edge of the cliff and held on. The debris and pieces of the broken throne plummeted toward him. Then, suddenly, everything stopped. The stones, rocks, the fragments of the broken columns and the glittering pieces of the throne hovered as if to defy the law of nature. Thranduil pulled himself up.

Enormous energy thrummed in the chamber. Even at the edge of it where Thranduil stood, the Sinda could feel the pulsating power.

Thranduil swallowed hard when he beheld a being surrounded by a tower of fire. In front of this being, at the reach of the raised arm, the warrior hovered, his hands groping his throat. The helmet was gone, and the warrior’s long black hair fanned around the Noldo’s head like a black mist. The warrior thrashed, gagging, and in great pain.

*Astarno?*

Somewhere in the swirling mist of his mind, the golden armor with the eight-pointed star embossed on its breastplate flashed across Thranduil’s mind. The Noldo had come to aid him. The thought came then dimmed as if covered by the mist. Thranduil shook his head. He’ll think later. Right now, he needed to kill the being in front of him.

Thranduil took out the dragon fang. Stealthily, Thranduil approached the being and struck it with everything he got.

“*ELROND,* watch out!”

Astalder grabbed Elrond and pulled him away as a spiked club landed where the Half-Elven had been. The troll straightened as another troll came behind them.

“Stump! Stump!” It shouted.

“Hiyaaa!” Astalder let out a cry and jumped up on the troll stabbing his sword into the troll’s mouth.

At the same time, Elrond rolled under the other troll striking one of the heels as he passed under it, straightening himself before meeting a thrust of an Orc sword.

“Awww!” bellowed the troll as it stooped down to swipe at his heel, but it did not fell forward as Elrond had expected. Instead, it turned and growled pumping its arms. If it wasn’t angry before, it was angry as fire now.

The Orc who came at Elrond stepped back, but now all the Orcs surrounded Astalder and Elrond with the angry troll baring its teeth and ready to attack. Captain Astalder’s breath was rough. Elrond, too, took a lungful of breath. He was so tired. He wasn’t sure how long he could last.
Just then, the stone wall behind where the stone Dwarf lay on a pedestal groaned, then opened wide.

“Axes of the Dwarves!” came a shout as four Dwarves and three Elves rushed out of the opening weapons in their hands.

Something whistled through the air and hit the troll’s head. The troll fell to its side. Astalder jumped on the fallen troll when it tried to get up. He plunged his sword through the troll’s eye. The now dead troll’s head had an arrow sticking out of one of its ears. The captain and Elrond looked toward where the arrow came. It was Elven woman. By the look of her torn and stained brown leather jacket, Elrond guessed she was one of the Green Elves. Were there prisoners from the village here?

“Now, that is some skill,” Astalder said. “Only very skilled archers can shoot an arrow through a troll’s ear.”

As soon as he said so, the captain jumped over to the woman as the Orcs crowded around her.

It was then that a loud boom reverberated through the ruin as the entire King’s Isle shook. Everybody, including the Orcs, stopped fighting.

“What was that?” Elrond looked about him.

“It’s coming from the tower,” Astalder said moving back to Elrond’s side.

A shout erupted just then from the Orcs. They growled and hissed as if a new supply of strength ran through them. Even the ones which were slouching on the ground, wounded and worn, got up as if all their pain was gone and they were renewed. The Orcs let out a loud battle cry, then they attacked with a renewed vigor.

“This is bad, Elrond. Something bad is in there. It is rousing the Orcs.”

The Orcs attacked, their eyes burning with fire. Elrond had no choice but to fight the Orcs who pressed on them like demons.

“Elrond!” Astalder pushed the Half-Elven. Elrond fell forward as something sped past him.

Astalder fell.

“Captain!” Elrond swapped away another arrow and ran to the captain. The Orcs who had crowded them with sudden vigor moved back and disappeared as the archers rained down their arrows.

Astalder sat up, his warrior braid undone, his one hand covering his ear. Blood seeped between the captain’s gold gauntlet. There was another arrow protruding just above his knee.

“As I said, there is one Orc who is very skilled.” Astalder looked up with a thin smile on his lips. It seemed as if the arrows were concentrating on the captain. Elrond blocked the fallen captain with his body and struck down the arrows coming their way.

The two Elves jumped in front of Elrond swiping away the arrows while one helped the captain up.

“Erfaron! Saldor! It is so good to see you,” Elrond flashed them a grin. “Where are the rest of the cadets?”

But, there was no more time to talk. Arrows flew towards them like rain. The Orc archers crowded the battlement. The Elves tried to stand their ground, trying their best to shield each other and the captain.
The Dwarves took out their shields and moved back toward where the Elves were.

“Ye there! Move the Elf here!” the white-haired Dwarf that Elrond recognized barked at them.

“Master Onar!”

Elrond crouched down behind the Shields carefully lowering Astalder along with him. Erfaron and Saldor did the same. One Dwarf shielded the Green Elf as she tried to shoot down as many Orcs on the battlement as she can.

The Half-Elven nodded to Onar looking around for the familiar faces, but none of the four Dwarves looked familiar.

“Thank you for helping us. But, where are Loni and Buri?”

“Hopefully safe,” grunted the Dwarf. “But where is the rest of ye? Why are there only two of ye here?”

“Where are the other warriors?” Erfaron asked as he looked Elrond over.

Erfaron’s face darkened.

Elrond frowned. It was the same question he wanted to ask. Weren’t Erfaron and Saldor here with the rest of the warriors to rescue him and Thranduil? But Erfaron and Saldor were as disheveled and unkempt as he was, maybe even more so.

“They are here,” Astalder said suddenly. Then, the Captain of the Silmacil laughed. “They are here!”

As if in answer, a clear alto of Elven horns rang through the King’s Isle followed by the deep bass of the Dwarven horns.

The archers above them rushed away toward the front of the Isle leaving Elrond and the companions. Elrond turned to look at the doors to the tower behind him.

Thranduil. He was in there. Alone. Something was happening. Something bad. He didn’t know why he felt it, but Elrond sensed it with the whole of his being.

*Thranduil will need help.*

Elrond turned and ran into the hall.

MAIRON grabbed the hand holding the dragon tooth. Thranduil screamed as the flames around Mairon’s form leaped into Thranduil’s hand. The fire sizzled and burned scorching the Sinda’s arm all the way to his shoulder. It was so easy to kill this weak little Sinda. But quick death was not good enough for this worm.

“You little worm, you think you could harm me?” Mairon growled. “You are nothing! An insect, just dirt under my feet! Kneel before your god, you worthless worm!”

Thranduil crumpled on the floor as Mairon towered above him. The dragon tooth fell off the Sinda’s blackened hand as he grabbed what remained of his arm with the other hand.
Mairon kicked the dragon fang over the chasm. There weren’t many weapons in Middle Earth that could harm him. But, the enchanted Elven weapons, as well as the dragon teeth, were among them.

“I should have killed you, but I had looked upon you with mercy. I would have given you the honor of serving me, but now I will burn you, little insect. I will burn you piece by piece and will hear you scream. Beg for mercy, little worm. Beg forgiveness from your god.”

Thranduil’s face which had contorted with pain turned icy as he looked up, his eyes defiant.

“You are no god of mine, you monster. Whatever you are, you are nothing to me. Go back to the pit of Angband where you came from, Seed of Morgoth!”

“Silence!” More fire leaped off Mairon onto the Sinda’s scorched arm.

The pitiful creature screamed, rolling on the ground.

“Demon!”

A sword flashed. Mairon opened his eyes wide as a sword spouted on his breast. The Maia turned around. Behind him stood the kinslayer, barely able to stand, disheveled and wounded.

Mairon blasted the Noldo, throwing him off the cliff into the chasm when something sharp tore through his back.

“Die, you bastard!” Thranduil screamed as he thrust a knife into Mairon, pushing Mairon off the cliff. The Maia screamed as the pain he had rarely known ripped through him for the second time.

With a cry that echoed around the chasm, Mairon turned into a bat as he fell. The pain on his chest and the back were excruciating. He called on the spiders at the bottom of the chasm. He could tell he was losing a lot of blood. He wasn’t sure he could fly too long in this state. And there were too many loose ends. And anger burned inside him. He wasn’t done yet. He was wounded, enough that he needed care, but not enough that the wounds would kill his body. But, all the work he had put into the body was now meaningless. The years he had spent weaving the spell was broken the moment he took over his own body before the spell took effect.

“Damn these worms!” Mairon groaned as each movement of his wings hurt. But the movement was necessary to slow his fall.

As spiders gathered to spun threads below him, Mairon swerved to land his body on the giant spiderwebs. As Mairon grimaced with pain, he heard the Elven horns and the horns of the Dwarves. They were here. And Thranduil was still alive. Mairon looked up at the edge of the cliff which was far above him. The Sinda had seen and heard too much. Mairon had not planned to keep the worm alive. And there was the dragon. She didn’t have much time left. He could hear her shallow breath somewhere below him.

“Not yet, my little pet. You are not forgiven yet.” Mairon curled his lips as he left his body in the care of the spiders. He didn’t have much time, but there was enough time to kill this Sinda.

Mairon soared over the chasm. Thranduil lay panting at the edge of the cliff with the remains of the throne scattered about him. He was still clutching the dagger in his hand, a dagger with a big red stone on the hilt. It was a weapon from Valinor. No wonder it hurt so much. Mairon ground his teeth as he found the body of Gelir which lay not too far from Thranduil. In his spirit form, Mairon could not affect anything on Middle Earth. He needed a body. The young Noldo’s soul was passing, just matter of minutes. But, it was enough time to get rid of Thranduil.
Mairon sank into Gelir’s body which gasped as Mairon took it over again, its fading spirit too weak to struggle. Mairon got up and flexed his neck. The body felt stiff as the spirit of Gelir slowly faded from the body. Mairon realized he could not use his power as his original body was injured and Gelir’s body was too weak. But, no matter. Mairon took out the sword and walked toward Thranduil. The sword felt heavy in his hand, but everything will be over soon.

Thranduil groaned as he sat up.

“Gelir?” Thranduil looked up.

Mairon swung his sword. But, Thranduil, despite his left arm that hung limply by his side and the obvious lack of strength, scrambled away and stood up in an instant. Mairon had to give it to the Sinda. The worm did have a reflex of a beast.

“What the hell, Gelir. What are you doing?” Thranduil put up the dagger in his hand to block Mairon’s thrust. “Put the sword away. You could barely stand,” Thranduil said.

“Perhaps. But, enough strength to kill you, Sinda,” Mairon said as he swung his sword. Thranduil sidestepped and blocked, straining under Mairon’s strength. Even at this diminished state with fading strength, the worm did not compare to him.

“What are you doing, you stupid Noldo,” Thranduil growled, glancing at the chasm just a few steps behind their feet. "Stop this or we both will regret it!”

The doors of the Throne Room creaked. Over the shoulder of Thranduil, Mairon saw Elrond. And behind the young Noldo was the Silmacil captain limping in after him. Mairon smiled. There was something better, something lot worse for the Sinda. Something Thranduil deserved for foiling his plans.

Mairon dropped his sword and grabbed Thranduil’s hand holding the dagger, struggling with him as he inched toward the cliff.

“No! No, Thranduil! Don’t kill me. Please, don’t kill me!”

“What the…” Thranduil’s face contorted as Mairon took Thranduil’s hands and plunged the dagger into Gelir’s chest. Behind Thranduil, he saw the horrified face of Elrond running toward them.

“No! Thranduil! No!” Elrond’s anguished cry echoed down the cliffside as Mairon fell over the cliff. Gelir’s body separated from Mairon’s as the Noldo’s spirit was whisked away into the Hall of Mandos leaving an empty shell, the shell that Mairon could no longer use even if he had all of his power at his fingertips.
Aftermath

Chapter Summary

The aftermath of the events at the Dwarven Ruin for Elrond, Mairon, Uluch and Thranduil.

King's Isle. October 6, Second Age 144

"ELROND!"

Arms encircled him, stopping Elrond, restraining his fury. If he could, Elrond wanted to beat this evil out of the Sinda. Elrond's chest burned. How could he?

Thranduil fell, his face bloody.

"Why!" Elrond screamed. His fists shook covered in Thranduil's blood.

"What are you doing? Why would you…" Saldor sat down next to Thranduil to prop the Sinda up on his arms. Erfaron frowned, looking at Thranduil then at Elrond.

Saldor's face wavered. He glanced at Elrond then at Thranduil. The look on his young face made Elrond take a breath and step back. It was apparent that Saldor and Erfaron had not seen what Elrond had seen.

Thranduil's blue gaze trailed over Elrond.

There was such a look of hurt in Thranduil's eyes, it struck Elrond, dousing the anger in the Half-Elven's heart. Without a word, Thranduil closed his eyes and went limp in Saldor's arms.

"Thranduil! Thranduil!" Saldor shook the Sinda, but Thranduil did not move. His face was pale as snow.

Elrond frowned as he noted the tattered and stained tunic, Thranduil's golden hair half burned and scorched on one side. His one arm looked black and charred. What had happened?

Astalder groaned next to Elrond making the Half-Elven jump as the captain's arms went slack. Elrond grabbed Astalder who teetered on his legs. The captain's breath was raspy as if stretched thin. Astalder reached out, then grabbing the front of Elrond's tunic, yanked the Half-Elven close.

The captain's breathing was rough and labored. With a halting breath, his mouth close to Elrond's ear, the captain whispered in Quenya.

"Elrond, think carefully what you say to Lord Celebrimbor. What you say now will change the Sinda's life, his path, forever." Captain's breath hitched. "Hear with your head, see with your heart."

The gate to the hall crashed open, and several people ran in. Someone took the captain off Elrond's hands.

Celebrimbor walked in then looked around the hall. The entire chamber was a mess of debris, pieces
of shields, gold, and dead bodies of Orcs and trolls.

"Are you all right, Elrond? Where is the dragon? What happened?" The Noldorin lord glanced at Astalder as one of the Silmacil attended his captain, then turned to Thranduil and the two cadets next to him. "What happened here?" Celebrimbor asked Elrond.

Elrond felt his eyes prick. His body shook as his chest tightened and heaved. He knew it was not the time to lose himself, but all the days in the dark ruin, the bloody battle, and the loss, they all came crashing in. So much has happened…and Gelir. But most of all, Thranduil…Why? He could not understand it.

Elrond dropped his head, his fists clenched. His throat ached, and he could not utter a word.

Celebrimbor squeezed Elrond's shoulder.

"It is all right. Take your time. You need not talk now, Elrond. We'll have time later. We'll talk later." The Noldorin lord patted Elrond's shoulder gently before walking away to issue commands.

Erfaron and Saldor walked over to stand next to Elrond when they took Thranduil away. Saldor wiped away tears from his eyes. Elrond reached out to grab Saldor. Erfaron held onto Saldor and Elrond. They held onto each other and Elrond could feel that they felt same as he, each trying to contain the tears that threatened to spill. They had been full of joy and anticipation when they started out on this field training. But, now, the world had changed for them.

---

**Deep below the chasm. October 6, Second Age 144**

**MAIRON** winced as his breath became shallow and painful. The healing spell was taking more time than usual as his body rapidly weakened. For a moment, Mairon feared that he took too long to return to his body to start the healing process.

Panic welled up inside him as the breathing became increasingly painful. Mairon opened his mouth and gagged as he took in a lungful of air. Something metallic spewed out of his mouth. Seeing his hand covered in blood, Mairon felt himself tremble. If he were to lose his body now, where will he go? Will he ever see Rodwen again? The thought brought something unfamiliar in the pit of his stomach. No. He had to see her again. As it was, he could not return to Valinor. And if he were to remain only as a spirit, his vast power meant nothing. He could not be seen or felt by those who occupied the Middle Earth in their earthly bodies.

And, Rodwen would not know him. Mairon needed a body not only to channel his powers but to interact with others. Without it, he would become a mere whisper of consciousness, just a thought expressed only through the Orcs or the Wargs. They were Melkor's creatures and as Melkor's chosen successor, Mairon's control over them was absolute. Still, without a body, he would become a mere passing thought without a power to control them. Only the fear would control them to do his bidding until they realized that Mairon no longer had any other power. The fallen Maia shivered. He would only be a voice, a voice that could be ignored. That would be worse than death itself.

Mairon's heart thundered and pulsed as his breath caught in his throat.

_No. It can't be._

A fit of coughs ripped through his chest. Mairon trembled. He wasn't done yet. Another cough of blood. Taking a lungful breath, Mairon sang. His voice halting, filling the dark cave with the music of healing.
As he tried to concentrate, Mairon heard the creatures around him skitter, creaking and chattering, disappearing into the shadowy crevices. The fear in the darkness was thick, heavy and palpable.

Breath slowed, then the calm returned as the pain on his chest began to subside. He was healing now. This was the problem with a physical body. It was susceptible to weapons and treachery. And the spell that he had devised to make his body invincible had failed. He had needed few more hours...just measly few hours were all that he needed to complete the spell that had taken him years. And now he had no dragonlings at hand even if he were to try again.

Breathing freely again, Mairon sucked in a long breath of air. He cracked his neck muscles, this way and that. It was a close call. The kinslayer had been teetering on his last strength. His sword thrust had missed the vital organs. But that Sinda...Mairon ground his teeth as he fingered his chest where Thranduil's dagger had torn through his lung.

How had he, a mere Sinda, the strength after tasting his fire? Mairon had adjusted the potency of his fire so that he wouldn't kill Thranduil right away. Still, the Sinda should not have had the strength to get up. The Noldo, Mairon understood. The kinslayer was born in Valinor, had seen the light of the trees. There was strength in that kinslayer that the Sinda, one of the Dark Elves, could not even comprehend. But, Thranduil had never seen the light of the trees nor had the blood of those who had. Mairon wondered how much of Uluch's blood Thranduil had. His fire should have burned the Sinda's arm so that it would have become useless.

The ground trembled then all the loose things around the cave flew up circling all around Mairon as the Maia tested his power.

But, then, there were Edain, The Men who had not seen and will not see the light of the trees but had the strength of the Elves. The Edain, however, had the benefit of learning under the Noldor.

"Sindar are nothing!" Mairon ground his teeth.

It was a disgrace. To be undone by a Sinda. At least, Melian's whelp had the blood of Maia in her. As he thought so, Mairon remembered the Sinda with hair as white as the smokes of the forge. The hair and the beard. That old Sinda was the one who had brought a fleet that decimated Orc troops Morgoth had sent to Hithlum seven years after the Battle of Sudden Flames to kill the High King of Noldor. Mairon grimaced. Yes. There were few, but there were some Sinda with remarkable strength.

The Maia paced where he stood, fire around him surged and burned away the webs and the rocks all about him, the tongues of the flames licking at the fine white webs and illuminating the darkness of the cave.

Elves were dangerous if left to themselves, Mairon decided. The faster he brought them under his control, better it was. But, how? Mairon sighed then walked out onto the cliffside. Maybe there was a better use for the dragon blood.

A thought slipped into his mind. He will have to think about it more. He looked up, but the gorge above was covered in the webs of spiders hiding the sight of the cliff and blocking out the daylight.

"Sinda, I will make you suffer yet. There will be no place in this world where you will have peace, Thranduil Oropherion. Once I have Noldor under my control, I will have them stomp on you and your people like worms that you are. Your people will bow down and lick the feet of my Noldorin captains. Then, I will see how you crawl and scream."

Mairon laughed out loud as he picked up his pace. He could hear her labored breathing much slower
and less pained.

"How do you fare, my dearest Uluch?" Mairon smiled. "Hurt much?"

The dragon was healing, but not fast enough. What Mairon had done to her had weakened her scales. The usually indestructible armor had failed to protect her from the fall. She lay, half on her side, her tail and one back leg and one arm twisted. The wings were torn and lay limp and crushed underneath her.

"You will never get my babyssss! I made ssssure they ssstay away from you! They are gone! Frrrr, far away!"

"Babies?" Mairon nodded as he glimpsed the vision in her mind. Two of the dragonlings had survived. When Mairon took over his body prematurely, the link he had established with the dragonlings had severed. Without Mairon's control to interfere, Uluch had reached into her children.

"That is truly unfortunate." Mairon shrugged. "But, now that I need to stay quiet for a while, I have plenty of time to look for them. Don't worry, my beautiful beast. I will find them."

I ammm not your beasssst!

"Oh, but I beg to differ, my dear." Mairon chuckled. "You promised me your blood, remember? Once promised…remember the rules? You cannot break promises even if you try."

"Only my bloooood. My mind isss my own. I neverrr pledged fealty."

"Yes, of course. But, the blood is all I need." Mairon grinned widely. "You see, Uluch, the blood runs through all of you." The Maia raised his hands channeling his power. "And when I control the blood," the air crackled with lightning as it flashed around Uluch's body. The broken body and the wings straightened. "I. Control. You."

Laughter, beautiful as the darkening night and terrible as the raging storm, echoed through the chasm.

---

**North Fort. October 10, Second Age 144**

"**THRANDUIIL**, are you listening, lad? Are you in pain?"

Lord Istuion's voice brought Thranduil out of the haze brought on by the medicines the healers had given him. Thranduil licked his lips which were crusty and hard.

"I am fine, Sir," Thranduil managed and winced at the gravelly voice that scratched the air.

"Of course, you are," Istuion let out a long sigh shaking his head. "You are always fine. The healers are gone, Thranduil. I am the only one in here. You need not put on your mask."

Thranduil closed his eyes. Lord Istuion had been hovering over him ever since they had arrived at this fort at the northern boundary of Lindon. The healers had given him a heavy dose of medicines which had dulled his senses and kept him sleeping.

Thranduil wondered why the dragon blood was not working now. Whatever healed the dragon burns did not heal the fire from that…creature? Thranduil wasn't sure what the entity was. It wasn't a
dragon. That, he was certain. Was that a Balrog? Is that how a balrog looked? What he learned of balrogs was that they were spirits of fire, lesser Maiar who were drawn to Morgoth from the beginning. According to Master Pengolodh, balrogs were surrounded by flames, shadows, and fear. The description seemed to fit, and yet, it was different from what Thranduil had imagined. Balrog or something else, it was immensely powerful. There was an aura of darkness about it, but what surprised Thranduil was that it was beautiful. Even the dragon, she had been beautiful, too. Like those kinslayers. Like that tall and beautiful Noldo who had lied to him, leaving a valuable lesson for Thranduil that beauty and goodness were not synonymous. He supposed evil were not always ugly.

"Thranduil?" Istuion's calm baritone invaded Thranduil's thoughts. "Are you well, lad?"

Thranduil opened his eyes and nodded. "Whatever they gave me, it is strong. The pain calmed."

"What happened at the ruin? I have never seen an injury like yours. You don't have any visible injury, but your arm…I have never seen its like."

Thranduil glanced at his left arm which was bright red. It had been charred black with splotches of red in the beginning, but the charred parts fell off leaving a smooth skin looking like a white fabric where someone had spilled ruby red wine. Except for the deep red color, the skin was smooth and even textured. Still, it had not healed, unlike the dragon burns. The whole arm was stiff. Without the medicine he was given, the pain was almost unbearable. Even now, Thranduil could feel the heat rising from his arm.

"Do you wish to talk about it?" Istuion asked, his voice gentle and quiet.

Thranduil glanced at the door. The last healer had just left, but Thranduil had not heard the sound of the healer moving away.

Istuion followed Thranduil's gaze.

"Perhaps when we get to the Grey Havens?" Istuion lowered his voice.

"Grey Havens?"

"After we were lost, Lord Celebrimbor had rerouted the cadets to Grey Havens. I am to take you there along with the rest of the cadets. I believe my uncle is sending a ship. It is scheduled to arrive early in the morning. Rest, Thranduil. I will come for you before the sun rises."

As he watched the Sindarin lord leave, Thranduil wondered how much they told Lord Istuion. As for him, Thranduil did not remember much after the events of the Throne Room. The pain on his arm had been excruciating. The healers had given him something that had Thranduil sleeping most of the way from the Dwarven ruin to the Fort. It seemed the pain increased with time requiring the healers to medicate Thranduil continually. It was only last night that the pain began to subside somewhat making it bearable and allowing the healers to lessen the dosage of the medications.

Thranduil looked around the rectangular room. He woke up here after the last time he awoke screaming. The pain was such that he could not help but cry out. Maybe the dragon blood had worn off? Thranduil wasn't sure why the second burn did not heal.

When the sound of Lord Istuion and the healer outside the door faded away, Thranduil got up. The medicine was potent, and his body felt lethargic, but his mind felt clearer than it had in days. He will fall asleep soon, but for now, he felt suffocated in this tiny stone room.

Thranduil was sure that they had locked him inside, but he tried the door anyway. When the wooden door creaked open, the Sinda was more than surprised. Thranduil stepped out of the room and
understood why they had not locked the door. He was high up. The fort, carved partly out of the stone walls of the Blue Mountains, stood at the apex of the mountain’s ridge, a lower arm of the Blue Mountain’s eastern slope.

From where he stood, Thranduil could see the wide moorland facing the fort and the track of dark green forest of pines and fir which stood to his left and near the mountain.

The small stone room was a guard tower. It was the highest point in the fort. From where he was, there was no way go except down and through the throng of guards stationed on the battlements below him.

When the pain in his arm subsided, the mists that in his mind cleared shocking Thranduil with the full impact of what had happened. Thranduil wasn't sure how much Elrond and the other cadets saw, but Elrond must have seen his last struggle with Gelir.

Thranduil fingered his chin where Elrond had delivered several painful punches. It was obvious that Elrond thought the worst. The Half-Elven had not come by, not even once, since that day at the Throne Room.

"Good riddance," Thranduil said into the open air, but a corner of his heart clenched.

Part of him wanted at least a chance to explain. The haziness in his head began to clear, but Thranduil realized there wasn't much he could explain. He wasn't sure exactly what had happened. Thranduil was sure of only one thing: he did not kill Gelir. He had no reason to. But the Sinda understood that things looked bad for him.

Thranduil shook his head. No. Whoever that was, that was not Gelir.

Thranduil thought back to Gelir who opposed the dragon, of the unearthly song that filled the chamber. Although he could not explain it, Thranduil was certain that the person inside the Throne Room was not Gelir. Then, who was that? How did Gelir get to be that? And even if Thranduil explained what happened, who would believe him? Thranduil thought of the king, Lord Gilmagor and Lammaeg as his hand reached for the necklace that wasn't there. They had not believed him back then. And this incident was so much worse. This was murder. Killing another Elf was the worst and most horrible crime one Elf could commit against another Elf.

And there was no evidence Thranduil could offer to prove his innocence. Image of Astarno in his golden armor came to him then. Thranduil wondered if the Noldo was alive. Thranduil remembered seeing the kinslayer clinging onto what looked like a fine chain rope down the cliff side. But even if Astarno was alive, will he risk coming forward to defend him? There were laws against the kinslayers at Lindon. Many Noldor died in the hands of the Feanorians and their army at Sirion. Thranduil did not know what Noldor did to those who killed other Elves. Under Pengolodh, Thranduil had learned what one Noldorin king did to a Sinda who had killed the Noldo's sister, the story of Eol the Sinda and Aredhel, his wife. It wasn't intentional. She was a mother who tried to save her son by jumping into the line of poisoned dart Eol threw to kill his son. But when his sister Aredhel died, the Noldorin king had punished the Sinda by throwing him off the battlement. Thranduil grimaced realizing that the Noldorin king was Elrond 's forefather Turgon. And here he was, a Sinda, standing at a battlement under the mercy of Turgon's descendant.

Thranduil supposed that there was the possibility that they will execute him. Yet, the Sinda felt at ease. No anger, fear or anxiety troubled him. Thranduil wondered whether it was the effect of the medicines or all that had transpired at the ruin. Through the darkness of the ruin and the dark mist, there had been light. Thranduil touched his heart. It thumped softly and steadily. Astarno and Onar's faces flashed before Thranduil. When he had been desperate, the ones who he once thought were his
enemies had offered their hands.

Thranduil raked his head with his good hand then frowned when his hand slipped over the shortened hair of his head. The skin on his left arm no longer looked burned, but the scorched hair needed time to grow back. Lord Istuion had trimmed the hair almost close to his head to even it out.

He shall look strange for a while, but the hair will grow. And with the trouble he was in, that was the least of his concerns. For now, Thranduil wondered what his father would think when he received communication from Gil-galad about what had happened. It was the only thing that bothered him.

"I may not be able to keep my promise to you, father," Thranduil whispered into the air.

At least, Thranduil was glad that they didn't place him in a cellar. He wasn't sure he could take another moment in dark places. He supposed that he could understand now why some people grimaced when talking about underground cities. People's view of the cave cities probably looked like that of the Dwarven ruin. Even his fellow Sindar, the majority of them, anyway, had lived outside Menegroth shunning the idea of living underground. Some had never even seen the cave city. They had judged first before giving the city a chance.

Thranduil chuckled. And had he not done the same?

Thranduil breathed in the chilled north wind filling his chest and head with the crisp green scent of pines and firs. He looked toward the moorland which was covered in gray mists. He relished the wind, being out in the open. The River Lune that Thranduil knew flowed through the moorland was hidden under the swirling greyness.

Had he not judged the Noldor and the Dwarves? Assumed the worst of them? For the first time, Thranduil wondered what they thought of him. Would Onar forgive him for the betrayal of the trust the Dwarf had shown him? Would Beril forgive him for what he had tried to do, and what he had caused because of it? And Lord Gilmagor…Thranduil looked up. He realized that he had not seen Lord Gilmagor. Lord Istuion had filled Thranduil with the events that happened, but the Sindarin lord had been sparse with the details.

As he looked up, something flickered in the air. Thranduil blinked. Like moonflies, they fluttered, a silver sliver of scintillating lace. The Sinda swallowed. He had forsaken snow since that nightmarish night at Menegroth. The world had been gray and full of snow, the glimmering white floor stained with blood and smoke.

His chest tightened. Thranduil expelled air from his chest and watched as his breath swirled and mingled with the snowflakes. Snow had always reminded him of that night, the last night at Menegroth. As for all the good memories of Menegroth, he had locked them all away, buried them under the barren earth where he could not see or remember.

Thranduil turned away when the gray curtain of the sky drew open revealing the bluest of the skies. Behind it, the afternoon sun shone down flooding the gray moor with sunlight. Thousands and thousands of snowflakes shimmered as the white light of the sun brightened the whole world turning the white flakes into shimmers of silver white.

Thranduil stood there frozen. It wasn't the snowflakes of that night, the ones tainted with the red of the blood and the black of the smoke. This snow, it was brilliant white. The sparkling white of the snow Thranduil had loved as a child.

A sudden rush of something that had remained suppressed surfaced flooding his chest and stinging his eyes and nose.
It was so beautiful it took his breath away. Had it always been this beautiful?

The snowflakes glimmered pale as his eyes filled with tears.

For a long while the snow had been red and black, reminding Thranduil of the anger and the loss, but now the thousands of the tiny snowflakes reminded him of the moonflies; of Menegroth and his childhood; of the twitter of nightingales and the glitter of the golden lanterns; of his brother, Aron and the guards dancing and singing as they marched through the halls; of Master Greybark's low rumble as he grumbled disapproval when Thranduil splashed around the stream below him; of the laughter of the twin princes as they chased him down the winding passages of the Menegroth; of his mother…his beautiful mother singing as his father played his harp…

Thranduil looked up at the brightening sky and the falling snow. They fell on his eyes, on his face, and on his lips. They fell, melted and dripped down his face. Thranduil had forgotten how bright they were. How he had loved them once.

Alone, on the battlement, under the silver snow, Thranduil stood and wept.

He wept remembering all that he had lost, remembering all the people he had loved who were gone now, remembering the ethereal beauty of his beloved city, and his lost childhood, and the times that would never come again.

---

**Balrog** (Sindarin, *Demon of Might*)—spirits of fire, possibly lesser Maiarian spirits, corrupted by Melkor. They were cloaked with shadows, flame, and smoke. They were used by Melkor to lead his armies during the First Age. In LOTR, one is found in the Third Age sleeping in the depth of Moria.

**Eol** and **Aredhel** are characters from Silmarillion. They are the parents of Maeglin who betrayed the location of Gondolin to Morgoth (Melkor). Eol is a Sinda and known to be related to Thingol (In other versions he is called the 'Dark Elf' and NOT related to Thingol). Aredhel is Turgon's sister. Turgon is the king of Gondolin, high king of Noldor after Fingon and before Gil-galad. Turgon is also the father of Idril, Elrond's grandmother on his father's side.
Fact and Truth

Chapter Summary

Elrond hears Astalder’s story.

Chapter Notes

Warning: Long. This is what happens when I don't cut things off.

North Fort. October 10, Second Age 144

ELROND frowned at the clump of snow under his boots. While others in the fort glided over the snow, he alone had left footprints all over the courtyard.

Elrond stomped and scraped the snow off then looked up at the highest battlement of the North Fort where a narrow square tower stood. According to Erfaron and Saldor who had been by Thranduil’s side, the healers had moved Thranduil there. And no visitors were allowed except for Lord Istuion. It was probably for better. Elrond wasn’t ready to face the Sinda yet.

Rubbing at his throbbing head, Elrond turned away from the tower and up at the sky. It was strange weather. Snow and the sun. The two combined to chase away the gray gloom that had covered the fort. The dark stones of the fort looked stark against the vibrant white of the snow and the deep blue sky. So blue.

Elrond took comfort in the brightness of the sky. Even with so much loss, the world had retained its light. After Valar knows how many days in the dark of the Dwarven ruin, the sun, the light, and the bright snow combined to lighten Elrond’s heavy heart.

Elrond sent up a brief prayer for those who were lost, both the Elves and the Dwarves. If the Elves had lost, Dwarves had lost more. Compared to the Dwarves, Elves had lost only six people, three Silmacil, one personal guard to Lord Celebrimbor and the two cadets. Still, they were six too many. And as for Silmacil, Elrond remembered that the king had mentioned once that there were less than fifty Silmacil left on Middle Earth. Once, back in the First Age, there had been five hundred.

Elrond swallowed the lump in his throat remembering the gray face of Oron. With no family near, the job of preparing Oron’s body rested with Saldor as Oron’s warrior companion. But the young cadet was too devastated. In the end, it was Erfaron and Elrond who prepared the body to return Oron to his parents who will arrive at the Grey Havens to claim it.

And what of Gelir? They had no body for his parents to claim. His spirit would find its way to the Hall of Mandos, but his body would lie somewhere in the darkness of the chasm never to nourish anything. It was the worst kind of death for the Elves.

Elrond blinked away the tears that threatened to spill. He wanted to forget the scene at the chamber, but he could not. And those desperate words. Gelir’s last words:
“No! No, Thranduil! Don’t kill me. Please, don’t kill me!”

Elrond turned away from the tower and strode into the central building. By the entrance to the commander’s office, he saw a group of gray-clad company. They had a deep hood covering their faces and most of their body.

“Commander Thalador?”

Elrond walked in when the commander bid him enter. The commander of the fort was a thin Elf. Like Lieutenant Gwendir, he was an old warrior from Valinor.

“Lord Elrond, what can I help you with?” the commander asked with undue politeness.

“Please, commander. I am just a training cadet.”

The commander nodded. “Ready to leave in the morning? The snow has stopped so I do not expect any delays in the arrival of the ship. Lord Cirdan’s ships are never late.”

“That is why I am here, sir. Lord Celebrombor had wanted me to wait for him here at the fort, but he is yet to arrive.”

“Lord Celebrombor is delayed. There are matters with the Dwarves that are not resolved.”

“Matters with the Dwarves?” Elrond frowned.

“Matters for the king and the council. I received a message from Lord Celebrombor, but there was none regarding you.”

“Then, should I remain until Lord Celebrombor returns?” Elrond asked.

“That is unnecessary,” someone said next to Elrond startling him. Elrond had not felt a presence of anyone else in the room.

Just a few steps away, an Elf was leaning against a wall. Elrond couldn’t fathom how he missed someone standing there. The Elf pulled his hood off. It was Captain Astalder.

“Commander, a moment?” the captain said taking a step towards them.

“Of course.” The commander gave a salute before leaving the room.

Elrond blinked, then looked at the captain then at the commander of North Fort who left closing the door behind him.

Astalder laughed. “What can I say, Elrond. Only Lord Celebrombor outranks me here. Silmacil answers to no one except to the king and the council.”

Elrond noted that the captain wore a gray cloak meant for traveling. Underneath, instead of his plate armor, Astalder wore a thick leather armor reinforced with leaf-shaped steel pieces like the scale armor of the Doriathrin warriors. Perhaps less protective than the plate armor, but it provided more mobility and stealth.

Unlike four days ago, the captain looked hale although Elrond noticed the captain favoring his right leg. It was slight but having seen the captain’s former catlike grace and the fluidity of movement, Elrond sensed the stiffness in the warrior’s injured right leg.

“How do you fare, captain. Only four days ago you were barely able to stand. Do you not think it
too early for you to be traveling?”

The captain’s lips curved as he leaned back onto the desk behind him and crossed his arms.

“I have learned to overcome Orc poison.” Astalder shrugged. “It makes me ill for a time, but as you can see, I am fine.” The captain smiled thinly.

“It wasn’t just the poison.” Elrond looked pointedly at the warrior’s right leg. “Your wounds would not have healed already.”

Astalder shrugged.

“Some things cannot wait. As the way things are going, we may not get access to the ruins later.”

“But what would having access to the ruin matter? The King’s Isle is inaccessible.”

After the Dwarven commander walked into the chamber with his warriors, the walls of the central tower trembled as a dragon roar reverberated through the hall. Everyone had run outside and caught sight of a golden dragon, half the size of the mother dragon, fly up from the chasm then out the opening on the side of the mountain.

Its roar shook the entire King’s Isle, and everybody evacuated across the bridge to the main section of the ruin when the bridge that Elrond had lowered collapsed. With the only remaining bridge raised, the access to the King’s Isle was no more.

Once outside, half of the Silmacil returned to the fort with the injured and the dead while the other half stayed with Lord Celebrimbor at the Dwarven settlement.

“There are other ways to get into the isle even without the bridges,” said Astalder. “But without the consent from the Dwarves, we will not be able to get in. Lord Celebrimbor is trying to talk to Lord Hanar. He is the ruling Dwarf.”

“They are grieving. We need to give them time. And you. You and your Silmacil need time, too.” Elrond dropped his head. “I am sorry for the loss of your warriors.”

“I wanted to get another look at the central tower before anyone touches anything. We’ll have time enough to grieve and plant later. And the matter of the dragons is not resolved yet. As for the lost Silmacil…It is too cold to plant anyway, and there are no bodies to bury.”

Astalder stopped and looked out the window behind the desk.

“Will their family be at the Grey Havens? I will deliver the messages to them if you have any letters written.”

Astalder smiled faintly. “Very few of us have any family left on Middle Earth, Elrond. A handful of us have some distant relations, but we have not been in contact with them. I believe I am one of only four who has relations who are alive and still living on Middle Earth. But those three…they had no one.”

Elrond heart clenched.

“They knew the dangers. We were required to renounce our ties when we choose to become Silmacil. Of course, that doesn’t mean we give up on flirting,” Astalder laughed. “Just cannot take a mate. It is a very convenient excuse. And I get to work with my uncle because he just happens to be the one I report to.” Astalder shrugged.
Elrond’s eyes filled with tears. The growing grief in his heart mingled with that of the captain’s. Like a river swollen by the rain, it flowed over Elrond’s chest overwhelming him. Something hot choked his throat and the terror of the dark ruin, the loss of the fellow cadets, the death of the warriors, and Thranduil…Thranduil…Why? All the things Elrond had bottled flowed out of his heart and his eyes.

“Ai, Elrond.” Astalder’s hand landed on Elrond’s shoulder and squeezed it. “You have our sensibilities and the Men’s wondrous ability to express.”

“It is a nuisance, sir.” Elrond wiped away the tears with ferocity. He had not wished to show the tears in front of the captain.

“It is not a weakness, Elrond. You do not know how many of us wish, at times, we could express our emotions as honestly as Men do, the way we used to when we were young. With each century, we keep things in. We repress our emotions because it is the only way we know how to go on. It makes us duller and graver. Why do you think Men were able to enthrall our most beloved ladies? Trust me, Elrond. You hold your emotions on your sleeves, and it is such an endearing quality. Look how popular you are with the ladies.”

“That is a nuisance, too, sir.” Elrond sniffed calmer now.

“I bet Erfaron wouldn’t have thought so.”

Elrond winced remembering Fumella.

“How do you know about that? You weren’t even there at the dinner.”

“I was around,” the captain shrugged. His eyes twinkled. “I was tasting the fine wine some rascal switched.”

Elrond frowned. He had no idea what the captain was saying.

“Never mind,” the captain laughed. “The important thing to remember, Elrond, is that you have the best of both worlds. It is a good thing. Too many of us keep things inside and are unable to forget the vivid memory of the dark past. Men laugh, cry and rage, then their memories fade. They move on. They have the strength in them that many of us do not.”

“It is not always about strength, sir. Life for Men is short. They do not have the time to linger too much on one tragedy. And yet, I have seen Men dwell on their losses as we do.”

“Then, it is good that you are not one of them. You feel as deeply, remember as clearly and live as long as any one of us, yet, you do not linger in the darkness of your emotions. That is a strength, Elrond. You have the best of both races. It is what makes you unique. Don’t ever lose that, my friend.”

He had the worst of both races as well, Elrond thought grimly, but he felt better. Elrond nodded looking up at Astalder who patted his shoulder.

“Before I left, I meant to see you,” Astalder said as he took out a dagger. “This is yours, is it not? I remember seeing you holding it once.”

Elrond’s breath hitched as he took Maglor’s dagger from the captain and fingered its red jewel on the hilt.

“How? I had given it away.”
“Thranduil had it. He was clutching it so fiercely even while he was unconscious that the healers had a hard time prying it off his hands.”

Elrond grimaced. Was this the dagger Thranduil used on Gelir?

“I am afraid it is the same dagger,” Astalder said.

Elrond looked up surprised.

“You are easy to read, Elrond. As I said, you wear your emotions.” Astalder sighed. “I thought you may want it back. I noticed Maglor’s seal.”

Elrond clutched the dagger but could not find his voice.

“If Thranduil did kill Gelir, will you turn against him?”


“Those are the facts. Yes. But did you not notice that Gelir’s uniform was pristine? There was not one drop of black blood. Yet, there were three trolls and five Orcs dead in that hall.”

Elrond blinked. He did not notice anything in the room except Thranduil and Gelir grappling, of Thranduil’s hands plunging the knife into Gelir, of Gelir stumbling and falling off the cliff. He barely remembered how the room even looked.

“I suppose you didn’t have the chance to look,” Astalder said. “Trust me, Elrond. There were five dead Orcs. Each one probably as deadly as any one of our best warriors. I don’t think Thranduil alone could have handled them, yet they were cut down. By swords. I have spoken with both Saldor and Erfaron. Gelir was not one of the better-skilled cadets. According to my uncle, it was you, Belegor, Thranduil, Erfaron, and Oron who were the top five warriors among the cadets. Gelir was never mentioned. I hardly noticed him until I met him at the Dwarven settlement.”

“He was neither in the bottom five,” Elrond said.

“But, how did Gelir get there? With all those Orcs in the Isle. Thranduil may have been with a Dwarf and got in through some secret way, but how did Gelir get inside the King’s Isle? And why was he there in the first place?”

“I do not know. But it doesn’t change the fact that Gelir died and Thranduil killed him. Those are the facts, therefore truth.”

“Truth and fact are not always the same thing, Elrond. It is a fact that we saw Thranduil’s hand stabbing Gelir. It is a fact that we heard Gelir shout asking Thranduil not to kill him. But what we saw and heard, are they the whole truth?”

“Why wouldn’t they be?” Elrond frowned. What was the difference between the truth and the fact?

“Sometimes what we see, what we hear are not what is. When something does not make sense, you need to dig deeper to get at the truth. That’s why we exist. Silmacil was created to provide the king and the council with the information so that they can make the correct decisions based on the truth. Too often in our history, we have allowed what we heard and saw to affect our judgments without thinking too deeply. We forgot to ask where the information came from, why and how did it get there. By accepting what we saw and heard as the truth without checking its source, we have unwittingly spread fear, judged incorrectly, and made wrong decisions. We lost our blessed home due to the wrong information because we were too quick to judge and accept as the truth the rumor
Morgoth had spread about Valar. I have seen it, Elrond. Saw how evil things cloak themselves in the half-truths. And, I, too, have mistaken the fact and the truth and paid most dearly….” Astalder’s jaw flexed as he turned away. “I have learned to question facts that do not make sense. And this does not make sense to me. What reason was there for Thranduil to want to kill Gelir?”

Elrond shook his head. He wanted to believe Thranduil was innocent. He wanted that more than anyone but wanting did not change what happened.

”Have you talked to Thranduil?” Astalder asked.

Elrond turned away to look out the window. He had wanted to talk to Thranduil, at least before talking with Celebrimbor, but he could not bring himself to do it. Gelir was Cellon’s childhood friend. And Cellon was the only one among the cadets Thranduil could call a friend among the cadets. And, Gelir, although kept mostly to himself, tolerated Thranduil much more than other cadets had been.

“I went a few times to the infirmary when he was kept there, but Thranduil was in a lot of pain, or he was sleeping. They moved him, then…” Elrond shrugged. “I don’t know why they took him. I haven’t said anything.”

“I had Thranduil placed in the tower,” Astalder said. “The loss at the Dwarven ruin was affecting the soldiers at the fort. And Thranduil waking up screaming had the soldiers on edge as the talk of dragons circulated. I thought it best that he was kept away. And I felt it would do Thranduil good to have some time to himself.

”Did you tell Lord Istuion?” Elrond asked.

“No. Although Lord Istuion is astute and suspects something. But, he has not asked. And you obviously had not talked to him.”

Elrond shook his head. He had avoided Lord Istuion. He had not been ready to talk about it yet. Still…

”Thranduil killed Gelir. No matter what the reasons were, that fact wouldn’t change. But you think I should not talk about this?”

“I did not say that, Elrond. The king needs to know. The King and the council. Before this gets out, they need to have all the facts so they can find the truth before it gets out there and hurts people who do not deserve to be hurt. People deserve the truth, not fragmented facts that stir up emotions.”

“But, you don’t want me to tell Lord Celebrimbor,” Elrond remembered what the captain had said before he was taken by the healers.

“It is not that I don’t want you to tell the truth, Elrond. Lord Celebrimbor favored Gelir. Loss of that cadet weighs heavily on his lordship. Added to that, the soldiers here are disturbed. They are grieving and unsure. They fear the rise of old evil, going back to the days of war upon war. Imagine what they will do to Thranduil if it is known that a Sinda killed a Noldo.” Astalder shook his head. “I know what the combination of fear, anger, and grief can do.”

“But surely, we wouldn’t behave illogically. We are Elves and not Men. I know Men can be overwhelmed with emotion.”

Astalder scoffed out loud.

“I know you learned history from Master Pengo. Have you not? Did he omit to tell you of our
glorious past? There was a time, after the Battle of Sudden Flames, when the fear ruled our cities. We were so afraid that when some of the prisoners taken in the battle returned, we feared they were Morgoth’s spies. Instead of taking them back into our fold, trying to help them deal with the trauma of being prisoners, we shunned them, banished them.”

Elrond frowned. He had not heard that.

“But, they accepted Gwindor back into Nargothrond.”

“That was years later. After turning away many who may have been innocent. What you do is up to you, Elrond. You must do what you feel is right. But, let me tell you a story. Something very few now know.”

The captain walked toward the window and looked out for a long while. The stance or the face did not reveal anything. But like a barely visible mist, grief surrounded the captain.

“At Valinor, I joined to become a warrior with two of my closest friends. My brothers at arms, friends of my childhood and heart, the ones I would have died for…” the captain’s usually calm voice shook. Silence filled the room.

Although his face remained unchanged, Elrond noticed Astalder’s chin tremble slightly. Briefly, like a kiss of a stray wind, Elrond felt a rush of grief then suddenly nothing as the captain took in a sharp breath.

“We trained together, became Silmacil together, and competed for the top positions. Our names sounded alike so from the beginning, they grouped us together, the “Three Aces,” they called us, but our superiors and the ladies called us “The Three Asses.” Astalder chuckled. “We were… full of ourselves, foolish and confident in each other and our abilities. We three competed so fiercely that we left all other warriors behind. Like any lads, we competed…fought…fooled around…” a soft smile played on the captain’s lips then vanished as quickly as it came. “We crossed Helcaraxe together. We thought we will always be together. Then, came the Battle of Sudden Flames.”

Elrond remembered learning about the history of The Battle of Sudden Flames. It broke the four hundred years of peace brought by the Siege of Angband. It was the beginning of the Morgoth’s foothold on Beleriand leading to the Dark Lord’s eventual full control of the land.

“So many of us were lost.” Captain’s voice trembled as the cadence of his voice turned heavy and grave. “The Edain(Men) from Dorthonion were wiped out. All the golden sons of Lord Finarfin would have perished if it wasn’t for the bravery of those Men. Only Orodreth and Finrod survived. We lost Tol Sirion. In the east, the sons of Feanor scattered. And at Hithlum, we barely held the mountain forts along Ered Wethrin (Mountains of Shadow). We lost all the passes that protected East Beleriand from the Morgoth’s reach. For the first time, there were Orcs in Thargelion at the north of Ossiriand… and my friends…” the captain stopped. His hands clenched turning his knuckles white.

The chamber filled with something heavy.

“I am sorry,” Elrond said when Astalder stayed silent.

“Forgive me. I haven’t talked about them for a long time,” Astalder said then turned to Elrond. “It is not what you think, Elrond. One left us out of duty imposed by his family as his father and elder brother perished when the East Beleriand was breached.” Astalder let out a long sigh. His gray eyes clouded. “The other, Asumo…I killed him.”

Elrond blinked, so surprised he was by what the captain said.
The captain Astalder shook his head then chuckled, hollow laughter devoid of joy.

“No, Elrond. I didn’t run my sword through him although it might have been better if I did. He may have suffered less.” The captain’s eyes hazed losing all lights in them, a dull gray of a winter lake, before he turned away.

Astalder remained silent for a long while, and Elrond feared that the captain would not go on when Astalder breathed out as if he had been holding it. He continued.

“Asumo was the best among us three. If he survived, he would have been the captain of the Silmacil. When my uncle found King Fingolfin had ridden to Angband without any of the royal guards with him, all alone, to challenge Morgoth, he sent a bird to us. The three of us were near Angband at that time trying to find a way to infiltrate it. Both Aegnor and Angrod perished in the fire. Many of his people, as well as the Men of Dorthonion, were taken prisoners to Angband. Three of us with five other Silmacil were trying to get information on the dragons and find a way to free the prisoners. Asumo was our leader. When we got the message and rushed to the Black Gate, it was too late. We couldn’t have rescued the king even if we tried. Most of the captains of Morgoth were there watching, surrounding the two. We all knew we had no chance of rescuing our lord. But I knew that my uncle hoped that we would recover the king’s body, at the least. There was no chance of even that, but we all would have risked everything to try. But, Lord Manwe must have been listening to our prayers because the great bird came and fought the Morgoth to secure King Fingolfin’s body.” Astalder smiled, his eyes glistening with fierce pride and even fiercer grief. “You had to see it, Elrond. Our king fought a battle all knew he would not win. But by Valar, he gave that Black King the hell the monster deserved. Lord Fingolfin fell, but he was glorious.”

Elrond listened suppressing his awe and surprise. He had always wondered how his people knew the battle between King Fingolfin and Morgoth fared. Although Fingolfin had been said to have traveled alone to Angband, the battle between the king and the Dark Lord had been described in detail when there would not have been anyone except the creatures of Morgoth who would have seen it. Elrond wondered what other events of the First Age the captain must have witnessed. The warriors of the Silmacil were hidden soldiers who worked in the shadows and were never mentioned in any history.

“When Asumo saw that Balrogs, Orcs and all other minions of Morgoth distracted, he convinced us to leave the king’s body to Thorondor. For surely, the bird was sent by Manwe. And using the distraction, we, for the first and the last time, infiltrated the Angband.”

“You were inside Angband?” Elrond could not but ask.

Astalder’s forehead pinched as he shook his head as if he wanted to erase the vision before him. “Imagine the worst you can think of then make it worse tenfold. Even then,” Astalder swallowed, “you could not imagine the terror and the horror inside.”

“Were you able to find what you were looking for, or rescue any of the prisoners?”

Astalder shook his head again.

“We were able to obtain the information about the dragons, but the prisoners...we could not help them. They were in chains that were bound with sorcery. We could not break them. In the end, all we could do was to give them the luinil we carried and some of the weapons with the hope that they will find an opportunity.”

“Luinil? The blue star? You are referring to the white crystal of the Feanorian Lamp?”

Astalder nodded. “We always carried some with us in the event we were unable to generate our own
light as it often happened when our spirits were dampened by too much shadow. It provided us with light when all other lights went out.”

Astalder took a breath, then continued.

“Although we took precautions and the prisoners hid us, we were discovered and pursued. Angband, however, was easy to get in, near impossible to get out.”

Astalder fingered his forehead. “In the end, we were cornered at the edge of a cliff with only three of us standing. We had our climbing gears but needed time to climb down. Someone had to stay to cover for the other two. Asumo…he didn’t give us a choice.” Astalder shook his head. “He was always the fastest, the strongest…”

“But, it wasn’t your fault. He made that choice.”

“Yes. At Angband. But, seven years later, he came back.”

“Asumo survived Angband and returned?” Elrond could not keep his mouth closed. “I thought Gwindor of Nargothrond was the only one who returned alive from Angband?”

“No, Elrond. There were others before him, but he was the only one to return after being captured at the Battle of Unnumbered Tears. I know of no other who returned after him. Fortunately for Gwindor, we had changed the policy as to the returned prisoners. Before him, after the Battle of Sudden Flames, there were others.”

Shadow fell on Astalder’s face. “And those few who had returned, they had changed. They didn’t remember how they came to escape and…they became violent, unstable…You must understand the time it had been, Elrond. Everyone was afraid. King Fingolfin was dead. Orcs ran rampant in Beleriand. We were beginning to realize the hopelessness of the struggle against Morgoth. And some of those who returned began to act strangely. Not all of them, mind you. Most of them remained quiet and isolated, but the behavior of the few tainted the rest. It made people uneasy. There was a talk that these prisoners were sent back to spy for Morgoth, that the Dark Lord broke them. I don’t know how such rumor started, but it spread like wildfire. We began to look at them with suspicion and fear. It was at this point when Asumo returned. When Asumo said he was rescued by the Sindarin warrior of Lord Thingo’s people, I was more suspicious.”

“What do you mean, captain,” Elrond asked.

Astalder bent his head.

“Back then, the Sindar we knew were mostly Mithrim who were in Hithlum before us. They were hunters until we trained them into warriors to fight in the war. I am ashamed to admit it, but when Asumo talked about how the Sinda’s wit and skill allowed them to escape, I just couldn’t believe him. It never occurred to me at that time that the Hidden Kingdom (Doriath) would have skilled warriors akin to Silmacil who were sent out to spy on Angband. I never considered it as I didn’t think Doriath had warriors who were capable. I was an idiot back then.” Astalder snorted before continuing. “And suspicion is a terrible thing, Elrond. Once it takes hold of you, it gnaws away at your reason and objectivity. And Asumo had changed much in that seven years. He was not what he once was. And I, the one who had seen what that hellhole was like, the one who should have understood him better than anyone else,” Astalder’s voice cracked as the captain pounded his chest. “I stayed away from him instead of helping him. My uncle was away at that time, taking Lord Fingon’s son to the Havens. I was recently appointed the captain of the Silmacil. I had information pertaining to all our defenses. And I feared that Asumo might try to get such information through me. You see, Elrond. I have already judged my friend, believed Morgoth had broken him. I may not have
said it out loud, but my action could not be explained otherwise.”

The captain clenched his jaw, fisting his hands.

“And then the three of the previously returned prisoners went berserk. Two of the guards got killed, and Asumo... he said he only tried to stop them, but when I got to the scene, all I saw was Asumo standing over the five dead Elves, saw the blood on the sword in his hand. The suspicion I had harbored proclaimed it as evidence.”

Elrond could not breathe as Astalder’s eyes misted.

“I assumed the worst. I who was trained to be objective, to gather information, to think clearly when others could not... all that training meant nothing when your emotions blind you. I would have killed Asumo with my own sword if they didn’t stop me.” Astalder’s voice shook visibly now. “If you could have seen the look of hurt in his eyes...” Astalder let out a shuddering breath. “Everyone was screaming for Asumo’s head. They said he was a Morgoth’s spy. The council wanted him executed for the death of the five dead Elves. And I... I did nothing to defend him.”

Silence filled the room. Elrond thought of the look on Thranduil’s eyes just before the Sinda passed out. Did his own eyes deceive him? But it wasn’t just what he saw. Gelir had screamed, begged Thranduil not to kill him. Even if what he saw was not what was, Elrond was sure of what he had heard.

“How did you find out if what you saw was not what had happened?”

“King Fingon, considering all the prior services Asumo had given, decided to banish rather than execute him. As I accompanied Asumo to the edge of our boundary, he warned me, to enforce our southern border, that Morgoth planned to attack us through the south. He begged me to look over the letter he left for me. It didn’t make sense. Our southern border faced the sea. It was the safest. I didn’t take Asumo’s warning to heart, but I made the report both to the king and to my uncle. Within less than two moons after banishing Asumo, we were attacked. It was only because King Fingon decided to take the precaution and enforce our southern border, and because my uncle thought it prudent to discuss it with Lord Cirdan who brought a fleet to Hithlum that our city did not fall that day.”

Astalder let out a long breath as if he was emptying out his soul.

“Were you able to find him?” Elrond could guess the answer, but he asked.

Astalder shook his head and closed his eyes. “Somethings cannot be undone, Elrond.” The captain’s voice sank almost to a whisper. “After the battles were over, I looked for him. But Beleriand was filled with the Dark Lord’s minions. We found him... pieces of him staked all around the perimeter of Angband as a warning. The Dark Servants had been looking for him, too. And they had found him first.”

---------

**Hithlum**—was the seat of the high kings of Noldor (Fingolfin, then Fingon). First Age 462, seven years after the Battle of Sudden Flames, Morgoth sent a large force to attack Hithlum sending group of Orcs to attack from the south with the larger force attacking from the north. Cirdan brought a fleet of ships to aid Fingon without which Hithlum would have been lost. Given the distance that Cirdan had to travel upstream to reach Hithlum's boundary, the Sindarin lord would have needed a prior notice to reach Fingon in time.

**Gwindor**—Prince of Nargothrond, affianced to Finduilas, a princess of Nargothrond, daughter of
Orodreth. He was captured at the Battle of Unnumbered Tears and kept a prisoner for 14 years before escaping by cutting off his chained hand. His story is told in *Children of Hurin*.

**Finrod, Orodreth, Aegnor and Angrod** are brothers to Galadriel. Aegnor and Angrod perished at the Battle of Sudden Flames and his people were taken as prisoners. Finrod brought army out of Nargothrond to help Orodreth defend Tol Sirion but got ambushed and almost perished. Men of Dorthonion led by Barahir (Beren’s father) rescued them. In return for the help received, Finrod would later perish defending Beren from Sauron.

**Thorondor** (Sindarin. *Eagle King*) Lord of the Eagles sent by Manwe (king of Valar) to watch over Nolodr. The eagle helped Fingon rescue Maedhros from Thangorodrim. And he rescued Fingolfin’s body from Morgoth to prevent its defilement and brought it to Turgon (Elrond’s great-grandfather) at Gondolin.

**Feanorian Lamp**—white crystal which gave off blue light from a flame within. (I named it *luinil*, blue star, but it doesn’t have a name). The crystal is hung in a fine chain net and used as a lamp as its light was untouched by wind or water. Feanor is credited in its making and the craft of making it was lost. Gwindor is said to have had this lamp with him when he escaped Angband along with a sword. As everything prisoners had would have been taken, this is my explanation as to how Gwindor had the Feanorian lamp with him when he escaped.

**A/N:** In Tolkien’s work, there was a small section which mentioned that Morgoth freed some of the prisoners to use them as spies as well as to spread fear among the Elves. Many of them were used unwittingly but this led others to fear admitting escaped prisoners into their cities.
Future is Unknown

Chapter Summary

Gil-galad waits for the information Astalder may bring that may impact the future of Thranduil and that of his realm. There is much for the king to think. But amid all the troubles, Silwen provides unlooked for distraction.

80

Grey Havens. October 20, Second Age 144

GIL-GALAD read over the report from Celebrimbor. It was preposterous what the Dwarves were accusing Celebrimbor and the Silmacil of doing. But, at the least, Celebrimbor had convinced the Dwarves that they must finish off the dragon or risk it coming back. After the Dwarven soldiers confirmed that the mother dragon was down in the chasm where they had suspected it fell, the Dwarves had used their war machines to bombard the abyss filling it with the remains of the crumbled towers. The Eleven warriors, however, were not allowed entry and only had the words of the Dwarves to rely on. Still, Gil-galad had to applaud Celebrimbor’s oral skill. What it must have taken to convince the Dwarves to destroy their own home.

But to think that Dwarves thought his people had an ulterior motive for helping them, this disturbed Gil-galad. It was a ridiculous accusation. How could the Dwarves think that when Gil-galad had lost warriors fighting the dragon?

After the incident, even more of the remaining Dwarves had decided to migrate eastward, Celebrimbor’s letter said. Celebrimbor will travel with them and join the council who were asked to gather at the Grey Havens.

Now that he had read the report from Celebrimbor, Captain Astalder’s succinct report, coded and flown through a bird messenger, made more sense. The captain’s letter, however, had not given any details as to what happened to Thranduil except to state that more information was needed and that he was in the process of gathering it. The letter invoked the White Ring, a special council, which was reserved for grave matters. It meant that until all facts were checked, the information was to be shared only among the inner circle which consisted of the king, the chief councilor, Lord Commander, Lord Cirdan, Lord Celeborn and Lady Galadriel as the rulers over their respective domain.

“So, Celebrimbor and Astalder are on their way,” Gilmagor said as he handed back to the king the letter from the captain of the Silmacil. “No matter what Astalder may wish, it would be difficult to exclude Celebrimbor unless you get Lammaeg’s consent. Still, it would be best if Astalder arrived before Lord Celebrimbor.”

“Yes. I wish that, too. The captain specifically invoked the White Ring. Having read his previous report, I think I know why the captain did so.”

According to Captain Astalder’s report, Celebrimbor was quite attached to the young cadet who was killed.
If Celebrimbor returned before Captain Astalder, Gil-galad knew he would be hard-pressed to share information with his elder cousin, no matter that he was not an official part of the White Ring. As a part of the royal member of the King’s House, Lammaeg always included Celebrimbor and his cousin expected it as his right. It was crucial to convince his uncle that Celebrimbor should wait to review along with the rest of the council. Even then, if Astalder arrived later than Celebrimbor, keeping his older cousin out of the special council proceedings would not endear him. And Gil-galad did not need any further rocking of the already shaky relationship he had with Celebrimbor who was a powerful councilor with many followers.

The king handed Gilmagor a crutch when the elder lord strained to get up from the bed where he was seated. Gil-galad waived away the servant who rushed to aid the swordmaster. Gil-galad knew well how Gilmagor disliked having to rely on anyone.

Having been a busy Elf all his life, Gilmagor disliked, more than anything, being cooped up in bed. Despite that, Gil-galad would have ordered his Lord Commander to stay in bed if his master would listen. Although Elves recovered quickly and most wounds healed in time, even the best of the king’s healers could not put together a shattered leg and shoulder. Gilmagor would never be the warrior he had been.

“Hoomm,” Gilmagor glared at the crutch as if it was his enemy, but with a resigned sigh, the swordmaster took it.

Gilmagor’s chamber was one of the cabins with one wall that could be pushed open and led straight to the deck. Still, with only one good leg and one good arm, the movement from the bed onto the deck was labored and slow.

“Astalder will try to get here as soon as he can, but it is unlikely he will arrive before Celebrimbor. He is tracking a crucial witness,” Gilmagor said when they were out on the deck and away from the prying eyes and ears.

“How do you know? Did my uncle kept things from me?” Gil-galad asked. Were they passing vital information to and from each other without including him?

“No, Ereinion. Astalder’s letter. There are things only those trained as Silmacil can read. I doubt even Lammaeg picked up on them. Astalder’s wrote word for ‘return’ had a long tail, it meant he is coming but may be delayed. Depending on how certain words are written, it relays more meaning than what is written. Every one of Silmacil has a unique way of writing a certain character of the alphabet. This lets a king or a Silmacil know if the message was genuine as well as who the author is. From Feanor to your father, they were taught how to read these messages. You, I had hoped would not need Silmacil. Once this matter with the dragons was done with, I was going to bring the matter of retiring these warriors. So few of them are left…Their life had been one of sacrifice, one I had hoped the peace of these times would not need.”

“You cannot just retire them, master. I may need them in the future.”

“I realize that now. When we return to the White City, I will have a Silmacil teach you their characters. But, I had hoped…I thought we would have peace…” Gilmagor looked away. “Silmacil have been fighting in the dark for a long time. I had hoped to give them…rest.”

The Lord Commander sighed as he looked over the waters in the West. Gaunt he looked, thinned and paled by his injuries. And Gil-galad knew in his heart that the Lord Commander longed to return home to the land of his birth.

They stood together on the deck of the Swan Manor feeling the salty wind of Belegaer whip their
“You will have to choose a new Lord Commander,” Gilmagor said, his voice mingling with the wailing of the wind.

“You are my Lord Commander.” Gil-galad swallowed the lump in his throat.

“I can barely walk on my own.”

“You need not walk. I have commissioned a chair. With wheels. And there are servants…”

“Ereinion.”

“No!” Gil-galad smashed the railing of the deck with his fist and shook his head.

Had he not lost enough people? How many did he have to let go? There were so few left in the world whom he could trust. And Gilmagor, along with Cirdan, was the pillar Gil-galad had relied on to always be there behind him. The king didn’t doubt the loyalty of his uncle, but Lord Lammaeg had his own vision of the world that didn’t always correlate with Gil-galad’s.

“Once Elrond is done with his cadet training, elect him into the council position. I have a word from Lord Cirdan, Celeborn and Lady Galadriel. They will give their support. And once I return to the White City, I will make sure to obtain other’s support as well,” Gilmagor sighed. He looked tired and worn.

Gil-galad’s heart seized painfully. He knew Gilmagor was preparing for his departure. He planned to install Elrond into council and make room for the Half-Elven to replace him. Poor Elrond will have an even bigger hole he would have to fill. Too soon. It was too soon. But life happened, and sometimes it slapped you painfully leaving you gaping and unprepared. Gil-galad clenched his hands.

“There you are!” a familiar voice called.

Gil-galad turned to watch his uncle walk toward them dragging something with him. “I wondered where the Lord Commander would have gone in his condition.”

“I will go where and when I please, thank you,” Gilmagor huffed.

“Testy are we today?”

“You were supposed to be here in the morning!” Gilmagor growled.

“I had meetings. Unlike somebody who had gotten himself injured and unable to work, I had a lot of work. And look,” he pushed the contraption he had brought with him. It was a chair built on a platform with four wheels attached to the bottom. “With this, you can roam about this deck as much as you wish.”

“And what makes you think I will ride that horrendous… thing?” Gilmagor grimaced.

Watching the two of them, Gil-galad could not help but smile. He had feared after the incident with the necklace that his uncle and his master would never talk again. But, ever since Gilmagor was carried into the Grey Havens, Lord Lammaeg had hardly left Gilmagor’s side. The Chief Councilor even allowed Gil-galad to stay when the king had refused to go seeing his master in such a shocking condition. Gil-galad realized then that even his uncle was not aware of the extent of the injuries Gilmagor had received.
The king shuddered remembering the broken body of Gilmagor. The fall had been great and the valley full of rocks. It was only because they had found him not long after the incident that he was alive today. And it was all thanks to that cadet who was now lost.

“So, are we in agreement?” Gil-galad asked.

The faces of the two elder Elves who had been bickering at each other turned serious.

“I agree that this matter requires more thought and decision after all the facts are gathered. But, I do not see why the entire council should not be privy to the information? Almost everyone is here except for the two coming from Forlindon and one from the northern villages,” said Lammaeg. “And, of course, there is Lord Celebrimbor.”

“Uncle, you know already that several cadets have their parents or relatives on the council. What they know will trickle down to the cadets. Then, Thranduil will never be accepted. Even if we find later that he is innocent.”

“Elrond saw with his own eyes. What more proof can there be?”

“We discussed this, Lammaeg. They were in the midst of a battle. With an enemy we do not know. We also do not know what trickery there had been. You know well as I do what happened after the Battle of Sudden Flames. We cannot repeat the terrible injustice committed back then.”

“But, the Sinda refuses to say anything.” The Chief Councilor began to pace.

“According to Lord Cirdan, he seemed unable to say,” Gil-galad said remembering what the Sindarin lord said after he spoke with Thranduil.

“Yet, he refused to let Lady Galadriel see into his head.”

“Would you, Lammaeg?” Gilmagor asked. “As much as I respect the lady, it is another matter to have her look into your head. It wouldn’t just be that one incident she will have access to.”

“But, if he was innocent, what does he have to hide?”

“Remember the regrets, Lammaeg?” Gilmagor’s voice softened. “Let’s try not to repeat the same mistakes. Until we know what really happened, we cannot assume. Once we tell everybody what happened at the Dwarven ruin, can you imagine what Thranduil will face? And, if he is found innocent later, what will you do then? How will you repair the damage then? Once done, somethings cannot be undone. You know that as well as I.”

His uncle frowned but did not say anything which surprised Gil-galad.

Gil-galad had known of the time after the death of his grandfather. It was the beginning of the dark times when the power of the shadow grew and lengthened covering the most of Beleriand. His uncle and Lord Gilmagor had made sure Gil-galad knew the incidents that happened, the fear among the people, the suspicions that drove them to banish innocent people into a land filled with the Dark Lord’s minions. As the advisers to the king, both his uncle and the Lord Commander had wanted to make sure Gil-galad knew how fear can drive people to do things they would not normally do. They wanted Gil-galad not to make the same mistakes they had made.

“We made many mistakes. If we had not listened to your advice back then…” Gilmagor grabbed Lammaeg’s arm. “Your uncle’s wisdom and foresight saved you, Ereinion.”

The king looked up surprised.
“Once King Fingon decided to send you away for safekeeping, it was to Nargothrond that the council wanted you sent. It was your uncle who suggested the Havens instead. He feared the location of Nargothrond to be too central with no way to retreat in the event of an attack while the Havens had the safety of the sea if it came to that. The council was against it, of course. ‘How could we send the heir to the throne of high kingship to a Sinda?’ they said. If it weren’t for the king and your uncle standing firm against all of them, you would have been sent to Nargothrond. Finrod’s land may have lasted longer, but when it fell, hardly anyone escaped the sack.”

The two elder lords nodded as if deep in thought. Gil-galad knew the two of them were back in the old days when many things troubled them.

“Until the captain returns with more information,” Lammaeg said lifting his head. “No matter what information he brings, everyone must agree to accept it and decide accordingly. And once the decision is reached to inform the council, there are to be no objections on the sentence the council delivers. Agreed?”

“Agreed with one condition. Lord Cirdan feels Lord Istuion should be included in the White Ring meeting as this matter pertains to Thranduil. And he is Thranduil’s guardian. It is Thranduil’s life we will be judging,” Gil-galad said.

“We already have two Sindarin lords in the inner circle. That is more than sufficient representation for Oropherion. And if we include Lord Istuion, then we must include Lord Celebrimbor.”

“But, Lord Celebrimbor is not part of the White Ring,” Gil-galad protested.

“Neither is Lord Istuion.”

“But the whole point of the captain invoking the White Ring was to keep Celebrimbor out of the proceedings until all the evidence have been reviewed.”

“And, whether the council decides to execute him or banish him, it is Istuion who will have to report to Oropher. If anyone needs to have the firsthand knowledge of the proceedings, it is he,” said Gilmagor. “Celebrimbor can wait with the rest of the council. Surely, you see this, Lammaeg.”

“Fine!” Lammaeg frowned. “But, once the decision is made on the evidence the captain brings, whether good or bad, no further objections will be accepted, not from you or any of the Sindarin lords.”

Gilmagor nodded and looked up at the king. Gil-galad knew he was expected to rule on this and convince both Cirdan and Celeborn. Reluctantly, he nodded.

“Well then,” Lammaeg turned to Gilmagor. “Do you want to try this out or do you prefer to limp your way around the deck?”

Gilmagor shot Lammaeg an icy look that would have cut down anyone. But Lammaeg was not just anyone. The councilor shrugged then gestured toward the chair with the placid look on his face. Gilmagor grimaced but climbed up onto the seat and sat down.

“Have a good day, Sire. Don’t forget to look over the documents on your desk. I will come for them later,” Lammaeg said then turned to Lord Commander pushing the chair away. “I know a spot with excellent scenery. It reminded me of Lake Mirthrim although without those blasted fir trees. Remember that time when Prince Fingon ran naked into the lake with that boar chasing him?”

Gil-galad watched as Gilmagor laughed out aloud. “Haha! What I remember is the look of outrage on your sister when Fingon without a stitch of clothing on him ran up and swept her up and into the
lake with him!”

“He was trying to save her from the boar. That was one angry beast!”

“If he had not shot at it just after stepping out from under the waterfall, he wouldn’t have missed and angered the animal.”

“At least, Fingon finally got my sister to notice him.”

Gil-galad shook his head listening to the fading laughter of the two elder Elves reminiscing the old times. It was good to see them back together again. Although they regularly fought each other, sometimes fiercely, in the council discussions, no matter how heatedly they argued within the council chamber, they did not bring their differences outside it. They had remained friends until that incident with Thranduil and his mother’s necklace. Gil-galad had feared that his uncle’s affection for Belegor might thwart the friendship with the swordmaster. And until his uncle saw the broken Gilmagor at the Grey Havens, Lord Lammaeg had been cold toward the Lord Commander.

As for the talk about his mother and father, it was an old one which the king had heard enough times from both elder lords. According to his uncle, his father had been in love with his mother since they were children in Tirion. But Gil-galad’s mother had no interest in getting married or in any Elven men, least of all his father.

It was early in the First Age, after Dagor Aglareb (The Glorious Battle) when the guarded peace had begun. Gilmagor said he had accompanied his father in a hunt and both of them were washing under a waterfall that fed into Lake Mithrim when Fingon saw a boar smelling the clothes left on a cluster of moss. The boar started chewing on Fingon’s leathers. His father stepped out of the water, took up his bow to shoot the animal, but ended up angering the beast. The beast charged at his father who ran toward the lake hoping to thwart the animal by jumping into the deep waters. But, Gil-galad’s mother was there walking the lake. She had accompanied Lord Lammaeg and his wife on a picnic. Gilmagor had promptly chased after the beast and killed it before it reached Fingon, but the prince had already jumped into the lake taking Gil-galad’s mother with him. It was a story that was ever told only among the family.

Watching the two Noldorin lords disappear around the bend, Gil-galad felt his heart clench. It was nice to have a friend, someone with whom you could fight and argue, but who will be there to comfort you when you were down and to share the load each bore. He was always surrounded by people: his advisers, guards, and servants. And, there was Elrond. But, being a king was a lonely thing. No matter how good friends they were, in the end, the decisions were his and his alone, and the burdens of those decisions were his alone to bear.

“So, you spoke to Lord Lammaeg?” someone asked.

Gil-galad turned to watch Lord Cirdan walking up.

“Things are back to normal for those two?” Cirdan asked which surprised Gil-galad.

“You are well informed, my lord.”

“Istuion mentioned what happened.”

“Lord Lammaeg agreed to have Lord Istuion in the inner circle when the captain returns. But, whatever the captain brings, once our decision is made, there are to be no objections.”

Lord Cirdan closed his eyes briefly. “I understand. But, know this Ereinion. If the evidence your captain brings does not prove with absolute certainty that Thranduil killed that cadet, and the council
decides to execute Thranduil, you may have a civil war on your hands. Never mind how Oropher
will react to it. Do you understand the delicacy of this situation? For Sindar, even those who did not
live in Menegroth, Thranduil represents the last remnant of the Sindarin royal house.”

“But, there is Elrond.”

“Elrond. Yes, there is Elrond.” Cirdan shook his head. “But, no matter the amount of Sindarin blood
that flows in his veins, Elrond is a Noldo. He will have the respect of all Sindar, but he will always
be known as the Noldo, never as a Sinda. And you know the tension that has been brewing between
our two kin. This matter, if not handled delicately, could become the catalyst for something worse.”

Gil-galad let out a long sigh. “I am aware of that.”

“But, politics aside, do you believe our young friend capable of such a thing? He lost much in the
hands of Noldor, it is true. But, he is no killer, Ereinion.”

Gil-galad looked away. He wasn’t sure. He remembered that look in Thranduil’s eyes, the look of
absolute fury and hatred.

Lord Cirdan’s hand rested on Gil-galad’s shoulder.

“I am sorry, my lad. As if you do not have enough loads on your shoulders. I would speak with
Lammaeg myself, but Celeborn and I thought it best to keep clear of Lord Lammaeg until we see the
evidence your captain brings. What would be the use of us arguing before we hear more facts? It
would only shake everybody’s nerves.” Cirdan squeezed Gil-galad’s shoulder. “Don’t worry now. It
wouldn’t do anyone any good to worry beforehand. We don’t have any clear facts except what
Elrond saw. Poor lad. He was quite shaken. I could tell it was hard on him.”

“Elrond, I believe, was becoming somewhat fond of Thranduil,” Gil-galad said. He didn’t know
how he felt about that. “Maybe what difficulties they shared had brought them closer. I don’t know.
But, if this matter goes badly, I am afraid, Elrond would be devastated.”

It was his fault. If he had not pushed Elrond on Thranduil…

“Come, lad. Let’s hope for both our sakes that everything will work out, hmm?”

“Should I go see Thranduil? Should I go hear what he has to say?”

“Both Istuion and I tried. Celeborn spent almost a whole day with him, but…the pain. It seems to
flare up whenever he tries to talk of it. That healer you brought from the city, he said whatever burn
that was on Thranduil’s arm, it was not a dragon burn. He had not seen anything like it. It is up to
you as to what you feel you must do, but I don’t think your presence is going to do any good. To
you or to him.”

Gil-galad nodded.

Lord Cirdan squeezed the king’s shoulder one more time before he left.

Gil-galad breathed in the fresh air that came down from the mountains. Then, turned west and
toward the high tower in the western tip of the Swan Manor. They had placed Thranduil there. When
Elrond first returned from the North, Gil-galad had already received a report of the situation from
Captain Astalder who had sent a bird.

The king sighed. However it went, this was going to be difficult. As it was, he had met with the
parents of the two lost cadets. It was a painful meeting, especially with that of Gelir’s parents. Gelir’s
father, Amarthon, was one of King Fingon’s lieutenants. He was an old soldier who had retired and only recently returned to train city guards who were under Lord Celebrimbor. Although Gil-galad did not know Lieutenant Amarthon well, he knew of him. And as the king, it was his duty to comfort those who grieved especially when those who passed were warriors under his command as the king. It had been especially hard for Amarthon and his family as there was no body for them to bury. And that poor child, Gelir’s sister, had been at the north and returned in the ship with Elrond. She had been inconsolable. Gil-galad’s heart ached thinking of her and her wailing in her parent’s arms.

Gil-galad gazed up at the gray sky. The sky seemed to reflect his mood, thick with gray clouds. It was then a glimmer to his right caught his eyes. It was a lady with white hair. She disappeared into the tower standing at the prow of the Swan Manor. Although there were more than a few white-haired Sindar at the Grey Havens, Gil-galad’s heart thundered. Just by the abnormal behavior of his heart, he knew to whom that white head of hair belonged. Gil-galad leaned down on the deck railing to get a better look at the deck below knowing Paddirwen couldn’t be far behind. And just as he had expected, a dark-haired woman was running down the steps to the deck below, tripped at the last step and fell flat on her face.

Smiling, Gil-galad jumped lightly over the railing and landed softly onto the deck below.

“Paddi, you know you shouldn’t be running.” Gil-galad offered his hand.

“Oww,” the young woman sat up grabbing her nose. “I didn’t want Lady Silwen to get wet. She went up the light-tower. And it looks like it will rain,” Paddirwen pouted as she held up a hand holding a blue cloak.

“I thought she was supposed to assist Mistress Taurien.”

“Oh, the healer from the White City? Her assistant arrived yesterday, and she is assisting the healer. The assistant is with Master Thranduil now, I think.”

“Were not Mistress Taurien and Master Nestaron the only healers to attend him?”

Paddirwen shrugged. “Lady Silwen saw no harm in letting the assistant help the healer. Would that be a problem?”

“No. I suppose not. So, how are you, Paddi. I have a few minutes. You want to take a walk with me?”

“Oh, you have a few minutes?” Paddirwen’s face widened into a big grin. “If so, Your Majesty, would you mind taking this to Lady Silwen?” Paddirwen’s eyes sparkled as she handed the cloak to Gil-galad. “I have so much work to do, and well, you have a few minutes. And it would only take a few minutes to walk to the light-tower.”

“I…uh…suppose.”

“Great! Then, thank you, my lord!” Paddirwen went away so fast Gil-galad was left with the cloak before he could think.

Passing the guards at the base of the tower, Gil-galad looked up at the many steps that spiraled above him. It was narrow stairs that wound around a small circular tower. Two people barely fit side by side unless one flattened against a wall. Ever so often, windows were carved along the tower to let in light and air.

Gil-galad tried to still his thundering heart with each step he took. Now that he was here, he wondered what he would say to Silwen. He had not seen her much since Lord Gilmagor was
brought to Grey Havens.

That first day Gilmagor was brought to the Havens, Gil-galad had not left his master’s side, so afraid he had been of losing the Lord Commander. Events of that day were hazy in his mind, but he remembered her soft presence, her gentle urging for him to drink, flitting about in silence around him. He remembered surprising her as he snatched her into his arms. She had allowed him to hold her until he had reluctantly let her go. After that, he had only glimpses of her as they passed each other at the many decks of the Swan Manor, at the dining and the meeting halls. But with Gilmagor in the hands of the healers, and the constant reports that were flying from the north, and the petitions he had to read, to adjudicate, to sign, and the myriad of other things the realm required of him, and with eyes that were everywhere, with councilors that were beginning to gather at the Grey Havens, there had not been a chance for a private meeting.

He sighed and turned then came face to face with Silwen. He had been too deep in thought and had not heard the footsteps. Silwen’s silver eyes rounded wide as she stopped several steps above Gil-galad.

They stood and watched each other.

“I…uh…I was…just going…up” Gil-galad pointed up. He could pull out his hair at the incoherent jumble that came out of his mouth. *Ai, Valar! Just kill me now!*

“Oh! I…I was just going down,” Silwen pointed downward, her cheeks tinted a lovely shade of pink. How lovely she looked. But then, she was always lovely.

“It looks as if the rain will come. So…” Silwen smiled awkwardly, then gestured downward.

“Yes, of course,” the king flattened himself against the wall. Silwen came down the stairs like clouds flitting across the calm ocean. The silver-white hair shimmered like moonlight on the ocean surface. It glided past his face. Gil-galad closed his eyes and inhaled the scent of her, those flowers on the beach he had never learned the names of, like lilacs in the morning sea, intoxicating just like her.

Gilmagor was leaning against the deck railing when Gil-galad returned to get the letters he had left at the swordmaster's room.

“So, it is her, isn’t it?”

Gilmagor sighed as he watched Silwen disappear into the buildings of the manor. “I thought Lammaeg was right, especially when you left Lord Cirdan without asking for her hand. But it was her after all. If it is Lady Silwen that your heart desires, why do you hesitate, Erenion? You know Lord Cirdan will not oppose the union. If you love her, ask her. I know it is not my place to talk of your heart, but the matter of you having an heir is a matter that affects us all.”

“It is not that simple.”

“Oh? It is complicated only when you make it so. There are only two things that are important. Do you love her?”

“Without a doubt.”

“Does she love you?”

“I think so. Once, I may have been certain, but many moons and suns have passed since.”
“Maybe you should strip naked and take her swimming.”

“Funny!” Gil-galad rolled his eyes.

“It worked for your father.” Gilmagor chuckled. “But, in all honesty, you wouldn’t know until you ask her.”

The king sighed. “It isn’t just about our feelings. There are things I know that I had not known before, things that may come.”

“The future, is that what is stopping you? Future, Ereinion, is unknown. If you fear to live today because you fear tomorrow, then you lose, not just tomorrow, but today as well.”

------------------

**Dagor Aglareb** (Sindarin, *Glorious Battle*)-- The third battle Noldor fought against Morgoth which took place in the First Age 60. Except for Thingol who refused to fight alongside the sons of Feanor and the Green Elves, all Elven realms participated in this battle which utterly destroyed Morgoth’s forces. It was Noldor’s first complete victory over Morgoth which began 400 years of Siege of Angband. It was a time of watchful peace during which Noldor flourished and firmly established themselves in Beleriand.
Patience

Chapter Summary

Like a wounded beast caged, Thranduil is restless until he sees an opportunity for an escape.

Chapter Notes

Next week, I will not be able to put up anything, but I will do so as soon as the holidays are over. Thank you, everybody, for all your generous support given me through the reviews and kudos. As of today, I have 494 Kudos and 11,591 hits. It is far above what I had ever hoped to achieve. Thank you so much. Have a wonderful holiday and a healthy and prosperous New Year.

Grey Havens. November 1, Second Age 144

THRANDUIL rotated his neck trying to release tension there.

The chamber they had assigned him was high up on the top deck of the Swan Manor. It had a small balcony where outside, on a long pole, they hung the flag of Lord Cirdan’s colors: Pair of silver swans on a white background.

It was a small room. And just this morning, it was cramped with three Sindarin lords, the three of the greatest among the Sindar alive this Age.

Thranduil had been unable to talk to them when he first arrived at the Grey Havens. The pain flared whenever he tried to speak. But, once the pain calmed, Thranduil had not seen the need to talk. He had nothing to offer to prove his claim. What could he say? That Gelir tried to kill him? That he was defending himself? That Gelir took Thranduil’s hands and stabbed himself? Even to Thranduil’s ears, it sounded incredible.

But with three of them gathered together, Thranduil had been unable to resist the unspoken power of the Sindarin lords. Thranduil had confessed, briefly as he could make it, how he left the cadets to seek vengeance on the kinslayer to only end up a prisoner to the Orcs. He did not give them the details, just that he wanted to kill the kinslayer but was unable. Lord Cirdan frowned, Celeborn and Istuion shook their heads, but neither one of them had said a word. Thranduil told them how Elrond refused to leave him behind which led them to the Dwarven ruin and to the deep darkness, then to the dragon.

Lord Celeborn had asked, with deep frowns marring his fair face, why had Thranduil left Elrond behind? Why when he had the chance to get away, went instead to kill what was in the Dwarven palace rather than seek help? And the silent question that was left unsaid: what made Thranduil think he could handle what was up in the palace all by himself?
It was something Thranduil asked himself while alone in the chamber. Thranduil had not told the lords about the dragon blood. He feared what the lords may think, that he was being controlled by the dragon. Maybe what he remembered of Gelir trying to strike him dead was just an illusion, like the one in that treasury chamber had been.

Thranduil shook his head hard. He did not kill Gelir. He could not have. Why would he? He had no reason to.

Unable to breathe, Thranduil took off his tunic grateful for the enchantment placed on the garment to unbutton and button at a simple command. They even made the tunic sleeveless, so it was easy for the healers to examine his injured arm.

Thranduil tried to stretch but winced when his left arm pulled sharply. The pain was less, more bearable, but constant now. Turning his one cheek to the floor, he lay flat on his stomach. He never allowed pain to stop him before and it wouldn’t stop him now. Pulling his left arm to his side, Thranduil pushed up against the floor using his good arm. It made doing the push-ups harder, but he was up for the challenge. There was nothing much for him to do anyway.

When his arm was too shaky to support him, Thranduil turned over onto his back and stretched his legs and limbs and started sit-ups. They were feeding him constantly while keeping him in this tiny chamber. They probably wanted to fatten him up before they roast him or throw him off the cliff. Of course, if they were feeling overly generous, they may banish him.

Banishment was good. He could return to his father. But, most likely, that was not going to happen.

When the muscles screamed and the breath became rough, Thranduil stopped and lay back panting on the floor.

This was a serious matter. A cadet died. By his hands. Thranduil knew he was not the one who killed Gelir, had been sure of it, but the more he thought of it, less sure he became.

What if what he thought he saw was not real? What if that creature had cast some sort of enchantment? What if the evil blood inside him caused him to kill without his knowledge? What if he did kill Gelir? But, now, it didn’t matter. Even if he didn’t, there was no way to prove it.

He wondered now if he should have allowed Lady Galadriel to look inside him. But he had not wanted her to know, to see into the parts of him, things deep within him that Thranduil did not want to think about. The shadows were there. He could feel them, ever circling, ever hiding, ever biding their time.

Perhaps death would be a welcome release. He had seen enough of death. Welcomed it even. He did not fear it.

“Stop lying to yourself!” Thranduil said out loud.

There was a time when he wanted death, but now when the certainty of death loomed over him like the poisoned sword of Orcs, he wanted to live. Life was like a promise given by Morgoth. It never gave what you really desired.

Thranduil let out a long sigh and leaned back. The wooden floor felt cool against his naked skin. Through the sole window in the room, sunlight fell all around him. The large window faced the sea filling the small space with the scent of crisp, salty air.

“Dammit!”
Thranduil pushed up and off the floor and looked down at the open window. He had thought of escaping more than once. He didn’t know if it were because they believed he wouldn’t escape, but there were no guards at his door. The door was unlocked even. But, to get out of the Manor, he had to pass many guards. He had sneaked out of the room once just to see how easy it would be to get out. It wasn’t. He needed to go down several decks to reach the drawbridge which was guarded. And on each level of the decks, there were guards.

His door may not be locked, but it was a cage, nonetheless. Thranduil longed to dash through the grass filled plains, run over the thick tree branches of the forests, feel the pine-scented pungent air on his face and smell the clean aroma of the trees and earth. He was not made for this seaside room, to be patient, to wait, to die.

He wondered what would happen if he ran away to his father. Would they send soldiers after him? Maybe even Silmacil? Will there be war? Will these Noldor kill his father’s people to get their hands on him? Thranduil was almost certain that his father would not let the Noldor take him. But, if that happened, there was a certainty of blood.

“Let it be spilled!” Thranduil said aloud.

The Noldor shall feel the wrath of the Doriathrin warriors. How many died under the bloody hands of Noldor? He looked up at the sky where the clear sky began to darken. The wind rose and rattled the window.

“I didn’t mean that. You know, I didn’t,” Thranduil whispered to the winds. The Lord of the Winds was probably not amused. “And, yes. I remember the promise. I said I’ll ‘try.’ I can’t just blow out what burns in here and suddenly become the good little Elf!” Thranduil pounded his chest. “I cannot work miracles.”

Thranduil plopped onto the bed. He grabbed the small wooden squirrel on the top of the bedside table. It was carved with some expertise although not yet a master. Lord Istuion said Galion made it for Thranduil to wish him a quick recovery. The Sindarin lord had taken the Silvan boy to Glineth at the manor in the forest. Running his hand over the small carving, Thranduil stretched out. He would have to tell Galion about Beril. She may be the only relative the boy had left.

Thranduil wondered if Valar cared. Galion was innocent, but he lost everything. And Beril’s daughter, she was innocent, too. Thranduil ran his hand through his head. He had caused so much grief. For everyone. Maybe this was how Eru planned to exact punishment for all the wrongs he committed. To die in the hands of Noldor. To die tainting the good name of his father and mother’s family. To die a kinslayer.

Someone opened the door to his room making Thranduil sit up on the bed.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” the healer looked at him, eyes wide, then turned away, her cheeks flaming red. “I… I knocked, but you didn’t answer. I thought maybe you were sleeping. I can come back…”

“It’s all right. You can come in.” Thranduil grabbed his shirt and put it on hastily. “Please, excuse me. I was deep in thought.”

Healers. They were a nuisance but necessary.

Lassiel walked in holding a tray. Thranduil was surprised that she was not accompanied by Mistress Taurien. For an unmarried elleth to visit an unmarried ellon at his bedchamber, or for him to visit her unaccompanied by a third person was something not done, at least, not in Doriath. Even Silwen who was like an older sister to him always came with Paddirwen. Thranduil wondered whether the
Noldor didn’t care for such social etiquette.

“I was on my way here with Mistress Taurien, but Master Nestadion asked for her right away.” Lassiel bit her lower lip as she hovered by the door. “She wanted me to go ahead and give you the herbs for pain if you needed them.” She swallowed. “She is to join me soon, but, if you want me to come back…”

“It’s fine,” Thranduil said.

Lassiel hesitated a moment, but she entered fully into the room leaving the door slightly ajar as was proper.

“Have you had your noon meal? We were told to make sure your pain was managed. I believe there will be several people waiting to see you this evening?”

Thranduil frowned. “What people?”

The girl shrugged. “They just said to have you comfortable and ready to join the lords tonight.”

*So, it is to be tonight.*

All this waiting would be over soon. But, at the same time…The Sinda turned to the window. The sunlight of the moment ago was no more. Bitter winds swept into the room. He had wanted to see his father one more time, but that was not going to happen.

*Father…*

Winds howled as rain pelted the ceiling and the walls.

Lassiel rushed to close the window as the trill of the rain filled the room cutting off all other sounds.

“The weather here is so unpredictable,” Lassiel said. She flushed as she stepped closer. “How is your pain?”

“Manageable.”

The healer ran her fingers down Thranduil’s bare arm.

Thranduil now realized why all three Sindarin lords had come early in the morning. When Thranduil could not offer any proof of what happened with Gelir, even Lord Cirdan had looked as grave as his nephew. At the least, they believed him. And for that, Thranduil was grateful. While the other two lords seemed to have given up, Lord Celeborn had stubbornly pushed the idea of Lady Galadriel to him. But, Thranduil could not allow it. It wasn’t just because he didn’t want her to see his shadows. His pride would not allow it. If the Noldor didn’t trust him, if they saw him capable of committing the most heinous crime known to the Elves, then there was nothing he wanted to say to them.

But Lord Celeborn was stubborn. After all, the Sindarin lord had in his blood that same stubbornness shared by all of Thingol’s close kin. Even Elrond.

The thought of Elrond ripped through Thranduil’s heart making him wince.

“Does it hurt?” Lassiel looked up. She had been gently bending Thranduil’s injured arm. The vivid red mark on his arm had begun to fade and left a splash of pink stain.

“No. Just stiff.”
“Can you move your hand?” Lassiel asked.

Thranduil shifted his arm right and left. It felt wooden as if it was no longer part of his body.

“Move your fingers?”

Thranduil clawed his hand. It hurt to move the fingers but not half as bad as it had before.

“I think the arm is finally healing. It is healing unusually slowly, but it is a definite improvement from a week and a half ago when I first looked at it,” the healer smiled widely. “You should be back to the training in no time. Everyone was asking about you, especially Cellon. The cadets are furious that they are not allowed to visit.”

The thought of Cellon made Thranduil’s heart clench. How did Cellon react when he heard that Thranduil had killed Gelir? Gelir was Cellon’s childhood friend. Except for those times Gelir worked with Erfaron as his warrior companion, Cellon and Gelir had been inseparable.

“I doubt Cellon would want to visit me, or the other cadets for that matter.”

Lassiel looked up.

“Then you would be wrong. Saldor told everyone how brave you were at the Dwarven ruin. He said you saved them singlehandedly. Everybody knows about it. Even Erfaron vouched for you, and you know how nonchalant he is.”

Thranduil looked at the healer, gaping at her.

Had they kept the information about Gelir from all the cadets? Thranduil thought everyone would know by now. Even if the lords decided otherwise, Thranduil had been sure that he would never be able to train with the cadets again.

“You are a hero, Thranduil. Along with Gelir and Oron. The king gave Oron and Gelir a hero’s burial. Gelir’s body was lost, but they planted a willow tree by the River Lune in his memory.” Lassiel’s eyes glistened with unshed tears. She wiped it away, then looked up at Thranduil with a smile. “And you were very brave. At least, according to Saldor and Erfaron. They said you went to face the dragon. Alone.”

“The dragon?”

“The Orc master. It was the dragon, they said, that was controlling the Orcs.”

“Then, you do not fear me? I thought…”

Thranduil looked down at Lassiel as she applied honey-colored ointment on Thranduil’s rigid fingers. His hand may be stiff, but he could feel her hand tremble slightly as her fingers glided over his hand. He thought she feared him. He had assumed that she knew why he was kept in this chamber. A monster who slew another Elf.

Thranduil clamped his stiff fingers over her hand.

The healer looked up, her eyes wide. Then, she pulled her hand away, a deep blush staining her cheeks.

“Of course not. Why should I fear you?”

The rain poured harder outside cutting out all sound of the outside world. It was as if only two of
them existed.

If they didn’t tell the cadets, it meant that they did not want anyone to know. Not yet, at least. Even the guards may not know. Thranduil realized now why there were hardly any guards or why his door was not locked.

*Father…*

If he could see his father just one last time. Just a glimpse of his father and the other warriors whom he had known… then he could come back and receive whatever punishment these Noldor would deal out, even if it were death.

Thranduil reached out and grabbed Lassiel’s hand.

“I want to go outside, Lassiel. Will you help me?”

The healer looked taken back, but she did not pull away. “Can you not go?”

Thranduil shook his head. “They don’t want me to leave.”

“But you are so much better. I am sure once the lords see you, they will know you are well enough. You will get the chance to see them tonight…”

“I want to go now. Will you not help me?”

“Now? But, it is raining hard,” Lassiel said as she turned toward the window. “And Mistress Taurien should be here soon, probably once the rain stops or slows…”

“Are we not friends. Do you not care for me?”

The words came out so naturally as if it had always been a part of him, Thranduil was surprised. When had he become so deceitful?

“I do, Thranduil, but…”

“Just take me outside this manor. Tell the guards you were told to take me. They will believe you.”

“But…”

“I need to breathe the air outside. I have been in here for days. I just need to be out. Lassiel, do this for me.”

Thranduil moved closer, pleading with his eyes.

The Elder King will strike him down, Thranduil was sure. But, if this deceitful glimmer was what it took to get out, then so be it.

“Just for a moment then. You will just be out for a moment and return?”

Thranduil squeezed her hand and smiled. He just couldn’t say the lie out loud. That proud part of him would not allow him to lie so blatantly.

“Then, we must go quickly before the rain stops.” Lassiel got up. “Maybe we could visit Cellon. He wants to see you. He is so grieved.”

The healer put on her cloak and led the way.
“He was a good friend to Gelir,” Thranduil murmured.

“It is not only Gelir, Oron, too. Those three were childhood friends.”

“You knew them well?”

“I bandaged their hurts when they just started warrior training. And Cellon’s wife Ithiliel is my mother’s cousin.”

“Then, you must know them well. And Gelir especially.” Thranduil stopped. Something Cellon mentioned back in the White City pricked his memory.

They were at the foot of the stairs that led to the deck below. The rain poured like a waterfall just an arm-length away, a dark, watery curtain drawn all around the two of them.

“We were good friends.” Lassiel looked down. “I always thought of Gelir like a little brother I never had, but...” the healer looked away. “Gelir was a good lad, happy and always laughing. Kind of like Cellon…then… If it wasn’t for the accident... It was my fault.” Lassiel grasped the railing and leaned into it as if a strength suddenly drained out of her.

“What do you mean?”

“Where he got injured, the valley near the Blue Mountains. He went to the north because I wanted to go. I wanted to go find this plant that only grows along the northern valley of the Blue Mountains. He convinced Cellon and Oron to go as well. So, with Ithiliel and I, five of us went.” Lassiel covered her mouth. “Everyone thought we were going hunting, but I knew Gelir arranged the trip for my sake.” The healer’s eyes wavered. “They hunted while Ithiliel helped me looked for the plants. But I couldn’t find enough of the plants... we weren’t supposed to be that far up in the north. The guards at the border warned us not to go past the streams. We rested by the stream when Gelir told me not to worry and went away. He never came back. We looked for him, but we couldn’t find him, and the sun was going down. Oron made Cellon stay with me and Ithiliel while he went to look for Gelir, but... Something must have spooked him. Oron is not one to scare easily, but he returned his face drained of blood.” Lassiel shook her head, her hands covering her face.

“Do not think of it. But no matter what happened there, it was not your fault.”

“But, if we had not gone, he wouldn’t have been hurt. After the injury, he changed so much that Gelir was like a stranger. If I had not wanted to go find the plants, I think... I think he would have been himself, then maybe he would have survived the Dwarven ruin. I know it sounds strange, but I can’t help feeling that I caused his death somehow.”

Thranduil did not mean to, nor had wished to, but he reached out. He wiped the tears that fell down her cheeks. She looked up her eyes wet with tears.

*I am sorry. I am sorry for this grief I caused you.*

“It wasn’t your fault,” Thranduil said. “Whatever it was, it was me. I am sorry,” he said, the sound half drowned out by the pouring rain. He pulled up the hood of her cloak to cover her head. “Lassiel, you need to go,” Thranduil said quietly as he pushed her gently toward the stairs. “Go now, and do not come back.”

Thranduil turned and walked back into his chamber and closed the door.

The room was dark. Thranduil sat on the bed not bothering to light the room and listened to the trill of the rain. Perhaps for once, he should be patient and take what was coming to him. For once, he
should not struggle. Maybe then, he wouldn’t hurt anyone else.

Thranduil didn’t know how long he sat there in the darkness when someone knocked. Thranduil got up and lighted the lamp. He didn’t want Mistress Taurien to see him sitting in the dark.

With the lamp in his hand, Thranduil turned when the door to the room opened.

Elrond stood there completely drenched, water dripping like streams onto the wooden floor. Thranduil felt his throat constrict. His feet grew roots. Thranduil’s unruly heart thundered in his chest making it hard for him to talk. He felt his eyes prick and Thranduil tamped it down firmly. He had not realized until now how much he wanted to see Elrond. Needed to see him. More than anyone else, Thranduil needed Elrond to believe him, believe that he could not, would not have killed a fellow cadet.

What Thranduil wanted was to welcome the Half-Elven, but what came out were cold and sharp as a blade of ice.

“What do you want, Peredhel?”

Elrond pushed away the wet strands from his face and walked into the room.

“I wanted to hear your story. What happened in your words.”

“Why? When you have already judged.”

“I saw, and I heard. How am I to judge but with my eyes and my ears?”

“You Orc! Get out!”

“No.” Elrond closed the door and walked further into the room. “I am not going anywhere until you talk to me.”

———

Elder King and Lord of the Wind all refer to Manwe, King of Valar.

Ellon=male Elf

elleth=female Elf, elf maid
Elrond allowed his power to surround him. It was not something he did normally. He did not wish to intrude on anyone's privacy. But Elrond knew enough of Thranduil. If he was to get anything out of this Sinda, he needed every bit of skill he had at his disposal. And, Elrond needed to know the truth of what had happened at the ruin.

Elrond flooded the room with his senses. Like fingers of mists, it reached out toward Thranduil. It was invisible and hardly detectable to anyone except for those who were finely tuned to their surroundings like the old Elven lords. The Half-Elven hoped that like other cadets, Thranduil would not feel the power. Most didn't recognize it.

As the misty fingers reached for Thranduil, however, the Sinda frowned mightily and stepped away from Elrond.

"What kind of enchantment is this?"

Elrond worried Thranduil may feel it. Still, Elrond was surprised. He suspected Thranduil may have inherited some of his mother's powers, but Elrond had not expected the Sinda to recognize the use of his enchantment so easily. Elrond pulled back.

"I just want to know the truth, Thranduil. The lords, they are gathering tonight to review the evidence. Captain Astalder will be here soon. Your life will be decided by whatever evidence the captain is able to gather, and what you could prove. But, before he comes, I want to know, from your own lips, what happened. Tell me the way you saw it happen, untainted by all these other things and words from others. Just you. I need to know the truth, Thranduil."


"Thranduil! Please don't let your pride damn yourself. Let me help you in any way I can. Are we not friends? Are we not kin?"

"No Noldo is a kin of mine!" Thranduil's words were like ice. He scoffed aloud with his back to Elrond. "And when have we become friends? Last time I remember, friends did not judge nor accuse without first hearing the words from the lips of their 'friend.'"

"I was reacting to what I heard and saw with my own ears and eyes. What would you have done in my place?"

Thranduil did not turn back. Watching the Sinda's broad back, Elrond felt as if he faced a mountain,
a mountain that does not budge, does not listen, does not react. Elrond pulled at the collar of his tunic feeling unable to breathe. And with the frustration came anger also.

Elrond fisted his hands.

"I will beat the truth out of you if I have to," said Elrond.

That got the Sindar's attention. Thranduil turned around, threw back his head back and laughed out loud.

"You? You think you could beat me bare-handed? Now, who is arrogant here? If you wanted to beat me, you should have come with your sword, Noldo." Thranduil's blue-green eyes glinted. "Maybe with your sword, you may have been able to beat me. Maybe. But, never with your bare hands, Peredhel. Do not underestimate me because my arm is injured." Thranduil curled his lips.

"I am going to beat you, and you will tell me," Elrond said.

Thranduil's eyes flashed as he curled back his lips. "Certainly, my lord, if you can throw me down!" Thranduil sneered.

"I think it is me you underestimate," growled Elrond.

Elrond knew well Thranduil's skill, so as soon as the Sindar took a defensive position, Elrond lunged. The longer he took, Elrond knew it will get harder for him to land a blow, never mind throw the Sindar down.

Thranduil did not move. In fact, it seemed to Elrond that the Sindar did not plan to dodge Elrond's punch. Before his punch could land, Elrond pulled back sharply. He didn't want to hurt Thranduil, just knock some sense into him. But that was a mistake.

As soon as Elrond pulled back, Thranduil turned. It was as if the Sindar anticipated Elrond's move. Elrond saw Thranduil's foot coming, but he was in the midst of pulling back the punch. Elrond did not have the time to react.

The kick in the stomach knocked out his breath as Elrond flew back across the chamber and hit the wall with a thud.

"You know what your problem is, Peredhel? You think you are so righteous, so good. You want to beat me, but don't want to hurt me? Ha! You may hope to gain allies that way, but on a battlefield, there are no allies." Thranduil's eyes were cold and frozen. "If you are going to fight, fight, damn you! Spare me your pity. Don't play 'I am your friend, I don't want to hurt you' crap!"

Thranduil's words laid a harder punch than his kick. Barely taking a breath, Elrond pushed off the wall and flew at Thranduil, but the distance between them was too short. Thranduil moved almost at the same instant Elrond pushed off the wall shortening already a short distance. As Elrond jumped, Thranduil hunkered down. Using his head and his good arm, Thranduil flipped Elrond's body and threw him onto the other end of the room. Elrond crash landed on the bed, breaking the wooden furniture.

"Give it up, Peredhel. You are not trained to fight in a tight quarter like this. Within this room, I can fight you with my eyes closed," Thranduil grinned darkly.

Elrond scrambled up and was up on his feet in a blink, but he knew that Thranduil was right. He could give Thranduil a match with a sword, even beat him, but not bare-handed and certainly not in a close quarter like this room against one of the Doriathrin warriors who was trained to fight in such
tight spaces. But Elrond needed to win. It was one chance to make the proud Sinda talk to him. And the longer he dragged this fight, the probability of him winning became slim to none.

Eyeing Thranduil, Elrond stepped back. He tried to think back to what Lord Gilmagor had said about a way to win every time: Know yourself and your enemy.

What came to him went against his very being but losing was not an option. With his fists up, Elrond feigned a punch toward Thranduil's right, and as soon as Thranduil's good hand came to block, Elrond struck out on Thranduil's injured side which was left unguarded. Thranduil obviously did not see the need to guard it.

Thranduil cried out as Elrond's fist landed on Thranduil's left shoulder. Thranduil grabbed his left shoulder and staggered. Elrond threw Thranduil down on the floor.

"Son of an Orc!" Thranduil cursed out loud. "You cheated! Damn you, that hurt!"

"Let me see," Elrond grabbed Thranduil's shoulder mumbling the healing enchantment. Thranduil's contorted face eased as the song of healing took effect. The Sinda laid back on the floor letting out a sigh.

"I can't believe you cheated, Peredhel. You attacked me on my injured side. I never imagined…I never thought you had it in you."

Elrond threw himself down on the floor next to Thranduil and lay down beside the Sinda.

"It was the only way I could think of beating you, and I needed you to talk to me. You would not have suspected that I would do that because I wouldn't, and you would have known that."

"Except you did, you Orc. Using Gilmagor's strategy against me, did you? You know, you will never be able to use that move against me in the future."

"I hope never to use such base tactics ever in the future, and never against you," said Elrond.

Thranduil closed his eyes. Elrond glanced at Thranduil's face searching for the telltale sign of pain. Elrond worried whether his punch had aggravated Thranduil's injury.

The sound of the rain pelting the ceiling softened. A warm silence filled the chamber.

Worried about Thranduil's shoulder, Elrond sat up.

"Is it still hurting you, Thranduil?" Elrond hovered his hand over the shoulder where he had hit. Thranduil opened his eyes and looked up at Elrond.

"I didn't kill him," Thranduil said.

The Sinda's eyes were deep and dark blue in the faint light of the room. Looking into the jewel-like eyes as clear as the glass depth of a mountain stream, Elrond knew Thranduil spoke truly. Dark his eyes were, but there were no shadows of lies within their dark depth.

Something hot filled Elrond's chest. He grabbed Thranduil and pulled him into his arms and squeezed with everything he got. All the days he had spent barely sleeping, turning and tossing, the dark days and nights seemed to melt away in that instant.

"What the hell!" Thranduil protested loudly, but Elrond did not care. "Get off me, you stupid Noldo!" Thranduil pushed waving his arms wildly.
The Sinda yanked Elrond's hair trying to free himself, but Elrond did not let go. It was as if a dam broke and all the feelings of worry, hurt and horror Elrond had kept inside spilled forth.

"A-hem!" someone cleared his throat loudly.

"Oh my!" someone else cooed.

Elrond let go and turned to see Mistress Taurien standing at the door. There were two guards behind her.

"Are we interrupting something?" Mistress Taurien smiled widely, her eyes twinkling like two stars.

"What happened here?" One of the guards asked. His eyes scanned the room and landed on the broken bed.

Thranduil pointed to Elrond. "He did it."

Elrond made a face at Thranduil. "You threw me."

"You came at me. I was being quiet and being a good lad…"

"You are never a 'good' lad."

"But, I was. I was being the perfect little Sinda, patient and all."

Thranduil gathered his hands and gave the guards a doe-eyed smile, all innocent and tame.

The guards shook their heads, rolled their eyes, then left.

"I don't think the guards were fooled, Thranduil," Elrond said.

"Well, it seems you do not need me so I will leave you two," said Mistress Taurien. "Unless you need some medication, Thranduil."

"No, ma'am. I am fine. Thank you," Thranduil said.

The elder healer left, a smile hovering over her lips.

"How could you tell on me like that?" Elrond frowned.

"Well, I wasn't going to take the blame for the bed. You don't know how attached these Falathrim are with things they make."

"I know that, but you rather that I get in trouble with Lord Cirdan?"

"Better you than me," Thranduil shrugged nonchalantly. "Lord Cirdan most likely wouldn't say anything to you, but I will hear it not only from Lord Cirdan but from Lord Istuion. Maybe even from Lord Celeborn. You don't know what it is like to have three old lords harping on you."

"And here I was trying to be a good warrior companion," Elrond harrumphed. "You think I don't hear nagging from others?"

"Who would nag at you? Everybody loves you."

"That is an exaggeration."

Elrond got up and opened the window. The rain had stopped, and the dark clouds were dissipating.
Silence filled the room as Elrond picked up the broken pieces of the bed and cleared the area.

"Thank you for believing me, Elrond," Thranduil said after a while. "I wasn't sure if you will believe me."

"Tell me how it happened," Elrond said as he sat down on the mattress facing Thranduil who sat up on the floor.

"I do not know myself." Thranduil shook his head. "Gelir came at me. With a sword."

"Gelir?"

Although he knew Thranduil spoke truly when he said he did not kill Gelir, Elrond found it hard to believe that a fellow cadet tried to kill Thranduil. It just didn't sound right.

"Why would he?"

"I do not know. He didn't seem like Gelir. He seemed so different." Thranduil shivered as he lay his good hand over his injured arm.

"Different how?"

Thranduil shrugged. "Different."

"How did he get there in the first place."

"I don't know. He just walked into the Throne Room after we dealt with the Orcs."

"We? Erfaron said you went to the Throne Room alone. He said the old Dwarf was quite upset with you. I suppose Erfaron meant Onar. Why did you do that? Knocking him out and locking him in. Onar frightened Saldor with quite a rant, I heard."

Thranduil shrugged again.

"I wasn't alone. The kin…" Thranduil stopped and seemed to search for words. "This Noldo…a hunter came and helped me."

Elrond's heart thumped loudly as it began to race.

"A hunter? A Noldorin hunter?"

Elrond's eyes met Thranduil's eyes which had darkened into a color of slate.

"Astarno?" Elrond asked, his heart thumping so violently he felt it would jump out of his throat.

"You know him?" Thranduil asked.

"He was a friend. He made sure my brother and I were safe." Elrond looked away and readied himself for an attack, but Thranduil did not say any more.

"How did he get there? Why? And if he were there, then he would have seen what happened. What happened to him?" Elrond asked.

"The creature…"

"The dragon?"
"No. There was something else. Something worse. For a while, I thought it was a Balrog, but I remembered the She-dragon telling me it was not. He was powerful and surrounded by flames. The dragon said that the being was a sorcerer, a necromancer, and a shapeshifter."

Thranduil gave Elrond a look. Elrond's heart stopped beating.

"You could not mean…"

"I don't know. That is what the dragon said. I would not trust everything she said, but whatever that thing was, it was powerful, Elrond. It blasted Astarno clearly across the chamber to the cliff."

All breath went out of Elrond. "He…he is dead?"

"I am not sure," Thranduil sighed. "The thing had me in its grasp, and the Noldo tried to kill it, but obviously one strike was not enough. With one swipe, it blasted Astarno over the cliff. I stabbed it with everything I got, but I was weak. I don't know how much damage I was able to do to it, but it fell off the cliff. I was barely able to lift my head, but I thought I saw Astarno holding onto a thin chain of some kind, but I don't know if I imagined it or not. I didn't have a chance to look again. Gelir came at me with a sword."

"It is hard to believe." Elrond shook his head. He did not know Gelir well, but for any cadet to want to kill another Elf, it was unthinkable. "Did anyone see this? Is there anyone to corroborate your story besides Astarno? Unlike that matter with your necklace, this matter deals with a serious crime, the vilest among our people. This is about taking one's life. You will need more than your words as a proof."

Thranduil sighed. "I am aware of that. But there was no one in the chamber except Astarno and I. He may have seen Gelir attacking me, but I cannot say for certain. No matter whether the council will believe or not, I have nothing to offer as proof. Astarno may be my only witness."

"This is bad, Thranduil. Even if Astarno saw it, even if he survived, he could not be your witness."

Thranduil looked up.

"He is…was…" Elrond could not say the word. "He was a captain under Mae.. Feanorians. He is forbidden to enter any of our cities. Under penalty of death. There are not many who will be able to recognize him by sight now, but some members of the council would. And if Astarno is to make the statements for the trial, he would have to face the council members. He will be recognized… He will be arrested." Elrond let out a long sigh. "Many of the councilors are survivors of Sirion or had family members who died there. They will want his life for the lives that were taken even if Astarno was not the one who actually did the killing."

"I don't expect Astarno to show up even if he survived," Thranduil turned away. "Even if he knew what was happening…even if he could come."

There was an unfathomable look in Thranduil's eyes.

"He is not a bad person, Thranduil."

"According to you, no one is."

The icy tone was back in Thranduil's voice. Things unspoken swirled like a mist forming an invisible wall between them.

Elrond fisted his hands. There were many things he wanted to say, but he bit his tongue. What could
he say to defend the one who everyone considered a monster?

But Astarno had been a friend, a protector. The few times Elrond's foster fathers were unable to be there for him and his brother, it was Astarno who kept him and his brother safe. The captain of Maedhros' army had saved them countless times during the fourteen years they had spent with Maedhros and Maglor as the weakened army of Maedhros roamed the darkened Beleriand unable to settle down in one place, trying to stay a step ahead of the Dark Army that spread ever farther.

"I know Astarno. If he knew his words could save you, he would find a way to get here even if getting here meant death for him. He is one of the most loyal and honorable Elves that I know."

Both Maedhros and Maglor had trusted Astarno absolutely. And, Elros and he had learned to trust and love the Noldorin captain. More importantly, if there was anyone in this world who would know about what happened to Maedhros and Maglor, it would be Astarno. The moment Elrond had heard the cadets mention Astarno, he had hoped to find the captain, to find out what had happened to Elrond's foster fathers.

Elrond remembered back to one of the last things he had discussed with Elros before his brother left Middle Earth. Both Maedhros and Maglor had disappeared after the end of the War of Wrath. But, Elros heard about the two Feanorians who stole into the camp of the Valinorean army. But, by the time Elros ran there to find out, they had gone. Shortly after Maedhros and Maglor left the camp of the army from Valinor with the two remaining Silmarils, Astarno had found Elros and woken him up in the middle of the night. According to Elros, Astarno was tracking Maedhros and Maglor. The captain had not told Elros how he got separated from their foster parents, but both Elros and he had guessed that their foster parents must have abandoned Astarno in order not to involve him in their plan to steal the Silmarils. They probably wanted to protect Astarno. But the captain was not someone even Maedhros or Maglor could easily evade. If anyone could track and find his foster parents, it was Astarno.

Thranduil stretched out on the floor.

"Doesn't matter anyway. Even if he is to come to my defense, which I sincerely doubt, he will need a character testimony from at least two well-respected people. Or, do Noldor not have such a requirement?"

Elrond dropped his head. "For a case like this, he will need three people to vouch for his character."

Thranduil scoffed. "Ha! And who will vouch for the words of the kinslayer even if you would? Besides you, it will be hard to find even one person who will risk their reputation to defend a word of a kinslayer. Find two? Near impossible. And that is if, and that is a big if, Astarno had seen what happened, found his way here and risk losing his life. I tell you, Elrond. This is a hopeless case. I have known it."

"But, what if we have someone reliable talk to him…"

"Hearsay. Does Noldorin council makes judgments based on hearsay?"

"No, but in a case like this, wouldn't it be better to submit a hearsay statement than none at all?"

"And where do you plan to find Astarno? Even if he is alive. I am to face the council tonight."

"Did you not tell Captain Astalder about him?"

"No. I was in too much pain when he came to talk to me."
"Don't the Sindarin lords…"

"No."

"Why not?" Elrond bit down the urge to shake the Sinda. "They could have sent someone to look for Astarno. Why didn't you tell them? Didn't you trust them to believe you? Are you so unwilling to trust even those who care for you?"

"Calm down, Peredhel." Thranduil sat up. "I didn't tell them because I could not, and I do not think it would matter."

"What do you mean you 'could not'?"

Thranduil let out a sigh. "Maybe it was the medicine, but my head was foggy, and the pain flared whenever they tried to make me talk. Besides, I did not believe there was anything that could be done. I didn't want to give them false hope."

"False hope? Anything would be better than none at all!" Elrond got up, unable to sit. "How could you just sit there? Do you even care whether you live or die? Do you care at all? Do you care about anything?"

Thranduil frowned.

"What will you have me do?" The Sinda's voice was rough "What can I do? And what is it to you? You didn't come by until now. It has been almost a month since the incident. Why come now and stir me up?" Thranduil glared at Elrond. "If you are so concerned, let me out of this place. Let me return to my father."

Sudden heat rose in him, and Elrond narrowed his eyes. "You want to run? Don't you know that if you run now, it would be the same as proclaiming your guilt."

Thranduil shrugged.

"They will declare me guilty whether I wait or not."

"You don't know that. You don't know what proof Captain Astalder may bring."

"What can he bring that I do not know already?"

"But we need to have hope. Believe that things will work out."

Thranduil laughed out loud. "Ever an optimist, aren't you, Peredhel?"

"Nothing wrong with having hope."

---

**Falathrim** (Sindarin, *Coast people*)—Sindar who lived near the sea with Cirdan as their lord.

**A/N:** After the War of Wrath ended, Maedhros and Maglor sneaked into the camp, killing few guards in the process, of the army of the West (from Valinor) and stole the two Silmarils that were recovered from Morgoth's crown. The two eldest sons of Feanor were discovered, and Maedhros and Maglor prepared to fight to the death rather than surrender the jewels. Eonwe (chief of Maiar and herald of Manwe), however, allowed the two brothers to leave with the jewels.
The Trial

Chapter Summary

Unexpected witnesses appear at the trial of Thranduil disrupting the procedure.

Chapter Notes

I apologize that this chapter is quite late. I had meant to upload it before leaving for a trip abroad, but things got too hectic. I had to divide this chapter into two due to length, but I hope to upload the second part soon. Thank you for your continued interest. :)

Grey Havens. November 1, Second Age 144

GIL-GALAD frowned as he listened to Captain Astalder’s report. The faces of the other lords were grim.

“We are certain the dragon is completely buried under the mountain, but something else broke through the piles of rocks and debris. We couldn’t find any trace of it, but whatever it was, it is not a dragon,” Captain Astalder said.

“Thranduil mentioned to us that the being who attacked him was not a dragon,” said Lord Cirdan. “But, he didn’t know what it was except that it was immensely powerful.” Cirdan’s voice was grave. “I am afraid we focused mainly on what happened between him and the other cadet.”

“As it should be,” said Celeborn. “We are about to determine the fate of Thranduil Oropherion. Should we not focus on the matter of what happened between the two cadets? Whether the creature was a dragon or not, that is a separate matter. If so, the matter in question is not what was at the ruin, but rather, was there a crime?” Celeborn, as he had done ever since entering the chamber, brought the topic back to Thranduil.

“I am aware of that, Lord Celeborn,” said Lammaeg. “But, it is important to know what we are dealing with.”

“I agree with Lord Celeborn, my lord. We’ll deal with the matter of the dragons and this other creature later. Tonight, we need to deal with Thranduil,” Captain Astalder said. “He cannot be kept indefinitely away from the cadets without explanation. And maybe he could tell us more about this unknown creature. Although I have my own speculation, I would like to hear from the one who actually faced it.”

“I agree with the captain,” said Lord Gilmagor. “Gwendir told me the cadets wonder why Thranduil is kept away. We could not command Saldor and Erfaron to silence as that would have made them wonder more. Until now, the cadets were given time off to grieve the loss of our two cadets, but their training will continue with the new moon. That is in eight days. If we are to keep this matter private, we cannot delay any longer. We must decide now.”
“Fine. Fine,” Lammaeg nodded. “We will come back to the matter of the dragon later.” He turned to the captain. “So, where is your witness? I have been told you brought someone with you.”

“I did bring someone, but my hope lies merely in her presence and not in what she can tell us. But, before I get to her, let me inform you, lords, that I believe there was a third person in the chamber with Thranduil and Gelir.”

“Third person? I don’t think I have heard this until now,” said Gil-galad as he watched the Sindarin lords sat up and leaned forward, their eyes glittering with interest. He was glad that they seemed surprised as well. He didn’t believe any of the Sindarin lords would keep any information from him, but Gil-galad was sure that they would go to any length to protect Thranduil.

“Lord Celebrimbor obtained the permission for few of us to follow Commander Duff and his warriors down to the bottom of the chasm to confirm the demise of the dragon. It gave me a chance to sneak into the Throne Room to investigate.” Astalder reached into the sack he brought and took out a piece of golden metal. “Among the rubbles and the bodies within the chamber, I found this.” Astalder raised it so that everyone in the room could see. “It was shredded by a dragon claw. I had one of our smiths use enchantments to put it back to its original state.” The piece of gold metal had an eight-pointed star embossed on it.

Lammaeg frowned darkly. “That is Feanor’s sigil.”

“Yes,” said the captain. “This is a piece of armor worn by an officer in Feanorian army, specifically one under Lord Maedhros’ command.” The captain pointed to the inner star gilded in gold. “Each son of Lord Feanor had their own color to mark the star emblem.”

“How is that possible? It makes even less sense,” Lammaeg said.

“Actually, my lord, it makes more sense as I already told you there were five dead Orc captains as well as three dead trolls and one dragonling. Gelir and Thranduil alone could not have faced them and survived. Not only was this third person under Lord Maedhros, but he was also an officer, a powerful one.”

“Could it not be possible that maybe there was a Feanorian armor inside the chamber? It was a Throne Room if I remember your report,” said Lammaeg. “Maybe the Dwarves had one of the Feanorian armor gifted by Maedhros’ people. They traded heavily with the Dwarves of the Blue Mountains.”

“If it was an armor traded for Dwarven goods, why would they have given away an armor worn by an officer. It would have been an unmarked armor. Besides, whoever killed the dragonling used alapentë on the beast,” Astalder said.

Gil-galad sucked in his breath. There was no doubt that whoever killed the dragonling, it was a Noldorin warrior, someone highly skilled and powerful. The Lord Commander and the captain exchanged knowing looks. Gil-galad was quite sure that both knew, or at least guessed, who the unknown warrior was.

“And you know who it is, do you not, captain?” the king asked. Astalder seemed to hesitate when Lammaeg spoke.

“There are very few warriors now who are capable of using such technique.” Lammaeg turned to Gilmagor. “You know most of anyone who is anybody worth noting in Maedhros and Maglor’s army, do you not, Lord Commander? Still, I didn’t think any of them had survived the destruction of Beleriand.”
Lord Gilmagor’s face turned dark, but if it was, it was gone in a moment before Gilmagor nodded. His face was grim, but the king could not read anything further from his swordmaster.

“Why would this follower of Maedhros be at the ruin?” Lammaeg asked. “It does not make any sense.”

“The real question is not why he was there, but whether he saw what happened between Thranduil and Gelir,” said Celeborn who turned to the captain. “Did you find him? Did you bring him here so he could tell us what had happened between Thranduil and Gelir?”

Celeborn seemed excited for the first time since they started this inquiry. Both Lord Cirdan and Istuion leaned in, their eyes focused. Had Thranduil not mentioned this third person to the Sindarin Lords? Gil-galad could see only one reason why Thranduil may not have mentioned this new person. Maybe the Noldorin warrior saw something that Thranduil did not want him to see. Maybe the Sinda was guilty after all.

“The Dwarves have buried the chasm under the stones of the ruined tower and the side of the mountain. Whatever fell down the cliff are buried under the stone. If this warrior fell, his body is buried under it, unless he escaped.”

“But there is a reason you believe he escaped,” Gil-galad said.

“I found this buried in the cliffside opposite the Throne Room.” Astalder took out what looked like a sharpened piece of curved steel.

Then, he took out from his sleeve a fine silver chain connected to what looked like a paw of an animal with three silver claws. He placed the steel piece next to his silver chain. The tip of the claw with the chains looked exactly like the piece of the curved steel Astalder found.

“So, you found him?” Celeborn asked.

“No, my lord. I combed the area, but I did not find any further trace of him. That is why I brought the woman.”

“What woman?” asked Lammaeg.

“Among the captured, besides the two cadets, there was a Green Elf from the destroyed village.”

“The Nandorin woman? How is she related to the Feanorian officer?” Lammaeg asked.

“It would have taken skill, stealth, and courage to infiltrate the King’s Isle which was crawling with Orcs and guarded by dragons. I could not see a reason why any Elf would want to go there unless he was looking for someone dear.”

“What are you saying, captain? A wood elf and one of our warriors?” Lammaeg frowned and shook his head. “What nonsense!”

“If you remember, my lord, during this past summer I mentioned about a young woman who was visiting the Green Elven village with a child? It was how we found the village. I told you then that one of my scouts who was tracking the woman got waylaid by this Elf in hunter’s outfit? Someone who seemed familiar with Silmacil training?”

“I remember. What makes you think that the warrior is the same person as the hunter?”

“It was only a feeling, but I had to confirm. The Silvan woman, after being rescued from the
Dwarven ruin, we had her stay with Lord Cirdan’s people at one of the villages near North Fort,” Astalder nodded to Lord Cirdan. “So, after I left the ruin, I located the woman. I found that she was, indeed, the same woman and that her husband was one of us, from Valinor. She told me Orcs came upon them unaware, killed their daughter and took her captive. The last thing that she saw as she was being dragged away was to see her husband being tortured by the Orcs.”

“Then, the hunter cannot be the same person as this warrior,” said Lammaeg. “One of us, from Valinor no less, marry a Silvan? Even if the kinslayer lost his mind and married this woman, if he were powerful enough to use alapentë and skilled enough to waylay a Silmacil, he would not have been defeated by mere Orcs.” Lammaeg shook his head.

“I agree with my uncle,” said Gil-galad. “It does not make sense that someone powerful enough to use alapentë would be so easily defeated by a group of Orcs.”

“According to Beril, the Silvan woman, her husband was already injured when the Orcs came. He was attacked by a young Elf…in king’s uniform.”

“I can tell you about that,” said Lord Istuion. “Thranduil left our camp to seek a kinslayer. He confessed that he did attack a Noldorin hunter, but it wasn't Thranduil who gave him the grievous wound.”

Istuion relayed what Thranduil had confessed, how he attacked the Noldo but was interrupted by his wife and his child.

“What is this? Why have I not heard this?” Lammaeg glared at Istuion.

Gil-galad glanced at the three Sindarin lords. Lord Cirdan closed his eyes, and Istuion dropped his head. Only Lord Celeborn sat undisturbed.

“It is irrelevant,” Celeborn said, his voice firm. “The hunter was a kinslayer. Thranduil lost his family at Menegroth and at Sirion, maybe even at the hands of this same warrior. Need you ask why the lad may have attacked him? But whether Thranduil attacked this kinslayer or not is irrelevant. Thranduil left him alive and was captured before he was able to return to the camp. What we need to focus is whether the Noldo saw Thranduil with Gelir and what happened between those two cadets. Until it is proven that Thranduil intended to kill Gelir, you cannot say that Thranduil committed the murder.”

“But, it goes to show that Thranduil is capable of violence that may have led him to kill, so, of course, it is relevant,” Lammaeg said.

“Beril said, her husband lost a lot of blood. She was preoccupied with his injury, thus surprised by the Orcs. Her daughter was killed in the attack. Even as injured as he was, he was able to fight off the Orcs until Beril was captured. The Orcs used her to distract him. And in his injured state, he was overwhelmed.”

“You think he managed to survive and went after her?” Gil-galad asked.

“I think I could answer that question as well,” said Lord Istuion. “Galion, the Silvan lad who survived the Orc onslaught on the village, ran away from our camp. I tracked the boy down to a small cottage hidden between a valley. I later learned that it was the home of his cousin who lived outside the village. There, I found Galion and a group of Orcs who were torturing a warrior. A hunter. He was badly wounded. All around the house, there were many dead bodies of Orcs. The hunter was unconscious for a few days. There…there was also a dead child. Galion and I buried her. Despite the serious loss of blood, the hunter recovered. He was crying out for his wife who, apparently, was taken, but it was already several days past, and I couldn’t leave Galion, and the
hunter unprotected...I didn’t think the Orcs would have kept her alive. When he was well enough to move, he disappeared during the night while Galion and I slept. So, it may very well be him. He was a Noldo from Valinor, yet he was stealthy enough to leave without my notice, and when I tried to look for him, I could not find any trace of him.”

“Did you see any gold plated armor in the house?” Astalder asked.

“No. But, I could tell he was a hardened warrior, not just one of the hunters like the Green Elves,” said Istuion.

“So, you believe this hunter is the one who may have been at the ruin?” Gil-galad asked.

“I do,” said Astalder. “I could not track this hunter-warrior. But, if he is the one and the same, and if he is alive, I was quite certain that he would be tracking Beril.”

“Is that the reason you brought her here?” Lammaeg asked.

Astalder nodded. “To make sure he would follow us, I had my warriors stay far enough away from the two of us while we traveled here. Unfortunately, if he was following, he stayed far back from us for me to notice him,” Astalder let out a sigh. “Either he mastered the stealth from the Green Elves, or it was only false hope.”

Gil-galad sat back on his seat and noticed the Sindarin lords doing the same.

“Then, is there anything else you could offer as evidence, captain?” Lammaeg asked.

“I am afraid, that is all.”

“Well, then,” Lammaeg sat up straight in his seat. “It seems to me, there isn’t any evidence to prove the innocence of the son of Oropher.”

“Neither is there any evidence to prove that Thranduil is guilty,” Celeborn said.

“You forget, Lord Celeborn, we have an eye witness to the murderous act by your youth,” Lammaeg countered.

“But there is no reasonable motivation as to why Thranduil would have done that? According to Thranduil, Gelir came at him with a sword. Whatever happened, it was self-defense.”

“And why would Gelir do that? You say there was no motive for Thranduil to kill Gelir, but there was also no motive on the part of Gelir to attack Thranduil. And who is to say your youth is telling the truth.”

“Thranduil does not lie!” Celeborn stood up, his fists clenched. “He is his father’s son. Oropher would die rather than utter falsehood to defend himself, and neither would his son.”

Lady Galadriel laid her hand on Celeborn’s sleeve which seemed to calm the irate Sindarin lord. Celeborn took in a quick breath and sat down.

“I could tell you Thranduil spoke no lies,” said Lady Galadriel. “I did not enter the room, but I was just outside when these lords had a meeting with Thranduil this morning. The lad may have held back, but I can assure you, there were no lies among what he said. And should you require it, I am sure I can provide three others beside the lords here who can vouch for me.”

“We wouldn’t presume to doubt your words, lady. Do we, lords?” Gil-galad looked around the
room. The lords in the room, each one, shook their heads. “Such rule applies to only those individuals that this court does not recognize unanimously. Well now. There are two opposing views, one given by Elrond who saw the accused kill and the word of the accuser who claims that the act was self-defense.”

“Actually, no, your Majesty,” Lord Istuion said. “Thranduil does not claim…”

“That’s enough, Lord Istuion,” Celeborn interrupted. “Thranduil had no choice. Therefore, this matter need not go to the council.”

“I believe we agreed that unless there was definite evidence otherwise, we would allow the council to decide,” said Lammaeg.

“You and I know well that the moment this matter goes to the council for the ruling, we are condemning Thranduil to death. Do you think anyone will care that the act was committed in self-defense?” asked Celeborn as he stood up. “The moment it is revealed that Thranduil had a hand in Gelir’s death, people will want his blood. At best, he will be labeled a kinslayer. He will be shunned as if he is the reincarnation of Morgoth. His life at Lindon will be over the moment this matter goes outside this chamber. We all know this. Please,” Celeborn turned to Gil-galad. “Let Thranduil return to his father unstained. Oropher will know of your mercy, and he will be grateful. Have you not wanted us all to be unified as one people? What better opportunity than this to show Oropher your good will? Your willingness to trust? Such trust and goodwill could only be returned. Show Thranduil trust, and you will be rewarded with the trust of the Sindar and the gratitude of Oropher. There is more at stake here than the life of one Sindarin youth. I believe you all know this.”

Gil-galad wanted to believe. The sting of the necklace incident had taught him that he needed to be more patient and more willing to trust, but just because it will be bad politically, should he ignore the crime and let the Sinda go? Gil-galad wanted to avoid having to send anyone to death. He knew Lord Cirdan was right, if they were to sentence Thranduil to death, it would only widen the rift between the Sindar and the Noldor.

After the discussion with the three Sindarin lords in the morning, Gil-galad realized how much importance they placed on Thranduil. While it was Elrond who had the royal blood of Thingol, it was Thranduil that these lords considered the last member of the Sindarin royalty. According to Lord Cirdan, it was Lord Arandur, Oropher’s father, who was next in line to be the king after Thingol as the eldest of the male line as he was the eldest son of Thingol’s brother Olwe. It was only because Lord Arandur refused the kingship claiming Lady Melian wanted Dior to inherit that the Sindar of Doriath accepted the half-elven Dior as their king. And maybe Celeborn was right, that Elrond did not know anything about Doriath, of Menegroth, of being what it meant to be a Sinda. Still, did not Thingol’s blood flow in Elrond? The blood of Luthien and the blood of the Maia Melian?

Besides, the banishment was hardly a punishment. Thranduil would just go and look for his father which was probably what the young Sinda wanted. Where was the justice in that? Gil-galad wanted peace and unity. But what about justice? Did not Gelir’s family deserve justice? Should he, as their king, sacrifice justice to keep peace in his kingdom?

As if Lammeg read Gil-galad’s mind, his uncle stood up and faced Celeborn.

“Should we sacrifice justice in the name of peace?” Lammeg asked.

“We are not asking you to find Thranduil innocent where his guilt is apparent. We are asking you to trust in his goodness where his guilt is only a speculation,” said Celeborn.

“I wouldn’t call Elrond’s words only speculation, Lord Celeborn.” Gil-galad frowned.
“Then, maybe you should ask again, Your Majesty,” said Celeborn. “When I spoke to him last, Elrond was not as firm in what he saw and heard. And now is the good time to ask as here he comes accompanying Thranduil.”

Thranduil walked in, his head held high. Gil-galad did not expect the Sinda to wear any look of contrition, but the king had at least expected Thranduil to look grave. Either Thranduil was, indeed, utterly innocent of the charge or the youth lacked any remorse for what he had done.

Thranduil was led to the middle of the chamber in front of the dais where the lords sat. Lord Lammaeg started the procedure by outlining the facts and the testimony given by Elrond and Astalder.

“How do you plead, Thranduil, son of Oropher?”

“Not guilty,” said Thranduil in an emotionless voice.

“You deny you had a hand in the death of Gelir, son of Amarthon?”

“No, sir,” said Thranduil. “My hands were used. I deny only that I willed my hands to do so.”

“Then, what is your contention? Accident? Self-defense as Lord Celeborn suggested? What evidence do you have?”

“I have none.”

“My lords, I have new information to submit,” Elrond stepped in front of the dais.

“Elrond!” Thranduil frowned shaking his head at Elrond, but the Half-Elven ignored the Sinda.

“There was a third person in the chamber. A Noldorin warrior named Astarno. He may have seen what happened between Thranduil and Gelir,” said Elrond.

Gil-galad felt Lord Gilmagor who sat next to him go rigid at the name. The Lord Commander glanced at the Captain Astalder who closed his eyes briefly, but the captain did not look surprised.

“Do you know this Astarno…” Gil-galad asked Astalder when the door to the Chamber of Council flung open.

“Unhand me!” A sound of displeasure boomed through the chamber as a Dwarf with a long white beard stomped into the room followed by an Elven guard who kept one hand on the upper arm of the Dwarf. “I’m here on an invitation, ye tree-loving Orcs!” the Dwarf barked at the two guards stationed inside the chamber who blocked him.

“What is the meaning of this!” Lammaeg shot up from his seat. “Who let the Dwarf in here?”

“Hmph! With an ill-bred Elf like ye as an elder, it is no wonder there are Orc-mannered young ones like this one.” The Dwarf pointed to Thranduil.

Astalder waved the other two guards away.

“My lords, if I may, this is Lord Onar, cousin to Lord Hanar of the Dwarves of the Blue Mountains. He was the one who had accompanied Thranduil and led him into the King’s Isle through the secret passageways,” said Astalder then turned to the Dwarf. “Welcome, Lord Onar. Thank you for coming. I had hoped to convince you to attend, but I did not dare hope…”

“Save yer fancy speech, Elf,” said Onar after he looked the captain of the Silmacil up and down. “I
had enough of ye and yer warrior pestering me. I am not here on yer request so ye can save yer
thanks!”

The Dwarf stomped toward Thranduil. Then, before anyone could say or do anything, the old Dwarf
rammed his helmeted head into Thranduil’ stomach. The young Sinda stumbled back and fell onto
the floor on his one knee.

Gil-galad found himself on his feet, so surprised he was by the Dwarf’s attack.

The guard who accompanied the Dwarf held the Dwarf back. Two guards from the door rushed in to
seize the Dwarf, but Captain Astalder gestured them back to their post.

With his hands on his hips, the Dwarf looked down at Thranduil who got back up slowly, clenching
his teeth.

Gil-galad could imagine how painful it must have been. The Dwarf’s helmet was made of a thick
slab of steel and carved with ridges.

“Well, laddie! What do ye have to say for yerself,” the Dwarf said, his hands on his thick waist.

But what surprised Gil-galad was not the Dwarf but Thranduil. Instead of insults or curses, Thranduil
stood up and inclined his head even as he grabbed his stomach.

“Perhaps I should not have, but I would do it again,” Thranduil said.

“Hmph! So, what did acting like a hero do for ye, hmm?” The Dwarf crossed his arms and looked
up at Thranduil.

“I wasn’t acting like anything. Things happened. It was what it was.”

The Dwarf shook his head and clucked his tongue. “Still arrogant as ever. Rash, brash and stubborn
as stone.” The Dwarf harrumphed. “I am here only because I heard ye killed that bastard. Because if
he was alive, I would have killed him meself.”

“What is the meaning of this?” Lammaeg looked down at the Dwarf then at Thranduil.

“I am not here to answer any questions except to tell ye that one of yer young ones killed my son and
injured me nephew. If one of yer warriors didn’t tell me this crazy lad,” Onar pointed to Thranduil,
”killed him and is being tried for his murder, I would not have come all the way here.”

“My warrior?” Astalder asked, his forehead pinched. The Dwarf, however, seemed unconcerned
with the captain whatsoever.

“Yer young one commanded the Orcs to kill me son and nephew.”

“What nonsense are you blabbering?” Lammaeg countered. “Thranduil Oropheron may be a
murderer, but he is an Elf. No Elf commands Orcs or colludes with them!”

“Not this one,” Onar pointed to Thranduil. “The other one. Buri said the Elf in the same uniform as
this one here ordered the Orcs to attack.”

“Preposterous! You are telling us that one of us not only worked with the Orcs but commanded them
to kill? What evidence is there of such nonsense?”

“I don’t need evidence,” growled the Dwarf. “My nephew said so, over my son’s dead body, in the
name of me ancestors. That is enough for me.”
“Maybe that is enough for you, but in our court, justice requires that we check for the reliability of the information we gather, and as such, we require the presence of your nephew along with three witnesses who will stake their name and reputation for the words he will give as he lacks credentials with this court.”

The Dwarf puffed up his stomach and held up his head high.

“I am a Dwarf. And unlike ye Elves, the words given in the name of me ancestors are as true as any steel mined under the mountains. Me son lies dead and me nephew barely alive. And according to him, one of yer cadets broke off from fighting the dragon and asked them to take him to the King’s Isle.”

Onar proceeded to tell how his nephew Buri and his son Loni helped this cadet get to the King’s Isle only to be betrayed, how the cadet ordered the Orcs to kill them and went inside accompanied by the Orcs.

“The statement is preposterous and unacceptable,” said Lammaeg and looked about the chamber as if to seek support.

“I, too, believe there was something wrong with Gelir,” said the captain. “I wouldn’t go as far as to state that Gelir worked with the Orcs as Lord Onar stated, but there was definitely something odd with Cadet Gelir. Elrond, have you found anything while I was away?”

“Sir! I went about the cadets to gather as much information on Gelir as I could. But the only thing I could gather was that last Fall he was lost beyond the northern border. He returned two moons later, but that is about it. According to those cadets who knew Gelir, he changed, but not in any drastic way. Just that he was aloof and quiet.”

“I remember hearing about him and his accident. Lieutenant Gwendir told me of him,” said Lord Gilmagor. “But, such a change is to be expected on someone who had experienced severe injury.”

“Still, I think we should hear from the cadets as to Gelir. Especially now that we have this statement from Lord Onar,” Astalder suggested.

“Absolutely not.” Thranduil suddenly spoke up. Everybody turned to the young Sinda. “I will not have any of the cadets involved in this matter. This is my trial. I believe I have a say as to who will testify on my behalf.”

“Thranduil, there would be no harm to you to hear what the cadets have to say about Gelir,” said Celeborn.

“I do not care if their statement will harm me or benefit me. I will not have any cadets involved in this trial.”

Gil-galad watched as Elrond moved closer to Thranduil.

“Be reasonable, Thranduil. If Gelir had something to hide, this would only benefit your stance that he attacked you,” Elrond said as he frowned.

But, Thranduil shook his head firmly.

“No.”

“For once, Thranduil Oropherion is right,” said Lammaeg. “There are no reasons to involve the cadets. Even if they testify as to how changed Gelir was, it is only speculation. They did not witness
what had happened in the chamber with Gelir and Thranduil. Only a statement by someone who witnessed what happened there is relevant. Any statement by anyone else would only be a conjecture. At the moment, only witnesses who had seen and heard what happened in that chamber are Elrond and Captain Astalder.”

Elrond’s shoulders sagged. Gil-galad wondered what Elrond was feeling. The king turned to the captain of the Silmacil and found the captain glancing at the guard who had accompanied the Dwarf. The guard who had stepped away from the Dwarf stood apart, behind a column, barely noticeable among the shadows. He took a step forward and moved toward the Dwarf when the door burst open.

“I will be heard!” the Elven woman said in Silvan tongue as she ran into the room followed by two Falathrim guards. Astalder stepped in before the Falathrim guards and the two guards inside the chamber could grab the woman.

Astalder blocked her from entering further in the chamber.

“You cannot be here,” the captain said to her. “Wait at the other room, please.”

But the Silvan woman faced the captain.

“I traveled all the way here so I can see this Elf get punished,” said the woman in Silvan tongue as she pointed to Thranduil.

Gil-galad was taught all the different dialects of Sindarin, but her accent sounded thick and foreign to his ears. “Who is this, captain? Is she the woman you brought?”

“She is not to give any statement, sire,” said Astalder, but when he turned to the king, the woman dashed past Astalder and approached the dais.

“Hear me, lords. This Elf, this youth, is a killer. I demand justice!” There was desperation in her eyes.

“What do you know of him?” Celeborn asked the woman in Silvan. “Do you not understand what your husband may have done to this youth? Can you not understand his grief?”

“And what do you know of my husband, my lord, that you would say such a thing to me,” the woman shot back. “He is the noblest, kindest and the gentlest person I know. But this young warrior attacked him unprovoked. I know my husband. He wouldn’t even kill Orcs until they tried to harm others. My husband took the arrow that I would have used on this attacker to protect this...this violent youth even as he bled from the wound this youth gave him.”

Astalder moved forward. “Forgive this intrusion. Please ignore this woman. Her statements are irrelevant to this trial.” He reached for the Green Elf. "Please, you must leave."

“Let her be, captain. Let’s hear what she has to say,” said Gil-galad.

Astalder pursed his lips, but he stepped aside.

Gil-galad looked at Thranduil who unlike the moment before stood there, behind the woman, his head hanging, his face dark and sorrowful.

“I speak the truth. Ask him,” the woman turned to Thranduil. “Do you deny it?”

Elrond’s face contorted with a deep frown. “Thranduil?”
Thranduil looked up, his eyes shimmering. The Sinda shook his head. “No. I do not deny it,” said he, his voice subdued and filled with pain.

“I want this Elf to pay for what he has done. He hurt my husband, caused the death of my child. And maybe even the death of my husband. He is a killer. It was his fault. I want his life for the life of my child and for my husband.”

“My lord, the issue at hand has nothing to do with what happened with her husband,” Astalder said. “She is grieved at the loss. It is her grief speaking.”

But, there was so much emotion in what she said, Gil-galad’s heart was moved.

As if she felt the king’s heart listening, the Silvan woman threw herself down at the feet of Gil-galad, tears streaming down her face. “Give me his life. Give me justice,” she pleaded.
**Verdict**

Chapter Summary

Gil-galad makes his decision.

**THRANDUIL** knew somehow this was coming. This was judgment for the wrongs he caused, the countless death that he caused. He was not guilty of Gelir’s death, but there were other deaths. So many had died at Menegroth. And at Sirion.

And, Thranduil could tell Beril’s pleading had reached the king. The young Sinda waited, with clenched fists, for the verdict that will pronounce him guilty.

“No, Beril.” Someone said.

Thranduil looked up. It was the guard who had come with the Dwarf. He took the helmet off his head. The guard’s face which Thranduil had not noticed before became defined as if a mist that lay there melted away by the morning sun.

Captain Astalder let out a breath as if his soul would weep, a cry of a warrior who had lost a dear companion at war. He shook his head, then closed his eyes.

Thranduil frowned as he recognized the face. Onar harrumphed loudly next to him as Elrond gasped.

The guard was not just some unknown face. It was Astarno. He moved forward. Beril who sat at the foot of the dais turned to look, then stood up, her face brightening. “Faro?”

“He is not the killer. I am,” said Astarno. “I tried to tell you. What I told you before...It was the truth, Beril. I am the killer. The lad is innocent. He attacked me to get revenge, and even then, I knew he wouldn’t be able to do it. He is not a killer, Beril. Not like me.” The guard’s eyes filled with tears.

“Faro, what are you saying?” the woman ran to the guard and wiped away his tears, standing on her tiptoe to reach his face.

“I have been telling you for years, and you wouldn’t listen. Dear Beril. You always only listened to what you wanted to hear,” the guard smiled, teary-eyed. “I am a kinslayer. I was there, at Menegroth, at Sirion where the lad’s mother died.”

Beril shook her head.

“You were telling me that to keep me away, so I would leave you alone. So, I would go back to my people.”

“No, Beril. I was telling you the truth.”

Beril shook her head hard, her lips firm.

“You are not! You can’t be. You saved me. You even saved those young Dwarves and others. Many others. You...you are good. You are not a killer.”
“I’ve tried. To save as many as I could. But I had a duty to protect my charges, and when their lives were threatened, I fought to protect them. And I have killed, Beril. My hands are stained with the blood of kin.”

“No!” the woman shook her head again. “This is one of your nightmares talking. You are confused, Faro.” She grabbed his hands. “It is all right. I will take care of you.”

Astarno’s face crumpled with grief. “No one can take care of me now.” He dropped his head. “I should not have let you near me. I am sorry. I am sorry I could not protect you. I could not…could not protect our baby…. Forgive me.” The guard fell onto his knees. “Forgive me!”

The woman looked lost. Thranduil’s heart broke seeing the confusion in her eyes, the lines marred with grief and disbelief.

“You are not a kinslayer!” She looked around wildly as if to seek confirmation. “He is not a kinslayer!” The king and the lords turned their eyes away. Beril turned to him, and Thranduil could not face her. He, too, turned away.

“No! No!” She screamed. Thranduil turned back to watch her beat Astarno’s hunched head. “You brought your doom upon us, to my village and to our baby. How could you! How could you!”

Her cries rent Thranduil’s heart in two. The loss in them, the grief in them, the outrage and pain in them shook the walls of the chamber and the hearts of those within.

Thranduil’s heart raced as his body shook. Beril’s wailing was the wailing of the thousands of voices of those lost at Menegroth, her hands were those lost at Sirion. How many were lost because of what he himself had done? What he had not done. Was it any less than what Astarno had committed? What right did he have to judge Astarno? Thranduil had wanted Astano to suffer, but to see the Noldo lose everything, his child, his love…because of him, it bled his heart. If Eru had meant this as punishment, it was cruel indeed. For now, at this moment, Thranduil did not see himself in Beril, but rather in Astarno.

Someone moved and took Beril away. Thranduil looked up and watched as Captain Astalder carried Beril out of the chamber as she cried out as if her heart was shattered. As her wailing faded, Elrond moved over to Astarno and placed his arm around Astarno’s shoulder as if to lend strength to the Noldorin warrior who sat kneeling on the floor, his hands balled on his knees. Astarno’s face was blank, hollow like a tree whose roots had dried up and was lifeless.

Thranduil wondered whether Elrond would show him such kindness if the Half-Elven knew what he had done at Menegroth or even at Sirion where he had left Elrond and his brother forgotten in a cave too mired in his own grief and loss.

Something pulled at his heart, and Thranduil found himself standing next to the kinslayer. Elrond looked up, his eyes wary. The Half-Elven tightened his arm around Astarno protectively. But, Thranduil did not look at Elrond. For the first time, Thranduil realized that he was no different from Astarno. He was guilty of the death of many lives, those at Menegroth, those at Sirion, the loss of the twin princes, and his mother. But, his guilt didn’t stop there. He was also guilty of the death of that innocent child, and those of the Green Elves at that village. What made him think he was better? That he had a right to judge this Noldorin warrior?

And this Noldo, he didn’t need to reveal himself, didn’t need to risk his life or the love of his wife. If he was Astarno, would he have done as much?

Elrond helped Astarno to stand. Astarno took in a breath, then turned and met Thranduil’s eyes.
“What happened was not your fault, young one. Do not add my burden to yours. What Eru took from me, he took as a payment for those that I have taken.”

Astarno’s gray eyes misted. He closed his eyes, then took in a long breath. Then, with a determined look on his face, Astarno turned to the lords.

“If you will allow me to speak, I will tell you what happened in the chamber as I have seen it. It is a grave matter, more serious than the death of the cadet.”

Gilmagor signaled the two guards standing by the door to leave the room.

“Do not allow anyone else to disturb us,” Lord Commander ordered the guards as they opened the door. Captain Astalder stepped inside as the guards left the chamber.

“Please excuse the interruptions, my lords,” said Astalder. “I had told the Falathrim guards outside this chamber to allow to pass any guard who may seek an audience.”

Astarno turned to the Captain of the Silmacil. “You expected me?”

“I did. But I did not know you would bring Lord Onar. As for Beril, I am truly sorry. I did not expect her to interrupt us. I would not have her restrained or guarded. I had only asked her to wait in the next room. I did not think… I should have known better.”

Astarno dropped his head. “That does not matter now.” Then, he picked up his head and spoke to the lords. “I convinced Lord Onar to come here because I had hoped his testimony would be enough. But, I see that it isn’t. Then, hear me, lords, for I have seen it with my own eyes what happened in that chamber. The lad told the truth. Gelir did attack this lad. At least the thing that had taken Gelir’s body did. The one who tried to kill Thranduil, the one Thranduil killed was not Gelir. I would stake my life on it.”

“Take Gelir’s body?” The king asked.

“It was someone powerful. And evil. I tried to kill it, but it blasted me with some sort of force. I fell off the cliff but managed to cling onto a chain. Thranduil must have stabbed it afterward because it screamed and fell off. I saw it turn into a bat, but the creature was wounded. It could not maintain the bat form for long although the wings lasted longer to soften the fall. And there were spiders. They spun webs upon webs. He fell onto it, but I saw a spirit split from the body and flew back up onto the Throne Room…”

“Are you telling me you saw the spirit form of the creature?” Gil-galad interrupted.

“Those of us who had looked upon the light of the Trees of Valinor could see both the world of the living as well as the spirits,” said Galadriel. “

“Apparently, that ability is what separates us who were born on Middle Earth from those of the Noldor who are born in Aman,” said Celeborn. “So, are you telling me, this form, this spirit took Gelir’s body?”

“I believe so.”

“Believe? I thought you have seen it?” Gil-galad frowned.

“I was injured by the creature. I tried climbing up the cliff, but it took time. I did not see the spirit taking over Gelir’s body, but I do remember seeing a spirit come out of Gelir and enter the body which was encased in a dragon egg.”
“I do not understand. Can you explain from the beginning?” Lord Cirdan asked.

Astarno explained what happened at the Throne Room prompting Thranduil to confirm as he told the story of the body inside what looked like a gigantic dragon egg.”

“So, you are telling us that a spirit came out of the body of Gelir to enter the body held in the dragon egg? And this spirit was not Gelir’s fëa?” Gil-galad frowned mightily as he asked.

“No. Gelir’s fëa was weak, but it remained with him.”

“This is outrageous! There is no power on Arda that could take another’s body without consent. Why would Gelir give consent to this spirit?”

“Because Gelir thought he would not recover,” said Astarno. “When I found him up in the North at the end of the past Summer, Gelir was dying. He had fallen off a cliff. His body was shattered beyond repair. Had I been late to his side mere seconds, no amount of elixir I had, nor the healing enchantment, would have saved him. Even with what I could render, it should have extended his life for only a short while. But, instead of fading as I expected, Gelir miraculously got better, enough that I was able to take him home with me when the dawn broke. I thought it was a miracle; that, Valar were watching over him.” Astarno sighed. “But in hindsight, I may have been led to where Gelir was. I would not have known, nor would have seen Gelir’s body among the boulders if it hadn’t been for the Orcs that attacked me. The sun had fallen, and the darkness was descending on the plains when a group of Orcs suddenly attacked me. I had prepared my catch to make it easier to carry and had climbed up a tree to rest before returning home. Orcs would not have been able to find me. And yet, they knew exactly where I was. And I realize now that they may have been leading me. I don’t chase after Orcs that run away, but these Orcs, as they ran away from me, shouted to each other to leave me alone and get an easier prey who had just fallen off a cliff and was too weak to fight them off. It was by chasing these Orcs that I found Gelir. Once I found the youth, the Orcs scattered into the night.”

“If Gelir was, indeed as you claim, taken over by another spirit, would you not have known it then?” Lammaeg asked.

“Not if it had already taken possession. I only noticed that Gelir’s fëa was weak and fading. I didn’t detect any other. Maybe if I had purposely looked for it, but I had no reason to think such had taken place.”

“Lord Gilmagor, you have interacted with the cadets few times. Have you noticed anything unusual with Gelir?” Lammaeg asked.

Gilmagor shook his head. “I did not know him except as Erfaron’s warrior companion. I remember him as quiet and…” Gilmagor shrugged. “I did probe him once, but I did not find anything other than his own fëa which was fading.” Gilmagor turned to Lord Istuion. “You remember, Lord Istuion? That time when you found Gelir unconscious?”

Lord Istuion nodded although he did not say a word.

“I would not have invaded his privacy by probing him, but I feared for Gelir’s fëa when I saw how heavy he was. I had reached into Gelir’s mind, but he was too weak for me to wake him. If there was another spirit within him, I should have felt it. But, there was no other. At least, not at that time.”

Lammaeg turned to Astarno. “If what you say is true, Lord Gilmagor should have felt something when he probed the cadet. Do you have any evidence to counter Lord Gilmagor?”
“No, my lord,” said Astarno. “I did not probe Gelir. I did not have a reason to doubt the condition of his spirit, so I concentrated only on healing his physical injuries.”

“So, you do not know with certainty that Gelir’s body was possessed by some other spirit,” said Lammaeg. “In other words, your presupposition was only conjecture.”

“I cannot say with certainty as to whether another spirit took hold of Gelir prior to this incident at the Dwarven ruin. But at the ruin, I am certain his body was possessed by another spirit who later took his own body, the one I fought, and the one this lad stabbed and threw off the cliff.”

“Well, there you have it, Lord Lammaeg,” said Celeborn. “You wanted someone who had actually seen what happened. Here is your witness.”

“But why should we believe you?” Lammaeg asked Astarno.

Astarno frowned, then lifted his head. “I am Astarno, son of Sartawë. I was a captain of the army under Lord Maedhros. I speak as a warrior of honor and as one of the Noldor.”

“What is your word but that of a kinslayer?” Lammaeg’s voice was cold. “Who would vouch for you, one whose hands are tainted with blood of your kin?”

Astarno dropped his head.

“Lord Lammaeg, you knew Lord Sartawë. You knew he was an Elf of honor.” Lord Gilmagor frowned.

“Yes. I knew Lord Sartawë. But, I do not know his son, the one who followed Maedhros to Menegroth, then to Sirion.” Lammaeg scoffed. “Besides, he is not known to all the members of this court,” Lammaeg gestured toward the Sindarin lords. “Therefore, he must have three who will vouch for his character or his testimony is not acceptable.”

Thranduil felt Elrond bristle next to him. The Half-Elven clenched his fists.

“I will vouch for him, my lord,” Elrond cried out. “He protected my brother and I while we were with Lord Maedhros and Maglor. He had been a friend as well as our protector. I know him to be an Elf of principle.”

“And I, too,” said Astalder as he stepped in front of Astarno. “Astarno had been a friend to me since childhood. We have trained together, became warriors together. I know him like a brother.”

Astarno looked up. His eyes shimmered as he flashed Astalder a tearful smile which the Captain of Silmacil returned. They did not say anything to each other but understanding flowed between them.

Elrond rounded his eyes and stared, first at Astalder, then at Astarno. Thranduil was sure that Elrond knew something he did not. Thranduil wondered whether Astalder had killed as Astarno had. Maybe not at Menegroth and Sirion, but surely at Alqualondë.

“That still leaves one more person. Do you have anyone else who will vouch for your character?” Lammaeg asked Astarno.

“I understand, my lord, the requirement of the law, but the witness has risked his life and the love of his mate to give his testimony. Does that not say enough of his character?” Astalder offered. “He followed knowing where I led him.” Astalder turned to Astarno. “Did you not?”

“I did. But, I did not mean to reveal myself,” Astarno dropped his head.
“You may not have planned it, but you did,” Elrond said. “You risked your life even though you knew saying nothing would have saved you.”

“Perhaps that is so,” said Lammaeg. “But the law dictates, if the witness is not known unanimously by the entire court, the testimony cannot be accepted as truth unless the character of the witness is attested by at least three people. So, I will ask again. Is there another who will vouch for your character?”

Astarno sucked in a long breath, his eyes closed. “No. I do not know of any other.”

“Well, then I am afraid, we can’t just take your word.”

“Hmmph!” The Dwarf who had watched silently a few steps from Thranduil suddenly cleared his throat loudly. “Is this the famed Elven wisdom? Mahal be damned if I stand here and watch any more of this! A word of a warrior means nothing? Pah! What foolishness!”

“You will do well to keep silent, Dwarf! In fact, your part in this is no more. You are welcome to leave. Please allow our guards to show you out. Guards!”

Two guards answered Lammaeg’s call.

“Show this Dwarven lord out,” Lammaeg commanded.

“If any one of yer guards touches me, they will know what it is to face a Dwarf. I am not done. My son was killed by this cadet of yers. This matter involves me kin. I will know exactly who this Gelir was, and exactly who was responsible for my son’s death. I will be satisfied, or by the name of Mahal, me kin and I shall wrench it out of ye!”

“Is that a threat?” Lammaeg frowned.

The guards stepped forward toward the Dwarf, but the king waved them away.

“That is enough, Lord Lammaeg,” Gil-galad said. “Forgive my councilor, Lord Onar. We knew this only as a matter that dealt with one of our own. We were not aware of your personal loss. Please, accept our condolences.”

“We are indeed sorry for your loss,” Lord Cirdan said. “But this is a trial regarding the guilt or innocence of one of our own. If there is no further information you can provide to us regarding this trial, perhaps your grievances can be properly addressed by the king and the council at a later time. Will you not give us time to conclude this matter at hand?”

The Dwarf cleared his throat loudly again but seemed appeased by the words of the king and Lord Cirdan. Onar rounded his shoulders then walked over to stand next to Astarno.

“I interrupted because I, too, will vouch for the character of this Noldo.”

Thranduil and the everyone within the chamber turned to Onar.

“Ye obviously do not remember me,” Onar said to Astarno. “But, I remembered ye when ye used to come to our city during the time of me uncle when the Throne Room was filled with the wealth of me ancestors. Ye treated me with honor despite me harsh words. I was young then. Hmmph. And that time, when Orcs first came near our city just after the majority of me people migrated eastward, the two young Dwarves ye saved, the ones that the lass mentioned, they were me son and me nephew. I was too busy fighting the Orcs, and when I was done, ye were gone. Why did ye think I bothered to listen to ye when I would not listen to him,” Onar pointed to Captain Astalder. “I
recognized ye.” Then, Onar turned to those around him. “I thought ye Elves would be wiser, would know when the words spoken are true. I suppose ye don’t see all or know all. Now, I want to know more about this creature, for it is this creature that had killed me son.”

“Well, Lord Lammaeg,” Celeborn rose from his seat. “You have your three attestations. Gelir was not himself, and he attacked Thranduil. Thranduil fought against this unknown enemy who had taken over Gelir’s body. Alone with barely any help. Thranduil should be commended not executed.”

“I agree. If there are no other objections, Thranduil should be cleared of this charge of murder of kin,” Lord Cirdan added.

“Lord Lammaeg? You have any other objections?” Gil-galad asked. “Because I agree that if there are no other objections, I do not see the reason to continue with this charge.”

Lammaeg stared at Thranduil, and the Sinda met the councilor’s eyes.

“I suppose although we will need to hear more from both Captain Astarno and Thranduil Oropherion regarding this creature.”

“I want to hear about it as well,” said Onar.

“Thranduil Oropherion,” Gil-galad made his pronouncement. “You are absolved of any and all charges laid against you for the death of Gelir Amarthion.”

Thranduil blinked. He could not believe it. He had expected banishment, if not death, his name tainted and unable ever to see the other cadets ever again.

“And you are to join the cadets on their training which will resume in eight days’ time,” said Gilmagor. “Both you and Elrond are forbidden to talk of this matter with others outside this chamber. Is that understood?”

“Sir!” Elrond flashed Thranduil a bright smile, and Thranduil found himself smiling as well.

“Now, regarding that creature, do you have any idea what it was that you encountered?” Gil-galad asked Thranduil, then at Astarno.

“The dragon, she called the creature the favorite of her master, chief of his armies, a sorcerer and a necromancer.” Thranduil tried to remember what the dragon had said.

Someone gasped. A sudden silence made Thranduil stop and look around at the lords and the warriors. It was as if they froze where they sat and stood.

“Can it be?” Lammaeg was the first to speak. His face was pale and drained of blood.

“Elros said Morgoth was chained and taken away, but not all his servants were apprehended.” Lord Cirdan stood up, his hands behind his back. “I had hoped, at least, he had been taken.”

“So, it is true,” said Onar. “When the nameless fear spread deep inside our old city, I had feared the worst, but I had hoped it was not that.” The Dwarf groaned softly. “Well, what will the Elves do about it?”

“What do you expect us to do?” Lammaeg asked the Dwarf. “I understand the dragon is buried in the ruin of your old city, but according to Captain Astalder, something had escaped from underneath it. It must be Gorthaur. But as of now, the Orcs within the ruin are all dead. I have been told only a
“And based on what we have heard from Thranduil and Astarno, we could assume that Gorthaur is unable at the moment to do any further harm. He has no army and what remains of them are scattered. But we will keep watch, rest assured,” the king said. “Also, Lord Onar, I understand there were some misunderstandings from your kin as to our involvement in your old city. I hope you understand now that there were no ulterior motives on our part.”

The Dwarf nodded. “I will convey to my cousin what I have seen and heard here today.”

“I am grateful,” said Gil-galad. “We would need to work together if we are to keep this evil at bay so that there will be no further incidents such as this that happened at your ruin.”

“Thranduil and Elrond,” Lord Gilmagor said. “Both of you are dismissed.”

It was clear to Thranduil that the lords had more to discuss, but he and Elrond were not invited. It was fine by him. He could not wait to get out of this stale air and be out in the open.

“What will happen to Astarno?” Elrond asked.

“That is none of your concern,” said Lammaeg. “It is a matter for the council.”

Thranduil could tell Elrond was not done, but Astalder took hold of Elrond’s arm and pushed him, along with Thranduil, toward the door.

“Go on, now, Elrond. Later,” the captain whispered.

------

**Gorthaur** (Sindarin, Terrible Dread)-is the name used by Sindar to refer to Sauron. Sauron is a Quenya word meaning 'The Abhorred.' Mairon is Sauron's name in Quenya he was given while he was a Maia under Aule which means 'The Admirable.' And, Mairon was the name Sauron himself used. These other names (including Sauron) were used by others. Among his many names are Necromancer, The Abhorred Dread, Nameless Dread, The Enemy and The Shadow.

**A/N:** Regarding fēa (spirit or soul), according to LOTR, Gandalf states that the Elves who had seen the light of the two trees (lived at Valinor during the time of the Two Trees) “live at once in both worlds,” both the seen and the unseen. I took to mean that they can see the spirits as well. However, as Sauron hid within a body that already had a spirit, they would not have been able to tell there was another until someone chose to look deeper. As Elves (in my story) value the privacy of others, they would not have chosen to probe someone unless they felt the need for it.
Gil-galad rendered judgment on Astarno. The king still has much to decide about what is to come. Thranduil dreams.

Chapter Notes

This chapter is where I originally wanted to end Part 1, but because the story changed so much, I had to remove some chapters I had originally planned. I want to weave them back into the story as it will tie up some loose ends and give you more glimpse of what each character will be doing before we get to the later time in the Second Age. I hope no one minds.

Grey Havens. November 1, Second Age 144

GIL-GALAD watched Lord Onar leave followed by Lord Istuion. Now that the matter of Thranduil was dismissed, Lord Istuion had no place in the Council of the White Ring.

“What more can you tell us about this Shadow of the Great Enemy, this Sauron.” Lammaeg turned to Astarno. “You said you saw him fall onto the spider webs. What happened to the body if his spirit had taken over Gelir?”

“The spiders took the body with them after covering a portion of the chasm with their webs. After Gelir’s body fell and I saw two spirits leave his body: one to the West, another to the bottom of the cliff beyond the spider webs. I didn’t see more after that.”

“Is it possible that Sauron’s body is killed? He is a Maia and cannot be killed, but his body can be harmed.” Lammaeg sounded hopeful.

“I do not know, my lord. I could not see through the spider webs, but I am sure his body was injured enough that he did not seek to destroy us. Had he been well enough, he could have easily destroyed all of us in the Throne Room. We would have been easy enough targets for him to eliminate, then and there. But he did not. Mayhap he was too weak to do so.”

“And Thranduil had done it. A deed that not even many Noldor could boast of,” said Celeborn, his chin raised.

“You would like to think that, Lord Celeborn, but most likely, Captain Astarno had wounded him severely, enough for your youth to push him off the cliff,” said Lammaeg with a harrumph.

“It still doesn’t change the fact that it was Thranduil who pushed him off the cliff which injured him enough to stop him from doing further damage.”

Gil-galad sighed knowing an argument was brewing. Perhaps now was the time to talk of the
prophecy his dream. The king saw that they needed unity more than ever. But as he opened his
mouth, Lady Galadriel spoke.

“The shadow of the Great Enemy wakes. Instead of the peace we had hoped for, it will again be war
upon war.” Lady Galadriel shook her fair head. “When will the Spring come? When will there be
green leaves on the trees?” Then she looked upon Lammaeg and her husband. “The Shadow rises
again. Will you not stand together to face it?”

“The lady speaks truly,” said Gilmagor. “We do not have the time to argue among ourselves. We
need to do everything we can to make sure the Shadow does not have time to reorganize. His body is
injured, but he will recover.”

“Yes, his body will recover,” Lammaeg said. “But if he had used the cadet’s body, he will know that
we are well armed, that our walls are tall and strong. And it will take time for him to breed enough
Orcs to attack us openly now that his creatures at the ruin are destroyed.”

“What do you think, Captain?” Gil-galad asked Astalder.

“Based on the information we have on him, Sire, we know Sauron is careful. He works mostly
through deception rather than destruction as his master had done. He will not attack us openly until
he has gathered enough strength. But in the meantime, he may try to infiltrate us as he had done
through Gelir. We must find a way to make sure that does not happen again.”

“That was a problem we had not foreseen,” said Lammaeg. “We should do a thorough examination
of our soldiers. I do not believe any Elf would willingly give himself to Sauron or to any evil for that
matter, but if the Shadow managed to do it once, there is a chance he could do it again. We should
implement Onen Calad more often. Make it a requirement for the military all through their training as
well as for our people. The weaker our minds are, the more susceptible are we to trickery. We should
start with the cadets. Right now.”

“They are weary with grief, Lord Lammaeg. They will need some time. And if we suddenly
implement a new procedure without an occasion that calls for it, it will arouse suspicion.” Gilmagor
turned to the king. “Perhaps we can implement it as part of their field training. I will discuss it with
Lieutenant Gwendir as how best we could do that.” Gilmagor turned to Astalder. “But, even more
important than that, we should have Silmacil track Sauron, Your Majesty. If there is any way we
could get rid of his body before he could fully recover, there is a chance we can suppress him before
his power becomes great again. If we are successful, this may be a chance to rid ourselves of him
permanently. At the least, it may delay him giving us time to strengthen ourselves further.”

The other lords nodded in agreement.

“Then I charge Silmacil to track this Shadow,” said Gil-galad to Astalder. “Destroy him if you can.
At least cripple him enough that we can further strengthen our forces before he regains his strength to
become a danger to the free people.”

“I hear, and I obey,” Astalder straightened.

“We are already half into Fading, and the Winter will be arriving soon. You will need to rest as well
as to gather provisions. How long will it take you to be ready?” Gilmagor asked, his voice grave and
dark.

“The longer we take, harder it will become. We will take a few days to gather supplies and
provisions and shall leave before the week ends,” said Astalder.
Then, Astalder knelt before Gil-galad surprising the king. The captain did not kneel as a warrior would before his king, but rather like a prisoner seeking mercy.

“Sire, I beseech you for a favor if you have ever valued my service. Allow me to take Astarno as part of my team. Let him pay his debts by serving our realm as he once had. He was once Silmacil and served your grandfather and father. But, it is not just out of whim that I ask this. Astarno knows the north, better than any one of us. His skill will help us greatly in tracking the Enemy.”

Lammaeg frowned greatly.

“You know better, captain, than to ask for that. He must be brought before the General Council.”

“And what would the council do, my lord, except to judge him for what he did centuries ago out of loyalty to those who led him? What good is killing him? Is that not a slaying of kin as well? If he is to pay for his sins, what better way is there than to give his life to protect those whom he had wronged by his acts? What better way is there for him to be punished than to accompany us, do what he was trained to do? There will not be many who will return from this mission. Please, if he is to face death, let him face it with dignity. For the centuries of service he had given as Silmacil before he left to join Lord Maedhros, does he not deserve this mercy?”

Gil-galad swallowed. He had not thought of how dangerous this task may turn out to be. He turned to the lords. Lammaeg dropped his head as silence again descended in the chamber.

“This incident is to be kept silent,” Lord Cirdan who had sat quietly spoke. “It would look strange to bring Astarno to the council. How will you explain his presence in Grey Havens? They will ask him why he risked his life to enter our city. What is he to tell them?”

“I would have thought the Sindar would want him tried for the slaying of their kin?” Lammaeg’s voice was subdued.

“We may want it, but it is not what is best for us,” said Celeborn and turned to Lady Galadriel who smiled as if to encourage the Sindarin lord. “We do not wish his blood on our hands. At least, I can speak for those at Harlindon.”


“Then, I will not disagree if his Majesty is to rule so,” said Lammaeg.

“What of your wife?” Gil-galad asked Astarno when his swordmaster also nodded.

Astarno, who had watched with a solemn face that the king could not read, shook his head. “I do not believe she will want to see me now. And even if she did, it would be best for her that I do not stay. Whether the court decides to be merciful or not, she is better off without my doom to cloud her. I ask, if I am allowed that, that you be merciful to her and her needs and keep her safe.”

“She lives on this land; she is my subject. You need not worry about her wellbeing. Will you submit to my authority?”

Astarno knelt next to Astalder. “My life is no longer mine. I go where you will it. Command me, and it shall be done.”

“They, go, Astarno, son of Sartawë. You are now under the authority of Captain Astalder. I charge you with the finding of this Enemy. Defeat him if you can or die trying. Whatever happens, we leave it to the will of the Valar.”
Astarno and Astalder got up. They straightened.

“Sir!” they said in unison, then thumped their heart twice before leaving the chamber.

“I hope his doom does not follow him to North,” said Lammaeg. “The Silmacil will need all the favor of Valar if they are to succeed.”

“The doom is not limited to the kinslayers, Lord Lammaeg,” Gilmagor said. “It is laid upon us all who left the Blessed Land. If it is with Astarno, then it is with us all.”

Somehow, what Gilmagor said reminded the king of his dreams.

“What is doom, but a restriction Valar had set to stop us from achieving greatness?” Galadriel said. “The Shadow swallowed the realms, and the Valar sank the land, but we are still here.”

The lady raised her chin. Gil-galad thought he saw defiance in the glint of her eyes. She drew her eyebrows as she seemed to grow larger and fierce. It seemed as if the shadow on the wall behind her grew bigger and darker as if strengthened by the gleam of her bright hair. But Celeborn reached out and laid his hand on her sleeve. The shadow waivered and dimmed as Galadriel sank back on her seat.

“Perhaps this is the time I should tell you why I had wanted the army. Why I sought to have all our kin united.” Gil-galad wished he had the scroll with him. It felt ominous for him to have to recite it to them. “There was a dream, the first night I slept in the palace constructed in Lindon. I sought the loremaster who told me he believed it was a warning from the Valar.”

GIL-GALAD wondered if he had done right by not telling them the entirety of the prophesy, for he had termed the dream as such. He thought of calling the Council of White Ring back when a servant announced Lord Gilmagor. Maybe it was not meant for all ears. Perhaps it was meant for just one set of ears.

Lord Gilmagor limped forward into Gil-galad’s chamber. In a short time, his swordmaster seemed to have mastered the crutch and was now walking about with relative ease for someone who had almost perished not so long ago.

“Excuse me, Ereinion, if I am interrupting your rest. I just felt there was more you wanted to say,” the elder Noldo said.

“You are not interrupting me, and yes. Maybe there is more.”

Gil-galad breathed in a lungful of breath. Maybe it was time to come clean with everything.

Gil-galad offered his swordmaster a seat which he seemed to take gratefully.

“The words from the dream I told the White Ring, it was not complete.”

Gilmagor tensed, and the king could not blame him. Just as he was about to explain, another knock came.

“Lord Cirdan wishes to speak with you, my lord,” a servant announced.

Gil-galad exchanged glances with his swordmaster.

“Bid him enter. Perhaps, it is meant to be revealed to both of you,” said Gil-galad as Lord Cirdan
entered looking not so surprised at seeing Gilmagor on one of the chairs.

“I see I am not alone feeling that there was something left unsaid,” Lord Cirdan smiled.

“And he was about to tell us, I believe, Lord Cirdan. Let’s hear him together.”

Cirdan sat down next to Lord Gilmagor. The king took in another breath. He was sure now that this was the time to tell.

“There was one more stanza than what I told the rest of the council of the White Ring.”

“Indeed?” Gilmagor frowned. “Lammaeg wasn’t happy to hear the reference to the two Houses needing to stand together and mingle. He knew it referred to Sindar and Noldor. He is disturbed by that as much as the darkness that is coming. But give him time, Ereinion. Lammaeg will see the need among all our kin to work together. He may have his prejudices, but he is wise and knows much.”

Cirdan frowned. “Was there a reason you held back?”

“You tell me, lords. If you think I should share the entire passages, then I will. But, I felt it was not meant to be shared with the rest.”

Then, Gil-galad recited the words in its entirety:

“A dark seed grows, fed by blood and ire;
The old evil awakens, hiding its dark fire
To ensnare innocents in its tangled shoots.

The Darkness will rise, and the lights of Arda fail
From the seas to the mountains all will travail
As the ring of gold claims dominance above all.

For the hope to shine and never wither
The two houses of silver and gold must stand together,
Brother to brother by blood and love, all roots mingled.

When the Darkness recedes, the bright star, in ashes, shall fall,
Sun sets, Moon shines, the hidden Three will answer the call
To guide the children of the twin stars who shall inherit the land.”
The two lords were silent. Gil-galad wondered if he should not have shared the last verse, but it was done with. He could not have taken the words back now even if he wanted. And there was something cleansing to have said it aloud, to let out the burden that had been weighing on him.

“You were right to have kept this from Lammaeg,” said Gilmagor who spoke opening the eyes he had closed. “Twin stars are obviously referring to Elrond and Elros. For their children to inherit the land…Lammaeg will take that as a threat to your right to rule.”

“Children of Elros and Elrond? Maybe it is the Secondborn that the passage is referring to. If I am to understand the words of the Valar as they revealed to me long ago when I first beheld Lord of the Waters, we were meant as the guides to the Edain (Men). We were not meant to rule over them,” said Cirdan. “We were only meant to rule ourselves and lend wisdom and knowledge while we remain here. Perhaps, it is the children of Elrond and Elros who were meant to rule over the Secondborn. And, this land is to belong to them.”

“Even if it is referring to the Secondborn, it would not be welcome. We came, fought, and suffered. For what? Just to leave Middle Earth to the Secondborn? Lammaeg hopes to rebuild us back to the glory of the old days. You tell him all that we do and will do is for naught but to help the Men. What do you think he will say?”

“Precisely why I did not tell him this last passage,” said Gil-galad.

“What do you suppose is meant by the ‘hidden Three?’” Lord Cirdan asked.

Gilmagor shook his head. “If they are to guide the Secondborn, it may refer to us, but three? Why three when there is only one king?”

Gilmagor seemed to think, then his face turned pale. Lord Cirdan closed his eyes.

“Ai, Ereinion. You do not mean to say the star refers to you?” Gilmagor shook his head as if he didn’t want to believe it.

“I’ve known it. There will be war, maybe not as great as the last one, but big enough that we must all join together to fight it. And this time, it will be us and whoever is free in this land. And, once it is over, I will be gone and the Noldor will wane. New Age will come, Age of Men.”

Silence filled the chamber. There was an unfathomable look in the eyes of both Lord Cirdan and Gilmagor.

“How soon?” Gilmagor’s voice sounded feeble as if he suddenly aged.

“I do not know. By all accounts, it seems that the Morgoth’s servant is wounded, badly enough that he could not fight back. He will need time to recover as well as time to breed more Orcs and build up his army. Even if Silmacil succeeds, it will only delay, not destroy. Another war comes. I just don’t know how soon.”

“Is this why you wanted an army?” Gilmagor asked.

“Yes.”

“And your emphasis on unity,” said Cirdan. “I hope that Dwarven lord understood the need for the unity now that he knows Sauron is alive. I hope he is able to deliver the message to the lord of the Dwarven halls.”

“I am hoping Celebrimbor will help in that regard. I believe now that he was right to seek an alliance
with the Dwarves,” said Gil-galad.

“Maybe Lord Lammaeg is right. Maybe we should tell Lord Celebrimbor what had happened,” said Cirdan.

Gil-galad looked at Cirdan wide-eyed. It was rare indeed with a Sinda, even if it was Lord Cirdan, agreed with his uncle.

“If the Noldor, Sindar and the Nandor are to unite, having a common enemy may help bind us together. Perhaps, we should not only inform Lord Celebrimbor but also the people, limiting the information to who the creature within the Dwarven ruin was. By now everyone knows that there was trouble at the Dwarven ruin.”

“You do not know Celebrimbor well, Lord Cirdan,” said Gilmagor. “If we are to tell him, we need to tell him all. He is astute. If we don’t say anything at all, that is one thing. But if you tell him only a part and not the whole, he will know. It will make him question and wonder. We do not want him to doubt us. It may fracture his trust and cause more problems later. And, imagine the panic the presence of Sauron will cause on the people.” Gilmagor shook his head. “Our job is to protect this realm. We are only now picking ourselves up. We have only just begun to live again. It is too soon.”

“But, is it right to keep the people in the dark, regarding a matter as grave as this?” Cirdan asked.

“We will have to tell them, but not now. Let Silmacil do their job. That will give us some time. The matter will eventually have to be brought to the General Council, and also be told to Celebrimbor, and eventually to the people. But, I don’t believe that time is now.”

Lord Cirdan and Gilmagor looked up at the king. Gil-galad knew the decision rested with him.

GIL-GALAD pulled open the neckline of his evening tunic and took a gulp of the night air. The night was deep and dark, depth of the midnight ocean. Lord Cirdan had lingered after Gilmagor returned to his chambers. The king knew the elder Sindarin lord had more things to say, and he knew what it was. The moonbeam glimmered off the black surface of the ocean when Cirdan finally spoke breaking the silence.

“Silwen…” Cirdan said the name and stopped.

But it was enough. It was like ice-blade through his heart, and Gil-galad took in another breath.

“Was this the reason?”

For a moment he could not utter a word. The silence was like the night, thick and deep.

“You remember my mother?” Gil-galad asked after a while.

“Vibrant as the ocean, she was,” Cirdan said looking out at the vast sea far away.

“No. That is the way I want to remember her, but I remember her more with the face pale, the light in her eyes dimmed and fading.”

His mother’s hair, black as the night sea with the gleam of moonlight, fluttered in the wind as she smiled at him. Her eyes were the gray of the evening sky. That was the way Gil-galad had wanted to remember her, but whenever he closed his eyes, it was the pale, gaunt face, eyes dimmed of light, that flashed before him.
“Ereinion, she loved your father dearly.”

“And she did not love me?” Eyes stung. Gil-galad swallowed the lump in his throat.

“Of course, she did. It was for you that she lingered, for years, so you will be old enough to survive. Had she loved you less, she would have left you earlier, and you may not have survived the grief.”

“But, why didn’t she stay for me?” Gil-galad’s chest tightened. “Did you know what it was like for me, watching my mother waste away, to see the gleam in her eyes and hair fade? Every day, watching the color in her cheeks drain away into sickly yellow? Watching her shrivel like a flower in a drought?”

Gil-galad blinked away the tears that threatened to spill. He had never allowed himself to voice it, but now that he did, the grief choked his throat filling it with a lump he could not swallow.

“I do not wish that for Silwen. I want her free, my lord. I want her free to love another, to live and to laugh again as she used to. I have already taken so much from her.”

“Dear lad.” Cirdan laid a warm hand on his shoulder, and Gil-galad tried to calm his breathing. “We do not know when the war will come. It could be millennia from now.”

“Or mere centuries. The First Age lasted only 590 years.”

“You did not count the years before the years of the Sun, Ereinion. According to your loremaster, there were 450 years in Valian years to the First Age before the sun rose. That is more than 4300 years of our time. But besides that, some things are not for you to decide. The choice regarding her heart is not for you to make. Do not take the choice away from Silwen. Do not throw away today because what may come tomorrow.”

Cirdan squeezed Gil-galad’s shoulder before leaving him alone. Gil-galad let out a breath. He looked up at the sky sprinkled with the lights of the stars, silver like the eyes of Silwen.

Would it be all right to love her? Make her his wife no matter that in the end, her eyes would fill with tears unending? Many decisions weighed on his shoulders, but this one haunted him. He raked his hair roughly. And what of the child if he were to have one? Had he not sworn that he wouldn’t let another go through what he did? Had he not hated his mother at times, wanting, even praying, that Valar take her away quickly so that he wouldn’t have to see her waste away? Had he not hated his father for not surviving? Not coming back to him and his mother, for failing to take them back to Hithlum as his father had promised?

He thought he would never have to leave Silwen, never had to leave their child if they were to be blessed with one. But that dream at the palace had changed that. And, he wished he did not know his death was coming.

A delicate touch on his arm made him look up. Silwen smiled up at him, warm and reassuring as sunlight over summer ocean. She placed a tray in her hand on the top of the wooden railing. There was a teacup filled with dried flowers and herbs and a small pot filled with hot water.

“The night is deep, but I saw you walking the deck. Maybe this will help.”

Silwen poured the hot water into the cup. The pink of the florets and the green of the herbs came alive filling the deck with the scent of lavender and mint.

“Maybe it will help you sleep, my lord,” she smiled softly. “Leave the decisions until the sun knocks on your windows. I am sure your councilors will make sure you do not oversleep.”
“Oh, I am sure of that. They never stop telling me what to do…” Gil-galad smiled faintly down at Silwen.

“Then, my lord, maybe it is time you tell them what to do. If you will it, there are very few things that cannot be done.” Silwen pushed the cup of tea toward him. “It will help you sleep, and maybe dream of beautiful things.”

Gil-galad took the cup. “Is this one of yours?” He breathed in the sweet scent of lavender and mint that seemed to seep into his bones. Silwen wove enchantments into her teas. The many nights he could not sleep during his first few years at Lord Cirdan’s house, it was Silwen and her fragrant enchantments woven into the aroma of her teas and her soft voice reading to him that had allowed him to sleep and dream of the snow-capped mountains.

Gil-galad looked at Silwen as she turned to look out at the sea. She seemed at ease. Seeing her soft smile as the night wind sprayed her white hair all about her, Gil-galad felt his muscles relax, and the burden lift from his shoulders. It will not last, Gil-galad knew. But, at this moment, he was at peace standing next to the woman he loved with all his heart.

THRANDUIL sat by his window and watched the king and Silwen standing at the deck below him. They barely exchanged a few words, but they seemed content. Silwen looked happier than Thranduil had ever seen her after they had moved to Lindon and built the new cities.

The young Sinda leaned his head on the wooden windowsill and looked up at the sky. He wondered where his father was. The night was calm, and his chest swelled with things he knew not what they were. But this night, he missed his father. He wanted to tell his father all the things that had happened.

So many things happened in such a short time. People he thought were his enemies turned out to be friends. Dwarves, the Noldor, even the kinslayer. Maybe he had it all wrong. Maybe people were not as bad as he thought they were. Thranduil’s chest filled with feelings he could not describe. It was a swirl of emotions. He had not thought he would survive the trial. He had told himself it wouldn’t matter, that he was ready to leave this world which had given him only pain. But, it mattered. And he wasn’t ready to leave. He rubbed at his heart which felt as if it would burst. He didn’t know what this feeling was.

Thranduil let out a long breath, then closed his eyes.

_He stood on a top of a hill. In front of him was a barren land where nothing grew. He was a child again and in his hand was a dandelion fluff._

“Go on,” his mother whispered.

_Thranduil looked up at his mother. She smiled then nodded encouragingly. Someone on his other side took his hand and squeezed. Thranduil turned to find Elwing or was it Elrond? He couldn’t tell. They looked one and the same._

_Puffing up his cheeks with a breath, Thranduil blew. Thousands and thousands of fluffy white seeds flew in a swirl around Thranduil then filled the land with tiny, silver-white seeds._
**First Age:** Sun rose on the year 1, and the First Age ended in year 590. But, that is not the entire First Age. The First Age began with the waking of the Elves at Cuivienen at the Year of Tree 1050. That is 450 Valian years before the rise of the sun. As 1 Valian year = 9.582 solar years, that is 4,311.9 years before Years of the sun. That makes First Age (4,311+590) 4,901 in solar years.

**Elven Calendar** is divided into 6 separate seasons: Spring (54 days), Summer (72 days), Autumn (54 days), Fading (54 days), Winter (72 days) and Stirring (72 days). In between Autumn and Fading, there is Middle Day which is 3 to 6 days depending on what yen (144 years) it is. The year starts with Yestare (the New Year) which is the beginning of Spring. In this story Yestare is on April 1st.
Meetings and Regrets

Chapter Summary

Thranduil's meeting with Gil-galad. Elrond finally meets Astarno.

Chapter Notes

March has been unusually busy for me. Hopefully, I will have more time to write. Thank you to my readers for being patient. :)

Grey Havens. November 2, Second Age 144

THRAN DU IL sat up and looked about him as if he was seeing the place for the first time. Sunlight streamed through the tall windows. For a moment, Thranduil thought he was back in the tower room and not the room he usually used when at Grey Havens until he saw not the sea but the faraway hills of Emyn Berain (Tower Hills) outside his window. Thranduil blinked and shaded his eyes. Still heavy with sleep, Thranduil sensed the presence just as the warm voice filled the chamber.

“Yes, the sun has risen above the hills.”

Thranduil thought it was Aron at first. The white hair and the voice. But, Lord Istuion chuckled as he stepped into the light from the shadow of the wall where he stood by a window. In his hands was a bundle wrapped in green velvet.

“I had expected you awake hours ago,” the Sindarin lord smiled. “I don’t think I have seen you sleep this late. Not in a long while.”

“You should have awakened me, my lord.” Thranduil looked around the room for a tunic to throw over himself. “How late is it? Has he gone already?”

“Easy, lad. You have not missed him. He was invited to break the fast with the king. You should have enough time. Besides, I felt it was about time you slept. We all need a good sleep for the health of our fëa. And talking of the health of our spirit…”

Sensing a lecture, Thranduil hurried to put on his boots. “Could we do this some other time, my lord? I know I promised I would sit with Mistress Taurien, but that is when we return to the White City.” Thranduil moved toward the door. “And I will do so. I am just not ready at this moment.”

“I understand,” Istuion said. “I suppose your lieutenants will understand if they find that you are unable to perform Onen Calad now. You did spend many days in the dark. They may not think much of it under the circumstances. I just thought you would be more comfortable dealing with this matter privately.”

Thranduil stopped from grabbing the door handle. “What is this about Onen Calad? What has the health of my fëa to do with the lieutenants?”
“My uncle told me that the council means to implement Onen Calad as part of the training. Starting with the cadets. I suppose what happened with that Deceiver and Gelir…they don’t want anything like that to happen again.”

Thranduil felt his heart shrivel.

“Do not be alarmed, Thranduil. After what ordeal you went through in the ruins of the Dwarves, they will understand if you are unable to produce your light at this moment. That was a quite an ordeal at the Dwarven ruin. No one would think it strange that you will need time. Perhaps, this is a chance for you to work with the healers without having to keep it a secret.”

Thranduil felt his inside sink. He had hoped he didn’t have to think about Onen Calad for a while. While traveling through the darkness of the Dwarven ruin, all his thoughts had been focused on keeping himself alive. What happened at the underbelly of the Dwarven ruin at the burial chambers, the memory of that dark thing that had coiled within him, Thranduil had put that away from his mind. But now, the memory of it rose like a dark shroud about him.

“Lord Istuion, I…I don’t think I am ready. I need some time to myself.”

“The council did not decide on anything yet. My uncle said Lord Gilmagor would meet with his lieutenants to discuss it sometime this week before the cadets start their field training. I thought you might want to work on it before having to do the Onen Calad with the rest of the cadets. If you wish it, I will speak to Mistress Taurien after I leave here.”

“No. It is more than that. I…” Thranduil stopped. What should he tell the Sindarin lord? That he drank dragon blood, that he felt something dark within him? What will Istuion think? He wasn’t sure what it was.

“Yes?”

“Nothing,” Thranduil shook his head. “I just need some time.”

“Well, you will have a week for certain. Once the training starts again, I do not know how long it will take for the new procedures to take effect, but there may be some time.” Istuion stepped forward and looked into Thranduil’s eyes. “No matter how strong a tree is, Thranduil, it does not grow all on its own. It needs the sun, the rain, the earth beneath it and maybe even birds. It is no weakness to seek help when you need it. Just promise me you’ll remember that.”

Thranduil nodded feeling like a child again. Why did these elders all say the same things?

“Here,” Istuion handed Thranduil the velvet pouch. “I brought you what you asked for. “Are you sure about this?”

Taking the bundle, Thranduil removed the double blades that had belong to his grandfather.

“He saved my life. More than once. It is the least I could do for him,” Thranduil said. “And this is the only thing of value I have here in Grey Havens.”

“If it is only a matter of compensation, you need not to worry about that, Thranduil. My uncle and Celeborn have taken care of that. But more importantly, these swords are from your grandfather. A family heirloom. I don’t think this was meant to be given away.”

“Elrond gave up the dagger that obviously meant a world to him for me. How could I not do anything less? Do you think my father will be angry with me?”
Istuion sighed. “Your father gave these to you. They are yours to do as you will. Only you can decide what you will do with them. I think your father knows that.”

“What did you mean that Lord Cirdan and Lord Celeborn have taken care of the compensation?”

Lord Istuion shrugged. “Your wellbeing is our responsibility while you are here. We were grateful to Lord Onar for the help he gave you while you were inside the Dwarven ruin. And of course, his assistance at the court. My uncle gave Lord Onar some of the pearls. Don’t worry, lad. My uncle still has the gift for your bride when the time comes.” Istuion smiled.

Thranduil grimaced. Since the time of King Thingol, all brides connected to his House had a gift from Lord Cirdan on their wedding day as the pearls represented full moon which was the king’s sigil, the winged moon.

“Wedding? Don’t expect any such thing from me, Lord Istuion. There will not be any marriage of any kind where I am concerned.”

“You are still young, barely three centuries old and the years are long.” Istuion’s eyes glittered with mirth. “And there are many fair lasses. And…” Istuion looked out at the hill far away. “We hope that the young shoots will sprout and one day the Silver Tree will grow and bloom again. The moon shall shine again, maybe not as bright as the sun, but still the brightest and the fairest among the stars.”

Istuion turned back to face Thranduil. The young Sinda saw so much hope in Istuion’s eyes; it burned his eyes and tightened his throat.

“You expect much, my lord. The Silver Tree is no more. It has withered and shriveled into nothing. Only the gray, empty husk remains. With the sun so bright, the moon is barely visible.”

“Perhaps. But, even a fallen tree, rotted and dying, sprouts new life. And from its tender shoots, a new tree will grow. And the sun’s rays may hide the moon’s light, but it is the light of the moon that guides those in the dark.”

Istuion stopped. Then, he patted Thranduil’s shoulder as if he sensed the sudden weight that dragged down Thranduil’s shoulder.

“Never mind now about this old Elf’s ramblings. Just know that my uncle has, in his possession, three pearls of marvelous quality which he keeps in his treasury to give as a bridal gift, one for each bride.”

“What? Does Lord Cirdan expect me to have three wives? I am not Finwe. Even he only had two and look what happened to him!”

Lord Istuion laughed. And Thranduil’s heart filled with warmth to see the old Sinda laugh like his old self when he was at Menegroth. Thranduil had forgotten the last time he had heard Lord Istuion laugh. It gladdened his heart. Still, what were these elders thinking? Three brides? It was true that the number of Elves diminishes greatly after the end of First Age, but he had seen many young ones in Lindon. Surely, they would have enough elflings without a need for him to contribute. He had no intention whatsoever to marry. Ever.

“No, Thranduil. I believe, he was reserving them, one each for your bride, and for the bride of Elrond and Gil-galad.”

Thranduil pressed his lips.

“I understand Elrond, but…why Gil-galad. He is a Noldo. He is not at all like Elrond who is
Elwing’s son.”

“Gil-galad is like a son to him, Thranduil. And, I believe he hopes…” Istuion shook his head. “Do not begrudge his affection for Gil-galad. We hope that you and the king, even if you and he will not exactly be friends… If you two could get to know each other. He is only a few years older than you. You may be surprised to know you share many similarities.”

“There is nothing similar about him and me.”

“You think so, but Gil-galad had to leave his home at a very young age as well. He lost his parents and the people he loved. He grew up a Noldo amongst the sea of Sindar. He is the last of their great line with the burden of the expectation from many. Should I go on? If you only open your self and see with your heart, you will see that we all share more similarities than not.”

Thranduil looked down at his feet. He had not given much thought to Gil-galad. In fact, he had avoided the Noldo as much as he could. Gil-galad was the king. The Noldo had the power, the glory and the wealth, none of which Thranduil had. And unfortunately, Thranduil had already let Gil-galad know what he thought of him.

Thranduil winced inwardly thinking back to what he had said to the king who had come to visit him the day before the trial. As it was, what had happened between the king and he had disturbed Thranduil. But, with the imminent danger of losing his life, Thranduil had put it away to the back of his mind. Now, it came back to him full force. And along with it, a sense of regret.

Two days ago:

Nursing his achy arm, Thranduil stood by the window watching the roaring of the sea below him when he felt a presence at the door which was kept ajar. The Sinda was surprised when he realized it was Gil-galad. The king was the last person Thranduil expected to see in this tower room far from everyone else. And the Noldo was alone. No councilors and other lords were about him.

“What do I owe the honor of your presence, your majesty?”

Thranduil turned toward Gil-galad, tilting his head slightly. If it weren’t for his mother’s teachings, he wouldn’t have even done that, but Thranduil didn’t want the Noldo to think him ill-mannered.

Gil-galad grimaced, but the Noldo quickly cleared his facial expression.

“I just wanted to see how you are doing and whether you need anything.”

“I am fine as you can well see. Your generosity is faultless, and I do not need anything else. Thank you.”

Gil-galad pressed his lips.

“Well, I want you to know that your comfort is important to me. Should things not go well…In the event you wish to leave a letter for your father, you have my word that my messengers will be dispatched promptly with it as soon as we know where to send it. But, I will do everything I can to seek banishment over execution if it comes to that. You have my word.”

“Do not worry, your majesty. Even if I am to be executed and I will only have a time to leave a letter for my father, you have nothing to worry about. You have not done anything but be most gracious. I have nothing but good words to say.”
“Thranduil, that is not the reason…”

“I expect you to not insult my intelligence by telling me your interest in me is anything but political.”

Gil-galad sighed. Thranduil could tell the king was trying to control whatever impulses he had. The Sinda didn’t understand why the Noldo would even care. Gil-galad was the king. He could say whatever he wanted. What did Gil-galad think Thranduil could do? He was bound to the king even if he survived, to do the king’s bidding for five centuries whether he wished it or not. The chain was around him, and the key was in the king’s hands.

“Yes, one of my intentions was to find out how you will word the events to your father if you write one,” Gil-galad said. The king looked directly into Thranduil’s eyes. There was a challenge there as if he dared Thranduil to goad him further. “But that is only a small portion of why I came.”

Thranduil scoffed, turning his eyes back to the window. He didn’t believe one word.

“To be honest, I don’t understand why it would matter to you. My father is nobody. I am nobody. What would it matter what we think of you?”

“It matters. You matter,” Gil-galad said. “Why do you insist that my visit is purely political? While you are here, you are my subject. If you are hurt, it is my concern. How is it that you accept Elrond’s attention without a doubt but not mine?”

Thranduil glanced at the king. Was he serious?

“Elrond is my sister’s son. He may be considered a Noldo, but there is more of us in him than he realizes. You, you are not only one of the Noldor, but you are also their king. You cannot afford actions without thought. Everything you do has to matter.”

“Did it not occur to you that maybe I really just wanted to see if you were all right? That I just want us to be friends?”

Thranduil scoffed aloud.

“My lord, I am sure you have been a king long enough to know that a king does not have friends. And what would it matter? I may not even be here in a few days.”

“And, you know that for certain? You have never been a king. How would you know?”

"It is true. I have never been a king and never will. But, I have been around them enough, around the leaders of the Elves to know a leader is always alone. They cannot afford the luxury of friends.”

“Well, that tells me how limited your knowledge is. Let me tell you, Thranduil. One cannot be a good leader without good friends about him. I should know. I am the king after all. And, you… well,” Gil-galad stopped there.

Thranduil flushed at the unspoken words. Heat seared his face and body. The words burned him more than the Dark One’s fiery breath. Thranduil grabbed his left arm that began to ache and burn again.

“That was uncalled for. I apologize,” Gil-galad said quietly and turned his face away.

Thranduil was surprised. He had not expected Gil-galad to take a step back and put away his blade when he clearly had a chance at a kill. He certainly would not have backed down.
"I wouldn’t have apologized. There is nothing untrue in your statement. It was not my place to tell you how a king should be. As you already know, I am nobody."

"Do you ever not say what is on your mind?" Gil-galad frowned.

"Why should I not?"

Gil-galad sighed. "Is it not possible for us to be friends then?"

"As long as you are who you are, no."

"And, who am I, Thranduil?"

Thranduil turned to the king and held the gray twilight eyes of Gil-galad. He let the king have it all, the fire and the fury.

"You are the king of Noldor, those who came and took what was rightfully Sindar’s without asking, those that brought down Doriath, those who killed my cousins, my grandfather, my aunt, my brother, and my mother. You represent those who took from me every member of my family except for my father. Do you need any other reason?"

The king stood there, his face pale. He was silent for a moment, but he dropped his head and bowed, surprising Thranduil once again. When the king lifted his head, Thranduil saw immeasurable grief reflected in the king’s clear gray eyes.

"I am truly sorry."

And for a moment, Thranduil could not utter a word. He expected the king to deny that his people did any of that, that it was all Feanor and his sons, that he and his people had nothing to do with what happened at Menegroth, at Sirion. That had ever been the excuse Noldor had given him. Thranduil turned away from the king. He wanted to deny that Gil-galad felt anything, yet Thranduil could not but feel the genuine sorrow that wafted through the king’s entire person. Pain burned through Thranduil’s throat.

"You don’t need to apologize to me for something you yourself had not done. I do not expect you to answer for all that your kin had done to mine. But you are the king of Noldor, and if I have life and I am here in Lindon, I owe you fealty. And that, I will do my duty here as was agreed on. And I will do this duty faithfully. You can count on that. But, don’t ask me to like you or be friends with you."

"Fair enough," with a terse nod, the king turned and left the room.

Grey Havens. November 2, Second Age 144

ELROND tried to calm his aching heart. His head pounded. He was sure it would split into two. The Half-Elven massaged his head and tossed away the crumpled and twisted blanket. His head felt heavy, and his sleep-deprived eyes felt leaden. Outside the window, the sea churned frothy white as the sea-wind howled. The cold air invaded the chamber and Elrond shivered.

Maedhros was no more. Somehow, this didn’t surprise Elrond. But, Maglor. Dear Maglor…

Even though he knew Maglor would not answer, Elrond reached out with his mind, crying out with
his soul for his adopted father. But, like always, Maglor was silent.

Elrond placed his hand on the cold window pane and bit down the tears.

He had waited last night. When they left the Council Chamber, Captain Aron, one Elrond knew only as Lord Cirdan’s captain, was waiting for Thranduil. Feeling their need to talk privately, Elrond had left Thranduil and had returned to the Council Chamber waiting patiently for Astarno to appear. Elrond needed to know what would befall Astarno.

The Half-Elven had been prepared to go down on his knees and beg Gil-galad to spare Astarno’s life if it came to that. The Noldorin captain was the only one Elrond had encountered of the followers of Maedhros and Maglor. After the War of Wrath, after Maedhros and Maglor tried to steal the Silmarils from the camp of the Valarian army, no more was heard of the two brothers or their followers. Many assumed they perished when Beleriand sank.

The night before:

Elrond’s heart tightened when Astarno walked out of the Council Chamber with Captain Astalder. No words were needed when Elrond stepped toward them. Captain Astalder left Astarno and Elrond alone.

For a moment, Elrond could not speak. His throat ached and he could not utter a word. Astarno looked tired and drawn. And up close, the Noldorin warrior was all bones and skin. And he looked changed in every way than Elrond remembered. Astarno used to tower above him and his brother, powerful and full of strength.

“If it wasn’t for the eyes, I may not have recognized you,” Astarno said. “You have changed much, young one, but not as old as I would have thought.” Astarno then looked deeper into Elrond’s eyes. “You look remarkably like one of us, only slightly older than an Elf of your age would.”

Elrond smiled. He supposed Astarno would not know. “I am. I am one of you now.”

Laughing now, Elrond wrapped his arms around Astarno. It used to be Astarno who used to carry him and his brother on his shoulders, but now, the Noldorin captain felt slight and delicate in Elrond’s arms.

“I thought I will never see you again,” Elrond said, half choking.

“Good to see you again, Elrond. Although, I wish we had met under better circumstances,” Astarno said as he pulled away.

“What will they do to you?” Elrond managed to ask.

“They were merciful,” said Astarno.

“Then, you are free to go?”

“No. I am to go with Astalder. To the north.”

“Why? I thought he is dead.”

“Injured. Not dead. As long as his body lives, he will be free to do his evil.”

“But, you and Astalder, both of you just arrived. You need to rest. And, so does Captain Astalder.”
“Evil does no wait, Elrond.”

“But…how about Beril.”

Astarno’s worn face crumpled and he turned away to look away at the waters below them.

“She is better off without me.”

“You are wrong, Astarno. She needs you. I felt it. She loves you. If you ask it, she will forgive you.”

“You have always been such a compassionate child.” Astarno smiled although his eyes were dark with grief. “You and your brother were such comforts to us, especially to Lord Maedhros and Maglor.” Astarno’s eyes shimmered. “But most of the world is not like you, Elrond.”

Hearing the names of his foster parents seared Elrond’s heart. He swallowed hard. The questions he had wanted to ask burned within his throat like hot coals.

“Where are they?” When Elrond finally spoke, it was hoarse, a bare whisper even to his own ears.

“You know. Don’t you?”

“Some things are better left unsaid.”

“Please, Astarno. I need to know. Whether good or ill, I must know where they are. They have the jewels now, don’t they? Have they found peace?”

It was what Elrond wished for them even if he will never see them again. To know that they found peace…But seeing the grief in Astarno’s tired eyes, Elrond knew the answer.

Astarno sighed. “Elros told you?”

Elrond nodded. “Elros told me you found him after they left the camp, after they tried to… steal the jewels. How come you were not with them? Did you find them after you left Elros? You must have. I don’t know of any other among Maedhros’ warriors who can track as well as you.”

Astarno sighed as Elrond came to stand next to him on the top of the cliff above the churning sea.

“Do not think ill of them, Elrond. You and your brother, and those you led away, they were the best part of us. After you left, despair descended on us.”

Elrond wasn’t surprised. Elrond and Elros had led away the part of Maedhros people who were not warriors, the many women, crafters, musicians and artists, the ones who made the life of the homeless ragtag army bearable.

“But Morgoth’s shadow spread ever southward, and everyone understood the dire situation we all faced. The Dwarves fought alongside us, even the Nandor who had previously refused to treat with us. We all fought to keep the Orcs from crossing River Ascar. And for a while, we had peace if you can call it that. That is, until the winged dragons covered the sky. The Dwarves retreated into their caves and the Nandor disappeared to wherever it was they hid. But, we had no place to hide. The make-shift fort we had made with wood could not shield us from the dragon fires. More than half our number perished in the evil flames before the onslaught of the Orcs that came after.”

“Your sister?”

Astarno dropped his head and shook it. She was one of the married women who had chosen to
remain with their husbands to fight beside them.

“Her husband was severely injured. He could not be moved. She refused to leave him.” Astarno
looked up then. “The others?”

“They are safe. Most of them went back to Valinor with the Valar’s army.”

For a moment, hope flickered in Astarno’s gray eyes.

“Good,” he said. “Maybe Valar had not forsaken all of us.”

Astarno looked away again at the sea that was raging below them. The wind was picking up and the
darkness deepened.

“What of Maedhros and Maglor?”

When Astarno did not answer and stood silent, Elrond dropped his head. Was this his doom? To not
know, to wonder for an eternity? But in a subdued voice, Astarno spoke again.

“When Morgoth’s great dragon fell, the tremor lasted for days. But, we all knew Morgoth lost. And
there we were, just a handful of us. And we had nowhere to go. Every one of us knew that we
would not be allowed back into Valinor. And we were weary, Elrond. The remaining warriors, they
wanted to return to Himring. It had been home to them. Lord Maedhros gave in. On our way, we
met the Valarian army returning from the north with Morgoth as their prisoner. Lord Maedhros sued
for the return of the Silmarils to him and his brother as the jewels were the last legacy of their father.
But, Eönwë would not reply nor allow us to enter the Valarian camp. If you had seen the brothers’
despair. I tried to convince them to let go. But, Lord Maedhros…he would not, maybe could not, let
go. They had lost so much, had given up so much, and suffered so much. And those jewels were so
close, almost within their arm’s reach. Do you understand, Elrond?”

Elrond looked down at the dark waters. He wanted to understand.

“But they got their jewels. Didn’t they?”

“Yes. Eönwë allowed them to leave.”

“So, you found them afterward?”

Astarno closed his eyes and nodded.

“The brothers left us early in the morning. Lord Maedhros was to speak directly to Lord Eönwë,
plead if he had to. They were supposed to return before the nightfall. When they did not, I went to
search for them. The Valarian army would not allow me to enter the camp. It was only after sneaking
into the camp that I found Elros and learned what happened. And, I tracked them down, several
day’s ride from Lord Eönwë’s encampment.”

Elrond took in his breath. Astarno was coming to what he had been waiting to hear.

“For some time, the land had suffered aftershocks of the battles. The ground shook and earth
cracked. Many chasms had opened up. The land was changing, so it took more time than it should
have, but I found Maglor near what used to be Amon Erebor. It was a ruin of stones and upturned
earth. And amid the ruin, Maglor was singing. And, I almost thought we were back there when the
walls were strong and the flowers pale and lovely.” Astarno swallowed. “But then…” the Noldorin
captain grabbed his ears as if he heard a sound he didn’t want to hear. “You had to hear him, Elrond.
The scream. I had never heard anyone scream like that as if his soul was being ripped apart, as if his
heart was torn asunder. Maglor ran, and I went after him. Lord Maedhros held onto this stone of the brilliance I had never seen before. The light was blinding, and the stone, it burned him, Elrond. The stone for which Maedhros had lost everything, his father and brothers, for which he had given everything, his life, honor and integrity, would not suffer his touch. And he, proud and defiant to the end, refused to let it go. It scorched and charred his hands, but he wouldn’t let go. We begged him, Maglor and I, but Maedhros would not. It was then that the land below our feet cracked open. And he…jumped.”

Elrond took in a sharp breath too shocked to react any other way. No Elf he had ever heard or read about had ever taken his own life.

“And, Maglor, he was mad with grief. It was all I could do to hold him back from jumping off the chasm after his brother. The earth spewed fire. And with a thunderous roar, the land all around us fell apart. I dragged Maglor back as the ocean water rushed in and swallowed the land in front of us. And for a long while, we sat by that water. When the sun was sinking, Maglor got up, took out the other stone, the one he carried. He didn’t even scream when the stone burned him. And he threw that stone into the churning waves.

‘Tis done. Only the everlasting darkness waits for me,’ he said. ’I will wander the shores until the day comes when the oath can be fulfilled.’ Those were his last words. He was silent after that. We made our camp in silence as the sun sank. And when the moon rose full and bright, he took out his harp.”

Astarno closed his eyes. “His music was like the ocean itself, terrifying typhoon of turbulent emotion in its darkness, yet sinuous and hypnotic like the flights of the white gulls on the blue sky. And in its deep darkness there resided the light that glimmered, that glanced off the waves like the kiss of the sun as it rose over its impenetrable surface. The waves drew you in. I was lost in the songs unaware of the enchantment Maglor weaved. I should have known. But when I awoke, he was gone.”

“But, surely, you could have tracked him again. He could not have gone far!”

“When I awoke, the moon had waned, not quite half, but almost. Do you understand, Elrond? And the land, it was changed. There were chasms, plains and rock masses that had not been.”

Elrond swallowed the painful lump in his throat. “Is he gone then?”

“No,” Astarno shook his head. “He is here. I know. I have heard him, his songs. I have wandered up and down the entire western shoreline looking for him as the land changed and was remade. And whenever I despaired, I would hear it again. His harp. His music would lead me. It was his music I followed that led me to cross the Blue Mountains.”

“So, he is here. In Lindon?” Elrond’s heart was running again.

“I know it not. I had tried to leave this area, but then I would hear it again. His Noldolantë would whisper in the leaves, in the winds. It held me here. It was the music that led me to Beril….” Astarno dropped his head.

Hope stirred in Elrond’s breast. Was Maglor alive then? Was he here in Lindon?

“About a century after I saw him last, I had finally accepted that he does not want to be found. You need to let him go, Elrond. He let you go because he wanted you to have a better life, a new life as the prince among people who matter and who love you. The way you were meant to be.”

Elrond shook his head. “I don’t believe he doesn’t want to be found.” He looked at Astarno. “I will find him. I am going to find him and bring him back from the darkness where he wanders.”
Emyn Beraid (Sindarin, Tower Hills)—a range of hills east of Grey Havens. Later, toward the end of the Second Age, Gil-galad will build three towers, The White Towers, for his friend Elendil. Upon the tallest tower, Elosirion, one of the seven Palantíri, the Seeing Stones, Elendil brought from Numenor will reside there. As this particular stone could be used to gaze upon Tol Eressëa where the master stone was kept at the Tower of Avallónë. Elves at later Age will travel here (sort of pilgrimage) to look upon their home in the West.

River Ascar—Southernmost river to Thargelion which separated it from Ossiriand. It paralleled the Dwarf-road as it emerged from the Mount Dolmed (location of Belegost Dwarven city at the Blue Mountains) until it met River Gelion. The Battle of Sarn Athrad took place where River Ascar met River Gelion. This is where Beren, Dior and the Green Elves attacked the Nogrod Dwarves returning from the sack of Doriath. All the treasure of Doriath the Dwarves had looted were cast into the River Ascar thus gaining a new name Rathlóriel (“Goldenbed”).

Himring (Sindarin, Ever-cold)—greatest hill among the hills northeast of Beleriand. On the top of the greatest hill which was treeless and flat, Maedhros built his fortress from where he guarded the northeastern border. After the War of Wrath, when the Beleriand sank, top of the Himring remained above water and is later known as Tol Himling. It is believed that some followers of Feanor still could be found there.

Eönwë—Herald of Manwe and Chief of the Maiar along with Ilmare (handmaiden to Varda). He led the army of the Valar at the War of Wrath.

Noldolantë (Quenya, Fall of the Noldor)—Lament composed by Maglor which described the terrible events, the rebellion and the kinslayings, that led to the fall of Noldor and their exile at Middle Earth. It is said that Maglor wanders the shores of Middle Earth singing this lament.
Elrond convinces Thranduil to accompany him as he searches for Beril.

I am still trying to work out my schedule to fit in more of writing time. Bear with me. :)

Grey Havens. November 2, Second Age 144

ELROND hurried knowing there may not be another chance. For now, he didn’t have the power, time nor the resources to look for Maglor. It would have to wait, but there was something he could do now for someone else.

It was good that Elrond met Lord Nimfindor, Lord Cirdan’s steward, as soon as he left his chamber. The steward informed Elrond that he and the other lords had just returned from escorting the Dwarven lord to the northern gate of the Grey Havens which was located at the Laurelin, the City of Gold Tree.

Elrond picked up his pace, fearing that he would miss the chance to thank the Dwarven lord in person before the Dwarf left the city. Lord Onar was few paces outside the city gate where several Dwarven warriors waited for him. Elrond was surprised when he saw who was with the Dwarven lord.

“And what am I to do with this?” Onar growled up at Thranduil.

In his hands, the Dwarf held twin short-swords of marvelous workmanship. The hilt was studded with large green gems, and the scabbard was made of white leather embossed with silver into swirling vines.

“Well, this is the most valuable thing I own here,” said Thranduil. “And I lost the dragon tooth. I have nothing else of value to give you except this, and you saved my life.”

“Is that so?” Onar said. Then, he reached over his back for the double-bladed ax he carried. He threw it to Thranduil who caught it with both hands, swerving at the weight of the weapon.

“That is the most valuable thing I own,” said Onar. “Ye avenged me son. It is the least I could do.”

Thranduil frowned. “What am I to do with a Dwarven ax? No matter how valuable it is to you, it means nothing to me.” He handed it back to the Dwarf.

Onar took the ax, then pushed the double swords back to Thranduil.

“Exactly my point, laddie. We are even now. We don’t owe each other. Now, run along.”
Elrond stepped forward and opened his mouth to utter the words of greeting.

“You!” Onar pointed a finger at Elrond as the Half-Elven approached. “I don’t want to see yer face!”

Elrond stopped. He had not done anything to the Dwarf and did not know what Onar meant.

“If it wasn’t for ye, we may not have been involved. I may not have lost me son,” said Onar. “I don’t want to see ye or him.” Onar pointed to Thranduil, “anywhere near our city. Am I clear?” Onar’s voice was gruff, and if Elrond did not have his ability to read people’s emotions, he would have missed the soft fragrance of those thorny words.

“Thank you, Lord Onar,” Elrond bowed respectfully. “For all your help you had given us. And, I am truly sorry for your loss.”

“Bah!” Onar frowned and harrumphed loudly. But with a softer tone, he said, “Run along, you two. Don’t get into any more trouble.” With that, the Dwarf turned and waved his hand in a dismissive fashion before disappearing down the road.

Thranduil turned to Elrond. “And you think I’m gruff.”

“He’s a Dwarf. And he lost his son. What is your excuse?”

Thranduil took a step back. “Excuse me? Did someone take your sweetmeats? Or, have I turned into one that everyone is taking a bite out of me?”

“I am not in a mood for jest, Thranduil. It is good that I found you here. One less thing for me to do. Come with me, please.” Elrond walked toward Tilperion, the City of Silver Tree.

“And where are we going?”

“To talk to Mistress Beril.”

Thranduil stopped. “I doubt she will talk to me.”

“But you are the best one to talk to her. I learned their dialect, but I never had a chance to use it much. Help me talk to her.”

Thranduil frowned, and Elrond could tell the Sinda was thinking of ways to avoid going with him. Thranduil guarded his eyes and was silent for a moment before he asked.

“What do you wish to speak to her about?”

“Astarno. He is to go up North with Captain Astalder and the Silmacil to find Sauron. To stop the Deceiver. The matter between her and Astarno needs to be resolved. He helped you. Help him.”

Thranduil turned away.

“It will be best for you to go alone, Elrond. You speak well enough. Or, there are others who could help you. Besides, I am certain she will not want to see me.”

“I am not the one who has matters to resolve with her. You do. And if you can show that you can forgive Astarno, then she will forgive him.”

“I didn’t say I forgive him,” Thranduil said. But the Sinda’s voice was soft and weak. Elrond took comfort in that.
“But, Astarno helped you when he didn’t have to. He risked everything to save you. Without him, things would not have turned the way it did. Don’t you think you owe it to Beril, if not to Astarno, to make this right?”

“What is between them is not for me to meddle. It is their problem.”

“Don’t you understand, Thranduil?” Elrond fist his hands. “She will die. She will fade away. The grief, it will consume her. I felt it. She needs him as much as he needs her. Please, Thranduil. Help her if you will not help Astarno. Do you not owe her that much?”

Thranduil looked down at his boots. Seeing him hesitate, Elrond felt something hot rush into himself.

“Will you abandon her like you abandoned …”

Elrond bit down the word “us” before it came out. He was surprised at the heat he felt, and the feelings that he didn’t think he had rushed to his head. Elrond took in a breath to calm his heart which beat like summer showers on arid land. It was sudden and unexpected. He had not thought he had such feelings. Why did he feel this anger? Had he not forgiven his fathers for things even worse than abandonment? Yet, it boiled inside him and surprised Elrond at the sudden heat of it. And all these after what Astarno told him about what happened at Sirion. Or, maybe he was more upset about being left alone at the Dwarven ruin. Elrond wasn’t sure.

“What will you have me do?”

Thranduil stood there, his shoulders drooping and his eyes looking at anywhere but at him. Elrond’s heart pinched. Was Thranduil softening? Elrond wasn’t sure if Thranduil understood what he almost said out loud. For a moment, he wanted to ask Thranduil why the Sinda left him behind with the dragon. But, Elrond thought better of it. He needed to focus on Beril. That was what mattered now.

“Just come with me, please. Talk to her. Astarno will be here in Grey Havens for only a few days.”

“What do I say to her?”

“Just let her know that Astarno didn’t take any of your family’s life. You can do that much, can’t you?”

Thranduil gave Elrond a terse nod. Taking a quick look behind him to make sure Thranduil was close at his heel, Elrond took to a run. She was staying with a Nandorin family here at Grey Havens. Elrond thought back to the courtroom where he felt the despair of her soul. And that dream. It was one of those rare dreams that seemed so real, the ones that tended to come true. He couldn’t remember the details, only the feelings of loss, but everything inside him told him that he needed to get to her as soon as he could. If Astarno was not going to do anything, he had to try, for Beril’s sake, and Astarno.

But, when they arrived at the small white building, Beril wasn’t there. The Nandorin woman who answered the door told them that Beril wanted to return to the North and Lord Nimfindor had given her a horse and an escort of four guards to accompany her. They had left in the morning.

“Well,” Thranduil shrugged. “That is that.”

“No, it isn’t!” Elrond said. “We are going after her.”

“Come, Elrond. Don’t you think you are overreacting? She is obviously well enough…”

“No, Thranduil. I felt it. She is not herself. She wants to go back to her home. She will lay herself
down to sleep and never get up.”

“You don’t know that.”

“I’ve seen it in my dream. And, I tell you, Thranduil Oropherion. Things I see come true. It has not failed me yet. I am going whether you come with me or not. You have only one thing to ask yourself. Will you be able to live with the fact that you didn’t do everything you could to save her?”

“Be reasonable, Elrond!” Thranduil snapped. “They left hours ago. Sun is already sinking. We are in the middle of Fading. You know what that means, don’t you? Shorter days. And Lord Nimfindor gave her a horse. Do you know what that means? It means they have already grounded all boats going North until the Spring. We’ll have to track her through the woodland and the plains.”

“We’ll ask Lord Nimfindor for the horses. And you can track, can’t you? You have lived in the wild, did you not? Maybe the will of Valar and Eru are at work here.”

“What has Valar and Eru have to do with all these? And if they had a hand in it, how cruel they are to allow all these terrible things to happen, the loss of innocent lives! There were children in that village. What have they done to deserve such death?”

“I believe all these losses happened for a reason. If it wasn’t for what happened, we might not have known that Sauron penetrated our city. Can you not see what further evil this creature would have sown?”

“Perhaps.” Thranduil was silent for a moment; then he seemed to have made up his mind. “Go get your sword and traveling gear. And grab some provisions. Discretely.”

“We are not going to sneak out,” Elrond frowned. “I will go ask Lord Nimfindor for horses and permission.”

“Do you want to get to her as fast as we can or not?” Thranduil asked. “If you seek permission, Lord Nimfindor will have to ask Lord Cirdan for approval. That will take time. Are you willing to sit and wait for the approval or do you feel it urgent enough that we should go now? You decide.”

Elrond grimaced. He disliked having to worry others. And Gil-galad would worry if he knew that Elrond had gone out of the city without an escort. But, Elrond also knew that there was a meeting of the general council. The king and the other lords will be in a meeting for most of the day. The approval may not come until much later, most likely not until tomorrow. Still, to sneak out, without informing the lords, it seemed wrong.

Thranduil rolled his eyes when Elrond stayed silent.

“She has four guards with her. Green Elves do no use horses unless they are traveling far, and they rarely travel far from home. Do you understand, Elrond? She wouldn’t be comfortable on a horse for a long time. We should be able to catch up to them rather quickly and return with the four guards she has with her. I only mentioned weapons and provisions just in case. You never know what you will face once we leave these city walls. But, if you rather not, then, fine by me. It wasn’t my idea in the first place, and I have other things I had planned.” Thranduil turned toward the bridge to the Silver City. “Find me when you want to go. Whenever that is.”

Elrond massaged his head. Last night, he dreamed of Beril lying on a forest floor covered with pine-needles. She looked as if she was sleeping, then in another moment, she was gone. On the ground where she lay, a cluster of sweetbrier roses for which she was named grew wild. And both Thranduil and Astarno were caught in the numerous hooked prickles of the flower bush. The thorny bush grew
all around them gouging their skin and face. And the blood from them had stained the pink cluster of
the wild roses red.

“Wait!” Elrond stopped Thranduil. “How can we get horses if we don’t obtain permission?”

“Leave that to me. And, no,” Thranduil shook his head. “I will not be stealing them.”

“Alright. Meet me by the northern gate as soon as you can.”

It took some doing, but Elrond got out of the Swan Manor without garnering too much attention. He
pulled his thick fur-trimmed cape tightly around him grateful for whoever had recovered his pack
from their camp by the river up at the north. The cape also hid the small traveling pack and his
sword.

When Elrond got to the gate, Thranduil was talking to the gate guards. The Sinda was fully armed
with a bow and the double short swords.

“They left when the sun was coming up,” one of the guards said looking up at the sun which was
halfway down the sky toward the ocean. “Even at full gallop, you may not be able to catch up to
them by nightfall.”

The guards waved jovially as they passed.

“What did you tell them?” Elrond asked giving furtive glances at the guards.

“Just what we were doing,” Thranduil said with a shrug, “that we needed to talk to the elleth who
left with the four guards.”

“What? You told them the truth?”

“Were you expecting me to lie to them?” Thranduil frowned. “Why should I?”

“They didn’t try to stop you?”

“Why should they? Trust me, Elrond. If you talk to them as if you know exactly what you are doing
and why, not too many will dare to oppose you. Well, that is if you are not dealing with one of those
elders. It is hard to put anything over them. Let’s hurry if you….”

Suddenly, Thranduil stopped, pulling on his horse sharply. He was still like a rock as if he was trying
to hear something Elrond could not. Elrond looked about them. They had just left the guards and the
sight of the walls of the Grey Havens.

“What is wrong?” when Elrond did not see anything unusual, he asked.

Thranduil scanned the sparse woodland about them and the river to their right which flowed between
the two cities of the Grey Havens.

“For a moment, I thought…” Thranduil shook his head. “It’s nothing. Let’s hurry. It seems storm is
coming.”

Sure enough, the sky turned gray as thick clouds rushed from the north toward the cities driving
bitter wind.

They put their horses to a gallop until they spotted the group of Dwarves who had left more than
three hours before them. They were on foot and were slow. Not wanting to disturb the Dwarves,
Elrond and Thranduil veered off the road. With the Fading deepening, there was no undergrowth to
deter them. They took to a full gallop keeping an eye on the road that ran parallel to the River Lune until it bent toward the Blue Mountains. They slowed as the terrain became rougher. The flat plains turned hilly, and the trees began to close around them. As they rode through the forest of oak and birch trees, the roar of thunder came from the direction of the Blue Mountains. Soon, the sky darkened as if it was nightfall and drops of rain began to pelt them.

They pushed on through the rain until the rain came harder and faster. Elrond could barely keep his eyes open. The wind picked up, and the tips of trees bent with the sudden gust of wind and rain.

“We need to find shelter!” Thranduil shouted through the roar of howling winds.

Elrond nodded back grateful for the words. He had not wanted to admit it, but the bitter chill brought on by the wind and the rain was beginning to make his teeth chatter. They pulled over their horses which thumped the wet ground nervously.

“Calm the horses,” Thranduil jumped off his horse and threw his rein to Elrond.

“Where are you going?” Elrond shouted after Thranduil, but the Sinda had already jumped onto one of the low-lying branches and was climbing up the trunk of the tree nearest them.

Is he insane? Elrond wondered as he gathered the horses under one of the trees. The horses wouldn’t bolt no matter the thunder and lightning. Still, Elrond could feel the waves of fear and unease from the horses as they fidgeted under his hands. Elrond sang the song of comfort weaving enchantment to ease the horses’ fears.

“Come! I found a place!” Thranduil slid down the trunk.

The place Thranduil took Elrond was a small opening among the cluster of boulders that had fallen over each other. A group of trees grew near the boulders providing an area relatively dry for the horses as well.

“It doesn’t seem like the rain will stop any time soon,” Elrond said.

“Mind as well,” said Thranduil. “The daylight is lost. We wouldn’t have light to travel further even if the rain stops. Unless you…” Thranduil looked at Elrond.

Elrond shook his head. He had not been able to generate light since he returned from the Dwarven ruins. Elrond supposed neither did Thranduil.

“Then, we should camp here for the night.”

“But what if they keep on going?” Elrond asked.

The weather did not bother Elves as easily as it did Men. He was sure if it wasn’t for him, Thranduil would have ridden through the rain.

“There will be no starlight tonight. She is one of the Nandor. No one knows the danger of the dark forest on a starless night better than the Green Elves. She will find a place to rest rather than to press on. Besides, if they had taken a path other than the road, we may lose their track in this weather.”

“Why would they have taken another path?”

“If she wishes to return to her cottage instead of returning to the village near the North Fort, it would be faster for her to go through the forest. Guards may not know the way, but I am sure she does.”
Elrond gathered some dry twigs he found under the boulders. He was able to stir up a small fire. Forest was quiet as the deep darkness descended as the rain came down steadily.

They sat silently listening to the sound of the rain drumming on the boulders and the wind howling through the bare branches.

“What should I say to her,” Thranduil broke the silence. “What do you plan to say?”

Elrond blinked. He had been concentrating on catching up to Beril; he had not thought about what to say to her.

Elrond shrugged. “I was hoping you would think of something. Or I could tell her about Astarno the way I know him.” Elrond rubbed at the back of his head. “I actually didn’t think that far ahead. Don’t you have things to say to her?”

Elrond realized he didn’t know exactly what happened after Thranduil left the cadets at the camp by the river.

“What I heard at the court, is that true? Did you attack him?”

Thranduil stayed silent.

“Were you really going to kill him? What would that have done? You need to know, Thranduil, that Astarno was one of the few who rebelled against killing my father’s people. When you found him behind the manor house, there was a reason for him being there.”

“Oh, let me guess why he was there,” Thranduil frowned as his eyes met Elrond. “What possibly could he have been doing? Gardening? Singing, perhaps? Oh, wait! He is a warrior. Killing, then.”

“We are warriors, and we don’t always kill. We protect, too.”

“He was protecting all right, protecting your mother, and the children. You are right. I should be so very grateful. Let’s go tell Beril that right now.”

Elrond let out a sigh. Perhaps he should not have talked about this, but Elrond realized that Thranduil and he needed to be ready to convince Beril. And he could not do that without first conciliating Thranduil to Astarno. And Elrond was sure that if Thranduil knew the full story, he might come around. Now that he had heard from Astarno as to what had happened, Elrond felt he knew enough to talk about it.

“According to Astarno, there wasn’t supposed to be a battle at Sirion. Maedhros’ army completely outnumbered those at the White Tower. The warriors of the White Tower would have surrendered if it was not for the Sindar from your father’s settlement who came to aid unexpectedly.”

“So, it is our fault for having been there, is it? Were we supposed to ignore them? Our people were at the White Tower, too. Many from Gondolin were Sindar, and some of our people from Menegroth went with your mother when she wed your father. Did Maedhros think we would abandon our people?”

“It is not that. The Sindarin settlement was sufficiently distant that they didn’t expect the Sindar to be aware of their presence. They didn’t know how the news reached the Sindar. They had the road watched and shot down all birds out of the White Tower. Had your father’s warriors not come, my mother’s people would have known there was no hope of defying the Feanorians. My mother would have given up the jewel.”
“If you think that, then you do not know your mother,” said Thranduil.

I don’t know her, Elrond almost said it out loud. Elrond pulled at his braid and tried again. He needed Thranduil to understand.

“All I am trying to tell you is that they were not supposed to fight at Sirion. In fact, when the warriors in the White Tower refused to surrender, a small group of Feanorians refused to fight. They didn’t want to kill their own kin. Astarno was among them. He was trying to stop the fight and had gotten injured. That is until the Sindar attacked from the rear. Feanorians were cornered…”

Thranduil eyes burned, stained red by the reflection of the flames from the fire.

“You do not know what you are saying! Feanorians outnumbered us, both our warriors and the Gondolin warriors, three to one. Had Lord Cirdan not come, we would have been wiped out. So, don’t try to defend them, Peredhel.”

“I am not trying to defend them,” Elrond said feeling the heat rise from Thranduil. This was not what he intended. Elrond picked up a stick nearest him and jabbed at the fire. The fire seemed to falter and shake. “All I am saying is that the battle at Sirion was unavoidable at that point. And it wasn’t just Lord Cirdan who came to aid. King Gil-galad came, too, with his Noldorin warriors.”

“Battle was all over by then,” Thranduil sneered. “And how do you know Gil-galad would not have been on the side of Maedhros? According to what I learned, his father and Maedhros were close. Maybe he would have been on the side of the Feanorians.”

The stick Elrond held in his hand snapped.

“Do not insult the king, Thranduil. He has not done anything to deserve your slander.”

“How would you know? You weren’t even there,” Thranduil said with a scoff or was it a jeer?

“But, I was. Have you forgotten?” Elrond’s chest tightened. “You abandoned us. In that cave. You said you would come back, but you never did!”

Elrond did not mean it, but the words slipped out before he understood what he was saying. He regretted them instantly. But what was spilled could not be undone.

Elrond heard Thranduil’s quick intake of breath. An agonizing silence filled the space between them. Elrond clenched his hands feeling them tremble. Why had he said such a thing? Why now? He had heard from Astarno how Thranduil’s mother died in the Sindar’s arms. He should have understood why Thranduil had not come back for him and his brother.

Elrond wished he could read what Thranduil was thinking, but he was no Lady Galadriel.

Elrond got up from where he sat and moved toward the entrance. Elrond shot up and blocked the entrance. He wasn’t sure what he intended, but Elrond was aware that if he let Thranduil leave now, the Sinda might not come back. The rift that rose between them could remain unrepaired. But, this had not been his intention. Elrond’s insides tightened. He needed to be honest with the Sinda. Perhaps, in turn, be honest with himself. What had Maglor said? When one was truly open and honest, one could reach where none else could.

“I am sorry. I should have known better than to say that. I have heard from Astarno what happened at Sirion. And I thought about what it must have been for you. I thought I could forget it. After all, I had forgiven Maedhros and Maglor. They have done a lot worse. To my mother and her people. Still, I suppose I could not forget it.” Elrond shook his head. This wasn’t what he wanted to say. His
head ached. He could not remember what it was he originally wanted to say. It seemed whatever he said, it came out wrong. The Half-Elven let out a long sigh, then yanked at his front braid as his stomach turned into a knot. Things he had kept unsaid, the feelings he didn’t think he had, rose up and throttled him

“Maybe you had a reason to forget about us at Sirion, but why did you leave me behind with the dragon? When I was first captured by the Orcs, I was terrified, but seeing you, being there with you, I felt safe even though we were prisoners to the Orc horde. You were my warrior companion. If we were together, what was there that we could not do? Sure, I didn’t like you in the beginning. When my king asked me to befriend you, I was reluctant.”

“Gil-galad asked you to befriend me?” Thranduil looked up.

“He did. Because he wanted you to be comfortable at Lindon. He only ever wanted you to understand us. He wants all Sindar and Noldor to become united, the way we should be. And why should we have this wall between us? Are we not all kin? Are we not, Thranduil? Aren’t you and I family? You told me yourself that my mother was a sister to you. Then, you and I are a family, Thranduil. And, I thought you felt that, as I did, back in the Dwarven ruin. I thought you would not leave me behind. Not again.”

Thranduil looked away, out at the darkness where rain pelted the bare branches, where the wind howled and where the darkness was thick.

“Damn you! Say something! Can you not see that I am trying. I have been trying to reach you. Can you not meet me half way? Can we not be friends? In all honesty, we should be like brothers.”

But, Thranduil pushed past Elrond and disappeared into the dark.

Elrond kicked the broken pieces of the stick and bit down the shout that came to his lips. He grabbed his head. Maybe honesty wasn’t the best way to go about it. He thought if he opened himself up to Thranduil, the Sinda would also open up to him. Maybe he was wrong.

Elrond plopped down onto the ground next to the fire which was slowly dying. Soon, there will no longer be any light or warmth in this cave. And, Elrond was suddenly tired as if all the strength leaked out of him. The Half-Elven wrapped his arms around himself feeling the chills that crept up from the ground and all around him.

Elrond didn’t know why the talk had moved to himself. He had only wanted to tell Thranduil what he had learned, that Astarno was wounded from trying to break up the battle that was imminent between Maedhros’ army and those inside the White Tower. And that was why he was with Amras at the back of the manor which was supposed to have been cleared. Maglor had sent Astarno with Amras to keep the youngest brother away from the main battle, to keep him and Astarno safe and uninvolved.

But instead, Elrond had to talk about himself. He thought if he kept the feelings inside, one day it will disappear. But, keeping it unsaid obviously did not make the feelings go away.

Elrond wasn’t sure how long he sat alone. The fire was dying, only a few embers remained.

It was then, Thranduil walked in, drenched. He threw open his cape. In his arms were dry twigs and branches of trees. The Sinda threw the branches he brought and stoked the dying embers. Soon, the fire roared back to life.

“It was my fault at Sirion,” said Thranduil. “I thought I was doing what was best at the time. I was
young and weak. I couldn’t protect you and your brother. I am sorry.”

Thranduil stopped talking, his eyes on the fire before him. Elrond’s throat thickened as he felt the waves of grief coming from Thranduil. The Sinda was struggling to tamp down the feelings, but it was great enough that Elrond could feel them. When Thranduil mastered his emotion, he spoke again.

“But, at the Dwarven ruin, I didn’t abandon you, Elrond. You were lost in a dream, and I couldn’t awaken you. So, I did what I thought was best. I bargained with the dragon. I would not have left you.” Thranduil turned to Elrond then. “Do you believe me?”

Thranduil held Elrond’s eyes. Elrond swallowed the lump in his throat.

“I believe you,” Elrond said and smiled brightly feeling the warmth of the fire that burned bright.
The Sun, Moon and the Shadow

Chapter Summary

Mairon sets up his board for the new game.
Thranduil laments.

Chapter Notes

Thank you for your patience. I am still overwhelmed with work, but the month of May looks promising which may mean more frequent updates.
Special thanks to The Dark Lord of Doom for the inspiration regarding Sauron. He is the one who came out with the idea that Sauron invented chess.

Forochel. November 3, Second Age 144

MAIRON swirled the bottle of blood in his hand as he looked about the new abode from his seat carved out of ice and stone. He let his other hand trail over the white fur of the huge wolf by his feet. The creature hummed, leaning into his hand.

The walls of granite were encrusted with thick ice. This ice cave in Forochel was far from Angband with his master’s soaring towers and its fiery pits, but until a suitable place could be carved out, this will have to do.

Unlike his master, Mairon disliked the cold, but the inaccessibility of this region suited him. He had healed his physical wounds, but the Elven sword and the dagger were weapons from Valinor made with unsurpassed skill and enchanted with the powers that sapped him of strength.

The wolf by his feet suddenly sat up. Mairon stretched out his empty hand knowing that his messengers have returned. A thin gap appeared on the walls of the stone and ice on his silent command. A swarm of gray bats poured through the crevice. The ice bats Mairon engineered to be hardy in these coldest of climates flew in filling the ice cave with chirps and clicks, inaudible to most, but clear as ice to Mairon.

The cluster of gleaming gray wings circled Mairon like a swarm of ice chips.

“Hello, my beauties. What news have you brought me?”

The chirping of the bats filled the cave as Mairon heard the report.

“Incaptive Fools!”

The fire erupted from Mairon’s hand, and the bats nearest him burst into flame. The swarm of the bats scattered. The gigantic icicles hanging nearest Mairon shattered into numerous pieces, and their shiny shards like blades of knives hovered all around Mairon as a pulse of energy surged and filled
the cave chamber. The wolf whimpered and slinked away into the shadows.

With a swipe of his hand, thousands of ice shards flew over the wide expanse beneath the throne and embedded themselves onto the frozen floor of ice.

An image appeared on an ice wall as Mairon whistled a song of power to see what he sought.

A crow. One of the few he had stationed at the Grey Havens after the report that the cadets had been taken there sat on a branch of a tree just outside the walls of the city. His strength was limited while he recovered. But within his own body, Mairon could control all the beasts and creatures that Melkor had once controlled, no matter the distance. Mairon reached into the crow to see what it saw: two riders coming out of the city gate. One glance was enough to show him exactly who they were.

“Despite all their talk of justice, they allowed you to live, have they?”

By the fact that his crows could not fly over the cities, Mairon knew the king and his councilors were at Grey Havens. Where the king and his advisers were, the combined power of them was great enough that it kept the sight of the crows from seeing beyond the walls of the cities.

Despite that, no power on Middle Earth would have been able to keep Mairon away if he intended to force his way in, but he knew now was not the time to confront the Elves.

No. He can be patient.

It was times like this that Mairon mourned the loss of Thuringweithil. During the First Age, she had been his eyes and ears not only in Angband but in all of Beleriand. She alone, Mairon had trusted to carry the most important contents that needed to be sent to Angband. If it wasn’t for Luthien… Had Thuringweithil lived, she would have found a way to infiltrate, the way these crows, bats, and wargs never could.

Through the eyes of the crow, Mairon watched the two Elven riders gallop away, one dark haired and the other golden.

Mairon sat back on the throne in the ice cave of Forochel.

He fisted his hand containing the fire that thrashed to erupt from within him. Out of the habit he had engaged at Lindon, Mairon pulled the bottle open and drank from it.

The moment the blood burned as it went down his throat, the Maia realized it wasn’t a wine that he drank. There was a very little of Uluch’s blood. He had not had the time to salvage more than he had in the bottle.

As soon as the blood entered him, the strange pull of the dragon-blood enticed him to drink more.

More! More!

The desire flamed within him. Hunger, keen, hypnotic and vicious, like a snake dripping with poison and ready to strike, wound itself around Mairon’s body filling him with great thirst. Wanting, enticing, craving hunger and thirst seethed deep within him. It tested even his Maiarian will.

Mairon fell back and laid his head on the throne of ice and stone as he struggled to master his will.

Once calmed, Mairon opened his eyes into a slit and picked up the bottle half empty now. Mairon curled his lips. Within the blood, Mairon tasted Uluch’s thoughts as he absorbed her blood.
“You have been a clever little girl, haven’t you, Uluch?”

He could understand Melkor’s affection for the she-dragon. His master had a fondness for subtle malice that left a lasting effect.

It was unfortunate he could not use her now. But her unwitting gift was welcome.

Mairon gestured toward the wolf. It wagged its tail and pranced back to lay under Mairon’s feet. The Maia ran his elegant hand over the beast who purred contentedly.

“Uluch has been busy with this little Sinda before she fell, didn’t she, boy?” Mairon cooed as the wolf nudged closer, rubbing its moist snout into his hand. “She had given him her blood and put him under her spell. Do you know what that means, my boy?”

Mairon laughed out aloud. The sound reverberated through the chamber.

“I am glad they did not kill you, Thranduil Oropherion. No, indeed.”

Mairon glanced at the image of the two cadets as they disappeared from the crow’s sight.

Mairon held up the glass bottle and shook the red liquid. His master had wanted to destroy all the Elves when he found they could not be controlled. But, he may have just found a way. If this could test his will, what could it not master? What creature in Middle Earth, be it Elves, Men or Dwarves, would be able to resist the temptation of this blood? Within it was Melkor’s essence that melted into the very heart of the substance that made this world. Like the air that one breathed, it was invisible, pervasive and so far-reaching. If he could harness the power of this blood, he would be able to control anyone. Even the Elves.

And this time, he will not fail. When he first entered the Elven city, it was just out of curiosity, an opportunity unlooked for and unplanned. He had been a mere observer in an uncharted territory just taking the steps where they would fall.

But now, things have changed. Thranduil was alive. It meant they believed the Sinda. The Elves would have guessed who he was. And knowing he was wounded, they would be looking for him thinking they could eliminate him and his Orcs before he regained his strength.

Mairon whistled a note and the floor beneath him molded itself into a large rectangular stage. With a wave of his hand, pieces of ice shards formed into a shape of Gil-galad, Celebrimbor and the faces of the many lords and ladies Mairon had seen that formed the king’s council. He surrounded the council with the warriors, each represented by the commanders Mairon had carefully tagged in his memory.

“I know the pieces you possess. Shall we play a new game, my little king?” Mairon said to the piece carved like the shape of Gil-galad.

Mairon walked over to the center of the board to pick up Gil-galad, then stopped as another piece blocked his way. Tilting his head, Mairon picked up the piece with the cool gray eyes of that clever and deadly captain of Silmacil.

“I didn’t forget you, captain. How could I?” Mairon said. “You are the thorn on my beautiful rose. To pluck the flower to put it in my vase, I will have to cut off some leaves and especially the thorns. We do not want to get pricked; do we?”

“Make your move, captain. I have a special treat for you. With regards from my Master.”

Silmacil had been a thorn on Melkor’s side for a long time. This hidden asset of the Elves had
thwarted many of his own brilliant plans. Mairon wanted to possess the Elves, but to keep them, there were few he needed to eliminate first. And the captain of the Silmacil was one of them. It was a pity, really. The Noldo was a brilliant warrior. But, Mairon knew the type. The Noldo would be more of a hassle than an asset.

Mairon raised his hands and filled the chamber with the songs of power. Words beautiful in sound, yet frightening in its intensity, rose in cadence. The floor of the chamber trembled, and the stones and ice-covered floor cracked open.

Forest outside Grey Havens. Same Day.

**THRANDUIL** massaged his left arm. A sudden pain ran down his arm making the Sinda clench his teeth. He wondered if the medicine he brought was enough. But he should be able to return to the city soon. Thranduil glanced at Elrond. The Half-Elven was sleeping, his eyes looking toward the stone ceiling. Elrond’s gray eyes were glazed and moving as he walked in dreams.

They had talked through the night. Elrond had wanted to know what happened at the Dwarven ruin, and Thranduil had obliged, carefully omitting the parts that related to the dragon blood and the personal matters.

When the pain calmed, Thranduil wondered what the Half-Elven saw in his dreams. If things in his dreams came true, did Elrond have foresight? Thranduil wondered what other powers Elrond had. He had noticed Elrond’s uncanny ability to feel other’s emotions. He wasn’t sure if the Noldo was just sensitive to other’s feelings or that was another of his hidden powers.

Most Elves had powers, one talent or other in growing, creating, shaping or healing. Some were powerful enough and knowledgeable enough to weave enchantments beyond what was normal for his people. Rare few had powers beyond mere enchantments. His mother had said Elves were given these gifts because Eru made them to enhance and beautify his creations.

Thranduil suspected that Elrond had more of those talents than others. The Half-Elven was, after all, from the line of Melian.

And it seemed Elrond had a skill for healing as well. Every soldier was taught healing spells, but not all had a talent in them. He certainly didn’t. And, his mother was a healer.

It seemed as if everyone was gifted with talents except for him. Thranduil did not have any special powers or talents, none that he knew of.

Thranduil sighed. Life was unfair. Some people were born with gifts. Some had more than one while he had none. The Sinda glanced at Elrond again. And others… Thranduil glared at the brightest star in the sky. Some just took.

"He is truly your son, Earendil. You Orc!” Thranduil muttered. “It was not enough you took Elwing from us, take her Silmaril as if you had all the right to it? Did you had to make Elrond a Noldo?"

As the words spilled out of his mouth, Thranduil realized how much he equated Elrond with Elwing. Elrond looked much like his mother. The Noldo had her warm gray eyes, her infuriating stubbornness, and her deep compassion. And yet, Elrond was not Elwing. No matter the amount of Sindarin blood that flowed in Elrond, it did not make him a Sinda just as Astarno being a kinslayer.
didn’t make him a killer, and Onar being a Dwarf didn’t make him a thief and a liar.

Elrond, unfortunately, was thoroughly a Noldo. He made excuses for the actions of the kinslayers. Even Gil-galad, the king of Noldor that he was, did not make excuses for his kin. It was ironic to Thranduil how it was Astarno and Onar, the ones Thranduil considered enemies, who shared his grief and understood it. And that old Dwarf, he saw more, understood more than one of Thranduil’s own kin.

Thranduil rubbed at his heart trying to erase the ache there. He had wanted and needed Elrond to believe him. Even if no one believed, Thranduil thought if Elrond believed, then maybe, perhaps, Elwing would find a way to forgive him for failing her.

Although it seemed Elrond had forgiven him for what happened at Sirion, it didn’t lighten Thranduil’s heart. Was he selfish for wanting Elrond to be more Sinda than a Noldo?

It was so unfair. Thranduil sighed and looked up at the star-filled sky. It seemed to him Noldor received all the glory and Sindar only the grief. Noldor may have fought against the Morgoth in the First Age, but the large part of their army had consisted of Sindar they had trained to fight for them. An uncounted number of Sindar died in the war Noldor waged against Morgoth, but that was never mentioned in their written records. What was worse, the Noldor took from them the best part of what made them the Sindar, the bloodline of Lady Melian.

Stars were fading now. The greatest star twinkled bright and merry. Thranduil imagined Earendil laughing, the way the Half-Elven-turned-Noldo used to do even at Sirion. The fool was always laughing.

What had he expected? Elrond grew up with the kinslayers. Of course, he will sympathize with them over his mother’s people. Elrond was a Noldo. Thranduil knew that, thought he had accepted that. Still, why did his heart hurt to hear Elwing’s son defend the Feanorians?

Thranduil got up and stamped out the smoldering fire crushing the last remnant of the embers with his booted foot.

An unburnt piece of wood cracked loudly under Thranduil’s boots. Elrond sat up, his eyes half open and full of sleep.

“Is it time to go already?” Elrond mumbled rubbing his eyes.

“Yes. Let’s go,” Thranduil said and kicked over Elrond’s bag towards him.

Thranduil ignored Elrond’s frown and got on his horse and moved away when Elrond caught up to him.

“What happened?” Half-Elven said running his hand through his head to comb the stray hairs.

“Nothing. You want to catch up to Beril, don’t you?”

Elrond let out a sigh. The Noldo was blissfully silent for a moment. But, only for a moment.

“Why are you so… like this?”

“Like what?”

Elrond shook his head pressing his lips into a thin line when Thranduil looked at him.
“You are like a warm Spring and a chirping of birds one day, then suddenly you are all Winter and bitter winds. Have I done something wrong? Why the sudden chill?”

“What do you mean?”

Thranduil shrugged turning his eyes back on the ground. He wanted to concentrate on the work ahead. No good came from thinking too much.

He found the trail, six on horses. Four of them were well armed and carrying enough for the horses to leave clear prints.

“Found it. Their track.”

Thranduil spurred his horse to follow the track that veered off the main road into a forest of birches and pines.

“Don’t try to change the subject,” Elrond said when he caught up to Thranduil.

“What is it now?” Thranduil looked up at Elrond. “Did you know that you nag like the elders?”

Elrond made a face. He looked so much like one of the twin princes back in Menegroth, Thranduil’s lip quivered. Elurid and Elurin had been the first friends Thranduil had made who were nearest his age. Back in Menegroth when the moon still shone.

“Elrond, we are here for a reason. Can we not focus on the matter at hand?”

“This is important to me,” said Elrond. “As important as Beril. I want to know if I have done something to offend you.”

“You didn’t offend me. Now, can we get back to….”

“Then, why you are you so moody.”

“Moody? Me? If you mean that I am of the Moon, then you are right. I am a Sinda, after all. Always has been. Not that you would know anything about that.”

“Is that what this is about? Because I chose to defend Astarno? Thranduil, I wasn’t trying to side with him. I was just trying…

“Doesn’t matter. You are a Noldo after all. Just because you have Sindarin blood in you, it doesn’t make you one of us.”

Elrond threw his hands in the air.

“Look,” Elrond grabbed Thranduil’s rein and pulled their horses to a sudden stop. “I am not only my father’s son, I am also my mother’s. And even if I am a Noldo and you a Sinda, we could still be friends and be open with each other.”

“Can we?” Even as he asked, Thranduil’s heart clenched. “Can we really be friends? You and I? We are so very different.”

“Who said we have to be alike to be friends? We will have that much more to learn from each other.”

“Don’t you understand, Elrond? The Sun and the Moon never meet. They are forever sundered.”

“And, yet, they share likeness also. They both shine and give light in the darkness. If one is to
become friends only with those who share the same thoughts as you, then you are limiting yourself to a very small world indeed. How are we to become better leaders if we are to associate ourselves only with those who like our ideas? Who are just like us? Who only see the world the way we see it? And think what great friends Lord Cirdan was with King Finrod? Or even with Gil-galad? You cannot deny that both have gained much from each other’s friendship.”

“They were the exceptions.”

“Why can’t we be exceptions, too? We could be the greatest of the friends that had ever been. Is not Cellon your friend, too? Or Captain Astalder? Even Lord Onar? Have they not been a friend to you?”

Thranduil could not answer. He spurred his horse.

Gil-galad had asked that, too. But, can he truly be friends with another who saw things so differently from himself?

The rain and the wind from last night had strewn the forest floor with debris making it difficult for the horses to gallop.

And as the sun rose in the sky, they came upon the two guards in a scale armor with white and silver colors of Lord Cirdan’s sigil.

“Well met! We are glad to have found you,” said Elrond after he introduced himself and Thranduil. “You are accompanying Mistress Beril to the village by the North Fort? We wanted to talk to Mistress Beril. Could you take us to her, please?”

The guards exchanged glances.

“What happened?” Thranduil asked seeing the hesitation among the guards.

“She’s gone,” said one of them.

“Excuse me?” Elrond jumped off the horse, and Thranduil followed.

“Last night, after the rain and the wind stopped, she went up on a tree. She said she sleeps better up there,” said the guard.

“We just figured it was a Nandorin thing,” another said with a shrug.

“But, she never came down, and you cannot find her,” Thranduil finished for them.

“She said she knew the way and didn’t need our help, but even at full gallop, it would have taken us five days to get to the North Fort. Lord Nimfindor’s instruction was clear. We were to escort her to the village. With what happened at the Dwarven ruin, there could be anything in these woods.”

“The trees are bare. How could you miss her?” Elrond asked.

“She is a Green Elf. And this is a forest. If she does not want to be found, it will be near impossible to find her.” the guard said. “We don’t have much time to linger. I hope we find her soon.”

“We had a report of the wolves in the north, didn’t we?” one of the guards said.

“That was three moons ago, Earhin. When the cadets were lost in the north. But, I think the border guards took care of them.”
“Never mind that,” said the guard called Earhin. “Come with us. We will take you to our lieutenant. He is at the campsite in case she returns.”

The lieutenant was an old Sinda Thranduil knew well. Next to the lieutenant was another guard and an elderly Elf. Thranduil groaned when he saw who it was.

“Well, well, if it isn’t the son of Lord Oropher. Thranduil Oropherion, how is it you are here? And with young Lord Elrond. I hope you are not leading him into any mischief?” said the healer. He was one of the healers from Menegroth who now stayed at the Grey Havens under Lord Cirdan.

“I beg your pardon, Master Camnestir,” Thranduil frowned down at the healer. “It was Elrond who brought me here.”

“Is that so?” The healer nodded to Elrond respectfully. Thranduil was sure the healer didn’t believe a word. Camnestir had been a target of Thranduil’s pranks enough times during their time at Menegroth as well as at Sirion although, at Sirion, Earendil was the instigator.

“If you will hear it, I advise you to give a wide berth to this young lad, Lord Elrond. If he doesn’t make trouble, trouble usually follows him,” Camnestir laughed.

“My experience is that if he makes one, you cannot find a trace of it,” said the Lieutenant. “Remember the disappeared wine from Lord Cirdan’s cellar? I heard it was his doing.”

“I think most of us had taken a bottle or two from cellar somewhere,” Elrond said.

“Yes, a bottle or two I understand,” said the lieutenant. “But, how about three barrels, from a cellar which is located within a guard house full of guards. I still don’t know how he did it. How did you do it, Thranduil?”

Did they really expect him to incriminate himself? Thranduil stared at them as if he had no idea what they were saying.

“Did you really?” Elrond asked.

“Were you able to find Mistress Beril?” Thranduil asked ignoring Elrond's question.

“Ah, that Nandorin elleth. No. We looked all around our campsite. Nothing.”

“Shouldn’t you be looking for her?” Thranduil asked.

“I am afraid we cannot linger here too long. We were to take her to the northern village on our way to the North Fort. They are expecting Master Carnistir and his medicine. We were supposed to be there already before the snow makes the roads impassable. If it weren’t for what happened up at the north, they would not have closed the road, but here we are in the middle of Fading, traveling north.”

“Don’t forget, I had to help with the injured cadets and Lord Gilmagor,” said the healer.

“I wasn’t sure what to do as we cannot stay to look for her and we will need to send someone back to the Grey Havens to let Lord Nimfindor know what happened. Perhaps you two can go back and inform Lord Nimfindor?”

“But, how about Mistress Beril?” Elrond asked.

“I am afraid there is no way to find a Green Elf who does not want to be found.”

“But it is very important we find her, lieutenant,” said Elrond. “We must speak with her. And isn’t
"She in danger alone?"

The lieutenant frowned up at Thranduil then at Elrond.

"Was there an order from the city?"

"We wouldn’t roam around here for no reason," said Thranduil before Elrond could answer. "And even if she does not want to be found, there is a way. Perhaps she returned to her own home. It is just beyond their village which was destroyed."

"How far away from the North Fort?" The lieutenant frowned. "My duty lies not only in guarding Master Camnestir and his medicine but also in delivering a message from the king and Lord Cirdan. I am afraid Lord Nimfindor didn’t think to dispatch another guard as we were scheduled to go up to the North Fort and could accompany her. And the medicine must be delivered timely. We do not have the time to tarry." Then the lieutenant smiled. "Why don’t you two return to the city? You could bring more guards to search for the elleth."

"I am afraid we cannot wait to locate Mistress Beril. We need to find her quickly. If you will, could you not send one of your guards back to the city instead? Thranduil and I will search for Mistress Beril in the meantime," Elrond said.

"It is too dangerous for two youngsters to wander alone."

"You forget we are trained warriors," said Thranduil.

"We heard that both of you were captured by the Orcs," said the lieutenant. "If you two cannot even handle a bunch of Orcs…"

"I don’t think you understand the circumstances of our capture." Elrond glanced at Thranduil.

"That’s right, lieutenant. I heard that the swordmaster of Noldor was also hurt at the north," said Earhin.

The lieutenant made a face. He seemed torn.

"Give us some time to look for Mistress Beril, lieutenant. We will return to North Fort as soon as we find her. Once you are there, you could send out a few warriors for us," said Elrond.

The lieutenant nodded. He turned to Earhin.

"Earhin, return to Lord Nimfindor and tell him what happened. I will head out to the North Fort." Then, he turned to Thranduil and Elrond. "The city is only a day’s ride. You two will have a two days’ head start. If I wait until I get to North Fort, that is not until another week from now. Anything could happen in a week. I do not wish to take a chance of something happening in that time."

With that, they bid each other safe journey. The lieutenant, the healer, and the two guards left first.

When Earhin turned toward the city, Thranduil stopped him.

"If you see Captain Aron, will you deliver a message to him for me, that perhaps the woodland just outside the walls of the North Gate may require his attention?"

Thranduil kept his voice light. He didn’t want to alarm anyone.

"What was that about?" Elrond asked once the guard left.
“It is probably nothing. Just a precaution. Outside the walls... I don’t know how to put it, but the woodland was oddly quiet. And the trees, they seemed tense and afraid.”

“What? Why didn’t you say before? To the lieutenant?”

“It was just a moment. And the lieutenant needed to go to the North Fort. And if I told him that, he might not have allowed us to go off on our own. Did you want to wait? If so, we could just stay here until the warriors from the city catch up to us. I am sure as soon as the lords receive a word that you and I are out here, they will send out warriors right away. I don’t know how your king is, but Lord Cirdan and Celeborn, they are kind of overprotective.”

“Overprotective lords? Trust me, Thranduil. I know what that is like,” said Elrond. “As to Beril, I would prefer to wait, but we cannot. I fear for Beril. We need to find her as soon as we can.” Elrond sighed. “You said there is a way. What do you know?”

-----

Forochel (Sindarin, Northern ice)—north end of the Blue Mountains and a part of Northern Waste. It was a part of Dor Daïdelos (Region of Everlasting Cold) where Morgoth’s first fortress Utumno (literally means ‘hell’), then later his second fortress Angband, used to be located. Forochel is remnant of this region which had remained icy and cold even after Morgoth was defeated and removed from Middle Earth. The region’s harsh weather made the region inaccessible to most people except Forodwaith, and later Lossoth their descendants, who lived there since the Elder Days.

Thuringwethil (Sindarin, Woman of Secret Shadow)—a vampire with bat wings, she was Sauron’s servant during the First Age, both a messenger and a spy. Luthien used Thuringwethil’s cloak as a disguise to gain entrance to Angband.
Stag Hunting

Chapter Summary

Thranduil and Elrond go hunting.

Forest north of Grey Havens. November 3, Second Age 144

ELROND looked at Thranduil who looked up at the slender birch trees all around them.

“You said there is a way. What can we do to locate Beril?”

“We’ll have to ask the trees,” Thranduil said.

Elrond sighed. He didn’t know what to make of the Sinda.

“Thranduil, we don’t have time for jest.”

“Do you see me laughing?”

Elrond’s temple pounded. Beril may have already found a place to sleep instead of going all the way up to where her home was. Maybe the Sinda did not realize the seriousness of this matter.

“I know trees sing, but they don’t talk. They are not Ents or Huorns.” Elrond sighed and looked about him. “And I don’t believe there are Ents here. I think all of them perished when the Beleriand sank.”

“Not in this forest, but if you cross the Tower Hills, there is a vast forest that stretches all the way across the entire Eriador. It is a green country that stretches over to the other side of the Misty Mountains. It is Ent country. Ents and Huorns.”

“Indeed? I have read about them, but have not seen any of them. Ents. I would like to meet them one day.”

“You should be able to find one not too far from the Tower Hills. Maybe after the field training ends, before returning to the White City, you could go.”

“I would like that. Will you come with me? Introduce me to one of the Ents?”

Thranduil shrugged. “We’ll see.”

“But, how do you suppose we talk to the trees? If these are not Ents or Hourons, how could they talk? Is there a special language?”

“Not that I know of. Just open your mind and talk slowly. They can’t understand you if you talk too fast.”

It sounded mad to talk to trees. Elrond had done it when he was a child, but it was a pretend, not for real. But Thranduil could not really be joking about Beril. As far as Elrond knew, the Sinda did not jest about serious matters.
“Can anyone speak to them?” Elrond looked about the forest of birches, aspens and pines feeling his stomach flutter with excitement. It was a chance to learn a new language.

“I believe so.”

“Then, let me try,” Elrond said feeling a sense of exhilaration. His stomach tightened as blood rushed into him as joy filled his body at the prospect of learning something new that he had not known before.

Taking a breath, Elrond approached one of the birch trees.

“Ex.cuse. Me, Maas.ter Birch,” Elrond shouted up at the tree trying to pronounce each syllable.

“May. We. Asssk You. A. Que.sss.tion?”

The wind rustled through the dry leaves on the ground and spread them all about Elrond making a sound like waves of the ocean.

Elrond turned back to beam at Thranduil, but the Sinda’s face was aghast.

“Are you a half-wit?” the Sinda said, his dark eyebrows drawn together into a thick frown. “I said talk slowly. I didn’t say shout. There is nothing wrong with their hearing.”

Elrond turned back to the tree. The slender birches shook their branches all around Elrond as if the wind disturbed them.

“Are they saying something? Did I get through? Should I talk more slowly?” Elrond asked. He leaned into the tree, but all he heard was a rustle of the wind. “I don’t hear anything.”

“You do not hear anything because the birch thinks you are an idiot. And they are all laughing at you.” Thranduil shook his head.

“How do you know?”

“I don’t know how you cannot hear that. Listen,” Thranduil said and leaned his head and closed his eyes.

Elrond closed his eyes and let his senses flood him. He heard the rustle of the leaves, the sweep of the wind as it lifted the fallen leaves off the floor. Elrond allowed his senses to waft among the trees. Like misty fingers, his senses reached out searching for the minutest sounds: the crack of branches, the scurry of tiny feet busily gathering the last of the nuts, the roots digging into the cold earth to strengthen them against the coming frost. Elrond could even hear the woodland animals deep under the ground in their last preparation for the long winter ahead. Somewhere a lone bird hooted longing for its companions who have gone away.

Blinking, Elrond looked up. Thranduil was looking at him, still frowning.

“You do not hear them, do you?”

“Not really.”

“Amazing!” Thranduil pointed at Elrond. “You can wield a sword like one of those famed Noldorin warriors, heal like a trained healer, sense people’s feelings and dream the future, but you can’t hear trees.”

“Excuse me? My talent in healing is minimal at best. And I don’t dream the future or …” Elrond
hesitated. He wasn’t sure if he should let Thranduil know his powers, but he didn’t want to lie openly either. “Perhaps I am sensitive to the feelings of the others, but I don’t dream futures.”

“You said you did. And as you have the blood of Lady Melian, I wouldn’t be surprised if you did.”

“It is only sometimes. I do not know. I do not have any control over when it happens when it does happen.”

Thranduil shook his head, then he put his head on the trunk of the tree, and with his other hand, the Sinda stroked the peeling bark as if he was stroking his beloved.

“Help us, please. We are looking for someone,” Thranduil said. It was spoken respectfully with a warmth that was rare for Thranduil.

“It seems we need to go hunting,” Thranduil said after a while.

“Hunting? Now?”

“Yes. According to Master Birch here, a stag gave an elleth a ride.”

“A stag? But I thought Green Elves do not eat meat? And why would she go hunting? She wants to sleep, not eat.”

Green Elves were the only ones among the Elven kind that Elrond knew who didn’t consume meat.

“She doesn’t want to eat it, Elrond. She probably asked it to carry her so she could leave the area without a trace.”

“That is bad, Thranduil. It is a breeding season for the deer population. There could be any number of stags roaming around this forest. How are we to find the right one?”

Thranduil looked up at the tree as the branches creaked and shook.

“Apparently, this stag is quite large with an impressive set of antlers,” Thranduil said as he walked over to a next tree.

The bark of the tree was tattered as if someone scored the trunk with a thick tree branch. The scoring was all over the tree the highest even close to the lowest branch which stretched out its arm about twice Elrond’s height.

“It is one large stag. Even if we could recognize it, how are we going to find it in this forest?”

“There!” Thranduil pointed. Outside the grove where they stood, a hind dashed past followed by a large stag. Even at a distance, the stag was huge. They disappeared deeper into the forest. Thranduil bounded after them.

“Wait!” Elrond shouted after Thranduil, but the Sinda disappeared after the stag.

Elrond ran after. Elrond jumped over a dried cluster of undergrowing bushes one after another, sped past the trees, sliding over the leaves wet from the rain the night before.

The trees sped past as Elrond rushed after the glimmering gold ahead of him.

Elrond ducked and swerved to avoid low-lying branches and the thick cluster of trees in his way. His warrior training had mostly been in the open ground, on foot or on horseback. There had not been many instances which had required running through the forest at top speed.
Elrond focused on the flash of gold ahead. But Thranduil’s golden head disappeared among the thick cluster of trees ahead.

Unwilling to slow down, Elrond veered sharply to his left when something came at him. Elrond turned as a blur of movement pushed him off his feet.

Elrond fell onto a wet mound of leaves. Someone landed on top of him. Elrond rammed his head into the attacker’s face.

The attacker staggered, but when Elrond opened his mouth to shout, a hand clamped over Elrond’s mouth. Elrond reached for his dagger.

“What the hell, Peredhel!” Thranduil growled under breath as he blocked Elrond’s hand holding the dagger. Elrond relaxed laying back on the ground.

Thranduil let him go, then rubbed at his chin which was beginning to turn red.

“I didn’t expect you to come at me from the side,” Elrond also lowered his voice. “I thought you were in front of me. Why did you throw me off my feet?”

“You were about to rush into the stag and the hind about to mate,” Thranduil said as he jumped up. “Damn it. They are gone.”

“Sorry,” Elrond said as he got up to shake off the wetness of the leaves. “What do we do now? It is a mating season. There will be many stags and hinds in this forest. How could we track one particular stag?”

“We wait. We have no other choice.”

“How do you know if our stag will come back here?” He saw that the bark of the tree was marked and there were hoof marks around the area. “This could be a territory of some other stag. And, are you sure this is the best way? Maybe we could find Beril’s track some other way.”

“Trust me, Elrond. She would not have left any track for us to follow, not when she knows that people will be looking for her. And the grass is still green here. This is a prime location. There are not many places left where the grass is still green. You saw the sheer size of that stag and its antlers? I doubt there are many that would go against it. And if the stag succeeds in mating, it will need to feed and rest. It will come. Let’s wait for it up on a tree. It will prevent our scent from wafting through the area.” Thranduil pointed to a tall pine standing just below the low hill where they stood.

Most of the trees in this forest were young and too thin for them to hide in, but the pine tree was older with thick trunk and branches. Under the tree was a sunny area where a small patch of grass was still green protected from the wind by the hillside and the cluster of trees. Several clumps of dried bushes below the tree provided a hidden place for the deer to rest.

Not having climbed trees much, especially not the tall ones like the pine tree where the lowest branch lay two stories high, Elrond had to get a helping hand from Thranduil who seemed to have no trouble going up the tree trunk although it lacked stumps to hold onto. Once they reached the branch with many pine needles to hide them, they sat on the branch with their backs to the tree trunk.

“It seems this is the territory of our stag.”

“How do you know? The tree?”

Thranduil nodded. Elrond sighed.
“I know what you believe, but I don’t hear anything. I didn’t hear anything before either.”

Leaning against the rough bark, Elrond looked up. The sun was high up. The sunlight painted the silver speckles into the gray bark of the tree. And the crisp wind massaged their hair.

The forest was silent with occasional cracking of twigs and flurrying of furry feet.

Elrond closed his eyes and listened to the soft hum of the music of the tree. He didn’t hear anything except the music. Elrond wondered if hearing the trees was Thranduil’s special power? According to Maglor, all Elves had one gift or other. The potency of those gifts was determined by the inherent strength of the individual Elf. His lore master said that Noldor were exceptionally talented in matters relating to the elements of fire and metal having learned most from Vala Aule. As for the Sindar or Teleri, most of what was written about them perished with the destruction of Falas, and later Menegroth. But Elrond saw that Sindar and Nandor were talented with things of earth and water. Elrond supposed that Thranduil, as a Sinda, had more of his father and had a gift over trees which grew out of earth.

Maybe what he saw was not some random vision, but of the future, Elrond realized now. Two moons ago, while traveling with the cadets up north, few days before being attacked by the wargs and wolves, Elrond had a vision. To this day, he wasn’t sure if it was a dream or a glimpse of some unknown future.

He and Thranduil were tasked with hurling skins of water from a small stream that passed through the forest they entered. Elrond walked into a grove of trees. Thranduil was standing in front of a tree. The forest had been full of young aspens and birches, but when Elrond walked in, the forest changed. Instead of the young trees, the trees around Thranduil grew into the trees of enormous size. It was an old forest. And Thranduil stood his hand stroking the tree in front of him. His golden hair was long and fell over a green robe worked with silver leaves. The Sinda was no longer young but seemed ancient. He looked very tall and kingly. On his golden head was a garland of Fall foliage.

Elrond had rounded his eyes, then blinked. But like a mist, all dissolved, and Thranduil in his cadet uniform had turned around to face Elrond.

“Maybe it is a special power of yours,” Elrond said.

Thranduil turned to him. “What is?”

“Talking to the trees.”

“Pah!” Thranduil scoffed. “Everybody could hear trees.”

“Yes, their music. But I don’t know of anyone who actually hears them talk.”

Thranduil tilted his head and leaned it onto the tree bark. “Lady Melian did.”

“She’s a Maia. She doesn’t count. Didn’t anyone tell you that talking to trees, not Ents or Huorns, is special?”

“Not really.”

Elrond looked at Thranduil.

“I find that hard to believe.”

“No one at Menegroth thought it strange that I talked to the trees around Neldoreth.”
“You were a child. They probably didn’t think it more than a child’s fancy. When we were young, my brother and I talked to all kinds of things including trees, but we just pretended. We didn’t really hear any response. But you really did, didn’t you?”

Thranduil frowned at that.

“How about your warrior companions while you were traveling the Middle Earth?”

“As I said, there were a lot of Ents and Huorns in Eriador. And when we were up in the north, there weren’t trees around. It was a desolate land full of rocks and snow.”

“So, no one really knows you speak to the trees?”

“I never hid it.” Then, Thranduil shook his head. “I am sure you are wrong, Elrond. There are probably people who talk to the trees. We just haven’t met any. Green Elves are known for their knowledge of plants and animals. Some of them are known to understand the tongues of the beasts.”

“Do you?”

Thranduil shrugged. “Just birds. Maybe woodland creatures.”

“Elks, deer?”

“No more than any hunter. You?”

“I can speak most tongues of our kin and the known tongues of Men, but animals? I never tried it. How did you learn to talk to them?”

“Your foremother,” Thranduil smiled. “Lady Melian taught me.”

Elrond did not begrudge Thranduil, but his heart clenched. Thranduil knew so much of his family, the ones Elrond will never know. How wonderful it would have been to have met Lady Melian, to have met Luthien, or even his grandfather, King Dior? What was it like to have all your family around? Would he have learned to speak to the trees and the birds?

“You have so many talents already, Elrond,” Thranduil shook his head. Elrond felt a heat sear his face. Did this Sinda read his mind?

“Don’t worry. I can’t read minds or sense feelings. I don’t have such talents or any other talents I am aware of. You are just easy to read, Elrond. You have powers I don’t even understand. How many could sense other’s feelings or see into the future? Or heal others?”

“Healing? I don’t even know if I have a talent in that.”

“Don’t be modest. Trust me. You are skilled in healing. Even Mistress Taurien thinks you are talented.”

Elrond found he was immensely pleased. If it was not in learning new things, it was in healing that he found the most joy.

“You think so? I think healing is one of the noblest professions. I would have loved…” Elrond stopped.

“If it is healing you want to study, why are you in the officer training program? You are proficient in the ways of the sword, enough to protect others if the need arises. You need not be a warrior. Lord Celeborn was a famed swordmaster among the Doriathrin warriors, but he chose to become a
councilor instead. It was his brother who took on the duty of guarding…” Thranduil hesitated a moment before he went on. “No one respects him less for it. And healers are highly respected, more than warriors. What is stopping you?”

“I know that,” Elrond sighed. “It is just…. There are expectations.” Unlike Lord Celeborn, he had no brother here who could take on the responsibility of his House. Protection of the people was the first and the foremost responsibility of the people in his rank.

“Ah! I see,” Thranduil said.

They stopped talking, but Elrond knew Thranduil understood.

Duty. Obligations.

Elrond leaned back onto the bark of the tree. The music of the tree soothed, and the sunlight warmed his face. The Half-Elven looked up at the cloudless sky. A stray wind whistled through the branches sounding like laughter.

“When you were in that tower room, Lalaithwen wanted to visit you.” Elrond glanced at Thranduil who was also looking up at the sky.

“Who?” Thranduil turned to him.

“Belegor’s sister.”

“Isn’t she at the White City?”

“She and Cellon’s wife, and some others came when Oron and Gelir’s parents came to the Grey Havens.”

And when Lalaithwen learned about Thranduil in the tower room, she had tried to find a way to see the Sinda, even coming to see Elrond trying to convince him to take her to see Thranduil.

Thranduil’s posture stiffened at the mention of the lost cadets. The Sinda sat back, his eyes on the spikey leaves by their feet.

Elrond regretted mentioning the dead cadets. He wondered how Thranduil would feel. Even if Thranduil did not kill him, Gelir died at the Sinda’s hands. Even if they found that Gelir was not who he was, it would have been a burden on his soul.

“She likes you, you know,” Elrond said. He had been curious how Thranduil felt about her. Maybe, it was a good time to mention her, take Thranduil’s mind away from the cadets. Thranduil looked up.

“She likes you.”

“I thought you were interested in her,” Thranduil said.

“Me? No. I mean, I don’t know.”

“Then, why are you blushing?”

“I am not blushing!” Elrond sat up straight on the branch where he sat.

“But you are all red,” Thranduil chuckled.

“She is more like a friend, a sister to me. That is all.” Even as he said so, Elrond was still not sure if that was the truth or it was just what he wished.
“I don’t know how I feel, but I know how she feels.”

“Are you using your power to snoop?”

“Of course not!” Elrond frowned. “I would never do such a thing, and you know that.”

“I do,” Thranduil chuckled again. “But, why would you bring her up now?”

“I was just wondering how you felt about her. As I said, she is like a sister to me. I don’t want her hurt.”

“And you think I would hurt her?”

“You did partner her at the Midsummer Festival.”

“I only danced with her, Elrond. And, I didn’t choose her. She chose me.”

“Knowing you, that wouldn’t have stopped you from declining. You accepted just to annoy Belegor. Admit it.”

Thranduil shrugged.

“I don’t deny it. And, it is nothing she doesn’t know.”

“Please, Thranduil. She is a good person. Don’t play with her heart.”

“Play with her heart? Me? You are mistaken. I have no such intention. Besides, she could take care of herself. Did you know what she said when I told her that I accepted her invitation because I wanted to irk her father and brother?” Thranduil chuckled a rare smile that reached his eyes. “She laughed and said I’ll have to do better than just dance with her if I wanted to succeed. Then, she dared me to try. I tell you, Elrond. I was sorely tempted. Your Lalaithwen, you need not worry for her. She knows her mind. She is not one to fall easily.”

Elrond knew that. But he also knew that when a woman of strength and strong will fall, they fell hard. And he knew Lalaithwen was intrigued by this Sinda. And even now, Elrond was unsure how Thranduil felt about her.

“Still, it would be best to stay away from her. As is, Belegor is not happy with you.”

“What now? I haven’t even seen the Noldo since we left the White City.”

“I think it is Erfaron.”

“What about him?”

“Erfaron is Belegor’s best friend. Even their families are very close.”

Thranduil looked at Elrond blandly.

“Erfaron changed.”

“He had faced death. That can change a person. But, what has he got to do with me?”

“Erfaron and Saldor have been talking about you, how you saved them.” Elrond smiled at Thranduil. “You have become a hero, Thranduil. Saldor did all the talking, and the cadets weren’t sure what to believe until Erfaron backed him up. You know how Erfaron is. He doesn’t say much, but when he
does, people listen. Belegor was already unhappy that he missed out on all the action, but now, I
think he feels you stole his best friend.”

Elrond had expected Thranduil to tell him all about how he rescued the two cadets, the details Saldor
took half the night describing to the cadets. But, last night, Thranduil had glazed over the entire
incident with three words, ‘I found them.’ Listening to Thranduil’s succinct description of what had
happened at the Dwarven ruin, Elrond had wondered what other things happened that no one will
know except Thranduil, the dragon and the dwarf. Trying to get details out of Thranduil was like
trying to keep recovering Maedhros confined to his bed, an almost impossible task.

“I don’t know about that but being captured by Orcs is an experience I would gladly forgo. How are
Erfaron and Saldor? I know how hard it was after my first encounter with the Orcs.”

Elrond nodded. He had a hard time sleeping for many days after leaving the Dwarven ruin, being
startled awake at the slightest of sounds. It had made him realize how detailed Elven memory was.
Even now, when he closed his eyes, he could smell the odor of sulfur and ash, the suffocating heat of
the dragon fire, see the crystalline brilliance of the ruby scales. Sometimes, in the dark, he thought he
saw the burning eyes full of malice that had growled from the blackness of the night. And, the air
around him turned sour, thick with the scent of blood and fire that made his stomach knot. Elrond
shivered. How does one forget when every detail of your memory does not lessen with time?

“How about you?” Thranduil broke into Elrond’s thoughts. “I heard you had a quite an excitement.
Riding a dragon? Now that sounds like an unforgettable experience.”

“Who told you? Ah, Lord Istuion. Yes, I had to relay the incident to the lords. Trust me, Sinda. I do
not want to ever do that again.” Elrond grimaced thinking about dangling underneath the flying
dragon. Flying was definitely not meant for the Elves.

Thranduil smiled, then stopped, his ear flat on the trunk of the tree. “Stag,” Thranduil whispered.

Elrond looked down. It was not the stag they were looking for. It was too young and too small.
When it didn’t find a hind or doe, it moved away.

The sun moved further down in the sky.

“It is taking too long,” Thranduil said watching the sun tilt in the sky. “What did you do with the
horses?”

“I didn’t have time to do anything. The horses should be fine, though. They should be where we left
them. I hope Beril is not moving, going further away from us.”

“Let’s try calling the stag,” Thranduil said, and he jumped down onto the ground. “With no wind, it
shouldn’t smell us.”

“Are you sure this is a good idea?” Elrond looked around the woodland. “It should darken soon.
They should be more active if we wait…”

“You said yourself that Beril may be moving further away at this moment. Come on, Elrond. Let’s
try it. You know how to bleat like a hind, don’t you? I’ll grunt like a stag. That should drive our stag
crazy hearing a doe in heat and hearing another stag in his domain.”

“That stag was huge. And it is mating season. It might turn aggressive and just attack us.”

Thranduil shook his head. “Come, Elrond. I think you and I can handle one stag.”
They stepped further into the forest.

Thranduil let out a long grunt, gesturing for Elrond to bleat. Reluctantly, Elrond mimicked the sound of a hind. He wanted to get this over with so they could find Beril and return to the Grey Havens. For some reason, Elrond felt a need to return to the city as quickly as he could.

“Elrond, you need to sound more in heat than that. Your doe sounds boring.”

“Then, you do the bleating!”

Sun went down further as they stepped deeper into the forest.

Just as Elrond finished his short bleat, a stag appeared. Elrond beamed at Thranduil few feet away. Another stag appeared near Thranduil. Then another.

Thranduil moved closer to Elrond.

“Well, that was quick. But I don’t see our stag.”

Two of the three stags moved closer, blowing air through their noses.

“Thranduil, I think we are found. I don’t think they like the fact that there is no hind, just us.”

The stags lowered their sharp antlers.

“I am not sure if this was a good idea. I am sure they know we do not hunt them at this time. Even if they did, they are crazy this time of the year.”

“I know. But these stags are not so big. We could handle them.”

Elrond and Thranduil let out a battle cry startling the stags. They beat their chests, puffing up their breasts to make themselves look bigger. One of the stags backed away. Then, the two stags turned tail and bounded away.

“That’s right. Run!” Thranduil shouted triumphantly.

Elrond picked up his head when a shadow fell on him.

“Uh, Thranduil,” Elrond pulled at Thranduil’s sleeve.

“What? Whoa!” Thranduil took a step back.

Elrond had glimpsed it several yards away. The stag, their stag, stood only a few feet away from them. It was bigger than Elrond thought it was. It was too large to be a mere deer. It was the size of an overgrown elk. Its antler alone was almost as tall as Thranduil was.

The creature roared, then stamped the ground lowering its antler toward them, then bent down its hind legs.

“Run!” Thranduil shouted. They took to a run.

“Up the tree!” Thranduil shouted, but the trees around them were too young and thin. Elrond scrambled up one of the birch trees faster than he had ever done in his life. But the tree limb swayed under his weight as he climbed higher. Before he had a chance to look, however, the stag or the bull, Elrond wasn’t sure, rammed into the tree he was on. The tree toppled over onto the tree Thranduil climbed. They jumped off as both trees uprooted.
“To the pine tree!” Elrond shouted when he saw the stag turn to them rearing to charge again.

Elrond ran as fast as he could, but he could feel the many points of the antler behind him. If they were to kill the beast, it would be an easy matter, but they needed to calm the creature without hurting it.

“Run faster!” Thranduil shouted as he turned back to glance at Elrond.

They slid down the hill to the pine tree. The stag charged down picking up even more speed. The ground shook and the forest filled with the roar of the stag.

When he reached the foot of the pine, Thranduil hunkered down, his hands gathered in front of him. Elrond knew instinctively that the Sinda meant to give him a boost.

Elrond jumped onto Thranduil’s extended hands. Thranduil threw him up. Grabbing the lowest branch, Elrond hooked his legs and hung upside down and stretched his hands out to the Sinda.

Thranduil jumped just as the stag charged into the tree.

“Got you!” Elrond grabbed Thranduil, but the Sinda was a lot heavier than he had expected. He didn’t get a chance to haul Thranduil up when the stag rammed into the tree trunk.

The pine tree shook, but it did not buckle or topple over like the birch trees.

“Pull me up!” Thranduil shouted when the stag jumped up running his antlers at Thranduil. The Sinda kicked the antlers away. The stag roared and stood up on its hind legs and jammed at Thranduil’s buttocks.

“Ow! You crazy animal! I am going to skin you alive!” Thranduil roared.

Elrond swung Thranduil. Once he was settled on the branch next to him, Thranduil glared down at the stag which tried to use its antlers to reach for them.

“You talk to that beast, Elrond. I am afraid I might lose my temper and cut off its antlers,” Thranduil said rubbing at his bottom.

-------

**Eriador**—large region between the Blue Mountains on the west to the Misty Mountains in the east. Inhabited mostly by Ents and Nandor during the First and early part of Second Age. Later, by Noldor, Men, and Hobbits.

**Ent**—Shepherds of the Trees created by Yavanna with permission from Eru to protect the trees from Orcs, Dwarves and other creatures. They were sentient and were taught to speak Elvish by Eldar on their great march to the West. During the First Age, there were some Ents near Mount Dolmed. They helped Beren fight the Dwarves who were returning from the sack of Doriath. Treebeard was Ent.

During the beginning of the Second Age, most of the Eriador was covered in forest, and it was known as Ent country. But when Numenoreans (Aragorn’s ancestors, people of Elrond’s brother) returned to Middle Earth, they cut down a vast track of forests to make ships and to bring back to Numenor. With more and more human settlement, by the Third Age, most of these forests will disappear. The Old Forest, Fangorn Forest and Mirkwood were the only remaining forests from the ancient times by the War of the Ring. And Fangorn Forest was the only place where Ents still remained.
**Huorn** (Sindarin, *Tree Spirit*)—Trees that could talk and move, especially when they were angered. They had great strength and power. It is said that they were once Ents who became tree-like or trees that had become Ent-like. But whichever they were, when Ents were not around to look after them, they became wild and dangerous to other people. Old Man Willow from the Old Forest was probably one of the Huorns.
Chapter Summary

Celebrimbor returns and the General Council is in full session. Gil-galad hopes to get away to a meeting that is more sweet than dutiful.

Grey Havens. November 3, Second Age 144

GIL-GALAD sighed as he looked out the window. After the heavy rain last night, the sunlight seemed brighter and warmer, but it was waning now. The late afternoon sun washed the white walls of the council chamber in crimson.

The king had hoped to join Silwen and the rest of the Sindar in what probably was their last dip in the ocean before the waters would become too cold and rough. But, with the arrival of Celebrimbor the previous night, the meeting of the General Council commenced in earnest. Gil-galad who had been in one meeting or other through the entire yesterday had no break as he went over the details to be presented to the council with the members of the White Ring and Captain Astalder. He had rested barely a few hours before he had to face the General Council.

Gil-galad had been at the Grey Havens for a month now, but with the arrival of Lord Lammaeg, the Grey Havens which had always been his sanctuary from the cares of ruling became no different from his seat at the White City. It had been meetings after meetings, an endless stream of documents to read and sign, matters to adjudicate, and conflicts to settle.

Through it all, Silwen was just a glimpse of moonlight in the long hours of the night filled with work, duty, and obligations. Luminous as moon she was, full of warmth and light, always there but never near enough to touch.

Gil-galad traced the rim of the now empty plate of fruits which were brought into the council chamber when the meeting continued without a break for luncheon. Unlike those of the councilors, his plate had been decorated with the dried petals of flowers, the pale red of them vivid against the white and silver of the plate. Gil-galad ran his fingers over the petals feeling the warmth of her slender hands in them. Did she long for him as much as he longed for her?

Resigning himself, Gil-galad gathered himself to listen to Captain Astalder give his report on the events that occurred at the Dwarven ruin.

“I am glad that the misunderstanding by the Dwarves has been resolved. I wish I had a chance to speak with Lord Onar myself, but I understand that he didn’t want to stay here any longer than was needed,” Celebrimbor said. “What I don’t understand is why he was here. When I heard about the death of his son, I offered my condolences, but he had refused to meet with me. So, why did he come here? And, how did this rumor that one of us had killed his son come to be? What had he to say on the matter?”

“As you are aware, my lord, none of my warriors had seen what happened at the King’s Isle,” said Astalder. “Of what we know, Gelir Amarthion was with Lord Onar’s son and the nephew. The two Dwarves were attacked by the Orcs while Gelir was taken inside the King’s Isle. Lord Onar’s nephew who survived believed Gelir betrayed them.”
“Why would he think that? That is what I don’t understand.” Celebrimbor frowned mightily as other councilors echoed his sentiment.

“We do not know the details of what happened inside the King’s Isle. No one person had seen everything.”

“But, was not Elrond there? And the other cadets?”

“Elrond saw what I saw, my lord,” said Astalder. “And the other cadet, Thranduil Oropherion, was badly injured and fainted. It took our best healers to stabilize him. What is certain is that both the dragon and Gelir fell into the chasm and perished. Both Elrond and Thranduil have already given their statements to the king, the written copies of their statements are before you. As for the other two surviving cadets, they entered the Throne Room just before you did and did not see anything.”

“So, we do not know anything about what happened to Gelir Amarthonion?”

“Only conjectures,” Lammaeg said. “And we do not have time for conjectures, Lord Celebrimbor. But it is clear that the cadet did his best to resist the evil, but failed.”

“But, where are Elrond and the other cadets? Should they not be present here for the council to question. Why are they not here?” Celebrimbor asked.

Gil-galad repressed a sigh. How should they deal with Celebrimbor if his cousin insisted on questioning the cadets?

“They have been through enough,” Lord Gilmagor said. “Thranduil Oropherion is only now recovering. What happened have been traumatic for the cadets. What need is there for us to make them relive it again when they have already given their statement in front of the king and the chief councilor. Do you not think so, Lord Lammaeg?”

Lammaeg did not say but nodded.

“I agree with Lord Gilmagor. The four cadets who survived this ordeal already made their statements. The facts are laid out on the statements before you, each cadet testified in front of His Majesty and the Chief Councilor. Both Lady Galadriel and Lord Cirdan vouched for their statements. I do not see the need to question them further in this matter.” Lord Hathaeogor, Erfaron’s father and a firm supporter of the Chief Councilor, said. “What we need is not to make our young cadets repeat what they have already stated, but focus instead on how we can prevent any further threat from the dragons. And we need to discuss what this incident means to our future. The last war was only a century ago. Are we to face more war? Most of us believed wars would become only memories. I didn’t think we would need to worry about sending our children to battles. Does my son need to fight and kill as we had done?” The councilor’s eyes darkened with grief. “I have seen enough death since I came here, through those long marches in the deathly cold, to the war upon war waged against the Dark Foe. My wife and I remained here, believing we will be free of the blood and fear at last. Had we known that our son will have to fight, to kill…. It is not what we wanted for our son.”

A wave of murmur went through the councilors, many who nodded in agreement.

“Let us not allow our worry to speed ahead of us or to darken the blue sky black,” Lammaeg said. “We all stayed when we had a chance to return to Valinor because we had given so much of ourselves to this land. It is time for us to live and build this land the way we dreamed it. Just because the Great Evil is gone, it does not mean all our troubles are gone. There will be other troubles. There will be the remnants of the Enemy. We knew this. The rain and snow, this land will always have, but
let us not, in our fear and grief, forget that there will also be fragrant springs and warm summers. Do not let this small mishap discourage you.”

“Small mishap, my lord?” Celebrimbor stood up. “Six died. Six Elves who should have had life. And the cadets,” Celebrimbor took in a long breath. “They were mere lads, less than two centuries old.”

“I am not downplaying their loss, Lord Celebrimbor.” Lammaeg’s voice was grave. “But losses will happen. And it will continue to happen. It is the evil of living here. There are dangers. But that is why we must strengthen our arms,” Lammaeg turned to Gil-galad. “This is why, in his wisdom, our king had wanted to build an army. Not to wage war, but to keep the peace. If we are strong, no one can hurt us. Not the growing number of Men, not the strength of the Dwarves, not even the remnant of the Dark Enemy.”

The councilors burst into a cacophony of disagreements. Since the first day Gil-galad had proposed the building of the army, there had been disagreements in the council. Many councilors had been against having a large army. Many who remained in Middle Earth had wanted peace and wanted to live in peace. They saw having a strong military as a hindrance to the peace and harmony they sought.

“We also need unity,” Gil-galad said, but his voice was drowned out by the dissonance. He was a lone island amid the stormy sea. No one minded him and his words. Gil-galad looked about him feeling helpless and lost.

CRACK!

An explosion of sound stopped everyone in the chamber. They all turned around, wide-eyed and gaping. Captain Astalder picked up his helmet which was on the floor by his feet. Underneath his steel helmet, there were cracks on the stone floor.

“Oops! My apologies. Slippery fingers,” the captain smiled, nonchalant and apologetic at the same time. He looked at Gil-galad and bowed low. “Please forgive me, Your Majesty, for the unfortunate interruption. Please do not let it stop you from addressing the council.”

Gil-galad flashed the captain a smile, then turned to the council who looked at the king with attention.

“Having strong arms is important to protect us against the remnant of the Enemy, but what we need more than ever is the unity among us,” Gil-galad said.

“You mean having allies,” Celebrimbor said, rising from his seat and drawing the attention of the council. “We are still few in number. We do not procreate as easily as Men or the Orcs who breed like the green slimes that choke the life out of the waters. Dwarves have always been our allies, until the event at Doriath two centuries ago. Before that, Dwarves have always stood with us against the Enemy. We should befriend them again. Become allies.”

“But, they refuse to see what is the truth,” said Celeborn.

“We cannot do anything about what happened at Menegroth, but I understand the misunderstanding Dwarves had about Gelir Amarthion has been resolved. I know Dwarves are stubborn. I accompanied them when those who plan to migrate to the Misty Mountains went down to the Dwarven halls south of the Tower Hills. Many Dwarves do not trust us. I think it is a good opportunity for us to show them our friendship, and perhaps earn their trust. They will be wintering here and will start their journey to their kin at the Misty Mountains at the end of Stirring.
Gil-galad remained silent. Celebrimbor had the council’s attention. He knew his elder cousin’s words to him were meant only as a courtesy and was not a real request for permission from him.

“What aid could we offer them?” Celeborn asked, his mouth thin and forehead pinched.

“The last migration of the Dwarves occurred over a century ago mostly traveling north of Lake Nenuial. Their old path is now occupied by the Orcs. There is a safer passage through the vast forest beyond the hills. We have the map of the entire Eriador with the passages marked by Oropher. We could offer the Dwarves a safe passage through the forest and show our goodwill towards them,” said Celebrimbor. “It has been over two centuries since we had any trade relations with the Dwarves. We are short on ores, especially mithril. If we can reestablish trade with the Dwarves of the Misty Mountains, we can have a steady supply of mithril and other gems. In fact, I have been talking with Lord Hanar about building a road through Eriador.”

“Why would we want a road through Eriador?” Celeborn asked. “Eriador is Ent country. I doubt the Ents will want to have Dwarves cut a path through their forest and lay a permanent road. Oropher mapped a passage through the rocky part of the forest with the permission from the Ents. It was so that anyone passing through would be able to do so with the least disturbance to the trees there. If we were to guide the Dwarves, the Ents might see that as a betrayal of their trust. They had never gotten along with the Dwarves. And, Ents have been our allies also.”

“But what can Ents do for us?” Celebrimbor looked around the chamber. “What they can offer is so limited compared to what Dwarves can. And as for dealing with the Ents, that is where you come in, Lord Celeborn. I understand you and Oropher had gotten the permission from the Ents for the passage. You can go to the Ent elder and explain to them our needs. I am sure you can convince them as you had done before. It is my knowledge that you are also known, not only as the Silver Tree but also as the ‘silver tongue.’”

“You were seeking permission to travel east, Lord Celeborn. Were you not?” asked Lammaeg, his voice cool. “To find what had happened to your cousin as the place Oropher meant to settle was just beyond the Misty Mountains, I believe. Mayhap, this is the opportunity. With Lord Celebrimbor accompanying you, you will have all the provisions and arms you will need.”

“And if Oropher’s report is to be believed, Men are spreading. Not the Edain who had helped us in our fight against the Dark Lord, but lesser Men. We all know how easily Men can multiply. Before they take over the bulk of Middle Earth, we should stake our rights and set boundaries.” Celebrimbor and Lammaeg exchanged glances. Gil-galad was certain they had discussed this matter among themselves.

“That is another matter altogether,” Celeborn said. “In fact, if it is the spread of Men that you fear, then that is more reason we do not need a road. We all know that the Orcs and wargs migrated eastward. If another dark lord rises, such a road can only give easy access to us here in Lindon.”

“What dark lord?” Celebrimbor scoffed. “He is gone. The Orcs mean nothing without someone to control them. There are only dragons left. Only the strongest among them could control the Orcs. We destroyed the strongest one. The ones that flew off to North were dragonlings. Even if there was a strong one among them, they are nothing like Morgoth. I do not see the need to worry about them.”

Gil-galad glanced at Lammaeg and Gilmagor. Their faces were blank and unreadable. He could tell Celeborn was sorely tempted to say something, but Lady Galadriel lay her hand on Celebrin’s sleeve.
“We should never underestimate the power of the evil, Lord Celebrimbor,” said Cirdan. “We do not know with certainty what other servants of the Enemy remain here in Middle Earth. This incident at the Dwarven ruin assured us of that. There may be other lieutenants of the Dark Lord who had remained to take over the Dark Lord’s seat.”

“Morgoth is no more. He was of the Valar. That is the only reason we failed against him. Anyone less than he, I believe we have the power enough to handle,” said Celebrimbor. “Unlike the Sindar, we are of Valinor, Lord Cirdan. Remember that.”

“Even so, we ought not underestimate them,” Cirdan said. “Perhaps the matter of the road through Eriador can be discussed at a later time when the trade for mithril becomes more a reality. For now, I agree with His Majesty that we should focus more on strengthening unity among us.”

“As to unity, we can leave it to Lord Celeborn to speak with Oropher,” said Celebrimbor waving his hand dismissively. “Surely, Lord Celeborn could keep his cousin in check. As for the Sindar here in Lindon under you and Lord Celeborn, I believe it was His Majesty who said that they could be trusted. Did you not, Sire?”

Gil-galad could not say anything to that. But, Celebrimbor was not interested in obtaining an answer. He barely glanced at Gil-galad before turning back to Cirdan.

“What we need to decide now is whether we could give aid to the Dwarves or not. What say you, Lord Cirdan?”

“Dwarves helped us. We should return the favor. I am not opposed to giving them aid in the passage,” said Cirdan. “As to the matter of building the road, that can be discussed later when and if we establish a trade with the Dwarves.”

“With the dragons in the north and the migration of the Orcs east, perhaps it is time we look beyond our boundary and establish relationships with other realms. Dwarves have always been our allies,” said Lammaeg. “I do not see why we shouldn’t help them. It is a good chance for us to work with them again. Having a good trade relationship with them would enrich us.”

For once, both Cirdan and Lammaeg seemed to agree. And with them in agreement, no one seemed willing to voice disagreement.

“I suppose if we are to have allies, we have to start by showing our goodwill. Lord Celebrimbor and Lord Celeborn, we will leave it up to you to plan the route and submit a detailed proposal to the council for approval,” Lord Lammaeg said.

The meeting concluded as the sun bled onto the glassy surface of the ocean.

Gil-galad let out a sigh as he returned to his chamber. Whenever both Celebrimbor and Lammaeg were in the council chamber, he felt useless and incompetent. Worse, he felt invisible.

Gil-galad rotated his neck, trying to release the tension on his shoulders.

“There is a message for you, my lord,” his valet said helping Gil-galad get out of his courtly robe. “You probably want to see this right away,” he said as he brought papers folded like petals of a flower.

Even without opening it, Gil-galad knew who it was from and what it contained. Their meeting place. He wondered where it could be. Their secret location at the Crescent Cove was no longer private enough with so much more eyes within the Grey Havens. Even without looking at the letter, he knew the hour of the meeting. It was always when the Valacirca, the Silver Sickle, rose high in
the sky challenging Evil, giving hope to all.

Suddenly, all the tension seemed to melt away as his heart fluttered at the prospect of seeing Silwen alone and away from the prying eyes of others.

“What time is it, Elendur?” Gil-galad asked his valet.

“Four hours to Midnight, my lord.”

Four hours. He had four hours to find a way to get away undetected. With his uncle, Lord Gilmagor and some of the Silmacil here in the Grey Havens, it would be impossible to get away, but he wouldn’t let them stop him, not when Silwen was willing to see him.

Gil-galad had not been able to answer the first red petals as Lord Cirdan arrived with the injured Gilmagor that day. He had not seen another red petal until now.

Calming the pounding in his heart, Gil-galad picked up the delicately folded letter.

“Where is Elrond?” the king asked Elendur. Elrond had, more than one occasion, covered for him so that he could have some alone time away from the prying eyes of the servants and the councilors.

“I do not know, my lord. I have not seen him since yesterday.”

Gil-galad frowned. “Not since yesterday?”

It was then that a knock was heard. Gil-galad quickly put the message away inside his pocket. He swallowed a groan when he saw Lord Gilmagor limping in and behind him, Lord Cirdan and Lammaeg. Gil-galad took in a quick breath to steady himself. He was glad that the centuries of teachings his uncle and Lord Cirdan had instilled in him to keep his emotions guarded came to him naturally now.

“Celebrimbor may wonder why all of us are missing from the dining hall,” Gil-galad said.

“He is busy speaking to Lord Celeborn,” said Lammaeg. “I believe he is eager to work out the details of the travel east. But, we will not hold you long, Erenion. We’ll make this quick.”

But as far as Gil-galad knew, these ancient lords were never quick.

“With Celebrimbor here, I doubt we will have too many private moments for discussions. I was seeking you to inform you what I have discussed with Lieutenant Gwendir as to the cadets,” said Gilmagor. “They,” the Lord Commander turned to Lammaeg and Cirdan, “didn’t want to miss anything as this matter deals with Thranduil and Belegor as well.”

“So, a decision is made as to the placement of the cadets?” Gil-galad asked. “I thought the decision would not be made until the completion of the Field Training.”

“Field Training is the last test. But, the top three are far above others although two came very close.”

“So, who are the top three?” Lammaeg asked.

“Not much surprise here. Belegor, Elrond, and Thranduil are our top three cadets. They were to be given an officer position at the division of their wish as well as a chance to train with the Silmacil.”

“What do you mean ‘were,’ master?” Gil-galad frowned.

“What happened in the North had changed the way I see things. As to the cadets, Belegor wanted to
be in the royal guards, and both Elrond and Thranduil did not choose a division.”

Gil-galad waited. Both Lord Cirdan and Lammaeg remained silent.

“We will be giving lieutenancy to the royal guards to Belegor and Thranduil. I will take in Elrond as my personal lieutenant.”

“Excuse me?” Gil-galad frowned. “You want Belegor and Thranduil to work as co-lieutenants to the royal guards? You do know that those two are not exactly friends, especially not after what happened with the necklace incident.”

Lammaeg cleared his throat but did not say further. The chief councilor seemed unsurprised by the decision. Gil-galad did not like it.

“I am aware they do not like each other,” said Gilmagor.

That was an understatement if Gil-galad had ever heard one, but he waited.

“I thought to separating Belegor from Thranduil would benefit both. I was wrong. Separating two people who dislike each other is not the answer. Rather, by being forced together, even if they fight, kick and scream, they will have to learn to work as a team. Despite their differences, Belegor and Thranduil share much in common. Both work hard and have a high sense of duty. In the end, they may still dislike each other, but perhaps they could at least respect each other enough to work together. Is that not what we hope for ourselves?” Gilmagor looked around.

Both Lammage and Cirdan nodded, which surprised Gil-galad.

“And Lammaeg wants eventually for Belegor to join in the council, and I have recommended Elrond for the same. Lord Cirdan, along with Lord Celeborn, wants the same for Thranduil.”

Now, Gil-galad was surprised.

“And you agree to this, Lord Lammaeg?” the king asked his uncle.

“The Sinda will be here temporarily.” Lammaeg shrugged. "Five centuries is not such a long time. Besides, being accepted into the council requires winning a majority vote. I have nothing against those three being trained for the council. Whether they become councilors or not is not up to any one of us.” Then, he turned to Gilmagor once again. “As for the lordship over the king’s army, it seems clear to me that Gilmagor has Elrond in mind for the position. As one of your generals, Belegor will serve you better as one of the councilors.” Then, Lammaeg turned to Gilmagor. “There is more, is there not?”

Gilmagor nodded. “And, I will train the three along with Erfaron. Both Erfaron and Oron came close to the three in the skill with arms and the mastery over tactics. And after how he held himself in the north, I think Erfaron earned a place with the top three.”

Gil-galad understood now why Lord Lammaeg agreed to have Thranduil trained as a councilor beside sharing a lieutenancy in the royal guards, the most prestigious position for those seeking to be warriors. As the king’s personal guards, the royal guards were the best in the realm next only to the members of the Silmacil who were peerless.

“How about the other cadet who survived?” Gil-galad wondered about the young cadet.

“Saldor?” Gilmagor sighed before he went on. “He will be leaving us once the cadet program completes. Saldor had wanted to join the city guards under Lord Celebrimbor as many of his family
are jewel smiths, but after what happened, it seems the young lad has lost a desire to become a warrior. Unless he is called to serve due to war, the field training will be the last martial exercise he will be attending.”

“I don’t blame the lad. The first encounter with the Orcs is always the most trying experience,” said Lord Cirdan. “But are we doing the right thing by hiding the presence of Sauron?”

“You heard Lord Hathaegor.” Lammaeg shook his head. “He is not one to be easily disturbed, but he was ready to sail if he could. That shows how afraid we are of falling into war. If people knew of Sauron now, it might drive them into a panic. We may see a massive migration to the West. I am certain of that now. But if Silmacil succeeds in defeating Sauron before he can recover fully… There is a chance for us to have peace, to establish our realm the way we were meant to. Besides, if we were to tell the council about Sauron, then we must mention Astarno. And I assure you, the council will not forgive him. There are too many in the council who had lost loved ones at Sirion. And if we do not reveal Astarno, how will you convince Celebrimbor and others of the innocence of your young Sinda? You tell me, Lord Cirdan. Do you wish to risk the life of Thranduil Oropheron?”

“We have all decided on that already,” Gilmagor reminded them. "It is too soon to reveal anything. Don’t forget what it would mean for the Gelir’s family. I do not wish for them to suffer. Gelir already suffered, too much. And too many things are at stake to change things now. Let us focus on finding Sauron, and strengthening our forces. And Celebrimbor is right, also. We need to have allies. The Dwarves have always stood beside us through the War of the Jewels. And we need to strengthen our cadets. It is also the more reason their field training cannot be done within the safety of the Grey Havens.” Gilmagor’s face looked grim. “If there is to be a battle with the Enemy, our cadets need to be hardened.”

“But, it is so soon after all the loss at the Dwarven Ruin,” Gil-galad protested.

“Evil does not wait for us to be done with grieving, Erenion. We must be ready at all times. Warriors must know that. They do not have the luxury. We must train and be prepared so the rest of our people need not.”

“But, I do not want the repeat of what happened at the ruin. According to the guard report, more than a few wargs and wolves escaped the pursuing guards. They may have crossed the river and…”

“You are right, your Majesty. I did receive a report later that those vile creatures migrated eastward and northward, which is why Lord Cirdan had ordered a thorough scanning of the forest outside the walls after the end of Autumn. Did you not, Lord Cirdan?”

“I did. Before I took a boat up to the north to bring Lord Gilmagor here, I had several of my guards comb the forest just outside the north gate to make sure none of those wolves came there. That forest is where most of our healers go to obtain the materials they need for their potions. Many valuable plants grow there that are not found elsewhere although many bloodthorn bushes grow there as well.”

“Were any wargs found there?”

“Further north, the guards found a herd of wolves west of the river. One of the guards thought he saw one too big to be a wolf, but they managed to corner them near the water and slew them there. Few of them escaped up north, however. I received a report that many of them crossed over to the east.”

“And you want to take the cadets there?” Gil-galad could not stand still. He started to pace.
“I have doubled the guards at the Tower Hill,” said Cirdan. “None can come through from the east.”

“And the Silmacil will move northward. They will sweep east of the river and the west of the tower hills as they move northward and meet Astalder and Astamo who will stop at the Dwarven ruin before joining the rest of the Silmacil. The cadets will be behind them, and the guards of the Tower Hill will be ready to assist if it comes to that. Last time, I did not know what we were dealing with, but we will be prepared. The training of the cadets will take place within the hearing distance of the tower guards and the Silmacil. I am not leaving anything to chance this time.” Gilmagor’s eyes flashed. “Especially when this may be my last act here.”

Gil-galad looked down at his feet. Although not made public, Lord Commander had already declared to him his desire to leave for the land of Valar. The Valar had opened a passage to Valinor, one vessel at the end of every yen. The first ship to leave Lindon for Aman was almost complete. Gil-galad wished fervently that Gilmagor will not be on it, at least, not until Sauron is destroyed.

A heavy silence filled the room.

——

**Lake Nenuial** (Sindarin, *Lake of Twilight*) also known as Lake Evendim is a large lake north of the Shire. The Brandywine River flows out of this lake to the east, then south to the sea. It is said that Galadriel and Celeborn lived by Lake Nenuial after the War of Wrath.

**Valacirca** (Sindarin, *Silver Sickle*)—refers to the constellation of seven stars known as the Big Dipper. It is known as the ‘Sickle of the Valar’ as Varda made it as a warning to Melkor as a sign of his doom and as a sign of hope for the Elves. If anyone is interested in knowing the names of the stars and constellations in Tolkien’s work, try “The Song of the Stars” written by The Evenstar at the website: The Council of Elrond.

**A/N**: Some believe that the Great East Road, the Dwarven road that runs from Tower Hills through Eriador to the Misty Mountains, is made during First Age, but I don’t believe this. Eriador is supposed to have been one vast forest until later in the Second Age when Numenoreans cut down the trees to take back to Numenor. I cannot imagine Dwarves building a road through this forest when it was Ent Country. So, if Dwarves built roads there, it must have been after the deforestation, perhaps after Celebrimbor and Celeborn established Eregion which is not until Second Age 750.
COLOR OF GRIEF

Chapter Summary

THRANDUIL wrapped his arms around the trunk of the tree. At this rate, the tree would topple over, or they would be thrown off. The stag rammed at the tree again and again.

The tree trembled and shook all the way to its roots.

“I think you really angered it,” Elrond shouted above the noise as he held onto the trunk as if his life depended on it. They had climbed further up, making it impossible for the stag to reach them. But there were no trees around the pine tree, at least not big enough to hold them. There was no way for them to escape the stag.

“Oh, you think?” Thranduil glanced down where thickly growing branches covered the sight of the animal.

“Why can’t you keep your tongue in check. If you hadn’t called it names…I almost had it calmed!”

“Did you not see it attack me? It put a hole in my pants!” And Thranduil had not expected the beast to be sensitive about its antlers.

“Just apologize, or we’ll be the laughingstock of the cadets. Ai, to be chased up a tree by a stag!”

“I am not going to apologize to the overgrown, violent animal which doesn’t know how to behave.”

“It thinks we are a threat, Thranduil. Don’t forget, it is a breeding season. All stags and bucks are crazy this time of the year. You do realize that.”

“More reason I shouldn’t bother. It wouldn’t even care. It just wants to let out all its frustration on us. We should just cut off its antlers. Then, we’ll see what it can do.”

“You don’t mean that.”

“Don’t I?” Thranduil said, taking out one of his long daggers.

“Lord of the forest!” Someone shouted in Silvan tongue below them.

In a melodic voice like a whisper of wind wafting among the summer trees, she sang a song of comfort, a song of green glades, a stretch of sward of tender grasses, of sweet summer sunlight flooding the meadows, of deer and does and hinds. The stag stopped ramming the tree. It snorted loudly followed only by a gentle thumping of the ground.

Thranduil looked up at Elrond. They climbed down. Thranduil’s heart tightened into a knot when Elrond spread apart the branches below them. A woman was standing in front of the stag, her hand on the animal’s snout. She cooed softly as her song concluded.

Soundlessly, Elrond jumped off the last branch. Thranduil followed, landing at the foot of the pine
tree.

The elleth was standing barefooted, her back to the two Elven warriors. Her green tunic was loose and skimmed her knees. Her dark hair was undone and flowing. It was as if she just woke up from her sleep.

The stag turned then snorted loudly when it saw Thranduil. But suddenly, it looked up, its snout moving as if it smelled something in the air. Then, before anyone could say anything, it bolted into the forest.

The elleth watched the stag bound away, then turned. Her eyes widened when she saw Thranduil. A knife slid across Thranduil’s heart when he saw the pain in her gray eyes flame with dark anger, then turn red with hatred. Thranduil knew the looks in those dark gray eyes. Knew them intimately. Knew the unquenchable thirst for blood in them.

She growled like a wild animal, then she dived under the cluster of bushes that grew below the pine tree.

“Mistress Beril,” Elrond took a step, then he jumped back as Beril emerged, a bow in hand. It was already threaded with an arrow. She aimed it at Thranduil. The Sinda could not speak. His throat choked as his eyes pricked and mists blurred his vision.

Did he look like this? Thranduil wondered as he looked at the petite woman who stood with her dark hair flying everywhere, her eyes thundering like a gray storm. Grief was her armor, and the hatred was her weapon. Her eyes did not see him, for the vengeance had blinded her. Was this how he had looked? Thranduil’s heart tightened and bled.

Elrond stepped in front of Thranduil.

“Please, Mistress Beril. He is not to be blamed.”

Beril glared at Elrond, her hands holding the bow. The arrow shook visibly.

“Out of my way! Don’t know you. Step away!” She moved over to aim her arrow back at Thranduil.

“I cannot,” Elrond said, taking a step to block Thranduil from her line of sight. “If you kill him, you wrong yourself and your daughter.”

Beril turned fully to Elrond now.

“You not my lord. Go away!”

“Please, Mistress Beril. Do not give in to this evil. It was the Orcs who killed your daughter. Not my companion.”

“Aye. The Orcs did the killing. But, he” Beril pointed to Thranduil. “He caused the injury. If Faro weren’t hurt, if I weren’t distracted, we would have known before the Orcs reached us.”

“If we were to lay blame, it lies with the creatures of the Dark Lord. No matter the injury, if they weren’t there, if they did not kill, your daughter would have lived. Who would you blame: the smith who made the sword or the wielder of the weapon who did the killing?”

Beril shook her head as if to block out Elrond. “Not listening. You know nothing,” she hissed, rims of her eyes turning red. “Was your child taken from you? Did you hear her call out to you….Ai, Valar! Ai! Ai! You know nothing!”
“I do not know what it is like to lose a child. But, as a child of parents who are lost to me, I know what it is to lose ones you love. I feel your pain, even if you do not think so.”

Elrond reached out, but Beril jumped back, pulling back the string of her bow.

“The ones who have the power would do nothing. They are afraid to stain their hands. But I’m not!”

Thranduil knew that anger and the need that drove it. Words alone could not appease her. Not now. Not while the anger held her. Thranduil bowed his head.

“Then, take it. If it is my life you want, I will give it freely for I live today because your husband risked his. I will give it up if by giving it, you will be appeased.”

“Thranduil!”

Thranduil saw Elrond’s eyes widen as the Half-Elven shook his head. But, Thranduil ignored him.

“A life given freely will not mark you.” Thranduil pushed Elrond away. “This choice I give to Mistress Beril. The decision is hers. Do not interfere, Elrond.”

“Don’t think I wouldn’t!” Beril hissed.

Her hand moved back, then released the arrow. Thranduil took in a quick breath, but with a flash, the arrow was struck away. In Elrond’s hands was a naked blade.

“Mistress Beril, please!” Elrond’s voice cracked as desperation seeped into its cadence. Elrond sheathed his sword, then stepped in front of Thranduil, blocking her completely from Thranduil’s sight. “Please, listen to me. Listen to reason,” Elrond said. “You are laying blame on the one who doesn’t deserve it. Do you not know what it will do to you?”

“I don’t care! Why should he have a life when I have nothing!”

Had he not thought the same? Thranduil’s heart clenched tightly. He pushed Elrond aside and stepped forward.

“Right now, you hate me. You do not care where the blame falls. You hate the world and everything within it. There is no joy, no color. The whole forest you had loved had burned, and there is nothing left except the gray ash. I know what that is like. I felt that when my brother died, when my mother died. In front of me. Like the leaves that fall and lose color, so they have fallen. In front of my eyes.” Tears stung his eyes as Thranduil saw his mother fall again, the way his brother fell. “I saw the lights in their eyes extinguish…” Thranduil’s throat tightened. His breath caught in his throat. “And I…I did nothing. Could do nothing. And you knew from then on that nothing will be beautiful for you. Nothing.”

Thranduil expelled air to release the pressure on his achy throat. He opened his mouth but found that no more words would come. The forest was silent all around him.

When Thranduil lifted his head, Beril’s eyes were filled with tears. She shook her head, and the bow dropped to her side.

“Did Faro…did Faro kill your brother?” Her voice trembled. “Your mother?”

Thranduil shook his head.

“It was not his hand that had killed them, but he was there when my mother was struck. The one he
was protecting, it was his blade. But of all his companions, he alone survived. He lived when my mother didn’t. So, I blamed him. I blamed him for all the wrongs Noldor did me. I let rage consumed me. I swore vengeance, and when I found him, I wanted to take from him the life that was taken from me.” Thranduil shook his head as his breath roughened. All seemed clear to him now. “I had not cared that he had a family, that he had a wife and a child. It had not mattered that it was not his sword that had struck my mother. I just wanted blood. His blood.”

Tears brimmed over Beril’s eyes and fell down her cheeks.

“Do you see, Mistress Beril? I know well the road you wish to take, the road to ruin and damnation. I know you care not whether you live or die. Because, really, what is there for you to lose? You have nothing. Everything has been taken from you.” Thranduil took in a long breath. “In my despair, I had lost my way. In pursuit of my revenge, I had become what I had hated. It was your daughter who showed me what I had become. Through her eyes, I saw what I was trying to do made me no different from those kinslayers who took from me my family.”

Thranduil bent his head. His heart cracked, and the pain seeped into its many crevices. “For my part in the loss of your daughter, I am truly sorry. I do not ask for forgiveness. How could I? I don’t even know if I am worthy of forgiveness. But, your husband… despite everything, when he could have left me to perish, whether it was by the dragon, the Orcs, or by the court, he gave up his own life and freedom to save me.”

Beril swerved. The bow fell off her hands. Elrond grabbed her before she could fall.

“While I wished him ill and would have killed him given a chance, for things done to me by his companions, when it came to saving me, he never hesitated. Not even once.”

“That is Faro. He never hesitated to save anyone who could be saved. He saved Farion and me when we were attacked by Orc hordes. Many years ago now. And later, when there was battle outside the old Dwarven ruin, and their young ones were in danger, Faro never hesitated even when those Dwarves previously had refused to help him. That is my Faro.”

Beril turned her face away. When she spoke again, it was barely audible. “He is gone. Isn’t he? He…” Beril hid her face behind her hands.

“No, Mistress Beril,” Elrond said. “He lives. That is what I wanted to tell you. That is why we searched for you.”

Beril lifted her face. “But not for long. They will kill him because… because…” She shook her head.

“The court decided his skills will be better used to fight our enemies. He will be traveling with a special force to travel north to fight the…” Elrond glanced at Thranduil. “Dragons. There is a chance he may return.” Elrond dropped his head. “But it is a perilous mission. Will you not go to him? If he knows you will wait for him, then, maybe then, he will make sure to return. Please.”

Beril turned away. “I…I don’t know.”

“What do you not know?” asked Thranduil. “You knew who he was, what he was when you took him to mate. Even if you denied it to yourself, you knew, did you not?”

“Thranduil!” Elrond frowned and shook his head, holding Thranduil’s eyes.

“Astarno…I mean, your husband. He lost everything,” said Elrond. “Everyone he loves. He was the last of his family to survive through the long wars with the Dark Lord. He had no one until he met you. You and your daughter were his world. To you, your daughter was a gift, the way we all feel
about children, but he told me she was more than that for him. She was the light in his land of darkness, the welcoming rain at the end of a long drought, and more than anything, a symbol of Eru’s mercy. Her loss…His grief was measureless. And now, without you, I fear he will not return. What is there to keep him bound to this earth? But, if he knew you will wait for him, if you give him a reason to live…Please, Mistress Beril. Will you not go to him? For his sake, for your sake, and even for your daughter’s sake. For would not your daughter want him to live? For you to live?”

Thranduil turned away as Beril fell onto her knees. She was wailing now. Elrond would comfort her. Unlike Elrond, he was not good for such a thing as that.

Thranduil closed his eyes. He did not know about the court’s decision on Astarno. He had not known what he would say to Beril when they caught up to her. Thranduil had not had much time to think about Astarno until the last night’s discussion with Elrond. Thranduil wasn’t sure what Beril thought of Elrond’s words, but the Noldo’s words struck something in him. All through the years, Thranduil had thought only about his loss, his grief, but there were many people with their own losses and grief, some greater even than his own. He had lost family, but so had Elrond, Gil-galad, Lassiel, Astarno. Even Belegor. And now, Beril. And there were many more. This grief. This was not his alone.

Thranduil clenched his fist when the ground underneath him trembled. Warning blared in his mind. Looking up, Thranduil grabbed his long double daggers.

The moment he had his daggers out, the stag shot out of the forest and knocked against his blades. Thranduil braced himself, digging his feet into the ground, but the stag pushed Thranduil back several feet from where he stood.

“Thranduil!” Elrond’s call cut through the steamy, beastly grunt.

“Ah, here you are. Again,” Thranduil said between clenched teeth as he strained against the stag. His arms throbbed as his daggers locked against the antlers. Thranduil’s arms shook as the veins in them popped. A sharp pain swiped against his left arm. Thranduil clenched his teeth harder.

“The doe ran away again? Can’t get your girl to accept your ugly self? Letting your steam out on me?”

The stag snorted loudly, ramming his antlers further against Thranduil’s blades.

“Thranduil, stop infuriating him!” Elrond who had run after them turned to the stag. “Master Stag, she is fine. She is just grieved. No one is hurting her.”

Behind her, Beril called out for the beast to stop, but the stag was beyond their words. Its eyes bulged with the strain and fury.

Relentlessly, it drove forward, and Thranduil was pushed until his feet hit a trunk of a tree. Thranduil staked his feet firmly against the tree trunk. As strong as he was, Thranduil knew he could not fend off the animal’s savage strength.

Using a tree like a board, Thranduil pushed against the antlers, then flipped over onto the stag’s back sheathing his blades at the same time to grab onto the stag’s antlers.

As soon as his weight landed on its back, the stag bucked, flounced, and reared trying its best to throw Thranduil off his back. But the more the stag flounced, more tightly Thranduil held on, tightening his thighs around the stag’s ribs.

The stag roared, then dashed into the forest. Thranduil held onto its antlers, twisting the stag’s head
toward the direction he wanted it to go.

“You can jump and buck all you want, beast. I could do this all night,” Thranduil growled into the stag’s ear.

A thought came to him suddenly and loudly.

“What? No! She is not a doe, stupid. She is my kind. And even if she was, I certainly was not going to mate with her.”

The stag stamped the ground and shook its body, but it stopped bucking.

“Yes. Yes. I know I am in your territory, but neither Elrond nor Beril is a doe. Believe me, I wasn’t trying to mate with any doe in your territory and certainly not with Elrond or Mistress Beril.”

The animal snorted loudly, but soon, stood still.

“We understand each other now? I am going to let go. Are we good?” Thranduil let go of the antlers, one at a time just as Elrond and Beril caught up to him and the stag.

Thranduil slid off the stag’s back and backed off the animal, keeping his body and hands low.

“Are you all right, Thranduil?” Elrond stepped toward Thranduil, but the stag stepped forward, inserting itself between Elrond and Beril on its one side and Thranduil on the other.

Thranduil could not help but roll his eyes when the stag moved its hindquarters to push Thranduil away.

“Elrond, I’ll meet you and Mistress Beril where we left the horses. The stag does not want to share his ‘does’ with me.”

“What?” Elrond frowned.

“Never mind. I’ll tell you later. Obviously, the stag didn’t think you as boring as I thought you were.” With that, Thranduil bounded away, leaving the two Elves and the stag behind.

He will let Elrond figure out how to get out of that one.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!