The Last Temptation of Legolas Thranduilion

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Summary

JRR Tolkien said that of the members of the Fellowship, Legolas did the least. But what would have happened had he declined the quest? The butterfly flaps its wings . . . AU, MovieVerse, rated PG-13.

Notes

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See the end of the work for more notes
"Oh, when I was in love with you
Then I was clean and brave,
And miles around the wonder grew
How well did I behave.

And now the fancy passes by
And nothing will remain,
And miles around they'll say that I
Am quite myself again."

A.E. Houseman, 'A Shropshire Lad'

"I will take it! I will take it!" The loud arguments died down as all in Elrond's council chamber turned to the dark-haired halfling, astonished. "I will take the Ring to Mordor. Though-- I do not know the way."

The Ithron, Mithrandir, closed his aged eyes as if in momentary pain. Even an accomplished chess master might spare a moment of pity for one of his game pieces, it seemed. "I will help you bear this burden, Frodo Baggins, as long as it is yours to bear," he said, placing reassuring hands on the hobbit's shoulders.

"If by my life or death, if I can protect you, I will." Aragorn stepped forward to kneel at the feet of Bilbo's young kinsman. "You have my sword."

As he heard these brave, noble words, Legolas Thranduilion's heart seemed to pause in its eternal beat. 'Oh, no, Estel -- no!'

So this was to be his strange fate, Legolas mused; born with the vision, seen in the week before his coming of age, of a green leaf withered upon its branch by an early frost, and sealed years later with the solemn promise to a beloved lady to protect her son. The hour of his doom had come upon him at last, and this was the form it would take.

The man from the south -- Boromir of Gondor, was it? -- had spoken true for all his brusqueness. One did not simply walk into Mordor. One went to Mordor with huge armies, and even in the midst of those huge armies, one fought and died upon the barren plain before the Gates. Legolas knew this only too well.

He knew it was his turn to speak now, offering his service, fulfilling his old vow to Aragorn's mother, and yet the spit had dried in his throat and his tongue clove to the roof of his mouth. He recalled his father's troubled words to him before sending him out on this mission to Rivendell to deliver woeful news: I see you, on a barren plain with ash for earth and a sky like lead. It is a
place I know all too well. And then your face turns into that of Oropher, standing on that same plain.

If Legolas followed Aragorn now, it would be to Mordor, to stand before the Black Gate, perhaps at the very spot where his grandsire had died. And that quest would mean the end of his life.

"You don't have to do this, you know."

"I beg your pardon?" With the natural suspiciousness of Thranduil Oropheron's son, Legolas turned and found himself staring into the face of a strange elf clad in russet and gold. He bristled. Who was this person to be offering him advice?

This elf's hair was black and his eyes were a strange pale amber hue. How odd! Legolas had never seen elven eyes of that color, but he was unfamiliar with the Golodhrim enough to suppose that he might have missed such things before. Many folk had come to Elrond's Council: Men, Elves from Cirdan's and Gildor Inglorion's people, and even a group of Dwarves from Dain's Halls in the Lonely Mountain east of Mirkwood. Remembering the unpleasantness of eighty years past, Legolas kept as far away from these Naugrim as was decently polite, although he had just now come close to a face to face shouting match with the most vocal of them, an auburn-bearded hot-head who had been fool enough to try to smite the One Ring with his neighbor's axe.

"I said, you do not have to do this." The strange elf twisted where he stood and leaned in close, his voice beguiling and kept low for intimacy. "You looked as if you were about speak and join in on this perilous errand. How much more can be expected of you? How many times have you risked your life for Isildur's Heir, son of Thranduil? You have no need to shirk your duty to your father to follow Aragorn now."

"I made a promise," Legolas said. His wariness lulled by those oddly hypnotic eyes, he did not even pause to wonder how this handsome stranger knew him or his business. "I do not take such things lightly."

"You made a promise to a lady," said the amber-eyed elf, his honeyed tone faintly compassionate. "But how long must that obligation to her hold? She spurned you, son. She died years ago -- with the name of her husband on her lips. What do you owe her now?"

Legolas furrowed his brow in consternation. Splendid! He had long ago resigned himself to the fact that most of the folk at Rivendell had been aware of his hopeless infatuation for the Lady Gilraen, but had total strangers learned of this too? He could not help a mental wince at the cold assessment of the outcome. Spurned indeed! Gilraen had done it out of kindness; he'd had that from the lady's own lips at the end, but it stung nonetheless. She had known of his feelings for her, and she had dismissed him as she might a foolish child holding out a crumpled flower to a great queen.

He looked about the Council area, which seemed to have become oddly quiet; those gathered having stilled their discourse in the aftermath of Aragorn's pledge. Even the dust motes seemed to hang suspended in the golden light. Legolas blinked hard and watched a leaf resume its drifting fall to the earth. At least, for a miracle, none of the others seemed to be paying attention to his whispered conversation with this stranger.

"Do not trouble yourself with the affairs of Mortals, young Thranduilion," the elf continued. "The continued existence of this Ring of Power is an old matter between Elrond and the line of Elendil. Let them deal with it. You have done more than enough in the service of your father's realm, and indeed, rumors of war from the east say that you will be needed there again, and soon. The Valar themselves could ask no more of you."
The stranger spoke the truth. Legolas looked at Aragorn and felt a moment of doubt. Despite Thranduil's parting words to him, giving him leave to follow his own judgment in how best to further the security of the people of Mirkwood, he knew it would break his father's heart to learn that he had set off on some foredoomed mission that must almost certainly mean his death. He shook his head and drew breath to speak, only to hear the silence broken before he could utter a word.

"You have my aid, such as I can give."

This was an Elven voice, but not one of the great lords such as Glorfindel or the sons of Elrond. Legolas turned to identify the speaker: an elf by the name of Indavir, whom he had met only in passing on earlier visits to the House of Elrond. Legolas knew little of him, save only to wonder how the hapless fellow had managed to earn himself the nonsensical nickname of 'Figwit.' And yet this Indavir seemed to have some courage about him.

"And my axe!" came a deep voice.

Legolas pursed his lips, trying to school his features into princely serenity, although he realized that to observers he must look as if he had smelled something bad. He could have sworn that the Nogoth accompanied those words with a snide glance directly at him.

Legolas looked at the stranger beside him and shrugged as the Gondorian added offers of his own assistance to the growing chorus. Frodo Baggins seemed to be well set for bodyguards, and truly, Legolas would not have been happy to share a long journey with a Dwarf -- especially the son of one that Thranduil had been forced to imprison not so long ago. He barely paid attention as three more of the halflings appeared out of nowhere and rushed forward demanding to be included in the quest.

"You see?" said his strange companion with an almost catlike smile. "You may go with an easy heart. You are not needed. You never were."

* * *

And so, on the first day of the eleventh month of the year 3018, Third Age of the Sun, Legolas and his retinue rode out from Rivendell, his mission to deliver the news of Gollum's escape discharged. The members of the group now coming to be known as the Nine Walkers would tarry for some time yet in the House of Elrond, making preparations for their journey south, but the Mirkwood delegation had not that luxury if they wished to traverse the Old Pass above Imladris before the first snows made the crossing impossible. When Aragorn's party would depart, he did not know, but it was no longer his concern. Legolas Thranduilion was going home.

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The Return of the Prodigal

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Come you home a hero,
Or come not home at all . . ."

A.E. Houseman, 'The Recruit'

As the trail began to drop beneath his horse's feet, heading down through the ravine that led to the Forest River, Legolas had still not rid himself of the sour feeling his farewell to Aragorn had left in him. Aragorn had been courteous, no trace of disappointment showing in his eyes, yet the matter had hung unspoken between the two of them. If ever there were to come a day when the last Hope of the Dúnedain needed a friend to fight at his side, this should have been it. Legolas had clasped his friend's hand for what he knew might be the final time, his own betrayal weighing on him like a stone in his chest.

A few stray snowflakes drifted across his first view of Thranduil's stronghold. Ironically, for all their haste in departing, the Mirkwood party had encountered no snow in the Pass, nor on their trip across the plain of the Anduin. This flurry was the first sign of winter they had seen. Perhaps Nature would be kind this year, where Fate had not, giving them an easy winter in which to prepare for the inevitable war.

Legolas could never understand how news of his homecoming always preceded him. Runners went ahead, he supposed, or else the tidings were carried by the birds and forest creatures. He could see Thranduil standing in the demi-lune courtyard on the opposite side of the bridge, flanked by twice the usual number of courtiers. His father's face was impassive, kingly, yet Legolas's keen senses noted that Thranduil shifted unobtrusively from foot to foot in covert anticipation.

Why, of all the times he had returned home from duty, must his father be making such a great ceremony of it?

Legolas shook his head as he dismounted and strode up the flight of steps from the bridge. This time, he had not come home a hero. His mission had been ignominious; his homecoming the opposite of triumphant.

Legolas had not even the time to bow formally to his King before finding himself suddenly enveloped in a tight bear hug. Taken by surprise, he struggled only briefly before surrendering to the long-remembered comfort of a time when his father's strong arms cured all hurt and fear. "You came back!" he heard Thranduil whisper.

"Was there ever any doubt of that?" Legolas asked, drawing away to see Thranduil grinning like a giddy child. It would seem that there had indeed been some doubt of his safe return.

Legolas looked around the courtyard at the smiles of relief on the faces of the assembled courtiers and further out to the elves who lined the incoming path. 'At least I've made someone happy,' he thought.

"Rest yourself," said Thranduil, giving him a final one-armed squeeze. "Come inside and wash the grime of the trail away. Tonight, you and I have much to discuss."

* * *
That evening, bathed and well fed, Legolas presented himself in his father's study. He found Thranduil in his familiar chair in front of the fire, holding his customary goblet of red wine. The same oversized silver decanter they had used on the night before his departure for Rivendell sat on a low table close to hand.

"What?" said Thranduil, noticing Legolas's soft smile.

"Nothing changes. It's as if I never left."

Thranduil laughed, but his eyes retained a hint of sadness. "Odd, it seemed like an eternity to me. Are you rested from your journey, son?"

"Yes, Father," Legolas lied. He saw no point in burdening Thranduil with his continued disquiet. He had not slept well since leaving Rivendell, and did not think the comfort of his own bed would change matters tonight.

Thranduil poured a glass of wine and held it out. "How did Elrond take your news?"

"He was rather decent about it, actually." Legolas accepted the goblet and took a sip, letting the wine warm his throat. "Considering how important a prisoner the creature Gollum was. And the circumstances under which I was forced to deliver the tidings of his escape."

Thranduil raised an eyebrow but remained silent.

"You were right, Father."

"Right?" Thranduil drained his glass and refilled it. "About what?"

Legolas sighed. "Isildur's Bane. It's been found. This Gollum creature pulled it from the Anduin five hundred years ago and kept it about him."

"Nae! I had hoped his mad ravings were just that -- the delusions of a fevered mind." Thranduil shook his head. "But he has not got it now. He spoke of thieves. Who, then?"

"I think you know," Legolas said. "Do you recall that party of dwarves you locked up eighty years ago right before Smaug was killed and we fought Bolg at Erebor?"

"Very well indeed. I doubt they've forgotten it either."

"They had an odd little fellow with them who called himself a hobbit. Mithrandir told you this 'Baggins' had a magic ring he found in the Misty Mountains that allowed him to disappear at will. Alas, Father, that was no silly bauble he carried."

"Nuath! I had that . . . thing in my stronghold for over a fortnight?" Thranduil's eyes had suddenly taken on a haunted, hollow look in the firelight.

Legolas nodded, unhappily recalling the period of nightmares and waking unease he had experienced years before during the time Bilbo Baggins had lived among them unseen in the caverns. He now realized he had felt the same flesh-creeping sensation in Elrond's Council chamber in the presence of the One Ring, as if he had stood next to great evil unknowing. He shivered, imagining having to feel the fell voice of the Ring in his mind on a long journey south. He was well out of it.

"Well, thank the stars the Ring is at Imladris now and nowhere near us. Elrond will know how to keep it hidden, safe from the eye of . . ." Thranduil trailed off, with a pointed glance to the south.
Legolas swallowed slowly. "Indeed, the Ring is at Imladris. For now."

"For now . . . ?" Thranduil took another large gulp of wine. Already, his usually precise speech was devolving into the Laegren lilt he slipped into when in his cups. "All right -- spit it out. What does Elrond plan to do with it?"

"The plan is for Bilbo Baggins' kinsman to take it to Orodruin and destroy it. Aragorn is with him, and Mithrandir, along with a company on foot."

"Lord Glorfindel and Elrond's sons are among them, I hope."

Legolas shook his head. "There is an Elf with them, but he is not one of the great lords. There is also a Dwarf, and a Man from Gondor. Oh, and three more of those halflings. I believe the idea is for them to travel in secrecy."

"Huitho!" Thranduil's expression had turned from ill to stricken. "They haven't a prayer! They will fall into the clutches of the Enemy and when he gets his hands on that Ring . . . You and I had best be sharpening our swords, my son."

A burnt log collapsed in the fire, sending a shower of sparks up the chimney. Thranduil shut his eyes and rubbed the bridge of his nose between his thumb and forefinger. He looked weary, Legolas thought, and a little frightened. "They'll all be killed," he said at last. "At least . . . at least you are not with them. I had feared that . . ."

"I should have been with them, Father," Legolas said quietly. "I owed that to my friend, but at the last moment, at the thought of Mordor, my courage failed me." He shook his head, feeling the bitterness flood his heart. "I'm a coward."

"Never say that!" Thranduil said roughly. "Three thousand years ago, I went to Mordor. I left your mother for seven long lonely years. I lost my father and two thirds of our men. Why? That war was to put an end to Sauron for good, Gil-galad and Elendil told us. Legolas, I went to Mordor so no child of mine would ever have to."

Thranduil sighed. "At the end, when Isildur held victory in the palm of his hand, he failed in his duty. By hanging on to that cursed Ring, he let peace slip through his fingers. If there is a debt to be paid now, it is his heir, your friend Aragorn, who must do it. This is not your battle, Legolas."

"I fear this battle belongs to all of us now, Father," Legolas said.

"Perhaps," replied Thranduil. "Perhaps. But that battle will come to us, all too soon. We need not go looking for it."

Thranduil turned to him, and, for the first time, Legolas saw the great age and weariness in his father's eyes. "Legolas, if I were to lose you, all of this would be nothing." Thranduil waved his hand to encompass the room with its tasteful appointments: candles burning in carved sconces, so different from the elaborate Golodhren work of Imladris yet exquisitely wrought nonetheless: the chased silver goblet in his hand, the signet ring glittering on his finger, the silver bands that secured the tail ends of his hair. "Without you, the works of my hand would be fleeting, ephemeral -- no more substantial than the mists that rise off the Forest River on a chill morning. And I, myself, would be hollow, the heart gone from my body."

Legolas sat back in his chair. Although words of overt affection had been rare between him and Thranduil he had somehow never doubted his father's love for him. Yet never until this moment had he realized the depth of that love.

"Father," he said, setting down his own goblet of wine to gesture round at the stone walls of the
cavern as his father had just done, "this is more to me than mist and smoke. This is my home. Here I have lived in joy, and here I will stay to help you fight for it."

The joy in Thranduil's answering smile banished the last of the doubt from Legolas's mind.

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Chapter End Notes

**Translations:**

_Nae_: Alas  
_Nuath_: Shadows  
_Laegren_: Green-elven, Nandorin  
_Huitho_: the affirmative command for the marital act (Thranduil's favorite cuss word)  
_Golodhren_: Noldorin
The Blood Runs Gold

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

'Ah, spring was sent for lass and lad,
'Tis now the blood runs gold,
And man and maid had best be glad
Before the world is old.
What flowers to-day may flower to-morrow,
But never as good as new.
--Suppose I wound my arm right round . . .'

A.E. Houseman, 'A Shropshire Lad'

The Solstice came and went. The Avorren tree had been divested of its jewelry and Thranduil's crown of holly leaves, to be replanted back in the forest where it would thrive for many a year, as did all the evergreens that had briefly stood proxy for the King during the darkest time of the season.

Tonight, the thirteenth day of Narwain, it was Legolas's turn to look as resplendent as the Solstice tree, much as he disliked the gaudy show. As he had done every anniversary of the occasion since his coming of age, he wore a tunic of deep forest green velvet with silver tracery on the sleeves, and in his hair sat the circlet of mithril that never failed to make him look like a girl. Oh, the things he did to please his father!

The weather on his Begetting Day was always unpredictable. Sometimes the woods lay deep under a blanket of snow, as had happened the previous year. At other times the biting cold would turn the river to black ice and make the very rocks crack in the night. This year had brought a post-Yule thaw, melting the snow and setting the branches to dripping in the shifting mist.

"So it was on your actual Begetting Day," Thranduil had told him earlier that morning as the two of them stood together on the bridge in their shirtsleeves, enjoying the unseasonable warmth. "The air was mild enough for me to sit out on the balcony with Mithrandir while he smoked his vile weed. And then, merry with the wine, I went to your mother."

Legolas had dropped his eyes and shifted as uneasily as might any child hearing a parent speak of a begetting. It had happened; he was here; that was all that mattered. He did not need to know the details.

"That night, Mithrandir warned me that in my greatest joy might lie my greatest grief. So far, despite all, I have proved him wrong."

Legolas remembered those words as he stood watching his own celebration. Even while making an even bigger fuss over the occasion than usual, Thranduil seemed carefree for once. He sat on his throne, surveying the festivities with a happy smile, goblet of wine in hand, with Galion standing ready with the decanter to refill it when it became empty. Legolas felt content as well.

"... and look how Mereth is wearing the same gown as last year and the year before that. Does she never care for new things?" A voice as clear as the sparkle of sunlight off of water jerked Legolas back to reality, and slender fingers gripped the green velvet of his sleeve proprietarily.
"But see that Sarniel has new ribbon on her sleeves and how she tries to get Fefelas to dance every dance with her? They'll be bonded by spring, mark my words. I'd like new ribbons on my bodice . . ."

Legolas schooled his features into his princely smile. Gwilwilleth was exquisitely fair, even for an elf-maiden, but sweet Elbereth on Taniquetil, her head was as empty as -- he cast about for something suitably vacant -- Thranduil's wine decanter after an especially merry night! There had been a time in years past when, inspired by too much wine, Legolas had fancied taking her off into the darkness for a few stolen kisses. But tonight she stuck to him like a burr.

Legolas knew he should feel flattered by the attention, but if the talk of fabric and costume and who was going to plighted troth with whom went on much longer he would be forced to counter with talk of books to chase her off. He gazed with longing at a carafe of wine on a nearby side-chest while Gwilwilleth prattled happily on.

"Gwilwilleth, dear, may I borrow our Prince for the next dance?" This new voice was as low and melodious as a reed flute. Legolas started and looked down to see a pale hand laid upon his free arm. He did his best to hide his smile of relief. Guest of honor or no, he must remember his manners.

Thranduil's chief healer had an austere beauty that rivaled Gwilwilleth's. Nestalinde always insisted on treating the King and his son herself rather than leaving it to an underling; hence Legolas knew her quite well. She could be rather daunting at times, with her oddly ancient name, which she refused to change despite the difficulties in pronunciation, and the whisperings of awed elves who maintained that there were none among Thranduil's folk who had known her as a child. Over the years, Legolas had secretly come to enjoy his all too frequent wounds just for the opportunity to be close to her while she stitched a cut or removed some orcish arrowhead from his person.

However, something was unusual tonight. The lady healer never danced, preferring to keep herself apart and watch the others.

"Of course, Nestalinde." Gwilwilleth spoke in a tone of pure sweetness, yet Legolas marked how she arched a disdainful eyebrow at Nestalinde's simple dress of deep brown linen and her lack of jewelry. Women! Legolas thought Nestalinde looked lovely. Her healer's braid, now thrown over her shoulder in a glossy black rope, set off the color of her gown to perfection and was finery enough.

The harpist struck the first note of the next set. With a quick parting nod to Legolas, Gwilwilleth disappeared off into the crowd to attach herself to Glavras, who had been in the midst of a drinking game with two of the other guards. The elf shot Legolas a glance of surprised gratitude before bending to whisper something into the maiden's ear.

"You looked as if you might be in need of rescue," Nestalinde said as Legolas took her arm for the dance.

"I hate to admit that, but . . . yes," he replied with a quick laugh.

"Even the greatest warrior requires help at times," she said, placing her palm to his.

Either by fortune or design, the lady had chosen a dance where the partners remained together throughout. The pace was sedate as well; all the better for conversation. "Alas, I fear the empty banter of the court is not my battlefield," Legolas said as he circled about her, pressed palms high in the air, then switched hands and circled the other way. "I wish I could be as self-assured in the throne room as Father is."
"Nestalinde merely laughed. "Oh, I can assure you that our Prince Thranduil spent much of the previous Age shy and awkward. He stepped up into the role of King when it was thrust upon him, but why do you suppose he hugs his throne on these occasions? Compared to him you are the epitome of grace. All the maidens sigh after you, Legolas."

"Truly? I fear it has escaped my attention," Legolas said with a rueful quirk of his lips. "Save for Gwilwilleth, there, they do not seem to have noticed I am alive."

Nestalinde let out a low chuckle. "They have all noticed, Prince, believe me. They are merely all too frightened of Thranduil to approach you. Except for Gwilwilleth who is young and . . . not of the keenest wit."

Legolas smiled. That was one way of putting it. "I am sure she has a very good heart, though," he added diplomatically.

"Oh, yes," Nestalinde replied. "And a good eye for clothing." Even as she spoke, Legolas could see the corner of her mouth twitching. He caught her gaze and the two of them burst into simultaneous laughter.

He could hear the measures of the dance coming to an end, and he had a sudden desire not to let her slip away. "Lady, would you think me a great churl if I were to leave my celebration early?"

"Of course not, Legolas. It is your Begetting Day after all. Tonight of all nights, you should do as you wish."

"And would you then think me an even greater churl if I were to ask you to come with me? I would far rather spend the evening in conversation than in frivolity."

She smiled. "On the contrary. I would expect such boldness from the son of Thranduil and the grandson of Oropher."

"Then follow my lead," he said, becoming the elusive wood-scout of his days with the patrols. As the stately steps of the ending dance brought them to the right spot, he deftly guided her behind a pillar. From there it was only a short sprint to a side doorway. On his way out, Legolas snatched up a full jug of wine from a nearby sideboard, doing his best to hide his silly grin at the prospect of time spent alone with Nestalinde that did not involve the piercing of his flesh by sharp needles.

Where should he take her, though, to talk in comfort and privacy? His first choice, his bedchamber, would not do, for obvious reasons. Legolas often entertained in his room, but the lady healer differed from Glavras or his other friends from the forest guard.

A walk in the woods was out of the question. A chill drizzle had begin early that afternoon. Even swathed in cloaks they'd soon be cold and wet. Then he hit upon it.

"This way," he said, leading her up the long staircase with its stone banisters carved into the shape of branches, and down the torch-lit corridors. Her hand remained in his, warm against his palm, and her slippers made no noise on the stone flags.

The smell of dusty books and old parchment never failed to lift Legolas's spirits. How different from eighty years ago, when he had entered the library, filled with resentment at having his command withdrawn as punishment for what Thranduil had deemed reckless behavior. Although with the extra years of perspective, Legolas admitted to himself that his desire to gaze upon the old Amon Lanc without the protection of his guards had been nigh unto suicidal. He never wanted to lay eyes upon Dol Guldur or any other place belonging to the Enemy, ever again.
A small annex off the main room had become a sanctuary to him, as much his own spot as Thranduil's private study belonged to the King alone. Here he led her. The light crystal in the ceiling had gone dark with the coming of night, and only one candle burned in the wall sconce. Legolas knelt at the banked fire in the hearth, throwing on another log to start the blaze anew.

"How pleased Oropher would have been to see you working with the books."

Legolas looked up over his shoulder to see Nestalinde standing at his drafting table, examining his latest copy project, a crumbling scroll of poetry by one of the lesser-known bards of Doriath. "You knew my grandsire?"

"Yes," she said, running a tentative finger over the handles of his brushes where they stood propped in their holder. "Very well. Since he was a young scribe in Thingol's court."

Legolas swallowed. Of course he had known she was old. Although her face remained as fair and unlined as a maiden just coming of age, Nestalinde's eyes showed the weight of long Ages. He had not stopped to think that she might know the man Legolas had only caught a glimpse of through his oddly upright lettering in faded ink and through the occasional pithy comment inscribed in the margins of scrolls he copied. "What was he like?"

"A lot like you," she replied, sinking down onto a low, backless couch that rested along one wall of the alcove. She patted the seat beside her. "You have his hair, and his eyes . . . and his nature."

Legolas rose from his crouch at the hearth and joined her, bringing the wine with him. He realized, to his chagrin, that he had neglected to bring goblets. Shrugging, he drank from the jug itself, turning the edge around politely as he offered it to the lady. "His love of books, you mean?"

Nestalinde smiled and turned the jug back, to drink from the spot where his lips had touched. "That . . . and he had a reckless streak when put to the test. You are so like him it frightened your father, I think. Oropher had a touch of destiny about him. Right up until the end."

Legolas took back the wine. "My poor father. I confess I did not make things easy for him. Truly, I wish I could have been a healer or a harpist, as he hoped. But ever since I was small, I've had a sense that fate held a special purpose in store for me; that I was not meant to be a man of peace."

"You are like your grandsire in that respect as well, Legolas. Yours is not a peaceful spirit."

"How could I be, living in such times? I don't like killing, you know, but I often find it required of me. As Father is so fond of saying: kings rule and princes serve."

"Even tonight," she said, with a cryptic smile. "You wear your crown as a gift to your father. And your return has been a gift to all of us. You give to others each day of your life, and yet, tonight, I have nothing for you."

"Your very presence is a gift, Nestalinde," he said. "Being here alone with you is the closest I have come to peace in quite a while."

"Still," she said, eyeing him carefully and reaching for the wine, "it seems not enough. If you could ask for anything at all on this, your Begetting Day, what would it be?"

"Anything?" he laughed.

"Within reason, of course," she said, coloring faintly as she raised the jug to her lips. "And assuming it is within my power to grant." She handed back the wine.

Legolas threw one leg over the other and leaned back against the stone wall behind the couch,
sipping his wine meditatively. He really needed very little. Then a mischievous thought wormed its way into his mind. "Did you really mean it -- about anything at all?"

She nodded.

"In that case, I would like a kiss. From you."

He halfway expected her to take offense at this, prince or no. As his father's chief healer, Nestalinde was the ranking lady in the realm, standing high in wisdom, and he was but a cheeky child in comparison. Instead she smiled. "Put the wine down, Legolas. I thought you'd never ask."

Feeling his pulse begin to race, Legolas set the jug on the floor, suddenly shocked back into the awkward uncertainty of the years following his coming of age. He'd kissed girls before, but Nestalinde was no silly maid to be groped behind the trees. Truth to be told, mindful of his position, he had not done all that much of that either.

Swallowing, he slid closer to her on the couch. "Thank you," he whispered, reaching out with his right hand to stroke her smooth cheek before bending his head to press his lips to hers.

She was soft, moist and pliant against him. Legolas shut his eyes and wound his left arm about her back, bringing her in close. If he were to have this one kiss, he would make the most of it. He let out a happy sigh as her lips slowly parted, allowing his tongue entrance. Emboldened, his mind followed, reaching out to touch her faer . . .

He let out a grunt and jerked away as if burned. "You . . . you . . .?"

She stared back at him, silent.

"You love me . . .?" He realized he was stammering. "You love me!"

She looked no more than a girl-child now, vulnerable and uncertain. Slowly she nodded.

"How long?" he managed to choke out.

She shook her head. "Too long."

How could he have failed to notice it? "I don't care -- tell me."

'I felt the strength of your faer when you were born into my hands, and I knew you had come to us for a reason. I would not let myself feel that it might be for me. You grew from a beautiful boy into a beautiful young man, and still -- it was not right. You were the King's son and I . . ."

"Not right," Legolas whispered. Things fell into place now, like the pieces of a puzzle. He had been just a green youth and she an august lady -- one of the wise.

"And then there came a time," she continued, "when I thought it might be not so impossible. The passion, at least, was returned."

Legolas coughed and blushed, remembering the first of many sessions with needle, thread and his skin, and his body's response to her closeness, despite all. "You noticed."

"Of course," she replied, with a soft smile. "We women cannot fail to mark such things. The idea took root. But I thought myself a fool, and an ancient one at that. Someone had already taken your affections."

"Ai!" He grimaced, having to admit the truth of it. For the past eighty years his heart had not been
his own, even after Aragorn's mother had handed it back to him on a platter. Even now, years after her death, he still felt the ache.

"I kept my peace," she continued, "thinking I would outgrow the foolish fancy, that I would forget you. But last autumn when I saw you ride off to Imladris, a feeling of doom passed over me: that you would never return to us -- at least not unscathed -- and my heart broke at the thought of it. When you came back, I felt as if I had been granted a reprieve, the chance to make things right. I knew I would have to speak if ever the opportunity presented itself."

Legolas picked up the wine and took another long pull, taking the occasion to study Nestalinde's face in the firelight. She was beautiful, as were all elf-women, but with her, the beauty went deep. He delighted in her company, always had, but the thought that she might be within his grasp had never occurred to him. Now that it had crossed his mind, it took root and bloomed into full realization: He had been pining for a distant, unattainable star, while all the while overlooking the very real woman standing right next to him. "I've been a fool," he whispered. "I think I love you too."

"You think?" she laughed.

"Well," he said, putting the jug back on the floor and moving in closer, "I'll have to kiss you again to know for certain."

This time he used both arms, drawing her to him hungrily. His kiss was fierce, demanding, as she opened to him, her tongue caressing in return. Her hands came up around the back of his head, stroking his hair and the tips of his ears. "Mmm, yes," he murmured. "Now I know for certain."

Slowly, he brought his right hand around to stroke her cheek, the slender cords of her throat and down her neck to the hollow of her collarbone. Did he dare? Oh, yes, he dared. With infinite care, he moved his hand along her bosom, slipping it sidewise down her bodice to cup the treasure that lay beneath.

Thranduil had, on more than one occasion, said that more than a handful was a waste. Nestalinde had not even a handful to fill Legolas's long fingered grasp, but it was perfection indeed. As he gently kneaded, he felt her breast swell beneath his touch. Her tiny nipple hardened, tickling the palm of his hand and sending a line of keen pleasure shooting up his arm and back down to his groin. "Oh, Stars!" he gasped. "I'm certain. I love you. I love you!"

Spurred on by instinct, he felt a pressing need to push her body back down onto the couch, to cover it with his own.

"Legolas . . . Legolas!"

He barely heard her voice over the pounding of his own heart. "Yes?"

"I want you too. Say the vows. Seal it tonight."

Ah, sweet Elbereth, what was he doing? He wanted nothing better than to take her at her word -- to make the oath and have her right then and there. But once done, it could not be undone. He took a deep breath, trying to regain control of himself. He was a prince, after all, and should show a modicum of wisdom. "Are you certain of this, Nestalinde?"

"I know my own heart. Do you have doubts, Legolas?"

He searched his feelings. The more he thought on it, the more the prospect of an eternity with her seemed natural and desirable. To lose her now would break his heart. He shook his head. "I've made my choice. But you are a great lady, high in the esteem of this realm. If you wish the
courtesy of a one year betrothal with all due ceremony, I owe you that. I will wait."

She looked at him gravely. "You still have feelings for this other woman?"

"Yes." It hurt to admit it, but he could not lie at such a solemn time. "I will always hold a place for her in my heart, even while I love you. Can you forgive me for that?"

"There is nothing to forgive," she said. "Have you never wondered why, in all the long-years of my life, I never wed?"

He shrugged. "It was not for me to speculate. I had assumed that you were not inclined to marriage. Or that none had yet been worthy of you."

She shook her head. "Ages ago, in my youth, I had a sweetheart. Not long before we were to join, he disappeared, taken by the Dark Hunter, or so they said. I suspect that many of the orcs who trouble us now -- the ones you kill -- are his progeny. Even so, I love him and do not forget him."

Legolas drew in his breath in a sharp gasp. "I'm sorry, Nestalinde."

"Don't be. These things happen for a reason. He was taken from me for a reason. You were born to us for a reason. Fate gives back what it took. Love is not finite, Legolas. There is room in the heart for more than one." She looked up at him, hopeful yet vulnerable. "Do you still want me after this?"

He kissed her and drew her in close, inhaling the sweet scent of her hair. "More than ever. It isn't that. I just wonder why you choose tonight, in this time of uncertainty and coming war. We'll have all the time in the world when it's over."

"For that very reason," she answered. "Let me tell you a story, Legolas. Some time ago, I tended a woman in her last illness. She confided much to me near the end. The man she loved had done something very reckless, and she feared him lost. When he returned to her alive she resolved not to wait another day, not to risk losing him again. She took him to herself that night, custom and prudence notwithstanding."

Nestalinde sighed. "At the hour of her death she told me that, even though they'd spent almost an entire age together, she cherished every moment and would have begrudged the loss of even a single hour."

Legolas swallowed. "My mother."

She nodded. "When I saw you ride back in on your return from Imladris, I understood what she tried to tell me. War comes upon us, Legolas. We may have only a short time together, or we may have until Ardhon Meth. Either way, I don't want to waste one single, precious second of it."

He laughed. "Then I would be a fool to gainsay you. We'll do it right here, right now."

Taking her cheeks between his hands, he looked her in the eye and recited the secret invocation to Elbereth and the Allfather, binding himself to her until World's End. Eyes glittering, she repeated the same. It was done. Almost . . .

"Ah --" he said, suddenly remembering himself, "wait right here."

He jumped up and sprinted out into the library proper. The great door had no lock, but he shut it firmly and left the latch pointing downward, the generally understood signal to any of his father's people that those within desired privacy. He doubted that anyone this night would find themselves in need of a good read, but it would hardly do for one of the subjects to walk in and find their
Prince, bare buttocks gaily pointed to the ceiling, in the midst of consummating his marriage.

That done, he returned to the annex. Nestalinde lay back on the couch, waiting for him with a patient smile. "One more thing," he said, giving her a quick grin over his shoulder as he threw another log on the fire.

He walked back to the couch, kicking off his boots one by one as he went. He removed his circlet, setting it carefully on the drafting table, and then sat down beside her.

His fumbling hands tore at laces and fasteners, removing the layers of clothing that lay in his way. When at last he was naked and she too, he paused for a time to savor the enchanting sight of her bare flesh glowing in the firelight: the tender column of her neck, the twin mounds of her tiny breasts, the gentle swell of her belly with its soft triangle of hair below. Finally, he undid the tie on her healer's braid, undoing the plait and running the soft strands through his fingers until her hair spread out around her like a dark halo.

"You are so very beautiful," he said, lowering himself into her waiting arms.

She reached up to stroke his cheek. "You're trembling."

Legolas shook his head and laughed ruefully. How could he explain it? Although what passed between men and women was no mystery to him, his knowledge of it was purely theoretical. So many conflicting thoughts ran through his mind. Was he good enough for her? Would he please her? And the age-old prayer of any man facing his first time with a woman: 'Please, Elbereth, let me last!'

Aloud he said, "It is just that I've dreamed about this moment for so very long . . ."

She smiled up at him. "Don't worry, my love. No matter how long you have waited, it has not been so long as I. It will be all right."

"I love you," he murmured, and covered her. Despite his inexperience, his body knew what to do. He felt a brief resistance, Nestalinde gave a soft gasp, and then he had claimed her. His arms surrounded her; her flesh surrounded him. "Such joy!" he whispered as his faer reached out to join with hers. "Such great joy . . ."

* * * * * * *

Chapter End Notes

Translations:
Avorren: Avarin
Narwain: January
Ardhon Meth: World's End
faer: spirit
In a dream, Legolas stood upon the western bank of a great river, staring nervously out over the water and listening to shrill orcish cries from the eastern shore. With the odd omniscience of sleep, he knew in his bones that the currents rushing past were those of the Anduin, but the river was much wider here. He must be far to the south, and indeed, although the clear night was chilly, the breeze from the east felt far warmer against his skin than he would have expected for a night in Nínui.

In his hand he held a great bow, much larger than the one he had carried for the past eighty years since he'd lost its predecessor at the Battle of the Five Armies; its carvings felt strange against his sweating palm. His senses prickled, ever alert to danger from across the river and from the dark night around. He strung the bow and set an arrow to the string.

A bank of dark clouds swarmed up from the south, blotting out the stars, and Legolas felt a cold dread seize his heart. "Elbereth Gilthoniel," he whispered, frightened into the piety of an elven-child calling upon the queen of stars in the lonely darkness of his bedchamber. What horror drew nigh?

A dark mass broke away from the thick clouds and resolved itself into the shape of a huge winged creature. Fierce voices rose in ululation from the eastern bank, as if saluting one of their own. His heart hammering, Legolas drew the great bow and took aim upward into the night, his muscles straining for the shot. Such a thing could not be allowed to exist.

And then, in the manner of a dream, the scene wavered. Legolas felt his body grow insubstantial, slipping sideways. He blinked and found himself sitting in a boat in the bushes along the riverbank below, staring upward at a figure whose shadowed head seemed caught in a net of stars like white gems. The bow sang and the arrow flew. The dark silhouette tensed in anticipation and then slumped. "Missed it," said the Imladren elf, Indavir.

A deep, rough voice with the accent of Erebor boomed beside him. "That was a mighty shot in the dark, laddie. At least you tried."

"But who can say what I might have hit?" replied the elf.

From the night sky there came a soul-piercing shriek of triumph that made Legolas want to clap his hands over his ears, only to discover that he had no hands, nor even a body . . .

Legolas sat bolt upright in his bed with a gasp, the eldritch cry still reverberating through his mind. Beside him, Nestalinde stirred from sleep and put out her hand to steady him. "What is the matter, my love?"

"Nothing," he muttered, trying to bring his ragged breathing under control while she stroked the small of his back. "Just a bad dream."
But as he settled back down into the warmth of the covers and curled himself around his wife, he could not rid himself of the nagging sense that something had just gone very wrong indeed.

* * *

If Legolas had worried about any repercussions from his precipitous marriage, they failed to materialize. The morning following his Begetting Day celebration, when he and Nestalinde had come down together to breakfast wearing the unmistakable demeanor of a mated couple, Thranduil had greeted them with a look of stupefied amazement that Legolas would have paid his weight in mithril to have captured in a painting. He quickly replaced it with a wink and a nudge -- and a murmured quip about the acorn not falling far from the tree. But since then, Legolas would often catch, sidelong out of the corner of his eye, his father watching the two of them with an expression of pure joy on his face.

While his happiness waxed, the news from the world outside grew ever grimmer. Messengers from Dale reported that both Dain and Brand had refused the envoys from the East for the final time, sending the Easterling ambassadors off muttering that they had sealed their fate. They had come to Mirkwood asking the Elvenking for his aid in the coming conflict. Thranduil had only shaken his head. "I will. If I can." After the Dalesmen left, he turned to Legolas and said, "I fear attack from the east, but the south worries me even more."

Meanwhile as winter progressed toward spring, Thranduil's armourers set about the grim business of sharpening swords and pike-heads, preparing weapons for as many fighters as possible. On the first day of Gwaeron -- the anniversary of his friend Aragorn's birth, Legolas thought with a pang -- a breathless runner stumbled out of the forest, bearing news from the patrols in the southern part of the wood.

"Dol Guldur is on the march, my Lord," he gasped after the guards helped him inside and brought him before the throne. "Half go west to Lothlórien, the rest march north to us. They are many!"

Thranduil nodded, his face somber. The scout's news confirmed the anxious twittering of the birds. "How many?" When the elf hesitated, trying to catch his wind, Thranduil snapped, "Out with it, man! I need an estimate of their troop strength!"

The scout choked out a figure. Legolas saw his father swallow hard and shut his eyes. "Bard and Dain are on their own. Magorion, assemble every possible fighter."

"Every fighter, Sire?" The chief general's face looked equally grim.

Thranduil gave a quick nod of his head. "Even the women. We march at dawn."

Watching the general's retreating back, Legolas felt a cold dread settle in the pit of his stomach. "So many," he whispered. "How could Khamûl have amassed such an army?"

"They breed like maggots. But be of good cheer, son," Thranduil replied with a bravado that rang hollow in the face of the recent news. "They may have us outnumbered three to one, but a single Wood-elf is worth two orcs on their best day. And you, Legolas -- you're worth ten. I'm glad I have you with me in this fight."

* * *

The following dawn, Legolas rode at his father's side as Thranduil's army set off to the south. They left a small remnant in the caverns, safe behind the spell-guarded doors, consisting of women, youngsters, and the few men with children who had not yet attained their majority.
Thranduil's parting words, spoken to those bereft men, hung heavy in Legolas's ears. "Your charge is as important as those who go to fight. You guard the hope of our realm. Open these gates for no one but my son or me. And if it comes down to it... don't let them get the children."

"Should we not have stayed in the stronghold?" Legolas kept his voice soft, barely audible over the footfalls of his grey gelding and the sounds of the moving army -- the creak of saddles, the clink of weapons and armor, and the rhythm of marching feet on the moss of the forest floor.

Thranduil shook his head. "And end up like rats in a trap while they burn the woods around us? No, this is my forest, and I will not let them defile it. I've been retreating for too long. This time we go to meet them."

Legolas cast a quick glance back down the train to where Nestalinde rode with the other healers. At least they had not been parted. He'd sooner have had her back at home, but she had accompanied the King's armies on every campaign since the Last Alliance and would not change her custom now.

Another thing had not changed. Above, clearly visible through the breaks in the treetops, the carrion crows circled lazily, as they had done on the journey to Erebor eighty years before. Thranduil looked up and set his jaw in a grim line. "They know me, and they know they will feast well at the end of this march. Filthy birds," he muttered, pulling his cloak up to hide his hair. "I wish they would leave me alone."

The army traveled south for a fortnight, moving at a pace brisk yet gentle enough to leave the less hardened fighters with enough strength for the inevitable battle. They came at last to the area just north of the Old Forest Road. To the west, the land rose into the dark heights of the Emyn Duir. As they marched, Legolas could sense the wild unease of the trees and smell a queer reek upon the wind.

After a sidewise glance and a nod at Magorion, Thranduil held up a hand. "Here," he said, reining his big bay stallion to a halt. "We make our stand here. They're close now."

"I can smell them," Magorion muttered. "It will be soon."

Thranduil turned his horse while the captains arrayed the troops out in a deep line. When they were assembled, he raised his voice to be heard by all. "My warriors, my people -- we fight today for the very existence of our realm. Expect no mercy from this filth. Fight to your last breath, your final drop of blood. For if we lose this battle, we will be in the thrall of the Enemy, and those left living will envy the dead."

No cheer rose from the ranks. The only sound was the rustle of grimly nodding heads and some scattered sighs.

Thranduil dismounted from his charger. He whispered a word into the animal's dark-tipped ear and gave it a slap on the rump. Something about the finality of the gesture and the wistful look on his father's face as the horse cantered off northward put a pang into Legolas's heart. He had seen that expression only once before, in equally dire straits.

At that moment, an iron tipped arrow flew out of the south and buried itself high in the trunk of an elm. A second arrow followed, and another after that. As each hit, it burst into flame, setting the branches alight. The trees, dormant for the winter, did not catch readily, and yet they burned. What evil substances did these creatures of the Enemy have at their disposal?

"Legolas."
"Yes, Father?" He pulled his attention from the burning trees to meet Thranduil's steady gaze.

"I want you to take one hundred fighters and head back north a furlong."

Legolas drew in a breath to protest. "I should be here at your side. I'm not some child, to be sent far from the danger!"

His father laid a hand on his shoulder and spoke softly, seemingly unbothered by the challenging of his orders. "I'm not doing that, son. I want a good fighter at my back in case they maneuver around behind us."

"Do you really think they'll attack from the rear?"

"It's what I'd do." Thranduil smiled grimly. "I remind you, the healers are behind our lines. They'll bear the brunt of the attack if that happens."

Legolas shrugged and bit back his own smile. How well his father knew him! How well he knew them all, to command the loyalty and cooperation of each and every one of them with just a word and a glance. He touched his heart and bowed. "Aye, my Elven-lord. Kings rule, and princes serve."

Thranduil nodded and gave his shoulder a parting squeeze. Legolas could hear the obscene screeches of the advancing orcs, still unseen among the trees to the south. To their left, another arrow hit and a big pine tree flared up in a rush of flame. Above their heads, the few leaves still clinging to the branches of the oaks and elms crackled and burned. Already, despite the chill of Gwaeron, the heat from above felt like a baking summer day out on the plain.

Thranduil frowned, shut his eyes and raised his hands in a whispered incantation. A wind picked up out of the west, fanning the flames eastward, but keeping the worst of the heat and smoke away. "Go now, Legolas. Go quickly, and may fortune be with you!"

Legolas turned and sprinted northward, beckoning warriors to join him as he went. His last view of Thranduil was with sword drawn, greeting the advancing enemy with wild laughter, the light of the fire glinting off his hair.

North he led his group the required distance and then set them facing into the seemingly deserted woods. He commanded a mixed crew, with several of his father's best warriors and the rest hastily assembled conscripts. One of them, a girl dressed in the simple homespun garb of the Laegrim, bore a spear fashioned from the straightened point of a hook such as the foresters used to prune the young saplings. She wore only the minimal leather armor issued to the foot troops. Legolas gave her a reassuring smile. "No matter what happens, you stick close to me, all right?"

For a time, as he stared northward into the empty woods, Legolas thought that nothing would happen -- that Thranduil had cooked up the possibility of a rear attack to get him out of the way. He shifted from foot to foot, feeling the heat of the conflagration at his back and listening to the faintly heard clangor of the battle off to the south. A hare burst out of the trees and darted past him, followed by several more, then a crowd of squirrels, a lone fox and finally three deer.

Bringing up the rear came a giant spider, undulating on eight legs and leading a column of tiny spiderlings. "Your doom comes upon you, Elf," it clicked as it scuttled past.

The forest began to echo with the same fell cries he had heard from the opposite bank in his dream. Orcs. Many orcs.

Rather than pondering his impending death, Legolas set an arrow to his bowstring and thought of Nestalinde, somewhere back between the lines with the other healers. He smiled at the memory of
how, the night before, the two of them had shared the same blanket. While those within earshot
had politely pretended not to notice, he had made love to her for what they knew might well be
the last time. She was something worth fighting for. Something worth living for.

The loving smile still lingered on his face when the first orc appeared from the trees and he put an
arrow in its skull, right between the eyes. He heard the other bows singing around him as he drew
and loosed methodically, knocking the orcs back as they came swarming.

Letting the battle-fever sweep him along, Legolas fell into a familiar rhythm: pull an arrow from
his quiver, nock, draw, loose, and then reach behind for another. To the east, fanned by the wind,
the forest was full-ablaze. Legolas felt the heat of it against his right cheek. Fools, he thought! All
the orcs had managed to do was give them a barrier against attack from that direction.

To his left, he heard a thud and a gasp as an orcish arrow found its mark and a warrior fell.
Fefelas! For thirty years he had served as Thanduil's valet, while Galion served as his butler. Then
he had been assigned to Legolas. He had liked the fellow well, although he had given him the
lightest duty of all, preferring to dress himself and tend to his own needs. He shook his head and
kept fighting. No time to mourn; no time to feel; no time even to think.

The orcs were upon them, and soon would come the time to draw his knives in close combat, yet
Legolas still clung to his bow. He drew an arrow and used it to stab an onrushing orc before
setting it to his bowstring. He cast a quick glance to his right, to where the Laegren girl wielded
her makeshift pike with fierce determination. What he saw chilled his heart.

"Freeze!" he yelled, ignoring her look of wide-eyed terror and loosing a shot that sailed past her
head close enough to waft her hair. Behind her, a big orc crumpled to the ground, his sword stilled
in mid swing. She continued to stare at a spot just past his shoulder, her eyes widening further.

'Oh, no!' he thought, and prepared to leave this life, just as he heard a wheezing grunt and felt hot
droplets hit the back of his ears. He whirled to see a strange elf clad in muted brown and green
wiping the blade of his knife on the tunic of the orc whose throat he had just slit.

The dark-haired elf placed his hand to his heart and bowed in a gesture incongruously courtly for
the chaos of battle that surrounded them. "De alârjamê, kundûlmâ."

Out of the trees they materialized, dressed in hues that made them seem as if they were ghosts
birthed by the forest itself. They wore no armor and carried only the simplest of weapons, but with
their numbers to augment the troops of Legolas, soon the besieging orcs were no more. They were
the Forest Folk, those whom Thranduil's elves called the Evyr, Legolas realized. His mother's
people.

"We come to fight for our King," said the tall one who, by his voice and manner, seemed to be
their leader.

Legolas nodded, both in assent and in gratitude for saving his life. "Then let us do that."

He threw back his head and let out the elven battle-scream he had first heard his father utter at
Erebor. All around him, he heard voices taking up the cry. Surrounded by his mother's people and
his own, Legolas ran southward.

They found Thranduil's group sorely beset. Legolas fought long that afternoon, amidst the heat
and smoke of the great burning, until the sleeves above his vambraces were sodden with black
blood. Slowly the tide turned, the elves pushing the orcs back until the foul creatures began to flee
south to Dol Guldur in a full rout.
His final memory of the day was of Thranduil, his hair and skin dulled by the soot save for two pale tracks down his cheeks, holding up a hand amidst the carnage and crying, "Halt! Let them go -- we have won. The victory is ours!"

Legolas turned, laughing, to the little *Laegren* girl, who still fought like a demon beside him. He swept her into his arms and whirled her about, laying a chaste kiss on her blood-soaked cheek as the skies opened with the first rain of spring, dousing the fires and washing them all clean.

* * *

In the early hours of the next morning, Legolas sat dozing on a log outside the hastily assembled tent of the healers. Soon, his wait would be over. The worst wounded lay inside, while those more fortunate left the tent in a steady stream, wearing bandages and slings.

The procession of casualties slowed and stopped, and suddenly Legolas heard a burst of blistering profanity issue from inside. He bit his cheek and stifled a grin, amazed at the extent of his father's vocabulary. He heard curses in Elvish, Westron, Entish, and if not mistaken, even a few words of Khuzdûl thrown into the mix.

Presently, Thranduil stepped from the tent, leaning on Galion's arm and limping only a little. He offered a ceremonious bow to Nestalinde, who walked beside him. "Forgive me, my daughter, for my uncustomary vulgar language."

"Of course, my Lord," she replied with equal formality. "Indeed, you showed great restraint. That arrowhead was in a very sensitive area."

Thranduil coughed and turned to Legolas, clasping his shoulder. "See to your wife, son. We all need some rest."

"How like him to wait until everyone else has been treated before seeing to his own wounds," she chuckled as Thranduil hobbled off.

Legolas said nothing, just pulled her to him, and the two of them embraced and kissed, oblivious to the fact that they both smelled like a smoky abattoir, she covered in red blood and him in the remnants of black.

"You are well?" he said at last. In the grey light of dawn she looked paler than usual.

She nodded. "A little tired. And you? All through the night I expected to see you coming through with a wound."

"Not even a scratch this time," he said with a shake of his head and a laugh. "I suppose I'm charmed now that I don't have to make up excuses to see you."

"That is well," she said, coming close again and laying her head in the hollow of his shoulder. "I have been so worried for you. You see, my love, I am with child."

* * * * * * *

Chapter End Notes

Translations:

*Nínui*: February
Gwaeron: March
De alârjamë, kundûlmâ: You we hail, our prince (Primitive Elvish courtesy of Darth Fingon)
The Fallen Trees

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

'Give me a land of boughs in leaf,
A land of trees that stand;
Where trees are fallen, there is grief;
I love no leafless land.'
A.E. Houseman

Thranduil's elves laid their fallen warriors beneath a great cairn of stones. The Evyr carried off their dead for secret burial in the forest, as was their custom. The bodies of the orcs they threw onto a pyre set on the edge of the burnt area, using what logs remained and dousing them in the evil inflammable substance taken from the bodies of the orc-captains. Legolas now stood beside the pyre, torch in hand, ready to set it aflame.

"A waste of good wood, my lord. I would leave them for the carrion birds." The voice from his left belonged to Heledir, former captain of the palace guard eighty-some years before, and more recently a fellow soldier in the forest patrols.

"Save that we need to rid the forest of their foul taint, brother," said the soldier to his right: Glavras, perhaps the best friend Legolas had among his father's people. "We don't want to be smelling the stench for months."

"Bah!" said Heledir, "they deserve no such honor!" He drew back to spit.

Legolas looked on the dead orcs' sad twisted faces and recalled what Nestalinde had told him on the night they wed. These pitiful creatures had been Elf-kind once. They had not chosen this fate. Save for the happy chance of having a more fortunate ancestor back at Cuiviénen, Legolas might be lying on this same pile of corpses himself.

He held up a hand. "No, Heledir. They are our brothers. I take no joy in this."

Solemnly, he laid his hand to his heart and bowed his head. "Hiro hyn hîdh ab 'wanath," he whispered, sending a silent prayer to the One that these lost children of the First Born might find mercy and healing in the Halls of Mandos.

Legolas tossed his torch onto the pile. Glavras and Heledir did the same, and the flames sprang up. Black smoke from the burning bodies and the evil substance that soaked them drifted back, forcing its way into his nostrils. He swayed, feeling sick and dizzy, fancying that he saw shifting shapes among the dancing flames.

It seemed to him then that he stood on a wide plain, with the clangor of battle surrounding him. To the west rose a city of white stone, set in ascending levels upon the side of a mountain. Within the city, many fires burned. It was their smoke he smelled now.

Off to the south, he heard the braying of battle horns, and he saw creatures moving like living mountains across the field of battle. They had long noses like the tails of giant serpents and huge gleaming tusks the diameter of tree trunks. They stood so vast that many men rode upon their backs in tiny houses. Legolas would have laughed were it not for the horror of the things. His father's chessboard had come to life; the pieces had been no mere fancy.
The scene before his eyes held him now. A white horse writhed upon its side in death throes, its rider, an old man and a mighty leader by his insignia, lay pinned beneath. A slender warrior, little more than a boy, stood beside him, brandishing a sword in defiance.

A shadow fell over the field, and Legolas heard the same soul-curdling scream that had pierced his heart in his dream of the banks of the Anduin. From the sky settled a creature out of nightmare, with huge webbed fingers for wings, a tiny head upon a long neck and a tail like a lizard. Upon its back rode a black figure whose very being sucked the light and life from the living world. "Come not between the Nazgûl and his prey! No living man may hinder me!"

The young warrior whipped away the helm, revealing not the face of a youth but that of a woman, beautiful in her determination. "Begone! I will smite you if you touch him."

The Ringwraith merely laughed. The fell beast on which he rode flapped its leathery wings and poised to strike. The woman swung her sword, as the beast, with the sinuous skill of a seasoned war mount, dove beneath her stroke and took off her head with one quick snap of its jaws.

The creature settled on the body of the dying king and his would-be protectress, rending their flesh. Once the steed's hunger for blood had been sated, its master took it in hand. Pausing only to dispatch a small weeping figure in child-sized armor with a careless blow of his mace, he spurred the beast to the sky.

They swooped and flew over the battlefield, scattering the mounted fighters and giving strength to the forces of the Dark Lord. The defenders of the white city scattered, fell and died before the onslaught, and soon every level of the city was ablaze. Legolas could feel the heat of it on his cheeks and hear the screams of the dying. As black specks massed in the corners of his vision, he saw, far off to the south, a fleet of ships with black sails come drifting up the Anduin. On the lead ship a black and white banner began to unfurl, revealing three stars and the tips of a tree. It stopped in mid-drop, as the Nazgûl flew over a scene of death and devastation. The unearthly screech echoed in Legolas's ears as the light failed and darkness took him.

* * *

He felt cold on his face, and wetness, and his eyes fluttered open to see the worried face of his father's valet, Galion, staring down at him. "You almost fell into the fire, Prince, when you swooned."

Legolas shook his head, trying to rid it of the lingering vision of the great battle and the burning city. "What happened?"

Heledir snickered, somewhere off to the side. "His wife is with child and he is the one who faints."

Legolas groaned and coughed. It seemed his lot in life to have everyone know his business almost before he himself knew it.

"Leave him alone. It happens," Galion said, casting Heledir a look of annoyance. "I threw up every morning for four months with our first, while my wife stayed well. You're in no position to mock."

He turned his attention back, whispering, "Are you all right, Legolas?"

"Yes," added Glavras, "you'd better snap out of it, because here comes the King."

"What is going on?" Thranduil bellowed, his voice harsh with concern.

"Just the smoke," Legolas mumbled, letting Galion and Glavras help him to his feet. He still felt
weak and sick but he managed a smile to greet his father. "I breathed in too much, that's all."

Thranduil furrowed his brow.

Legolas took a deep breath and swallowed his fear. " Truly, Father, all is well."

No sooner had he spoken, than they felt the ground groan and shudder beneath their feet in a series of shocks that seemed to emanate from the south. A wave of darkness passed over them, a blackness more of the spirit than any lack of light, and the air turned cold. Although the day was windless, the trees began to writhe and lash their branches as if in anguish at the passing of an Age.

Legolas saw his father wince and clap his hands to his temples, as Galion bent his head and swayed upon his feet. Legolas spared them little attention, for in his mind he felt, rather than heard, an eldritch scream of triumphant malice. He doubled over and put his hands on his thighs to keep from falling over again. "What was that?" he heard Glavras mutter.

Legolas straightened up to see Thranduil's face, pale and stricken. "It is done," his father said. "He has put the Ring back on his finger. Woe to all who live in these times!"

* * *

Three days later, as Thranduil's army tended to their wounded and stood watch against a renewed attack from Dol Guldur, a group of battered elves, mostly women and children, straggled into the camp. Their leader, one of the few men among them, knelt stiffly, for he had suffered wounds. "I am Rúmil of Lorien, my lord Thranduil. I and the remnant of my folk request sanctuary within your realm. We offer you fealty in return."

"Lórien?" Thranduil asked. "What of your lord and your lady?"

"Dead, my lord. Lord Celeborn was slain on the hill of Cerin Amroth during the last onslaught."

"Alas, my cousin," Thranduil whispered. "And his wife?"

"The Lady Galadriel fought by his side until the end, my lord, wielding her sword with the valor of a man. They fell together."

Legolas heard his father sigh. He laid his hand on his heart and bowed his head. "Aiy' ar namárie, Nerwende Aranel."

Rúmil seemed to be fighting tears. "The orcs were so many. So many of them, they kept coming and coming. I wanted to stay and fight with my Lord and Lady, but I had my orders to save those whom I could. Ai, my brother! Orophin stayed behind to hold off a pack of them while our group fled Caras Galadhon. I wanted to be with him too."

"There; calm yourself. You did the right thing," Thranduil said, placing a steadying hand upon Rúmil's shoulder, which had begun to tremble. "How many are there?"

"Threescore, no more than that," said a fellow in brown who stepped out of the crowd. "Lothlorien is finished, King Thranduil, and so is my order."

"Radagast!" Thranduil exclaimed. "I rejoice to see you well. But what do you mean, your order is finished?"

"My brother Olórin is no more. I felt him pass and return again, but three days ago his spirit left the Middle Lands forever. He is gone." The brown wizard's face, usually so open and kindly,
looked pinched and lined with grief.

"And what of Curunír? He stood high in the esteem of the White Council, or so I am told." As his father spoke, Legolas detected a note of bitterness. Deemed too backward, a woodland king of a rustic people, Thranduil had not been included in the counsel of the Wise. Nor had the brown wizard, for that matter.

Radagast shook his head. "His heart grew too proud and it fell to the Enemy long since, did we but know it. He used me, unwitting, in treachery against Olórin not a year past. Isengard is a place of evil now. And I, my lord Thranduil, have failed in my task."

"Perhaps not," Thranduil replied, his face brightening with a grim hope. "I am not so ignorant as some think me. I have long known what manner of beings you and your brother Ithrynn are, my friend. Tell me, Radagast, can you place a girdle of enchantment about my forest, as Melian did of old in Doriath to confound evil and keep it out?"

The brown wizard nodded. "I believe I can, my lord. It will mean the cessation of commerce with the world of Men, though."

Thranduil frowned and shook his head. "There's no avoiding it, I'm afraid. But in days to come, the world of Men will have little to offer us anyway. It will become a dark place, filled with Sauron's oppression. We are on our own."

"Very well, King Thranduil. I will set up the borders."

"Radagast, wait -- have you enough strength to extend the girdle to these mountains?" Thranduil asked, and Legolas knew his father was remembering the Evyr, whose arrival had turned the tide of battle and saved them all. "We must -- I must preserve these lands."

Radagast nodded. "Yes, my lord Thranduil. I can do that."

"Then see to it. And, Radagast, I am grateful"

* * *

They arrived back at the caverns on the Forest River to find those they had left still safe behind the spell-guarded gates. The other news, however, was not as good. Thranduil pieced the story together from the twitterings of birds and the reports of scouts sent to the forest edge to spy out the land to the east. Dale had fallen to the Easterling armies; the town lay burnt and deserted as it had been two hundred years earlier after the coming of Smaug. Of the battle, there was little description save for vague murmurings of the two kings, Dain and Brand, falling together. Erebor belched a foul smoke that no Dwarven forges could produce. Thranduil's prediction of rich orcs for neighbors had come true.

Upon receiving the reports, Thranduil had covered his face with his hands. "Ah, Dain -- he was a decent sort for a Dwarf. I am grieved that he and his folk met such an end. And Brand. I knew his forefathers back since before . . ." Thranduil trailed off with a haunted look.

Legolas recalled a day, long ago, when he had set out to meet the younger son of King Girion. His father had promised him a trip to the fabled toyshops of Dale. It had never happened. "Father, what of Laketown?"

Thranduil shook his head. "Either its defenses held, or they did not. We can do no more for them. Radagast, shut the borders. Shut them tightly."
No longer did the rafts come up the Forest River bearing food and trade-goods. No longer did the barrels go downriver empty. Other than that, life in Mirkwood changed little as spring turned into summer, summer turned into autumn, and the first snows fell. Legolas, busy with the hunting and the food gathering and the strengthening of the realm's border patrols -- still maintained conscientiously despite Radagast's Girdle -- had little free time, and that was used in the company of Nestalinde as the new life grew within her. He could not afford to wonder what had happened to his friend Aragorn. And to the rest of them.

When the Solstice rolled around, they held a feast and drank the last of the Dorwinion. Legolas stayed up late that night with his father, enjoying the camaraderie of his fellow soldiers and the shared joy that the kingdom had endured for another year. At last, quite merry, and more than a little tipsy, he stumbled up to his chambers.

Nestalinde, who had excused herself early in the evening, lay in their bed breathing evenly. Legolas stripped off his clothing and slipped in naked between the covers. "Come closer," she muttered, as he settled himself gingerly on the mattress.

"Are you sure? I must feel like a block of ice."

"Yes, and you smell like wine, too. But come, warm yourself."

Obediently, he moved in closer and spooned himself around her, throwing an arm over her side to stroke her taut belly. She was naked too, and her warm skin felt soft and soothing against him, the gentle swell of her buttocks pressing into the front of his thighs. Before long his body reacted predictably. "Sorry," he muttered and started to pull back,

She caught his wrist, holding him firm and keeping him from rolling away. "No. It's all right. Stay. Give your strength to the child."

He laughed in the darkness. "I think that's an old wives tale the women of Mirkwood tell to fool us fathers into feeling as if we're actually of some use at times like these."

"I can assure you, my love, the very same tale was told back at Cuiviénen, and do you think we wives would continue to tell it to you husbands if there were not some reward in it for us?"

Legolas needed no further prodding. An arch of her back, a curl of his hips, and he found himself sliding into slick warmth. "I love you. I love you both so much," he murmured as he moved his hand lower to bring her along with him.

When the moment of his crisis came upon him, Legolas froze and held his hips rigid, fearful that otherwise he might thrust too hard and injure either of them. The effort intensified the sensation of his climax, and, after clenching his back teeth and groaning, he collapsed panting against her hair.

"Are you warm now?" she laughed.

He nuzzled, parting the dark strands with his nose. "I think," he said, kissing the damp skin on the back of her neck and tasting salt, "I think this is the very best Solstice I have ever had."

He held his wife close, and beneath his hand, their child did its slow dance in the womb.

* * *

Three weeks later, on his Begetting Day, Legolas did not wear the circlet or his festive finery. While Thranduil and the elves made merry without him and a gentle snow fell in the forest outside the caves, Legolas spent the evening in his bedchamber, holding Nestalinde's hand while their
child came into the world.

"You have a son, my lord," cried Sarniel, the healer doing the honors that night.

"Give him to me," Nestalinde demanded. In her voice Legolas heard a hint of jealousy that, for the first time in three Ages, a scion of the House of Oropher had not been born into her hands. He felt her position as mother of the new prince to be a promotion. True, she had not cried out during the course of her labor that she hated him and proposed to do him some violence as Galion had warned she might, but he decided that discretion was the better part of valor and wisely forbore to say so.

Sarniel placed the hastily wrapped bundle into Nestalinde's waiting arms. Legolas watched as she unwrapped and examined the infant, still streaked faintly with blood and his pale hair damp from the birth, carefully counting his fingers and toes before placing him to her breast. "Calen," she whispered. "I name you Calen, after your father."

As the new baby began to suckle, Legolas felt a sudden rush of love for this tiny being that he and his wife had made. He would nurture and teach the tender faer given into his keeping. He would live for him and die for him, should it come down to it.

"Nestarion," he said, and both Sarniel and Nestalinde turned questioning faces to him. "After his mother. Calen Nestarion -- my son."

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Chapter End Notes

Translations:
Aiy' ar namárie, Nerwende Aranel: Hail and farewell, Princess Nerwen. Thank you, Darth Fingon!
Hiro hyn hûðh ab 'wanath: May you find peace beyond death
Falls the Remorseless Day

"To-day I shall be strong,
No more shall yield to wrong,
Shall squander life no more;
Days lost, I know not how,
I shall retrieve them now;
Now I shall keep the vow
I never kept before."
A.E. Houseman

In the summer of the year that Calen turned four, Thranduil finally gave in to Legolas's repeated requests to be allowed to see how things fared in the world of Men. Obeying Thranduil's dictum to give Erebor, now teeming with orcs and other foul creatures of the Enemy, a wide berth, Legolas led the scouting party to Laketown himself.

He stood now, at the end of what had been the causeway. Big fluffy cumulus clouds drifted serenely across a brilliant blue sky. A warm breeze riffled the waters of the lake. Yet all was silence save for the roar of the falls off to the south.

The blackened stubs of rotting pilings poked up through the water, recalling to his mind the devastation over eighty years past when Smaug had fallen on the old town in his death plunge. A short distance to the south the lake birds still wheeled and dipped above a patch of water that sparkled with the fire of gemstones below, flying low to snatch up an occasional unlucky fish in their claws.

From the rushes at Legolas's feet came the whir of wings, and a flash of blue shot upward. A startled muskrat that had been drowsing in the shelter of the bank launched itself out into the water, leaving a vee of ripples in its wake.

Watching the heron flap off, its blue plumage a brighter spot against the azure of the sky, Legolas paused to let his heartbeat return to normal. 'Where do they go when the summer ends and the sun dips low in its passage across the sky, turning the air cold?' he wondered, recalling a day long past when he had pondered the same question along with a heartbreakingly young Aragorn. 'To what strange lands and climes?'

The memory came back with full force: standing with Aragorn at the south end of the lake with the roar of the falls in his ears and the spray against his cheeks, gazing out over the precipice at the faint silver ribbon of the Celduin winding its way southeastward toward the Sea of Rhûn. On that long-ago morning, his heart had been filled with a hunger to see those far off lands, a desire so keen he could almost taste it. Time, he had told himself. There would be all the time in the world to travel with his friend and stand at his side.

"Oh, Aragorn," he sighed, "where are you now?"

No answer came. Only the sough of the wind and the soft chuckle of the wavelets against the bank.

"Legolas." Glavras' voice brought him back to the present. "There is something you must see."

Past the remains of the guard hut, Glavras led him to a spot where the blackened earth of a
makeshift forge still showed in places through the long grass. Beyond that, hidden by a clump of
brambles, they found a jumbled pile of skulls and bones, tossed heedlessly aside like so much
garbage.

Glavras kicked at a broken link of chain that lay half-buried in the dirt, rusted from four years'
exposure to the wind and rain. "They killed those inclined to fight and led away the women and
children for slaves."

Legolas shook his head, remembering his trips to Laketown, with the rough but kindly men who
shared their ale with him and the laughing barmaids who had caressed him with their eyes.
Thranduil had always warned him never to become unduly fond of mortals; they did not live long
enough, he said. Not that Legolas had listened . . .

"This was a mistake," he said, his voice grating in his own ears. "The world of Men is finished.
There is nothing for us here. Nothing."

It was a dispirited group that Legolas led back through the Girdle and westward along the river
path toward the caves. However, as they reached the ranks of beeches and came in sight of the
great gates, a small figure came hurtling across the stone bridge, its pale hair streaming behind.
"Daddy!"

Legolas choked back a sob as he gathered his son up into his arms, feeling the pain leave him.
'Why do I have the strength to go on?' he asked himself, as he buried his face in Calen's hair. 'This
is why. And it is enough.'

* * *

The years passed, and the elves of Mirkwood learned to make do with what the forest provided.
They drank wine made from gathered berries. They ate venison, and bread made from nuts. They
wore leather and silk, which was in plentiful supply from the spiders. Thranduil, in his cups, was
wont to laugh and say that even the humblest of his folk dressed better than kings. Oropher's
vision of a life natural to elves had come, at last, to pass.

Calen grew from a sweet child who learned his harp without a murmur and brought injured
animals to his mother in the healers' ward, into a gentle young man with his father's hair and his
grandsire's bright blue eyes. Upon reaching his majority, he found his vocation as a healer, taking
his place beside Nestalinde.

Despite the wizard's girdle, Thranduil's soldiers remained ever vigilant. As his father's ablest
warrior, Legolas was often away from home for weeks at a time supervising the border patrols that
stood guard against an invasion from Dol Guldur that never came. And with each time away,
came the joy of homecoming as he returned to the arms of his wife. With Calen long past his
majority, they even began to speak tentatively of another child. Legolas had never been so happy.

No news from the outside reached them until a day in the last weeks of Ninui, one hundred and
twenty-three years following the battle under the trees, when two men made their way through the
Girdle and were brought by the border patrols to the stronghold.

Legolas, summoned from the sword-practice chambers, arrived in the throne room still in his
shirtsleeves. With a quick nod to Radagast, who had come to stand high in Thranduil's esteem
during the past hundred years, Legolas took his place beside the throne, just as the guards
conducted the pair into the King's presence. He heard his father gasp softly. "Elladan Peredhel!"
Legolas would scarcely have recognised the son of Elrond, so changed was he. A jagged scar marred his right cheek, pulling the corner of his mouth up into a perpetual sneer, and his hair showed streaks of grey.

However Legolas's eyes were only for the aged man who leaned on Elladan's arm. His dull hair was white, his face deeply lined. His wizened body was bent with the weight of too many winters, and he shuffled beside his companion with slow faltering steps. "Aragorn . . ."

Ignoring protocol, Legolas leaped down from the dais and rushed to their side. The old man looked up at him with a vacant stare. "Who are you? Do I know you?" he said, just before he staggered and fell heavily against Elladan's shoulder.

"Healers! Fetch the healers," Legolas shouted, and a footman ran off to do his bidding.

"And a chair," added Thranduil.

Galion, ever at the ready, swiftly produced a chair and Elladan eased Aragorn down onto it. "You must forgive my foster brother, my Lord Thranduil. The years have not dealt kindly with him."

"Nor with you, it seems," Thranduil muttered. "What brings you to my halls, Master Elladan?"

"Even the blood of Númenor cannot fend off the hand of time, especially after a life of such travail. Aragorn's life is ending, and I bring him to you, my Lord Thranduil, that he might have a sanctuary in his last days. The time draws close. I think he will not last beyond the anniversary of his birth on the first day of Gwaeron."


Elladan gave him a sharp look. "He fell in battle, many years ago. On the docks at Harlond, before the White City."

He paused and bent his head, seemingly lost in old grief. "If only we had not been so slow. But Indavir, used to the light of Imladris, hesitated to go underground at the Paths of the Dead. His horse balked and hampered by his own fear he could not make it obey. We lost precious time waiting for him to master his mount and himself, for Aragorn refused to leave one of his Fellowship behind."

"We know nothing of the events outside our own realm," Thranduil prompted. "Be plain. What happened?"

"We came too late; that is what happened," Elladan said, his face twisted with emotion. "Our ships sailed up the Anduin, and we began to unfurl our banner, preparing to do battle. But all was devastation before us, with the city in flames and that cursed captain of the Nazgûl flying his evil beast over the plain. I saw it right away -- we had no chance, and Elrohir saw it too. All we could do was to convince Estel to get out of there -- to save the last Hope of Men."

Elladan took a deep breath and covered his face with his hands. "He would not leave, though. Not until four squads of Haradrim came at us and Elrohir and Indavir fell holding them off. The dwarf died too, on the end of a Southron's spear. He made a good accounting with that axe of his before the end; even though he and Indavir had never gotten along, he avenged his death. Halbarad and I managed to drag Aragorn away, and we escaped along with the remnant of our army. We've been hiding and fighting ever since."

Nestalinde arrived then, with Calen in her wake. She bent over Aragorn, gentle hands measuring the beat of his pulse. With an encouraging smile, she offered him a draught of their precious miruvor. Aragorn managed to choke down a few drops and smiled back. "Arwen . . .?"
In the uncomfortable silence that followed, Elladan turned anguished eyes upon Thranduil. "Do you know what running from a battle does to a man's spirit, my lord?"

Thranduil sighed. His face was stern but his tone kindly. "Yes, Elladan, I do. What of your father? What became of Master Elrond?"

Elladan shook his head. "When Sauron the Accursed put that Ring back onto his finger all our secrets were revealed to him. Vilya, so long our shield, became our undoing. The forces of the Enemy found Imladris and they spared nothing in bringing it down."

Legolas shot a quick glance at his father, whose mouth had set into a grim line of comprehension. They had spoken of it little, but Thranduil had long suspected that the other Elven realms held the Golodhren Rings of Power. This confirmed it.

"After the rout at the Pelennor, we headed north straightway," Elladan went on, "but it took us weeks, evading orcs all the way, and . . ." He paused, his face pinched with grief. "When we reached the valley there were none but the carrion birds to welcome us."

Thranduil covered his face with his hands. "Oh, alas!"

"He knows," Elladan said, laying a gentle hand on Aragorn's shoulder. "He knows she's dead. He saw the evidence with his own eyes. I think the reason he has allowed his wits to wander at the end is so that he might know the balm of forgetfulness. How I wish I could do the same."

Elladan looked up, and Legolas found himself transfixed by piercing grey eyes. "He deserves a little peace, a comfortable spot to lay his body down in death. He fought so long and so bravely for so little. He was a man, my brother Aragorn. Unlike you, Legolas. On the whole, she was wrong to think so highly of you."

A gasp ran through the assembled elves at this slur to their Prince.

Legolas shot a quick glance at the throne, where Thranduil had narrowed his eyes and tightened his hand around the shaft of his carved wooden scepter. The staff was no mere decorative prop; Legolas has seen his father sling it once with deadly accuracy at a spiderling that had stolen in on the heels of a careless guard. He sensed now that Thranduil would not hesitate to send it flying at Elladan in rebuke for insolence toward a member of his family, great-great-grandson of Lúthien or no.

He gave a subtle shake of his head, staying Thranduil's angry hand. Elladan spoke out of grief rather than contempt. "She?" said Legolas, although he knew the answer well enough.

"I would have given anything for a smile from Gilraen, or a kind word from her lips," Elladan continued. "But she blamed me for Arathorn's death and would not be swayed. You, Legolas, you, she loved."

"Loved?" Legolas murmured. "I never knew." And then, at the pain in Elladan's eyes, the other revelation: "I never knew."

"She let you hold her hand while she died. She let you promise to take care of Aragorn, as you would a son. And what did you do, Prince?" Elladan shook his head, his voice choked with emotion. "At the last moment, you broke your vow and deserted him. You have spent almost a long-year living the good life in your father's halls while Estel and I have slept in ditches and caves fighting Sauron and his minions. You are forsworn, Legolas Thranduilion!"

"What?" Legolas responded, stung at the truth of it. "What could I have done to change any of
"Who knows what small thing will change the tide of fate? At least you could have tried."

The doors at the end of the throne room flew open, this time without the aid of any footmen. A dark-haired figure stalked into the room, his russet and gold robes streaming out behind him. "Did somebody just speak my name?"

Once again, Legolas found himself staring into a pair of amber eyes that twinkled with malicious amusement. Eyes he had not seen since Elrond's council. "You . . ." he whispered.

The sensuous lips curled upward in a smile. "Well met, Prince. And indeed, what small thing might you have done had you not taken my counsel that day? Fortunately for me, you did take it."

With a swift glance downward, Legolas noticed what had escaped his attention on that long ago bright morning in Imladris: the missing forefinger on the stranger's left hand. And now, on the middle finger of that same hand, a gold ring gleamed. "You!"

"At last you begin to understand who and what I am. I have borne many names. Mairon. Gorthaur. Sauron. But your kind knew me once as Annatar, and what a gift I gave you, Thranduilion! Your heart's desire -- a beautiful wife who loves you, a strong, handsome son. Tell me, are you not grateful?"

Legolas glanced quickly about the throne room. Why were the others not reacting? Save for a collective shudder when the stranger entered, the assembled elves stood quietly. Too quietly. They barely seemed to breathe.

Time had begun to behave strangely. In the sconces, the candle-flames ceased their flickering, standing frozen for several heartbeats only to start up again fitfully with the slow undulation of reeds underwater. Legolas realized that no one else could see the stranger or hear the two of them as they spoke. Except . . .

To the left of the throne, the brown wizard had snapped to attention, glaring at the newcomer. Radagast. Radagast could see him too.

"Did you think your puny girdle could keep me out, brother?" Sauron asked, focusing his attention to the throne. "You always were a bird-loving fool. I, and my servants, could come in any time I wanted. I merely chose not to do so until now."

Legolas felt his heart turn to lead within his chest. The secret spells had not sealed the gates against Sauron either. "Will you kill us now?"

Sauron turned back and laughed. "Why should I want to do that, Prince? I have you exactly where I want you. I confess, of all of them, your father was the one who gave me the most worry. He held a realm against me for the better part of an Age with no Ring of Power to aid him. But in the end, you, the long-awaited son Olórin gave him only to use you as a pawn, were the key to bringing him down."

He turned his attention to Aragorn, slumped in his chair beneath Nestalinde's hand. "Your hope is dying. The world outside belongs to me now. Here you all will stay in your precious woods, becoming creatures of cave and dell, forgetting and forgotten."

Legolas shut his eyes in horror. *I have put my son into a cage . . .'*

If only he could go back to that day so long ago and undo his folly. If only . . .
There is always hope, a small still voice said in his mind, for those with the courage to see it through...

"Radagast!" Legolas's head snapped up. "Radagast, can you put me back? Please help me make this right again!"

Legolas watched as a beatific smile suffused the brown wizard's face. "At last I know why Yavanna sent me," he said with a laugh. "I who once existed outside of time and the material world can go there again. And I can take you with me."

"You cannot," Sauron hissed. "Even I have not the ability to do such a thing."

"Don't be so sure," Radagast said. "You should have paid more heed to the minor strains of the Music. Evil has great power. It has always been thus. But the Good retains strength beyond your ken. My love for the beasts and the birds of the air has increased me, while you have diluted your essence into that Ring of yours. Radagast the fool, Aiwendil the afterthought has one last burst of magic left in him, my fallen brother, and there is nothing you can do to stop me."

"Nothing?" replied Sauron, although his smile did not cover the chill of fear in his eyes. "Nothing except to point out to this elf what a price he will pay for it. It is exceedingly dear, Prince," he said, with a pointed look at Calen, who stood beside his mother.

Legolas froze, as the understanding washed over him. Slowly, those around him seemed to have sensed that something was amiss. Thranduil's face showed a dawning fear. Nestalinde gazed at him with sorrow, yet the look in her deep grey eyes was one of acceptance. Calen merely looked confused.

'Oh, my son, my beautiful son,' he thought. 'If I do this thing, if I do what is right, you will never be. All else, I can sacrifice: father, wife, my own life if need be, but this?'

And yet, how could he not?

His heart ached with love for them. With his coming of age vision of a green leaf withering in its branch, Legolas had expected to live single and die young, and this foreknowledge had led him to the knives and bow rather than the more peaceful pursuits his father urged upon him. What an unexpected joy his wife and child had been! He had savored every moment as if stolen from a harsh destiny: lying beside Nestalinde in the night and waking to her smile; watching his son grow into a splendid young man.

He now realized that in following his own happiness he had bound his strange fate inextricably with that of his own son, and both would share in his choice. Thranduil's parting words before his departure for Rivendell rang in his ears: "You are like an arrow aimed at my heart." How true!

And yet, he recalled his father's other words: "Better to die on your feet fighting like a man than on your knees weeping like a slave." Better not to live at all than to live in a cage.

Sauron scowled as if sensing Legolas's growing resolve. "Don't be a fool! If you leave these woods and venture into my land, I guarantee you will not return whole."

"If that is what must be," Legolas said, fighting to keep the grief from his voice as the arrow transfixed him. He turned to the wizard. "Radagast -- let it be done."

The wizard nodded and gave him a smile whose edges softened with sympathy. "Stay resolute, Legolas. He will no longer be able to approach you."

As Legolas steeled himself, he saw Radagast allow the veil to fall away. The old brown man grew
taller, younger, a being of blazing light and beauty.

As the light swelled around him, outshining the flickering candles, and Sauron screamed in negation, Legolas fixed his eyes upon his son. *I promise you, Calen, I will not forget you. I will survive, and I will come home. You will live again; I will find a way back . . .'*

* * *

Legolas came back to himself in the golden light of Elrond's council chamber. He blinked hard, and watched a leaf resume its gentle fall to earth. Something nagged at the edges of his mind. Something he knew he needed to remember -- something important -- but the more he tried to recapture it, the more the memory slipped away and dissipated like a puff of mist off the Forest River in the hot sun.

He turned, only to see an empty chair beside him. Had not someone been there just a moment before? And why did he feel this awful ache in his heart?

Aragorn, the last hope of Men, the man Legolas loved like a son -- and why did that word cause him such grief? -- knelt at the feet of a hobbit. "If by my life or death I can protect you, I will. You have my sword."

Mordor. They would be going to Mordor, to stand on the very spot where grandfather Oropher had left this life. Legolas knew he would not return unscathed -- if he returned at all.

*Trust to hope,* said a small still voice in his mind, and Legolas nodded. This was his strange fate.

'To whatever end awaits, my friend,' he vowed, and stepped forward, his voice ringing clear and strong. "And you have my bow . . ."

"Leave your home behind, lad,
And reach your friends your hand,
And go, and luck go with you . . .'
A.E. Houseman, The Recruit

The End

End Notes

**Author's Note:** This story is loosely based on Nikos Kazantzakis' novel, The Last Temptation of Christ. It is primarily MovieVerse with some book elements to make the plot work. All quotes from the movie and book belong to their respective copyholders.

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