**Hope**

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**Summary**

In honor of the birthday of my stalwart beta-reader, Ignoble Bard, a LOTR take on a classic tale by Nathaniel Hawthorne. Legolas spends Mid-summer's Night in the woods of Ithilien. Legolas; Aragorn; Gandalf. PG-13 AU

**Notes**

The usual disclaimers apply. I do not own the world and characters of JRR Tolkien, nor do I own Hawthorne's plot. This story was written for personal amusement, and I am making no profit from it.

See the end of the work for more notes

Hope

Legolas Greenleaf stepped forth at sunset onto the uppermost circle of Minas Tirith. On the doorstep of the palace he turned back to face his friend.

"Are you sure I cannot dissuade you from this fey plan of yours?" said Aragorn. The woods of Ithilien are perilous, on this night of all nights, and I fear for you."

Legolas shook his head. "I came of age in woods both haunted and perilous. Ithilien holds no terrors for me." He paused and looked to the east, where the Ephel Duath were sinking into the shadows of twilight. Over the past months, the murk in the skies above Mordor had begun to clear, but the sunrises were still glorious. "Aragorn, the war is over and the day is gone down on warriors like you and I. The shadow has left the forest I once called home, and now, instead of Mirkwood, it is called the Wood of Green Leaves. You must become a leader of Men and I must
find a new purpose for my life. Instead of an archer, I shall become a gardener, and where better to apply my skills? If the trees of Ithilien can be healed, I need to be certain of it."

"If you are bent on it then," said Aragorn, "may the Lady Starkindler keep you safe."

Legolas’s swift feet carried him down through the city, out the gates, and east across the fields of the Pelennor. By the time he had crossed the newly rebuilt bridge at Osgiliath, full dark hadfallen. Onward he sped, until the old road that led to Minas Ithil dwindled into a faint path among the trees.

Not long after, a tall figure in white robes stepped forth from between two warped trunks. He held a staff that in the dim light appeared to be fashioned of twisting tree branches -- or was it two serpents entwined one about the other? And at the top shone a pale gem. "You are late, young Greenleaf," he said.

"I tarried for a time to reassure Aragorn. He told me there are dark enchantments in these woods."

"And are there not?"

"Perhaps, Gandalf. I need to know if they can be overcome, if the forest can be cleansed. That is why I answered your summons tonight. I still do not like to deceive Aragorn, though."

The old wizard laughed softly. "You are young, Legolas. If you are to become a lord in your own right you need to get past the notion that good and evil are stark opposites." When Legolas shook his head in confusion he continued, "The morality of life in the Middle-lands has never been black and white. Not even in your own family. Take Oropher, for example..."

"You knew my grandfather?"

Gandalf shook his head. "Oropher is not yet released from the Halls of Waiting and rehoused, but his history is well known among the Rodyn of the Blessed Realm, myself included. I could recount to you deeds of his in old Doriath, and later on in Lindon, that might tarnish your glowing vision of him. And of course there are the widows and orphans he made out of his stubborn pride at the Dagorlad."

"I know the story. My father told me often enough."

"Ah, your father. He is another one who learned to recognize the virtues of pragmatism. Why, I lit a pitch-pine knot from this very staff to give him a spark so that he might burn out a nest of orcs in his forest in the early days. For almost fourteen long-years I gave your father aid and counsel in his fight against Dol Guldur."

"Was there a fee for this assistance?" Legolas asked.

"A very dear price," said Gandalf. "You."

Before Legolas could make any reply, they heard footsteps on the pathway behind them. Gandalf took his elbow and drew him into the shelter of the trees.

Legolas could not believe his eyes. Was this newcomer the venerable dame who terrorized the chambermaids in the Houses of Healing with her iron discipline? Was this the same matron who sat in the courtyard on many a sunny afternoon telling the assembled children tales of Gondor’s ancient glory?

"What is Mistress Ioreth doing out here after dark and on Midsummer's Night too?"
"Indeed," replied Gandalf, "what business can a decent woman have out here? You will find out if you have the courage to go deeper into the woods."

They went on. Once more they were overtaken, this time by two mounted figures, Lord Celeborn of the Golden Wood and Prince Imrahil of Dol Amroth. "I would not miss this gathering for all the pleasures my palace has to offer me this night," said Imrahil. "There will be communicants from far and wide."

"Yes," replied Celeborn. "Men of the north, and others from as far as fabled Khand. And two new young ones to join the Councils of the Wise."

These cryptic words told Legolas very little about what would bring two such mighty lords out into the wood at night, but when he turned in their place of concealment to enquire of the Wizard, Gandalf was gone.

Legolas continued on alone, deeper into the woods. At length, drawn on by the murmur of voices and a glow among the trees, he found the spot he sought. The cold starlight from above would have been enough for his Elven eyes, but there were mortals among this gathering. And one of the voices had a familiar timbre.

In the center of the clearing stood an oddly shaped rock that bore an unfortunate resemblance to a crude altar. Nearby, a bonfire burned, casting a light that tinged the rock, the faces of the gathered celebrants and the trees themselves with the hue of blood. Lord Celeborn’s Lady was among them, not standing with her husband, but with a shorter figure by her side who threw an arm about her waist, his braided auburn beard gleaming in the ruddy light. Off among the shadows the doughty Beregond sat sharing a cup of some reddish liquid with Ioreth. Her head was laid back against his neck, and his arm was draped about her shoulder, one hand lazily cupping her bosom. Other faces were familiar to him. Faces he had known at Imladris from the time of his youth, and others he had seen going about the streets of Minas Tirith, models of stern probity in Elessar's new kingdom. Their voices were raised in song, an old Elvish paean to the Powers of the West, but in the tainted light of the clearing the words sounded different, alien -- almost obscene.

The fire suddenly blazed upward, and silhouetted against it stood a figure at once small as a mortal child and vastly tall as the shadow stretched and danced. And on its left hand were only four fingers.

The hand stretched out. "Bring forth the convert . . ."

As a tall man stepped out of the crowd, Legolas shut his eyes. "Nae, Estel!" He did not even know if he spoke the words aloud, but the fire shot up in a great blaze of sparks and suddenly the clearing fell into darkness. Legolas turned and ran, headlong, heedless of the branches that whipped at his face.

When he came back to his senses, his night vision had returned. The woods were bathed in gentle starlight. He heard a voice ahead and saw a figure. Aragorn! Legolas whispered a silent prayer of thanks to the Lady Starkindler just as another figure came into view.

Tall she was, as slender as a young willow, and her hair was dark. Legolas shrank back against the concealing trunk of a gnarled tree as Aragorn took the Lady Arwen Undomiel into his arms. He remained silent, unblinking, while the two of them sank together onto the mossy ground, and her soft noises were as the cry of gulls . . .

* * *

Legolas awoke at first light, lying on his bed of dead leaves amid the tumbled statuary fragments
of a long-dead Númenorean king and his lady. He rose, shook his head, and turned his feet to the west.

The sun was high in the sky when Legolas reached the seventh level of Minas Tirith. He had passed, with averted eye, the Houses of Healing, where Dame Ioreth sat reading to the children in the morning sun. He had nodded courteously to the greetings of Lord Celeborn but continued on without a word. In the court at the foot of the Tower of Ecthelion, where stood the newly transplanted sapling of the white tree, Aragorn rushed forth to greet him.

"Legolas, you have returned! I had begun to worry some mischance had befallen you."

Legolas took a long look at his friend and at Arwen, who stood next to him, the roses of love blooming in her cheeks. It seemed then to one and all that the weight of his elven years had finally fallen upon him.

Had his night in the forest been a dream brought on by the remnants of fell enchantment? He would never know, even until Ardhon Meth brought an end to all things.

In the months and years to come he bade farewell to his father's realm and, true to his promise, founded an elven colony in Ithilien. Under his care, the woods flourished, but he did not. For Legolas Greenleaf, who had lived long under tree, had lost both his joy and his hope.

And when at last, in the fullness of time, King Elessar Telcontar died and was laid in the Rath Dinen, Legolas, accompanied by his faithful Dwarf, set their white ship into the West, and the journey held not the anticipation of the swift green sunrise but rather a dull acceptance of the dry, dusty Ages that stretched out, endless, before him.

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End Notes

Author's Note: This story comes to you un-beta'ed, seen here for the first time by human eyes other than my own. A few cats may have taken a peek at the screen whilst stepping on my keyboard, but that's it.

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