# Building

**Summary**

A city, a marriage, a world.

Legolas and Gimli return to Minas Tirith with their people to help Aragorn rebuild his city, and learn how to be together in a new world of peace.

**Notes**

So . . . Finding a Voice was new and unbelievable for me. I've never gotten so much feedback on a story or felt so intimately involved in a fandom, and all of that encouraged me to keep writing in my anxious!Legolas 'verse. I don't have anything as big or as plotty as that first story (help, what do I do when I don't have books providing a storyline for me?), but I didn't want to let go of the characters yet, so . . . this. It'll probably be a series of vaguely interconnected oneshots, all of which take place during this general time period.

I have a few written already, but otherwise this story will just be a place where I put new ones as inspiration strikes me. (Feel free to comment or message with prompts, though I can't...
promise to write them - but if you have ideas, I would love to hear them and who knows? Maybe I'll be inspired!

And without further ado, on to the story.
The dwarves came a day later than the official missive had indicated – but then, Gimli’s personal letter had warned him that they might. *My people are very determined to make it clear that we are subordinate to no other race, and I am in no position to challenge them on this,* he had written. *None will slight your authority in your own city, but they will want you to know that your authority is not over them. Pay it no mind.*

Aragorn had wondered over some of the phrasing, particularly the *I am in no position to challenge them* – was Gimli not in command here, after all? But perhaps there was something he did not know, and in any case, if there was anything he had learned in his long years as a Ranger, it was flexibility.

(Some of his staff were not as pleased, but then, they were all still learning how to get along.)

Still, for all the declarations of independence he could allow the dwarves, he could not give way to them either. So for all his eagerness to see Gimli, he had his guards meet them at the gates and waited in his palace (where they had been given rooms) for the delegation to arrive.

And arrive they did.

They were loud enough entering the throne room – boots ringing on the stone floors; the clanking of mail audible from rooms away – but as soon as they had entered, they fell into a disciplined silence. There was not even the quiet muttering that Aragorn might have expected – he supposed the rumored privacy of dwarves was not overstated, then.

And at their head – *ah,* but it was good to see him!

Gimli’s face was solemn, as befitted this greeting, but his eyes danced beneath stern brows, and – if Aragorn could make it out correctly through the beard – the corners of his lips were twitching. He was dressed not so differently than Aragorn was accustomed to seeing him: perhaps the travel-clothes and armor were even the same that he had worn when they had journeyed together across Middle-earth.

And yet – something was off about him, something Aragorn could not quite place. He tilted his head just slightly, trying to make it out without making his scrutiny too obvious.

“King Elessar,” said Gimli formally. “I, Gimli, son of Glóin, greet you in my own name and in that of Thorin Stonehelm, King under the Mountain. As agreed upon in letters between Gondor and Erebor, I stand before you now with a company of architects and stoneworkers, come to examine and repair the gates and the stonework of your city, if you are in turn able to uphold your end of the contract.”

“We are indeed,” said Aragorn just as solemnly. Oddly, the use of the royal *we* had been one of the most difficult minor adjustments yet, but he consoled himself thinking that he spoke not only for himself. “Per the terms agreed upon in the letters, we have prepared lodging for you and all of your kindred in the palace, until such time as less temporary arrangements can be made. And we bid you welcome in the city of Minas Tirith.” And now he could hold it back no longer, and he felt his face break into a true smile. “Ah, but thou art a sight for sore eyes, my friend!” And he stood and descended from his throne.

Gimli seemed to make one more effort to restrain his face, and then split into a smile of his own.
“And thou,” he said, striding forward as well to meet Aragorn in the middle of the room with a firm clasp of the arm. “It was a harder parting than I had anticipated, but now that you have finally hired some sensible workers for your city, I rejoice in your company once more. But for now, we have traveled long and hard in the last days. You would not happen to have food for five dozen hungry dwarrows, would you?”

“Come with me,” Aragorn said simply.

He led the way, his guards falling into step by his side, but he waved them aside when they would have stood between Gimli and him. There were few that he trusted at his side more than this dwarf, after all, and even fewer who had traveled so far and braved so much by his side. And if Gimli trusted this company of dwarves, Aragorn trusted them as well. Still, he did not protest when his guards flanked the group – and the dwarves did not protest either, for all that they murmured among themselves.

But Aragorn could only smile at Gimli, the camaraderie coming as easily as months before when they had separated. “A harder parting than you had anticipated?”

“Ah, do not mock me for my sentimentality!” said Gimli, grinning. “My folk already tell me I am become most un-dwarvish.”

His voice changed ever so slightly, and again Aragorn noticed that something was off. Was it something about Gimli, or was it just that it felt strange to be walking at his side without Legolas beside them as well – wait. Could it – ?

“Speaking of un-dwarvish,” he said, cutting his eyes very carefully to the side. “I know not if you have heard from him, but Legolas too will be arriving within the month. He has managed to gather some of his people as well.”

He would not have noticed it had he not been looking so closely, but he thought he saw Gimli’s cheeks flush very faintly red. Behind him, someone snickered. Yes.

“We have corresponded, yes,” said Gimli, recovering his composure. “I knew he was coming, but I knew not when. That is welcome news indeed!”

“I can imagine,” said Aragorn, still watching Gimli closely, not trying to hide the smirk. “And I could not help but notice that you have changed your braids, Master Dwarf.” That was it; that was the thing that was different, and though he did not know exactly what it might mean, he could certainly guess. If he was wrong, the conversational non sequitur would make no sense at all, but – But.

Another wave of snickers, louder than the last, let him know he had found his mark, and Gimli’s blush showed itself more clearly – particularly as a hand came up to tug at one of the braids in question. “Have you,” he said pleasantly, making an effort, but the look he shot Aragorn made it very clear that his words had had the desired effect. “What an interesting observation. Few men have such keen eyes.”

“Few men know how to see what is there,” Aragorn corrected him. He felt his smirk bloom into a full smile: one of joy for his friend’s fortune rather than satisfaction at his expense, and clapped a hand to his shoulder, leaving it there as they walked. “You are happy?”
Gimli glanced up at him, looking suddenly shy. “Very,” he confirmed, and he curled his hand up to rest atop Aragorn’s.

He did not even need to speak the words aloud. He knew what he said, and Gimli what he meant, and that was enough.

And now Aragorn could hardly wait for the arrival of Legolas.
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Legolas and a small group of elves arrive in Gondor and greet the king.

The elves arrived a day earlier than planned.

Legolas’s companions were still teasing him even as they approached the gates of Minas Tirith, as they had been doing since they had left the eaves of Fangorn behind them – left reluctantly, in all cases but one.

“Such haste, my lord prince,” said Celair, a title ze knew Legolas did not prefer. Though ze rode near the rear of the company, at a distance any mortal would not be able to hear, Legolas could of course hear every word. He had never before regretted the sharpness of his senses, but over the last days, riding with his company to Minas Tirith, he had come almost to wish for mortal ears. “You will wear the horses down before nightfall.”

“This haste is hardly as unusual as you make it,” retorted Legolas. He was keeping a brisker pace than he might have in days past, but it was far from fast enough to upset the horses, who would likely be pleased to run even harder. The reason for their early arrival was only that they had left Eryn Lasgalen days earlier than necessary.

. . . Anyway, they were only a day early.

“I never thought that I would see our Legolas in such a hurry to arrive on a diplomatic errand,” stage-whispered Damion at his right.

“I am not hurrying!” protested Legolas again. “And if I am, it is only to make up for your delay.”

“Our delay, he calls it.” He had wondered when Eleniel would speak up; she gave a dramatic sigh that more than made up for her extended silence. “You are cruel, Legolas, to cut short our delight in such a glorious forest as Fangorn and then call it a mere delay.”

“Perhaps Legolas has found greater glories than forests,” snickered Celair.

Legolas rolled his eyes as the teasing continued. The eleven elves with him were all friends and companions; he knew that none of what they said was intended to wound him – but it gnawed at him nonetheless, for they brought up worries that he himself could not help but mull over. Was he too hasty? He could not deny – and all of them knew, in any case – that the true reason for his haste was the company of dwarves who were even now in Minas Tirith to rebuild – particularly their leader. But he could not help but wonder if Gimli had come to Minas Tirith with the same haste, if seeing him again would be the same as he remembered. They had exchanged letters in the months they had been apart – but Legolas did not like sending letters; as soon as it had been posted, he always feared that he had written just the wrong thing, made enough of an error to end the relationship for good, and he would not know –

He knew, of course, that all this was likely not true, that he was seeing spiders where there were merely shadows; all the same, he fretted.
His companions were still enjoying themselves at his expense. “Since when does Legolas, son of Cuindis, darling of the Silvan elves, find a city of stone a greater glory than a forest?”

“Why, since he fell in love with a dwarf, of course!”

He knew – oh, he knew they did not mean it cruelly, but he could bear it no longer. “Since the forests of Middle-earth ceased to give him peace,” he snapped, anger flushing fast and hot through his blood, and with a whispered word to Arod, he took off at a canter and hoped that they would not follow him.

He rode ahead until he could no longer hear their voices behind him. He knew not if he had ridden far enough that the sound no longer carried, if the roaring in his ears had drowned out their voices, or simply if they had fallen silent; he did not turn around to look, and he did not care to listen for the sound of their horses’ hooves. He leaned forward into Arod’s neck instead, and occupied himself with his own thoughts – which almost immediately turned to guilt.

That had been unnecessary. Their teasing had been well-meant, and gentler than he likely deserved. He had been hasty, after all, had he not? He was in too much of a hurry; now he would arrive early and inconvenience Aragorn; and perhaps Gimli would not even be there? Or he would be there, but he would not be ready to see Legolas? Or would not want to see him at all – he had not replied to Legolas’s last letter; had it finally been the one that had broken everything –

Ah, and again he knew he was being unreasonable. That dwarves loved once – even had Gimli’s assurances not been enough for him, the reaction of his family proved that well enough – and nothing trivial would turn Gimli away from him. But the fear – it was so close to the surface now, as always, and it would not abate, no matter how he tried to force it to –

Hoofbeats grew louder behind him, but only one horse. He knew before turning around that it was Eleniel, and he slowed Arod’s canter as she drew up beside him. Any of the others, he might have brushed off, but Eleniel always knew how to soften conflict between them.

“We are sorry, Legolas,” she said. “You know that our awareness of the sea-longing is yet new, and I hope you know that we meant no wound to you.”

“No, I am sorry,” he said miserably. “I overreacted, and I should not” –

“Legolas,” she said, cutting him off. “You have done nothing wrong. We simply did not realize the pain we were causing – and the wounds of your heart reflect no fault in you. We hope only that it will not be a lasting ache.”

“The jesting is forgotten already,” he promised. “It is only – I have felt so empty these last months, and I yearn to see Gimli again even as I” – He ducked his head, flushed, but she was listening expectantly, and to her if to no other he would unburden his heart. The others were far enough back that if he spoke softly they would not hear. “Even as I fear it.”

“Ah. I think I begin to understand.”

“I know it is foolish – you need not remind me” –

“I tell you again,” she insisted, “you need not apologize for your heart. But I will also tell you that I spoke to Gimli in Lasgalen, Legolas, and as your friend I trust him with your heart as I had never imagined I would trust another – particularly not a dwarf.”

“But that was then, and what if he” –
She interrupted him again, perhaps understanding that even he knew not with certainty what he would have said. “I do not trivialize your fears, Legolas,” she said gently, “but I tell you they will not come to pass. He will find as much joy in your reunion as will you, I promise, and all this will soon be forgotten.”

“I hope you are right,” he could only murmur, pushing the fear down again, forcing himself to be reassured.

Aragorn did not seem surprised when they arrived, late in the evening as it was – though given his general nature, Legolas would not have been surprised to learn that Aragorn had had everything prepared days in advance, just to be sure. He was that kind of person.

“The palace is full these days,” he said apologetically, once they had all greeted him and Arwen. All knew, of course, who the Evenstar was, but aside from Legolas only Celair, by far the oldest of the company, had ever met her. “We are still giving quarters to the dwarves of Erebor who have also come to aid in the restoration of our city.” Legolas’s heart and breath seemed to meet in his throat, interfering with one another for a moment; he forced himself to swallow down the strange gulping noise that wanted to emerge.

Aragorn did not seem to notice. “My hope is that once the organization of the repairs has been completed, I may provide lodging for everyone closer to where they will be working, but for now I will have to ask if you are willing to share rooms.”

“With one another, of course,” said Arwen quickly, placing a hand on Aragorn’s arm. “We do not ask you to share quarters with dwarves you have never met.”

A wave of titters swept through Legolas’s companions, and Aragorn’s lips curved into a too-familiar smirk. Legolas wished to turn and glare, but he could not afford to let personal thoughts cloud his mind: not now, not when he spoke for so many, not when he represented his people. Not even if Gimli waited for him, somewhere within these very walls – no! He cleared his throat. “We are able to adapt to whatever you may provide to us, and we are grateful for your hospitality, your majesty.”

“Ah, none of this!” Aragorn arose and descended to Legolas’s level, Arwen at his side. “It is I who am grateful to all of you for your aid in the restoration of a long-besieged kingdom. And I hope that soon enough we will be able to establish a better arrangement for the long term – but for now I thank you for your willingness to adjust.” He clasped Legolas’s arm. “And it is good to have thee once more in my home, my friend.”

“It is good to be here once more,” Legolas mumbled, his cheeks warming. It was always an awkward transition from official to informal interactions; it left him off-balance, as though attempting to find perch in a sapling. Still, Aragorn and Arwen were smiling at him, and he managed a smile back. “I have missed you.”

Aragorn’s eyes turned mischievous again. “I would wager I am not the only person here you have missed,” he said. “If you would, I will show you all to the quarters we have arranged for you – and Legolas, if you wish to visit another friend, the leader of the Erebor dwarves has been given his own room.”

Legolas flushed deeper, attempts at composure shaking free like leaves in an autumn gale. But to his surprise, it was no longer fear he felt, but excitement. Gimli was here! Gimli was here, so close to him that he could practically feel him, and did it matter what he felt when he knew that their reunion was so near at hand?
And while he was off-balance, bracing himself against both the wave of breathless anticipation and the titters running through his company of elves, Arwen gave him a gentle smile.

“And, Legolas,” she said, “as one newlywed to another – congratulations.”
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Legolas and Gimli have a proper reunion. Eventually.

Chapter Notes

I was serious about needing prompts/inspiration for this one. I didn't start posting until I had at least a few scenes written, but I only have a few more. My thought is to maybe lay out the headcanon-y stuff I'm thinking of, and see if anyone has ideas based on that - or just wait for a prompt somewhere else that strikes my fancy. So again, if you have anything you'd like to see happen, please feel free to comment it.

But for now, enjoy the story! I hope the reunion is worth it!

Gimli was tired.

Not the beaten-down, exhausted-drained kind of tired he had been throughout the war, a tiredness born of the constant tug of despair at all of his limbs. This was the very best kind of exhaustion: born of hope-fueled hard work building, shaping, planning a city, a future.

Gimli had always been a builder – of kingdoms and stone alike – but this was the largest project he had ever taken on, the largest crew of which he had ever been given charge. Dwarves were wonderful to work with, but they were not relaxing: every proposal needed to be discussed, sample-tested, argued from every angle. Tested in fire, to make sure it came out stronger than ever.

And so, whether the joys were those of inspection – wandering, arguing, drawing up plans – or of building – swinging hammers, feeling solid stone under each strike and smelling the dust that rose up, watching something take shape beneath his hands – each night, he had only enough strength to make it through an evening meal before retiring to the room he had been given and falling near immediately into sleep.

He slept more heavily here in Minas Tirith than he had done through the whole of the quest, and even his nights in his own home. Perhaps it was the feeling of safety that kept him so calm here – exhausted as he had been during the war, he had never been able to sleep peacefully without fear of enemies; and then at his home he had not slept so soundly, because his nights had felt so empty, without – but no, he would not dwell on that, not now.

He still slept alertly enough that soft noises roused him, but Aragorn’s palace was not quiet, anyway: filled with the bustle of servants or guards; stone that whispered of all the comings and goings. It was too much to listen to, and he could not give his attention to all of it. And he was too tired, anyway, to pay it much mind.

On this night, though, the exhaustion was stronger than usual. A fortnight had passed since his arrival in Minas Tirith, and the dwarves were beginning to move from inspection to making true
plans. This was something different from simple fixes: reinforcements to walls that any sensible being could see were necessary; tiny aesthetic touches to existing structures. No, now they were discussing the outer walls, and the gates, and the palace gardens, and and and – and such work was much more exhausting. It was difficult to balance the aesthetic senses of so many different dwarves, all of whom had their own ideas.

Particularly when some of those ideas were proposed by those who refused to bow their dwarvish sensibilities to the requirements of a city of men, heedless of Gimli’s tireless explanations that that was how diplomacy worked – making compromises to the values and ideals of others, when your own could stand to be compromised – and that anyway in a land of men there were certain things they had to give way to – but no matter how often he explained it they would refuse to listen –

Which all was to say that Skafi, for all that he was older and more experienced than Gimli, was proving more of a hindrance than the help Gimli had hoped he would be, and after hours of wrangling with him over the smallest things, Gimli could hardly keep his head up at dinner. He even forewent Aragorn’s offer of a nightcap after the meal, in favor of slumping to his quarters and taking only the time to change into night clothing before heaving himself onto his too-tall bed and falling asleep practically as soon as his head landed on the pillow.

And so it was that even when the doors to his quarters creaked open, he did not pay it the mind he should have. He would shame himself for it later, but at the time, roused only slightly from a peaceful sleep, all he did was grumble his dissatisfaction and sink deeper into the pillow.

There was a soft laugh, and the light from the hall disappeared as the door shut. Then footsteps, which he vaguely noticed in his half-asleep state – and he managed to open his eyes to see a tall dark figure cross the room to slip into bed with him.

It did not surprise him as it should, perhaps; still partly asleep, it seemed only natural that he should be here. “Legolas?” he murmured, groggy even as his newly-acquired bed-partner wrapped long arms around him and pulled him close.

“Go back to sleep, love,” whispered Legolas, a laugh trapped in his voice. “We will speak more in the morning.”

And Gimli was already so far down that all he could do was nuzzle his head into Legolas’s chest before sleep claimed him fully once more.

Gimli woke in the morning slowly, then all at once. Light filtered in through the window and through his eyelids, and he came slowly to consciousness, unwilling to let go of the pleasant dream he had had. He had dreamed that Legolas had come into his room late at night –

His eyes snapped open. Was it his imagination, or was the bed warmer than usual?

He sat bolt upright – and his eyes landed on the figure perched at the end of his bed.

Legolas sat cross-legged near Gimli’s feet, dressed only in an undershirt and breeches. His hands were clasped under his chin, his hair braided still in the marriage style Gimli had taught him, his eyes dark and sparkling: more beautiful than any dream, after so many months apart.

“Good morning,” he said with a small, hopeful smile.

“You are here,” said Gimli stupidly. He almost had the urge to pinch himself.

Legolas nodded. “I wondered if I should wake you,” he said, “but I did not wish to disturb –
Aragorn tells me you have been working very hard; I thought you could use your sleep?” His hands unclasped and then clasped again, just once.

Any doubt Gimli had had was gone; this was Legolas, and all clever words vanished straight from his head. All he could do was reach out and grasp Legolas’s wrists. “Come here,” he growled, and tugged.

With a choked laugh, Legolas tumbled forward into his embrace, overbalancing them both and tackling Gimli back down onto his pillows. Gimli tightened his arms around Legolas and buried his face in his hair, inhaling the familiar scent of him, tangling their legs in the sheets, and they held each other for long moments.

Legolas’s back rose and fell under his palms, quick and jerky, and after a moment Gimli realized that he was still laughing. “What?” he asked, making no move to extract himself from the embrace.

“I feared it would be different,” Legolas breathed against the top of Gimli’s ear, raising goosebumps on his neck. His laughter sounded more like disbelief than true mirth. “That the ease between us would not be the same – at times, I even feared I had dreamed it all up. But you – you are just the same, and better than any dream.”

It was so close to what Gimli had thought just moments before that he laughed himself before pulling back from Legolas’s hold just enough to kiss him.

It was a strange combination of feelings: his body caught fire as soon as their lips touched, and he wanted to rip the clothes off of both of them, press Legolas down into the bed, and – but at the same time, he did not want to remove his arms from Legolas for a single moment; wanted the peace of lying here, feeling their hearts beat in synchronization.

They kept kissing instead: long, warm, languid. Legolas’s hands sank into Gimli’s hair and kneaded almost like a cat, and Gimli would have laughed, if he were not so focused on absorbing the exact feel, smell, and taste of Legolas – of his husband.

“You are real,” Legolas whispered against his mouth, even as Gimli nipped at his lips to silence him. He laughed again, quietly, the laughter flowing like water into Gimli’s own mouth, and it quenched him better than any drink. “Real, and warm, and solid, and oh!” – The last noise sounded almost like a cross between a laugh and a sob, but very quiet – “Gimli” – He fought to keep speaking even as Gimli sought to trip him up – “I missed you so.” Then he seemed to give up on words, diving in for another kiss.

“And I you,” Gimli managed when they parted once more. “Letters are not the same.” Not the same as the living warmth of Legolas in his arms, the surprising weight and strength bearing down on him, the constant motion in the long body against his own. And letters from Legolas were never true to him, either: the crafted words were too still, not faithful to Legolas’s stumbling tongue, as restless as his body.

Legolas shifted again, and Gimli realized that he was moving with purpose: he had settled one knee on either side of Gimli’s hips, pressing his legs to the bed, and now he sat up, disentangling himself from Gimli’s hands and mouth. Gimli would forever deny the whimper of protest that left him when Legolas backed up, but then he sat back on Gimli’s thighs and his hands fluttered around the hem of Gimli’s nightshirt.

“Not the same,” he agreed, tugging the nightshirt up bit by tantalizing bit, his eyes devouring every inch of skin that was revealed until Gimli could swear he felt real heat beneath his gaze. “But now you are here, laid out before me, and I would have a proper reunion.”
It was hard to think, with those words hanging in the air, Legolas’s fingers teasing at his chest, his weight rocking slightly back and forth on Gimli’s hips, but Gimli’s eyes caught on the rays of sunlight streaming in through the window, and he remembered suddenly. “My team – my companions – Legolas – they will be waiting on me; we have work to do; things to attend to” –

“Must you, now?” asked Legolas. He stilled, and Gimli stifled a groan at the sudden loss. “Can you not be a bit late, just this morning?”

Gimli looked back into Legolas’s eyes, torn for just a moment. Legolas would stop, he realized. With previous bed-partners, this would have been a game of wills, and one he would have already lost. But for all Legolas’s requests, for all his own submissive position, if he pushed even just a bit harder, Legolas would give in and let him go.

He felt the fingers twist into the fabric of his shirt in a much different fashion than before, and he knew this was not a game he could play – not fully, not now.

“Just this morning,” he agreed, settling his hands firmly on Legolas’s hips and rocking him forward once more. “Do with me as you will, Master Elf.”

And Legolas smiled again, and did just that.
Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

Aragorn, Arwen, Legolas, and Gimli spend an evening together.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Mealtimes in Aragorn’s palace had become something of an event.

Where before there had typically been one table for himself, Arwen, Faramir, Eowyn, and the rest of his close council, with the staff eating elsewhere, now the hall was full. Instead of one long table, they had arranged for several smaller tables, each of which fit some dozen people, which were filled now with guests.

He had planned for now to house both elves and dwarves with him, until they could establish their own arrangements. In the contract with the dwarves was that he would house and feed them while they completed the planning and organization of their work, after which point he would arrange alternative lodging for them and they would be responsible for their own expenses (which had been anticipated in the final price they would charge). The elves were not charging him for their work – this was only the first group, who would stay for only a few months before retiring to Ithilien. The arrangement had been that his granting them that land would suffice as payment.

All this was to say that for now, the palace was particularly full.

On the first evening after the elves’ arrival, Aragorn invited both Gimli and Legolas to his chambers for a nightcap after dinner. It was mostly, of course, because he had missed them both – the two of them had become as close to him as brothers during that difficult quest – but he could not deny that he had ulterior motives, and who could blame him? It was not his fault that they were both so much fun to tease, and after months of ignored suggestion and impotent frustration, he deserved a bit of satisfaction.

He watched them as best he could during dinner, but it was difficult to observe any changes in the way they behaved around one another. In part it was because each sat with his respective people – Legolas with the table of elves; Gimli at the head of one of the dwarves’ tables – and in part it was because, Aragorn decided with a sigh, they had been acting like a wedded couple throughout the course of their quest anyway.

He had to hang back to discuss a matter with Faramir, so he had a servant show Legolas and Gimli to his chambers, such that they were waiting for him when he finally made his way there as well. And when he opened the door, he realized that he had been wrong – things had changed indeed.

His friends had arranged themselves on a small sofa: Gimli sitting upright while Legolas lounged across the cushions with his feet dangling over the side. His head lay in Gimli’s lap, Gimli’s fingers sifting through his hair in seeming absentmindedness.

Aragorn raised his eyebrows.
It seemed, though, that their embarrassment had fallen away along with their pretense. Instead of glaring or blushing, Gimli simply raised his right back. “Yes?” he asked.

Aragorn did not reply. Instead, he only smiled – smiled uncontrollably, happier suddenly for his friends even than he had imagined he would be. “It is nothing,” he said. “Congratulations, to both of you.”

Legolas smiled as well, turning his head slightly in Gimli’s lap to meet Aragorn’s eyes. “Thank you,” he said. “We thought you might be pleased.”

And he was. It was a marvel to see them so: all that seemed to have gone unspoken between them during the quest finally said; Legolas lying there, more relaxed under Gimli’s hands than Aragorn had ever seen him –

But that last sight lasted only moments. Arwen had been behind Aragorn, and she entered now, with a smile for both of them. “Greetings to both of you,” she said, “Legolas, Gimli – it is good to see you together once more.”

“Good evening, Arwen,” said Gimli. He and Arwen had grown friendly over the time he had been here, so he made no move but to smile up at her. Legolas, though, sat straight up, shaking his hair free of Gimli’s hands, making to stand and bow – and Aragorn had forgotten that he would be like this; he knew not how he had managed it, but he had forgotten – and he opened his mouth to calm him, to bid him sit back down.

But Gimli caught his shoulders and held him to the sofa before he could rise fully, before Aragorn could say anything. “Legolas,” he said softly into Legolas’s ear, “remember, you are among friends. You need not fret on behalf of anyone here.”

Legolas blinked for a moment, and then looked at Arwen as though for confirmation. She provided, of course. “Gimli speaks true,” she said. “I believe I have already told you once that we need no formalities between us.”

“Yes,” Legolas breathed, looking bashful, “yes, I remember now, my lady – Arwen” –

He looked as though he would have stammered on, but she interrupted him in what seemed an act of mercy. “Do not let my presence interfere with your comfort,” she said, smiling mischievously. And Gimli took the hint and pressed on Legolas’s shoulders to guide him gently back down into his lap.

Legolas looked stiff still, but went without resistance, and Aragorn could not help admiring the effect Gimli had on him. He had noticed it long ago, of course, but there was a different satisfaction now, in seeing them as they were: Gimli gazing down with such unrestrained fondness; Legolas visibly relaxing as Gimli’s hands threaded into his hair once more.

“I am pleased to see you both here once more,” said Arwen, smiling, “and pleased to hear elvish voices in this city. I have never been so long without my own kind, and it is a comfort to me that your people have come, Legolas.”

“It is true,” Gimli stage-whispered. “Oft have I heard her complaints about the insufficiency of my dwarves to configure the city exactly as she wishes it. Alas! it seems the feud between our peoples yet runs deep!” He gave a long, exaggerated sigh.

Aragorn chuckled, even as Arwen made a mock-scandalized noise and threw a small pillow at Gimli. But Legolas snatched it out of the air first and hugged it to his chest. “First you insult my husband, and then you assault him?” He shook his head, dislodging Gimli’s hands from his hair.
“This city of men is a bad influence on you, I think.”

“And now that we have all been sufficiently insulted,” said Aragorn loudly – Legolas’s face morphed into an expression of horror for half a second before melting back into amusement – “I wish to point out that this is the first time I have heard the word ‘husband’ from either of you.”

This time, both of them did blush – it was harder to make out on Legolas’s complexion, but also much more obvious in his face. But it was he who spoke once more. “There seems no sense in denying it to one who has known for longer than we.”

“Much though we might have wished it otherwise, at times.” Gimli frowned at Aragorn, weaving his fingers back into Legolas’s hair. “Ah, but you were an annoyance, my friend – a veritable stone in the sole!”

“A thorn in the thigh,” interjected Legolas, and when they all looked at him, he raised his hands defensively, balancing the pillow on his chest. “What? I make no jest of brambles – have you ever run through a thorn-bush?”

Aragorn would have truly guessed that he was joking, but his face was impossible to read, and it seemed no one else had gleaned any better hints. “Leaving that aside for a moment,” Gimli said at last. “Where was I? Ah, yes – I thought if you gave me one more meaningful look, Gondor should never see its rightful king!”

“Well, you were in turn a trial on my patience, which had already been so sorely tested.” Aragorn waved around at the room in a sweeping gesture meant to encapsulate all that he had finally gained – his kingdom, his destiny – and he looked at Arwen, who was smiling secretly back at him – his wife –

“But how that patience has been rewarded,” said Legolas, all seriousness now. “Our letters were scarce enough, and anyway I knew not how to ask you – but how do you fare, my friend? I worried for you at times, for I could not imagine that your transition into ruling would be easy as new growth, for all you are a rightful branch of that tree.”

“You worry too much,” said Gimli fondly, but he looked up at Aragorn as well, the same question in his eyes.

Aragorn shrugged. “It is still too soon to say, I think,” he said. “For the people alive today, threat and war is all they have known. At times now they are too dazzled or disarmed by this time of healing and peace to determine how they should feel about it, and even after a year it is still so new, for all that is a long time to men. The true test of leadership is yet to come, I think.”

“Soon, most likely,” said Gimli, nodding. “Now that you have begun to move from immediate recovery and repair to long-term healing – and choosing the direction in which your city will move in the future. Then you will find that there are traditions to uphold, and you will have to make your decision as to which ones to keep and which to change.”

“But some decisions have been made already,” said Legolas, brow furrowing. “How do your people feel about the presence of – of dwarves and – and elves in your city?” His eyes flickered over to Arwen for just a moment, and it was obvious what he was truly asking – and that the question was not directed at Aragorn, not anymore. He fell quiet and let her answer.

“There have been challenges, certainly,” she said, “but I think the people know yet not how to feel about it. I prefer to believe, anyway, that they are reserving judgment on our decisions – and on my presence especially.” She turned to smile at Aragorn, and he returned it. This was not a new topic
of conversation for them; they had been aware of the potential consequences of their union since long before. And for all that it was different than they had expected – for all that that would always be the case – he did not worry for them, or for her, not now.

But their understanding was between them only, and did not extend to their friends. “And how do you fare?” Legolas asked her, still with that little crease in his brow. “With the doubt, with the – reserved judgment?”

“I am well,” she assured him with a kind smile. “But I would talk to you at greater length later, for we have much to discuss, and I think now is not the time to do so.”

“Of course,” said Legolas, and his hands clenched in the pillow on his chest, his body jerking as though to rise, but he was stayed by Gimli’s fingers in his hair.

“Stay still,” Gimli scolded him, though his voice was gentle. “You are disrupting my work.”

Aragorn looked again and laughed. While they talked, Gimli’s hands had been busy weaving tiny braids into Legolas’s hair, each – if Aragorn was making them out correctly – with a slightly different pattern.

“The stonework of my city is not enough for you?” he asked, only half joking. “You have found a new material for crafting?”

Gimli laughed, good-natured. “It is still a marvel to me what can be done with such fine hair,” he said, his fingers still flying about their work. “And the material is so infinite that I think I shall never be satisfied with a final creation.”

“It is not only the material, but the craftsman that makes the work,” added Legolas, and the uncertainty of earlier seemed to have disappeared into a sly grin. “And none know better than I the skill of your fingers.”

Aragorn choked on nothing. He had not expected such a jest from Legolas – and not in such a context, either. Coughing helplessly, he saw that across from him Gimli’s fingers had stilled in Legolas’s hair and his face frozen in an expression of half-horror. But the greatest reaction came from his queen, who tipped her head back and roared.

Arwen had the opposite of a dainty laugh. It was one of his favorite things about her – something he had noticed early on in their acquaintance: that during dinners or official functions, her laugh was the tinkling bell-sound so often expected of elves, and of elf women in particular. But when something amusing truly struck her, when she truly laughed, it was a deep, loud guffaw, rumbling up from her belly in fits and starts and the occasional hiccupping snort.

It was so infectious that the others could not help but join in. Even Aragorn, once he had recovered from his fit of minor asphyxiation.

“Had I known,” he gasped, “had I known what nature of beast stood to be unleashed from this,” he waved a hand to indicate Legolas and Gimli, who were laughing as well – as much at him as anything else, he thought – “I would not have been so eager for you to admit your true feelings to one another.”

“I think you would,” said Legolas, when they had all calmed a bit more. He smiled still, but now it was a smile all fondness, all warmth. “For you are a great spirit in friendship as well as in majesty, and we have always known you desired our happiness, before even we could admit it to ourselves.”

Aragorn blinked, unsure if the sudden lump in his throat was left over from the shock of before, or
born of the emotion that this company – three of the dearest people in the world to him – aroused in him. Arwen’s hand came to rest on his, and Gimli and Legolas were both smiling at him, and he could do nothing but smile back.

“That I have,” he admitted softly. “And I find joy in your felicity and in your company.”

“And we in yours,” said Gimli. “Truly, it is good to be together again.”

And as the conversation wound on well into the night, with more laughter and solemnity and subjects that raised smiles and tears alike, the warmth in Aragorn’s stomach never quite faded away.

Chapter End Notes

I may have gotten a little bit too excited about different little idioms elves and dwarves might have.
Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

Legolas steps out of his comfort zone. Gimli teases him.

On the second full day of their work in Minas Tirith, and the second dinner in Aragorn’s palace, Legolas left his people to their own table and went to sit with the dwarves.

More than a few concerned glances were sent his way, which he did his best to ignore. These elves hardly needed his presence, after all – he was leader in name alone, which suited him best anyway – and it was not as though this would be anything near so challenging a test as his journey to Erebor, many months past. They were in a city of men, neutral ground, and with Gimli at his side, Legolas would not be cowed.

So he told himself.

Eleniel followed him anyway, and he turned to give her a look. “I need no assistance, Eleniel,” he said quietly.

“Oh, really?” She gave him an arch look. “I will return to our group in good time, but first I would see my friend Gimli, whom I have not yet had occasion to greet properly – and to whom I think I owe gratitude for the renewed life in your eyes.”

“Eleniel!” he protested, but she squeezed his arm and said nothing else. And he could not deny that the short walk to the first low table was easier with her by his side.

Gimli was not looking in their direction, so Legolas tapped him on the shoulder and laughed when he startled. But Gimli’s look of affront quickly melted into a fond smile. “Legolas!” he said, rising to take his arm. “I wished you would come to join me, but I did not dare expect you. And” – his eyes swung to the side – “can it be my friend Eleniel? It is a joy to see you here and so hale!”

Eleniel smiled broadly; again Legolas marveled at Gimli’s effortless charm. “I would hardly allow Legolas out of my sight for too long, Master Gimli, however capable I know your hands to be. He is too adept at finding trouble.”

Legolas pretended offense, but in truth he was relieved at her response. The last months had not been easy on him or on Eleniel; both battling wounds – her to body; him to spirit – that would never fully heal, and they had agreed to venture into this new beginning together, as anything else, though they both knew their time together could only be temporary. Adjusting to her new limitations had not been easy for Eleniel, but it was true that her condition was much improved, and for all she would never regain the full use of her right arm or eye, Legolas was glad to see her assured of the extent of that improvement.

Gimli nodded solemnly. “Well, now you have safely delivered him to me” – Legolas struck him lightly on the shoulder – “I assure you I shall keep the closest watch on him.” And he wrapped his arm into Legolas’s and jerked him tight into his side; Legolas went willingly, leaning into him.

Eleniel nodded. “Then I return to my companions” – her eyes flickered over the table of dwarves;
though no one seemed overtly hostile, they were clearly suspicious, and two elves would likely be too much at this early juncture – “until such time as we may talk properly. But it is a pleasure to see you once more.”

“And you.” Gimli inclined his head. “I look forward to future meetings.”

“Thank you,” Legolas added softly, and Eleniel smiled at him before turning on her heel and disappearing back to the table of elves.

But he did not have time to watch her retreat, for Gimli tugged him around and pressed him onto the bench beside him – and silence fell immediately. Legolas could feel all their eyes on him even before he looked up to see it, and when he did look, he wished he had not. Even as warmth flooded his face, he became suddenly aware of his body, aware of how physically he stood out. He was too tall, half a head at least taller than anyone else even sitting, and his knees ran into the underside of the table, and this had been a mistake.

Gimli’s voice cut through the rushing in his ears, but only to make everything worse. “I see you have not found yourself anything to eat.”

He had not. It was a foolish oversight, and one he had somehow not realized – but to stand now, now that everyone was seated, and cross the room to retrieve food, and then return to the dwarves’ table, knowing their eyes would be on him the whole while, knowing the murmurs that would break out as soon as he rose. Moving again was not an option. “No,” he forced himself to say, “no, I – am not hungry, truly.”

“Nonsense,” said Gimli. His right hand snaked around Legolas’s waist, and with his left he pushed his plate over until it lay between them. “I was just wondering what I would do with all the extra food on my plate, for surely this is too much for me alone.”

Legolas looked over at the plates of Gimli’s companions and found that he had taken no more than any of them. But the arm around him squeezed again, the grip harder and firmer than anything Legolas had felt in months, and he leaned into Gimli once more and smiled. “Of course,” he said, resolving to eat as little as Gimli would let him. “What a happy coincidence.”

Looking out over the table, he tried to ignore the gazes of the dwarves and rather frantically rifled through the faces he had met, trying to remember if he knew any of them. He did not think he saw Gimli’s friends Ain and Nali at the table; they and his parents and a cousin or two were the only dwarves he had met during his time at Erebor – he thought – Again, Gimli saved him. “Legolas, I would like you to meet my team of builders,” he said, sweeping a hand out. “There are five dozen of us here now, though more are to come later, if all goes well.”

“If you straighten everything out with Aglarond?” Legolas said, trying to remember what Gimli had said in his last letter. “Do you intend to meet with Éomer while you are here?”

“I am,” said Gimli. “Things go well, and I think I have reason to hope. But for now, we must focus ourselves on the task at hand. I would introduce you to those who are working closely with me now on the design of the city.” He gestured first at the dwarf sitting on his other side: young-looking, with skin darker than Legolas’s own and black hair and beard braided into hundreds of tiny braids. “Here is Alma, daughter of Aldis, my second. She is young” – so Legolas had been right, and he found that he was relieved at that – “and this is her first real project, but she is one of the most promising architects in the mountain, and she keeps me constantly on my toes.”
Legolas gave the dwarf a nod, one which he hoped was the correct mixture of friendly and respectful, and she returned it. He tried to memorize her face at the same time. *Alma, Alma, Alma,* he repeated to himself.

Gimli gestured across the table. “And here is Skafi son of Skofti, one of my chief advisors, and the most experienced architect who was willing to join me in this mission.” The other dwarf looked older, if Legolas was any good judge: the lines in his face deeper and hair gray. His nod was stiff and his face still unfriendly, and Gimli’s right hand rubbed Legolas’s back as he moved it back around to his front. “Alma, Skafi, this is Legolas, son of Thranduil of Lasgalen and my husband.”

“I had gathered as much, my Lord,” said Alma.

Gimli shook a finger at her. “None of that impertinence, you,” he said. “Respect your betters.” But his eyes twinkled, and Legolas could not help smiling.

But that smile faded immediately as he caught Skafi’s eye. He had thought, during his first experience at the Lonely Mountain, that dwarves’ faces were difficult to read – but the look of hostility that greeted him in Skafi’s eyes was impossible to mistake, so intense that it wrenched his breath from his throat for a moment.

But then it was gone in an instant, replaced only by one of the neutral expressions that could be disapproval, wariness, reserve, or any number of other emotions that Legolas could not identify with any certainty. Gone so fast that he wondered if he had imagined it – but his heart still beat hard in a reminder, and it took long enough to slow down that he did not doubt himself, not in this, at least.

He groped under the table for Gimli’s knee, and closed his fingers around it: there was solidity again, to anchor him to the ground. Gimli looked a question at him, but Legolas only shook his head: they would speak of it later. For now, he held on under the table, and Gimli did not question further. He gestured around the table, giving names and identities and pronouns, but for all Legolas tried to remember them, he was shaken enough that he knew he would forget immediately.

He would try, he swore, he would try – only now –

Gimli could tell, he knew, that something had gone wrong, but there was no way for Legolas to tell him what it was, not now. He would ask later, perhaps, probing questions about Gimli’s companions and the project. But for now his tongue was motionless, rooted newly to the insides of his teeth.

But Gimli was good – *Gimli was so good* – and he moved to fill Legolas’s silence as easily as though there were nothing strange about it. “Well,” he said, taking up his silverware, “I am famished after a long day of hard work, as I am sure we all are. Thanks to the generosity of our hosts!” He seemed to direct that phrase at no one in particular, but turned to his plate and set to, pressing his knee against Legolas’s as he did so.

The other dwarves followed his example, and silence fell for a moment; Legolas sipped from Gimli’s goblet of wine to calm himself and give himself something to do. After many moments, one of the dwarves to Alma’s left – whose name Legolas had already forgotten – looked up from his plate with a satisfied sigh. “Much can be said about dwelling in a city of men,” he said, “but one cannot fault their hospitality.”

“Much indeed,” said Gimli before anyone else could speak, “particularly in this city. Much of the courage and hardiness of those who live here, to have stood for so long in such close proximity to Sauron, and to have stood against him in the darkest of days.” There was a warning in his eyes and his voice, but Legolas saw that his gaze was not directed at the most recent speaker but across the
table at Skafi – who made a noise in his throat, one soft enough that Legolas was sure Gimli could not hear it, but unmistakably derisive.

Frozen, wondering if he should speak, Legolas was freed from the decision – perhaps mercifully, perhaps not – by Alma, who looked up at him then. “Lord Legolas,” she said, “is it then true that you were here as well as Lord Gimli, fighting the armies of Mordor?”

It was better, perhaps, to be asked questions directly – for that at least he knew he could answer. “I was,” he said, “and sat in this very hall in the weeks before and after, and at the wedding of the King and Queen.”

“My Lord tells us you are a great hero, and battled mighty foes at his side.” She gave him a mischievous smile. “My Lord speaks of you a great deal, in fact.”

“Your Lord is too kind,” Legolas managed, “and gives me too much credit. I was but a single warrior among many, hardly greater than any other.”

“Her Lord gives you as much credit as you deserve,” corrected Gimli. “For all that she could stand to keep a closer guard on that tongue of hers.” Alma smiled still, unrepentant, even as Gimli turned a look on Legolas so fond that he flushed and looked away. “And I’ll not stand for this refusal to take what has been offered you, either.” He pushed the plate closer to Legolas. “Eat, my friend. I mean it.”

Now that attention had been drawn to it, he could hardly refuse – which had likely been Gimli’s intention. Legolas cast his eyes down at the table so he would not have to meet anyone else’s gaze and plucked the smallest dumpling from Gimli’s stew, bringing it to his mouth in a quick jerky motion and praying it would be enough.

Gazes and conversation turned away from him, at least for the moment, but Gimli’s scorching eyes did not leave him. “I am hardly satisfied,” he said quietly, as though he had heard the question Legolas had not asked. “That is no way to appreciate the meal that Aragorn’s kitchens have so kindly prepared for us.” And without asking he began to prepare a spoonful of the stew, with vegetables, dumpling, and sauce, and Legolas had a sinking feeling that he knew exactly where this was going.

“You will pay for this when you come to eat with my people,” he said in a voice even quieter than Gimli’s.

Gimli gave him a positively wicked smile. “Oh, I count on it.” And he lifted the spoon. “Open up.”

His face burning up from the inside amidst the laughter of Gimli’s people, Legolas closed his eyes, wished to disappear, and opened his mouth.

He said little for the rest of the meal, for all Gimli’s gentle teasing and the dwarves’ occasional questions. Some, like Alma, seemed genuinely curious and welcoming; others indifferent, but there were still many from whom Legolas detected feelings of wariness or even outright hostility, and he could not deny that it was a relief to leave the table at the end of the meal. And even more of a relief to close the door behind them in their own quarters.

“Thank you,” Gimli said when they were alone again and Legolas had slumped onto the bed with a sigh. “It means much to me that you would reach out to my folk as you did this evening. And” – He smiled slyly – “I am sorry for embarrassing you.”

“You are not.” He could laugh at it now that he was no longer there, feeling their eyes on him, and
of course he knew Gimli had had no malicious intent. He reached out for Gimli’s hand and tugged him over to the bed.

“No.” Gimli laughed as well and let himself be pulled up next to Legolas, sprawling beside him with an arm over his stomach. “I am not. But I appreciate your tolerance. It will help, I think, in the long run.”

“How do your people feel about elves and men?” Legolas asked tentatively. “There was certainly dissent among my people when I decided to come here, and likely not everyone who comes to Ithilien will be so pleased, but – those with me now are among the most open-minded of my folk. They would have to be” – he laughed wryly – “they have come to work in a city of men and have agreed to follow me.”

“I will assume that you are not insulting yourself, and so I will not scold you,” said Gimli, fumbling his hand up to squeeze Legolas’s shoulder. “But you are right to ask. Most of those with me are either enthusiastic or indifferent – they chose to leave the Mountain, after all – but you are right that there are some who are here only because we will be paid, and who do not approve of the mingling between the races that will occur here.”

“Am I right in thinking that Alma is of the enthusiastic variety?” said Legolas. “And” – he hesitated to ask, but it would come up anyway – “and Skafi is more . . . hostile, to the interactions between the races?”

Gimli groaned, flipping and turning until his head was buried in Legolas’s middle instead. “Do not speak to me of Skafi,” he complained. “He is one of the most backwards dwarves in my company, closed-minded and fixed in the past – and unfortunately, he is one of the most powerful as well. He wished to come along – and I was forced to bring him – because he and many others did not approve of my choice of Alma as my second.”

It was, in a way, a relief to realize that he had not misunderstood Skafi’s reactions to him at dinner. But he had no wish to pull Gimli into a foul mood, and so he changed the subject. “Alma seems lovely,” he ventured.

“Ah, she is!” His attempt had worked; Gimli cheered up instantly, rolling off of Legolas to sit up and gesture emphatically. “We had never worked together before the Quest, but when I returned, I knew I would be looking for open-minded and inventive dwarves to bring with me both here and to the Glittering Caves. She is young and eager to learn new things, and she is brilliant, Legolas! Her promise as an architect is unmatched, and already our work has been rewarding.”

“You will have to tell me more of what that work entails, if that is not divulging trade secrets,” Legolas replied. He had never understood what one might see in stonework before, but the excitement in Gimli’s face told him that there was much to learn. “But before, I wished only to ask.”

Gimli’s face fell. “No, they are not here,” he said. “They are both well-established in Erebor, and neither is a stoneworker. They would have found little here to interest them. My hope is that they will agree to come with me to the Glittering Caves when I have made them fit for living, but I know not if they will wish to leave the Mountain.”

“I am sorry,” Legolas said. He remembered the deep relief he had felt when Eleniel had agreed to accompany him here, to move into this new life by his side, and his heart hurt for Gimli when he imagined how he would have felt had she refused. He sat up as well and wrapped an arm around Gimli’s shoulders.
Gimli leaned against him and took a breath, long and slow. He did not speak of the pain, but Legolas could feel it in the silence that hung around them. He made himself as solid as possible, that Gimli might use him for support, and matched his breathing to Gimli’s, holding space between them for whatever Gimli might wish to feel, or to say.

After a long moment, he felt Gimli breathe out, felt tension melt from his shoulders. “It is well,” he said at last. “It is strange to let go of dreams for a future with friends I imagined at my side forever, but I must believe that our friendship is strong enough to withstand a separation.”

“I believe it as well,” Legolas said, remembering how good they had been to him when introduced; how they had invited him with little question into their home; how they had supported so staunchly his place as Gimli’s betrothed and then his husband. He would never forget following Nali to the dais where he had spoken his Khuzdul vows, in his second wedding ceremony – or the meaningful look the dwarf had given him afterwards, in which so much had passed between them without words. “I spoke little to them, but I have no doubt in the friendship and love they have for you.”

Gimli twisted his head to the side and kissed the place where Legolas’s ear met his cheek; he felt the brush of beard against his neck and pleasant shivers ran through his body. “I thank you for your words,” Gimli murmured. “And truly, I am glad for them, that they have found passions in which to ground themselves, have found their love in their work and their home, even as I have pursued mine elsewhere.”

Legolas knew the tone in his voice, and the shivers of pleasure turned into liquid heat instead, dripping down into his stomach. “Have you?” He shifted his own body to the side, bringing the arm behind Gimli’s back up to cup his neck. “Where could you possibly have found such a love that inspires you to follow it from your home? Surely” – he slid his other arm around Gimli’s waist and tugged him forward until their foreheads touched – “such a pursuit must be tiring.”

Gimli smiled at him, his face so close now that Legolas could not decide whether to watch his eyes or his lips. “I have found my love in the work of my dreams, and in an elf of whom I never dared to dream,” he breathed against Legolas’s mouth, “and as I think I have told him, I would follow him anywhere.”

And perhaps he would have said more, but then the space between their lips was gone, and there was no more room for words.
Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

Knowing you are loved sometimes isn’t enough, and being together doesn’t fix every problem - particularly when your people are only just learning to work together. An overheard conversation causes Legolas to doubt.

Chapter Notes

Some people last chapter guessed there might be some trouble ahead from Skafi. Hmm. Subtlety . . . I have it.

In all seriousness, I meant it at the end of Finding a Voice when I said there wasn’t going to be any miracle healing. (Also Legolas is very very easy to hurt. It's not my fault!!) Part of this whole 'verse is my attempt to explore the way that Legolas's anxiety would impact aspects of his relationship with Gimli and with the world in general, and having to deal with people who are already predisposed to be suspicious or hostile can’t help at all. Thus, this chapter is slightly less than happy. (I promise, there will be comfort eventually!)

On an entirely unrelated note, I'm glad that people are liking my OCs - but I'm very concerned that I'm giving you expectations that are too high. My main goal is to have a little cast of background characters that I can use either as inspiration or as characters in other chapters, which will hopefully be forthcoming, but this is also one of the last things I have pre-written, so I am hoping for inspiration in the future.

(My propensity for overlong author's notes has not decreased at all, apparently. I just keep feeling like this story is not turning out quite the way I want it to, so I'm . . . trying to keep your expectations where I feel they deserve to be? I don't know. I'm going to stop now and give you the actual chapter.)

For all Legolas’s attempts, for all his cautious hopes, the first incident between elf and dwarf occurred the very next day. And perhaps Legolas should not have been surprised that it seemed to have nothing to do with their respective races, and everything to do with only him.

He had finished his work early for the day: he and Duvaineth had begun work on the Queen’s garden (which would henceforth be ceded to her). They had spent hours listening first to Arwen and then to the trees and plants that already grew there, trying to determine what would create the best kind of harmony: mingling the stature of a Queen of men with Arwen’s still-elvish sensibilities. Then they had spoken to the dwarf Lis about how best to integrate the growing things with the stone and metal structures that she wished to build. The initial conversations finished, Legolas left the rest in the capable hands of the other two (watching with cautious pleasure as their reserve seemed to melt into cooperation and enthusiasm for their work).

His part in the process finished, and with nothing else to do, he thought he might find Gimli and wait
for him to finish – possibly even bring himself to ask some of the returning dwarves where he was. They might retire early – perhaps they could forgo the meal at Aragorn’s palace and go on a walk reminiscent of those they had taken last summer. Their people hardly needed supervision, after all, and it would be nice to be alone together once more.

Groups of dwarves were beginning to trickle back from their work, but Legolas knew that Gimli would be among those back latest. He wandered back and forth between garden, palace, and courtyard, trying to work up the nerve to ask one of the dwarves where their leader was working today and always failing before he could move forward. And it was when he was leaning against one of the walls in the courtyard, wondering whether he should move forward, when he heard it.

“– as though our Lord has naught better to do.”

At the sound of the voice, coming from the other side of the wall, Legolas froze. The speaker was Skafi, whom Legolas remembered – as though he could have forgotten – from the night before. And he was speaking of Gimli. Legolas pressed himself against the wall, out of sight, turning his head so that their words filtered more easily into his ears. Perhaps this would be – well. He knew not if he should tell Gimli that he was eavesdropping on his kin, but he could hardly move away.

“Believe me, I understand,” responded the second speaker, one Legolas did not think he had ever met. “But who are we to tell him how to use his time? If he wishes to spend it coddling elves, that is his business, not ours.”

Oh.

Legolas’s breath turned into something hard and metal, lodged in his throat; his shoulder seemed to have adhered to the wall more firmly than sap. Did they know he was here, that he was listening? They could not see him; surely they did not hear him? And yet it seemed too great a coincidence that they should be speaking of elves – of him, of course – when he was so nearby.

“But does he wish it?”

They had not said what it was, but it took little effort for Legolas’s mind to fill in the gaps. They spoke of him, that was obvious, and this was not the prejudice between two races, but something more personal, more immediate – something he had always wondered. Something he had long suspected.

Skafi was still speaking, harshness lending volume to his voice. It was almost as though he did not care if he were heard, and Legolas could not help but wonder why that might be – if perhaps it was because he had no reason not to make his opinions known. If all the dwarves in his group shared them. “If the elf is his one love, that is well and good, but Gimli is new to love and unfamiliar with what is expected. He ought to be made aware that a husband is not a child, and it is not his duty to kiss every scraped knee and soothe every fear, night and day, distracting him from his work” –

Legolas’s stomach curled in on itself; images of the night before sprang immediately into his mind. He had never wanted to appear weak, but something about Gimli simply brought his walls down. They must have noticed his unease. As though he could ever have successfully hidden it! And suddenly Gimli’s kindnesses of the night before took on a new meaning as he saw them through the eyes of these others – the meaning he had been afraid they would have. Revelations of weakness, of a partner who could not stand up beside the leader that these dwarves needed so much to respect –

“Undwarvish it may be,” ventured the other, “but it seems as though he wishes it. Gimli, I mean.”

“It seems,” retorted Skafi, “as though it is not fair. Not fair to Gimli, who has come here for serious
work, not for honeymooning, and certainly not for chipping lovingly away at a gem too flawed for use. He has other things to be concerned about, his own future to prepare for, and he does not need to be held back, husband or otherwise.”

Did they know he could hear them? Legolas did not know, but it made no difference to the truth of their words. He felt as though their words were frozen rain, dripping down his entire body and holding him fast to the ground. Could he move? Did he want to?

All that they said was correct, of course, and it seemed to confirm his own wonderings: if he was imposing on these dwarves by daring to enter their lives, by taking their leader from within their midst. And he was not easy to love; he knew that too. Gimli had to expend so much more energy on him than he would have on another partner, to get nothing in return! What did Legolas give, after all? There was nothing, nothing he could do, nothing he could be, that would ever be good enough for Gimli – but it seemed a cruel trick of fate, to give Gimli someone like him, who was so far from even almost good enough.

The other dwarf was speaking once more, but the ringing in Legolas’s ears was loud enough to drown it out. It was all he could do to control his breathing, to keep it shallow and quiet enough not to catch their attention – but he could not stay here any longer. He tiptoed back on unsteady feet, breath held so as not to make any noise at all – and finally, when he gauged he was far enough away, he fled.

He could not speak of it to anyone. Over the next days, he threw himself into his work, drawing back and away from anyone who tried to approach him. The feelings fought viciously in his belly: the shame at the thought of confessing this to anyone else warring with the burning, almost explosive need to speak, to spill all of his insecurities and his fears, to unburden himself and ask for reassurance –

And it was for that very reason that he could not.

He could not hide his disquiet from Gimli, not for long. His husband caught on to his unease moments into their first evening together after the incident. Abandoning his plans for a walk together, Legolas had taken one of his own instead: long and late, missing dinner in the hopes that time away would allow him to calm himself enough to meet Gimli’s eyes without spilling out his heart and taking up even more of his time and energy. But he had never been good at being subtle around those he cared about, and he could read immediately from Gimli’s face that he had gained no more skill.

Gimli was waiting, he was sure, for him to unburden himself, but every time he thought to speak he heard their voices again: not fair; he deserves not to be held back, and he could not but remember that they were right. Gimli deserved better, and if he would not choose better than Legolas, Legolas could at least make this choice less painful to him.

“Legolas,” said Gimli at last, when yet another attempt at stilted conversation had failed into silence. “What troubles you? I know you are ill at ease; will you tell me the burden on your mind, that I may ease it?”

“There is no burden,” Legolas forced himself to say. The truth stuck in his throat, pulled back and forth between the desperate urge to spill out his mouth and the heavy weight in his stomach that tugged it back into silence. He would change his habits, he told himself. He would change them without telling Gimli. He would be cheerful and attentive and supportive; would show interest in Gimli’s life without demanding attention in return. “Truly, I am well. Tell me how your work went today.”
And Gimli looked at him with a depth of skepticism in his eyes that made Legolas cringe at how obvious he was – but he firmed his resolve. He did not need to speak of this – he only needed to be better. And he would be better. He would not take up more of Gimli’s time than he needed, but he would be here for Gimli as Gimli had so often had to be for him.

He knew not what was in his own face, but perhaps Gimli was eased, for he shrugged, and sat back, and spoke.

It was difficult, though. To be with Gimli, so close, when his husband was so able to read Legolas’s troubles in his eyes. It was, in fact, exactly the opposite effect of what he had hoped – he needed to give Gimli space; needed to take himself out of the way, and he could hardly do that if Gimli was constantly giving him worried looks.

He threw himself into his work – taking longer hours, volunteering for the more arduous tasks, so he would be more tired when he returned home. It was, after all, why he was here. Unfortunately, his companions also knew him too well to be fooled.

He caught them all giving him the same looks that Gimli had, as though they could see easily through his constructed disguise, but it was Eleniel who finally spoke to him. He knew not if they had spoken among themselves and chosen her, or if she had come to him on her own. Neither would have surprised him, but if only for the latter reason, she was the best choice.

Not, of course, that he intended to confide in her, either.

She did not dissemble when she approached him. “Legolas,” she said. “I think we both know why I am here.”

He opened his mouth – whether to give some token denial or to acknowledge her, he truly knew not – but she continued. “Deny it not – something troubles you, something of which you are reluctant to speak. Will you not open your heart to me, my friend?”

Perhaps he should, but in truth he knew not how to admit it – and he felt abruptly foolish for the trouble he was causing. And for all that he trusted Eleniel, he could not bring himself to speak.

“I cannot,” he whispered finally. “I am trying to overcome this trouble on my own, Eleniel. Please, allow me this.”

“I will not pressure you to speak to me if you do not wish it,” she said, “but it hurts me to see you suffer so in silence. Will you not speak to someone, Legolas? Surely Gimli?”

“Nay!” he burst out.

Her face changed abruptly. “Is all well with you?” she asked suddenly, urgently. Her good hand reached out and grasped his wrist, fingers digging in with almost sharp strength. “He has not done anything to you? Hurt you?”

“No!” If anything could have gotten him to confess, it was the thought that his reticence might be blamed on Gimli – that his elven companions might think ill of his husband. “No, no, he has done nothing – it is me, all me – Eleniel, believe me, I would not speak of it, but it is not – no,” he finished finally, weakly.

But she seemed to believe him. “That eases my heart,” she said, loosening her hold on his arm but not letting him go entirely. “But if he has not hurt you, then I do not understand your silence. If you do not wish to tell me, and nothing has gone ill between you, why not speak to him of what ails
you? You know that if you wish to, he will listen to you.”

But that, Legolas reflected miserably, was exactly the problem.

He did not say that aloud. In fact, he said very little aloud – merely mumbled some excuse and gave Eleniel a look pleading enough that she took pity on him, and let him go with little more said between them, and only a few meaningful looks.

Let him go home, where he arrived late enough that Gimli was already preparing for bed. He gave Legolas a look that said almost the same things that Eleniel’s face had said before, but aloud he said nothing. He merely pulled up the covers and waited for Legolas to join him in the bed.

Legolas wished to hold Gimli close, as he would have any other night, but he found that he could not – the weight on his stomach pressed still hard enough that all he could do was curl in a tight ball around it, in the hopes that the pressure of his limbs against the spot would ease the sensation. But after a moment, he felt a warm body against his back, an arm draped over his waist.

“We need not speak if you do not wish it,” said Gimli softly, “but will you allow me to hold you through the night?”

Legolas’s heart and throat were too choked to speak, but he nodded.
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

It's true that loving Legolas isn't always easy. But Gimli wouldn't trade it for anything, no matter how often he has to remind him.

Chapter Notes

Here's the follow-up to last chapter, in which Gimli deals with the fallout. Cuddling and comfort ahead, if not without an edge of sadness.

This is also the last thing I have pre-written. I do have some future ideas for stuff in this particular setting/story, so I will definitely continue writing. As always, suggestions are welcome, and I'll also probably start looking at prompts elsewhere to see if I can fit them in. Thank you all so much for your feedback and reading. You are the reason there is a sequel at all.

On the third day of Legolas’s strange and restrained solitude, Gimli returned once more to their quarters from a hard day of work, expecting to find Legolas either still out with his elves or perched on the balcony as was his wont, avoiding Gimli’s questions. So when he did not see Legolas at first, he sighed, scrubbing a hand across his face. He was going to have to track the elf down, it seemed, and force him to speak.

Sometimes it was almost too much for him, this worry. Oddly, it was worst when Legolas worried about upsetting him – because then, instead of offering the support he wished, he had to spend his time in reassurances and reminders not to apologize, and the whole process took more time than it would if Legolas would simply ask for help.

It was not too much, that was not true. Never too much. He never doubted that Legolas was his one love, the other half of his soul – and truly he gave Gimli more strength than he took, most times. But there were times like now – times when Gimli wondered if he should take Eleniel up on her offer to talk – just to better understand, just to make it easier.

He tossed his bag onto the chair in the corner and took a breath, preparing himself to go look for Legolas, and heard a tiny noise. He froze, turned and looked to the corner –

And only then did he see the ball of elf huddled against the wall.

Legolas was curled up so small that Gimli marveled at how tightly he had managed to press his limbs together: his legs tucked to his chest, arms wrapped around his shins, and his head pressed into his knees, dark hair streaming down his legs and back.

All of Gimli’s irritation dissipated instantly, and he hurried across the room, dropping to his knees. “Legolas?” he said softly. “Legolas, love, can you hear me?”
It did not quite look like a nod, not with his body so crunched together, but Gimli could read the bobbing of the head well enough. It had been a foolish question to begin with, he supposed, but Legolas seemed drawn so far into himself that Gimli had almost wondered if his voice would be able to penetrate the walls.

“May I touch you?”

“You need not.” The voice was so muffled that Gimli could barely make out the words, and when he did he started for a moment, taken aback. It was not the usual answer.

“That is not what I asked,” he said softly. “Will it increase your comfort if I” – He hesitated. Perhaps now was the time to be specific. “If I put my arms around you?”

“Will it decrease yours?”

Gimli did not know from where this strangeness stemmed, but it seemed that all he could do was play along. “You are my husband and my one love,” he said. “Touching you is hardly a discomfort to me, so long as you allow it.”

A long silence, and then the head bobbed again in that strange not-quite-nod. Gimli inched forward on his knees to gently ease his arms around the huddled figure, resting them against the rounded shoulders and laying his cheek atop Legolas’s head. The embrace was awkward, with Legolas’s arms still tight around his legs and trapped between their bodies, but Gimli rocked gently back and forth and listened. Legolas was not breathing hard, not in the way he did when he was panicking – so this was something else, something different. But likely not entirely unrelated.

He closed his eyes and paid close attention to Legolas’s limbs, waiting for them to relax. But instead of doing so, after a moment, they seemed to cinch even tighter.

“Do you wish me to let go?” he asked, alarmed.

“No.” The murmur quiet, almost unintelligible, and Legolas tensed up further, though Gimli would not have thought it possible.

This was not helping. Gimli sat back at last, removing his arms, and reached for Legolas’s hands instead. He tried to pry them away from his legs, but found their grip tight and unyielding; instead he brushed his fingertips lightly over Legolas’s knuckles until his fingers relaxed and Gimli could lift them away. Light finger-marks immediately appeared on the skin where he had been clutching, giving proof to the strength of his grip, but Gimli curled his fingers around Legolas’s and held on. And as though a loose thread had been pulled, the rest of Legolas’s tight posture began to unravel: arms going limp; knees falling apart. Even his head lifted just a little, and he peeked at Gimli through a veil of his own hair.

“This has gone on long enough, Legolas,” said Gimli. “You will tell me what is the matter.”

The head lowered again. “You will say it is foolish.”

“No!” Gimli said abruptly. Did Legolas think – “I may not understand everything that troubles your heart, but I hope you know that I do not think you a fool.”

“I think I know that,” he said quietly; Gimli had to strain to hear the mumble, “though sometimes I forget, but – it is only” –

Gimli did not speak, afraid of frightening him away from his point, but released Legolas’s hands and began to run his own up and down Legolas’s arms. They were colder than they should be, he
noticed, that body that had not reacted to even the snows on Caradhras chilled now in the warm room, and he rubbed them gently, trying to impart his own warmth. Legolas leaned slightly into the touch – he was melting, Gimli could see, and soon he would have the truth.

“I am a burden on you,” he said at last, and then the words were tumbling out in a rush, the first barrier broken. “You worry for me when your time should be taken up by your people; your energy goes towards assuring my comfort; and I – I cannot change it, Gimli. I have been trying: first to make myself better; then to make myself scarce – it does not work; there is no difference, and you would be better” –

“No!” Gimli blurted, cutting Legolas off before he could go any further. “No, Legolas, no, I” – But words failed him and all he could do was scoot to the side and throw his arms around Legolas’s huddled figure once more, tighter than before, murmuring, “No,” again and again into his hair.

“I do not doubt your love for me,” said Legolas, as though in a rush to explain, “it is only – I wish you did not have to” –

“You are not a duty to me.” Gimli curled his right arm up from Legolas’s shoulder to stroke his hair. “I thought you knew this. You may ask me for whatever you need, and if I may give it – I would do anything for you, Legolas, not out of duty but out of love.”

“I know that,” Legolas whispered, “and that is the problem. You give me so much, and I can offer you only this in return.”

“You are wrong,” said Gimli firmly. “This is not all you are, Legolas, and it does not lessen your worth.” He shifted; his knees ached from the hard floor, but any lower and he would not be able to reach. “Do you think you can move?” he asked. “If so, I would suggest we take this to the bed, where I may hold you properly.”

Legolas’s head moved up and down once more; he let Gimli draw him to his feet and guide him to the bed. He was shivering now, as though his body was trying to shed the cold it had taken on, so Gimli slid in beside him and pulled the covers up over both of them. “Is this all right?” he asked. “Would you have it otherwise?”

Legolas answered not in words; instead he pressed his face into Gimli’s chest and wound his arms and legs around Gimli’s body. Gimli wormed his own arms over and under Legolas’s shoulders and held him back just as firmly, rubbing small circles on his back and pressing himself closer to ease the shivering. “Please do not hide yourself from me, Legolas,” he said after long moments of silence. “I love all that you are, and you are no hardship to me.”

“I am sorry,” Legolas whispered into Gimli’s clothing. “I tried to tell myself that, but – I could not listen. It is merely – difficult – when the whispers of others seem to confirm my own fears.”

“The whispers of others?” Surprise made Gimli’s voice harsher than he would have liked; he berated himself as Legolas flinched.

“I did not mean – no, I” –

“The truth, Legolas,” said Gimli. “It would explain much; for all that he knew Legolas thought these things, he thought that they two at least had moved beyond them. But if someone else had said something – “Was it one of my kinfolk? One of yours?”

“Do not blame them,” Legolas whispered. “It is natural for them to be suspicious – your time is much taken up, after all, and they worry for you, as their leader and their kinsman” –
“One of mine, then.” Legolas’s back was still tense under his hand, the skin following his palm in circles which did not seem to reach to the stubborn muscle below. “Will you tell me what you heard?”

“I” – Legolas paused, and his muscles tightened for just a moment before relaxing. “It was nothing malicious, Gimli – and moreover it was not untrue. It is not worth stirring up trouble between you and your folk – not on my behalf.”

“I will be the judge of what is worth trouble,” Gimli reminded him, “and you are worth far more trouble than you give me, Legolas. Not that you give me trouble!” he added hastily. “No matter what my kin may say.”

“They say” – Legolas swallowed audibly, and then mumbled the rest into Gimli’s chest. “Your companions fear for your time and attention, because it is so much taken up by – by tending to my needs.” His voice sank so far that Gimli could barely hear it on those last words, and then rose again abruptly. “By this exactly! This was precisely what I had hoped to avoid, and I tried – but I cannot. I despise this weakness; undone by my own mind! They are not wrong, Gimli, and had they been lying it would not affect me so, but they are right and I know it!”

“They are not.” Gimli made his voice as firm as he could, pulling back enough from Legolas to put a finger under his chin and tip his face up until their eyes met. “We cannot move forward until we have established this, my love, but I know not how to tell you so that you believe me that you are no burden on me.”

Legolas blinked up at him, and then his eyes flickered down once more as though he could not meet Gimli’s. “I do not know how to believe you,” he whispered, and his voice broke Gimli’s heart. “I am sorry. It is nothing to do with you, and I know it is all in my mind, but – I cannot stop it. And it is easier to believe those who see me as a burden, when I am already disposed to think it.”

Gimli closed his eyes and pulled him close again, already regretting his sharpness. “I know,” he breathed. “I do. And you need not apologize for who and how you are.” He hesitated, trying to phrase what he wished to say. “It is only that I see such good in you, and I wish you saw it in yourself. I wish that you understood that my companions are wrong – be they bitter, or frustrated, or unwilling to accept an elf into their midst” – and he would have to determine who had spoken, if Legolas would not tell him, and figure out what unrest existed within their ranks. In fact, he had his suspicions already. “I wish I could make you believe that you are no burden on me. That I am better for your presence in my life.”

“I” – Legolas nuzzled his head against Gimli’s chest, as though trying to bury it inside him – “I do not, not always,” he said. “But here in your arms, I find it easier to believe.”

“Then I will hold you for as long as it takes,” Gimli promised, “even if all stone crumbles to dust and all stars fall from the sky.”

There was a long silence, and he knew that in that moment they were both thinking of the impossibility of that promise, of the topic they had not discussed since their first coming together months ago in Fangorn, the topic they had acknowledged as hopeless and yet inevitable. But now silently and together they both agreed to avoid it again, and Gimli kept his arms tight around Legolas and felt as, bit by bit, he began to relax.
Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

Legolas invites Gimli to spend the evening with him and his companions. Among other things.

Chapter Notes

I'm not really sure what this chapter is. It's sort of a mix of headcanon and story, with lots of gratuitous fluff. I don't know if it really came together, but I hope it is at least enjoyable to read.

While I have you here, I thought I would lay out some headcanon without even being blended into the story - specifically relating to my thoughts on gender pronouns among elves and dwarves. Because I'd like to include more gender representation than just the cis binary, but I've also decided that I don't have any idea what's going on under the clothes of any of my background characters. So whatever gender pronouns I give them, that is their gender, and they may be cis or trans, but I'll be referring to every OC with their gender pronouns, regardless of their biological sex.

In regards to pronouns: I’ve decided to go with the headcanon that Westron does not have gender-neutral pronouns, but both Khuzdul and Sindarin do – so when he talks about Celair, for instance, Legolas is just substituting the Sindarin pronouns. The dwarves have found a different solution. There are many different headcanons about dwarves and pronouns and the non-50/50 gender split, and what I’ve decided to take from those is the idea that dwarves who prefer she/her pronouns use them, while everyone else just uses he/him, regardless of where they identify on the gender spectrum. (Because it’s simpler, and because those pronouns often command more respect.) I think it’s true that there are fewer females than males, but that discrepancy isn’t as big as non-dwarves think it is because a lot of nonbinary – and even some female – dwarves just use he/him pronouns in mixed company. So there will be more use of he/him among the dwarves, but that is my reasoning. But please let me know if any of this is a problem, or if there’s anything I can do to better represent gender among my cast of OCs. Again, these characters aren’t going to get a huge amount of screentime – some more than others – so I know that these attempts don’t get any further than tokenization, but I’m hoping to do it as respectfully as possible, so please let me know.

Also: Reminder that Legolas and all of his companions are people (elves?) of color. Other reminder that I am not, so if there's anything I'm doing that's disrespectful, please let me know.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

They would not be in the palace much longer. The dwarves were nearly ready to depart to their own lodgings, their plans for the city neatly divided up, and the elves would disperse along with them.
Legolas could not say he would not be pleased to leave – to live in a house in the first level of the city with only Gimli, to come home only to him in the evenings. But there were benefits to living in the palace – to say nothing of the proximity to his close friends, there were also Aragorn’s sparring courts.

He settled his elbows more comfortably onto his knees and leaned forward, watching carefully every move in the bout before him. Eleniel had asked him to watch, had asked for suggestions and pointers, but with the way it was going now he wondered if she would even want his advice afterwards.

He winced as Celair dealt her a blow to the knuckles with the hilt of hir knife, loosening her grip on her own. She brought up her other knife to counter, but her grip was unsteady and loose, and she hissed a Silvan curse just before the knife slipped from her hands and clattered to the ground.

“You are relying too much on your second blade,” said Celair, sheathing hir own knife and stepping back as Eleniel retrieved hers. “If you continue to do so, I shall make you relinquish it entirely.”

“I know,” said Eleniel, lowering her head. “It is not so easy to unlearn reflexes honed over yenë, though, and I have not given up hope” – She broke off abruptly and flexed the fingers of her right hand, and Legolas bit back the noise of sympathy that wished to escape.

“I know,” said Celair, hir voice softening. “But you know that you will need to know how to fight with a single blade, just in case. You cannot rely on compensation with your right hand. And if you will not do this for me, I shall force you to spar with Legolas instead.”

Legolas raised his eyebrows, but ze was not looking at him.

Eleniel managed a reluctant smile. “I suppose you are right. At least I am reasonably certain that when I defeat you, you will not say you were pulling your blows, as I know he would.”

The jibe was weak, more bravado than confidence – Legolas had seen both in Eleniel, and he knew the difference. But she was trying, and he could not help but appreciate that, even if he did wonder why it needed to involve jabs to his own skill. “He is sitting right here,” he pointed out instead of responding to the specifics of what she had said, realizing as he did so that this was not the first time in the last days that he had needed to refer to himself in the third person. Perhaps he should ask his companions to stop discussing him while he was present, but he knew already that it would be of no use.

“Again,” said Celair, without even acknowledging him. “With only the left blade this time.”

Eleniel had only just begun sparring again after long months of painful recovery from her burns. Most had healed well enough, though the scars left behind would never disappear, but she had sustained damage to her right eye and the joints of her right arm, and the nerves in her fingers had been damaged so badly that she would likely never be able to work precisely with that hand again. Because her preferred weapons had always been bow and two knives, this required some adjustments to her fighting style – adjustments she was loath to make.

Legolas was sorry to see it, as well. At her best, she was his favorite sparring partner and most evenly-matched opponent – particularly with her two knives against his one. (None of his other companions were his match, but his father and Laerwen bested him in every bout.) He had his suspicions that she had chosen Celair instead of him not only because ze would make a more evenly-matched partner but also so that the pleasure in the memories of their own bouts would remain untarnished.
He could not help but agree, in his own mind. Defeating Eleniel now would taste less like deserved triumph and more like bitter regret.

Celair and Eleniel backed apart and began to circle one another again, and Legolas watched intently. Celair did not seem to be pulling hir blows, not exactly, but Legolas thought that perhaps the force behind them was less than it could have been.

And from the looks of it, Eleniel knew it too.

Footsteps – dwarf footsteps – approached from the left, but Legolas could tell just from the sound that it was not Gimli. He could not help tensing automatically, though he forced himself to relax. He could do this: he had promised himself that he would. He could make pleasant conversation with Gimli’s companions.

He turned, and the forced smile on his face softened into a real one. “Alma!”

“Lord Legolas!” Most of Gimli’s company remained tight-faced and unsmiling around him, but she beamed back and sat beside him, eyes turned toward the elves in the practice courts, mouth slightly open in seeming fascination. “They move so quickly,” she remarked, her eyes flicking back and forth between Eleniel and Celair, following their movements. “Like striking snakes” – she grinned at him then – “only with more limbs.”

Legolas could not help but smile back. “Had you not seen elves spar before?”

“I had never seen an elf at all before you and your kin arrived here,” she said earnestly. Legolas wondered for a moment how old she was – but then, he had seen no dwarves either for much of his life, not until he had grown experienced enough to patrol near the outskirts of the forest. “I had heard that you all preferred the bow to close combat.”

“That is true of many of us, but not all,” said Legolas. “And we of Lasgalen at least have grown skilled in a variety of weapons, particularly for places where the forest is too dense for archery.” His eyes flicked back down to the ongoing match: Eleniel was faring well enough, but he could tell she was beginning to tire. Her mobility was not what it had once been, and her wind shorter, for all the damage to her lungs had mostly healed. Celair was gaining the upper hand, even holding back, and as Legolas watched, ze swooped in at Eleniel’s blind side, faster than she could react, and disarmed her with a quick twist of hir blade.

Eleniel’s spirit seemed to clatter to the ground along with her blade. Her shoulders slumped; her head dipped, and a hand came up to rake through her hair in frustration, but could barely wrap into the few inches that were left.

Suddenly Legolas wished they were both somewhere else. He knew her frustration and her shame, and he wished suddenly for her to have no witnesses to it, perhaps not even himself. Celair placed a hand gently on Eleniel’s shoulder, and she let hir, keeping her eyes on the ground. Ze leaned forward, presumably to speak encouraging words to her. Knowing she would not want him to listen – whatever she wished to share with him, she would do herself – Legolas sought distraction and found it in the sound of another set of dwarvish footsteps.

Gimli in truth, this time. He hoped that the presence of his husband would not make things worse for Eleniel – but then, her discouragement was due less to being defeated in front of others, and more to her frustration with her own body. Legolas determined to give Alma – and Gimli, when he arrived – another topic on which to focus. “And what weapon do you prefer, then?” he asked Alma. “If, as I assume, it is not the bow.”
Alma made a face. “A drafting pencil,” she said simply. “I have no interest in weaponry, and though I can defend myself well enough with axe if I must, I have often been told I have no promise.”

“She makes up for it in other areas,” said Gimli, who had arrived. He nodded to the elves on the courts, his eyes glancing past Eleniel with a diplomacy that made something in Legolas’s belly unclench. “Aragorn told me I would find you here,” he added, dropping a kiss onto the corner of Legolas’s mouth before settling beside him. “Has Alma been wearing down your lovely ears with her sandpaper tongue?”

He touched one of said ears very gently, and Legolas bit back a yelp. Gimli known that was not done, but he could not even manage to scold him for it, as he had lost track of everything around him in a white-tinged daze.

Luckily, Alma had not noticed his lapse. “It is only a shame my tongue is not enough to sand your rough edges,” she said to Gimli, heaving a dramatic sigh (as Legolas wrapped the offending hand in his own to keep it from further mischief). “Alas, that is a lost cause already.”

Gimli laughed, sliding his fingers through Legolas’s and leaning comfortably against him. “I see you are spending your day of rest well,” he said, nudging Legolas. “You do not even spar yourself, but leave all the enjoyment to your fellows?”

Legolas hesitated. He knew not what to say on this topic – how could he tell Gimli that Eleniel had asked him not to spar with her? What would she want him to share? He looked down, eyes drawn with his thoughts back to his friend, and saw that she had parted from Celair and was looking back up at him.

He forced a laugh, still looking at Eleniel. “Perhaps I am merely unable to match up to the legendary tirelessness of dwarves.”

Gimli seemed to sense that something was amiss, but he said nothing of it. “Your stamina has never been in question,” was all he said, squeezing the hand still tangled with his own. Legolas’s attention was elsewhere, so he did not respond correctly – but he did not need to; Alma gave a squawk of protest, and Gimli turned to her even as Legolas kept his eyes locked on Eleniel’s.

Legolas could not have said what either of them was thinking, but he knew all that he needed. After a long shared glance, Eleniel turned to leave, and he made to follow her. Likely little enough would be said between them, but her face had told him enough – merely that she did not wish to be alone.

Legolas made it halfway to his feet before he was brought up short by the wrench of his arm where his hand still held Gimli’s. Ah, yes. This was the moment when he must excuse himself, make polite goodbyes. It would not matter so much for Gimli, surely, but for Alma –

And yet Eleniel was leaving, and he needed to follow her, and what more excuse could be made?

He turned around. “I must go,” he said – short, graceless. What else was there to say, after all? His eyes flicked from Gimli to Alma, and he hesitated again before giving a quick nod – a short, jerky motion of the head, as though his chin had been dragged down, then back up. “I – it was lovely to speak to you, Alma; Gimli, I” –

Gimli squeezed his hand, then let it go. “Do what you must,” he said. “Will I see you for dinner this evening?”

Legolas opened his mouth to speak, then paused. He had not spoken to his companions about this –
but suddenly he did not care. “If you wish, you may come to eat with us. We have plans to spend the evening together before we disperse in the coming days – we will be preparing a meal of our own in the park in the first level, with songs and storytelling. We plan to gather at sunset, and I – we – would be glad to have you join us.”

The absolute silence from the other elves might not have been noticeable to another, but Legolas’s ears caught it immediately – not least because he had been expecting it. He risked a glance behind him and saw Celair and Damion looking back at him. But he kept his face determined, and turned back to Gimli.

Gimli, too, was looking at the other elves, but Legolas raised his eyebrows and half-smiled in a hopeful request, and finally Gimli nodded. “If you are certain I will not be intruding” –

“No,” Legolas promised – he would see to that.

“– then I would be glad to join you.”

Legolas exhaled, feeling suddenly as though more had been said than had passed Gimli’s lips. “I look forward to it,” he said. “Tonight, then.”

And then he turned away to follow his friend.

When the light dimmed and the first tinges of pink began to spread along the horizon, Gimli made his way along the stone-lined path through the biggest park in Minas Tirith.

The west side was heavily forested, and he could only imagine that that was where Legolas and his Silvan companions would be preparing their evening meal, though other than that he had no real idea what to expect. Nor could he be entirely certain of his welcome; he had not been unaware of the other elves’ surprise at Legolas’s offer.

But, he reminded himself, he was Legolas’s rightful husband, accepted by Thranduil himself. After that, this could hardly be any worse.

He felt the same shiver of apprehension when he crossed the border of trees and ventured into the thicker forest without any sign of elves. But again – he had journeyed through Fangorn itself; this could be no more difficult.

All the same, as the trees thickened around him and the sky darkened, he grew more and more unnerved. Perhaps he had made a mistake, after all? Perhaps they were somewhere else in the park? Legolas had not told him exactly where –

He barely had time to hear the rustling in the trees behind him before something touched his shoulder, but he reacted instantly. Ripping himself free of the grip, he whirled around and drew his axe from his belt in the same motion and –

Came face to face with Eleniel.

“Eleniel!” he exclaimed, leftover adrenaline coming out as anger. “What” – His heart was racing.

But she just shook her head and held a finger to her smiling lips. The other hand she placed on his shoulder once more, as though to calm him. He was not sure exactly how calm he should be, but he resheathed his axe anyway and focused on trying to slow his heartbeat.

Still with the reassuring smile, Eleniel closed her eyes and cocked her head first to one side, then the
next, then swiveled around to look behind her – and her smile turned triumphant.


And suddenly the silence of the forest was gone and the trees were alive, and Gimli witnessed for the first time the speed of wood-elves when they had no interest whatsoever in stealth. Leaves and needles rustled and twigs snapped; tree after tree moved as elves sprang between them, and although Gimli could not see the elves in question, he watched four separate paths streak through the trees directly towards them. And then there were elves everywhere, dropping out of the trees and rushing at the point of convergence where Gimli and Eleniel stood.

The first to reach them was an elf slightly taller than Eleniel, with hair tied back in two long braids, who bent to tap the ground at Eleniel’s feet and then, rising, dug a shoulder into Eleniel’s stomach and scooped her off the ground. Eleniel gave a shout of laughter as the elf made to run off again with her held captive, but she made no move to free herself.

The elves all arrived within seconds of one another, but Legolas was second, and his face broke into a beaming smile when his eyes landed on Gimli. While the other two made to chase after the elf carrying Eleniel, Legolas bounded straight to Gimli’s side and greeted him with an enthusiastic kiss. Gimli lost himself in it for a moment, swept up by Legolas’s energy. He felt like the wind in Gimli’s arms and smelled of the pine needles that showered from his hair. When he pulled away, Gimli opened his eyes to see him still smiling in delight, eyes bright. “You came,” he said.

“Of course I came. Do you doubt my word so easily?” Without letting Legolas answer, Gimli tangled a hand in his hair and pulled him down again.

The soft laughter of the elves broke them apart at last, and Gimli looked around as Legolas straightened up and slung an arm over his shoulders. Eleniel’s captor had set her down at last, and the four elves all stood together, smiling at them. One of them said something in elvish, quick and light, and although Gimli did not understand the words, he could make out the teasing tone well enough. Without even removing his arm from Gimli’s shoulders, Legolas stooped, straightened, and threw a handful of pine needles at him. Him?

“You have arrived just in time to remind us to finish our game,” he said to Gimli. “The others are preparing our meal, but they are likely nearly ready by now. But first, allow me to introduce you. You know Eleniel already, of course. Here is Hadril; she is a cousin on my mother’s side” – He indicated the elf who had been carrying Eleniel, who smiled and waved – “and Damion, a warrior formerly under my command” – the elf who had teased them – “and his sister Faines. You all know who Gimli is, certainly, but I am pleased to introduce you properly at last.”

Gimli bowed to all of them, in true dwarvish fashion. “Gimli, son of Glóin, at your service,” he said.

“And we are at yours, Master Dwarf,” said Damion. “For all that your husband continues to assault us.” He flicked pine needles from his hair, grinning at Gimli – and to his own surprise Gimli did not feel mocked, but rather invited to share in the joke.

“You will survive.” Legolas squeezed Gimli’s shoulder and turned, guiding him along. “Now come. Let us go eat.”

The rest of Legolas’s companions were deeper in the forest, sitting around a small fire over which a large black kettle steamed. They looked up at the approach of the others, smiling and chattering
further greetings in their Silvan dialect. Legolas introduced Gimli to all of them as well; he repeated their names in his head, but it was likely that he would not remember them all, not now. But he did his best.

They sat on the ground around the fire to eat. The contents of the kettle – a hearty soup with mashed vegetables – were dished out generously, and there were thick slices of nutty bread to accompany it. Gimli noticed the absence of any meat in the food, and wondered at it. There had been meat served in the Woodland Realm, he thought, when he had visited there – but now that he looked back, he could not think of an instance of Legolas accepting meat from Aragorn’s table. But he had eaten the dried meat well enough on their journey –

He did not say anything, but to his wonder, Legolas seemed to understand his confusion without even asking. “It is a Silvan tradition to eat only the meat we hunt ourselves, unless there is no other option,” he explained, dipping a crust of bread into his soup. “At table with others, or on journeys such as our quest, we may relax that rule, but when cooking for ourselves, we adhere to it whenever possible.”

Gimli opened his mouth to reply, and Legolas filled it with the bread crust, eyes dancing with mischief. Gimli started for a moment, but then laughed through the mouthful, accepting it as his due. He did flick his tongue against Legolas’s fingers as he withdrew, though. Just for good measure.

Legolas ate with his right hand, his bowl nestled in his lap and his left still snug around Gimli’s shoulders. Gimli found himself leaning into the warmth of Legolas’s side as the night grew darker and chillier around them. Legolas was more relaxed than Gimli had seen him in a long time – perhaps ever – laughing and talking with his companions and with Gimli, switching back and forth between Silvan, Sindarin, and Westron. Gimli looked at the way the elves were together, how easy with one another, and he thought he understood, for the first time, what it must mean to be friends with someone for centuries.

He felt strangely welcomed among them, almost as though they had all merely forgotten that he was not simply one of their own. And so he almost regretted it when his mortal body finally reasserted itself, reacting to the chill of the night with a deep shiver.

Legolas rubbed his arm. “How are you feeling, my friend?” he asked, leaning over to place a kiss on Gimli’s temple. “I have brought blankets, if you would like to stay for stories, or we can go back to our rooms if you would prefer.”

“I would stay,” Gimli said, though for the first time he noticed how slow his voice had become, how sleepy, “as long as none will be offended if I doze off.” He smiled at the others around him. “I promise, it is no comment at all on the company or the entertainment.”

“No offense is taken,” Hadril assured him. “We are pleased to have your company tonight, elf-friend, and glad to share with you some of the stories of our people. We will speak in our own tongue, but the spirit of the tales should carry through, even if not the exact meanings of the words.”

“And I am pleased to hear them,” Gimli said. He had heard the title elf-friend before, named so by both Legolas and the Lady Galadriel the year before, but this was the first time he had heard it from one of Legolas’s kinfolk, and he felt the weight of it here, felt the welcome it brought him. He was curious as well, of course, but it was that welcome more than anything that made him want to stay.

“You are sure?” Legolas breathed in his ear, arm tightening around him. “None will blame you if you wish to go” –
“No,” Gimli said, and found that he meant it. “So long as you have the blankets you promised, I am glad to stay and listen.”

“Eleniel?” Legolas asked, and Eleniel stood and crossed to a nearby tree, beside which several items had been piled. She retrieved two thick blankets and a small drum and returned to the fire. The blankets she passed to Legolas and the drum to Celair, the elf Gimli remembered because of hir height and hir exceptionally long feather-woven braid.

Legolas moved his arm back from behind Gimli, and replaced it just as the rush of cold air hit Gimli’s shoulders – this time, wrapped in a blanket. He had arranged the first of the blankets as a cape around his shoulders, and his arm drew it all the way around Gimli. The increase in warmth was immediately obvious, and Gimli leaned into Legolas with a contented sigh.

“Are you warm enough?” Legolas asked him. “I have another” –

“Save that one,” Gimli said. “I will let you know if it becomes necessary.” With the heat of the fire on his face, the blanket around his back, and Legolas against his side, he felt nestled in a cocoon of warmth.

“Perfect.” Legolas left another kiss against the bone beside Gimli’s eye and fell silent as Celair beat a resonant note on the drum with the heel of hir hand, and began to speak.

Ze had switched languages, to either Sindarin or Silvan; Gimli was too tired to tell, but he found that Hadril had been right – though he understood nothing of what was said, the story seemed to sink into his bones and settle there. Celair’s voice was low, resonant as the drumbeats, and ze seemed to speak in a chanting rhythm – almost songlike, but not quite.

Hir voice lilted up as in a question, and Gimli shifted a bit as Legolas drew breath against him, and then he – and all the other elves – responded, in the same chanting rhythm, punctuated by the beat of the drum.

Gimli sat, still conscious, but not quite awake, and he let the spoken song carry his thoughts away, along many different paths. He thought about the stories – about how honored he was to get to hear them, even if he did not understand them; about the warmth of Legolas against him, and the warmth of the welcome he had received here. He thought about the Silvan language: about how beautiful and wild it sounded in Legolas’s voice; about the way it vibrated deep in Legolas’s chest, vibrations he could feel against his head, which continued to sink lower and lower.

He wondered how Khuzdul might sound in that voice, thought about the elvish accent that tinged Legolas’s previous attempts at speaking dwarvish names and even some words in Westron. He had long held the secret desire to trade languages with Legolas, to understand Sindarin at very least, and to teach Legolas his own secret language, to give him that final private assurance that he belonged.

He pictured Legolas in a circle with his own people, listening to their stories and songs, listening to the low rumble of dwarven voices speaking their own language, in the light of dim lanterns reflecting off of stone walls. Pictured Legolas learning the language and the stories, the songs and dances of his people, pictured Legolas feeling as welcome in dwarvish circles as Gimli himself felt right now.

It would not be able to happen right away; his own people were wary of other races, and for good reason, but suddenly he wanted it even more intensely than he ever had before.

He would make it happen, he promised himself. Whatever barriers needed to be broken, whatever fears needed to be soothed. It would happen.
The chanting, singsong story changed into something slower and deeper, something that spoke to the part of Gimli that knew earth and stone and dark, deep places. Legolas’s breath came slower and longer as well, his chest rising and falling in motions as steadying and comforting as the motion of the earth itself. The firelight was dying slowly down; light through his eyelids a dark red – and when had his eyes closed? Legolas’s hand was resting on his chest, he thought – or was it on his knee? No, that warm weight was the corner of the blanket . . .

The chorus picked up again, and as Legolas’s voice joined the others, it wrapped warmly around Gimli and brought him down, down, down into the deep.

Chapter End Notes

So . . . I hope that was enjoyable. I wanted to do some exploration of Legolas's and Eleniel's relationship, and particularly of Eleniel adjusting to her limitations. I also wanted to explore Gimli's welcome among the elves. Maybe it's a little too easy to be believable, but my explanation for this is that Legolas has actually brought his closest friends among the elves, and they want him to be comfortable, so they're willing to be open-minded. And then Gimli is just such a charmer that he breaks down their walls immediately.

I also felt bad about where I left you in the last few chapters, and I wanted fluff.
Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

The last grey ship leaves. Even in Gondor, its absence is felt.

Chapter Notes

I think this story was supposed to be fluffy.

Seriously, I am doing a TRIGGER WARNING here for a couple of things in this chapter. In a comment on Finding a Voice, the user bonehandledknife remarked that they saw a connection between sea-longing and suicidal depression. There is no explicit mention of or desire for suicide in this chapter, but there are a couple of lines that briefly touch on those themes, so if that is a trigger for you, I hope this is enough warning. This chapter also contains . . . not exactly dubcon, but some poorly-negotiated desperation-sex. I don't think any of this stuff is too explicit or too bad, but I do want to make sure everyone reading this is okay.

Other than that, crushing angst ahead. With no easy fix, unfortunately. I very much hope that I will have some actual fluff written soon to ease all of our souls, but until then, proceed with caution.

This chapter takes place a few months into the stay in Gondor, so we might be jumping around chronologically from now on. (This story is really meant to be more of a general setting wherein I can write whatever I want.) But I wanted to explore Legolas's and Arwen's reactions to the departure of the ship.

Legolas felt it when the last ship left.

Aside from moments of profound exhaustion, he had not had a peaceful night’s sleep since Pelargir. One of the things the sea had stolen from him was his elvish ability to control his own dreams, and now instead of stepping gently into his chosen dream paths, he found himself dragged into sleep instead, immediately swept away onto rocking waves amidst the endless screaming calls of gulls, imploring him to join them. He never saw the Undying Lands themselves – his sleep would not allow him even that temporary solace – but night after night he lived his own journey there, helpless to turn away or think of anything else, and often woke heavy-hearted, nearly as exhausted as if he had not slept at all.

It had gotten a bit better when he and Gimli had reunited: the solid body against him stayed in his awareness, holding him to land as the anchor that he knew Gimli to be. He still heard and felt the waves, but their power over him was lessened with the reminder that he was where he wanted to be.

But not this night.

This night, the sea was not an abstract endless landscape, but real. He saw the Grey Havens – and
though he had never been there before he knew where he was – and Cirdan the Shipwright. He saw Gandalf and Galadriel and Elrond and Frodo and Bilbo – and he saw the other hobbits saying farewell.

Gandalf had told him they would be leaving soon. Had come to Lasgalen ostensibly to visit, but really to say goodbye.

He had not even asked Legolas if he would like to come along.

In this dream, Legolas was not pulled along with the ship. In this dream, he did not feel waves rolling under him, weight shifting between his feet to keep his balance on the rising and falling boat beneath them. In this dream, he was left on the shore with Merry and Pippin and Sam, waving helplessly goodbye and weeping tears that tasted of the sea.

The other hobbits did not see him; Legolas knew that he was alone here, alone between reality and dream, between land and sea. Alone, and trapped, pulled in two different directions but unable to move in either, and for a moment he forgot why he stayed.

Wait! he tried to call after the fast-disappearing ship. Wait for me! but his voice would not leave his chest, and the boat did not turn. He made to rush forward, to throw himself desperately into the water and swim until he caught up with the boat or until the waves closed over his head and took him finally for their own, in that moment he did not care which, but his feet would not leave the ground.

He watched instead: watched until the disappearing ship shrank to a black speck on the horizon and disappeared into the mist – and then he was wrenched from sleep with a jolt and a gasp that razored through his throat and sliced his heart cleanly in two.

He was sitting upright, he realized, in the bed he shared with Gimli, but not for long: he folded forward against the pain, wrapping his arms around himself, still gasping and weeping in great, gulping sobs. He knew not exactly why, for he had made his decision months ago, but he felt he had not understood before what it truly meant to stay behind.

“Legolas?”

Gimli’s voice, behind him, still hoarse with sleep. Legolas wiped his eyes roughly with the back of his hand in a futile effort to stop the flow of tears, as endless as the waters he had forsaken. Tried to clear his throat to tell Gimli he was fine, but his voice was swallowed up in another heaving sob.

The rustling of bedcovers behind him, and Gimli was sitting up now, hand a warm weight on Legolas’s shoulder. “Legolas?” he said again.

Legolas turned into him, shuddering with the force of his weeping, unable to do anything more than cling. His own arms were an insufficient cushion against the jabbing pain, but Gimli’s were better. Gimli was always better. He buried his face against Gimli’s shoulder and beard, clenched his fists in the back of his nightshirt, inhaled the scent of sweat and stone dust and pipeweed, and tried to calm himself down.

It seemed to take an age for his tears to stop. In fact, he himself knew not exactly why he was affected so. He had made the decision that he would not sail with the others. There was more holding him here than there was calling him there. And this had not been his last chance to sail – he knew that. As long as the call held his heart, the way would always be open to him.

And yet the wrenching loss came from somewhere deeper than logic, a place so deep within him that
it had only been touched a few times in his life. Gimli’s arms encircled him even as he felt Gimli’s body safe within his own grasp, and he clung to this love, this anchor, this only one who had ever been able to reach exactly that deep.

“Legolas,” Gimli said one more time, softly, warm breath against his wet cheek. “Will you tell me what is wrong?”

Legolas could not speak. Instead he attached his mouth to Gimli’s, clamped his hands to the tops of his shoulders, and thrust against him with a sudden desperate ferocity, bearing him back down to the bed.

“Beloved,” Gimli said when he could pull away long enough to speak. The worry in his voice was reflected in his eyes. “Are you sure you” –

Legolas bit back another wave of tears. “Please,” he whispered. “I need” – Needed what? Needed to be here, needed to remember that Gimli was here as well. Needed to feel grounded, present – alive. But no, he could not say it like that. He could not deny Gimli a choice. “Will you, please?” was all he could say.

“Will you tell me what is wrong, after?” asked Gimli, one finger under Legolas’s chin.

He nodded, eyes spilling over again, desperate to fill that aching emptiness inside of him with something warm and alive. “I will,” he said, voice strained away almost to nothing.

Gimli held his eyes and his face for another long moment, as though studying him. Then, finally, he nodded.

“Come here, then,” he said, and pulled Legolas down.

“They set sail last night,” he said after, lying in Gimli’s arms, his hands buried deep in the beautiful auburn hair. “Frodo and Gandalf and Galadriel and the others. I watched their ship leave the docks.”

Gimli hmm’ed beside him. Legolas could hear the usual lassitude from lovemaking slowing his voice and his motions, but he could also feel the great effort that Gimli was making to stay awake and listen now, and brushed a grateful kiss over his cheekbone. “Gandalf told me they would, but I knew not when. You say you saw it?”

“Saw it, and more.” Legolas shuddered again. That awful empty grief inside of him did not slice at his insides as it had before, not with the warmth of Gimli against him, but it ached still: a throbbing press toward the outsides of his being, almost physical.

“More?” asked Gimli, but Legolas could not answer. He could not speak of that feeling – could not admit that while his feet adhered to the docks he had looked out at the waves and yearned to throw himself in, had not cared where they would take him, or whether they would take him anywhere at all. He felt it no more, not here – but he could remember how it had felt, and he did not think he could tell Gimli, not about that.

“I stood on the shore with the other hobbits,” he said instead, “and watched them leave – Frodo and Bilbo, Gandalf, Galadriel, Elrond” – He stopped.

Elrond.

“Arwen,” he said. Sat upright again, disentangled his hands from Gimli’s hair. Arwen would know
as well, if he were any judge. He had not seen her in the dream, but she would have dreamed it as well. Her father, gone; her grandmother, gone; some of the last legends of their people –

“What are you doing?” asked Gimli, sitting up as well and watching Legolas struggle into his clothing. They lived no longer in the palace, it was true, but they were close enough, and he only knew that he had to go.

“Arwen,” he said again. “She will know as well. She will – she will need someone. She” – She would never see Valinor. Legolas had still the option to go one day, in years and years, if he did not die first, but Arwen –

“Legolas,” tried Gimli again, but Legolas could not listen. Now dressed, he went for the door to the bedroom, and was already running before even leaving their house.

He did not notice until he was halfway to his destination that he had forgotten his shoes.

Aragorn woke up and knew something was wrong.

His right arm was cold; Arwen’s side of the bed was empty. She rarely woke up earlier than he did anymore; though much of her body retained the hardiness of an elf’s, there was a new mortal softness to her that seemed to manifest in her sleep. She no longer had control over the amount she slept or what she dreamed, which meant that Aragorn woke before her nearly every morning, and watched the strange sight of his wife with her eyes closed and mouth slack in the depths of mortal sleep.

But now it was barely sunrise, and her side of the bed held only empty space and the lingering imprint of a body against the sheets.

He sat up and rubbed his eyes, and then he saw her: sitting alone beside the open window, barefoot and clad only in a light robe.

“Arwen,” he said, rising and going to her. “Meleth.” Her arms were cold, and he rubbed them gently; she did not even move. “The night was cold; you will freeze.”

She did not respond, still staring out the window. Her eyes were distant, her face set, and she seemed as far away from him in that moment as she had ever been.

“Arwen?” he tried. “What is wrong?” He fumbled for her hand, wrapped it in his own. She held on, grip seeming almost instinctive, but otherwise did not react. “Arwen?”

For long moments she said nothing, and he did the same, hung suspended in a silence as though waiting, but somehow heavy with sadness as well. Then suddenly, for no reason he could discern, she lifted her head. Her eyes flicked over to the door, and after another long moment, Aragorn heard the footsteps as well, tearing down the hall as though in flight or pursuit – but however hard he listened, there was no other noise.

He stood up when she did, ready to – what? Attack, or defend, or whatever was needed – but then there was a frantic pounding on the door, as though someone needed to tell them something urgent. Aragorn wondered if something had happened, if Arwen knew something he did not. If they were about to get news? And even as Aragorn wondered who could be outside the door, Arwen crossed their chambers, heedless of her barely-clothed state, and threw it open.

It was Legolas, disheveled as Aragorn had not seen him since the days of long runs and battles and constant fears. His hair, usually so sleek and well-kept, was rumpled, braids half-undone; his eyes
were wide and wild, cheeks smeared with tearstains. He stood staring at the two of them for a moment, mouth half-open as though to speak, and Arwen stared back at him.

“Legolas?” Aragorn started, feeling more and more off-kilter on this strange morning, but Arwen moved. She reached out, and Legolas fell forward, and suddenly they were in one another’s arms.

Aragorn could only look at them, bewildered. For all their differences, they seemed somehow similar now: two heads of sleep-mussed dark hair; two sets of fists curled into the other’s insubstantial clothing. Arwen still wore only her light robe, and Legolas’s tunic was half-fastened, practically hanging off of him.

Aragorn mused that to another man, such a scene might be alarming – but he knew both Arwen and Legolas better than that. No, this scene was alarming for an entirely different reason – even if Aragorn did not entirely understand that reason, not yet.

Legolas’s cloak was trailing off one shoulder, one corner sweeping the ground. As Aragorn’s eyes followed the line of the fabric, he noticed that Legolas wore no shoes.

He and Arwen separated at last, looking long at one another. Aragorn thought again that there was something that they both knew that he did not. He wondered if he should ask, if he should speak, if he should offer comfort – but how was he to do that when he knew not what to say? But before he could make any decision, Arwen turned without a word and beckoned Legolas back into the sitting room.

As Aragorn was debating whether or not he should follow them, he heard another set of footsteps, heavier and more sedate, and Gimli was approaching the door as well, breathing hard as though he had just stopped running. He looked more put-together as well: his clothing at least was fastened correctly, if his hair too was unbraided and wild.

“Aragorn,” he said, nodding.

“Aragorn.” Aragorn reached out and clasped his hand. “You have come with Legolas, yes? Is aught amiss with you two? Arwen seems to know something, but neither of them have spoken, to me or to one another.”

“So Legolas was right.” Gimli seemed to be speaking more to himself than to Aragorn, but then he looked up and forced a smile. “He woke this morning in great distress, and though he would say but little, he did tell me that the ship with Frodo and Galadriel and the others set sail last night. That he saw it in his dreams. And then he said only that Arwen would need someone, and from that moment I could not prevail upon him to stay.”

“Ah.” It made sense now, even if a large part of Aragorn wished it did not. “Arwen too has been strange all morning, but she would say naught to me. But I think they must have seen something we did not.” And he knew he should not, that envy was not befitting of the King of Gondor, but he could not help feeling almost bitter that he had received nothing of this in his dreams. Elrond was nearly as much his father as he was Arwen’s (though he tried not to think of it in those terms often), even if he was no elf, and had he not grown up in Rivendell? Was not his Sindarin better even than Legolas’s, who had spoken it for longer and yet had never managed to shake his Silvan accent entirely? Why had he deserved no warning that his people – that his family was leaving?

Because you were never destined for Valinor, said a calm voice within him, cutting through his envy and reminding him what the others must be feeling.

“And Legolas?” he said aloud. “How does he fare?”
Gimli gave a half-shrug and gestured to the door of the sitting room. While Aragorn and Gimli had spoken, the door had closed against them. “You have seen him,” he said. “We have not spoken of it directly, not since before we parted, but I know the sea weighs heavy on his heart. I can only hope that it grants him comfort greater than his present distress when – after I have passed.”

He said those last words lightly, almost casually, but the weight of pain behind them nearly staggered Aragorn, and he thought suddenly of his dear friends in a different way than before: as needing to experience a pain that he and Arwen, with the choice that had been given her, would not have to feel. He had thought of them sometimes, had even thought of the difficulty of their situation, but it had never seemed as real to him as it did now, with Gimli speaking so matter-of-factly about his own death, about Legolas’s eventual departure.

But he looked at Gimli now and saw his friend gaze defiantly back, and he knew his pity would not be welcomed here.

“We can only hope,” he said, and clapped a hand to Gimli’s shoulder.

They stood there in heavy silence for another long moment, and then the door to the sitting room opened and Legolas and Arwen emerged: both quiet and somber, shoulders slumped as though under a heavy weight. Arwen was paler than usual, eyes wide and wet, but she came to Aragorn now and embraced him, and she was warm in his arms as she had not been earlier. He closed his arms around her shoulders and laid his cheek against her hair, and they stood there together and breathed, and mourned the loss of the father they had both known, whom they would never see again.

He heard a shaky inhale beside him, and opened his eyes to see Legolas and Gimli locked in an embrace of their own – a bit more awkward because of their differing heights, but Gimli’s arms were around Legolas’s waist, Legolas’s upper body practically draped over Gimli’s head. As Aragorn watched, Legolas pressed a kiss to the top of Gimli’s head and then turned his own to the side, and Aragorn closed his eyes again and matched his breathing to his wife’s.

And the four of them stood together in that room, with nothing spoken between them, silent under the weight of individual grieves, but finding comfort at least in the knowledge that they were not alone.
Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

The next day, Legolas is still struggling. Gimli helps him. Domesticity ensues.

Chapter Notes

Literally. Just. Fluff. Some talk about loss of appetite/encouraging a character to eat, so proceed carefully if that's a trigger for you, but it shouldn't be too bad, I don't think.

The only excuse I have is that I made myself sad last chapter.

The next morning, Gimli woke alone in the bed.

He sat up, not entirely surprised, to find his husband perched on the windowsill, looking out: one knee drawn up to his chest, the other dangling from the sill almost to the floor. He did not turn around, but Gimli knew he had heard him wake.

“Did you sleep?” he asked.

Legolas shook his head, the barest side-to-side motion, without turning around.

“Not at all?” Gimli pressed, though he knew the answer.

Legolas knew he knew it, too; he did not even deign to respond. The only sign that he had heard at all was the slight descent of his head to rest against the window, where his breath left puffs of condensation on the cold glass.

Gimli’s shiver at seeing it was not entirely affected; the sheets had fallen around his waist when he sat up, and the bed was colder without Legolas in it. “Will you not come to lie with me now?” he coaxed. True, he was to meet Alma and Skafi in a few hours, but the morning was early yet, and if Legolas could be enticed to rest . . .

“You have plans,” was all Legolas said. His voice was cold and distant as it had been in the beginning of their acquaintance, as it was whenever he was wounded or afraid, whenever he was trying to mask his own hurt. But Gimli would not stand for this coldness – not with him, not anymore.

He stood up instead, taking a blanket with him, and went to the window to touch Legolas’s arm. As he had expected, the elf’s skin was as chilled as his voice.

Force did not work, but gentleness did. Gimli ran his hand up and down what he could reach of Legolas’s arm, interlacing their fingers at the end and giving only the slightest tug to draw him away from the windowsill and back to the bed. It worked well enough, Legolas’s resistance melted away even if the chill on his skin did not subside.
Gimli pressed him into sitting on the edge of the bed, but Legolas resisted when Gimli urged him to lie down, tensing up, an ice sculpture that would rather shatter than bend. Unwilling to undo his work, Gimli sighed instead and rose up onto his knees to cast the blanket around Legolas’s shoulders and pull it snug.

“What is the matter, my friend?” he asked. Then cursed himself immediately. “I mean – I know what is the matter. But what may I do to comfort you?”

Legolas’s shoulders moved almost imperceptibly up, then back down.

Helpless, Gimli could only keep questioning him. “Have you eaten anything this morning?”

Nor had he eaten the day before – at least, with how scarce he had made himself, Gimli could not imagine that he had seen to any of his comforts. And if he had not slept, and would not speak, and this chill in his body persisted? Gimli was still not well acquainted with elvish ways, but he knew that illnesses of the spirit could wear down the body if left unchecked. “I will make you tea,” he said. He did not want to push Legolas’s boundaries, but nor would he allow him to neglect himself into illness. “And I will prepare breakfast for both of us, if you think you can eat” –

“I will be well enough,” said Legolas quietly, but his tone was more tired than unfriendly. “You need not – I mean” –

“Legolas . . .” Gimli hesitated. Sometimes it was difficult to tell if Legolas put him off out of a desire for solitude or a fear of imposing – but he also knew that most times, Legolas did want to be comforted. “If I overtax you, you must tell me. Do you truly wish me to leave you alone?”

“No, I – I wish you to – I mean, your attentions are not unwelcome.” That question seemed to have shaken something loose, and Legolas peeked at him sideways. “It is only, I will be well enough without them, and I would not have you go out of your way to fuss over me” –

“And you would deny me the pleasure?” Gimli ran his hands up and down Legolas’s arms again, through the blanket. “Legolas, I do not understand the sea-longing, and I cannot understand how you feel now. But I would know what I may do to ease your pain.”

“You need do nothing more than this,” Legolas whispered. “No, I mean it” – as Gimli would have protested – “simply your presence is a balm to all hurts.”

“Then I will stay here.” His meeting was not so important anyway. “I will make breakfast for both of us – some of us must eat, in any case – and we will eat it in bed, and there is no use protesting” – Legolas had opened his mouth – “for my mind is made up, and will not be changed.” He chanced a smile. “I believe there were certain words said once concerning the stiffness of my neck, and I mean not to disappoint.”

Legolas did not smile, not exactly, but Gimli thought his face lost some of its melancholy. He slid his hand up Legolas’s arm and wrapped it around his shoulders, feeling for any increase in tension. “Will you lie down now?” he asked, thinking he could tuck Legolas into bed to rest and warm while he set water on for tea and began preparing breakfast.

It had been the wrong question: Legolas stiffened in what looked like terror. “I cannot,” he said, and his usually-smooth voice rasped from his throat like metal shavings. “Gimli, I – I do not wish – I mean” –

“Hush,” Gimli said, rubbing Legolas’s shoulders now. “You needn’t sleep if you do not wish it –
not now, anyway, though sooner or later you will need to rest.”

“It is only – if I sleep I will dream it,” Legolas said, voice shaking. “I know I must return to it eventually, but now – the thought of it stretches me thin as a forest wind, and I cannot bear” –

“Shh,” Gimli soothed again, rocking them both gently back and forth on the edge of the bed. “I understand, my love, I understand. You need not face it yet.”

“Thank you.” Legolas’s voice was a strained whisper.

Gimli held him for a moment longer, but the low rumbling of his stomach broke the moment. He laughed, and the huff of air that escaped Legolas seemed to have the slightest edge of humor. “I must have something to eat,” he insisted, resolving to ensure that he would not be the only one. “And I will put on water, and I must send a message to Alma and Skafi that we are not meeting today, and you are not to feel guilty.” It bore repeating. “For all that I love my work, spending the day in bed with you is hardly a burden to me.”

“Thank you,” Legolas murmured as Gimli made to withdraw. “I am sorry that you must” –

“No,” Gimli said, putting a hand on Legolas’s cheek and urging his face around until their eyes met. “I said you were not to feel guilty, and I meant it. You need never apologize for existing as you are.” Legolas’s eyes shifted away, but Gimli leaned closer so that he could not look away. Legolas *would* understand this – maybe not this time, maybe not even the next, but he still hoped that with enough reminder, one day it would sink in that he was here not out of obligation but out of love.

Legolas’s eyes finally flicked back up to meet Gimli’s: dark and sad still, but as Gimli watched, they softened into something like resignation. Gimli smiled at him and squeezed his shoulder with his other hand. “May I kiss you?” he asked, and Legolas closed his eyes in answer, lips parting in expectation.

Gimli obliged him very gently, with the lightest brush of his own lips, the gentlest stroke of a thumb over Legolas’s cheekbone. Legolas’s soft sigh chased him when he drew away, and he smiled as he let his hands fall to his sides. “I will go put water on for tea,” he said. “Join me when you feel ready.”

Gimli had only been in the kitchen for a moment – had scarcely had time to find flint to kindle the fire – when he heard the patter of light feet and swish of fabric over the ground that told him Legolas had come to join him.

He did not turn around until he had started the fire in the stove, filled a kettle with water and set it on to boil, but when he did, he could not help but smile.

For all his sorrow today, he loved seeing Legolas like this: soft and unguarded in the morning, before donning the shields of protection he wore around most others. He looked young suddenly, barefoot on cold stone with the blanket still draped over his shoulders and dragging on the ground, and for all that Gimli wished to banish the pain in his eyes, he was glad at least that Legolas did not try to hide it from him.

Alma and Skafi had planned to meet him here, which was to his fortune; all he had needed to do was write a note to them that he could not meet this morning and leave it on the outside of the door. They lived nearby, and would not be too put out with him for having made their preparations for nothing – or so he hoped. He would visit them later and see if they could meet in the evening, or in the next morning.
“That is done, then,” he said – half to Legolas, half to himself. “Now, what shall we have for breakfast?”

He had learned early on in their cohabitation that Legolas’s culinary skills were passable at best, and then only if heat was not involved. He had explained (in sheepish self-defense) that his only food preparation had ever been done on patrols far enough from the elves’ dwellings that it was not safe to build fires – and his own palate was not so discriminating as Gimli’s. Gimli himself was no expert cook, but when he decided to do something, he liked to do it well. Though Legolas had shown interest in learning to prepare food, the bulk of that duty still rested on Gimli’s shoulders.

Legolas did not speak, still silent and distant, so Gimli continued. “We have some potatoes – those will be delicious fried in butter, and perhaps with the rest of the fish. Sam would be pleased.” He glanced back at Legolas to see the hint of a smile, just as he had hoped. As soon as Sam had recovered his strength, he had fried up a vast serving of potatoes, insisting that “they were all he could think of, all those dark and hungry days, with naught but water and that lembas bread, which fills the stomach well enough, but doesn’t feel as substantial as food ought, if you know what I mean – ah, but no offense to your people’s food, Legolas, sir!”

“For Sam’s sake, if nothing else, we must have the potatoes,” said Legolas, and Gimli could not help but smile in triumph at the word we.

“For Sam’s sake,” he agreed.

He fell silent as he washed the potatoes and sliced them, filled a heavy skillet with butter and set it on the stove as well, but the kitchen felt too quiet without the usual background noise of Legolas’s humming, a sound he did not usually notice until it was gone.

Then Legolas was behind him, hands on Gimli’s shoulders, chin on the top of his head. “Keep talking,” he murmured. “I find roots in the sound of your voice.”

So Gimli spoke – about nothing in particular, chattering to himself, narrating the steps of slicing the potatoes, laying them in the butter – melted and sputtering with heat – removing the fish from the icebox. He talked about the meeting he was to have with Alma and Skafi – tomorrow, it would have to be now, but he skimmed over that, not wanting Legolas to dwell on it. It would not hurt them to have one more day to finalize their designs; he had asked each of them to sketch out a possible design for the gates, and they would compare their plans when they met to find the best melding of all ideas. Though he would then have to be diplomatic about taking mostly his own and Alma’s suggestions, for Skafi was still not keen to meld the ideas of dwarves with those of other races (and here he lapsed into a lengthy tirade about the frustrations of working with one so conservative, but as Legolas’s feelings were no friendlier than his own, he thought that was not so much of a problem). When the kettle boiled, he carried on an entire conversation with himself as to what kind of tea he would like, finally selecting mint for both of them, and put it on to steep. And when he turned to press a mug into Legolas’s hands, he saw the faint smile on his husband’s face, and felt his heart as warm as the steam rising from the tea.

As the potatoes began to sizzle golden brown, Gimli turned them over and laid the slices of fish in beside them, inhaling appreciatively as their scent filled the kitchen. He was hungry indeed, not just feigning it for Legolas’s benefit, and he took the opportunity to rhapsodize on the quality of dwarvish cooking (with not a few jabs at Legolas’s own lack of skill; the gentle teasing made that half-smile appear again).

When the food was finished, Gimli scooped the whole mixture into a large bowl and went to the sideboard to fetch cutlery – and, after a moment of deliberation, a bunch of grapes as well. Perhaps fruit would help him tease Legolas into eating. Then, balancing all this and his mug on a wooden
“Gimli,” Legolas began, half laughing, half resistant, but Gimli held firm.

“I said we would eat breakfast in bed,” he reminded Legolas, “and I intend to do so. Will you join me?”

With another almost-laugh, and a kiss to the place behind Gimli’s ear that almost made him drop his tray, Legolas followed him.

They propped themselves up in the bed, Gimli on pillows set against the headboard; Legolas on Gimli’s chest. The tray lay across both of their laps, and Gimli tucked one arm around Legolas’s shoulders so that he could reach around him for the food. Legolas closed his eyes and sighed, rolling his head back into the hollow between Gimli’s neck and shoulder.

“Are you comfortable?” Gimli asked, touching him gently on the top of the head.

“As can be.” Legolas opened his eyes again, and the corners of his lips rose very slightly. “You make a most satisfactory pillow, Master Dwarf.”

“My services are always available.” Gimli bent to kiss Legolas’s forehead before reaching for the food. “Are you still so certain you will have none?”

Legolas hesitated. “I know not,” he said at last. “Begin as you will.”

The food was very good, made so as much by Gimli’s hunger as by his own skill, and he ate in silence for a few minutes. Legolas lay very still against him, his face closed and smooth, but now that silence had fallen again so, it seemed, had his spirits. Gimli could still see edges of that cold pain around his eyes and his mouth, and he ached to ease it. Yet he knew there was little he could do but be here.

“Here,” he said at last, separating a grape from the bunch with his right hand – the arm that remained slung around Legolas – and bringing it to the elf’s lips. “Will you not eat a little?”

It seemed to take Legolas a moment to respond, but then he sighed and opened his eyes once more. “If it comes from your hands, how can I refuse?” he murmured, and opened his mouth for the offering.

They were mostly quiet for another while, resting and eating. Legolas did not reach for any food himself, but he sipped from his mug of tea and allowed Gimli to feed him small bits of breakfast. Gimli relaxed a bit with every bite he saw Legolas eat, and even more when Legolas nipped at his fingers along with a morsel of fish.

Finally, though, Legolas shook his head when Gimli held another grape to his lips. “I have taken all I can,” he said. “I am sorry.”

“What have I said about apologizing?” Another kiss to the top of Legolas’s head to soften the words, and then Gimli ate the grape himself, glad at least for the small victory. “I thank you for eating, even if it was only to please me.”

There were only a few bites of breakfast left; Gimli finished it himself – it would be no good cold later – and set the tray aside. Legolas nestled more comfortably against him, eyes still closed. “Do you still dare not to sleep?” Gimli asked. He knew Legolas should not be held to mortal standards, but he looked so tired.
“I might dare,” said Legolas. “If you would do one more thing for me.”

“Anything,” Gimli promised. Almost without his notice, the fingers of his right hand had begun to run through Legolas’s hair, and Legolas sighed, a long rush of air.

“Would you sing to me?” he asked then. “In your own language, if that is permitted – I love to hear the sound of it in your voice.”

It was not permitted, but Gimli had broken this rule before and he would break it and many others again. Legolas was his husband, the one love of his heart, and he was here to stay, and if he wished to hear Gimli sing, then he would.

Gimli did not sing as Legolas did – constant and light, melodies changing at an instant as the new spirit took him. He could not compose song in the moment. But he had a fair voice, which had often been called upon at events and gatherings, and he knew well the songs of his own people. He chose one now – a song of miners who had found a new vein of ore which would provide for their people’s future: a song of earth and deep places and discovery and hope. A song slow and quiet – hope was always tentative – but with an undercurrent of overwhelming joy. And he hoped that Legolas could hear all these things in his voice, feel them in his heart, even if his mind did not understand the words.

Legolas turned his head to the side, cushioning it on Gimli’s beard and pressing his ear to the place between heart and throat where it vibrated with Gimli’s voice. His fingers stroked Gimli’s arm in the slow rhythm of the song, and he exhaled again, long and deep.

“I could listen to your voice for the rest of my life,” he murmured.

Gimli sang still and could not answer, but he rested his hand on Legolas’s chest in turn, holding him close and feeling the beat of his heart as it slowed to match his own.

When he finished the song, he paused to choose another, but Legolas said nothing. His face had gone very still, Gimli noticed, eyes half-open and distant in elvish dream, but his hands still moved to the rhythm of a song no longer sung.

For his next song, Gimli chose a lullaby.
Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

Gimli has a very, very bad day. And it's only going to get worse.

Chapter Notes

I decided that I had hurt Legolas enough. And what is the fun of a mortal/immortal pairing if you can't write the mortal character getting extremely sick?

That said, warning for detailed descriptions of flu-like illness.

Sleep did not want to relinquish Gimli this morning. It lapped away in slowly-receding waves of heaviness, holding his body to the bed as though something did not want him to wake up just yet.

As soon as his awareness of his body returned, Gimli understood what it was.

The ache was not sharp or intense, but it was persistent and pervasive, radiating through his whole body from a place just above the base of his skull. His limbs felt slow and heavy and sore, his head too-warm and sluggish. He groaned, and the sound sanded across the inside of his raw throat.

He did not have time for this.

They were building today, for Mahal’s sake! The metal for the gates had been gathered and they were to begin the shaping process today. It was work far too important to put off, and work about which he had fallen asleep filled with excitement.

Well, there was nothing for it but to push through.

“Gimli?”

Gimli blinked his eyes open to look at Legolas, whose face was drawn in concern. Perhaps another time it would have warmed Gimli’s heart, but just now he was not disposed to be cheerful.

He grunted, a vaguely acknowledging sound.

“Are you well?” ventured Legolas. “You seem . . . off, this morning.”

In fact, all Gimli wanted to do was turn over, bury his head in his pillow, and go back to sleep, but as that was not an option he heaved himself into a sitting position instead. “I” – He cleared his throat. “I am fine – no need for concern.”

“Are you sure?” Legolas persisted. He reached out to touch Gimli’s forehead, right between his eyes, as though to smooth out the crease of his frown. His cool fingers felt very good, actually, but not enough.
“Yes,” Gimli lied. “I am well enough – merely tired. I did not sleep as well as I would have liked last night, that is all.”

Legolas was frowning, too, now. “You slept soundly enough, it seemed. You are sure there is nothing else” –


Legolas’s mouth tightened, and Gimli knew he had hurt his feelings, but his head pounded harder as he rose and he knew he could not manage a well-worded apology now. Instead he merely went into the bathroom, hoping that a splash of cold water on his face would prepare him for the day.

When he had washed and dressed, he went into the kitchen and found that Legolas had made tea for both of them, and had cracked eggs into a bowl for Gimli to cook. He slipped silently out of the kitchen as soon as Gimli entered it, off to perform his own morning ablutions.

Gimli regretted snapping at him, and he regretted even more that he had yet to let Legolas near the stove. The thought of breakfast was not at all appealing to him this morning – he did not feel nauseous, exactly, but his appetite had deserted him entirely – but he knew that he must eat: the forge would be even less pleasant if he did not, and Legolas would worry – more than he was already worrying.

“So, you are working with the metal today,” Legolas said lightly when they sat down. Gimli could see him trying to make pleasant conversation despite being stung, and he almost wished that Legolas would be less polite. He was in no mood to talk.

But talk he must, so he did. “Aye,” he grunted. “We are cutting and drawing the iron into rods the size we will need for the gates.” Perhaps he would be able to muster up his excitement in this conversation. “Aragorn has provided us with the raw material: sheets of iron that must be cut to the right size, and then drawn into rods – we use heat to change the shape, pulling them longer and thicker.” These were trade secrets he was not to give away, but Legolas did not understand anyway, and even if he did, Gimli could not bring himself to care. “We will spend a few days doing this, and then we will have rods the right length to shape and weld together to form the structure of the gates themselves.”

Despite himself, he was growing excited once more. The mood between them warmed, and he even managed to do more than pick at his breakfast.

They departed together, as ever, parting with their usual kiss at the end of the walkway – Legolas to the park where he was working, Gimli to the smithy – and as soon as they had separated, Gimli felt the brief burst of energy desert him.

With a sigh, he squared his shoulders, set his jaw, and walked on.

Oh, the forge was not a good place to be today.

Gimli prided himself on his ability to endure most anything. He had run across Rohan in three days practically without stopping, had slain forty-two orcs in an all-night battle, and even more in longer battles to come, had even forced himself through the Paths of the Dead and the most crippling fear that had ever seized him. Why was it suddenly even more difficult to be in a forge with other dwarves, doing the work he loved?

But it was loud and hot and busy, and everything that Gimli usually loved about it seemed swallowed up in a haze of discomfort. Every screech of the grinders cutting the metal seemed to
slice straight into that place in the back of his head, turning a dull ache into a throbbing pain; every thrown spark streaked afterimages across his eyes, so that he was constantly blinking spots away. The heat of the flames, which usually affected him not at all, seemed to seep into his forehead, lower back, underarms, until he was wet with sweat, boiling inside his clothing.

He was meant to be mostly supervising the work, pitching in here and there, and the bustling back and forth simply made his legs ache even more. He tried to pay attention to what was happening, but his head seemed swallowed up in a thick gray fog.

To his fortune, he had Alma, who was so excited about her new role as supervisor that she noticed little else and unknowingly made up for much of his own lack of energy and observation. Regardless, many others noticed that something was wrong. Skafi asked him early on if he was well, and though he accepted Gimli’s snapped affirmative, Gimli noticed his keen eyes resting on him from time to time. Bjolla and Ganar both asked after his health as well, and some of the assistants, and each time he was asked, his answers grew shorter and more irritable.

He had never been so relieved at the end of a day of work. He barely managed to give the necessary compliments on everyone’s hard work and progress that day before wobbling out of the forge on shaky legs.

The evening air hit him like an ocean wave; immediately he became aware that he was soaked in sweat, and within moments he was shivering so hard his teeth chattered.

The walk home felt like the entire run across Rohan. He had to stop more than once to sit on benches or lean against walls – always with furtive glances around to make sure that no one could see him like this. A mighty dwarf, one so skilled in enduring, brought so low! And yet the closer he got to his home, the less he cared.

Legolas was not home yet, which was a relief. He might have insisted on making dinner, on asking Gimli what was wrong. As it was, Gimli glanced into the kitchen, thinking longingly of tea – but he was so tired that even the thought of lifting the kettle, of waiting for it to boil, did not appeal. At the moment, all he wanted to do was sleep.

So he dragged himself into the bathroom, barely managing to clean his face and teeth before climbing into bed. He was still shivering hard, so he wrapped himself up tightly in the blankets – Legolas did not need them, anyway – rolled onto his side, and fell asleep almost immediately, hoping that he would feel better in the morning.

This was not normal.

Legolas returned from his work a bit later than usual, hoping that Gimli had had a good enough day at his own forges to shake him out of the strange mood that had held him that morning – only to find the house dark, and no fire in the hearth. Perhaps Gimli was not here yet? But when Legolas retreated to the bedroom, he found Gimli lying in bed in a heavy sleep, swathed tightly in all the blankets on their bed.

His heart went cold. Perhaps Gimli did not want to speak with him? He combed through his mind to examine the talk they had had this morning – the talk that had been running through his mind all day, for all his attempts. Gimli had woken in a poor temper, and Legolas had asked him if he was well – and then Gimli had shut him down without explanation. And then not apologized afterwards, which was the true reason for Legolas’s worry. He was usually so careful with little slips like that, careful to let Legolas know that he was not responsible for Gimli’s irritation. That he had not this time –
And he had been short all through breakfast, but as though trying to pretend that nothing bothered him. Which meant that there was something, but something that he did not want to tell Legolas about.

Had he done something wrong? He cast his mind back through the last few days. The night before had been fine, he thought – but then there had been that other morning; Legolas had tried to cook and had burned eggs again (he was trying, he really was, but he had no sense of how hot the pan needed to be!). Gimli had not seemed as amused as usual – but then he had smiled after long moments and cooked breakfast himself, and he had said nothing of it – surely it was not that? But perhaps it was? What else might he have done –

Gimli twitched in the blankets and let out a low moan.

The other thoughts left his mind at once, and Legolas was in the bed beside him, wrapped around him, stroking his hair. His face was covered in perspiration, he noticed – could he be having a nightmare? Perhaps something else was wrong, something of which he had not been able to speak? Legolas took a moment to remonstrate himself for his self-centeredness. Had Gimli heard bad news? Been reminded of some past fear or sadness?

“Shh,” Legolas soothed him, brushing his hair gently back from his forehead, kissing his temples, cheeks, neck. “Hush, Gimli, all will be well; I am here.”

Gimli moaned again, and said something in his own language, a word Legolas did not know. What was he reliving? He stared at Gimli’s eyelids as though he could look through them and see what he was dreaming.

But as he could not, all he could do was lie beside him, rubbing his head and back, as Gimli slept: never waking, but moaning and thrashing throughout the night in the strangest sleep that Legolas had ever seen.

He was relieved in the morning, when Gimli finally woke up.

Gimli, to the contrary, was not.

His sleep had been heavy but fitful, dreams blurred but vivid at the same time, physical and mental discomfort blending to trap him in a hot-cold fog. But as soon as sleep left him, he realized that being awake was even worse.

Everything hurt. His limbs, his throat, his head, his neck. The general distaste for food had morphed into full nausea, and he was sweating within his blankets, but still too cold. He groaned even before opening his eyes, and the groan raked across his throat and sent him into a fit of coughing.

“Gimli?” Legolas’s hands were on his shoulders as he recovered, his face seeming to swim before Gimli’s eyes. “Gimli, you are – are you – unwell?”

And how, Gimli thought, but he did not answer. All his strength was devoted to attempting to stand up.

Perhaps this would pass? He could not think how it would, but he also knew through the haze in his mind that his people were expecting him. It was only the second day in the forges, after all. They would need his direction.

In one motion, he yanked the blankets away from himself.
The cold air sliced straight into him, and he was immediately wracked with violent shivering, but he tried to pay it no mind. He could sit up. He could do this.

“Gimli!” Legolas’s voice was sharper, now, but only a vague presence at the back of Gimli’s mind. He braced his hands behind his back and forced himself up.

As soon as he was upright, his vision went red. There was a sound in the back of his head like a hive filled with angry hornets, and he wavered on the edge of his bed. One more motion, and he would be standing. He had run across Rohan, he reminded himself. He could surely rise from his bed.

Legolas was still speaking, he thought, but his voice was drowned out in the violent buzzing. Gimli blinked hard, and his vision began to clear. He could do this. He would do this.

Bracing his hands again, he shoved with palms and thighs and lurched to his feet.

Instead of dissipating, the buzzing intensified. The hornets were swarming him, and his vision had turned from red to checkered black and white. His stomach hurt. His entire world narrowed down to his body and his mission: keep moving.

He lifted a foot to take a step, and his vision darkened, lightened again, and then went entirely black.
Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

Legolas takes on caretaker duties.

Chapter Notes

I don’t know why this idea inspired me so much, but I think I should probably just accept the fact that I love inflicting pain on characters, be it physical or emotional, and this is both. So this little story arc will have a few chapters yet.

When Gimli collapsed, Legolas at least had the presence of mind to catch him before he could hit the floor. Supporting his shoulders with one arm and back with the other, he eased Gimli back onto the bed, checked his heartbeat and breathing, and pushed a pillow under his head.

Then he panicked.

How could he have missed this? He pushed the sweat-soaked hair back from Gimli’s brow and laid a hand there – only to recoil. Legolas had no skill in evaluating temperature – as Gimli had often told him – but how had he failed to notice that Gimli’s skin had become so hot?

Legolas had no experience with illness: he had rarely been among mortals before the Quest, and though he had lived in a house filled with them that summer in Minas Tirith, only the hobbits had ever been unwell. And they had all been recovering from wounds to body or spirit anyway. Illness born of injury Legolas knew, but nothing like this.

Nothing like this! He looked down at Gimli again, took up his hand once more to check his pulse, and noted again the heat in his skin, the clinging dampness of his palm. What was he to do? This was clearly some illness, and it was clearly serious, but that knowledge imparted no understanding of how to react. He knew not how to care for Gimli, or what signs would reveal that he was well, or how long this would take to pass, or whether it would pass at all! A cold hand wrapped around his heart at the thought that this could be some deadly malady, that their time could be cut so short before even really beginning. Wild thoughts flashed through his mind – that Gimli had not yet even begun to prepare his colony, that they were supposed to have at least a hundred years yet, perhaps more –

Some part of him knew that these thoughts were irrational, but still they beat hummingbird wings in his mind, buzzed fear and dread through every nerve in his body.

The only thing that saved him from descending entirely into helpless panic was the knowledge that he was the only one here, and that he must retain his wits if he was to help Gimli at all. So he forced himself to pull back and breathe, and to turn to more practical thoughts.

Gimli’s forehead was very warm. He should cool it down, should he not? Only – Gimli had also been shivering all night. So perhaps cooling him down would make things worse?
Oh, he could not do this! He knew so little, and how could he tell which decision would only make everything worse? But – but there were other dwarves in the city right now, some not far from their home at all. Skafi – he was only two houses away. Legolas could fetch him and ask him to send a healer, for surely they would have brought at least one with them.

Just yesterday the thought of begging help from Skafi would have reduced Legolas to an entirely different sort of panicking mess, but there was no time for that now. The only thing that mattered was Gimli.

But still freezing fear held Legolas in place, and it was not fear of Skafi, but of leaving Gimli’s side. How could he leave him alone here – what if he woke up to find himself abandoned? Or even worse – what if he did not?

Before he could gather himself enough to do what he must, there was a faint moan from the bed, and Legolas’s gaze snapped around to see that Gimli was stirring.

“Legolas?”

Gimli’s voice was quiet and raspy, and he coughed weakly, wincing as though it pained him to speak. Legolas was still frantic with worry, but seeing Gimli conscious again washed warm relief through him, gave him the strength to move.

“Gimli,” he said, bending over where the dwarf lay and taking his face between his hands. “Do you know me?”

Gimli nodded, and then grimaced and moaned again.

“Do not speak, if it hurts you,” said Legolas. But even to know that Gimli would have spoken – that he knew himself and Legolas – brought a swell of pressure to the backs of Legolas’s eyes. He kissed Gimli’s forehead. “I am going to find a healer for you. No” – Gimli had opened his mouth as if to protest, and Legolas put a finger to his lips. “Do not even try. I know not what to do for you, Gimli, and I must find someone who does. Please” – His fear in leaving Gimli alone was lessened now that he was conscious once more, but not gone – “please do not try to get up when I leave. I am begging you, Gimli, if not for yourself then for me, please do not rise from your bed. I could not bear to return and find you – even worse.” He cut himself off, gulping down whatever other words would have emerged.

But it had been enough. Gimli’s mouth formed words again, words which escaped only in the faintest breath of air – but loud enough for Legolas’s sharp ears to catch. I will stay.

“Thank you,” Legolas whispered. He kissed Gimli’s face once more, the skin hot against his lips. “I will be back soon.”

Skafi’s house was the closest, so it was to Skafi’s house that Legolas ran. Every moment he was away was a moment that Gimli lay alone in bed, so he spared nothing in his speed. Did not even take a moment on the doorstep to steel himself: he knocked hard and long as soon as he had arrived at the door.

It took Skafi what Legolas thought was an unconscionably long time to come to the door. He was shifting from foot to foot, wondering if he should give up here and go to Alma’s house instead, for all that she lived with three others a greater distance away, when Skafi finally came to open the door and stared at Legolas with blank shock on his face.

Legolas had no time to explain anything beyond the essentials. “Gimli is ill,” he said, with no other
greeting. “I know not what to do for him, but I thought surely you would have brought healers with you in your company.” He did not give Skafi time to respond, but plowed forward – he would speak all his piece before letting himself be cowed into silence. “I hoped you would have the time or inclination to send word to one, for I know not whom to ask, and that you would tell all your smiths that Gimli will not come to work today.” He paused for a moment before realizing he had left out the word, and added, “Please.”

Skafi was silent for a moment after Legolas finished speaking – long enough to send all manner of dread scenarios through Legolas’s mind. Suppose Skafi said no? Or that he did not believe Legolas, and asked for proof? He did not want to explain what was wrong with Gimli, not when he did not know himself, and he did not wish to let him or anyone else look upon Gimli while he was laid so low – not merely for the satisfaction of curiosity, in any case –

But then Skafi nodded. “This news is not wholly unexpected; I thought he seemed unwell yesterday.” He looked Legolas straight in the eyes. “I will pass along your messages, Master Elf. You may return to Lord Gimli now, and one of our healers will call upon you within hours.”

“Thank you,” Legolas said. For all the hard feelings between them, he could have embraced Skafi just then, but he did not have the time. “I must return now, but – with all my heart, I thank you.”

Gimli lay still where Legolas had left him, but he had kicked the blanket off of himself and was pulling at his nightshirt when Legolas arrived. “Gimli?” he said, going straight to the bed.

“Too hot,” Gimli mumbled. “Have to – cool down.” He tugged at the sleeve, but did not seem to have the strength to pull it off. “Help me?”

“Let us leave it on for now,” Legolas said gently. Was Gimli fully in his right mind? “I spoke to Skafi, and he says he will send a healer along soon. But surely you would not like to meet him unclothed?”

Gimli shuddered. “Nay. But Legolas, it is so hot.” He sounded near to weeping. “Please.”

“I have another idea,” Legolas said. “Wait just a moment.” He knew not what should be done now, but surely this could not do too much harm? He fetched a clean cloth and a bowl of cold water to bathe Gimli’s face – and after a moment of deliberation, he filled a cup with water as well. “Will you have a drink?” he asked when he was back in the bedroom. Gimli’s voice still sounded dry and rough, and Legolas’s own throat hurt in sympathy.

Gimli nodded, so Legolas helped him sit up, propping him up against pillows and the headboard. Gimli squeezed his eyes shut and brought a hand to his head, and Legolas hurried to steady him. “Are you in pain?” he asked. “Dizzy?” Gimli mouthed an affirmative, and Legolas put a hand to his forehead again, still alarmed at the heat there. “Tell me when you think you can take the water.”

After a long moment, Gimli opened his eyes again. “Now,” he croaked, reaching for the cup. Legolas helped hold his hand steady when it shook, guiding the cup to his lips and tipping it back. Gimli drank in large gulps, water spilling out the sides of the cup and into his beard, but he grimaced again as soon as he had finished.

“What is it?” Legolas asked. “More?”

“No.” Gimli’s hand had drifted to rest against his stomach. “Should have gone slower.”

It took Legolas a moment to catch his meaning, and then his alarm spiked. “Are you – do you need” – He struggled, unsure how to ask, but Gimli held up a hand to stop him.
“No,” he ground out. “Just – have to let it settle.” After another moment, his face relaxed again, and he managed a smile. “But that helped, I think. Thank you.”

“Of course,” Legolas murmured. He realized that the cloth was still draped over his shoulder, awaiting use. “Are you still too warm?”

“Yes, but it is better.” His voice sounded smoother already, and Legolas resolved to give him more water as soon as he thought he could take it. “Your hands feel so good.”

“My hands?” Legolas set cup and cloth aside and pressed one hand to Gimli’s forehead and the other to the back of his neck. “Like this?”

Gimli sighed and closed his eyes. “Much better.”

The contentment did not last, however; soon enough he was shivering again, and Legolas was glad that he had not had a chance to use the cold water. He laid Gimli back down flat on the bed and wrapped him in blankets once more, curling around him for further warmth, but he kept his hands on the dwarf’s forehead and neck, wishing he could cool the heat that still burned in his skin.

They lay like that for so long that Legolas thought that Gimli had fallen asleep, but suddenly he stirred. “Legolas?”

“Yes?” Legolas tensed, readying himself to unwrap if Gimli had grown hot again, to reach for water, for the cloth, for anything else –

“I am sorry I snapped at you yesterday,” Gimli mumbled, opening one glassy eye. “I did not mean to hurt your feelings.”

It took Legolas a moment to understand what he meant, and then he could not hold back a choked half-laugh, burying his face in Gimli’s hair. It smelled off, sour with old metal and sweat, but it was still Gimli. “That is entirely forgiven, love,” he said, “and nearly forgotten. Worry not for me. All you must worry about is getting well, do you understand?”

“Aye,” murmured Gimli, closing the eye again and snuggling closer to Legolas. “I will do my best.”

They remained lying there, tangled together, until the healer arrived.

The healer Skafi had sent was Jorunn child of Torunn, the best one in their company. (This was not high praise on its own merits, as they had brought only two healers with them, but the point was that Jorunn was very good.) Gimli did not actually hear the knock at the door, he was drifting in a state of half-wakefulness that seemed to allow him to escape from as much of his discomfort as he could without being trapped in fitful sleep. But he did vaguely notice Legolas pull back from him to go answer it.

The chill seemed to hit him anew as the warmth of Legolas’s body left him, and by the time he re-entered with Jorunn, Gimli’s teeth were chattering once more.

Professional as he was, Jorunn raised his eyebrows when he saw Gimli, which if nothing else told him how pathetic he seemed. Some very, very distant part of his mind was telling him that he should be ashamed to appear so weak in front of his followers, who were meant to respect him, but the vast majority of him, which felt exactly as pathetic as he appeared, was far past caring.

“. . . for coming,” Legolas was saying now, so much gratitude in his voice that it was almost heartbreaking. “I know not what to do, and I” – He came to sit on the bed and laid a soft hand on
Gimli’s head, so much unsaid in that gesture that it made Gimli ache.

Even more than he already did, that was.

“Of course.” Jorunn nodded and approached the bed. “Greetings, Lord Gimli.”

“And to you,” Gimli croaked, wincing as his voice scraped against his throat. It had felt marginally better earlier, after drinking water, but no longer. “Good morning.”

Unfortunately, those last words had overdone it and he felt his body taken over by another fit of coughing: the same dry, unsatisfying cough that had plagued him earlier, that seemed to have no end but to set his throat aflame. He was vaguely aware of Legolas standing up beside him, but could not ask him where he was going – he did not have the breath.

When the coughing finally subsided, Gimli could do nothing for a moment but pant, despite the fact that the cold air burned his throat nearly as much. And to make matters worse, Jorunn had decided it was the moment for dry humor. “I think my morning is better than yours is, my lord.”

Legolas had returned holding another cup of water; when Gimli had recovered himself, Legolas helped him sit up once more and held it to his lips. “Slowly this time,” he cautioned – as though Gimli needed to be reminded – and although his throat pleaded for relief, Gimli managed to sip instead of gulp.

“I daresay you are right,” he rasped, when he finally felt able to speak again. Legolas’s free hand had returned to the back of his neck, right at the spot from where the rest of his aches seemed to be emanating, and Gimli wondered how he knew exactly where to touch.

Jorunn pulled the chair in the corner of the room closer to the bed. It was a mark of Legolas’s worry that he did not jump up to help, but remained beside Gimli with his hand where it was. “So, coughing – sore throat, I imagine?” He did not even wait for Gimli to respond. “Tell me what else ails you. Have you a fever, my lord? Chills?”

“Both,” said Legolas, before Gimli could answer. He might have been put out by Legolas’s speaking for him, but he found that it was both uncomfortable to speak so openly of his health, and physically uncomfortable to speak at all. So he just closed his eyes and let Legolas answer the questions – in too much detail at times; Gimli did not think, for instance, that one of his followers needed to know that he had swooned trying to get out of bed. But he supposed that he could not blame Legolas for his worry. And that last anecdote made Jorunn “hmm” in concern, so perhaps it was warranted.

“It seems a usual flu,” said Jorunn when he had finished his questions. “Perhaps more severe because of overwork and lack of rest, but it should pass in a few days.” Legolas’s soft exhale was not audible; Gimli only felt it in the relaxing of his chest, the breath stirring his hair. But Jorunn turned to Legolas anyway, as though he knew. “You need not worry for him, Master Elf, but make sure that he rests and drinks plenty of water. He should eat, too, when he feels able. I will leave you some herbs for a tea that should soothe his throat and headache; otherwise, fetch me tomorrow if the dizziness and nausea have not passed. And” – and he looked at Gimli now with a stern expression that Gimli thought must be part of healer training – “he is not to enter the forge until his fever has been gone for at least three days.”

Gimli made to protest, but his attempts to jerk forward made his head swim again, and he gave up. “Thank you,” Legolas said. “Will you tell me where you may be found, should he become worse?”

Jorunn passed him a slip of paper with an address written on it. “You may find me here. I will come
again in two days if you do not, shall I? Just to ensure that all is progressing as it should?"

“That would be much appreciated.”

Legolas saw Jorunn out while Gimli leaned back against his pillows and fretted. Not to enter the forge for three days! Why, by that point the rods would all have been formed, and even the shaping might be beginning! What if his people changed their minds about the designs? And what would they think of him if he could not supervise – this his project, the largest of his life so far and the proof of his leadership to those who would be following him to start a new colony? How was he to lead them if he could not even participate in the work, and all because of something so trivial as illness?

And on top of that, he was still too cold!

When Legolas returned, he went straight to the bed and curled around Gimli once more. “Still cold?” he asked, stroking Gimli’s hair. “Shall I make you tea?”

The tea was an appealing offer, but it struck Gimli that Legolas would have to get up to make it, and the warmth of his body was worth all the blankets in the world – a comfort Gimli would not willingly relinquish. But that thought made him realize that Legolas had said nothing of his own work, nothing of his plans to leave the house.

“What of your work?” he asked. “Are your people not expecting you today?”

Legolas did not seem surprised at the conversational non sequitur. “I am not leaving you,” he said firmly.

“You must!” Gimli struggled to sit up under his own power, but gave up again when his body refused to cooperate. “I would not have this annoyance interfere with your passions as well as mine.”

“You are my passion,” said Legolas – then, perhaps realizing how that sounded, he amended, “rather, you are the reason I remember that I have one.” He kissed Gimli’s temple. “Without you, there is no comfort for me this side of the sea – but there is much here that I love, and I am not ready to sail yet. So you must take care of yourself, so I can remember that I wish to stay.”

Gimli closed his eyes against the tears that suddenly wanted to spill over – tears whose source he did not quite understand, except that he was tired and miserable and ill, but beyond all that, there was still space for such a rush of affection and love. “I will,” he whispered. “I promise.”

Chapter End Notes

Just to make it really clear, because I don't think I did in the text, Jorunn is a nonbinary dwarf who uses he/him pronouns in Westron. He's not very important, but I did just want to throw that in.
Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

Legolas and Gimli contemplate mortality.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Gimli dozed fitfully on and off for the rest of the day, tossing and whimpering, more energetic in his sleep than awake. Legolas paced about helplessly, filled with nervous energy that had no outlet except when Gimli was awake. He made the dwarf tea, coaxed him to drink water, assisted him in sitting, and as good as carried him to the bathroom, to which Gimli put up no more than a token protest (which was possibly the most concerning event of the day). When Gimli slept, Legolas roamed the house, searched the kitchen to try to think of something both that he could make and that would not upset Gimli’s stomach. Fruit? He could cut up fruit. Or toast. They had a loaf of bread, and that at least was something he could cook.

But he spent most of his time in the bedroom, watching Gimli. He knew that it was a foolish thought, but he feared every time he took his eyes off of him that his condition would grow worse.

Gimli woke for the third time in the early afternoon, sweating and thrashing until Legolas helped free him from the cocoon of blankets he had wanted when wracked with chills. “Water?” he croaked when the blankets were gone.

Grateful that he was showing an interest in drinking, Legolas reached for the cup he had refilled while Gimli slept. “How are you feeling?” he asked after Gimli had taken a few sips, setting the cup aside to let the water settle.

“Miserable.” Gimli let his head roll back onto Legolas’s shoulder. “But glad you are here.”

“Miserable you must be indeed if you admit it so readily,” Legolas murmured, letting his fingers skim over Gimli’s scalp, down the back of his head and neck. “Do you think you could try to eat?”

Gimli closed his eyes and swallowed convulsively.

“Later, then,” said Legolas, still stroking Gimli’s head. In truth he knew not if the gesture was for Gimli’s comfort or for his own. “Is there aught else I may do for you now?”

“No,” said Gimli; then, a moment later, “Feels good.”

“This?” Legolas ran his fingers through Gimli’s hair again, and Gimli sighed in wordless affirmative. “Shall I braid it for you? Just loosely,” he added in a hurry, “that it not pull at your head and worsen the pain, but you might not be so warm with your hair off your neck.”

“Mmm.” A long pause, and then, “Yes.”

It took some ingenuity, for Gimli’s body would do no more than drape over a supporting surface, but after a moment Legolas had him arranged against a pillow between them, his head tilted back and the mass of wild auburn hair spiraling in all directions down the back of the cushion. It was tangled and
grimy, and Legolas wished for warm water, soap, or even just a comb to untangle it – but that could wait until Gimli felt stronger. His task now was simpler.

Which was not to say that he made quick work of it. He let his hands linger against Gimli’s head, stroked down the whole length of his hair, separated sections for braiding as gently as possible. Gimli let out quiet “mm”s as he went that let him know that he was at least not making things worse.

He wove the hair into two loose braids, off to the sides, so that they would not cause discomfort when Gimli lay down, and did not tie the ends. Gimli was nearly asleep when he finished, rousing only long enough for Legolas to coax the rest of the water into him, sip by sip. Lay him back down on the bed. Cover him with a light blanket.

“Legolas?” came Gimli’s bleary voice, glazed eyes blinking half open. “Will you sing?”

Legolas reached down and enfolded Gimli’s hand into his own. “Of course,” he said.

The song he chose was the lament of an elf-maid whose lover had sailed before she could – a song he had learned in recent months, as his heart and thoughts turned ever towards the sea – and as he sang, he thought. He had known, of course, that Gimli was mortal – that had no bearing on the choice of his heart. But even in all the thought he had given it, he had not imagined this. Gimli had ever seemed an unshakable pillar of strength, solid as the stone of his mountain, and though Legolas had known he would die one day – for all that he tried not to think of it – he had not imagined what might come before then. He had always thought of Gimli’s death as a single event, a hard deadline looming inevitably in their future, a sweeping blow to crush his heart all at once. But now he held Gimli’s hand, still clammy and warm with fever, and he knew that it might not – indeed, likely would not – be so.

Gimli was asleep now – more peacefully? Legolas hoped so – but he kept singing, and his song flowed from the familiar lay into something of his own, something laden with all the sadness of this thought. He pictured Gimli old, Gimli ill – Gimli’s life not flaming out in a single blow in battle, but Gimli wasting away, too weak even to sit on his own, tired and frustrated and constantly miserable – and his throat choked so that he could hardly sing.

And yet – and yet even as tears streamed down his face, as his song turned husky with grief, he thought that it was not all bad, not all of this.

Ever Gimli had been his strength, a supporting wall when Legolas felt he had nowhere to lean, and often he had doubted his own ability to be the same, but now he saw that it could be so. When Gimli woke up, he looked for him. He trusted him to help him sit up, to bring him water and sing him back to sleep. He showed weakness in front of Legolas that he would not have allowed any other to see. He admitted to his misery, and looked to Legolas to help him through it.

Legolas had not the hands of a healer, not like Aragorn’s. But he remembered Gimli asking for his hands, remembered the ease that they had brought him even in the depths of his misery, and felt a powerful swelling of protectiveness and tenderness in his chest, and his tears flowed now for more than merely grief.

He bent over Gimli’s head, singing quietly now but so close that his lips brushed the dwarf’s forehead. Tiny water-drops fell onto his flushed face, and some part of Legolas wished that his tears might help cool him down.

When Gimli woke the next time, the light in the room had changed. It was dusk, he thought, and he was alone in the room.
He shifted, wishing for Legolas, but unwilling to call him – not now. If he knew his husband, Legolas had been by his side nearly all day, and if he was away, it was likely because he needed space.

He attempted to assess his condition instead. He was too warm, so he kicked until the blanket covering him fell away, which helped a little if not much. His body still ached all over, and he still felt as weak as a newborn. He made an experimental noise, and his throat grated with it.

So, not much change then.

But he thought his head felt a little clearer, less lost in that thick gray fog. He knew that standing was still beyond him, but he wondered if perhaps he could sit up on his own.

There was a pillow behind him still, where Legolas had propped him up earlier. That morning, he had been able to brace himself on his hands – surely it could not be so difficult to do so again? Surely he could at least raise himself up to the pillow.

His body held less strength than on the Paths of the Dead, but he had dragged himself through that cavern on hands and knees, and if he could do that, he could do this. He shoved against the mattress beneath him, pushing with hands and thighs, wriggling his body backwards onto the pillow. His head spun, vision swimming in and out, ears ringing, and he wondered briefly if he would faint again. But finally he had moved to where he needed to be, and he let himself fall back against the pillow. A few beats, a deep breath, and his head slowly settled, his eyes and ears clearing.

Light footsteps outside the door, and Legolas was in the doorway, his face filled with concern. “Gimli?” His eyes brightened when they landed on the bed. “You are sitting up – you rose unaided!”

He managed a smile back. “Yes,” he croaked, and cleared his throat.

Legolas hurried to the bedside table and handed him the cup, which seemed to have magically refilled itself. He was pleased to find that his hands were steady enough to hold it himself this time, and he drank as slowly as he could bring himself. And here was another reason for optimism: his stomach felt much calmer than it had hours earlier.

“I thought I heard a noise,” Legolas said, perching on the edge of the bed. “Forgive me for not being here when you woke – I had – I wished to step outside and watch the sunset. But I should have” –

“Nonsense.” Gimli lowered his hands, still holding the cup, to rest in his lap – his arms were already tired. “It is I who is sorry for keeping you indoors all day.”

“Do not be foolish,” said Legolas, kissing the braid that – if Gimli’s vague memories were to be trusted – he had put in earlier in the day. “How do you feel now? Any better?”

“A little, I think.” It still hurt to talk, and he took another sip of water, wishing his hands would not shake so much.

Legolas laid a hand on his forehead, and Gimli sighed. His hands – how were his hands always just the right temperature, cool against his feverish skin? “You are still too hot,” said Legolas in concern.

“Yes,” Gimli agreed, closing his eyes to focus on the feeling of Legolas’s hand. “And your hands are so cool; ever balm even to the most blistering heat.”

He had at least enough wit to doubt the sense of his words, but he heard the smile in Legolas’s voice even with his eyes closed. “And the shine of your silver tongue does not lessen,” he said, “even if
exhaustion and illness do dull its sharpness.” His voice turned serious again. “You feel too warm still, then?”

“Aye, and tired and aching besides. But I think I know myself and the world around me, and” – he hesitated, wondering if this was not tempting fate – “and I think perhaps I could eat a little.”

“You could?” Legolas withdrew his hand; when Gimli opened his eyes he saw that Legolas had clasped it with his other hand in front of his chest. “That is promising indeed! I shall make you some more tea, shall I, and some toast? And if I sliced an apple for you, could you eat it?”

“Do not excite yourself overmuch,” warned Gimli, but he did think that the gnawing in his stomach was hunger and not nausea. “But – yes, perhaps.”

“I will return soon,” Legolas promised, practically leaping out of the bed. Then he paused and took the cup from Gimli’s hands. “First I will bring you more water.”

When he returned with the food, Gimli was still awake, though the energy that had allowed him to sit up was draining away. Legolas came to sit beside him once more with the plate on his lap, and Gimli allowed him to feed him a bite of dry toast, then a sip of tea.

It hurt to swallow, but his stomach did not immediately reject the offering. While they waited for it to settle, to see if he could take more, Legolas said carefully, “We have had visitors, while you were asleep.”

“Visitors?” Gimli fought off a surge of irrational worry. Legolas would surely not have let anyone in to see him like this. Would he?

Legolas raised the mug to his lips, and Gimli took another sip. The tea was too warm, the steam overheating his forehead and eyes, but it felt good against his throat and seemed to lessen some of the pressure in his head. “Some of my companions came by to ensure that I was well, and I told them that I knew not when I would return to work.” Gimli made to protest, but Legolas put a finger to his lips. “There is no use arguing; I will not leave you until you are hale once more. And Alma came after work in the forges had ended. She wished to see you, but I told her that you were sleeping, and that you would speak tomorrow.”

Alma. He would need to speak to her, would need to pass along instructions for shaping, reveal to her his preferences – especially if he was to be bedridden for a few days yet. “That was well done,” he said at last. “I have things to say to her. But you did not – they did not” –

Legolas seemed to understand. “No one saw you, no,” he promised. “I would not have let them in without your permission.”

“I never truly doubted it,” said Gimli, and let Legolas feed him a bit of apple. So far his stomach had made no protest against the food, except to ask for more.

After another long moment of silence, and a few more bites, Legolas said, “Thank you.”

“For what do you thank me?”

“For letting me take care of you.” Legolas traced cool fingers down the side of Gimli’s face and neck. “For not hiding your suffering from me.”

“As if I could, in this state,” Gimli said wryly. “But no – rather I thank you for caring for me, and not recoiling from this weakness. Surely you could not have imagined that your future might hold this, before you knew me.”
He tried to jest, but the worry was real. He had been laid low before Legolas before, and not since the Paths of the Dead had he been ashamed of it, but this was not a single incident – or it would not be. Rather, it was the reality of being mortal, however hardy Gimli was, and he could only hope that it was not too much for Legolas to bear.

“Much of what you are I could never have imagined,” said Legolas, lifting the mug to Gimli’s lips once more. “And every new surprise only makes me love you more. True, I have been reminded much today of the heartbreak that awaits me, but I have said before and I will say again that nothing in this world or beyond could entice me to give up even a step of our road together, whatever twists and surprises may lie along the path.”

Sudden tears sprang to Gimli’s eyes for the second time that day, his emotions perhaps more raw from his physical weakness, and the roughness in his throat was no longer solely from illness. He longed to take Legolas in his arms, to kiss him breathless, but he lacked the strength for it, and all he could do was reach over and place his hand on the elf’s knee.

Legolas’s free hand came down to hold it.

Chapter End Notes

One chapter left of this particular little plotline, up probably tomorrow!
Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

Gimli recovers, Alma visits, and Legolas will never stop worrying.

Chapter Notes

This is it for this particular little plotline, friends, which means I'm back to the drawing board for ideas - but I'm still having so much fun with these two that I hope it won't be too long before I have something else up. (Which makes me irrationally worried that I've just jinxed myself.) Anyway, I hope you enjoy!

The unfortunate result of spending all day abed was that there seemed little distinction between day and night, and the night passed in much the same way as the day: in alternating periods of fitful sleep and waking frustration.

But he was not alone for it. It was, Gimli reflected, the benefit of having an elf as a partner: the time of day was indifferent to Legolas as well, and whenever Gimli woke he was there, there with his cool hands and his loving eyes, there with soft kisses to face and head and hands, there with strong arms that raised Gimli up and laid him down again without ever shaming him for his weakness.

No. It was not the benefit of an elf as a partner. It was the benefit of Legolas.

He woke for good – so he believed, anyway – at sunrise the next morning, unable to close his eyes against the rays, with a clearer head and enough strength in his body to sit on his own without the overwhelming dizziness that had plagued him previously.

And with that strength came his first real awareness of how grotesque he felt.

His hair was a tangled mass against his back, loose braids long unraveled after hours of tossing. Clumps trailed over his forehead, grimy from grease, old sweat, and the forge two days before. His beard was in a similar state: braids fraying, oily hair limp against his chin and cheeks. He had been wearing the same nightshirt for more than a day, and had scarcely left the bed; when he shifted, the sharp tang of old and new sweat seemed to rise up in a foul mist around him.

He made a face.

Legolas sat up immediately. “What is wrong?” he asked. His hand went immediately to Gimli’s forehead. “Is it your head? Your stomach? Do you” –

Gimli shook his head, and was pleased to note that the motion caused only a slight haze rather than an onslaught of pounding dizziness. He was somewhat less pleased with the way it shifted the greasy hair over his forehead. “Fear not; I am well – much better, in fact. It is only that I have been in the same clothing for so long, and I find myself craving a bath.” He looked at Legolas hopefully. “Will you help me?”
Legolas’s smile was brighter than Gimli had seen it since before this had begun. “Of course,” he said, “so long as you feel you have the strength for it.” His hand brushed the loose hair back from Gimli’s brow. “You are still warmer than you ought to be, I think, but it is not so bad as it was yesterday.”

“As if you would recognize such a thing,” Gimli scoffed, and Legolas beamed even brighter before rushing off to prepare a bath.

When Legolas helped him up, Gimli found that though his body still wavered in alarming weakness, his head no longer spun when he tried to stand. Legolas no longer needed to half-carry him to the bathroom, but only to support him as he wobbled there on his own legs. His strides wove as they did not when he was anything but dead drunk, but they carried him into the bathroom, where Legolas assisted him in removing his clothing and climbing into the tub he had prepared.

The water was not as warm as Gimli usually liked, which felt good for a moment but soon made him shiver. But he stayed Legolas when he would have gone to heat more water, for his desire to be clean was only made stronger by the coolness of the water, and he did not wish to wait any longer.

It was not even humiliating to have Legolas wash him; bathing one another had been their habit and their pleasure since they had declared their sentiments. His one frustration was that he could not return the favor – and that Legolas did not respond to his enticements as he would have liked, restricting himself to the bathing and nothing else. But the disappointment was less than it might have been had it not felt so glorious to be clean, to have the grime and illness of the last days scrubbed and rinsed away until he felt made anew.

“Better?” The same smile of relief was in Legolas’s voice, although he sat behind Gimli in the tub.

“Indescribably.”

Legolas helped him out of the tub when they had finished, drying his body and his hair and fetching him a clean nightshirt to put on. Gimli would have dearly liked to wear day clothing, but to his chagrin it was already clear that he lacked the strength for anything other than simply returning to bed.

He felt his temper souring as Legolas supported him into the bedroom and sat him down in the chair beside the bed. It did improve for a moment when Legolas stripped the bed, exchanging the sheets and blankets for fresh ones with a speed and enthusiasm that Gimli himself had rarely shown in household chores, bundling the old sheets into a pile to wash later. And when he helped Gimli back into the bed, the dwarf had to admit that the clean bedding did much to reduce the unpleasantness of being unable to do anything but return to bed.

But fresh sheets and cool water could neither drive back the heat building up again in Gimli’s head and body, nor return the strength to his limbs, and his spirits sagged along with his body back against his pillows.

Gimli wished to walk to the kitchen for breakfast, but by the way he sighed and grumbled as he lay back down, it was apparent that bathing had taken all of his strength. So Legolas left him in bed and went to the kitchen to make him more toast and tea – and to escape his darkening mood.

Gimli had said nothing of it, but Legolas was certain that he missed the kinds of food that dwarves would make at such times. Legolas could make simple fare, but simple did not always translate to gentle, and he would not inflict experimental cooking on Gimli in such a weakened condition. But he knew Gimli wished for something better than toast, and he could only wish in turn that he were
able to provide it.

Perhaps later he would go to ask someone for advice, but he would not do it now. With the return of some strength – but not enough – Gimli’s awareness of his own weakness had sharpened, and with it his frustration at his confinement to bed. Legolas did not trust him to stay lying or sitting down if left alone. The horror of the morning before was still heavy on him, and whenever he thought of leaving, he was assailed by the image of returning only to find Gimli crumpled senseless on the ground like so much spider food. He could not leave – not now, not yet.

He cleaned instead.

After eating breakfast, Gimli asked for paper and pens to make notes: he expected Alma to come by after her work at the forges was finished, and he wished to note down all that he wanted to tell her. Legolas brought him the paper and left him to it, hoping that it would improve his mood and not lower it. Then he turned to a task he could perform.

The house had been closed for over a day, the air grown stale, so Legolas threw open doors and windows (after ensuring that the bedroom would remain warm enough for Gimli’s comfort) to freshen it. Then he filled a tub with water and brought it outside along with their laundry.

Misled by his inability to cook, Gimli had been surprised at first at how well he could perform most domestic tasks. But Legolas was a warrior first, one who might at any time be called out onto a patrol and one who had learned to always take care of his clothing, his weapons, and his space. His room in Lasgalen had always been kept neat at his father’s behest – perhaps surprisingly, Laerwen was the less tidy of the two siblings – and he had never wanted others let loose in his private space, so he had always done it himself instead.

So now he set himself to cleaning their house: washing clothing and bedding and then hanging it up to dry; sweeping the floor; wiping down tables and other surfaces; scrubbing the bathroom until it shined. And all the while he listened for any indication that Gimli might need him; checked in the bedroom at regular intervals to bring him water or tea.

Gimli slept again around midday, his notes on the table beside him, and woke in the late afternoon. He insisted on being prepared for Alma’s arrival, to preserve as much dignity as possible, so Legolas braided his hair for him, fluffed the pillows behind his back, brought a robe to drape over his shoulders. And just as he had finished these small tasks, he heard a knock at the door.

“That will be Alma,” said Gimli. “Will you” –

“Of course,” said Legolas, rising to answer the door.

Alma was standing outside the door when Legolas opened it, holding a large basket in both hands. Her tiny braids had been tied into bundles behind her head and under her chin, as though to keep them out of the way, there were smudges of soot on her face, and she greeted Legolas with a wide smile.

“Good afternoon, my lord Legolas,” she said. “I am pleased to see you, if less glad of the circumstances of the encounter.”

“I share both sentiments,” said Legolas, standing aside to let her in. “But I thank you for coming. Gimli has been eagerly awaiting your arrival – he tires of sitting at home with only my company.”

“He is a fool if he wearies of your company.” Alma tossed her head. “But that is no more than I would expect of him.” Her voice rose as she stepped across the threshold and looked around, as
though hoping Gimli were somewhere nearby to hear her.

“Even in visits of courtesy, you cannot stay your tongue?” came Gimli’s own raised voice from the bedroom, but the last words grated audibly, and he dissolved into a fit of coughing. Legolas tensed, but he knew Gimli would not wish him to rush to his aid – not in front of Alma – so he forced himself to stay and smile at her.

In truth, it was not a difficult task. She had glanced in concern back to the source of Gimli’s voice, but then turned to face Legolas again, her own cheer renewed. “In truth, he is only getting what he deserves,” she confided, still in that loud voice. “He could do with a lesson in humility. But ah!” She held out the basket to Legolas. “May I put this in your kitchen? It is for you and Lord Gimli.”

“For us?” She had brought something for them that must be brought to the kitchen? Legolas dared to hope –

“Bjolla and I made it together – it is the chicken soup our mother used to make us when we were ill as children. It is not as good as hers, for she has ever refused to tell us the secret ingredient, but Lis tried it and said it would do.” She heaved a large cloth-wrapped pot out of the basket and set it on the table, followed by a cloth bag. “And here are half a dozen braided buns. We meant no offense to whatever you might be making, but we thought that Lord Gimli might like to have some proper Ereborean food to aid in his recovery.”

Legolas’s knees almost went weak, and he laughed in pure relief at their kindness. “In truth, Alma, I have no cooking skills at all, and your lord complains loudly and often of my shortcomings in the kitchen. I cannot thank you enough for this gift.”

Alma’s brows arched. “So he was telling the truth then, when he spoke of it! It is my wont not to believe a word he says.” She winked at Legolas. “Ah, well, you may be assured that your cooking skills are the only thing he does not praise.”

Legolas’s cheeks warmed, and for a moment it felt so good to speak so lightly, to think of Gimli speaking of him with fondness around his companions and friends. The sensation was nearly the same as when he had opened the doors to allow the fresh air in – as though Alma herself were a warm spring breeze into the gloom that their home had become. “Well, I am sure he will be just as filled with praise for your soup. Shall we bring him a bowl to eat while you confer?”

Alma was amenable, so Legolas filled two bowls with the soup and they carried them into the bedroom where Gimli was waiting.

He looked hot and irritable, but his face brightened up as they entered. “I had wondered what delayed you,” he said, “but now I see it was the happiest kind of delay. Did you make this?”

“Bjolla and I, my lord,” said Alma, “with the compliments in her absence of Aldis. It was ever as good as any medicine in my youth, and I hoped it would do the same for you.”

Gimli inhaled appreciatively. “I have no doubt it will.”

Legolas stood and made to tiptoe out, that the two of them might speak uninterrupted, but Gimli caught his wrist before he could go. “Come eat with us?” he requested, his eyes softer than they had been since the morning. “Practical matters can wait until pleasant company is satisfied.”

Legolas hesitated. “I would not impose” –

“Stay, my lord,” urged Alma. “I should surely grow dreadfully bored with only Lord Gimli to keep me company.”
Gimli made an indignant noise, though he frowned after and cleared his throat, and Legolas looked to the contents of the cups on the bedside table. Both mug and cup were empty, and he brought them with him into the kitchen to refill Gimli’s tea and water, before returning with a bowl of soup for himself.

The food and the company were equally pleasant, and Alma seemed to have had the same effect on Gimli that she had on Legolas – shaking him free of the disgruntled frustration that had shrouded him for much of the day. They talked and laughed as they ate, and then Legolas excused himself so that they could speak of their work undisturbed.

For all his airing out of the house, he had spent the majority of the day indoors, so he went outside to lie in the grass behind their house and watch the sky. The sun was near to setting, and he followed its path with his eyes toward the horizon. He would have sung to it, but his ears were occupied listening to Alma’s and Gimli’s voices inside.

He did not know Khuzdul, save the few words that Gimli had taught him or he had picked up on his own, but he loved listening to the sound of it in other dwarves’ voices (particularly Gimli’s, of course). When spoken fast, the syllables seemed to blend together and become one continuous sound, like rocks rumbling against one another on shifting ground. Gimli’s and Alma’s deep voices traded places, sometimes overlapping with one another or flowing together in their excitement, the slightly different tones of their voices creating a cushion of harmony that seemed to bear the sun across the sky.

It struck him as he lay there that he was very weary, but he put that thought out of his mind as quickly as he could. It was true that Gimli was on the way to recovery, but he was not there yet, and Legolas would not let his guard down until he knew for certain that all would be well.

The sounds in the bedroom changed eventually: the scraping of a chair that said Alma was getting up; the voices slowing and lightening. Legolas rose from the ground and was already returning to the house when he heard his name called.

He met Alma in the doorway, on her way out. “Farewell, Lord Legolas!” she said. “Thank you for the company” – and here her voice softened – “and thank you for your care for Lord Gimli. For all that I tease him, he is dear to me, and I am comforted knowing that he is in such capable hands.”

“Of course,” said Legolas – as though he would have done anything less! “I am glad to know that you find no fault in my actions, and I thank you in turn for coming. You have teased him into far better humor than I have managed yet this day.”

He said that last with a smile, trying to make fun, but she laid her hand on his arm. “His humor is better because you are here with him,” she said seriously. “I did not know Lord Gimli well before he knew you, but enough to see how much joy you bring him. I know not if you know that, but – I hope you do not doubt it.” And then she looked down and away with an embarrassed laugh, but Legolas’s heart was touched.

“Ever do I endeavor not to,” he said softly. “Thank you, Alma. I hope you know also that he holds the utmost affection for you.”

“I know.” She looked up again, pert smile back on her face. “And it is for this reason that I will devote myself heart and soul to shouting his orders at the bumbling in the forges.” She waved a sheaf of notes. “I will go now, Lord Legolas. Fare you well, and good night!”

“And you.”
For all that Alma had ended the conversation with lightness, Legolas’s heart was full as he returned to the bedroom. Gimli was leaning back against his pillows, robe and blankets all cast aside, face flushed and eyes closed. Legolas hastened to his side to lay a hand on his cheek.

“I love you,” Gimli mumbled, eyes still shut. “I think I have not said that today.”

“And how do you know it is I, and you are not declaring your love for Alma?” Legolas asked, trying to tease, though his voice wobbled.

Gimli turned his face into Legolas’s hand. “I would know your hands from any other pair in the world,” he slurred, still without opening his eyes.

Legolas kissed his forehead. “I love you, too,” he said. “But let us now tuck you in properly for sleep, shall we?”

Gimli yawned, and sighed. “If we must,” he said. “Though I could stay awake a bit longer.”

He looked as though he were seconds away from falling asleep, and Legolas was not sure whether to worry or to laugh. So instead he helped Gimli lie down for good, straightening the sheets and tucking him in under a single blanket, and then sat down at his side to keep watch as he slept.

Gimli’s fever broke for good the next morning.

He had slept more soundly that night than the one before: perhaps after being awake for much of the day and eating substantial fare, his body was beginning to return to normal. Legolas had kept the already-familiar vigil at his side, hand resting on his forehead. The temperature had lowered since the day before, to be sure, but it still felt too warm throughout most of the night, and Gimli still perspired, though the chills seemed to have mostly gone. But – and Legolas did not understand entirely how he recognized it – he knew exactly when the fever was gone. Perhaps he had grown more skilled in recognizing differences in temperature, or perhaps it was simply the soft sigh that Gimli let out, some tightness in his face that finally relaxed.

He woke shortly after, taking a deep breath before opening his eyes and smiling – a real, if tired, smile – up into Legolas’s face. His eyes were clear, and they danced.

“Am I yet delirious,” he said, “or does the brightest star in the heavens shine down upon me?” He reached up to lay his palm – his cool, dry palm – against Legolas’s cheek. “Ah! it is no mirage. My eyes tell the truth: that I am indeed the most fortunate dwarf on Middle-earth.” Legolas was smiling now, helplessly; Gimli’s fingers stroked the rounds of his cheekbones and the corners of his mouth, and his answering smile was sweet and languid. “Then do my senses not lie to me, Legolas, when they say I will soon be well?”

Legolas laughed finally, and let himself fall to the bed at Gimli’s side, nuzzling his cheek against Gimli’s. “They do not lie, my love. Your fever broke this morning, and even could I not read it in the temperature of your skin, it is plain in the renewed deftness of your tongue.”

“Ah, is it?” said Gimli, rolling to his side, eyes shining with promise. “Let us test that. I should hate for you to be mistaken.” And he cupped the back of Legolas’s neck and drew him into their first full kiss since he had fallen ill.

The kiss was long and soft and sweet, and Legolas felt he could drown in it. The fullness of Gimli’s attention, no longer in confused shreds or distracted by discomfort; the satisfaction of having something so long denied; and the relief of knowing that the worst was over. When they finally slipped apart, Legolas felt he might now need to be steadied.
Gimli placed a gentle finger against his lower lip. “I will call that test a success, I think,” he said.

Legolas laughed then, and he could not stop: the tension of days and nights of worry surged up into a compressed cloud of steam in his chest, and it was as though some force within him was expelling it all, as though every burst of mirth sent some of that fear free. He slumped against Gimli, buried his face against his shoulder, still shaking with laughter, practically snorting with it, and Gimli stroked his hair and wrapped an arm around his back, sure and strong.

When the fit finally abated, Legolas realized that he had wept as well, laughter and tears mingling without his notice, and he wiped his face on Gimli’s sleeve before subsiding against him, weak with relief.

“Oh, Legolas,” Gimli said softly, his voice no longer teasing but gentle and soothing. “You have been so good to me these last days. Have you taken any thought for yourself?”

“How have I been?” Ah, he was still crying; he turned his face into Gimli’s neck again, words barely escaping through his choked throat. “I have never done this before, Gimli; always I feared I would make things worse instead of better, and yet – and yet” – He gasped for breath and let it out in a wordless whimpering sob; Gimli made quiet soothing noises, but waited for him to finish speaking. He managed it finally, in a voice strained almost to a squeak – “And yet I was so glad whenever I thought I brought you relief.”

“You did.” Gimli’s fingers sifted through his hair. “Not since I was a child have I been cared for so attentively, so lovingly. And yet I knew, when I could think outside of myself, how much it must be taxing you.” Legolas gasped another sob against Gimli’s beard, and Gimli kissed his head. “I am well, I will be well,” he murmured, “all is well, let it out, my love, let it go.”

Some endless time later, Legolas’s tears finally slowed to a stop. He left his head where it was, face still pressed into the curve of Gimli’s neck, eyes closed, breathing him in. He still smelled of sweat and days in bed, the scent of pipeweed and wood-smoke disorientingly absent, but he was himself, and he was sound in mind and almost in body, and the scent of him would always be a comfort to Legolas.

“We should rise,” murmured Legolas when he had calmed. “You will want a bath, I think, and breakfast? I can make toast and fruit again, or we have the buns that Alma brought us, and if you would like something more substantial, that can surely be arranged.” But the strength seemed to flow out of him with every word, and he wondered if he would have any left to rise himself, let alone to assist Gimli.

“Later,” Gimli said, caressing his hair again. “You sound so tired, and I suspect you have not slept at all since the onset of this illness. Am I correct in that presumption?”

Legolas thought frantically about how to answer that without telling a blatant falsehood, but his thoughts were as slow as his body, and Gimli spoke again before he could. “As I thought. And have you eaten?”

“When you did.” The pillow beneath his head was very soft, and Gimli’s beard against his face even softer.

“Then in time we will rise together, and break our fast together, and finally wash off the last remnants of these unpleasant days,” said Gimli. His hands on Legolas’s hair and back were slow, lulling. “But now you will take the rest you have denied yourself.”

“But you” –
“I will wait for you.” Gimli forestalled his protest. “I think I can rise on my own now, but I know your worry, and I will not do anything to rouse it. We will lie together for some time yet, and then we will rise and leave these last days behind us.” His hand ran up and down Legolas’s back again, gentle and strong, drawing away the last of Legolas’s resistance. “Rest, Legolas. I love you, and I am grateful to you, and I promise you that all will be well. Sleep.”

Legolas could not fight him – and for the first time now, he did not need to. Gimli would be well. They would both be well.

He slept.

Exactly three days later, as commanded, Gimli re-entered the forge to a round of boisterous applause.

He was immediately swarmed: dwarves everywhere were shouting his name, squeezing his arms, slapping him on the back. Alma ran at him full-tilt and hit him in an embrace so tight that the breath huffed from his lungs.

He could not help but laugh as they separated, scrubbing an embarrassed hand over his forehead. “Yes, yes,” he said, “I am back. Such enthusiasm! I almost fear to see what little was accomplished in my absence, if you are all so relieved to see me returned!”

“Do not be ungenerous, my lord,” chided Regar. “You know we are merely reassured to see you hale once more.”

Gimli clapped him on the shoulder. “I know, and I am grateful for your concern.” He would have preferred no need for the fuss at all, of course, but his heart warmed at the concerned and welcoming faces all arrayed before him, all glad to see him in full health.

“We could not help but worry for you,” chimed in Narin, “left alone to the tender mercies of an elf! Who is to say” –

He was shoved and shushed quickly into silence, but Gimli was already drawing himself up, good humor fading. After all that his people had already seen and done, after all the care Legolas had taken of him, still this was the second thing mentioned upon his return? He took a breath, angry words on his tongue – but he did not get the chance to speak.

“Tender mercies?” fired back Alma, hands to hips, shoulders drawing back. She looked so formidable that for a moment Gimli forgot that she was his second, under his command. “Aye, more tender even than I received from my own mother in childhood! Coddle your suspicions as you will, Narin, but leave them at the door to this forge, for I will have none of them!”

An explosion of noise followed, shouting and stamping and pointing: dwarves arguing as they only did among themselves, as though Alma’s words had thrown a fresh spark into a pile of embers. This sort of conflict was not new, and even the subject of it was not – it took dwarves a long time to trust anyone not of their own folk; their history with the other races was well-kept and full of too many slights, and for all that Legolas had never proven anything but a hesitant friend to them, they did not know him well enough to relax their traditions. But through the yelling, and even adding his own voice to the din in an effort to restore order, Gimli was pleased to notice how many voices were raised in defense.

He caught Skafi’s eye as the shouting began to calm down. His older advisor was standing apart from the others, taking no part in the argument, and he did not look at Gimli for long; an unreadable expression crossed his face, and he looked away.
Gimli knew not what had passed between Skafi and Legolas – and he knew the other dwarf well enough to know that his mind was not easily changed. It was more likely than anything that Skafi’s only reason for abstaining was that he had no desire to raise his voice. But even this smallest amount of progress was heartening.

“For shame!” As the voices died down, Gimli finally managed to make himself be heard. “Stop this now, else I shall be forced to assume you have managed nothing but squabbling in my absence!” The last arguing murmurs seemed to die away into sullenness, but if there was anything that could bring a group of dwarves together again, it was this. “Now, before we begin today’s work, I would see what has been accomplished over the last days,”

And he let himself be led around the forge, between shaping and welding stations, listened to the assessments of the metal and the changes that would need to be made to their plans, with a clear head and legs that did not waver.
Chapter 15

Chapter Summary

Legolas and Eleniel have both lost parts of themselves.

Chapter Notes

Warning for some discussion of trauma and recovery. And some really horrible insults that I kind of hate myself for having written.

Mediocre news (which could be good or bad depending on how you see it): I think I have developed a plotline that will bring this story to a thematic close. I haven't started writing it at all yet, but I think it'll be another few chapters. That's not to say that I won't keep writing in this universe or even in this setting, but I think after that little arc I'll mark this story as complete and add anything else I write as separate little stories. I just don't like having an incomplete story hanging over my head.

Returning to this particular scene: I actually don't know when this takes place, because it could be set at almost any point in the (probably) year or so that this story has spanned. But it basically involves Legolas and Eleniel working through some things together and being there for each other.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The call was strong today.

Legolas knew not why it was so, for the sea remained ever too far away even for his eyes to make out, but it was worse on days when the wind blew from the southwest. He had asked his companions if they could feel it, but it seemed it was only he: the scent of sea and salt seemed blown into the white city, the faint, high notes of the sea’s call singing in his ears along with the wind.

He tried to focus, tried to bury his hands in the soil and listen to the song of the earth and the things that grew there, the trees both old and new, as they discovered new harmonies. Tried to hear them as they were, tried to join his voice to those of his fellows in songs of life and hope and stillness, but the harmonies were flat and discordant to him as that high, unearthly melody stole into his heart and his lungs, winding through his soul until he could hardly breathe for yearning.

They were spreading seeds along the pathways of the parks: ferns and wildflowers that would grow up only partially tamed, in explosions of green and sprays of color that would please the corners of the eye without stealing it entirely, that would bring some of the wildness of the forest into the city without taking it over. They sang as they planted, and Legolas’s voice faltered and failed, and the blood in his body sank low into his belly until there was none left in his fingers, and he gazed down at his handful of seeds and thought he might as well be sowing the earth with salt.

He lurched to his feet. His fingers opened without his awareness and scattered the seeds over the stone before him. He looked down at them and thought how tiny they were, stirred in the sea-sent
breeze, and he wondered if he were in truth any stronger.

Without speaking, he turned to leave. And, equally silent, Eleniel rose and left with him.

He heard her behind him, but he spoke not a word, wandering off in search of the source of the wind. It blew his hair back, and he closed his eyes and turned his face into the salty spray.

No. No, there was no spray. No salt. The wind carried song, nothing more – but what song it was.

He stopped at last at a low stone wall in a crevice in the hill that made the city, looking out over the other levels. The wall was low enough for him to sit comfortably, his feet stretched out before him, heels balanced on the stone below. Without asking, Eleniel sat beside him, turned her face in the same direction, although he knew she could not hear the song he did. After long moments, she spoke at last.

“What is it like?” she said.

“What?” he asked, knowing what she meant but not in a mood to make things easy.

“The sea-longing.” She remained patient. “I saw it upon you in Lasgalen, but it is different here. It seems stronger and weaker at the same time.”

“It is.” He closed his eyes, so they would not strain to look out at the sea that evaded his sight. “It is stronger here, because I know the sea is so close – and if you would have the truth of me, Eleniel, sometimes I fear I will be so entranced by the song that I will simply wander away and follow it.”

He could not have said this with his eyes open, could not have said it if he were not in this strange dream state, in which nothing quite felt real. And could not have continued if not for the fact that she remained silent beside him, listening still. “But it is also in being here – in our company, in our work – that I see my future on Middle-earth extend for a few years yet. And,” he trailed off. “And it is better now I am not alone at night.”

“Gimli?” asked Eleniel.

“Gimli.” And now it was not just the song of the sea in his heart, and he even felt himself smiling. “It is worst at night, for my dreams are no longer a haven of my own device – but it is better with him at my side. His arms are a shield from the wind, his heart a drumbeat that keeps out its constant cry.”

“He is the reason you stay, you told me once,” said Eleniel. He remembered when he had said it, months ago in Lasgalen when they had spoken of wounds that did not heal. He still wondered sometimes if he had wounded her more in saying it.

“He is,” he said now, again. “And not even because I love him more than anything – for I would not have you think that my affection for you is lessened” –

“Legolas.” Her voice was so fond and exasperated that he had to open his eyes, to look into her face. “You will not wound me with comparison – and I would hardly have you hold back a truth to spare my feelings.” She rolled her eyes, and abruptly the relief of that familiarity coupled with his thoughts of Gimli to loosen something tight and straining at the corners of his mouth and eyes.

“My love for him is of a different kind, that is all,” he said. “He is a creature of the earth and stone, so solid in himself and in his heart that it awes me, draws my eyes and my heart so that I cannot pull them away.” She was sighing again, but Legolas was not entirely present, some part of him called still to the sea and the wind, another part pulled low and away, down to the forges below where the dwarves were working – and the part of him that was still here was dreamy and distant. “He is my
anchor, my safe harbor, the line tied to my heart that keeps me from being swept out to sea.”

When he finished, Eleniel did not speak immediately, and he looked over to see that she had leaned back on her hands and was gazing into the sky. He kept his eyes on her, brows raised, until she pretended to start and look up.

“Ah – are you finished?”

He contemplated elbowing her in the side, but decided that in fact the best solution was simply to needle her further. “When it comes to him, never.” He allowed himself to lapse back into that dreamlike state, this time a bit more aware. “If you wish, I could speak to you for hours of his virtues, and still describe but a part. But no words of mine could ever truly match him: the burning coals of his eyes and his hair, as though he is a being made from flame itself – and yet how solid he is, like the earth itself; the strength in his arms as they wield an axe, and yet they hold me with such gentleness” –

“I yield!” yelped Eleniel, throwing an arm over her eyes. “You need speak no more – such words I need not hear from your lips!” She looked up at him again, her smile equal parts amused and repulsed. “That I should see my dearest friend become a love-struck fool – that, I confess, I had never anticipated.”

“Nor had I,” said Legolas, and he too was smiling despite himself, the sea-winds banished, if only for the moment. “And I should not have come to be so, were he not eminently deserving of all the love I could ever give him – indeed, deserving of better than me, though I endeavor to be all I can” –

“This too I will not hear,” said Eleniel, stern now. “You are enough as you are, Legolas, and I imagine Gimli says the same.”

“That he does.” And would again, no doubt, if he heard this conversation. “But I can hardly be blamed for these thoughts, in the face of such magnificence. Come now, Eleniel, you cannot deny it!”

Eleniel put her head to one side, as though thinking, and then shrugged. “I do not find him unlovely,” she conceded, “but neither do I see such glory as you proclaim him to be – not in body, anyway.” She looked over at Legolas now, with mischief dancing about the corners of her mouth. “But then, to my eyes you are no great prize yourself, and yet he seems impressed enough. So perhaps the fault lies with me and not with you.”

“And you, ever the bloom of perfect beauty, are one to say such a thing.”

He did not think about his words – not before they left his mouth, not even while speaking. It was not until the moment after, when Eleniel did not laugh, but her breath caught instead, her face stricken, and her weakened right hand came up to tug at the ragged ends of her hair, dangling only to her scarred cheekbone.

Immediately he was on his knees before her, seizing her free hand in both of his. “Eleniel, no,” he said, “I did not mean – I meant only to jest with you – you know I have never” –

“I know you meant no harm,” she said, “but that does not lessen the truth of your words.” The corners of her mouth pulled up, wavered, and dropped again. “I know you do not see me for my beauty, but I feel its lack here as I never did in Lasgalen.” Her hand trembled inside his.

“You do not lack beauty!” Legolas protested. “You know I do not truly believe that, and that even did you I hardly see you for the perfection of your body!”
“You do not, but they do!” She yanked her hand free and took her own right arm in it, tracing the patterns that flames had twisted into her skin, up her arm and neck and cheek. “They stare at me, Legolas, the mortals, and I listen to their whispers when they know not that I can hear them.” Her hand had reached her hair once more – the hair that would take at least another yen to grow back to its former length. “Their shock that one of the Fair Folk could be so horribly disfigured, and yet paraded so before the world.” Her voice had turned hard and bitter, but her breath came short with it, and her eyes closed. “Their new understanding of,” she moved her hands from her hair to press them both to her mouth, muffling her voice, “of how elves” – Her breath was hitching now, the bitterness in her voice losing ground to plain hurt – “might have been t-twist – twisted into orcs.”

The breath rushed from Legolas’s lungs as though he had been struck in the chest; his lower body went numb, but he realized that he was on his feet. If anything could have driven the sea from his mind now, it was this. “Who?” he said, hardly hearing his own voice beyond the rushing of blood in his ears. “Who said this?”

“I know not.” she whispered, “some man in the city – but it matters not. For it is true, is it not? It was not said to my face, in an effort to wound or manipulate, but murmured in a moment of unmasked shock. It is true, and it” –

“No!” Legolas dropped to his knees again, reached to pull her hands away from her face, but she recoiled. He pulled back as well, stung – and then immediately ashamed of himself. He should have asked her; he should not have assumed – but no! This moment was not about him, and he must stop dwelling on his own mistakes! “No, Eleniel, it is not true! Anyone who would say such a thing of you is a fool who cannot understand what true beauty is” –

“I know, I know,” she said sharply, hands still covering her face, fingertips pressed against closed eyes. “I know these wounds, these scars, were honorably won, and I know that you have never seen me for anything outside of that which lies within. Nor have I ever been a great beauty, so this should not matter to me, but it does. It does, Legolas! I was a warrior, and I was an elf, and if both of those titles have been stolen from me, what is left?”

“Everything!” Legolas forgot himself, forgot all of his own concerns, all of his own pain. “You are nothing less than what you have ever been. You do not cease to be a warrior merely because you cannot handle your weapons as you once could. You do not cease to be an elf merely because your skin is scarred and your hair cropped. And you are not dear to us because of your beauty or your strength in arms! It is the strength of your spirit that we love, not your body: your courage and wisdom and joy. Eleniel,” and she did not look at him, but he softened his voice now, with all the persuasive power he possessed, “after all the times you have assured me of my own worth and expected me to believe you, how can I not do the same for you now?”

She took a short, sharp breath, as though she would have snapped back at him, but then stopped. The silence between them held for a long moment, and then she sighed.

“But I do not speak of you,” she said quietly, “I know you care for me, Legolas, you and the rest of our companions. I know you do not esteem my worth by what I have lost. But what of the mortals here, the men and dwarves who mutter such things?”

“They can eat spider eggs,” said Legolas.

The sound Eleniel made was sudden, sharp, but muffled in her palms – almost a cross between a sob and a snort. Her fingers curled back and down away from her eyes, which gazed at Legolas – the one glazed and narrowed in a permanent squint, the other overbright – in seeming disbelief.

“I mean it,” he insisted. “I will not make assumptions of the entirety of their races, nor will I
abandon the attempts to forge friendship between our peoples, but anyone who has said such things of you is not worthy of that friendship! I say again: they can eat spider eggs, and may they choke upon them alone in the bramble-thickets!"

Her shoulders hitched, and she made the sound again – and then she slid to her knees beside him and spilled forward into his embrace. He held her tight as she shook against him, with laughter or tears he knew not, closed his eyes and matched his breathing to hers until it slowed and steadied, and their hearts beat together.

“Thank you, my friend,” she said at last, withdrawing from him.

“You have no need to thank me,” he said. “And I hope you know that should you point me in the direction of anyone who has hurt you, I will not hesitate to demonstrate that the elves are made of much more than our famed beauty.”

“I never doubted it.” She gave a watery laugh and drew a hand across her eyes. “Still, I am grateful for your support and your steadfastness.”

“It is only what we do for one another – what we have ever done for one another.”

“And what we will continue to do.” She caught his hand once more, pressed it gently, and he felt the twisted and puckered ridges of her skin against his fingers. “If I have not lost myself, then neither have you – neither will you. You have your anchor here, your Gimli, but even if you did not” – and there was a silence, as she very carefully did not say when – “we are still here for you, in body and spirit, when you sail or whether.”

“Yes,” he breathed. “Yes, I know.”

He squeezed her hand, holding on even when her fingers could no longer grip back, and turned his face once more into the wind. After a moment, she began to hum – low and sweet, the sound of the interlacing roots of the grassy hill at their backs. He listened for a time, letting the melody seep into him along with the warmth of her hand, and he let it ground him in the stone beneath his body. And then, when he felt ready, he joined in.

Chapter End Notes

I read a story once, awhile ago, so I don't quite remember which it was, but it suggested that elves' hair takes a really, really long time to grow. I liked that idea, especially because of how significant long hair is to them, so I used it here.
Chapter 16

Chapter Summary

Aragorn asks Legolas and Gimli to help him prepare for a massive New Year celebration; Arwen and Legolas have a talk.

Chapter Notes

Okay. The last plotline of this story is beginning, and this chapter is a sort of transition from the last one to this one - because Legolas had some feelings that were left unaddressed.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The royal summons came the way they might have expected it: delivered by a page, to be sure, but the note was handwritten in the familiar scratchy hand that spoke of too many years in the wild.

_Come dine with me tomorrow night, my friends. It has been too long, and I have things to discuss with you. Good things, Legolas. Do not worry._

Gimli laughed when he saw it, with a squeeze of Legolas’s shoulders that soothed his inclination to take offense. “It only means he knows you, Legolas,” he said, still chuckling. “And come, you would rather he told you now, would you not, than worry about what he had to say?”

“He could have been less blatant,” mumbled Legolas, but Gimli just clapped him on the shoulder and directed the page to bring back their yes.

Aragorn and Arwen greeted them heartily when they arrived. It had been too long – usually they made a point to dine together every few weeks, and this time, it had been more than a month. “It is good to see you,” said Aragorn, embracing Legolas as Arwen kissed Gimli’s cheek. “And you especially,” as he greeted Gimli himself. “I had word you were unwell for some time?”

Legolas could not help stiffening, and he thought Arwen noticed it; she held him for a moment longer than she would have, and he thought – not for the first time – that they must speak again. There were things about loving a mortal that he had never considered, and though her own situation was somewhat different he thought that she, who had done so for so long, might have advice or experience to offer him.

“Aye,” grumbled Gimli, batting Aragorn away, “and if one day I would be allowed to forget it, that would be most welcome.” He looked up suddenly, frowning. “And whence came your ‘word’?”

His glance turned to Legolas, who held up his hands in denial. “I had not heard” –

“I visited the forges last week for an update on your work,” Aragorn interrupted. “I received it from your second, but inquired as to your absence and was told that you were away under order of a healer.”
“Alma,” muttered Gimli, but the heat was gone from his words. “Why in Mahal’s name did she not tell me” –

“Alma indeed,” said Aragorn. “She was both competent and charming – more of the latter than I had believed dwarves could be, before witnessing your encounter with the Lady Galadriel.”

Gimli waved this off, though he was blushing. “Competent or not, charming or not, I will have her braids for not informing me.”

“She must have merely forgotten,” said Legolas. “It was a time of much – excitement.” He could not help squeezing Gimli’s shoulder, reassuring himself of its solidity, but when Gimli looked up at him with too much understanding in his eyes, he sought to divert his attention. “I mean, with the forging of the gates. Those are nearly ready to be welded together, are they not?”

He did not like the way they were all looking at him now, but Aragorn was merciful. “Indeed, exactly that was one of the things I wished to discuss with you,” he said. “But shall we eat first?”

They dined in his and Arwen’s private quarters, as they were wont when it was only they four: the fare was finer, richer than what they cooked for themselves, but not overly so, and the company was equally satisfying. At first, they merely made pleasant conversation: anecdotes from the last weeks they had spent apart (though Legolas and Gimli both avoided any mention of the week before); speculations on goings-on within and between their companies. Through their work in the gardens, a fine friendship seemed to have struck up between Duvaineth and Lis, and it was a delight to watch.

“Perhaps they will be the next to scandalize Lasgalen and Erebor alike,” teased Aragorn.

Legolas laughed, but to his surprise Gimli shook his head. “Nay, that honor belongs yet only to us,” he said, resting a hand on Legolas’s. “Lis has a – a partner still in Erebor. They are not yet wed, but I know her eyes will not stray.”

This was the first Legolas had heard of such a thing. “And they are willing to be separated for so long?” he said. “Does Lis plan to come to the Glittering Caves with you? Will her partner join her then, or remain away? Or come to visit her here?”

“In fact it was of this – among other things – that I wished to speak to you,” said Aragorn before Gimli could answer. “Of family and friends in other places, and of your work here.”

He made a signal, and a servant came in to remove their empty plates as they rose and moved to the couches in the sitting room. Legolas settled against the armrest, pulling Gimli into his side, half on top of him. It was a comfort still, to sit so close to him, and Arwen gave him another significant look that let him know they still had a conversation ahead of them.

When they were all settled, goblets of wine beside them, Aragorn sat forward in his chair and began. “As you know by now, the Gondorian New Year has been changed to the anniversary of Frodo’s triumph and Sauron’s defeat. Last year, you may recall, it was a fairly quiet celebration, and even more so the year before – for all that we recognized a new beginning, we have still been focused so much on the past and our losses that it did not seem right to revel. But since the last ship departed, and with it all the Ringbearers” – and he paused for a moment of unannounced silence, as they all remembered – “we have truly said farewell to the Third Age. And with respect to all the work that you and your people have done, I think it is worth a celebration to welcome the next age and celebrate the new world we are building.”

A celebration. Legolas’s first instinct was to flinch from that – he remembered well Aragorn’s coronation, then his wedding; his own discomfort with the crowds. But then –
Gimli shifted beside him. “What kind of celebration?” he asked.

– perhaps Legolas’s discomfort then had come from more than the people in the crowds. And he remembered again the feast with which his father had welcomed him home, the giddiness that had overcome him, and even how the wedding feast in Erebor had not been so frightening, not with Gimli by his side, not with the music and dancing and drinking that kept eyes from lingering on him for too long. And he thought perhaps such a celebration might be enjoyable with Gimli by his side.

“Doubtless nothing so different from those to which you are accustomed,” said Arwen, “if perhaps a bit more varied. Feasting, dancing; we thought contests and games on the Pelennor Fields. And visitors,” she smiled, “from all around Middle-earth.”

Before those words could fully sink in, Aragorn took up the thread again. “We had planned to send messages and invitations to Erebor, Lasgalen, and the Shire.”

“The Shire!” And now all of Legolas’s apprehension was gone; he clasped his hands in front of him. “The hobbits!”

They had received a few letters from the hobbits, but not many. Sam, it seemed, was busy with his wife and child, and his new duties in the rebuilding of the Shire, and Merry and Pippin as inseparable as ever, so they simply sent joint letters, which Aragorn had invited Legolas and Gimli to read whenever he received them. It would be wonderful to see their small friends again.

“And the Lonely Mountain, and Lasgalen,” mused Gimli. “You would have us invite our families, then?”

“If they would come,” said Arwen. “Many and deep are the grudges of the old world, but we intend to build a new one here and now. How better to celebrate such a thing than to invite elves, dwarves, men, and hobbits all to the White City to look together into the future?”

“I do not think my father would come,” said Legolas, “but I think he would be pleased to be invited.” He spared a moment to wonder if Laerwen – but somehow even the thought of her in this setting felt strange and wrong. Still, should any of his people come, he would welcome them. “Yes, send the invitation to the Greenwood; I will ask the others if they have folk they would invite. And what think you, Gimli? Are there those among your people who would come to see Gondor welcome the Fourth Age in more than just name?”

Gimli nodded slowly. “I cannot say for certain, but it can do no harm to ask.” He turned to Aragorn. “Give me some time and I will speak to my companions and give you a list of names.”

“Wonderful,” Aragorn said. “And there is more I would discuss with you – it is the reason I visited the forges last week. Forgive me for allowing business to intrude on pleasantries, but I would know from your own lips how the future stands: whether the gates will be finished in time, and which aspects of the construction you would prioritize for such an event.”

Legolas had learned that business and pleasantry were not so very distant in Gimli’s mind, not when it came to the work he loved – and when Gimli immediately shifted away from him towards Aragorn, leaned into the conversation with enthusiasm and much gesturing, Legolas wondered if Aragorn had not known it just as well. Wondered, in fact, if all this was not simply a ploy. Because as soon as Gimli was distracted, Arwen met Legolas’s eyes with her own smiling ones. Rose from her armchair. And gestured for him to follow her.

“I have seen fear in your eyes this night, my friend,” she said softly, once she had led him into the next room. “I would know if it is anything I can soothe.”
“I” – He could not meet her eyes. “It is foolish.”

“No fear is foolish when an elf loves a mortal,” she said. “I think I can guess at what troubles you, Legolas, but I would rather you told me.”

“You know, I think,” he said miserably. “I have been reminded of his mortality – reminded that his mortality is different from ours.” He flushed, remembering. “From mine.”

She nodded. “I am sorry for you, Legolas. Years I spent watching my love leave my side and wondering if he would ever return to it; it is a fear I understand, but a fear to which I have grown accustomed. And now I may relinquish it, even as you learn how to shoulder the burden I had to carry for so long. But what mean you that his mortality is different from ours?”

“It is” – he faltered. “I knew that he would die, but I did not think – he will grow old. And” – No, that sounded as though he would be repulsed by old age. “I do not mean that I will not still be by his side, it is only – to watch him so weakened, fading away, it is – we met as warriors, Arwen, and I have never thought of death as anything other than a warrior’s death. This – illness, age” –

“I understand,” she said, cutting him off mercifully. “Though I cannot empathize. I have given up immortality to avoid the very helplessness you fear; I will grow old with my love, rather than watch him endure it alone.”

“I would not know how to choose,” said Legolas honestly, “not with the longing for the sea, not with those here that I still love, but – sometimes I envy you your choice.”

“But remember, too,” she said, “that I do not have any longer with my love than do you. I could not win him any more years; I could only cut mine shorter. I do not regret this choice, for I chose to share life and death both with him, but – all you will not experience with him is age, Legolas. Nothing will stop you from standing at his side. And if you would have the truth of me, I think he is gladder of your eternal life than he would be of your mortality.”

“You think so?”

“Legolas,” she said softly, “every time I look into my husband’s eyes, I see my own death. And while we both know that it was my choice to make, and we both know that our eternity will be shared because of it, I think sometimes that he wishes I had made a different choice. I know that Gimli holds out hope for you – that you will yet live and find some happiness, even after his death.”

“He has more hope than I do, I think,” mumbled Legolas.

“That is so,” said Arwen. “There are parts of your heart that he cannot fathom, because of the differences between you two. But I understand them, I think. And as long as nothing can drive you from his side, you must remember that age will be the greatest boon that can be given you – for it means that you have all the rest of the years of his life.”

“You are right, of course. But,” but why did it still feel so wrong?

Arwen seemed to see his continued distress. “I am sorry, Legolas,” she said. “I do not mean to wave away your pain. It will come, and times like these remind us that it will come to us so soon. But I wish for you untainted happiness, as much as you may have.”

“I thank you,” he said – it was all he could say.

The voices in the other room changed from serious discussion to light laughter. “I believe my wife has taken the opportunity she has been seeking all evening and swept your husband away,” came
Aragorn’s teasing voice.

“Ah, poor Legolas,” said Gimli. “Surely he will be desperately awaiting rescue.”

Arwen smiled at Legolas. “Shall we rejoin our spouses, then, that they not over-burden themselves with serious talk?”

He smiled back, and to his own relief it came without too much forcing. “I think that would be wise.”

Chapter End Notes

My plans for this final arc of the story are to use this New Year thing as an excuse to fit in some of the mini-plot ideas that I couldn't figure out how to work into longer chapters, rather than to do an in-depth description of Gondorian parties. So there will be a lot of stuff going on in the next few chapters, all with this New Year thing as sort of a backdrop to it. Also, there will be hobbits! Coming soon.

I had to quadruple-check the Appendices, because the timeline for all of this is very very weird. This part of the story takes place one year into the Fourth Age in Gondor, around the newly-declared New Year, but at the beginning of the Fourth Age in the Shire reckoning. Which is unnecessarily confusing, I think. It's three years after the destruction of the Ring, and I really can't figure out if Legolas and Gimli have been in Gondor for almost two years or almost a year, but I'm going with almost two years because I think that makes more sense for the work they've been doing. But because I've been calculating the timeline slightly wrong, there might be some stuff that feels . . . just weird. But since my timeline has been ambiguous this whole time, I think it still works, so I'm going to leave it there.

I feel really strange about these last few chapters - as I have felt about this whole story, in fact - sort of veering back and forth between loving and hating them. But as some things in my personal life start drawing to a close, I felt like it was appropriate to wrap up this story as well.

So I guess, just please . . . be gentle?
Chapter 17

Chapter Summary

The elves and dwarves make their preparations for the festivities - with a few hiccups.

Chapter Notes

Otherwise known as: I create a place to put all the tiny plots that I couldn't figure out how to fit into this story anywhere else. Snippets, each rounded to the nearest 100 words, but longer than my usual.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Legolas announced the news to his companions the next day. “The king would like the gardens and parks neatened and prepared in time for the festivities, so we must decide where to focus our efforts,” he said.

He could hardly fault their displeasure. Their healing went deeper than the surface, weaving harmony between the plants and animals and stone, and to cut that short in favor of appearance was a difficult request to make of wood-elves.

But there were times when appearances could be equally healing.

“He also wishes to know if we would invite others from Lasgalen,” he added. Their silence was conspicuous, but he pressed on. “For he would show all who wish to see it the new world we are building.”

The elves were fading, Legolas and his companions knew this. So many felt that the world still left was not for them. Even Legolas, with the call of the sea ever in his heart, knew he had so few years left in this world to make it almost negligible.

But he was building this world for the sake of those few years – and for its own sake. And those who had accompanied him felt the same.

When Gimli announced to the others that Aragorn desired to observe them in the forge, he expected both the mumbles of discontent at a man witnessing their work and the murmurs of approval at the king’s showing interest in it.

What he did not expect was for Alma to turn to him with wide eyes and pull him aside.

“What is it?” he asked her in low tones.

“Perhaps,” she ventured, “perhaps it would not be good for the king to come. It might be – well” –

“Might be what?” Something was off about her, he noticed. Her skin was too dark to truly tell, but there were other signs – was she blushing?
“Distracting?” she peeped, and yes, that was a blush.

“Alma,” said Gimli, amazed. Aragorn’s words rang in his head suddenly: *competent and charming.*

“Has my second developed a soft spot for the King of Gondor?”

“No!” she squeaked, but pressed her hands to her cheeks, and would not look him in the eyes.

Gimli only stared for a moment longer, unsure whether to be amused or appalled – but in the end, the former won out. Unable to hold back, he threw back his head and roared with laughter.

For all that Gimli’s nights had grown later as work hours increased, Legolas’s were even more so. The elves were fewer, after all, and needed less sleep. But usually Gimli was at least still awake when Legolas returned home.

Not this night – the night of the full moon. He had said something of singing and revels with his kin, had even invited Gimli to join, but he was far too tired. He had wished to wait up, but had not managed it, falling into bed alone.

He woke later, though, startled out of sleep when a wind-chilled figure slipped into bed at his side.

“Legolas!” he yelped, roused unwelcomely from pleasant dreams, and the elf chuckled and pressed freezing feet against Gimli’s calves, burrowing closer without a word.

It took Gimli, still half-asleep despite the rude awakening, a moment to realize what was missing. “You did not apologize,” he noticed, shivering as Legolas’s arms went around him.

Legolas shook his head against Gimli’s, nose cold on his scalp even through the cushion of hair, smile in his voice. “I did not.”

The cold was already fading, warmth of their bodies seeping together. “Good,” Gimli mumbled, and drifted back to sleep.

It happened on what would have been one of their last days in the forges, had the errors not occurred.

“The welding here is all wrong!” said Alma fiercely. “Karstin, you knew better than this; I know not to what to credit your decisions, but I expected better.”

“I did not” – began Karstin, but Alma waved him down.

“We discussed these designs *at length,*” she reminded him, and proceeded to expound upon all that he had misunderstood.

Gimli watched as she berated him, unsure what had drawn his attention. His second was in a fine temper, to be sure, but something was off. Karstin’s face had turned closed and sullen, but there was something else in his eyes.

“There is nothing for it but to start over,” said Alma finally. “But you had best hope they are done in time.”

Karstin spoke not; then a tremor seemed to run through him. “I cannot” – he said, then again, “I cannot” – He gave a strange hiccupsing sound. “I am” – The sound again, and then he turned his face away, pressed his forehead into the wall, shoulders drawing forward and in.
“Karstin?” said Alma, switching from angry to concerned. “Karstin, are you” –

“I am –” Another gulp of air. “No, I – I can –”

But they did not find out what he could, for his voice broke once more, and he drew back before driving his head forward, as though to break through the wall and away from them. Alma’s fingers had come to clutch Gimli’s arm. “What is happening?” she asked, her voice shrill as it never was. “What ails him?”

It seemed impossible to believe – and the picture was so different from what Gimli knew to expect – and yet –

“I cannot be sure,” he said slowly, “but I think I know.”

“Legolas.”

Legolas noted the caution in Gimli’s voice. “Gimli,” he responded, bracing himself for whatever might be said.

“I witnessed something yesterday,” still very carefully, “that made me believe – I think one of my workers suffers as you do.”

Legolas stiffened without meaning to. “As I do?”

“He had an attack yesterday, similar to those you experience.” Gimli’s hand reached out, but hovered over Legolas’s without touching, waiting for consent. “I told him nothing of you, but – your condition – it is not something dwarves understand, and I know not how to help him. I wondered if you would be willing to speak to him.”

Legolas hesitated for a moment. To speak of something so intensely private to a dwarf he did not know; to open up his weaknesses to one who had been bred not to understand –

But then he thought how miserable his own childhood would have been had no one attempted to understand him, how lonely and weak and frustrated this poor dwarf must feel, and he knew that his own fears were not worth such a thing. He reached up to take Gimli’s hand.

“If he is willing to listen,” he said, “I am willing to speak.”

“Was it your first?”

Legolas spoke first, out of desperation more than anything, to stop himself from spinning into witless panic at the hostile expression of the dwarf sitting opposite him. Whatever Gimli had said of his willingness, Legolas was beginning to think he had exaggerated.

“What?” Karstin grunted at last.

“The attack.” This was likely the wrong strategy, but Legolas could do nothing but plunge forward. “That you suffered in the forges. Had you experienced its like before?”

Saying it aloud – especially to someone he hardly knew – made him want to shrink into a tiny ball, curl around the sudden shaky emptiness in his middle. Failing that, he clenched his hands around the edge of the table, squeezed as though it would hold him up.

Karstin said nothing for several moments more, and Legolas gripped harder with every second of
silence. Just when he thought he must either crush the table in his hands or jump up and run away, never to return, the dwarf spoke.

“Why should that matter?” he said, voice tight and unfriendly. “When all that should matter is that I never experience such a thing again, why should you care if it has happened before?”

Legolas’s breath hitched in upset, and he was speaking before he could stop himself – before he could spare either his pride or his sense of civility. “Because my first was hundreds of years ago, Master Dwarf, and I hoped that it would comfort you to know you were not alone! But I see it is not so.” He could not be sure if it was his feet on the floor or his hands on the table which pushed him upright, but he was standing up and approaching the door when he remembered that this was his own home, and there was nowhere to go.

“It was not the first.”

Karstin spoke just as Legolas had reached the door, voice just loud enough for Legolas to hear. He stopped and turned around. The dwarf was sitting still with his eyes focused rigidly on the table before him – and Legolas forgave him everything immediately.

“No?” he said, returning to the table.

“No. But it was the first that has been witnessed since I was a child. I learned quickly that weakness was not to be cultivated.”

“That I too have always thought,” said Legolas. “But I am learning – with the help of your lord, anyway – that it need not always be weakness to need help.”

Karstin looked at him skeptically. “Perhaps such views may be held among the elves” –

Legolas laughed. “Even I do not really hold such views, Karstin – not when left alone with myself. But knowing I am not alone, I think perhaps there is some truth in them. I have learned to ask for help, and you can, too.”

“I am not asking for help,” said Karstin stiffly – but now Legolas saw his hostility for the front it was, and he understood.

“Well,” he said, “I am offering it.”

Chapter End Notes

The mini-plot in the last three snippets was something I wanted to devote more time/space to, but I couldn't figure out how. So we're leaving it there for now, with the knowledge that there may or may not be more exploration of it in later writing. But I figured just because mental health problems aren't talked about doesn't mean they don't exist, and there's more than one flavor of anxiety.
Chapter 18

Chapter Summary

Old friends reunite, and Legolas likes babies.

This idea had been a good one. Symbolic, hopeful, defiant – a declaration to the rest of the world that they were moving into a new age, and that Gondor was leading the way. A very good idea. Yes.

So Aragorn was constantly attempting to remind himself, anyway.

“Arwen,” he groaned, after having finally peeled himself away from the dozenth meeting about where exactly the pastures for the visitors would be set up, and then being waylaid by his head cook wanting to know for which day of the celebration he should prepare the lemon tarts, and then dodging (very majestically, of course) into a narrow hallway to avoid his head of security, who no doubt wished to speak about the arrangements for the visiting lords, “I should not have decided to do this.”

Arwen did not even look up from the list of guests she was checking against the arrangements they had made. “Yes, dear.”

Aragorn threw himself down on the end of the bed and stared at the ceiling in a way that might have suited him better were he still wandering with his ranger companions, rather than in the royal suite of rooms in the palace of Minas Tirith. “Do you recall the speech I gave to Legolas and Gimli weeks ago, when I was explaining why I wished to do this?”

“Mm,” said Arwen.

Aragorn chose to take that as affirmative. “Will you repeat it for me?”

The innocent expression on Arwen’s face as she looked up from her papers at last was almost certainly feigned. “You may lack elven memory, but I know you have not forgotten your reasons,” she said. “What is it that troubles you?”

“You know exactly what troubles me,” he grumbled. “As it happens, all the training of a ranger, all the lore and all the mores of the different people of Middle-earth that I learned in my travels, all the knowledge and wisdom that I hoped I would gain that would help me in the kingship – all of that does not suffice to teach one bureaucracy.”

Arwen made a noncommittal humming noise, averting her face and hiding it in her papers once more. But her shoulders shook a bit, and Aragorn had the vague suspicion that his wife was laughing at him.

All day, every day, he was forced to wear the mantle of the king – had had to wear it long before taking it up officially, in fact – but not in his bedchamber. He turned over so that his head was hanging off the edge of the bed and groaned again.

Arwen snorted from her table, no longer trying to hide her laughter, but she rose and came to his side. “You are being absurd,” she said.
He glared, but as he lacked the energy to lift his head, the expression was wasted. “I am aware.”

She sat down next to him and laid a hand on his back, and he took the moment to muse that it was unfair that she should be so calm about the matter – nay, Elrond’s daughter, having lived in Rivendell, home for any travelers who needed it, land of revels and celebrations, was most likely enjoying this.

The laugh was still in her voice when she spoke, but her words were kind. “We both know why you decided to do this, and moreover we both know that it will be worthwhile for you, us, our guests, and the world over. And if you, a hardy ranger, cannot endure bureaucracy” –

He sat up and shoved her: laughing fully again, she let herself fall backwards, but when he pounced on her, intending to wrestle her down, she rolled them over so that she was on top. And then her fingers were digging into his ribs, to the ticklish spots that no one but she (and, unfortunately, her brothers as well) would ever, ever know about, until he collapsed in a pile of breathless laughter.

When she had rendered him sufficiently helpless and worn, she finally took pity and sat back on his hips. “Now you are smiling, at least,” she remarked.

“You will pay for that,” he gasped, but the words were somewhat less than impressive – and anyway, such threats hardly had an impact on the Lady of Rivendell.

“I am sure,” she said, bending down to kiss his cheek, right next to the corner of his mouth. But when he reached for more, she batted him away. “First, go speak to whomever you evaded on your way here.”

“Arwen!” he protested, but she only grinned at him and gave him another peck, on the other corner of the mouth. He caught the back of her head with one hand, though, and pulled her in for a deeper kiss: one so long and thorough that his head was spinning when she finally pulled back. “You are certain I cannot convince you?” he asked, tugging her down again.

“Mmm.” They kissed again, and Arwen let her weight settle on top of him, melting into him. He smiled into the kiss, reaching to pull her closer –

And she jerked away again. “See to your responsibilities, King of Gondor,” she said with an impish smile, rising from the bed and returning to her papers. “Later, it will be made worth your while.”

It first became truly worthwhile, though, when the guests began to arrive.

The elves and dwarves had finished their work – at least, the work he had asked of them, for immediate appearances – the week before the celebrations were to begin, shortly before the arrivals of visitors, and he had given them the remainder of the time free. He did not wish to have his city under construction when guests entered it.

Still, only one who had dwelt long in the city would know that the work was unfinished. The gardens and paths throughout the city bloomed with greens and early-spring flowers, trees of all ages and sizes lined the paths and created tiny forests in the midst of the city. The parks were a marvel: the plants and the stonework mingled to create beautiful harmonies of things both grown and built.

And the gates – the gates.

Some work remained to be done on reinforcements to the gates and the walls, but the gates of every city level had been shaped and installed, and they were beautiful. In his few spare moments, Aragorn often found himself wandering past the gates and admiring them. There had been no
official ceremony – he planned to do that during the celebrations, a blessing of the gates and an
honoring of the dwarves who had crafted them – but he saw the awe on the faces of all who entered.

And so many did!

Few guests had come from far away, and none from Erebor or Lasgalen, which both Gimli and
Legolas had admitted did not surprise them. But many had come from nearby: Imrahil from Dol
Amroth and his family, and some of his people; Éomer, of course, and a company of Rohirrim – they
arrived three days before the celebrations were to begin, in a whirlwind of dust and laughter and
good spirit. Aragorn had had pastures fenced in on the fields for the guests’ horses, and extra guards
set out to ensure their safety, as the horses were too many to fit into the city proper. Housing had
been arranged for the most important guests (all of it at costs that made Aragorn cringe, for all that
this had been his idea, but Arwen reminded him once more that the benefits would far outweigh
them), but many had set up tents on the fields, or were staying in inns outside the city.

But the most important guests, at least in Aragorn’s mind, the ones who made all this worth its while,
arrived the day before the celebrations were to begin.

He and Arwen had been spending a rare moment with Legolas and Gimli, in the finest park on the
first level of the city, sitting and talking, when suddenly Arwen, who had been quiet for a few
moments, stiffened and touched Legolas’s shoulder.

“Legolas,” she said. “Do my eyes begin to fail me, or do I see what I think I do?”

He followed her gaze, and his eyes lit up. “You do.” He sprang to his feet, conversation forgotten,
and pulled Gimli up as well. “Our friends are coming! Let us go and greet them!”

And so it was that Samwise Gamgee and his family, Meriadoc Brandybuck, and Peregrin Took were
greeted personally by the king of Gondor at the gates of the White City. They were all chatting
animatedly at the slightly bemused guards at the gates, and Aragorn felt great fondness welling in his
heart, even as he tried to mask it.

“What’s this I see?” he asked aloud, drawing their attention. “Three great heroes, still young
rascals?” The hobbits had come on ponies, and Aragorn thought he recognized one of them, to his
great surprise, even if he did not know the hobbit who rode him. But this could only be Rose, Sam’s
wife, and he bowed slightly to her. “And a fine lady, who has somehow found herself in less-than-
distinguished company?”

Even as she blushed, Pippin slid down from his pony. “That’s a fine way to greet your own subject,
who’s traveled half across Middle-earth to see you, and who helped save the world besides!” he said
indignantly. “And here we had hoped for a royal greeting and perhaps a bite to eat, but” –

With every word out of his mouth, the shock on the guards’ faces mounted, as did Aragorn’s own
amusement. Sam’s face, though, was turning as red as his wife’s. “Pippin!” he hissed. “Forgive us,
Strider – er, Your Majesty, sir” –

Now Merry and Pippin were laughing at him, and he turned even redder, and Aragorn could hold it
in no longer: the laughter swelled up in his chest and burst out of him in a great booming roar. “Ah,
welcome to the city, dear friends!” he said, striding forward and dropping to his knees to clasp Pippin
in an embrace. “Of course I have not forgotten you, my wayward knight!” He pulled back and
looked at where the others were now dismounting. “How could I, after such pains we took to ensure
your welfare! Behold! your Three Hunters stand here to welcome you to Minas Tirith – much
changed though it may be!”
And then there were embraces and greetings all around, laughter ringing loud in the air. Gimli hardly had to stoop to sweep Merry, then Pippin, then Sam into his strong embrace; Legolas knelt to clasp their hands and shoulders in turn, his greeting hardly any more reserved, his light laughter chiming again and again as one after the other pounded his back. There were compliments on the gates and the walls, which Gimli accepted as his due, and on the greenery, which made Legolas beam. Sam blushed again as he introduced everyone to his wife and small daughter, who rode on her mother’s back in a sturdy sling. Arwen greeted Rosie with such grace that the hobbit glazed in delight, and Aragorn found room in his heart amidst the joy in the reunion of friends for a swelling of pride.

“Well,” he said at last, drawing back from Sam’s embrace and trying to ignore the pang in his heart at the thought of the missing members of their company, “so the remains of the Fellowship are reunited on Middle-earth once more! And another of them has wed, leaving only two wayward bachelors in our ranks now.”

“Hardly two!” Pippin protested. “I think you are leaving out two others, unless we have missed some happy news of either of you?” He looked at Legolas and Gimli.

“Unless . . .” Merry spoke slowly, looking back and forth between them. “No.” Aragorn followed his gaze to take in the slow-dawning smirks on the faces of both elf and dwarf. It was more pleasant to watch the hobbits’ faces, though, as understanding and pleasure bloomed in their expressions. “Sam, do you recall a conversation we had in this very city, some time into the summer?”

“I do,” said Sam in his turn, his eyes lighting up. “You’re not saying – you two” – He stopped for a moment, and then beamed. “Well, glory and trumpets! Congratulations, both of you!”

“I knew it!” Pippin burst out. “I knew there was something you were keeping from us!” He bounded forward to seize Legolas once more, around the waist this time, and then pulled back and pointed accusingly into Gimli’s face. “How long has this been going on?”

“We kept nothing from you!” protested Gimli. “Impertinent rapscallion! Perhaps had you visited sooner, you might have known earlier. Oof!” Pippin had thrown himself at Gimli as well, and there was nothing quite like an enthusiastic hobbit embrace to render one incapable of speech.

“Should I perhaps be protesting at your assault on my husband?” asked Legolas – quiet and wicked, and all eyes – even Pippin’s, as he turned his head away from Gimli’s beard – swung to rest on him.

“And you call us impertinent!” Merry seized Legolas’s hands in his. “You must tell us everything – all the details you felt free to leave out in all your letters to us!”

“Merry,” Sam began, even as Legolas raised his eyebrows, eyes gleaming, and said, “All the details?”

There was another boisterous explosion of protest at these words, and Gimli extricated himself from Pippin’s hold to knock Legolas’s side with his shoulder. Aragorn laughed again, losing himself so easily in the simple pleasures of being Strider again – so it was his queen who finally brought things to order.

“No! Shall we perhaps take this conversation to a more private place?” she said. “I think we are blocking the way” – and scandalizing the guards, she kindly did not say, but snapped back to attention, Aragorn saw that his gatekeepers were looking more and more helplessly bewildered. Poor Rosie, too, appeared a bit bemused – perhaps she had not been expecting such a spectacle when she agreed to come along.
“You are right, of course,” said Aragorn, regaining himself. “Come with us, my friends! I am criminally busy in these days, but I think I could set aside an hour to entertain old friends. Let us have your ponies stabled, and then we shall retire to the first level to give you a chance to sit and rest after your long journey – and refresh yourselves, too,” he added, as he saw Sam open his mouth. “For if I know anything of hobbits, you are sure to be hungry.”

“Well,” said Sam, coloring a bit, “now you mention it, we are a bit peckish, and we could certainly do with a bite to eat. And my Elanor, she can’t go too long without provisions; she’s young, you understand.”

“Of course,” said Arwen, laying a hand on Sam’s shoulder. “Come with us, and we shall have the best care taken of you.”

“And stories, too,” said Gimli, “all you could desire of us.”

“And then some,” added Legolas, still seemingly possessed of that wicked humor, and the shouts of dismay and laughter trailed behind their small party as they began to make their way through the city.

The hobbits had been given lodging in a small house very near the one Legolas and Gimli shared. So when Aragorn was forced to return to his meetings and planning, they walked their friends to the house – both to show them the way, and to keep their company.

They continued chatting as they walked, but Gimli found his gaze drawn again and again to Legolas. He had fallen quiet some time before, and seemed unable to tear his eyes from Sam’s and Rosie’s daughter, riding in Sam’s arms and staring back at him with large fascinated blue eyes. Legolas’s expression in turn was rapt: wholly absorbed in her, eyes soft with a kind of awe that Gimli had seen in them only a few times before. More than once he reached forward and then drew back, as though wanting to touch her but not daring. And all the while her blue gaze remained fixed on him, her tiny hands clenching in the cloak on Sam’s shoulder.

When they had showed the hobbits into their house, they were invited to stay awhile. As Merry said, “Unpacking is too hard a job to do without rest first, and what better rest than the company of good friends?”

“Besides,” said Pippin, “Legolas has been watching dear little Elanor nearly as long as we’ve been together, and I should hate to cut short the meaningful conversation they are no doubt having.”

At that, Legolas blushed and stammered something, but Sam turned to him, all innocent surprise. “Oh – Legolas, did you want to hold her?” he asked.

“Oh!” said Legolas, his hands twitching. “I couldn’t – I mean, such an honor, I would not ask” – “Nonsense,” said Rosie briskly. “You’ll be doing a kindness to Sam’s and my backs if you would, and she loves to meet new people.”

“Oh,” Legolas breathed. “Then I – I should be deeply honored.” And he reached out almost reverently as Sam disentangled his daughter’s hands from his clothing and handed her over.

She was tiny in Legolas’s arms, tinier than she had appeared when held by her parents. The size of a dwarf’s newborn, for all she was nearly a year old – her birthday on the New Year itself – and doubtless even smaller to an elf. But Legolas held her with as much care as Gimli had ever seen, one hand splayed out against the entire expanse of her back, the other cupping her head, stroking gentle fingers over her hair. It was the look on his face, though, that held Gimli captivated: he stared at the baby with undisguised awe and deepest tenderness, as though she were the most precious thing he
had ever been able to touch.

It made Gimli want to kiss him senseless, truth be told. But they were in company, so he restrained himself.

Everyone had fallen quiet as they watched Legolas and Elanor regard one another, as though the moment were too quiet and fragile to dare breaking it. At last, Legolas spoke.

“Elanor,” he whispered, twisting a golden curl around his finger. “How apt a name. Her hair is like sunlight on the leaves and petals of the Golden Wood, her eyes the bits of sky seen between the branches. The best of both her parents is in her.”

“I knew not that you were such a poet, Legolas,” teased Merry as Sam and Rosie beamed in pleasure.

Gimli’s throat was strangely choked up—something about the softness in Legolas’s face and voice—and he cleared it hard to break the mood. “Legolas can be quite poetic when he wishes,” he said, “given proper incentive.”

But even as the shouts of protest turned now on him, he tucked the memory of Legolas’s expression deep into his heart, to hold there and treasure for the rest of his life, and vowed to do all he could to make it appear again.
Chapter 19

Chapter Summary

The crowds in the city prove a bit too much for Legolas, and Gimli finally loses his patience.

Chapter Notes

In which being a rock is still a really hard thing to do and I write waaaaay too much conversation. Some conflict in this chapter, but resolved through lots of talking. Also there is Éomer.

There were too many people in the city.

Correction: there were too many men in the city, and not enough elves. Were he more inconspicuous, among his own kind, Legolas could blend into crowds, or make himself scarce. But as it was, there was only a handful of elves in Minas Tirith, and the Silvans of Lasgalen were so different from what most mortals expected of elves that he knew he was a curiosity. He could not mask himself in the crowds; he drew attention everywhere he went, and he knew not for how long he could take it.

Some of his elves fared better than others. Hadril and Damion enjoyed the attention, he knew, and Faimes and Lachor had begun a competition in which they compared the strangest questions they had been asked. Celair did not seem to care one way or the other; hir constant unflappable dignity was, unlike Legolas’s own, unfeigned. But Eleniel, like Legolas, found the crowds a misery. For different reasons, it was true, but the result was the same. They had found a hideout together, up in the trees in the deepest parts of the wooded park, and more often than not, Legolas found himself slipping away from the press of people to find her there.

Gimli, on the other hand, loved the attention. Appropriate homage was finally being paid to the dwarves, to their architectural and crafting abilities, to their willingness to show up for the world when it was needed. At every demonstration, every feast, he was approached by dozens of people wanting to congratulate him, admire him, praise his work, and he basked in the adoration.

But Legolas could not take it for long. He might have managed it were it not so many or so often, or if the people who came up to Gimli did not constantly stare at him as well. He knew not always why, for there were many possible explanations; surprise at seeing an elf for the first time; shock at seeing an elf by a dwarf’s side; or perhaps they were simply expecting something greater from him – something he was unable to give. It was all he could do not to physically cling to Gimli when this happened; he found himself shutting down instead, wrapping himself in layers and layers of feigned dignity, to hold up just long enough for him to find an escape route and flee.

He took to leaving events early instead, slipping away to join Eleniel in the trees and spend hours in blessed, blessed silence before having to return to some other dinner or game or event.
It took a toll – one that was quick to be felt.

As early as the second day, he could tell that Gimli was becoming irritable: his responses to Legolas’s departures grew short and snappish. But when Legolas tried to stay longer, he felt the crowds pressing tighter and tighter around him, felt his shields battered on all sides until he feared he would snap, and fall to pieces right there. And if he did, what good would it be if he stayed?

It was on the third day of the revelry that the simmering conflict came to a boil. They stood together, barely able to speak over the noise of the crowd – a murmuring loud enough that even Legolas’s ears had trouble penetrating it to make out Gimli’s voice – watching some of Aragorn’s finest swordsmen demonstrate a duel.

Despite all the people around them, the fighting was entrancing, and Legolas found himself able to relax into the moment, channel his concentration into the motions of the duelers rather than the press of the crowd. But as soon as it was finished, he could no longer distract himself. Casting his eyes about, he saw more and more people – men and some dwarves – who seemed to be heading straight towards him. Suddenly, he was in the center of a whirling storm of color and sound and scent and too much, and all he could think was that he must flee.

Without a word to Gimli he broke away from his side and slipped away.

For all that the noise of the crowd was loud and intense, though, he heard Gimli’s voice clearly. “Leaving again, are you?” he grumbled. “Well, I suppose I have no say in it if you do.”

There was anger in those words – more than Legolas had perceived from him in the last days – and hurt, too, a hurt that surprised him. He turned around, ready to return to Gimli’s side right then and there – but he was too far away. The press of people between them was too much, a wall of swirling sand that would suffocate him if he tried to breach it – he could not – Gimli was too far away –

And he turned and fled.

He regretted it as soon as he was out of the crowd and able to think clearly – and yet he knew that he would not be able to go back in. But this time, instead of fleeing to his usual sanctuary, he went straight home instead.

I am sorry, he said over and over again in his head, a step to a syllable. I do not mean to disappoint you – but no, that was wrong, that was blaming Gimli – I mean, I know you wish me to stay, but I know not how – no, that was not right, either –

He noticed no one and nothing in his path as he walked, his head too full of the words to Gimli that he could not force out in the correct order. He closed the door behind him, but the house immediately felt too small to contain the storm of nervous energy that raged within him, surging up inside his belly until he felt he would burst if he could not see Gimli and put things right this instant. The words he did not know how to say bumped against the insides of his lips, tumbling over one another in the urge to get out, and he would fly apart if he could not speak, but he knew not how, and there was no one here to listen –

He paced instead, up and down the entire length of their home, in and out of every room over and over again until he finally felt he could sit still. And then he perched on the couch, arms wrapped around his legs, mouthing words to himself that he knew he would not even be able to say, waiting for Gimli to come home.

He remained in that position until the door opened.
In some dim place in his mind, Gimli knew it was not fair of him to be angry.

He had known, when he had fallen in love with Legolas, what he was agreeing to, and it could hardly have stopped him. He had known Legolas’s fears and his flaws when they had wed, had known and willingly taken them on. To blame Legolas – to in any way do him injury over something he could not control – was as good as injuring his own heart.

He knew all this, and yet he fumed.

The words Skafi had spoken to him this morning, with true concern or hidden malice he knew not, rang in his ears: Lord Gimli, many of us find it strange that your husband does not wish to stand by your side at these events. It makes your assurances of his respect for dwarves difficult to believe.

Then there was something Narin had said in passing about the usual haughtiness of elves, and Regar had contributed his suspicion of Legolas’s intentions, as though those were not beyond question. Nor was this the first time such things had been said. Had Alma been there, she might have leaped to Legolas’s defense; even Karstin had become a staunch defender of Gimli’s husband after their conversations – but they had not been there, and Gimli heard such things so often that responding to them had grown exhausting, drawing more energy than he felt he had to spare.

Especially now. Especially when he could not deny that their words had found a mark.

He knew why Legolas left his side. He knew it, and he could not blame him –

But he did.

The worst of it was that were it not for this irritation, these celebrations would be quite pleasant for him. He could relax in the crowds and enjoy the spectacles and the food, the speeches, and the praise of onlookers – were he not constantly aware of Legolas’s fidgeting discomfort at his side, of the fact that he knew not when his husband would leave him to take it all in alone.

It should not bother him, but it did.

And now he stood in the midst of a milling crowd, in the wake of a spectacular demonstration of swordplay, on a fine spring day, and he was angry.

“Gimli!”

The hearty voice startled him free of his displeasure, and a smile rose to his face unbidden. “Éomer!”

Éomer clapped Gimli on the shoulder. “Greetings to you, Master Dwarf! I am glad to see your scowl disappear – I had almost feared the celebrations were not to your taste!”

The smile froze on his face; he concentrated on the muscles at the corners of his mouth to keep it in place. “Nay, my friend, they are as fine, I imagine, as anything a kingdom of men can manage. I am pleased to see you!” That at least was true.

“And I you.” Éomer left his hand on Gimli’s shoulder and guided him away from the crowds. “Would you walk with me awhile? I have been hoping to find you for some time, but I did not relish the thought of prying you from Legolas’s side. In truth, I am surprised to see you apart today.”

The last of the smile slid away; its replacement was more of a grimace. “Yes, well,” was all he said. Éomer seemed to see he had touched a nerve. “Not to speak ill of your husband, of course!” he said in a hurry, for all that Gimli might have been willing at this particular moment. “But I wished to discuss business matters with you, and you alone – if you are willing.”
That was enough – the smile was back. “Concerning the Glittering Caves?”

“Just that.” One last thump to Gimli’s shoulder and Éomer let his hand fall to his side. “Will you?”

“I will.”

As it turned out, this talk with Éomer was just what Gimli had needed. They walked through the streets of Minas Tirith, greeting occasional passersby but speaking with more seriousness and purpose than they had yet of their plans for the Glittering Caves. Éomer, it seemed, had only gained more approval from his people for this plan since they had come to the city and seen what dwarvish hands had wrought. And now that the walls and gates were nearly finished, he wished to move forward with more intent.

“How many of us will you be able to host at Helm’s Deep for the initial assessments?” asked Gimli. “For I must bring my second; she has expressed a desire to come with me to see these projects through to the end. And I am sure that many others will wish to see the prospects before they make their final decision whether to accompany me.”

“That I must tell you closer to the time of your visit,” admitted Éomer. “For I cannot know now how much space I will have for lodging, nor how long you will stay. My hope is that sometime when it is quieter – perhaps at the end of these festivities – you and I may sit and discuss this at further length. I believe this decision will benefit Rohan as well, but I confess that the kingship does not sit as easily on my shoulders as did my role as Marshal of the Mark. I will need assistance from advisors and more time to think this through. But I wished you to know that the offer to visit certainly stands, and that I am hopeful for the kind of future we can build together.”

“As am I!” Gimli thumped Éomer’s arm harder than he would for any non-dwarf, his excitement almost impossible to contain. “Ah, your words thrill me, my friend! We will most certainly speak on this soon and at length!”

“Excellent.” Éomer grinned at Gimli. “I look forward to doing business with you, Gimli son of Glóin.”

Gimli was still smiling when they parted, and as he made his way back to his own home, he found that his temper had cooled and he was much more willing to forgive. He knew, after all, that Legolas had no intention of frustrating him when he left Gimli’s side. He knew that his husband loved and supported him. And he knew all of Legolas’s limitations. He should be more patient, certainly.

He opened the door and found Legolas huddled on the sofa, and his forgiveness melted into contrition. But before he could speak a word, Legolas sprang from his coiled position to his feet and immediately paced towards him.

“Gimli,” he said. “I would speak to you.”

“You need not,” said Gimli. Had Legolas been fretting on this all the while he had been with Éomer? “I am sorry” –

“No!”

The suddenness of the word surprised Gimli – and, it seemed, Legolas as well. He looked down for a moment. “I am sorry; I did not mean to snap,” he said. “It is only – I would not have you apologize to me, not for your rightful frustration. For I know that this is not the first time I have taxed you so.”
“You must stop speaking of yourself as a burden!” said Gimli. Sick guilt flooded him now – how could he have reduced Legolas to this, when Legolas worked so hard to be enough, when he was supposed to be the one person with whom Legolas felt safe?

“No, I did not mean that – or, not only that. But I must speak, Gimli, for I think we cannot go on like this!” The words tumbled from Legolas’s mouth, fast and clumsy like a dwarfling who had just learned to run but not yet found his feet. “I know you were angered earlier, and I say this not to make you apologize, for I would not have you deny the truth of your feelings to spare my own – but there is truth to your feelings, and I know it is there.”

Gimli sighed. “There is,” he said at last, reluctant though he was to admit it. Legolas seemed determined to have this out, and Gimli would not lie to him. “I understand your struggles, or at least I try, and when my mind is clear I do not begrudge you your needs. But I cannot control my thoughts at the moment they arise.”

Legolas’s shoulders and jaw were tense, but he nodded. “I know,” he said. “Nor can I control mine, and there are times when I cannot stay with you, for all I wish I could. But I would not have you feel neglected or unheard; I would not burden you with my absence or with my presence, but I – I know not how that might be done.”

Gimli found that he could no longer hold this conversation while craning his neck, not with all the extra effort it took to catch and hold Legolas’s gaze. “Let us sit,” he said gently, beckoning Legolas to the sofa – but he did not touch him, not even when he saw Legolas’s hands twist themselves together. Now was not the time. “I am sorry for snapping at you. No, truly,” when Legolas would have interrupted. “It was not fair of me to say what I did.”

“But it was what you were feeling,” insisted Legolas, “and I worry that you have denied yourself long enough when it comes to me.” Gimli began to protest, but Legolas hurried on. “But I would do what I can to understand. Will you tell me at least why it upsets you so when I leave you? For perhaps if I know, we might find a way to ease it.”

Gimli hesitated, looking away now himself. He could not help remembering the other times Legolas had heard of Gimli’s companions’ doubt of his intentions, and he did not want to bring up something like that now – not when there was still this strange distance between them. And yet – Legolas wished to know, and there was part of Gimli that wanted to speak of it, wanted to unburden himself, even if doing so would be burdening Legolas.

Legolas seemed to see the conflict. “Tell me, Gimli,” he coaxed. “Please – I would know your mind and your heart.”

“I do not wish” – But he did wish, and Legolas would not let it go until he had spoken. “If I tell you, will you understand that I mean nothing against you personally?”

“Nor can I control my thoughts in the moment,” said Legolas, “but I promise at least to try.”

It was enough – or it would have to be. Gimli surrendered. “It is not you, Legolas. Nor is it my companions alone, but you know that they do not understand you, and this is more of the same. They think that your absence is meant as disrespect to me or to us. That you do not wish to stand by my side in the presence of others, or that you do not wish to see dwarves receiving admiration for our work.”

“No!” gasped Legolas, flinching back as though struck, composure gone and eyes wide and pleading. “No, Gimli, that is not it at all” –
“I know that,” Gimli reminded him. “But they do not, and I cannot – there is none among them whom I can tell how it is. I am their leader; I cannot confide in them.” And all those in whom he had confided had remained behind. How to explain that to Legolas, who had brought all of his dearest friends along?

But, and perhaps for that very reason, he saw understanding dawning in Legolas’s face. “I think I begin to see,” he breathed. “You are alone here, are you not? Even among fifty dozen of your people, you are alone.”

“I am not alone!” Gimli protested. “My companions understand me better than anyone else, and I have you – and I love you more than anything in the world, Legolas; you know that” –

“I know,” said Legolas soothingly, “relax, I do not doubt your love, but – I understand. We speak little of them, but your trusted friends did not come with you, and mine did. Oh, Gimli, I understand.” He said it as though the repetition would make it truer – but Gimli thought that perhaps it did. “I turn to others when I cannot turn to you, but you have no others – only me. And when I leave your side, you are alone.”

There was something about hearing it aloud that made it hurt more than it had. “I suppose it is true,” said Gimli. “And mostly it does not matter, but” –

“But sometimes it does.” Legolas’s mouth turned down, his eyes sad. “I am sorry, Gimli. I suppose there is nothing I can do for that, for I can be no one but myself. Regrettable though that may be.”

“I would not have you other than as you are,” said Gimli fiercely. “But – but sometimes I would have you by my side more often, that is all.”

“Perhaps there is something we can do, then,” ventured Legolas. “Some plan, some compromise. I cannot promise to stay all the while, but perhaps – after one game or feast each day, I will linger with you? Or if there were a way of controlling with whom you speak” –

“Reaching for solutions already?” Gimli could not help but smile. “How very dwarvish of you. But I think your suggestion is a good one, if it can be done. Could you do that? Be there at my side fully after one event each day?”

Legolas’s intake of breath was not audible, but Gimli saw his chest move – but then his shoulders went back and his chin up. “I can,” he said bravely. “So much I can manage. And for the others, you will not be bothered if I go?”

“I cannot promise never to be bothered,” said Gimli honestly. “As I have said, I cannot know what my moods will be from moment to moment. But I will promise you this – in these next days, and in the rest of our lives: if I am ever truly angry with you, angry in a way that lasts longer than moments, I will tell you. And if I do not tell you, can you allow me moments of irritation and keep the knowledge that it means no ill for you or us?”

“I can,” said Legolas. “Even as you cannot control your moods, I cannot promise not to take things personally, not all the time – but I think my mind will be easier knowing this.”

“So we are agreed then?” Gimli held out a hand, feeling ridiculously as though he were making some kind of business arrangement.

Legolas took it, his hand warm and willing in Gimli’s own. “We are. And are we” – His voice was tentative. “Are we finished quarrelling now?”

“Oh, Legolas.” Relief and fondness mingled into warm liquor, rushing into Gimli’s belly so fast and
strong that he almost laughed. “We were never quarrelling. But yes, I think we are done.”

“Good.” Legolas squeezed his hand. “Then may I kiss you?”

Now Gimli did laugh. “Please do,” he said.

The words had barely left his mouth before he had a lapful of elf and Legolas’s arms were tight around his shoulders, mouth fused to Gimli’s as though it would never come free again. As though after the tension of the last moments and the last days, he could not bear to be parted from Gimli for even an instant.

But after some time he seemed to gain the ability, breaking his mouth away to trail kisses over Gimli’s cheek and along his jawline, warm breath stirring the hair and grazing the soft places on Gimli’s skin. “I love you,” he whispered, his lips brushing the edge of Gimli’s ear, and Gimli could only smile and hold him closer.
Chapter 20

Chapter Summary

Friends say goodbye, and Legolas receives a letter.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The hobbits departed the day after the New Year.

After Legolas and Gimli had made their arrangement, the festivities had become easier for both of them to endure. Legolas found that it was easier to stay by Gimli’s side knowing that he would only have to do it once, and though Gimli had spoken no word of his people since their conversation, Legolas thought this shoulders seemed a little looser, his expression less unhappy.

The last few days had been less structured, as well – more displays of craft and architecture open to all, rather than scheduled events – which made things easier. Legolas and Gimli had elected to spend much of the time strolling with the hobbits, learning about their lives, their families, and the Shire as it was now.

Legolas would miss all of them – Merry’s sharp wit, Pippin’s energy and intuition, Sam’s straightforward kindness – but he could not deny that he would be most sorry to say farewell to the child Elanor. Children in Lasgalen had always been scarce, and as one of the younger elves in the realm, Legolas had never been able to speak to and hold one so small. He had no idea how much she was able to understand, but she looked at him with her sky eyes as though she could read his very soul.

They breakfasted together on the morning the hobbits were to leave, their energy dampened by the parting that hung over their heads – and perhaps a bit by the wine they had drunk the night before, as well. Hobbits could drink like no creature Legolas had ever encountered, but even they, it seemed, suffered in the morning after.

“I thank you all for coming,” Aragorn said at last, when the breakfast had been reduced to bacon rinds and bread crusts. “It was an honor to have you here to truly welcome the Fourth Age.”

“It was an honor to be here,” said Sam, and finished his cup of tea with a contented sigh. “I think you’ve the right idea, welcoming a new age. Perhaps we should bring it back to the Shire, change the reckoning there.”

“If any of us were to do it, you’re it, Sam,” said Merry. He looked at all the others conspiratorially. “Sam’s set up to be Mayor next time elections roll around. You ought to see how respected he is in the Shire!”

“Now, now, don’t say such things,” blustered Sam. “I’m no mayor.”

“Not yet,” said Rosie, patting him on the shoulder. “But he’s as good a chance as anyone.”

“I believe it!” said Aragorn, smiling. “I shall never be the one to doubt the ability or the authority of Samwise Gamgee – that lesson I learned early on in our acquaintance!”
Legolas said nothing. He was thinking of Sam as he had known him compared to Sam now: he had always been confident, to be sure, at least when it came to the things he knew for certain – but now that confidence extended to himself as well as to others and authority figures. It was a kind of self-assurance that Legolas sometimes wondered if he himself had – but it was a kind that was a pleasure to see in Sam, to see how he had grown into himself.

“Well,” said Sam at last, patting his stomach, “nothing like a good meal to set us off on the road. But I think we’d best be off now, if you don’t mind it.”

“Oh, are you certain you must depart?” Gimli threw a friendly arm around Sam’s shoulders and pulled him close. “Can you not shirk all your responsibilities and stay here with us indefinitely? What duty could be more important than gracing dear friends with your continued presence?”

Sam went red, but did not pull away. “Now, don’t tease,” he protested.

“I tease not – or, only a little.” Gimli gave Sam’s shoulders a squeeze that rocked him to the side, and then let go. “You know that we delight in your company. But surely the Shire would be at a loss for your absence at well, so we will reluctantly let you go.”

“We will miss you, too, Gimli,” said Pippin. He stood up at last and the others followed suit, making their way from the table to the courtyard, where their ponies were waiting. “But you are right that we must correspond more regularly – else who knows how many secrets you will keep from us!”

Legolas could not help but smile at that – Pippin in particular had been quite offended to hear that their marriage had come so soon after the Fellowship’s last farewells, with not a word of their new wedded state over two years – and that smile stayed on his face even as they saw that all their friends’ things were loaded onto their horses, embraced and kissed them goodbye. Rosie came up to him once he had finished embracing Pippin and promising to write him long, detailed letters about every new happening in his life.

“It was a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Legolas,” she said – though Sam had finally broken the old habit of adding honorifics after their summer spent together here, she had not yet gathered the courage. Though he hardly felt intimidating, Legolas could sympathize. “Would you like to hold Elanor one last time before we depart?”

“Yes,” murmured Legolas in reply, slipping almost unconsciously into his own tongue. “I know not what you say, but I feel that your words hold great wisdom, if only I could understand them.” He awaited with pleasure the days when he would understand her in truth, when she would grow up into a hobbit as strong as her father, as generous as her mother, as confident and wise as any other. He memorized the feeling of holding her, the surprising strength of her grip, the feel of her plump, slightly sticky fingers wrapped around his hair, the sound of her high, questioning voice.

It was a long time before he could bring himself to return her to the sling on Rosie’s back. “Thank you for the honor,” he said. “In all my years, I have never been so long near one so young, and it is humbling.”
“Thank you,” Rosie said. “This will be quite a story for her to tell, when she’s a bit older.”

And with one last round of goodbyes, their friends mounted their ponies and left Minas Tirith on their way home.

Legolas, Gimli, Aragorn, and Arwen stood watching them until they were out of the sight even of Legolas and Arwen. Then Aragorn sighed, and turned to the others.

“Would that I could have hobbits in my city at all times,” he said. “I think the kingship would be an easier burden to bear.”

“Would that you could have these hobbits,” corrected Gimli, but Legolas said nothing. He was thinking still.

Finally, half-teasing, he turned to Aragorn and Arwen. “Have you two any plans to have children soon?”

The letter arrived not long after the hobbits had left, as life in the city was beginning to settle back down to its usual.

Dear Legolas,

Though I cannot imagine you were surprised that none of us from Lasgalen would be attending the Gondorian New Year celebrations, I find that I cannot let it go without sending you a letter of my own.

You are never far from my thoughts, but I find myself thinking of you at strange times now and again: while fighting spiders, I compare the archers we still have to your own impeccable aim; while singing the forest back to life, I miss the harmonies of your voice that no one else quite knows how to duplicate.

Back to life, I say. We are restoring life and light to parts of the forest that have forgotten how to know it, after thousands of years of darkness – and it is growing back strong, though its wounds will always be remembered. The saplings you planted in the burn scar are beginning to grow, and I wander through them and look at their young green leaves, and I think of you. Groan all you like, but I think of you, blooming as they are in the wake of your own wounds.

I am sorry that I did not come to your celebration. You may laugh to read this, but the truth is that I was afraid.

Adar would never have come, and I think you knew that. He thinks of you as well, but he keeps his thoughts close, and he has not truly left this forest since I think before you were alive. He has no faith in men, and no faith in the new world that is being built. He loves you, but he does not understand – but you did not expect him to. I think, when you sent that invitation, that you hoped that I would come to you, and I confess that I considered it. But in the end, I was not brave enough.

I am sure you will scoff at me, Legolas, but the truth is that I envy your courage. Adar is a remnant of the old world, and he will not step into the new one. I think he will stay here until the forest heals, until our people need him not. I know not how long that will take, or what will become of us in the future – but he will not leave this forest, not in spirit, until he does finally decide to take ship to the West. But I? I know not what I will do.

I told myself that I would not be as he is – that I would not cut myself off from the world, that I would welcome the new age that has come. But in truth, I find it easier to do that in words, from the safety
of this forest: of the people and the things that I know. I know not where my path lies, when I will sail or whether, but I think I am as tied to this forest as he is now. I hope to find a middle ground, to be able to bind myself here but stray to other places – but I know that I do not have the courage you do.

For you, Legolas – you are the green leaves you were named for. You are a part of this new world, and you will grow with it. This new age needs you, and you it – and for all that your time on Middle-earth is now so short, for all that you will sail so soon, you are part of this new world in a way that I know not how to be. As I sing this forest back to life, into a greener, more joyful shape, so are you doing to this world and this age: through the friendships you are growing, the hope you plant in so many places, and the spirit you carry with you, wherever you go.

I love you, Legolas, and I am so proud of you, and I wish you all the best in the new world you are building. And, though you are grown too great for it, you know that there is still and always a home for you in Lasgalen, whenever you may return.

But until and when you choose to come back, I remain,

Your loving sister,

Laerwen

Postscript: Give my greetings to Gimli.

Legolas read his sister’s letter over and over, until the paper was wrinkled and the ink smudged. He did not weep, but his throat and chest were tight with a strange combination of pride, grief, and gratitude.

They had learned bits and pieces of one another’s languages, but not enough for Gimli to read the Sindarin himself – or decipher the flowing runes of Laerwen’s handwriting. But he did not ask Legolas to translate – he simply sat with his hand on Legolas’s thigh, the warm weight of the present and the future, and he waited until Legolas had set down the letter and turned to face him before he spoke.

“What has your sister to say?”

And for some reason, all Legolas could manage was, “She sends you her greetings.”

Gimli smiled, broad and warm – all the joy in the world seemed held in his face. “Does she?” he said.

Legolas kissed him: sudden and long, almost a surprise even to himself. He moved into Gimli’s lap, his legs wrapped around Gimli’s hips, consumed by a warmth that was not so much fire as hearth, and Gimli kissed him back with equal fervor. And Legolas knew not how much of Laerwen’s praise he could credit, he knew not truly what his part would be in this coming age, but he felt that somehow, this kiss contained the whole world within it.

“I love you,” Gimli whispered into his ear when they broke apart. In Westron, in Sindarin, in Khuzdul – one of the few phrases that they had shared in both their tongues.

Legolas repeated it.
And that's it! Thank you all so much for reading. This story has been so fun and so frustrating to write, I think in large part because I kept wanting it to "live up to" the first one - but it's just a different story, and I've had to accept that. Thank you so much to all who have been reading and especially those who have been commenting, because you've given me the courage to post the next chapter each time.

This story has definitely been a little different, and because of its less-structured nature, it was hard for me to figure out where to end it - but I think that this chapter does draw things to a thematic close. I'll never be able to write about everything, but I think I've gotten the bits into this story that I wanted to include.

The last eight or so months of writing and posting this series have been intense, and so amazing. Individually and together, they're the longest writing projects I've ever undertaken, and I've grown deeply attached to this 'verse. I do have at least one more short story planned for it, and after that, who knows? But probably nothing as long as these again. (She says. Who knows, though?)

Anyway, after all that, thank you again so much for reading, and I hope that the journey of reading this fic has been as worthwhile as the journey of writing it.

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