The Call of Duty: Legolas at Erebor

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Summary

We all know he had to be there, so what was he doing while Bilbo and The Professor overlooked him? Follow in the footsteps of the Elvenking's son, as we see the latter events in The Hobbit and the Battle of the Five Armies from an Elven perspective. Legolas, Thranduil, Galion. Rated PG-13.

Notes

Disclaimer: This is a work of derivative fiction based on the characters and world of JRR Tolkien. I merely borrow them for a time, for my own enjoyment and, I hope, that of my readers. I am making no money from this endeavor.

My thanks and gratitude go to my beta for this story, Lexin.
". . .We foot it all the night,
Weaving olden dances,
Mingling hands and mingling glances
Till the moon has taken flight;
To and fro we leap . . ."

W. B. Yeats, from The Stolen Child (1886)

Life under the trees of Mirkwood was good; very good. Legolas stood back among the shadows, watching the dancers and flaring his nostrils to enjoy the scent of the wood smoke.

The night of the *Mereth Lasbelin* traditionally marked the end of summer. Across the fire lit clearing, Legolas's father, Thranduil, sat at the head of a long line of revelers, crowned with a garland of leaves, goblet of wine in hand, obviously having one of those moments when it was good to be the king.

Legolas held his own half empty cup, and he had consumed enough wine already that he had allowed one of the lasses to give him his own circlet of late summer flowers twined in amongst his braids. This same maiden, the lovely Gwilwileth, had been flirting with him all evening, flashing him looks from under lowered lashes and letting her hand trail against his fingers overlong as she passed him dishes or refilled his glass. Which she had done quite often this night -- fill his glass, that is, and he suspected she was trying to get him drunk.

Legolas did not flatter himself. Her interest in him stemmed from the fact that he was Thranduil's son and heir. Of late, his duties in the service of the realm had not been the sort of activity to set a maiden's heart aflutter. Once upon a time, he could entertain with stirring tales of orcs slain or successes in the hunt. Now, he had only to recount the dry details of his days cataloguing books in the library and wait to see how long it took for the eyes of his listener to glaze over with polite boredom.

The evening was nearing its end, and even now, couples had begun to slip away hand in hand. Legolas was within one cup of wine of doing the same with Gwilwileth the next time she brought a bowl around, and taking her off into the darkness of the trees to steal a kiss or two. It would go no farther than that, for, alas, the maiden seemingly had nothing but thin air between those lovely ears of hers, and even the most exquisite beauty could delight the senses for only so long. But there could be no harm in having a brief taste of those lovely lips and maybe even a quick caress. Such amorous play was allowed between young unmarried elves, especially at the celebrations that marked the turning of the seasons, although Legolas, mindful of his high position, had never been a one to indulge very much in that sort of thing. But three years of soft palace living had left
him as restive as a young horse cooped up too long in the stable, and the wine had made him reckless.

The dance ended and a new one began. Gwilwileth came towards him with a suggestive smile on her lips. Legolas answered her with a sly smile of his own only to have a sudden shiver pass over him, the sort of feeling his childhood nursemaid, an adaneth now long passed beyond the circles of this world, had referred to as having a goose walk over her grave. He felt as if he had been doused in cold water, and it chased all thought of pleasant dalliance from his mind. At that moment, a stocky figure about the size of a partly grown elf child but much broader stepped into the clearing. The harp music stopped. Someone kicked the fire, which shot up in a shower of sparks, and the torches went out, plunging the clearing into darkness.

There followed much confusion and rushing to and fro as the men hastened to protect the women and those few couples with children snatched their youngsters to safety. Legolas could see in the dark better than most, but even so, he almost tripped over the prostrate form of the stranger, still asleep from a simple spell of enchantment set to guard the festivities from such intrusions. True to form, Legolas soon felt his father's presence at this side.

"No lights yet," said Thranduil. "Form ranks around the women and the young ones, take up the stranger, and we shall return to the palace in the dark lest there be any others around. My son, you lead the way."

It was only a short walk through the forest, to the steep path through the ravine that ran down to the Forest River. Legolas found his way with ease, avoiding the occasional tree root across the trail and warning those who followed. Torches burned at either end of a stone bridge that led across the water to the great gates.

Once within the pool of light of the guard post, Thranduil ordered that the stranger be set down. It proved to be a dwarf, dressed in a sky blue hood with a silver tassel. The king snatched a torch from one of the bridge sconces and brought it down to examine the dwarf's face more closely. He made a disgusted noise and beckoned to the chief of his forest guard. "Pallanen, give the rest of us time to go inside and then say the spell to wake this one up. Bring him to me in the throne room. You can toss him around a bit, but do not actually injure him. Legolas, you come with me."

Legolas gave his father a quizzical look as the two of them accompanied the crowd of revelers over the bridge and through the gates.

"It is a dwarf, son. Dwarves always mean trouble of some kind," Thranduil said as they headed to the throne room. "I am now told that two other forest gatherings were interrupted earlier this evening, so there are more dwarves than the one we just caught. I do not expect to get much information out of this fellow, but I want him off his balance as much as possible when I question him."

Thranduil settled himself on his carved throne and arranged his robes about him. He shot a quick glance at Legolas who, realizing how silly he must look, hastily snatched the garland of flowers from his head and stuffed it inside his clothing. He stood to the side of the throne and tried to compose himself as best he could. The effects of the wine were still with him, but he was sobering up quickly.

In marched Pallanen and his soldiers, dragging the now sullen-looking dwarf. "Is this the customary courtesy of the woodland elves? To manhandle innocent travelers?" the dwarf demanded boldly.

Legolas tensed, and he could see several of the guards wince. A small vein began to pulse in Thranduil's temple, but he replied with measured calm.
"I owe no courtesy to those who are in my realm without my leave and who refuse to state their business. Why did you and your folk three times try to attack my people at their merrymaking?"

"We did not attack them; we came to beg because we were starving."

Legolas found it hard to believe that anyone could be hungry in a forest full of game and tender summer plants, but he supposed that of all folk, the dwarves could manage it.

"Where are your friends now, and what are they doing?" Thranduil asked, with unusual patience, for Thranduil.

"I don't know, but I expect starving in the forest," came the answer.

"What were you doing in the forest?" Thranduil had begun to sound somewhat frustrated, and Legolas suspected that his adar felt as hung over from the harvest wine as he himself did.

"Looking for food and drink, because we were starving," the dwarf replied, and the guards began to look nervous and step away from their charge as if they expected their king to begin throwing things or shooting lightning from his eyes.

"But what brought you to the forest at all?" said Thranduil, definitely annoyed by this point.

The dwarf folded his arms over his stocky chest and refused to say another word.

"Very well, take him away and keep him safe until he feels inclined to tell the truth, even if he waits a hundred years."

The guards bound the dwarf with thongs and began to march him away. "Wait!" the dwarf protested. "Common decency insists that you place me in a cell that is twice as wide as I am tall, and that I be provided with bread twice a day and all the water I can drink. I demand exactly that and no less!"

Thranduil narrowed his eyes. "Very well, Master Dwarf. Never let it be said that the elves of the Woodland Realm are not reasonably decent to their captives. Guards, find him a cell of those dimensions and treat him exactly as he says."

"Do we even have one that small?" Legolas whispered, as the elves took the dwarf off to the depths of the dungeons. "And why would anyone in his right mind refuse fruit and venison?"

His father merely shrugged. "Gah, dwarves!" he said as the echoing footsteps died away. "Cursed, stiff-necked folk. Nothing good can come of their doings, secret or otherwise."

At that moment, the palace butler entered carrying a tray with a decanter and two glasses. "I heard tidings of the prisoner, Sire, and I thought a cup of wine would not come amiss. It's Dorwinion, the last of the 2933."

"You were not wrong, Galion," Thranduil said, the prospect of a drink banishing his ill humor. "The last, you say?"

"Indeed, Sire, but have no fear. Five barrels of the 2934 vintage are due in next week."

"Splendid, Galion. You know my taste for Dorwinion. Have a cup for yourself when you get back to the kitchen."

Smiling, the butler poured two glasses, bowed, and left.
Legolas took his glass. "I would say, Adar, that for a dwarf who was off his balance, the interrogation did not go very well."

"On the contrary, my son. I learned as much as I had expected to learn." Thranduil leaned back on his throne, relaxed, and sipped his wine. "You are too young to remember, but I have seen that dwarf before in Dale, long ago. He is the grandson of Thror, he who was king under Erebor before the dragon came."

"I thought the dwarves of the Lonely Mountain were all killed."

"Not all. There were a few out hunting that day. There was also a rumor that the king and his son had made it out alive. This would confirm it. If Thorin is passing through my realm and refusing to tell me the reason for his journey, it can mean only one thing; that a great deal of treasure is involved which he does not wish to share. And the only treasure I know of is under Erebor. That fool of a dwarf is going to stir up the dragon."

"Surely not!"

"I'm afraid so, Legolas. If Thorin and his party were on the way to honest blacksmithing jobs they would not hesitate to tell me so and ask for the food and safe conduct they need. No, they mean to get their treasure back, or at least a good part of it, and they haven't a thought for what effect their actions will have on the people of Esgaroth. Or us, for that matter."

"The wealth in trade the dwarves brought downriver was a good thing for Laketown and for us, I thought."

"Quite true, but you are forgetting the dragon. Thorin's company cannot be very great in number, or we would have noticed their passage through the woods before now. They have not the slightest chance of killing Smaug or even driving him out of the mountain. Believe me, Legolas, if I, with all my army, could have accomplished such a thing without a grievous loss of life I would have done it long since. No, I suspect some kind of burglary, and when that great worm misses even the smallest piece of his hoard, he will fly into a killing rage."

"I had not thought you feared the dragon, Adar."

Thranduil laughed bitterly. "You had best believe that I do fear that dragon! I was in Dale when Smaug came, and I have not forgotten. Would you like to see Laketown burned to the pilings, or these woods in flames? I fear that is what will happen if we allow these dwarves to continue on eastward."

"I see your point," Legolas said, pouring himself more wine.

"That will be the last one for you tonight," Thranduil said. "I want you clear headed tomorrow to go hunt out the rest of those dwarves and bring them in."

"What, no library duty?" Legolas asked dryly. "The organization of the books may suffer from my absence."

"Do I detect a note of discontent there, my boy?" Thranduil laughed. "I am sure you can understand my natural wish to keep a closer eye upon you until you mature enough to understand the difference between courage and reckless risk to your own person. Have you not always expressed the desire to learn the workings of this realm and to make yourself useful by whatever means?"

"Aye, Adar," said Legolas inclining his head gracefully. "Even if the tasks assigned me by my Elven-lord involve shoveling up after the horses in the stables or learning how the laundresses
keep the shirts so white. It is merely that I feel I might be more usefully employed at times."

"Then you shall make yourself useful tomorrow by tracking down the rest of Thorin's party. And I shall have a word with Pallanen about why his patrols allowed strangers to come so near to our festivities without us becoming aware of it. This vexes me somewhat. Dwarves are not known for their stealth."

Legolas sighed. "If I might be allowed to make an observation, you should place a different elf in command. Pallanen is a good sort and very brave in battle, but he could not find a fart in a pisspot."

Thranduil snorted. "That language is not very princely, my son."

"I humbly apologize to my royal sire, who, I am sure, never used an uncouth term in his long life," replied Legolas innocently.

Thranduil blinked with momentary surprise, chuckled, and recovered himself. "Your memory is too good. I shall have to bear that in mind. I expect to have those dwarves in custody by nightfall tomorrow."

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With an early start the next morning, Legolas had expected to bring in the rest of Thorin's band of dwarves very quickly, but the task proved more difficult than anticipated. The trail away from the clearing started out clear and easy to track, as one would have expected from dwarves, but it soon split into a myriad of smaller ones as if the dwarves had milled about and lost track of one another in the darkness. Those smaller trails came to sudden ends with signs of a scuffle, and Legolas very much feared the spiders had been at work. No doubt, the dwarves had been hoisted into the trees and transported above ground, and were even now hanging from some branch waiting to be made a meal of. Finding them now would be a matter of dumb luck.

So, it was not until twilight fell over the forest that the band of searching elves were alerted by the unmistakable clamor of a conflict coming from the woods to the south. From the sound of things, the dwarves had broken free from the spiders and were being pursued into the hands of the waiting elves. There was much crashing of undergrowth, loud breathing, dratting, and hissing from the spiders.

The elves melted into the bushes, waiting for the fleeing dwarves to pass. Legolas caught the eye of the archer nearest him, and the two could not help exchanging a grin. The behavior of the *Naugrim* in the woods was really too funny, and Legolas felt most lighthearted from spending a day out in the fresh air and getting the chance to wield his bow again.

Then, the back of his neck prickled, and he felt the same shivery sensation that had come over him at the feast the night before. He shook the feeling off, wondering what could be amiss. He feared neither dwarves nor spiders, especially surrounded by a company of Mirkwood archers.

The torches sprang to life like small glittering stars. A few well-aimed arrows sent the spiders into full retreat, and the dwarves were quickly surrounded and bound with thongs along a long line of *hithlain*. The final count was twelve, and they appeared to be the worse for wear, covered in the remainder of spider web and looking as starved as Thorin had said.

Back to the palace they went, and Legolas could not rid himself of the strange feeling of being watched. He looked about to see if any of the other elves were affected, but they seemed oblivious as they crossed the bridge and the stone gates shut behind them.
The trussed prisoners were taken into the presence of the Elvenking. Thranduil had designed his throne room so that during the daylight hours a light shaft cast a beam of light directly onto his carved wooden throne. The effect was especially splendid around sunset, when the ruddy light turned the monarch’s golden hair into a fiery halo, and Legolas much regretted having missed the optimum moment by half an hour.

Even by torchlight Thranduil looked very imposing. He wore a crown of autumn leaves and held a staff of carved oak, which matched the carvings on the throne. The look on his face indicated that he was ready to knock heads with it if pushed too far.

There had been no Lasbelin festivities that evening, so all the court was available, and Thranduil was flanked his chief advisor, Séregon, and his general, Magorion, along with several other nobles. It was a much better showing of pomp and circumstance than one slightly bleary and hung over prince. Legolas was clearly not needed to make an impression on the already ragged and weary band of prisoners, so he stood against one of the sculpted stone pillars of the throne hall and watched his father at work, bearing in mind that what the dwarves did not say was just as useful to Thranduil as the information he would be able to get out of them.

"Untie this lot," Thranduil said. "They look too tired and hungry to be much trouble. Besides, they need no ropes in here. There is no escape from my magic doors for those who are once brought inside."

That was not strictly true, Legolas thought. There were a few ways out for those who knew their way around the palace, but these dwarves would not know that. The idea of being trapped below ground, no matter how luxurious the surroundings, was usually quite intimidating to most of Thranduil’s prisoners, although perhaps less so to the Naugrim.

While his father questioned them long and searchingly about their destination and where they had come from, Legolas took the opportunity to study the dwarves up close. He was familiar with the appearance and the manner of the Edain, but he was too young to have had any experience with the dwarves of Erebor, so these folk were a novelty. The first thing that struck him was how hairy they were; much more so than men, with huge thick beards that hung past their belts and a thick pelt even on the back of their broad hands. They were noisy too, even when they were not speaking. Unlike the elegant stillness of the First Born, they were constantly shifting from side to side, breathing loudly and grumbling under their breath. Much to Legolas's distaste, they reeked of pipeweed, an odor of which he was all to familiar from his trips to Esgaroth and the infrequent visits of the wizard, Mithrandir. He did not envy the guards who would have to spend the next weeks or months in close proximity to them.

Perhaps the strangeness of the Naugrim prisoners affected him, but Legolas again felt that odd sense of unease that had passed over him in the forest. He chided himself, for surely there was nothing to fear from a pack of half-starved dwarves.

Exhausted and hungry though they might be, the dwarves still had some fight in them, for they gave no more information than Thorin had done, and they soon stopped their minimal attempts to be polite. Finally, the one who seemed to be the eldest among them, a strange looking fellow with a white beard and a scarlet hood, had had enough.

"What have we done, O king?" said this dwarf. "Is it a crime to be lost in the forest, to be hungry and thirsty, to be trapped by spiders? Are the spiders your tame beasts or your pets, if killing them makes you angry?"

Thranduil's eyes fairly blazed. "It is a crime to wander in my realm without leave. Do you forget you were in my kingdom, using the road my people made? Did you not three times pursue and trouble my people in the forest and rouse the spiders with your riot and clamor? After all the
disturbance you made I have a right to know what brings you here, and if you will not tell me now, I will keep you all in prison until you have learned sense and manners!"

When the dwarf stood firm and refused to speak further, Thranduil shook his head angrily and summoned the captain of his palace guard. "Heledir, take this lot to separate cells. They are not to speak to one another or come out until they decide to talk."

Legolas narrowed his eyes as the elf captain, Heledir, stepped forward. The two of them had served together in equal rank in the patrols in the south of Mirkwood not three years past. Now Heledir served as captain of the palace guard while Legolas was assigned duty as the palace librarian. This change in Heledir's fortune had come about at the same time as Thranduil had learned of certain activities on the part of his son; activities that might have been considered reckless, at least by Thranduil. Legolas had an unconfirmed suspicion that the two events were connected, and his liking for Heledir was no higher than his estimation of the elf's abilities.

"One more thing, "Thranduil said as the defiant group of dwarves were led away. "Confiscate their pipeweed."

As the sound of the footsteps died away, Séregon spoke. "That was a brilliant touch, Sire. You know how touchy Mithrandir gets when he cannot get outside to smoke his noxious weed. I give them a fortnight at best before one of them talks."

Thranduil looked rather pleased with himself. "I had to do something to make them feel ill-used. They will not have been so well fed in a long time, and a stone cell is pleasant lodging for a dwarf. But truly, Séregon, I would rather they not talk. Once they admit they are heading for Erebor, which I already have guessed, I will have no just cause to hold them."

"You could demand such a huge share of the treasure that Thorin would refuse to pay it," Magorion said.

"No share of any treasure would be worth the risk of rousing the dragon, "Thranduil replied. "Not even if Thorin agreed to pay it. I am doing the poor beggars a favor, really, by keeping them from going to their deaths. I will be happy if they never talk."

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Back to normal, Legolas thought, as he readied his inkpot and brushes. It had been three years since Thranduil had assigned him the duty, and the library at Mirkwood was a marvel of organization. Legolas would not have given his father the satisfaction by admitting it, but he had found he actually enjoyed working with books. He had been quite surprised to discover the extent of Thranduil’s library, and since he had all the time in the world to complete his task, he had often sat down to read one or another of the ancient scrolls and books he had been appointed to organise. There were treatises on military strategy and history, which he had made good use of, but more important were the many books about the handcrafting of everything from cloth to armor. Clearly, his father had wished to make his realm self-sufficient, with no need to rely on the outside need for dwarvish craftsmen for their necessities.

The true gems of the collection were the oldest scrolls, which the royal family had brought from the west at the founding of the Woodland Realm. Legolas had found them all together in a chest that had probably remained unopened since being carried north at the time Thranduil had delved the palace cave. Some of these were in bad repair, the parchment crumbling and worn, and the ink faded almost to invisibility. Legolas had one on his copy table now -- a map of a land now drowned beneath the sea. Such a thing was of no use save the pure knowledge it preserved, and as a link to the past. At the lower left corner, Legolas could still make out the faint inscription: "I, Oropher of Lindon, drew this map."

Once Legolas had finished copying the map, he intended to place his own name in the lower left corner of the new document, giving credit for the original to his long dead grandsire.

The library was a pleasant place. It was underground to be sure, but a fireplace banished the damp of the cave. A light shaft with a refracting crystal cast illumination during the daylight hours, and wall sconces burned with candles constantly. Legolas had set himself up a work area in an alcove off the main room. It was here that he spent his days and took his meals while he worked. It had become his own place, in the way that the private chamber behind the throne room had become his father’s sanctuary.

Thranduil would have preferred the quiet life of a librarian for his son, safe and sound, away from the risk of battle. As much as Legolas loved books and what he could learn from them, he knew this was not to be his fate. Always, since he first came to awareness, there had been a fleeting sense of a greater purpose that would eventually reveal itself. His warrior skills, so single-mindedly honed, had been for that elusive, undefined goal rather than a love for blood and killing. His need to serve, in whatever capacity, had been for that same end. But for now, he was content to sit and copy maps, and perhaps this patience had been what Thranduil had meant to teach him.

Legolas dipped his brush and began to copy the geographical features and cirth runes from the original map to his own. He took especial pains to be careful and precise this day, for he felt unusually tired and he knew his control was not at its best. For the past few days, ever since the dwarves had been brought into the palace, he had been sleeping with his eyes open, an unusual thing for the security of his own bedchamber, and his dreams and sleep visions had been troubled.
Without turning his head, he heard muffled footsteps on the carpet behind him and felt the air move.

"Your noon meal, my lord." A footman set a tray of bread, fruit, and herbal tea at his elbow. Legolas thanked him and began to nibble absentmindedly on the crust of bread while he worked.

He had reached a point where the original map was so badly worn that he was unsure of how to proceed. Fortunately, he recalled another map of the area that might provide a clue. He rose from his drawing table and left the alcove, going to a spot on the shelves where the maps were kept, thanks to him, in good order. He refreshed his memory - the area in question proved to be a bend in a river detouring around a mountain - and returned the map to the shelf. As he did so, Legolas felt a chill in the air, and the back of his neck prickled as if he were being watched.

He whirled to see an empty room. He listened carefully, but heard nothing other than the usual background noises of an echoing cave filled with hundreds of elves. The air, however, held just the slightest scent of pipeweed. Legolas wondered if the footman had been at the dwarves' supply and carried the smell of it in on his clothing. If so, he found it strange that he had not noticed it immediately.

He shrugged the feeling off and returned to his drawing table. The tea remained untouched, just as he had left it, but the crust of bread had disappeared entirely and one of the pieces of fruit was missing. Legolas knew for a certainty that he had not eaten any of the fruit. He strode to the doorway and looked up and down the empty corridor. Enough was enough. He abandoned his work for the day and went outside for a breath of fresh air and a long walk. He finished out the afternoon by staring down into the waters of the Forest River as they rushed beneath the stone bridge. He could not explain his reluctance to re-enter the palace, but the waking trance he fell into while watching the red and gold leaves flow past on the current proved to be more restful than the fitful sleep he got that night in his own bed.

The following week, the dwarves were gone, disappearing mysteriously from their locked cells overnight. This caused great consternation at first, for the only set of keys had been in the possession of Heledir, the guard captain. The raft elves brought the news back several days later that Thorin and his dwarves, along with a strange furry-footed companion who called himself a hobbit, had reached Esgaroth and were being feted by the townsfolk as the returned kings under the mountain. This happened about the same time that Thranduil finally ferreted out the story about an incident concerning Heledir, the butler Galion, and a large flask of Dorwinion wine.

Legolas would have been silently gratified at the disgrace of Heledir, the tattler tattled upon, had he not felt sympathy for Galion and a fair amount of worry for himself, since he had been the one to bring the dwarves in, with no detection of any silent, furry footed companion along with them. He stuck to his library and avoided his father's quite understandable bad temper.

So, it was with trepidation that he answered his father's summons a day later. He found Thranduil in his private chamber, seated not at his desk, but at his gaming table, with the pieces laid out ready for an Easterling game of battle strategy.

"Come in, Legolas. Have a seat and indulge your ada in a game." Thranduil's affable manner served only to make Legolas more wary.

Thranduil held out two closed fists and Legolas pointed at the left. Thranduil opened out his palm to reveal a tiny soldier piece carved out of black wood. Having chosen the black, Legolas would go second. Thranduil reversed the board and moved one of his own little ivory soldiers out two spaces. "I suppose you have heard that I have removed Heledir from his post."
Legolas grunted noncommittally and moved his own black pawn out a space.

"I am most disappointed about what happened recently," Thranduil continued. "The security in and around the palace has become far too lax, and there will have to be some changes made."

Legolas bit down on his tongue to keep the 'I told you so' from escaping. He merely nodded in agreement as he countered his father's second move.

The way was now cleared for the piece directly to the right of Thranduil's king to move out along the diagonal. "I do not know what the Easterlings call these pieces," Thranduil said, "but I like to call them the wizards. They are so much more mobile and deadly than the king." He paused, as if considering his next move. "I am thinking of placing you in charge of the palace guard, Legolas."

Legolas looked at his father in surprise.

"Magorion concurs with me fully," Thranduil said. "The library is well organized. I am sure you can work the same wonders with the guard. And I will still have the pleasure of your company here at home. But first, I have a small favor I wish you to perform for me. If your are willing, that is."

Legolas moved out one of his horsemen to threaten the wizard. "What would you have me do, Father?"

"Something that requires stealth. If I might say so, you have shown a great talent, nay, a genius, for stealth. I am told that Thorin and his party plan to travel up the river to Erebor within the week. I want you to go to within sight of the western slope of the mountain and report back to me whatever happens." Thranduil moved out his other wizard, leaving his queen in jeopardy.

"You wish to send me to Erebor?" Legolas asked in disbelief.

Thranduil nodded. "I have sent out many scouts to Esgaroth and farther north, but most of them seem strangely protective of their immortal lives. I have told them to go as close as they dare, but it will not be close enough. It would require someone insane... nay, let me rephrase that, courageous enough to have crept within the very sight of Dol Guldur without being detected. So naturally I thought of you."

Legolas sighed. "Am I never to live that down? Why are you suddenly willing to send me into a hazardous situation?"

"I have always trusted your courage, Legolas," Thranduil said. "It was your judgment that gave me pause. This needs to be done, and you are willing and able to do it. I also trust you not to go any closer to that dragon than you need to. You and I have both seen Smaug up close, and I do not need to tell you what he can do."

Legolas shuddered. It had been centuries, but he still could recall the feel of a great claw pressing into the back of his neck. "I will go no closer to that accursed mountain than I need to. That you can believe." With the way clear, he advanced one of his corner pieces, a munak. This piece moved straight along the rows of squares, and it depicted a strange beast with a tiny house upon its back, filled with tiny men. This always amused Legolas no end, for surely no animal could be as large as the fanciful Easterlings had carved it.

"Good," Thranduil said. "No heroics. If Smaug means to kill those dwarves, which I am certain he will, there will be nothing you can do to stop him. Just keep to the western foothills and bring us a warning if anything happens."

"When do you want me to leave?"
"Right away. We can finish this game when you return." He looked down at the game board. "Oh dear, you seem to have my queen under some concerted attack. I shall have to think long and hard to find my way out of this."

Legolas laughed. "The queen is even more deadly and mobile than the wizards. How unlike real life."

Thranduil made a wry face and chuckled knowingly. "Spoken like one who has never been married, my son."

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"He sent out his spies about the shores of the lake and as far northward towards the Mountain as they would go, and waited."

*JRR Tolkien, The Hobbit*

Legolas rode east that day. He knew his way through the marshes that lay just outside the eastern edge of the forest. There had been great earthquakes and the land had subsided, increasing the depth and breadth of the wetlands. The marsh folk had deserted their villages, and the island where once a fowler's cottage had stood centuries before lay now almost completely submerged beneath the risen waters. Yet Legolas stopped for a brief look, and to pay his respects, as he passed through.

For convenience, this time he rode with no saddle or bridle. His destination was the wilderness, and there would be none to complain that the seat of his breeches smelled like a sweaty horse. It felt good to be out on the heath, sitting atop Gwaeren's muscular back, with the wind in his hair. The horse seemed to relish the freedom too, and Legolas allowed him to run, laughing for joy when he gave a few joyful kicks as they sped over the ground. His pockets and the saddlebag that he carried in front of him, laid across his lap, were filled with *lembas* and more *lembas*, for although he carried his bow, he expected to find no game to hunt within the area of the dragon's desolation. He also carried several flasks of wine to ward off the chill of the autumn nights.

Mindful of Gwaeren's safety, he abandoned the horse in a sheltered hilly spot well west of the mountain. He made sure the horse had access to provender and water and bade him stay, shouldering the saddle pack and continuing on foot. On the eastern slope of the foothills surrounding Erebor, he found some of the few remaining trees, made camp, and settled in for his long watch.

This was as far as he needed to go or wanted to go, for there was surely no one around to whom he needed to prove his courage. Indeed, although the Lonely Mountain lay several miles away, it looked as if he could almost reach out and touch its western flank. For once, he had no worries about orcs -- the only advantage to the dragon's proximity. In his cloak of grayish brown, he was nigh onto invisible against the sere vegetation. During the day, he sat quietly and stared east. At night, he lay down on his side and made a tent of his hood with one of his own arrows. Even in sleep he faced eastward, so that no activity or movement would escape his open eyes. Autumn
was ending and the days and nights grew steadily colder. He felt the cold but did not let it trouble
him. If the snow came, he would be uncomfortable indeed, but he did not expect to be there that
long.

By the end of the first week of his vigil, Legolas found himself longing for the relative excitement
of his library. Even though he knew a dragon dwelt beneath that tall peak and he had even seen
the worm out flying once or twice, he felt none of the spiritual dread that had overcome him
gazing upon Dol Guldur.

In the pocket of his tunic, he kept a folded letter, brought in a diplomatic pouch along with other
missives by a courier from Imladris the previous month. From time to time, he took it out and read
it, smiling each time at the carefully drawn tengwar and earnest message:

"Dear Legolas,

I am fine, and I hope you do well. My Quenya lessons with Elladan continue. They are not as
exciting as my riding lessons with Elrohir. Next month, if I am good, Elrohir says he will teach me
to use a short sword. I will be good, because I want to learn sword fighting.

Your Friend, Estel"

It had been Legolas's idea that he and Elrond's young ward correspond in the ancient language of
Quenya rather than Sindarin, mostly for the experience it would give the boy. Yet Legolas had
found it challenging as well, for it put the two of them on a more even footing. While Legolas
could read Quenya with ease, his ability to speak and compose in it was limited to the 'how are
you, I am fine' level, and the writing served as good practice for him too.

This missive had contained something extra. At the bottom of the page, in a more mature hand,
proudly phrased in Westron, although Legolas knew the writer spoke Sindarin fluently, had been
another message:

"My Dear Prince of Mirkwood,

I thank you again for the interest and inspiration you have provided to my son. Your friendship
means much to him, and his behavior continues to be improved thereby. Even Master Elrond
remarks upon it. I remain your dutiful servant,

Gilraen, Daughter of Dirhael, and Wife to Arathorn, Deceased."

On the cold hillside, Legolas ran a fingertip over the feminine script and sighed. He had kept all of
Estel's letters to him, not sending them to the vats to be remade into writing paper, but this one he
carried next to his heart.

In between reading his letter and singing every song he knew, he had thought up imaginative
curses for Thorin and his dwarves, who were no doubt enjoying their soft stay at the expense of
the Master of Laketown so much that they were delaying their journey north while he froze out on
the blasted heath and his haunches grew numb from sitting. In desperation for something else to
occupy his mind, he began to devise a strategy for the continuation of the game of chess he had
been playing with his father before his departure from Mirkwood. Things had been going well; he
had been on the verge of taking out Thranduil's queen, and he visualized the board, picturing
every possible move his father could make. With increasing dismay, Legolas began to realize that
he would not only fail to take the queen, he would checkmate within a short number of moves.
No matter how he played it out in his head, ten moves was the best he could do before going
down to defeat. His father had outwitted him.
His consternation was such that he took several moments to notice that a mounted train of dwarves
had rounded the southeastern spur of the mountain and was heading north. Legolas snapped to
attention. Each dwarf rode a pony and several had pack animals in tow. The expedition had
arrived at last.

The next two days proved only marginally less boring. The dwarves set up a camp on the western
face of the mountain between the two western spurs. They made no attempt at concealment, for
their fires burned night and day. Their movements were pitifully easy to track, and Legolas had to
wonder if they were incredibly brave or incredibly stupid. He reminded himself to bring up their
example next time his father accused him of behaving as if he had a death wish. Unlike the earth
toned garb of the wood-elves, the dwarves' bright clothing stood out against the mountain, and
even though the air was filled with the perpetual haze from the dragon's reek, he had no trouble
seeing that the dwarves were showing a particular interest in a clefted valley partway up the
western slope. He could even hear the ringing of their hammers against the rock across the miles
that separated his position from theirs. How Smaug could have failed to notice their presence, he
had no idea, but the dragon did not appear immediately.

Then, on a night when the new moon hung like a faint sickle in the dark sky, Legolas awoke to a
light show such as he had never seen. The dragon flew back and forth across the western slope of
the mountain, breathing his fire. This was the end of the dwarves, he thought, surely. But when
morning came, he saw their bright hoods out against the mountainside, although the fire at the
lower camp no longer burned. Puzzled, he decided to hold his position.

That night, the dragon flew again. This time, the sound of stones crashing down the mountainside
accompanied the show of dragon fire. With his wrath visited upon the rocks, Smaug flew off to
the south, and again Legolas saw ruddy flashes off behind the hills that separated the desolate
plain of Dale from the Long Lake. Esgaroth was burning.

When the day dawned, Legolas could see no dwarves alive upon Erebor's slopes, only tumbled
crushed rocks and scorched earth where nothing could have survived, and he decided he had
exhausted his mission. What he had seen would be reported to his father, in hope that he could
warn his people before the dragon turned westward to visit his wrath upon Mirkwood.

He ran over the hills westward to the spot where he had left his horse. To his surprise, he found
three ponies sheltering there. Lucky little beasts to have escaped the worm! He left them where
they were and rode hard across the heath to home, hoping there was still a home to go to. But
along the way he began to hear the rumour of the birds and the small marshland beasts. They sang
a song of joy and relief. Smaug was dead.

He rode over the stone bridge and was taken immediately into the presence of the king. At that
moment, the weariness hit him, just as he saw the relief wash over his father's face.

"The dragon is dead."

"So we hear, Legolas, although the birds care little for details. Esgaroth took great damage as well,
by the reports of my other scouts. But yours were the only Elven eyes so far north. Tell me what
you saw."

"Not much. The Naugrim busied themselves on the western slopes of the mountain. Then Smaug
laid waste to it during the night and flew off south. The next morning, all was silence. I do not see
how they could have survived."

Thranduil gave a grim look to his advisor, Sëregon, who stood nearby. "Nor do I. We must
proceed as if Erebor is deserted. Are you well, my son?"
"Well enough. I would like a bath, a hot meal - anything but lembas - and a good night's sleep, in that order."

"You shall have them," Thranduil said. "But rest well, for tomorrow, we ride."

"Sire, is this wise?" Seregon ventured.

"It may not be wise, but it is necessary. The Lonely Mountain, with its vast halls and all its wealth has none to defend it. Would you like to see it inhabited by goblins from the north? Rich orcs for neighbors; now, is that not an appealing thought, Seregon? Nay, we must bring together such troops as we have and head for Erebor with all speed."

Seregon bowed and left.

"Father," Legolas said, "I cannot say for truth that those Naugrim are dead. I did not go to scout the mountain close up."

"For once you obeyed me. I am surprised. And I am pleased."

"As you are so fond of saying, Father, kings rule and princes serve. How do you wish me to serve you tomorrow?"

"I am appointing you captain of my bodyguard."

Legolas set his jaw in a grim line, hoping to disguise his bitter disappointment. Even in an army that likely would see no fighting he was to be given an empty title as a sop to cover the reality that Thranduil wanted to keep a close eye on him. He bowed stiffly and went off for his bath, his hot meal and his bed, in that order.

"Good night, my son," murmured Thranduil to his retreating back. "I hope you will do a better job of body-guarding than I did."

* * * * * * *
The next morning dawned grey and chill. Legolas arose before dawn, strapping on armor and seeing to his horse. He took his place beside his father, head held high, not caring if the other more experienced warriors of the king's bodyguard minded being commanded by one who just a fortnight ago had been a librarian, the inkstains still fresh on his hands. Sincere or not, he would do this duty with the same attention to detail as he had done all others.

As the ranks of pikemen and archers assembled, Legolas noticed a strange thing. He saw far fewer soldiers than he would have expected, and Magorion was conspicuously absent. He turned to Thranduil with a questioning glance, but before he could speak, a hush fell over the ranks and heads turned.

Trotting up from the rear came Galion, the disgraced butler, in full armor. Galion, whom no one had heard from since the incident with the wine and the Naugrim. He brought his horse up next to Thranduil's mount. "I cannot allow my Elven-lord to ride into battle without his longtime esquire at his side," he said with quiet determination.

Thranduil finally broke the protracted, uncomfortable silence. "I thought you had tired of strenuous duty, Galion."

"I changed my mind," Galion replied softly. He raised his eyes slowly to meet the king's stern gaze. "Please, Sire . . . allow me to do this."

Thranduil took in a deep breath and nodded. "So be it. Fefelas, you will attend the prince."

Legolas could not help but notice that Fefelas seemed quite relieved at the demotion, for Thranduil could be a most demanding master. His new duties would surely be light, because Legolas had been dressing himself for centuries and intended for it to stay that way.

A horn blew a clear high note. The Elvenking's banners flapped in the chill autumn breeze, and the host set off toward the east.

Before long, the army had reached the eastern edge of the forest and left the cover of the trees. Legolas looked up to spy flocks of dark birds circling overhead.

"Crebain," he said to his father.

Thranduil nodded and laughed bitterly. "The carrion birds know this yellow head of mine from days of old. Whenever they see it they expect to feast well. I pray to Elbereth that this time I disappoint them."

They marched for half a day directly east toward the Lonely Mountain. A little past midday, a
group of riders approached from the southeast.

"Hail, Thranduil of Mirkwood. The men of Laketown seek your aid."

"Do you come from The Master?" said Thranduil, and Legolas marked that there was a hint of distaste in his voice.

"Aye, The Master asks for your help, but more truly we come at the behest of Bard the Bowman, who shot the dragon down. Laketown is utterly destroyed, and the women and children shiver on the banks of the lake with little food and winter nearing."

"Bard," said Thranduil softly. "I am glad to hear he is leading things. For the friendship I bore his forefathers, Mirkwood will respond." He turned to his esquire, all business. "Now, Galion, I am glad I have you along for your experience in provisioning. You and Séregon will see to it that food and tents go down the river to Esgaroth by raft. The army is turning aside."

So it was that two days later, the army of Mirkwood arrived on the banks of the Long Lake. A pitiful sight awaited them. The scent of smoke still hung over the water, and the lake steamed from the smoldering pilings and at the spot where the great worm had plunged into the depths of the lake. As the host rode past, children peeked shyly at Legolas from behind the skirts of their mothers, and the women whispered, "Look, the Elves have come."

The food and tents had arrived already, easing some of the discomfort, but after conferring with Bard, Thranduil directed some of the most skilled of his elves to stay behind with the men of Laketown who were too old to fight, and he ordered that timber be brought from the forest to build huts for the winter. The younger men of the lake, under the command of Bard, made plans to accompany the Elven host northward to Erebor, for a share of Smaug's treasure would be needed for the reconstruction of Laketown. Already, the Master was making plans for a larger town to take the place of the old, north of the spot where the dragon had fallen.

After a stay of a few days to plan and regroup, the army of men and elves marched north along the western shore, and on the eleventh day from the death of Smaug, they passed the rock gates at the head of the lake. So it was that Legolas got his first sight of the valley that once had been the kingdom of Dale.

The vegetation was sere, still blasted and stunted from the dragon's fumes, and only a few blackened stumps of towers and stone walls remained of the town. Bard's face, already grim, took on a somber cast at the sight of what had been the home of his distant ancestor. For this careworn man, Legolas had learned, was the descendant of that small boy, King Girion's younger son, whom Legolas had once hoped to meet and play with as an Elf-child before Smaug had intervened. Thranduil had always been reluctant to speak of that last day and night in Dale, and now Legolas knew why. He felt a great sympathy for Bard, for how painful it must be to gaze upon the spot where a forefather had met his doom.

The Running River made a great sweeping curve across the valley after leaving the great gate of Erebor. At the southern edge of the bend, just before the river headed due south to the lake, the
Elven host first made camp as twilight fell. Thranduil, for both his own and Bard's sake, wished to avoid the haunted ruins of the burnt town.

In the morning, it was decided to send a scouting party of both men and elves up to the gate. Much to Legolas's gratification, Thranduil picked him to lead the contingent of Mirkwood soldiers. It was about a two-hour hike, crossing the river twice and heading up the old road on the eastern bank of the river. To the left ran the southwestern spur of the mountain, with a tall hill over which black birds circled. These were not the crebain that had followed the Elven host in their march from the forest, but rather ravens, and Legolas thought them to be noble birds. The hill also looked to him to be a good spot to defend, if matters came to such. He had had a good long look at the spur from the west, and it pleased him to finally see what lay on the other side.

The sight at the gate was not so pleasing. A pile of jumbled rock blocked the stream, with a waterfall pouring over it. At the top, they found a broad pool. The only means of reaching the gate ran along a narrow ledge, and a wall of squared stones with occasional arrow slits blocked off the gate itself.

At least, thought Legolas, the wall did not look to be orcish work, and sure enough, the blue hooded dwarf himself hailed them from the top of it.

"Who are you that come as if to war to the gates of Thorin son of Thrain, King under the Mountain, and what do you desire?"

One of the Lakemen made as if to answer, but Legolas cautioned him to silence. "Make no challenge or demand as yet," he said softly, "lest we provoke the Naugrim to further stubbornness. Allow my Elven-lord and Bard to set such terms as they deem just." He lingered for a while, sizing up the dwarves' defenses, before following the rest of the party back to the camp.

The news was met with much consternation. Thranduil said a word that Legolas would not have cared to translate, and Bard nodded grimly. "Who would have thought they still lived? Aulë must have blessed their efforts."

"Pah, I should have known it!" Thranduil said disgustedly. "Those dwarves have more lives than cats, and truly, I like cats much better than dwarves. Cats are much cleaner, and of a far more friendly disposition. Legolas, what is your estimation of their defenses?"

Legolas shook his head. "Good. Too good. We could take them, but we would waste half our army doing so. Perhaps diplomacy would be the better course of action."

Thranduil gave his son a sour look. "We need to move the camp closer. We will be doing a lot of talking in the next few days. At least we shall not have so far to walk."

That night the camp was moved an hour's march further north until it rested right between the arms of the mountain. The valley became fragrant with wood smoke, and the sound of Elvish harps rang between the rock walls.

The next morning, Legolas was surprised to see Thranduil exit his tent dressed in the brown and green uniform of a Mirkwood pikeman. His hair was tied back into warrior braids and all but invisible under a leather helm. In his left hand, he held the green banner of his own realm.

"Father, you look . . ."

"Unrecognizable to even my own mother at twenty paces, I hope," Thranduil chuckled. "This is Bard's cause. My presence would only cause complications, given that there is little love between Thorin and me already. But I wish to hear with my own ears what this dwarf has to say for
himself." He tossed Legolas a spear and a helm. "Put aside your bow. Today you and I will be our own heralds."

They joined with Bard's company of spearmen and took a spot beside the blue banner of the lake. Truly, Legolas thought, he would not have recognized his own father. Gone was the regal posture, and Thranduil somehow managed to look an inch or two shorter as they trudged along the rocky trail. He heard his father humming a soldiers' marching tune that was familiar from Legolas's own days with the patrols. "Do you do this often?" Legolas asked softly and was answered with only a cryptic smile.

After another long hike, Legolas found himself again before the gates of Erebor.

Again, Thorin called down from the wall: "Who are you that you come armed for war to my gates? I am Thorin, son of Thrain, King under the mountain!"

With only the briefest of sidelong glances at Thranduil, Bard stepped forward. "Hail Thorin! There is no need to fence yourself in, for we are not your foes. We rejoice to find you still alive, and we seek parley and council with you."

"Who are you, that I should have anything to discuss with you?"

"I am Bard of Esgaroth, who shot the dragon, who would otherwise have returned to the mountain to your great woe. I am the heir of Girion, King of Dale, whose treasure is mingled with your own in the late dragon's hoard. I also speak for the men of Esgaroth, who aided you in your hour of need and whose homes are now destroyed. These are all fit topics for discussion."

"We will pay Esgaroth back for the supplies and lodging in due time. As for the rest, I will not negotiate under threat of arms. Certainly not until you send that yellow haired elf and his army back to the woods where they belong."

Legolas glanced nervously at his father, but Thranduil had merely set his lips into a wicked smile, and his eyes glittered behind the helm.

"The Elvenking is a good friend to me, and to the people of the lake, whom he has already succored, although they had no claim upon him save friendship. You would do well to do the same, Thorin Oakenshield," said Bard grimly. "In the name of justice, I ask for one-twelfth of the treasure as recompense for slaying your dragon for you. I will help the men of Laketown out of my own share, but if you wish for the friendship and respect of Dale and Esgaroth, as Thror had in times past, you will show generosity from your own share as well. I will give you time to ponder the wisdom and justice of my terms."

"No need," said Thorin, "here's your answer," and he fired an arrow at Bard, who caught it in his shield.

Legolas tensed his spear-throwing arm, but Thranduil put out a hand to stay him. "He is lucky I did not have my bow with me," Legolas whispered angrily.

"If that is your answer," Bard cried, the arrow still quivering in his shield, "then you may consider yourself under siege. Go back into your mountain and eat your gold." He turned and led the party swiftly back down the trail.

"You have just had your first lesson in Dwarvish diplomacy," Thranduil observed once they were out of earshot. "Every time I am tempted to start feeling sorry for those folk, they do something like this to bring me to my senses."

"I had no idea," said Bard angrily. "Thror of old was never reputed to be such!"
"That was before they fell on hard times. Poverty can affect the spirit, as well you know, Bard," Thranduil said. "It is the dragon sickness. It has hold of him and there will be no reasoning with him now. But like it or not, we are in a stalemate. We have food; Thorin has shelter. My army is hardy, although we have no love of the cold, but I fear for your men, Bard, with the winter coming on."

"Freeze here at the foot of the mountain, or go back home and freeze on the shores of the lake. It isn't much of a choice," said Bard bitterly.

"I doubt it will come to that," said Thranduil. "Thorin will have sent word to his kin. And there will be others who may come. It will not be long before the crisis."

The armies settled in to wait. Legolas found that the hardest part -- the incredible grinding tension and boredom. The weather grew colder, and on some mornings there was frost on the ground and ice in the water buckets, although the river still ran free past the camp.

On a crisp night with no moon, a group of Elven riders arrived from the south. The chief among them was his father's heretofore missing general, Magorion, and a cloaked rider in grey. Among the soldiers accompanying them was an elf Legolas recognized from having served with him in the border patrols. As Magorion and the cloaked figure were shown into Thranduil's tent, Legolas called this elf aside.

"Hoi, Glavras! Where have you been? And Lord Magorion? I thought it most strange that he was not with the army when we marched from Mirkwood."

"Did you not know, Legolas? Lord Magorion led a group of us south all the way to the southern tip of the wood. There we met with troops from Lothlorien. Lord Celeborn was there himself and the two wizards, Mithrandir and Curunir, and even some fighters from Rivendell, although not many. We went on business of the White Council, marching against the Necromancer at Dol Guldur. You were away in the east when we left."

Legolas stared at Glavras, dumbstruck, and then let out an oath. "How did I not know of this?"

"Well, we were all told to keep it very quiet, and it happened quickly," Glavras stammered, "although one of the lieutenants told me that Mithrandir asked the king for troops as early as last spring. None of us ever see you anymore, now that your father has you locked up in the library most of the time."

"Well, what happened?" said Legolas, with increasing dismay.

"Nothing, that's the strange part. All that marching and buildup, and it was all to naught. At first they put up a token defense, as if to draw us in, but they soon melted into the forest. When we got to the tower, the place was deserted, not an orc to be seen, and the Necromancer . . . pffft! They say he headed south, although you couldn't prove it by me. The dungeons were still full though, and I hope I never see such a pitiful sight again. The orcs had cleared out and left the prisoners locked up with no food or water, and most of them were skin and bones to begin with. Edain, dwarves, even some elves, all looking like death itself. They are in the care of the folk of Lothlorien now, but I don't think many will live."

"The orcs were gone?"

Glavras nodded. "But not for long, I think. Celeborn showed no eagerness to garrison the place, and Elbereth knows we haven't the troops for it. The orcs will be back in there the minute we turn around. They should have razed that tower to the ground and sown salt into the soil if you ask"
The two of them had walked through the darkened camp and had reached the banks of the river. Legolas bent, picked up a stone and shied it viciously into the water. He had thought that with his assignment to scout Erebor, he had at last gained his father's confidence, yet it had turned out to be no more than a ploy to distract him from the real business at hand. Although, he had to reason with himself, had he really wanted to go anywhere near Dol Guldur after seeing it the once? No, he most certainly did not. But just the same . . .

"Legolas, are you all right?"

Legolas sighed. A cold wind blew from the north and he shivered. He was about to speak when another splash came from the river.

"That is no fish!" Glavras said, alarmed.

Legolas whistled, and elf guards with lanterns arrived quickly. "Hide your lights. There is a spy about. They will help him more than us, if it is that strange hairy footed creature that is their servant."

Legolas peered off into the dark, and out from behind a rock popped a small brown haired man, almost as if he had appeared from thin air. He was plump and had a cheerful face. There was nothing at all threatening about him, yet Legolas found himself on edge. "Who are you? Are you the dwarves' Hobbit? How did you get so far past our sentinels," he demanded, with an especially sharp look at the soldiers of Thranduil's guard.

"Have a light. I am here if you want me. I am a companion of Thorin's, and I know your king well by sight, though he may not recognise me. You too, Master Elf," he said, looking straight at Legolas. "Thank you for the bread and the apple. They were delicious."

"What is your business?" Legolas demanded hotly, aware that his elves were looking at him as if he was somehow in league with this cocky little intruder.

"It is my own, and it is with Bard, who knows me well. If you ever wish to get back to your own woods from this cheerless place, you will take me to him."

The hobbit was swiftly relieved of his weapon, an Elvish dagger that served as a sword for a being so short. Small though the dagger and the halfling were, Legolas was not about to let him go armed into the presence of either Bard or Thranduil. The search also revealed something that Legolas would rather never to have seen again. The hobbit wore a child-sized coat of silvery chain mail. The collar bore a fine tracery of vines and golden leaves, and there was a little belt of pearls and crystals. It could be none other. The last time Legolas had seen that mithril shirt, it had been trailing from the claws of a dragon in flight.

He and Glavras escorted the soaked halfling to the tent of the Elvenking, and sat him in front of the fire, wrapped in a large blanket. And they watched from the sidelines while this strange creature, who introduced himself as Bilbo Baggins, warned Bard and Thranduil of the imminent arrival of a Dwarf army lead by Dain Ironfoot and produced the Arkenstone of Thror. Legolas had never seen the like of it, nor had Thranduil, by his look of amazement when Bilbo pulled the huge gem out and offered it as his own share as a bargaining chip against Thorin.

"Bilbo Baggins, you are as worthy to wear the armor of elf-princes as any who have looked more comely in it," said Thranduil. "Although I fear Thorin will not see it that way."

While the hobbit was offered, and declined, the sanctuary of the camp, Legolas was left to ponder
the meaning of his father's words. Legolas had never thought he looked the slightest bit comely in that mail coat, merely absurd. Although, looks aside, there had been many an occasion since his childhood when he wished he had a coat of mail that would stop an arrow as that little mithril shirt had done.

"Well done, Mr. Baggins," said a man who had been sitting cloaked and mostly hidden in the shadows. "There is always more about you than anyone expects."

'And more about you, Mithrandir,' thought Legolas, recognizing the wizard as the cloaked horseman who had accompanied Magorion from the south. Something was definitely afoot, if Gandalf had ridden to join Thranduil's army rather than remain with the other members of the White Council.

He pondered on this while he escorted Mr. Baggins back to the edge of the camp, and he could not help but heave a sigh of relief as the hobbit splashed northward across the river and out of sight. Such a pleasant little fellow, and Legolas was at a loss to understand why he felt so uneasy in his presence.

"I say, Legolas, wasn't that your old coat of mail that little creature was wearing?" said Glavras with a saucy grin. "You always used to look quite the little warrior in it."

Legolas muttered beneath his breath and glared. "You show great courage, Glavras, to be making sport of one who someday might be your liege lord." Almost as soon as the words had left his lips, he regretted them. Such a sentiment was too uncomfortable with a battle brewing, for it could too easily become reality.

"Sport?" the other elf replied innocently.

"Aye. I may have been but a child, but it did not escape my notice how some of you would smile behind your hands whenever my father would make me wear it, and how some would call me The Leaflet when you thought none could hear."

"Not I!" insisted Glavras. "Your father would have had the ears off of any elf he caught saying such a thing, and I had not the courage for it. As for smiling at the armor, well, you have to admit you were just so adorable in it."

Legolas drew breath for a sharp retort but found himself laughing instead. "I was, was I not? What an image! Thranduil The Magnificent and his son, Legolas The Adorable. If ever I wish to acquire a new lore name for myself, I will bear that one in mind."

He was still shaking his head when he returned to his father's tent. As captain of the bodyguard, he had placed sentries, to whom he gave a brief nod as he passed. Had he not been immediately recognizable, he knew he would have been greeted by drawn bows. He would spend this night, as every night, asleep across the entry to the tent, while Galion slept at the king's side. No one could come into the tent or nigh unto Thranduil without both of them springing to his defense.

Thranduil, all smiles and courtesy, was bidding Mithrandir goodnight when Legolas arrived, and the smell of pipeweed hung in the crisp night air. Legolas bowed respectfully as the wizard left to head for his own tent. Legolas was surprised to see Thranduil's smile harden into a grim line once the older man disappeared from sight.

"Ai, wizards," Thranduil muttered unhappily. "Thanks to Mithrandir, I find myself with a battle brewing and half of my troops still several days march from here."

He nodded at Legolas to sit beside him near the fire.
"On the one hand the wizard asks me for troops to help the White Council drive the Necromancer from Dol Guldur," Thranduil continued, "while on the other hand he sends Thorin to confront Smaug and create a diversion. Had I known, I would never have divided my army this way. Now I am caught with my breeches unlaced -- nay, down around my ankles -- and I do not like the feeling."

"He told you he sent Thorin to distract the dragon?"

Thranduil shook his head. "Of course not, but he knows too much about that perian creature and about Thorin's plans for it to be otherwise. I have been deceived, Legolas, and I find myself rather vexed."

"One would never guess it from your friendly manner towards him just now."

Thranduil laughed mirthlessly. "I call myself a king, while Elrond of Imladris takes no grand title. Yet I do not delude myself as to which of us has the greater power and prestige. I am but the ruler of a backwater realm, and I know better than to enter into a water-passing contest with one of the Ithryn. Mithrandir suspects I know what I know and that I do not trust him entirely and that I trust his brother Curunir not at all. Of all of them, you may trust Radagast alone, for he has no guile. Do not misunderstand me, Mithrandir works for the good, and he means well, but on his chessboard I rate no higher than a pawn. We both know this, but you will never see either of us betray a sign of it. This is kingcraft, my son."

"If kingcraft involves deception, then I would rather not learn it," said Legolas bitterly.

"I would rather you not have to learn it either. Not for many a year. Let us hope that fate is so kind. Meanwhile, know that Mithrandir himself has been deceived, along with the rest of the White Council. The Necromancer let them waste their time, while he has stolen off elsewhere. Somewhere, I fear, where he may do more harm." Thranduil sighed. "It is an ignoble thought, but I am glad that he is now on someone else's doorstep instead of mine."

"Father, the Necromancer . . ."

"Hush, Legolas. I know of what you speak. You sensed it right away. I have long suspected who he was, and I will not utter that name."

"Then I suppose it was worth it, even if it means your army is divided now, just to have him gone. How many days will it be before they can join us?"

"They were just north of Rhosgobel when my messengers reached them with news of the Dragon's death. Magorion and Mithrandir came ahead swiftly, but the foot troops march more slowly. They will be making all due haste, but it will be three days if not more. Dain will surely be here before then. But be of good cheer. That little burglar has just given us a ray of hope. We may use the Arkenstone to make Thorin see reason."

"Ai, the hobbit! Father, I am most ashamed that I allowed him so near the camp tonight, and that I overlooked him back in the forest. I do not understand how that could happen."

Thranduil laughed. "I do. Gandalf tells me the little burglar has a kind of magic charm he found in the Misty Mountains that allows him to go about unseen. I do not think that any kind of magic will help him when Thorin learns what he has done. Come, let us to bed. Tomorrow our fortunes may change for the better."

* * * * * * *
Translation:

_Ithrynn_: the Sindarin equivalent of 'Istari,' Wizards.
"What Marches Down the Mountain Pass?"

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

"...The winds awaken, the leaves whirl round,
Our cheeks are pale, our hair is unbound,
Our breasts are heaving, our eyes are agleam...

W. B. Yeats, The Hosting of the Siddhe, (1893)

Another parley took place at the mountain gate early the next day, but Thorin remained obdurate, even after learning that Bard held the Arkenstone as security against a rightful share of the hoard. Furious at the hobbit, Thorin banished Bilbo Baggins from his sight, telling him he could use his promised fourteenth to give to the men of Esgaroth. Even the revelation of the presence of Gandalf did not soften Thorin's heart.

"You are not making a very splendid figure as King under the mountain," Gandalf chided, as the group watched Mr. Baggins being let down the rock wall that guarded the gate. "But things may change yet."

"They may yet indeed," replied Thorin, and he refused to relinquish the fourteenth share of gold until a time of his own convenience. It was apparent to all that he hoped the arrival of Dain would relieve him of even this obligation, while forcing the return of the Arkenstone. Bard set a deadline of twenty-four hours for the delivery of the gold, but this seemed an empty demand as the delegation made its way back down the mountain trail, richer by only one small hairy footed burglar.

"The dragon greed is in full possession of him," Thranduil said sadly. "Our last hope of avoiding a battle is to intercept Dain and persuade him to talk some sense into Thorin. However, given the nature of dwarves and treasure, I fear that there is little chance of it."

Legolas noted that his father carefully avoided looking at Mithrandir, who was very much the author of this current muddle. Bard merely looked grimmer than ever. Legolas knew that it was not for greed that Bard fought. The men and women of Esgaroth had placed their trust in him, and without the gold to rebuild, the town and its folk would die out.

The day passed, and the night. The next morning dawned grey and chill, with a wind out of the west. Winter was upon them, as were the Dwarves, for runners reported that an army of Naugrim had rounded the eastern spur of the mountain and were marching up the valley.

Trumpets blew, calling men and elves to arms.

Legolas watched while Galion performed the grim duty of putting Thranduil's hair into braids and strapping on his leather armor. He marveled at his father's apparent calm, and then marveled again as Thranduil turned about to strap Galion into his gear. "We have had much practice at this, Galion and I," Thranduil said. "One does not stand on ceremony before a battle."

"You expect a battle this day?"

"I still have hopes for a peaceful resolution, yet my experience tells me otherwise. Have Fefelas armor you up."
The main host of the *Naugrim* halted at the river, but a few of the dwarves continued on to make an envoy.

"We are sent from Dain son of Nain," they said when Bard and the Elvenking went out to meet them. "Who are you that sit in the plain as foes before defended walls?"

These dwarves were a different matter entirely from Thorin's half starved band, and Legolas could see that they meant deadly business. They wore full chain mail over leggings of flexible mesh and helms of iron. They carried heavy axes, but each also was armed with a short broadsword and a round shield. Their long beards were plaited into what looked to Legolas to be the dwarvish equivalent of warrior braids and tucked into their belts. The very look of them made Legolas keep a ready hand on his bow.

"We have business with Thorin," answered Bard, "and you shall not pass until we have received our due from him. Then we will retire."

The dwarves liked this not at all, and many angry words were exchanged before they retreated, muttering in their beards. Bard immediately sent messengers up to the gate, but a hail of arrows rather than the promised gold met them. Meanwhile, the dwarvish army began to advance northward along the eastern bank of the river along the mountain spur.

"Fools," said Bard. "They know little of battle strategy above ground. My spearmen and archers can have them in volley from the heights of the eastern spur at my word. I say we attack them now while they are still tired from their march."

Thranduil shook his head. "Nay, Bard, you are still new to kingship. This war is for gold, and I will wait a long time before I begin a battle for gold alone. Do not be eager to waste your men's lives without dire necessity. We have the advantage of numbers and position. Let us hold and hope that some compromise can still be reached."

But it was too late. The dwarves sprang suddenly forward in the attack. The battle had begun. Arrows hissed down from the eastern heights, and Legolas drew his own bow, waiting until the first of the advancing *Naugrim* should come within range.

Even more suddenly, the sky darkened and thunder and lightning sounded from the mountain's peak. A black cloud of moving shapes in the sky appeared from the north, moving not with the wind but with their own volition. Legolas saw his father look upward with an expression of pained horror.

"Halt! Dread has come upon you all!" cried a loud and masterful voice. Gandalf strode out between the two advancing armies, his arms held wide. Fire flew from the tip of his staff, and the sight of him brought the two sides to an amazed standstill. "The Goblins are upon you! Bolg of the north is coming, and his bats provide a cover of darkness. They ride upon wolves and Wargs are in their train!"

The fighting ceased, as dwarves, elves and men stared at the sky in horror and confusion.

"Come," said Gandalf, "there is still time for council."

Thranduil and Bard retired hastily to the camp to plan a defense. Within a short time, Dain joined them. "Only a fool fights in a collapsing cavern," he said tersely, "and my father, Nain, raised no fools."

"We are outnumbered," said Thranduil, with a look at Gandalf. "Our only hope is to lure the orc army between the spurs of the mountain, where we can catch them as if between two jaws. You,
Bard, have men already upon the eastern spur. I will set my archers and pikemen upon the southern spur, ready to charge when the goblins come into the valley."

"I will join Bard on the east," said Dain. "His army is fewer and my dwarves are closer to that spot."

"Who is to lead the feint that will draw the orcs into the valley?" said Mithrandir.

"My men will do it," replied Bard. "The orcs will think us easier prey than dwarves or elves. Come! To the mountain! Let us take our places while there is yet time!"

Some of the swifter elves accompanied Bard to the top of the eastern spur to spy out the approaching armies. Legolas would have gone to join them, but Thranduil shook his head. "Time to do what I brought you here to do, Legolas. You and your men will stand with me on the ridge they call the Raven Hill. My nobles and I will have need of a body-guard before this day is out."

He motioned the others on and bade Legolas stay behind with him for a moment. "This orc attack is what I feared all along. I now have little hope that the rest of my army will arrive in time, but we must hold out as long as possible. I am keeping you near me for a reason. If I should fall, the elves will look to you. Keep your head and listen to Magorion and Sëregon."

"And if I should fall?" Legolas said.

Thranduil smiled bitterly. "In that case, one of my nobles will lead what is left of Mirkwood. You and I will be meeting in the Halls of Mandos, and we will be beyond caring, I deem."

The hike to the heights of the Raven Hill took about half an hour, and time was drawing short. Mithrandir was with them, along with the hobbit, who looked overwhelmed but ready to make a good showing of himself, with his short Elven sword. Magorion was there, and Sëregon, and others of the lords of Thranduil's court, all in full battle attire, and a group of what Legolas realized to be Elf-women, dressed in male clothing and wearing armor. These were the healers, and although they carried weapons, they would not use them until the utmost need for self-defense, as it was believed that their power to heal was diminished by the taking of life. They found an old dwarvish guard post cut into the rock of the Raven Hill, where the healers could shelter and defend at the very last.

Elven pikemen were arrayed along the lowest slopes of the spur among the rocks, with groups of archers stationed above them. The thunderstorm had passed to the southeast, but the day was turning ever darker as the flights of bats grew thicker in the sky above.

They had not been long upon the hill when the first of the orcish wolf riders rounded the eastern spur of the mountain and were met by a group of Bard's men. The Esgaroth soldiers held out long enough to whet the orcs' fury and to allow their army to gather behind the resistance. Seeming to give back in defeat, they retreated to either side, causing the orcs to pour into the valley in a disorganized rush after the fleeing men.

When the orcs were well within the confining spurs of the mountain, Thranduil gave the signal, and the Mirkwood archers let loose a volley of arrows. With the goblins reeling from the bombardment, the pikemen charged down from the rocks in a deadly rush. The rocks were soon slippery with black blood, and the orcs retreated back toward the east.

Then, from the eastern ridge came the deep-throated cries of, "Moria!" and, "Dain!" as the dwarves charged in, wielding their two handed mattocks. With them came the men of Esgaroth, brandishing their long swords.
As the orcs met this new attack, yet another wave of Mirkwood pikemen charged in, this time led by Pallanen, the captain of the forest guard. From the heights, Legolas could see his dark head disappear into the melee and hear his voice among the battle cries. Legolas longed to loose a shot into the fray, but he heard his father's calm voice say, "Hold. Save your arrows. They will be here soon enough."

For a while, it seemed that the orcs were being beaten back and were retreating south down the valley, but soon there came cries from the north. The orcs had scaled the mountain and were pouring down the southern slope above the gate. Some made their way along the ridge and assailed the Raven Hill from the north, just as the orcs in the valley recovered and began to swarm up the valley slope.

Now, Legolas brought his bow into use, as did Glavras beside him, along with the rest of the bodyguard and those of the nobles who carried them. One after another, Legolas took careful aim and knocked back orcs who came up the ridge. He heard the sing of metal behind him as Thranduil drew his sword. The Elvish blades all glowed with a blue light now, even that of Mithrandir, who sat upon the ground, seemingly deep in thought or meditation towards some blast of magic before the end.

Down on the valley floor, a host of wargs came snarling, and with them rode the bodyguard of the goblin king, Bolg. These were not the puny cave goblins but huge orcs with metal armor and scimitars of steel. Legolas could see the forces of Bard being forced back up the sides of the eastern spur, and the tide of orcs now reached the Raven Hill. The carnage in the valley was terrible, and the bats plunged from the sky to feast upon the blood of the dying.

"Form ranks," Legolas yelled to his men "Form ranks around the king!" He fired his arrows as fast as he could pull them, and yet the orcs steadily advanced.

All at once there came a cry from the gate. Trumpets sounded and the wall of rocks collapsed into the pool. Out sprang Thorin and his dwarves. "To me, elves and men," Thorin cried in a voice so powerful that Legolas could hear him over the din of the battle. "To me, my kinsfolk!"

Thorin and his dwarves were a relative few, but the fire of battle filled them, and they charged through the goblin ranks like a battering ram. At the sight, Dain's folk took heart, along with the men of the lake. They flooded back into the valley.

Thorin fought mightily, but the bodyguard of Bolg, whose iron ring he could not pierce, brought him to a halt and soon he was surrounded himself.

Legolas was no stranger to combat, but his experience had been with forest skirmishes, quickly over. This was his first time in such a protracted battle, and although new to it, he could tell that his side was losing. The orcs were close upon him now, so near that he could almost see the pores in their skin and smell their foul breath. He stepped back involuntarily and caught his father's eye sidelong. Thranduil had a strange look about him. He shook his head as if to say, "I am sorry," and then uttered a high-pitched, bloodcurdling scream. This was the first time Legolas had heard his father give an Elvish battle cry, but he had little time to reflect upon it, for he heard the same cry coming from his own throat and from the throats of those around him as he followed his father headlong down the hill in a full out charge.

He was running fast now, so fast that he would surely have fallen if he had paused to worry about where he put his feet, but Thranduil's scream had filled him with a kind of madness, as it had the other elven lords. The orcs, met with this daunting rush of Elf-warriors in full battle-fever gave back against the onslaught. Legolas fired one arrow after the other. Soon his quiver would be empty and he would be forced to scavenge from the bodies of the dead. He drew his bow yet again, felt an arrow pass close enough to his head to waft his hair. At the same time he heard a
twanging sound. His bow abruptly lost tension, he felt a stinging pain at his right eye, and that side of his vision went dark. He put his hand to the right side of his face and brought it away covered with blood. It took him a few moments to understand that his bowstring, snapped by the passing arrow, had lashed him across the eye. He dimly hoped that he still had an eye left behind that torrent of blood, but he was far too deep in the battle fury to much care.

He wasted only a few seconds trying to slip his now useless bow into its carrier before abandoning the attempt and letting it fall. He hated to see it trampled underfoot, but no weapon, no matter how cherished, was worth his life. He reached back to his quiver and drew his matched knives. The world looked strangely flat to him now, but he could fight with his knives on instinct alone. Magorion had taught him well.

He could see Magorion swinging his sword, just up the slope beyond Thranduil and Galion. He spared a moment of gratitude for the patient hours his father's general had spent teaching a clumsy elf-child the rudiments of close combat. Many a time, those very sharp blades, inexpertly wielded by the novice prince, had nicked Magorion. Had it not been for the fact that elven skin healed without a scar, Magorion would probably resemble one of those patchwork quilts the Edain favored. That patient instruction was saving his life now, and Legolas knew it.

They had reached the valley floor by now and were in the thick of the fighting. It became much harder to see the course of the battle from the midst of it. All Legolas could do was to keep any attacking orcs away from his father as best he could until the battle ended however it ended. He heard cries, something about eagles. He heard a strange roaring sound and saw what looked to be a bear moving through the fray, batting orcs to right and left. The Elvenking's group fought their way toward the spot where Thorin had been surrounded. Whether they were anywhere near to reaching it, Legolas could not tell.

Legolas had stayed to Thranduil's right, so that he could keep his father in the view of his good eye. He realized his fatal strategic mistake too late, when he was hit from his blind side and knocked flat. Something heavy stepped on the back of his head - it felt like the paws of a warg - grinding his face flat into the dirt for a few moments. He heard the swish of a flying spear.

When Legolas came to himself and was able to make his limbs work again, the battle seemed to have passed off to the south. All around, he heard the sounds of groaning and weeping, and the muttering of the dying. Groggily, he pulled himself up and staggered toward the spot where he had last seen his father.

He saw Thranduil sitting on the ground, cradling Galion's head in his lap. The broken off shaft of an orcish spear protruded from the esquire's chest.

Thranduil looked up. "Ai Rodyn, Legolas, what happened to you?"

Legolas shook his head impatiently. "My bowstring snapped. It is nothing. What of Galion?"

Thranduil nodded in the direction of a headless orc and the equally dead warg he had been riding. "He came at me. Galion threw himself in the way of his spear. Such a stupid, brave thing to do!"

Thranduil returned his attention to his stricken esquire. "Why, Galion?" he whispered.

"My duty, Sire," Galion said weakly. "How bad is it?"

"Not bad," Thranduil lied.

"It hurts like a demon," Galion said, and a fine trickle of blood appeared at the corner of his mouth. Thranduil and Legolas exchanged a silent look of dismay.
"For the love of Elbereth," Thranduil cried, "will someone fetch a healer?!"

Chapter End Notes

Translation:
*Rodyn:* Sindarin for Valar, the gods.
All That Is Finished, Let it Fade

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Remember all those renowned generations,
They left their bodies to fatten the wolves . . .
Be still, be still, what can be said?
My father sang that song,
But time amends old wrong . . ."

W.B. Yeats, from Three Marching Songs (1939)

In the early hours of the next morning, Legolas sat in the tent of the healers, as one of them attended to his eye.

The tide of the battle had turned when the Goblin King fell crushed by the strange bearlike man, Beorn of the Carrock. Upon the death of their leader, the orcs, already sorely beset by the onslaught of the eagles, had turned and fled, some to the east, where they were cut down by Bard’s men and the Naugrim, and some to the west, pursued by Magorion and the Elven host.

Eventually, the healers had come and placed Galion on a stretcher, careful not to jar the spear point in his chest and cause further damage. Thranduil had taken a deep slash on the thigh from the dead warg rider's scimitar, and he was walking with some difficulty. Refusing to be carried, he leaned upon his son as the two followed the stretcher-bearers back to the hastily reconstructed elven camp.

There were few left on the field of battle who had not suffered some kind of wound. Gandalf had a cut on his arm, which the healers were binding into a sling as Legolas and Thranduil entered the tent. Glavras had caught his ankle between two rocks and was having the broken bone splinted, but he managed a smile at Legolas when he saw him. Pallanen, whom Legolas had last seen leading the second charge of pikemen, lay with his eyes open, still and staring in a corner. Legolas would have mistaken it for sleep and said a word of cheer to him, had not a healer come at that moment and pulled a sheet over the elf captain's face. Also dead lay two of the youngest dwarves in Thorin's band. Legolas was told that they were Fili and Kili, the sons of Thorin's sister, and that Thorin himself lay mortally wounded, having been carried from the field by Beorn. Of the hobbit, Bilbo Baggins, there was no sign.

At the moment, Thranduil was having his own wound stitched up, but he fixed his attention anxiously upon the healer who attended to Legolas's eye. She dabbed gently with a wet cloth, removing layer upon layer of dried blood and dirt, pausing many times to rinse the cloth and change the water. Legolas began to realize that he must have looked a sight. At last she straightened and laid the cloth aside.

"The eye is intact, Sire," she said to Thranduil, who gave a sigh of relief, "and so is the lid. However, the brow and cheek will have to be stitched. I think it is best that we wait for Nestalinde. She has the skill for such delicate work." She handed Legolas a cold compress, redolent with herbs. "Hold this to your eye, my prince. It will keep the swelling down until Nestalinde has finished with Galion. It should not be much longer."

"I fail to see why everyone is making such a fuss about my looks when there are men actually
dying," Legolas said petulantly. "It will heal without a scar, given enough time. Come, bring me a looking glass so I can see for myself. It cannot be that bad."

"Oh, no, that would be a very bad idea!" the healer exclaimed, looking to Thranduil for support.

"Legolas, you will do as the healer tells you and have your eye taken care of," said Thranduil evenly. "I do not want you frightening the horses. Do it for them, son, if not for yourself or the rest of us."

"What is this rebellion in my tent?" said a gentle alto voice that nevertheless held a ring of authority. "I brought you into this world, Prince Legolas. Are you going to be just as difficult now as you were then? What is the problem?"

It would be pointless to describe Thranduil's senior healer as beautiful, for every Elf-woman was beautiful. She was tall, dark haired, dressed in simple men's attire that was stained with blood despite her fastidious care, and her eyes were weary with millennia of sorrow.

"Wounded by my own bow, my Lady Nestalinde," Legolas said, shamefacedly.

"Not surprising," she said. "I've been expecting that for centuries now." She removed the compress from Legolas's eye and pursed her lips. "Hmm. Well, if you want the use of that eye any time soon, you will let me stitch it properly. We need more light. Follow me."

"Nestalinde, what about Galion?" Thranduil asked.

"He is within. You may go to him now. I have removed the spear point, and as I feared, it pierced his lung. Were he an adan, he would be dead or dying. As it is, he will have a long recovery, if indeed he survives this wound."

"See to it that he survives," Thranduil said pointedly, and the healer nodded her head.

"I gave him a mighty draught for the pain of the removal, and he will be very sleepy and wandering in his wits," she said, as they followed her into the interior of the tent. "Sit," she told Legolas, motioning to a stool near a bright lantern and a table laid out with bone needles and boiled horse hair.

Galion lay on a cot, wrapped tightly in a blanket. "How are you, Galion?" Thranduil said softly, sitting down beside him.

"I'm all right, Thran' . . . " he mumbled sleepily. "It was awful. King Oropher . . . gave me such a tongue-lashing. I didn' tell 'm though . . . that it was you who put that toad in his bed. Still thinks it was me."

"Ahh . . . well, you must rest, Galion."

"Perhaps we should keep Master Galion in a private spot until he comes to himself?" Nestalinde ventured diplomatically.

"If you are expecting any further embarrassing revelations," Thranduil said, "you will be disappointed. It is no secret that in my youth I used to lead Galion and myself into all kinds of trouble. And he was ever there to take the blame for it." He sighed. "I fear I have made Galion old before his time."

"What was it Or'pher always used to say?" said Galion. "Kings rule and . . . kings rule . . ."

"And princes serve," Thranduil finished softly. "And you must serve me by regaining your
strength and returning to your duties, my old friend. I find I have become quite dependent upon your talents, whether it be as valet or as butler. Rest now."

Thranduil stood slowly. "I must go seek out Bard. There is much to discuss." Pulling his majesty about himself like a cloak, he walked from the tent with only a hint of a limp.

A hint of a smile played about the corners of Nestalinde's mouth. "In the course of my work, I hear much," she said. "Elves in pain and dying -- they cry out for their naneths, or they speak the names of wives and lovers, and sometimes those names can be surprising. I hear it all and take it in my stride. But a toad in Oropher's bed -- that is something new."

She brought her instruments and materials to bear and drew her stool in close to begin her work, Legolas had not been this close to an Elf-woman since the years of his childhood, not even in the dance, and he found he was quite enjoying the sensation of her warm breath against his cheek. Discreetly, he crossed his legs.

At the first bite of the needle in his forehead, all pleasant thoughts ceased. In that moment, he learned that pain in the heat of battle was nothing like pain sustained at leisure to expect it. He broke out into a sweat, and a reflexive tear rolled from the corner of his eye.

The healer wiped it away matter-of-factly. "That is a most sensitive area, my prince. The reaction is quite natural." With a smile, she handed him a fresh scrap of deer hide to bite down on. "Only nine more to go."

* * *

The pale sun had newly risen when Legolas left the healers' tent looking for his father. His right eye was swathed in bandages, and the frost covered vista of the valley still looked strangely flat.

He found Thranduil sitting cross-legged in the dirt partway up the road to the mountain's gate, quietly surveying the cleanup efforts. Elves, men, and dwarves were all giving him a wide berth, because it was clear to one and all that the Elvenking was in one of his pensive moods.

Legolas nodded a greeting and sat down beside his father.

"I did not disappoint the crebain after all," Thranduil said at last. The valley was a sad sight, littered with the corpses of the fallen. The elves, after custom, had been quick to gather up their own, as well as the Edain, and the Naugrim were hurrying to collect their dead as well. The orcs would be gathered up and burnt last, and meanwhile, the carrion birds were busy despite the morning chill. "It was this Orc army that I feared all along. We were very lucky this time.

"Thorin Oakenshield is dying, and when he passes, Dain will proclaim his kingship under the mountain. He and his armies will guard Erebor and the treasure it contains, which is well. Bard, after seeing to it that Esgaroth is rebuilt, intends to reestablish the kingdom of Dale. He will be a strong ally for Mirkwood, and that will be a good thing too. Better than the dragon, surely."

Off, across the valley, the first pyres of dead orcs had been set alight. "In time, the wreck of this battle will disappear. The rains will fall, the winds will blow. Any bodies that have been missed will melt into the earth, and Arda will heal itself. It is the way of things. And you and I, my son, we shall still be here."

"This battle was not for gold, was it, Father."

Thranduil smiled and shook his head. "It never is. You are learning, my son." He stood, stiffly. "Come, we must return."

Legolas stood to follow and stubbed his toe on a mass of something hard. It was not a rock, he
saw as he looked down, but rather an amorphous shape of something melted into the dirt of the road. He picked at it with his dagger and saw the bright gleam of silver. Before he could ponder the mystery any further, he heard shouts from the direction of the Raven Hill. Elves were leading a small cloaked figure toward the camp. The hobbit had been found.

Thorin Oakenshield died that afternoon, but not before making peace with those with whom he had been at odds, including Bilbo and the Elvenking. He was put to rest deep within the heart of Erebor, and Thranduil laid his mighty sword, Orcrist upon his breast. It was said that it would glow with a bluish light in warning of the approach of enemies. And in the later days, among the Naugrim folk of the Lonely Mountain, it was said that in the last battle, at Ardhon Meth, mighty Thorin himself would arise one last time to wield Orcrist against the Foe.

Home the army of the wood-elves rode, sadly lessened by those they had left behind under a cairn in the valley beneath the Lonely Mountain. Thranduil was richer by a fabulous necklace of emeralds given him by Dain in return for the assistance of the Elven host in defeating Bolg's army. It was a generous gift, yet Legolas had seen a momentary flash of superstitious dread pass over his father's face as he received his portion. Bard also had received the equivalent of the dragon plundered wealth of Dale, enough to restore Laketown to its glory and rebuild the happy valley at the mountain's foot.

On the eastern edges of the marsh, they had met up with the other half of the Elvenking's army, along with the forces that had pursued to orcs westward from the rout of the battle beneath Erebor.

"They had little chance caught between us and the rest of your forces, Sire," Magorion said grimly. "Any who managed to get past us into the wood will not last long. But they were few, I can assure you. The marshes will be greener from their corpses for many a year, and the mountains of the north and the passes of the Hithlaeglir will be safer from now on."

At the forest edge, Mithrandir and the hobbit, who had been traveling with the elves, along with Beorn, who was massive, hirsute and swarthy enough to be a bear in truth rather than a man, bade them farewell, for they would be taking the northern route around Mirkwood.

"Will you not tarry awhile in my halls?" Thranduil asked, courteously.

"Nay," replied Gandalf, "we shall hope to reach the Carrock by Yuletide and spend it there with Beorn. Farewell, O Elvenking! Merry be the greenwood, while the world is yet young. And merry be all thy folk."

"And thou, Gandalf, may you always appear where you are most needed and least expected. The oftener you appear in my halls the better I shall be pleased."

'And the marshes shall grow greener for many a year from the manure of such flowery sentiment,' Legolas thought to himself but kept his peace.

"Excuse, me, pardon, me," said the hobbit, standing on one foot and looking for all the world as if he had to make water. He held out a necklace of silver and pearls. "Please accept this gift in return for all your, ahem . . . hospitality. I ate your food, drank your wine and alarmed your librarian. It is the least I can do. Even a burglar has principles."

"Librarian?" said Thranduil blankly, as a titter ran through the rest of the elves.

"Ai, Belair," Legolas muttered softly and gritted his teeth.

"I thank you for your gift, O Bilbo the magnificent, and I name you elf-friend and blessed,"
Thranduil said graciously. "May your shadow never grow less, or burglary would become too easy! Farewell!"

Mithrandir, the hobbit, and Beorn, turned aside and headed off to the north. Legolas caught a flash of silver under the halflings's cloak, and he felt a rush of secret glee to think he was seeing the last of that hated mithril shirt.

"What are you smiling about, my son?" said Thranduil, bringing his horse close for a confidential word.

"Ah, nothing, Adar," Legolas said innocently. "I am just glad to be getting back under the trees again."

"Nice little chap, that perian," Thranduil continued, running the necklace the hobbit had given him through his hands. "Honest, the sort who would never inspire me to count the silverware after he leaves, inoffensive, brave -- I cannot for the life of me understand why his presence made me so uneasy."

"You too?" Legolas said, with some surprise. "You felt it too?"

Thranduil nodded. "I felt it, although I did not allow it to make me think the less of him. I rule with my head, not my nerves. I can only assume it was that magic charm Mithrandir spoke of. Certain types of magicks have always made me feel . . . jumpy."

"Whatever it was, it was not a pleasant sort of magic. Evil, even, I would call it. Did Gandalf say what it was?"

Thranduil shook his head. "Well, we've seen the last of Mr. Baggins and his magic trinket. I do not suppose we shall ever know, and there's an end to it. Come, Legolas, home awaits us."

Up ahead, the forest edge beckoned, and, for a short time at least, the world was yet young.

* * * * * * *

The End

Chapter End Notes

Translations:
Belair: Valar
Ardhon Meth: World's End

Author's Note: This story was inspired, in part, by a story by IgnobleBard-- 'A Texas Gayboy in King Thranduil's Court' -- in which Thranduil turns every shade of red known to all the Races when teased about the fact that he cluelessly allowed Sauron to exist on his doorstep for two millennia. I thought not. As funny as that story was and is, Thranduil is a little smarter than that. It also got me thinking how the elves of Mirkwood could have had Sauron's One Ring among them for several weeks
without noticing anything amiss. This story was my humble attempt to explain while
doing my own version of Legolas at Erebor.

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