A Tangled Web
by Roselightfairy, TAFKAB

Summary

Five years after the War of the Ring, rumors have been spread all around Middle-Earth that the lords of Aglarond and Ithilien are closer than mere friendship. Threatened by Legolas and Gimli’s obvious preference for doing business with one another, the leaders of Erebor and Mirkwood turn suspicious eyes to their trading relationships.

Infuriated by the rumors and scheming, Legolas and Gimli decide to pretend they’re married in order to prove that their realms would treat fairly with others no matter what. But can they maintain the deception? Will it end their legendary friendship-- or could it lead to more?

Notes
Prompt:

Post-War-of-the-Ring, Gimli and Legolas are working to establish (or have already established) their individual settlements, when a diplomatic incident arises. Someone from a neighboring kingdom is arguing that there is a conflict of interest (or whatever the medieval equivalent is) with the lords of Aglarond and Ithilien: that they favor one another too much and aren't playing fair with other kingdoms in trade, or something. (I don't know; I don't understand politics; that's why I'm prompting this and not writing it.) How do they feel about it? What do they do? This can be an established relationship already, or they can be working out their feelings still, but I'd prefer romantic undertones (or overtones!) of some sort.

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This is our first attempt at collaboration; please be gentle!
Chapter 1

Thranduil drummed his fingers on the arm of his throne, staring the full force of his disdain down the stair toward the emissary from Erebor, who glared up at him with equal animosity. Almost admirable in a creature of its pathetic age and stature. Thranduil wondered if he would have to go so far as to yawn if he hoped to discourage the thing from delivering its interminable message, but just as he was about to do so, it finally spoke a word that piqued his interest.

“Aglarond.”

Thranduil roused himself from his thoughts, sitting just a little straighter.

“What is your quarrel with Aglarond? I had thought they were of a kind with you.” He flicked his fingers elegantly, the gesture dismissive of all the kin of Durin.

“Our quarrel with Aglarond. Aye,” the creature smirked, smug, through its horrible growth of black, bushy beard. “The King under the Mountain thought that might interest the likes of you.”

Thranduil arched an elegant brow. “The likes of me?” His voice might have condensed frost on metal.

“Given that it’s your get who dallies there with the son of Glóin.”

“Dallies.” The temperature fell even further. “Do you even speak Westron?”

“That I do,” the emissary said sharply. “And I chose the word with a purpose. For it is said that Legolas of Ithilien spends much time in Aglarond, closeted with its lord all the day long and most of the night, as well! The men of Rohan say they are closer than many who are wed. For this reason, the land of Ithilien receives the best fruits of Aglarond’s forges at a low cost, and in kind, they deliver up the choicest white gems they mine from the Mountains of Shadow to Aglarond--for far less than such stones may be had by any other, even the King of Mirkwood.” He spread his open palms, but could not hide his smirk of satisfaction at having provoked this reaction from his audience.

“It is not a seemly thing for dwarf and elf to prefer others above their own kin,” the emissary said. “It goes against convention and kind, against kinship and law. Why should your son deny you justly deserved tribute in the form of the best of his labors, when he has drawn away so many of your peoples to his realm to serve?”

“Enough,” Thranduil rumbled warning, rising from his throne. He could not deny the dwarf’s words troubled him greatly, but such insult was not to be borne. “Look to the slight offered to your own king. Has he not enough arms to keep busy in forging weapons without seeking yet more from afar?” He gestured to the guards at the edge of the room, who swept in and led the dwarf away.

He had been troubled in his mind for some time regarding his young ellon and the dwarf Legolas chose to keep company with. If such rumors were truly abroad in the land…

It was time to act to end the young one’s folly, and to claim the honor he justly deserved. For it was as the dwarf said: the majority of Legolas’s liegemen had once been Thranduil’s own, and their going had left Mirkwood far lessened. It would be only just for Legolas to offer his own father preferred trading rights.

It was, indeed, time to give the lad a lesson in the duties and obligations of proper rulership.
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Chapter 2

Chapter by TAFKAB

Chapter Notes

This chapter is also by Roselightfairy. AO3 always says the chapter is "by" whoever posted it, but we have each contributed to the story as close to equally as we could.

“I will never understand elves,” Gimli declared.

Across the table, Legolas raised an eyebrow. “I do not question that,” he said, “but I must ask what has prompted such a statement.”

Gimli waved a hand expansively, to indicate everything about his surroundings. “I think it constantly, of course,” he said--

“Of course,” interjected Legolas, rolling his eyes.

“--but never more than when I am in these foolish treehouses you insist on building.” His tolerance of heights had improved markedly from what it had once been, but it still escaped him exactly how Legolas had convinced him to come up here this evening. “You surround yourself with more windows than walls, open to any trick of the weather; you willingly elevate yourselves farther from the ground than any self-respecting person ought to be--”

“Your definition of self-respecting person ought to be adjusted --”

“--and you do not even provide solid anchors to keep yourselves there!” Gimli gave a firm stomp of his booted foot. The talan shook around them, a few leaves fluttered down from the tree, and the wine in Legolas’s goblet sloshed over the top to run down the sides.

He had expected more of a rise from his companion, but Legolas just laughed and picked up his goblet to lick the drips from the rim. (Gimli averted his gaze, for more reasons than he wanted to admit even to himself.) “Oddly enough, you are not the only one to feel thus,” he said. “I have heard similar complaints from Aragorn over the years.”

“Not Aragorn!” Entirely derailed from his earlier complaints, Gimli allowed himself to meet Legolas’s gaze again. “But-- in Lothlórien-- he was so at ease!”

Legolas shook his head. “He was feigning, for the sake of the hobbits-- and likely for you and Boromir as well. He fooled me at first, but I have witnessed him often enough since to see through his pretense.” He leaned forward, close enough that Gimli could smell the wine on his breath, and said in a conspiratorial whisper, “He fell out of one once, and ever since he has not been fond of them.”

“No!”

“Yes.” Legolas leaned even closer, his hair tickling Gimli’s arm, and somehow there was room, despite the topic of conversation, for shivers to start where the strands brushed. “And not as a child, either; he was already a grown man.”
Gimli could not hold back the burst of laughter that escaped him then. The thought of the proud king they knew, the man who always seemed to have an answer to every question before it was even asked, falling out of a tree was somehow both shocking and satisfying-- and yet he found, when he tried to picture it, that the image came to mind well enough. “And where did you hear this story?” he asked, once he had calmed.

Legolas’s smile turned positively wicked. “Why, Arwen, of course,” he said. “Who else? She was, in fact, the primary witness to the scene.”

“And she told you this?” Gimli asked. “How did you inspire her to give you such information?”

Legolas sat back once more and flicked a finger against the rim of his goblet. “What would you say if I told you that we were in a--” he waved a hand over the table “--similar state of inebriation at the time?”

Gimli rolled his eyes. “I would not be surprised at all.”

“No? Then what would you say if I told you that I asked Aragorn about it the next day, without even the excuse of alcohol to blame for my brazenness?”

Picturing that particular scene, Gimli could only laugh again before gulping the last of his wine and reaching for the bottle to pour himself another glass. “Then I would say that you are a fool with no sense of self-preservation. But then, that is no news to me, for you have surely been one all the long years of your life!”

“Slander,” Legolas laughed, without rancor. “I think you will find, Master Dwarf, that if you take an accounting of my life, my foolishness dates back only to the day I first met you.” He picked up his own goblet, only to frown as if in surprise to find it empty. “You have only to ask my f--”

He broke off, and the laughter slid out of his voice. Face going suddenly blank, he poured himself another goblet of wine and threw back its contents in a pull that would have made any dwarf proud.

His father. Gimli busied himself with his own wine, sipping instead of swigging this time to give Legolas a moment to collect himself. Legolas had not seen his father in the last few years; the Elvenking had allowed him to bring elves from Mirkwood here to establish his settlement, but had not deigned to visit or even to correspond, save the perfunctory missive here and there. Legolas spoke of it little, and he was evidently not deep enough in his cups tonight to open up about it, but Gimli knew it pained him.

He cast about for another subject, and his eyes landed on the quiver in the corner, half-filled with arrows that he recognized. “Your arrow supply seems to be dwindling, my friend,” he remarked. “Such carelessness is what you afford the finest of dwarven craftsmanship?”

Legolas raised his head and gave it a shake, as if brushing off the unpleasant thoughts. “Ah,” he said, “for that I can only offer the deepest of apologies.” He looked at Gimli again, and gave him a smile. “It seemed the last party of Orcs that dared to approach our borders also took a shine to dwarven steel, and did not have the generosity to leave them in their companions’ bodies for me to retrieve.”

“Hmph,” Gimli said, hoping his feigned irritation could mask his relief at the return of Legolas’s smile. “Well, if you are to treat them so carelessly, perhaps I ought to spare myself the middleman and give them straight to the Orcs.”

Legolas went to the quiver and withdrew an arrow, shifting it from hand to hand in motions
almost too swift for Gimli’s eyes to follow. Had anyone else done such a thing after so much wine, Gimli would have been ducking and shielding his eyes-- but this was Legolas. “Orcs lack the proper appreciation for such fine craft, my friend,” said the elf at last. “I can only hope that you will forgive me my transgressions against your generosity.”

Such fine craft. Legolas did not know, perhaps, the full meaning of the words he spoke. The craft was indeed Gimli’s finest, arrowheads the likes of which could not be found in any market, work of the highest caliber, the sort that was only gifted to--

But no. He would not think that-- though unbidden his hand wandered up to finger the clasp he wore in his beard, inlaid with three small, fine white gems. Legolas had given them to him in turn, an addition to the load that the dwarves had purchased, and refused Gimli’s offer of coin. “A gift,” he had said, “in symbol of goodwill and friendship between your people and mine.” And Gimli could not help wondering if somehow Legolas knew what such a gift meant among dwarves, although of course he could not.

Gimli cleared his throat hard, meaning to toss out a witty response, something befitting of the lighter moment, but what he ended up saying was, “Such generosity is no less than you are worth, and will be yours for as long as--”

Oh. All the wine seemed to hit him at once then, and he clamped his mouth shut just in time to prevent anything more sentimental from spilling out. Legolas had raised his head sharply to look at him, but Gimli looked studiously away. “For as long as goodwill remains between our peoples,” he finished lamely.

“Of course,” said Legolas, and when Gimli dared to look at him again, he saw that Legolas’s face had gone smooth again. “And may that be a long time yet.”

He raised his goblet, as though in toast, but Gimli shook his head. “I think I have had enough tonight,” he said. The wine was sweeter than his preferred ale, which made it easy to forget its potency--but he remembered now well enough. He must stop before he said anything he would regret. “I had best get my feet on the ground again before I forget how to walk.”

Unfortunately, when he made it to the edge of the talan, it seemed that that had already happened. His head was both light and heavy at the same time, overbalanced with the weight of the alcohol and yet seeming to float up into the open sky-- for there was no possible way he could be this far from the ground.

Was there?

Behind him, Legolas laughed. “Come back here before you fall,” he said, and in the next moment Gimli’s shoulder was caught in a grip far stronger than he knew it appeared. “I should be an irresponsible friend indeed if I let you attempt that ladder in this state. Here, I have an extra pad and blankets you may use.”

“Fine lodging for the Lord of Aglarond,” grumbled Gimli, but he let Legolas pull him back from the ladder with less resistance than he would have given anyone else. He had his pride, yes, but--not enough of it, it seemed, to turn down such an offer, and not from Legolas, in any case--

And he was far too drunk indeed, if he could not hold back these thoughts. Best he sleep now, before anything else foolish spilled out of his mouth.

“I will wake you with the sun, then,” said Legolas, a laugh in his voice, “and spirit you back to the ground before any of your companions see you in such an undignified state. But for now, do not force me to watch you attempt to navigate that ladder.”
Grumbling still, Gimli watched Legolas spread out the bedroll—far enough from his own bed for propriety, but near enough, he knew, that he would be able to hear Legolas breathing in the night. A sound which, though he had never admitted it to a living soul, had brought him great comfort ever since the days of the Ring War. “Very well,” he said, keeping just enough reluctance in his tone to save face even as he tucked himself into the blankets. “But only because you ask.”

He had not realized how tired he was, but it was not natural for a bedroll to seem so soft, and sleep was upon him almost as soon as his head sank into the pillow, crashing over him in waves. His consciousness fled so fast that he did not even have time to wonder what Legolas murmured then, in a voice he could barely hear.

And when Legolas roused him in the morning, with the dawn as promised, he was too busy hissing fond insults to remember.

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The task of maintaining a serious expression was not always an easy one. Particularly not when one’s arms were occupied helping a disheveled, half-hungover, and decidedly irritable dwarf to descend a rope ladder.

“You did this on purpose, I know it,” Gimli was grumbling at the moment. “You knew this would happen, did you not?”

“No comment,” said Legolas airily, jumping the last few rungs to the ground and reaching out to help Gimli make the drop himself.

“I need no assistance.” Gimli batted his hands away, and Legolas let him go, though keeping them near in case he should need support. “I may not be as nimble as an elf, but I can certainly climb down a tree on my own two—”

“Lord Legolas?”

Gimli stumbled on the last rung of the ladder and swore, landing heavily but— it seemed—unharmed. Legolas turned at the sound of the voice, drawing himself up (though one hand remained on Gimli’s arm to steady him) and doing his best to assume the lordly dignity which had never sat as well on his shoulders as he might have liked.

It was a young man, one of Aragorn’s guard, if he was not mistaken, though Legolas could not put a name to the face. He was already inclined to dislike it, though, watching the way the man’s eyes darted back and forth between him and Gimli.

“Yes?” he said, doing his best to call up his father’s most intimidating expression. He could see in the young man’s face that it had not quite worked as he had planned. “Am I wanted?”

“You are.” The guard licked his lips, looking over at Gimli again. “In fact, I suppose it is well that you are already—er, together.” Beside him, Legolas felt Gimli twitch, and looked over to see him scowling. “The king Elessar sent me to fetch both of you, as soon as possible. An incident has arisen that concerns you both.”

“An incident?” Gimli frowned, shaking off Legolas’s hand. “Is the laddie well?”

“He is. An incident of state, I should say.” The man fidgeted, raising his gaze toward the talan as if avoiding a sight he had best not witness. “A matter of trade, I am authorized to say, but the details are best kept for the official council.”

Legolas blinked surprised. “I shall summon my attendant,” he said with a somewhat better attempt
at statesmanship. “Go to your master and have him await us in the southern hall.”

“He is there already.”

“I will have Galion attend him and assign lodgings to his party,” Legolas said. “Is Queen Arwen with him?”

“She is. They have left the Lord Faramir to serve as steward in their stead.”

Legolas brightened; he would be glad to resume his acquaintance with the queen, who could match him cup for cup even when Gimli flagged. Perhaps she could advise him on… matters best left unmentioned, at present.

“Galion!” Legolas called, and heard others take up his call. He gently took Gimli’s elbow and nudged him toward his own assigned lodging-- a small house on the ground made of fitted stone, well suited to a dwarf’s liking, but rarely occupied, for its ceilings were lower than Legolas himself found convenient.

Gimli went, huffing annoyance at the nudge but fresh clothes awaited him there, and a ewer of clean water.

They would be presentable, at least when they went before the high king to find out what these matters of trade might be.

As Gimli stalked into his hut, Galion came gliding up, seeming not to hurry; Legolas could not have said how he managed it.

“Milord,” he said.

“Go and attend the Lord Aragorn. Ensure he and his party are assigned lodgings and refreshment befitting their stations. I will arrive in half an hour.”

“As you would have it, milord.” Galion bowed deeply and glided away.
Chapter 3

An incident of state. A matter of trade.

Those words repeated in Legolas’s head as he returned to his own home and hurried to change clothing and straighten his hair. None of this seemed to bode well, and although he liked to think that he had gained a deeper understanding of such matters as running a settlement in the last five years, matters of state were still something that he treated with the same kind of trepidation he might have afforded a fast-growing spider’s nest. More, perhaps, because those at least he knew how to handle. He had come to Ithilien to heal a land, not to run a settlement, and there were times when he wondered if it all hadn’t been a mistake.

He finished braiding his hair back into the style he used for ceremonies, and after a moment of thought he donned the circlet. It was the same one he had used as Prince of Mirkwood; he wore it now on formal occasions to remind himself as much as anyone else of his former and current status. This was altered, however, to reflect his new role; once the elves had begun mining the white gems of the Ephel Duath, he had had a few small stones set into the circlet as well. Gimli’s work, and though he had offered it for free, Legolas had insisted on paying him for this at least. He could hardly take advantage of offers made in innocent friendship, not when he knew what such gifts meant among dwarves, not when so many such gifts had already been exchanged between them that he could no longer justify it, not even to himself.

He refrained-- but only barely-- from running a hand through his hair and ruining his braids. Hopefully these matters would be dealt with easily, so that he could approach Arwen. He was beginning to think it was time to ask for her advice.

When he deemed himself ready-- or, as ready as he could be, in any case-- he descended from the talan once more: careful to do so with dignity, rather than jumping, as he might have otherwise done, in case any of the visitors were watching. Then he made his way to the southern hall, trying to glide as Galion did.

He did not think that he succeeded.

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Aragorn and Arwen sat at ease in the hall-- and he was glad of their association with elves, for he had no need to feel shame over the accommodations. Moss-clad stones, warmed by rays of early summer sun, alternated with carefully shaped rounds sawed from trunks of fallen trees to provide places for seating. It was informal at best, but any elf (or those raised by them) should find comfort there.

He could hear Gimli approaching in the distance, grumbling loudly, and he smiled as he stepped forward.

“Aragorn!” he called, and when the king rose, they embraced as was the human custom of greeting. To Arwen Legolas bowed with his hand over his heart, more formal; she simply laughed and embraced him as well-- and then Gimli, also, who stomped into the clearing still doing up the braid of his beard.

“Well met,” she said-- and Legolas flushed, knowing it should have been his place to offer the greeting. He would have to take more care to observe proper courtesies.
“Indeed. We are glad to have you both among us, though these accommodations are poor compared to the luxury of Gondor.”

“I am glad to be out in the air where I can breathe and feel the rain on my face once more,” Arwen said. “When my husband resolved to come here, I would not be kept back in the city.” Her eyes sparkled with warmth and mischief.

“I am glad of your coming,” Legolas said sincerely. “But I am troubled that such a visit comes to us for reasons of state rather than friendship. I hope whatever these matters are, they may be resolved swiftly and with little trouble.”

“Aye, my own thought precisely,” Gimli interjected, climbing up onto a stone and making himself comfortable.

Galion lingered nearby, properly obeisant, preparing goblets of good wine and setting them upon a silver tray. Legolas winced; he would have to sip his slowly. Gimli caught his eye, and he had no doubt the dwarf resolved to do the same.

“Hair of the wolf that bit you?” Aragorn intercepted the glance, giving Legolas a sly grin.

“Indeed. We had no need to stint ourselves yesterday eve, or so we thought then. My apologies for catching us so unprepared,” Legolas stammered a little.

“Think nothing of it.” Aragorn took a goblet and drank with evident pleasure. “I knew I could count on Galion to provide a fine Dorwinion vintage,” he smiled at Legolas’s attendant with a mix of fondness and amusement.

“Is it lack of wine that has brought you here?” Legolas hoped so; the previous year’s harvest south of Rohan had been poor due to an untimely frost, but the new vineyards of the Ithilien elves were protected had not suffered thus.

“Would that it were,” Aragorn sobered quickly. “It is instead a rumor from the realm that was Mirkwood which troubles me. I have received an embassy asking for affirmation of preferred trade practices and rates. It seems the king of Eryn Lasgalen seeks gemstones and swords at a lesser rate than he may find them from his own kin.”

“And not only that,” Arwen said. “But we have also entertained ambassadors of the Lonely Mountain, seeking an alternative for the dwarvish gems and steel of Aglarond, which they say cost more dearly than they will pay.”

Legolas blinked, and Gimli also. “This is the first we have heard of such complaints,” Legolas said slowly. “Is it not, my friend?”

“It is,” Gimli had raised a hand to his beard, seemingly absentminded, and was playing with the clasp that held his leftmost braid— the one Legolas had commissioned for him. “Why would our kin and kings—” and here Legolas could not help wincing, for at least to Gimli they were not the same “—approach Gondor before seeking out the very ones whose trade about which they complain?”

“And why do they complain of our prices suddenly?” Legolas cast his mind back— it was true that he was not economically-minded, but he did not think his elven memory had suddenly failed him. “For there has been no change in rate in the last few years, at least. At least, not for our goods.” He glanced at Gimli. “Is it the same for you?”

Gimli’s mouth twisted to one side as though in a shrug of its own. “Of course the amounts and
exact orders altered, as they do every year,” he said, “but none of our prices were inconsistent with what they have ever been . . . and why would my father not have warned me?” He squared his shoulders, his beard seeming to bristle with indignation. “For that matter, why would the king not have approached me directly, before going to Gondor-- and why would your father not have done so either?” He swung around to point at Legolas. “For he did not, unless-- you mentioned him last night?”

“Mentioned him only because he has sent no message to me since last year, when we spoke over trade!” cried Legolas. It was undignified, but he could not help it; agitation propelled him to his feet and he paced in a quick circle around his seat. “And you are right, Gimli; he is both kin and king to me, and I thought--”

The noise was faint, but loud enough to interrupt Legolas: Aragorn had cleared his throat.

Abruptly, Legolas remembered where he was - and more importantly, the dignity of his office. Blood seared the insides of his cheeks, doubtless visible on the outsides as well, and he dropped back into his seat. “Forgive me,” he murmured, and then, “Galion, you may leave us now.”

“Of course, milord.” Galion bowed, came forward with the pitcher to refill their wine glasses, and then glided back out into the forest. Not, of course, that the lack of walls would hinder him at all if he simply wished to eavesdrop.

Legolas gave in to the urge this time and reached up to tug harshly on the ends of his hair before letting his hands settle back into his lap. “No,” he said. “I have heard nothing from him.”

Aragorn cleared his throat again. “I did not tell you all,” he said. “The embassies who approached us complained not only of the prices of gems and steel, but also that they felt their kingdoms were being treated unfairly in comparison to others.”

“To others?” Gimli asked, but Legolas had become preoccupied. Arwen had caught his gaze, her face serious enough that he knew she was not merely trying to distract him. When he met her eyes, she flicked them deliberately back and forth, the same way Aragorn’s man had done earlier. Between him and Gimli.

He knew that he had understood by the sinking feeling in his stomach. “To one another?”

Aragorn’s eyes were mild, gentle with understanding. “Indeed, it seems Aglarond is the preferred trading partner of Ithilien, and the reverse is also true. Such a choice is, of course, the right of those lands to make; as their lords you have that power, and have done no wrong in so choosing. Yet when such a choice is made, it influences others, both realms and individuals alike. They may not be pleased by the difference.”

“Aye,” Gimli muttered. “And those others may have a larger complaint than mere coin. They would have elf prefer elf and dwarf prefer dwarf, as has always been done!”

“That is the heart of it, indeed,” Legolas could not speak for Erebor, but he was sure of his father. “At least it is Thranduil’s heart-- ever he has resented my friendship with you, Gimli. But I will not listen to his petty words, born as they are in selfishness and pride!”

“Nor I to Erebor’s, born the same!” Gimli flared, but Aragorn lifted his hands, trying to calm them both.

“No, we need not heed the voice of injustice,” he agreed. “But wisdom lies in contemplation and good rulership in compromise. Perhaps there are ways these voices may be placated without injuring the accord between the Glittering Caves and the Healing Wood.”
“What compromise then will Mirkwood and Erebor make?” Gimli asked, his temper hot. “None, I think, that Aragorn may order, lord of Gondor though he is.”

“Indeed not,” Aragorn laughed. “Rather I would be a voice of reason to advise the realms when they are met at a greater council. One perhaps including Rohan and Dale, as well. That way all may have their say, and other pressures may be brought to bear at need.”

“Éomer,” Legolas said. “He will aid us.”

“Indeed,” Aragorn said. “As long as he feels his realm is treated fairly, of course.”

“Gondor can have no complaints, not with the services the smiths of Aglarond have provided there at cost,” Gimli said. “Yet Erebor and Mirkwood make no complaint of that!”

“Such will be pointed out in time,” Aragorn soothed him. “Let us summon the leaders of these realms, then, that we may all meet upon neutral ground.”

“I like it not, but I think this must be,” Legolas said slowly. Gimli nodded curtly and turned aside to reach for his pipe. He loaded the bowl slowly; Legolas knew he liked to use the time to ponder a difficult problem and prepare his response.

“I agree with Legolas,” Gimli said at length, after blowing out a cloud of fragrant smoke. “Yet if possible, I like it even less than he. It seems an opportunity ready-made for strife, one in which personal enemies, in the guise of representing themselves as the ambassadors of allies and trading partners, will seek to divide Legolas and myself-- and thereby separate Ithilien and Aglarond-- for the satisfaction and profit of others. While I am not opposed to seeing them treated more fairly, I will resist all efforts to drive a wedge between our two lands, and I will not forsake my friend.” He drew fiercely on his pipe.

“Well-said.” Legolas lifted his chin. “Nor will I.”

“Your observations are not misplaced,” Aragorn acknowledged. “And yet, there is no way of divorcing personal from political concerns in this matter-- or in others, as I have learned all too frequently since taking the crown of Gondor.” He reached for his wife’s hand and squeezed it gently. “Alliances between the races cause fear, which provokes wrath among the fearful. Only by meeting them with a level head and calm can wisdom hope to prevail.”

“Calm, aye,” Gimli snorted. “You have not attended many councils of dwarves, I think!”

“Nor of elves and dwarves together,” Legolas said softly, remembering all too well his and Gimli’s own first meeting in Rivendell.

“Remember you have allies. You do not stand alone,” Aragorn assured them. “Do not be fearful yourselves; if you must become angry, let yourselves be provoked by injustice rather than despair. And try to curb your tempers as much as you may, that the talks do not break down on your account. When you stand for a country rather than merely speaking as yourself, anger is a weapon best employed by letting others become angry, and then using their wrath to divide and to shame them. Your anger may allow others to do this with you.”

“I will try to remember that when this parley comes,” Gimli grumbled, and blew a smoke ring, which wavered and rose into the air until it dispersed among the leaves.

Legolas set a hand upon his arm to comfort and support him.

“But let the ambassadors keep a civil tongue in their heads when it comes to personal remarks,” Gimli said. “Or I will call them outside to answer privately.”
Legolas could not help but laugh. “As you did Éomer, in the matter of his words regarding the Lady?”

“Aye,” Gimli said. “And they should look to it that they answer as courteously as he, when the matter was resolved!” He chuckled, and tension eased-- Gimli might be hot-headed in matters of honor, but he was ultimately also reasonable.

“We will meet, then, to the south of Mirkwood, in Rhovanion,” Aragorn said. “We will camp upon the plain and parley there, as near as can be arranged to equally distant from all the kingdoms concerned.”

“Let it be done as you say,” Legolas agreed, but in his heart he was troubled. His father would not be easy to placate-- and it was never easy to build an accord between dwarves and elves, even if circumstances were ideal. Yet he and Gimli might lead the way in that, if others would listen.

He sighed. “I have been remiss in my duty as a lord of this land,” he confessed. “When I undertook that duty, did not understand deeply or broadly what must be done to rule.”

“Nor did I,” Gimli spoke up hot on his heels. “We are fortunate to have the wisdom of your guidance in this, Aragorn.”

“As I am wise to have such reasonable and loyal retainers,” he smiled. “With this resolved, let us send out messengers and prepare our plans for the parley.”

“Aye,” Gimli said, and Legolas nodded his accord, wishing desperately for private words of his own with Aragorn and Arwen-- and also Gimli.
Chapter 4

Aragorn and Arwen went to settle into their temporary lodgings after their meeting had concluded; Legolas did not know where Gimli had gone, but likely back to his own small hut to freshen up further than what had been allowed him in the brief space before their meeting. It was a wise idea, and Legolas should have done the same, but he found himself unable to return to his own talan, there to sit idle until finally he chanced to encounter his friends. He hovered instead, pretending to observe the goings-on near his visitors in his capacity as their host, but rather merely waiting until he could catch one of them alone.

Arwen was the first to emerge, descending gracefully from their talan and looking directly at where Legolas was standing. He froze, but before he could make up his mind whether or not to approach her, she made her way over to him. “My friend,” she said easily, no sign of his own hesitation in her voice. “I would speak to you in private, if you have a moment to spare.” And he wondered if it were some innate elven affinity or her own particular personality behind the understanding he saw in her eyes.

“I always have a moment to spare for the Queen,” he said, but he saw in her smile that she understood his true meaning. And in the next moment, his arm had been taken in a grasp that could not be refused, and he was being steered toward his own talan.

Arwen could glide as well, he could not help noticing.

“I confess, I have missed these,” said Arwen, seating herself with customary grace on the low stool Gimli had occupied the night before. “It has been long, but such dwellings always bring up the fondest of memories.”

“Indeed?” Legolas smirked, unable to help himself. “I was telling Gimli of one such memory only last night.”

“So I can see,” Arwen commented, allowing her gaze to rove around the mess of Legolas’s home. He followed her eyes and could not help cringing a bit - it had not seemed so terrible when he had been here earlier, but then, he had been in a hurry. The empty wine bottles and goblets still littered the table; his clothing lay discarded on the floor where he had left it after changing into more formal robes, along with a few other items which had fallen off of shelves when Gimli had shaken the talan the night before. And, perhaps worst of all, the extra bedroll still lay spread in the far corner, beside Legolas’s own bed. Arwen let her eyes linger on it, surely knowing that Legolas was watching her every move, and then turned to him and raised one questioning eyebrow.

“Arwen,” he began, not quite sure what to say.

“If you are to tell me that it is not as I think, wait,” interrupted Arwen. “For there is more that Aragorn did not mention to you at our council, for it was not brought up to him officially, but rather whispered in corners and murmured among companies. It seems dwarves and elves alike forget that neither I nor my ears are fully mortal.”

“More?” Legolas felt that terrible sinking again, and feared that he knew exactly what would come next.

“More,” said Arwen, “and it concerns you and Gimli... intimately.”

Perhaps it was the remnants of the wine from last night, perhaps his mood from one bit of bad
news after the other, or perhaps the fact that this was Arwen, around whom he could let down his
guard; for whatever reason, Legolas put his head down on the table and groaned.

“There is nothing between us,” he said, “no matter what may be whispered, no matter how many
people may glance between us as though they think they are being subtle, no matter what I--”

He clamped his mouth shut.

“No matter what you wish?”

For all that he had wished to speak to her of this exactly, Legolas found now that he had nothing
to say. How could he, after all-- after what had been said of them already, after their very people
had chosen to ask Aragorn for intercession instead of coming to them directly? After his own
father--

And Gimli! The same reasons held his tongue numb as had held it for the last five years. How
many times had the words surged in his throat, only to die in his mouth? How often had he
reached a hand for more than Gimli’s shoulder, only to let it fall again for fear of being denied the
privilege of reaching out at all?

“No matter,” he said hoarsely, keeping his forehead pressed into his hands and not looking up at
her.

“But you do wish,” she said evenly. She did not reach out for him, but he could feel her gaze
throttling at him, urging him to raise his head again. He fought it, but her will was not to be denied.

“What good does it do?” he whispered, looking into grey eyes too knowing to hold his gaze for
long. “After all that has been discussed today, and when he would not have had me as it is? He
does not understand elves, he said so himself, and considering the abuse my father surely has in
store, who could ask him to?”

“Relationships between mortals and elf-kind are never easy,” she said softly, rising to lay her hand
on his shoulder when he could no longer meet her gaze. “I cannot presume to tell you the path
that lies before you; it is for you to find the way.” She paused, her voice soft with sympathy. “Yet
I will say to you that you should trust in your friend. Gimli is strong and true; he has walked with
you along many paths of terrible shadow, and I think he will not falter before your father.”

“If I stray from the path he would walk, I may spoil that friendship,” Legolas whispered. “Out of
selfishness and folly, I would drive him away, and he would be lost to me.”

“Aragorn once thought such a course would be best for himself and for me,” she said softly. “He
sought to part us for my sake; he did not trust in my strength or his own. But now we walk our
path together.” She stepped across the room, finding a clean goblet and half-filled bottle of wine.
“Come, my friend, traveling and sitting in council is thirsty work. Let us quench our thirst and
find better cheer.”

“All the realms are arrayed against us,” Legolas said, though he moved to join her. “What hope
may I keep, knowing this?”

“Not all,” she said. “For Aragorn and I are with you, Legolas, though he may not speak so
plainly from his office.”

“My heart is given to a dwarf.” Legolas set the goblet to his lips, the sweet wine cloying on his
tongue. “And you stand before me and say that you approve?”

“Who am I to gainsay you in this? And why should I wish to?” She toasted him with her goblet
held high. “I, who have chosen a mortal lover-- and a mortal life. Perhaps I am no longer elf-kind, Legolas, but I was raised thus. Not all of our people will balk at this, I think. Gimli’s valiant defense of the light is well-known among our people, and it is high time we forgot old grudges and lived in peace with the other races. All are children of Ilúvatar-- even the dwarves received his blessing after Aulë made them; they may not have come straight from Ilúvatar’s hand, but he deemed them worthy.” She smiled. “It is no wonder you should love Gimli, for ever we are drawn to that which is different, from curiosity, from boredom perhaps with our long span, and from the love of beauty that was put in us.”

“He is beautiful,” Legolas said, the words choking from him with pain-- the pain of having held them too long inside, and the strangeness of hearing them spoken aloud before the ears of another. “More so than I have tongue to tell.” The relief of having it out swelled in him for a giddy moment, light as air, before the heaviness of reality dropped back upon him. “But with all that lies between us, how could I ever expect to claim that beauty for my own? Nay, I must count myself fortunate to have earned his friendship and his goodwill-- to claim anything beyond that is asking too much.”

“You underestimate what you deserve, or what you may have,” she said. “But you are blessed to have eyes that see his beauty, rather than seeing only old hates and griefs, as so many of our people would. Such clear sight is surely a gift from the Valar.”

“Would, then, that others had such clear sight.” The bitterness was back in full, pressing down the lightness in him until he felt he must almost crumple from the weight. “I may know that what I feel does no wrong-- indeed, how anyone could not feel as I do is the greater wonder-- but that changes nothing of what is. Particularly not when these others think it so wrong that they will not even speak to me directly, rather going to my liege-lord and demanding intercession from him, when they will not even send me a letter--”

“You speak of your father,” Arwen interrupted him, mercifully.

“Of course I speak of my father.” He stood again; the talan was too small for proper pacing, but his agitation too great for stillness. “I knew Thranduil was displeased with me; I knew, even, that Gimli was the reason - but this! He has no great fondness for men either, and that he would approach Aragorn first--”

He broke off. He did not even know how he would have finished the sentence, and perhaps it did not even need finishing, for the truth was as it was.

This time, though, she did not speak, and so he applied himself to finding something to say, dropping, eventually, back into his seat and sliding down until his eyes were level with the rim of his goblet. “Arwen,” he confessed finally, simply, “I do not know what to do.”

“That is why we are here,” she said, reaching out to lay a hand on top of his. “Your heart is true and worthy of trust, and your friends are by your side. You need not be alone in this, however you feel. You must trust that we will find a way.”

“It seems so simple, when you say it,” he muttered. The wine goblet deflected his own breath back at him, and he almost wondered if he had spoken at all.

“That is why we are here,” she said, reaching out to lay a hand on top of his. “Your heart is true and worthy of trust, and your friends are by your side. You need not be alone in this, however you feel. You must trust that we will find a way.”

“It seems so simple, when you say it,” he muttered. The wine goblet deflected his own breath back at him, and he almost wondered if he had spoken at all.

“Not simple, maybe,” she said, “but not impossible. Trust me, Legolas, and trust yourself. We will find a solution--to all of your problems.” She smiled on him. “But for now, let us find a way to raise your spirits. It is long since you and I walked abroad together under the trees, and longer still since I drew a bow. Come, show me your land as we hunt, and let us see who can best the other at shooting!”
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

As a special treat, an early update this week (and there may be more forthcoming, once we figure out if everything is edited to our satisfaction)! Since Legolas got his heart-to-heart last chapter, it's only fair that Gimli get one as well, hmm?

“As of course they gave you a house in a tree,” Gimli muttered up toward Aragorn’s arse as they climbed the trunk to his talan. After the council ended in late morning, he had returned to his hut to make up some of the lost sleep from the night before; now the sun began to sink towards the west, the change in light disorienting. His stomach growled, longing for food. “Never mind that you actually fell out of one!”

“Of course Legolas told you about that.” Aragorn swung onto the platform and offered Gimli a hand up. “You do know Thranduil’s palace is underground? Legolas probably wouldn’t mind living below the earth either. It’s merely that many of his followers are from Lórien, and have the skill to build thus and the desire to live as they are used to living.”

“It seems easier than tunneling,” Gimli admitted, begrudging. “And yet it is much less satisfactory, at least to a dwarf!”

“You seem to have become accustomed to tree living,” Aragorn cast an arch look at Gimli, who ignored his hand and stepped onto the talan with great ease.

“Accustomed does not mean that I will ever like them!”

“Though for his sake, you would try.”

Gimli scowled at Aragorn and changed the subject. “Tell me more of this foolishness from Thranduil’s embassy, Aragorn. What is the old fox up to? I do not think he cares so much for the cost of goods, squatting as he does on spoils of wars won centuries past!”

“Thranduil may mean to cause discord between all the lands for his own entertainment more than for profit. Yet the more of both the better, of course,” Aragorn granted easily. “In any case, he has found a fine spot between Aglarond and Ithilien to set his bar and pry. Many goodly folk in Eriador and the east might benefit from a lower price on dwarven steel, and they will chafe that they cannot get it so easily as Ithilien— a land whose people are leaving this world slowly but steadily, passing away across the sea with their newmade weapons.”

A pang of panic shot through Gimli’s breast, making him scowl anew. “They do not all leave,” he blustered.

“Not yet. Not those who have a reason to stay.”

“I can easily adjust trade so that any special considerations for Ithilien come solely as gifts,” Gimli said, glowering with some embarrassment. “And I will keep those gifts infrequent, and small.”

Aragorn chuckled at him, doubtless guessing their intended recipient.
Gimli plowed over him, relentless. “But the elf’s people have little in the way of riches; they brought none of Mirkwood’s-- the Greenwood’s-- hoard, and those of Lorien had only the adornments on their backs when they came east. Their trade is largely in natural things-- honey or herbs or, yes, uncut gems and precious stones they find in their wanderings as they seek to heal the Ephel Duath. They do not, as you say, mean to stay here and accumulate riches. But should they be left defenseless if orcs or lawless men come upon them as they wander? Sadly the thralls of Sauron did not all pass with him! I will not refuse the elves the means to defend themselves, but my people have no need of trees or song. They take our steel; we receive their gems to craft.”

Gimli bristled with anger. “It is a fair trade for us both.”

“Well,” Aragorn sighed. “I know your reasons, Gimli, and they are good. But you must keep prices consistent, if you are not to make enemies.” He reached into his pocket and produced a small flask, which made Gimli’s eyes brighten. “Will you have a drop with me?”

“I will.” It was good malt whiskey, well-aged-- if there was ever a craft men excelled in, it was the brewing of ales and strong spirits, and Aragorn always brought special stores of prime drink along to share with Gimli when he visited. “I would trade a fine, finished axe-blade for a cask of that,” Gimli said, wiping his lips with gusto. “But Thranduil has no such valuables to offer. I have little use for any of his goods. My folk do not care to chew leaves and branches.”

“Here I have the ability to aid. I will trade whiskey to you and yours for steel, and then trade it to the elves of Mirkwood and of Ithilien for the fruit of their fields,” Aragorn nodded firmly. “The men of Rohan, too, can trade ale for steel. And I think Erebor would be much appeased if the two of you were to offer them a standing price at a reasonable rate for the gems of Ithilien and the steel of Aglarond in exchange for gold, of which they have much. Then you may buy the meat your people crave from Rohan and Gondor-- and such vegetables as you need from Eryn Lasgalen, if the price is not too steep.”

“This compromise seems like a good one-- we may detail and formalize such agreements at the council,” Gimli nodded, taking a second sip of the potent liquor.

“Yes. But have a care how much of that you drink before signing them!” Aragorn laughed. “Or you will find yourself offering bargain prices to all, and regret it sorely when your head clears!”

He reached to a tray of fruit left upon his table and offered it to Gimli, who took half a dozen apples and put them into his pocket, but did not eat. He glared instead and located a chair, then sat back, folding his arms. “You know as well as any that a trading partnership may concern more than mere goods,” he said. “Gondor and Rohan are proof enough of that! It is not only gems and steel we trade but trust and alliance-- commodities that are in short store between elves and dwarves, even still.”

“And you know as well as any that that is precisely Thranduil’s concern,” said Aragorn. “And possibly Erebor’s as well, though I cannot claim to speak for them. It is likely that they believe that the establishment of trust and alliance between elf and dwarf is disrupting existing relationships between kin.”

Again, Gimli could see exactly where Aragorn was attempting to steer the conversation, and again he determined to avoid it. “Erebor concerns me, I admit it,” he said. “I am hardly surprised at Thranduil’s decision to be difficult, and I suppose the feuding lies on both sides, but still, that their embassy should go to you before me is an intentional slight. They are telling me through you that they do not expect me to treat fairly with them.”

Which was, of course, a direct reference to his dealings with elves. How often had Gimli heard the words never trust an elf in his childhood? Liars, deceivers, dazzlers, enchanters, the list went
on-- and grew even worse. And he had believed them, too, for a shamefully long time; even in the first weeks he had known Legolas, he had been waiting for him to turn on the Fellowship. To abandon the company, even, as soon as they were truly challenged, for elves were fragile and unable to endure; flighty and not to be trusted with tasks that required steadfastness--

And yet Legolas was the truest soul Gimli had ever met, with a will of iron when he needed it and a heart of solid, polished mithril. He had never let Gimli down or betrayed his trust, had never flagged in tasks that wore down the body and the spirit. And the elves he had brought with him to his land were in large part the same, with a strength of spirit and a generosity of friendship that belied all that Gimli had ever been taught. In fact, he now thought that the elves of Ithilien, at least, would never have gone behind his back the way his own kin had!

“Do you think there is a reason for them to believe this?” asked Aragorn, before Gimli could work up a hotter head of steam.

He blinked, cast his mind back to remember what he had said, and then scowled again. “If there is, it lies in old prejudices unworthy of credit. Friendship with one realm does not mean false dealings with others-- which I suppose I will have to remind them when we meet.”

“But I think they may have suspicions as to the reasons for that friendship.” The tone of Aragorn’s voice was like a nudge. “Do you tell me then that there is no truth to those conclusions?”

Gimli gritted his teeth and took a deep breath before speaking, to ensure that his tone would remain calm. “I’m sure I do not know what you mean.”

Aragorn leaned back and cast his eyes up through the tree branches and into the sky. “Of course not,” he said. “You have no understanding of why the dwarves of Erebor might be suspicious of your motives, when you visit Ithilien regularly and host its lord just as often, often shutting yourself away with him into the early hours of the morning, when Legolas shoots arrows and bears knives of the finest dwarvish craft I have ever seen.” He leaned forward again and pointed, his hand moving far too close to Gimli’s beard for his comfort; Gimli retreated from the waving finger and could not help feeling that he was giving ground. “And when did you begin wearing Ithilien’s gems braided into your beard?”

Gimli harumphed. “And do you not wear an elf-stone upon your breast?” He indicated the green gem of Aragorn’s heritage. “Such an ornament is befitting the lord of a land!”

Aragorn merely raised a brow. “You are defensive indeed!”

“Should I not be, with the lords of other lands finding fault with my private business? Legolas and I are friends; we have been comrades in arms. We owe one another our lives a dozen times over. It is the height of rudeness to find fault with friendship such as ours, and to try to quash it for amusement or for selfish profit.”

“Then the gems were a gift from Legolas.”

“Aye. And what if they were?” Gimli realized he had his hands on his axe when Aragorn smiled and leaned back; too late, he forced himself to drop them. “Thranduil does not say to whom his son will gift the yield of his land, nor does he dictate aught else Legolas does, in this or any other matter.”

“And you are afraid that he will begin.”

Gimli scowled. “He will not succeed, if he tries.” Once he might have thought Legolas would be swayed by his father’s demands, but no longer. “I do not doubt Legolas’s heart.”
“Do you not?”

Gimli tensed at Aragorn’s tone; he did not appreciate the knowing note in his friend’s voice. “He has never given me a reason to.”

“With that, I agree.” Aragorn was looking far too pleased with himself. “Though I cannot but think you are not being entirely honest. If you are so certain of Legolas’s heart, then why this refusal to speak of it? Why are you so unsettled by the suspicions of the other realms, if you are so confident in what lies between you? Why do you--”

“Enough,” Gimli hissed. It had struck him suddenly: the memory of where they were, and the sharpness of elven ears. Legolas’s folk had kept a polite distance since Aragorn’s arrival, but his heart misgave him. Though many of the elves here were goodly folk, even friendly with Gimli and his kin, there were still others who were not. He had long suspected Galion’s smooth face concealed deep dislike, and even Legolas conceded that his attendant held allegiance for Thranduil and likely reported back to him. “I understand your meaning, and it is not something of which I would speak.”

Seemingly satisfied with his small victory, Aragorn sat back and rested his elbows on the low table between them, steepling his fingers. “You must speak of it sometime, even if you would avoid it now,” he said. “It will be mentioned at the council, however much you may desire otherwise. Not in any official capacity, perhaps - though in truth I would not be entirely surprised - but at very least in whispers in dark corners. You had best be prepared for that; none will be pleased with your evasion.”

“I say now and will say then that it is none of their affair,” said Gimli staunchly, although his stomach curled in upon itself. He knew not if his own father would attend this council, but the subject of Legolas had risen and then closed between them, after they had realized that it led to nothing but strife. Their letters since then had been tense, more formal than cordial, and Gimli worried about what would happen if these newer rumors had reached his father’s ears.

“That may be so, but it does not stop the damage that may be done by wagging tongues.”

“Is this Aragorn, King of Gondor, afraid of gossips prattling like maids in their bowers?”

“Sharp tongues may do damage. I say merely that you should be prepared to hear these words. It would be unfortunate if such a tale surfaced only to be silenced by the blade of an axe or the broad head of a hunting arrow, as you suggested might be the case, earlier. Should such a thing happen, I would not have either of my friends’ sigils be upon the weapon so used.”

Mahal. There was nothing else for it; he would have to speak of these things to Legolas, and together they must prepare a defense. Gimli groaned. “I would rather stand again before the Gates of the Morannon, with all the forces of Sauron arrayed, than wound my friend so unjustly as to suggest he… and I… should sully our friendship by suggesting it is based in common lust,” he felt his voice slow, the words reluctant to come forth. He turned away, setting his hands on the edge of a delicately carved wooden table. “And I would rather I had been slain there than to see dismay in his eyes at the thought… of….” He could not speak his thought.

Gimli took refuge in all that remained to him-- the certainty of the elf’s friendship. He would not say Legolas would look on him with disdain at the mere idea that others thought their friendship might conceal more, for powers willing it would not be so; he would forgive and be kind, though he might withdraw a part of himself out of caution. But any distress in the elf’s eyes at the knowledge of Gimli’s unwanted love would not only be sign of an unbearable insult to them both- - it would also be the death knell to Gimli’s secret dreams.
“At the thought of you two together,” Aragorn supplied. “Abed, perhaps.”

Gimli’s hands went so white he feared his bones might snap; the fibrous wood crushed and indented under his fingertips. Perhaps it would not distress Legolas. Perhaps he would be amused, and he might laugh—not with derision, but with contentment in their friendship, and with astonishment that others might think it other than it was. He would expect Gimli to be astonished at the idea, just as he was; he would not expect for Gimli to… wish it so.

He could not speak, but Aragorn seemed to read all that he needed in his face and hands. “And you are so certain you will see dismay?”

“How can it be otherwise?” Gimli gritted. “Dismay or amusement; perhaps he will think it all a— I will not say a game, but some kind of jest. We are friends, yes, comrades, yes, but elf and dwarf together is a tale untold— and do not bring up Celebrimbor and Narvi to me,” he flared, cutting off Aragorn before he would speak, “for the Doors of Durin have been shut for a thousand years, and when opened, brought only darkness.”

“You spoke truly when you said you were certain of Legolas’s heart,” Aragorn observed. “Certain to a fault, I think. You are so quick to doom yourself to misery! I do not belittle the sacrifices of your kinsmen, but remember that not only darkness but light came forth from the depths of Moria; Gandalf returned from struggle stronger and greater than ever. Perhaps you and Legolas can do the same.”

“We are not Gandalf,” said Gimli, already regretting the metaphor, “and our kin are no Balrogs, but perhaps something more powerful and subtle still in its malice. We have done so much, Aragorn, to forge friendship between elf and dwarf; it is not only we but many of our fellows who have grown close, and to risk such friendship on the whim of one heart— no. That I will not do.”

Aragorn did not speak right away, but rather stared at Gimli, and Gimli returned the look with defiance. This was not Aragorn’s affair, no matter what he seemed to think, and although his heart still felt squeezed with dread at the thought of bringing the idea up with Legolas, nor would he allow his friend to intrude any further. At last, Aragorn seemed to see it, and threw up his hands in exasperation.

“Very well,” he said, “do as you will. But if you will listen to me, I tell you that it is not all as hopeless as you seem to think. Speak with Legolas, and perhaps you will be surprised.”

Gimli gave only a noncommittal grunt. He had revealed too much already, and was not keen to speak any more of this— or to hear reassurances from his friend. And Aragorn, mercifully, seemed to understand. “I will release you now from the burden of my company,” he said. “But I would ask you to think on what I have said.”

“I will,” Gimli grumbled, half-unwillingly— he hardly had another choice.

His audience with the king over, he excused himself with little ceremony and backed carefully down the ladder of the *talan*. As soon as his head had descended below eye level from Aragorn, he heard a loud thump, like something hitting a piece of wood, and an exasperated groan. Aragorn muttered something that Gimli could barely hear, but he thought he made out the word, “Fools.”
Chapter 6

Chapter by TAFKAB

Aragorn’s abode had caught the last of the sinking sun’s slanting golden rays, but by the time Gimli descended to the ground he could not face either his own small hut or the elf’s talan; the chance that Legolas awaited him somewhere between here and there sent him turning in the opposite direction. He was well familiar with the byways near Legolas’s capital, and that stood him in good stead now as he began to wander aimlessly away from it.

He passed several elves, each intent upon elf business-- some of them took time to greet the dwarf among them, and others did not. Gimli found himself cataloging each by inclusion or omission, tallying a list of potential allies... or enemies. He had no doubt there would be some of both.

“Have a care you do not stumble in the dark, my lord!” A tall Silvan elf whose name Gimli could not remember appeared out of the wood with a lantern in hand and offered it to him, smiling.

“My thanks,” Gimli said, but did not take the light.

“It is Eithon,” the elf smiled, not at all disturbed. “My lord would never forgive me if I allowed you to come to harm!”

“My night vision is as good as an elf’s, or better. We dwarves live underground where there is no light of moon or star,” Gimli said. “Yet I thank you for your courtesy.” He bowed.

“You are fairspoken, as my kin have said,” Eithon returned his bow. “Enjoy the starlight then, friend dwarf!” He passed onward, leaving Gimli to look after him in a pensive mood.

Aragorn was right: he and Legolas had allies among both their peoples. They must have patience and keep faith in those allies.

Gimli meandered onward, ending up walking along a shallow cliff beside a trickling brook. It would be a lively stream in wetter weather, rising well above this path, but for now the pathway at its side was dry, if a bit rough, and keeping his footing occupied Gimli’s mind. The feel of living stone at his side helped calm him and made him feel secure, connected to the land around him.

After a time of walking, Gimli wearied, and his stomach reminded him of his hunger. He stooped by a pool, reaching for a smooth, flat stone, and sent it skipping over the surface of the water. A strange tickle nagged at him, as if--

He did not so much as startle when Legolas’s voice came from not far above his head; the elf stood on the low clifftop overlooking the pool.

“There you are, my friend.” He sounded subdued, not himself at all; was it the pointless, vicious rumor already at work between them?

“Aye, here I am,” Gimli said, and groped for another stone. The quartz in this one sang to him, and he turned it in his palm, sensing its quality. Nothing worth keeping, but when Legolas sprang lightly down and alit at his side, Gimli stuck it into his pocket, feeling somehow that he needed a remembrance of this last moment before all was ruined between them. “I have spoken with Aragorn, elf. His concerns are many.”

“And I with Arwen. She did not ease my mind any more than Aragorn has settled yours.” Legolas fell to a crouch, reaching for a stone of his own. Any other night, they might have competed to see who could have his stone take the most hops before it sank, but tonight neither of them spoke of
such childish games.

“Elf.” Gimli was not one to delay inevitable strife in the vain hope that it would go away. “It seems folk throughout Arda have formed the wrong idea of our friendship. Our peoples would not have it be so, no more than they would have our realms favor one another in trade— as we have done— and I judge they seek to put an end to both the false tale and the true one with these negotiations.” He tried to paste a smile upon his face, but it felt brittle and insincere, so he was glad of the deepening darkness.

“Yes.” Legolas was not looking at him, anyway, but rather at his hands, rolling the stone between them. Gimli was reminded of how rain and wind could wear down rock over time, and he thought that after only moments between Legolas’s palms, that stone would be smooth as glass. “Arwen and I discussed the same. No doubt, it will be mentioned at the council, even if in no official capacity.” He winced. “My father will certainly have words to say, in private at the very least. If indeed this rumor was not his true purpose in sending an embassy to Aragorn.”

“And mine will also, if he is there.” He and Legolas had spoken of it little, but the elf knew of the increased coolness between Gimli and Glóin, for all that it was less dramatic than the loud silence of his own father’s lack of correspondence. “He will be— less than pleased.”

“As will everyone else.” Legolas still looked studiously away from Gimli, his eyes skimming from the stone in his hands over the stream. “I suppose you wished to devise a way to avoid or lessen that displeasure? Or rather, I hope you do, for I confess I have no foolproof plan.”

“Is denial foolproof enough?” Gimli was glad that Arwen had spoken to Legolas of these rumors, saving him from witnessing Legolas’s first reaction. For what he heard in his friend’s voice now was not the distress or amusement he had feared, but rather the same sort of discouraged tiredness that he knew weighed on his own spirit. Tired of the folly of their peoples, their fathers, and of the judgment laid upon them by those who would not accept the bonds of comrades— whatever those bonds might be. “For we have the knowledge that they speak falsely, and so long as we both hold to that knowledge, they have no story they can hope to wring from us.”

“Falsely. Of course.” Legolas rose to his feet in one smooth motion; his arm snapped back and his wrist flicked, and the stone sailed across the stream and into the forest on the other side. Gimli did not see where it landed, only heard a thunk and saw a flurry of fallen leaves, but he knew it had hit whatever target Legolas had intended. “For how could it be otherwise?” He gazed off to where he had tossed the stone, and then looked down at his hands as though surprised to find them empty. “An elf and a dwarf. They would know, if anyone would, that such a thought is impossible.” His fingers twitched, as though he could not bear to hold nothing, and he bent to scoop up another rock, seemingly at random.

“Impossible.” Gimli echoed. It was not so different from his own thoughts, of course, but he could not prevent the dull pain in his chest, as though he had been stabbed with the rounded end of a stick. And yet there was more there, as well, that he had not expected: a slow-burning fire of anger and resentment. Not directed at Legolas, so much, but at the world that had made it so necessary. Quite apart from the two of them, the thought of an elf and a dwarf was indeed impossible, and suddenly he was aflame with wrath, abruptly furious at the prejudices that enforced it.

And in that fury, an idea began to form— a foolish idea, an idea that would no doubt break his heart a thousand times over, that would alienate his family and kin, that— that might get him the chance at everything he had ever wanted, or at least the chance to pretend he had it. “Unless.”

“Unless?”

Gimli’s heart was pounding now, sending hot waves of anger and fear and a strange, giddy
excitement through his body so fast that his head went light. “It is impossible,” he said. “Impossible, and scandalous, and--” he paused to gather his courage, his own voice barely audible over the blood thumping in his ears -- “and what could possibly infuriate them more than to believe it is true?”
Chapter 7
Chapter by TAFKAB

Legolas stared at Gimli wildly, unable to believe he had heard his friend aright.

“I have vowed that none will drive us apart from our friendship. It would be all the harder to separate us, and to protest the alliance between our realms, if they believed us more than friends,” Gimli said slowly. “If they truly believed their rumors true, and thought the two of us lovers, wed after the manner of your folk… there would be no easy chink in which they could set their prying bar. We might benefit well from allowing them to think thus— or even leading them to think it.”

Legolas’s heart raced as he thought on the possibility. To spite their kin with a falsehood was surely unworthy of honorable warriors, but it would be well-deserved for all of that. And… when he thought on it….

Legolas was glad of the darkness, for his cheeks burned. He would be able to pretend to the place he coveted; he could take Gimli’s hand, pay court to him properly… perhaps even kiss him.

Oh, but this was folly! Irresistible, mad folly, and already Legolas knew he would not be able to refuse. His brain lit up with a thousand feverish imaginings-- his hand in Gimli’s, Gimli’s cheek warm under his kiss, the two of them climbing a talan and retiring to bed together-- nothing would happen, of course, but he might lie next to Gimli and see the dwarf’s beloved face upon the pillow, to meditate upon it in reverie and greet him when his eyes flickered open in the morning light. He could give and receive tokens with impunity; they would be expected, and Gimli would not complain if Legolas adorned his hair with any amount of gems and silver filigree… he might feed Gimli with his hands, and the dwarf would tend his hair, and…!

“Perhaps your idea is a good one,” he made himself speak as if the notion pleased him only idly. “It would surely vex those who have vexed us, and as you say, it might strengthen our bargaining position. And if our falsehood is discovered, then our kin will be forced to accept our friendship for pure relief that it is the alternative they would prefer. They will never dare question us again.”

“Aye,” Gimli said gruffly. “And it will show them that we are not theirs to command; they will see that we could do it, if we willed. Perhaps they can pressure Aglarond and Ithilien to accommodate their petty quibbles over trades and tariffs, but they cannot govern what we do as Legolas and as Gimli!”

“It is agreed, then.” Legolas’s breath came short in his chest; he could scarcely keep his voice even. All through his limbs he tingled, fingers trembling where they clutched cold and white upon the stone he yet held.

“We will have to warn the king and the queen,” Gimli said slowly. “They may be impatient with our plans.”

“It will please the queen’s humor, I think,” Legolas said. “She is mischievous at heart, and the stuffy court of Gondor often bores her. This plan will be to her liking, and she will abet us in it.” That and more-- she would only be displeased that it was not true!

“Your people may find it hard to believe,” Gimli said slowly. “Galion will take the most convincing.”

“Then we should begin at once,” Legolas’s face flamed with heat, and he could not keep all the
breathlessness from his voice. “You will come to my talan, and you will stay till past the dawn. Let him discover you amidst my blankets.” And after last night, it would come as little surprise-- but he did not say that.


“Then let us be about it. It will take us until middle night to peel you from your armor alone!” He made himself sound merry, though his heart quivered with fey nerves as well as joy.

“I suppose it will,” Gimli muttered; he sounded as if he might even be blushing. “Yet we could hardly be about the business of love with a suit of armor between us.”

“You will have to trust in the vigilance of my border-guards,” Legolas teased, half-giddy with anticipation. He had never yet seen Gimli unclad. Tonight, it seemed, he would achieve at least a part of his goal.

“Then I will be glad indeed they are armed with the arrows of Aglarond,” Gimli said gruffly. He reached into his pocket and pulled out an apple. “It is past the time to eat; I find my new lover’s hospitality lacking!” He gave the fruit to Legolas and withdrew another for himself; Legolas took it, trying not to let his hands tremble at the word “lover.” “Let us be off, and when we arrive at the talan, order Galion to bring us a meal, that we may feast fit to fuel a night of--” he hesitated for just a moment, hardly perceptible-- “base debauchery.”

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Legolas did not always use the ladder when he climbed up to his home, but tonight he did; his hands and knees shook so badly that he feared even to lose his grip on the rungs. From nerves, or excitement, he could not say.

He almost hesitated to reach out and give Gimli a hand once he had made it onto the platform, for fear his trembling would give him away, but of course he could not turn down the chance to touch him-- and anyway, his nerves would need to be calmed tonight as it was, if he planned to do more than stammer and blush. And of course he must, for he could not give himself away.

It came to him that this ruse might be the ending of their friendship as it was if they were not very careful - but the chance to keep the friendship while coming as close as possible to everything else he desired was too tempting. He could not resist it, and he reached out to close his hand around Gimli’s as his head came into view and tug him onto the platform.

Gimli usually refused Legolas’s help, but tonight he accepted it without even a complaint. His hand was larger than Legolas’s own, though his fingers were shorter: thick and broad, calloused on palm and fingers from wielding axe and hammer alike. It was warm; Legolas did not notice the chill of the night until he felt the contrast of Gimli’s hand wrapped around his own. He did not let go, even when Gimli was safely in the talan beside him; his stomach twisted around upon itself and urged him to draw back, while his limbs held him captive exactly where he was. His hand refused to move.

Fighting every urge to look away, Legolas forced his eyes down to meet Gimli’s. They stared at one another for a time, not speaking. Gimli’s lips were parted as though to speak, but neither word nor breath escaped them; sweat slicked between their palms, and Legolas wondered whose it was.

He forced a laugh, and then tore his gaze away. “Come and sit, then, my-- my love.” The word was hard to say, at first, held back by instinct and walls built up over five years, but when it came at last, it was sweet with the release of long-withheld yearning.

There were lanterns in the talan, already lit in preparation; in the better light, Legolas could see
Gimli flushing. Had the word felt strange to him, then, as unnatural in his ears as it had been at home on Legolas’s tongue? For a moment, Legolas feared that Gimli would pull his hand away--but then he nodded, and did not draw back. “Yes,” he said, “yes, of course.”

They sat across from one another at the table, cleared from before; Legolas was glad, now, that he had taken the time to tidy after his speech with Arwen. That same stilted silence held them still. Legolas wondered if he should break it, but his tongue was too heavy with words he wanted to speak and others that he did not know how to say, and he did not.

Galion arrived soon after with the food Legolas had requested on their way to his home. Legolas never knew how to read his face; whatever expression it displayed might have meant any number of things. Even now, he only glanced at where Legolas still clasped Gimli’s hand, and no other feature on his face twitched.

“Your meal, as requested, milord,” he said. “Will you need anything else?”

“No,” Legolas said. “Only-- see to it that we are not disturbed.” His tongue felt strange, sandpaper against his teeth, and he poured himself a mug of fruit juice. No wine tonight-- he had imbibed too freely during the day, and he could not trust himself with a loosened tongue, not with Gimli so close.

If he had hoped such a request would make Galion’s face more readable, he was disappointed. “As you say,” he said, and departed, leaving them alone.

Gimli set to with enthusiasm, but Legolas could not bring himself to do the same. A time or two, he made a motion to take a bit of fruit or bread, but each time the food approached his lips, a flock of moths arose deep in his belly, flapping wildly in spirals that left no room for anything but slight nausea. Vaguely he recalled that he had been hungry earlier, but those memories seemed long distant in the face of this moment, here in his talan with Gimli opposite him, with the intention to stay overnight now named between them.

Certainly he had hoped last night and many nights before. But hoping was different from planning, it seemed.

Gimli looked at him from time to time, and Legolas pushed the food around on his plate and sipped often of his juice, unwilling to draw attention to his lack of appetite. Reluctant to draw attention to himself in any way, in fact, for with every moment that he allowed himself to stare at Gimli, he felt as though layers peeled themselves away from his heart until it was too naked in his eyes.

Naked. He thought again of their plans, and could not suppress a full-body shiver.

“Gimli,” he said abruptly, setting down his mug with a clang. Gimli looked up at him immediately; perhaps he had been paying more attention than he had seemed to? “Gimli, I--”

He stopped, searching for the words, and Gimli tilted his chin up slightly. “You?”

“I-- before we begin, with any of this, I would have a promise from you.” For all that this plan promised to offer him at least a pretense at all that he wanted, Legolas could not bear if that pretense stole from him what he already had. “Let us keep our friendship, above all. Let us promise that we will not allow the disfavor of our kin or-- or whatever discomfort our plans impose upon us,” for Gimli must not think he would be alone in his discomfort, in his lack of desire, “to sunder our comradeship. For I should miss it dearly, if it should be lost to a whim.”

Gimli’s face twisted briefly into a strange expression, and Legolas cast back over what he had
said, wondering what had been amiss, but within seconds his face had smoothed again. “That promise I will make gladly,” he said, “for I agree with you that proving a point to our kin is not worth a friendship as precious as ours.”

“Yes,” said Legolas, and wondered why he did not feel more relief. “It will be a fine jest and we will stand at the heart of it in accord until the lesson we mean to teach has been learned-- and then go on afterward as we are.”

He wondered how best to begin. They had already spent many evenings closeted together, but escalation was best begun now. What might they contrive to do next? To lie abed together, they had said, but the thought of advancing such an idea here and now made his cheeks burn, and he could not bring himself to speak his thought.

“It is well that we slept close in the wild during the war,” Gimli said gruffly, his thought apparently following where Legolas’s own treacherous mind had dared stray. “For we know you can bear my snoring.”

“It is indeed the only fear I have ever entertained for the talan,” Legolas said, seizing quickly on a jest. “That your rumbling will shake it down, and that we will awaken upon the forest floor in the morning.”

“It is a wonder I could sleep at all, with you lying open-eyed like a corpse among your blankets!”

“I sought only to warn the company should your snoring summon all the hosts and hordes of Mordor-orcs upon us, or cause an avalanche!”

“Hmf.” Gimli reached for his pipe and lit it from a candle, sending fragrant smoke curling upward. “It has been a tiring day after a night of wine,” he said gruffly. “I am weary, and I mean to enjoy my pipe and then retire. If I may…?”

“Of course.” Legolas’s heart skipped a beat, then redoubled its pace. “I, too, could rest; this day has brought more than its share of trials.”

Gimli smoked slowly, drawing on the pipe only little, and the two fell into silence that was more awkward than their custom. Legolas arose and tidied away a few things-- empty bottles and dirtied plates for Galion to take away when he roused them in the morning.

By and by Gimli tapped out the dottle in a bowl of sand Legolas kept expressly for the purpose, then tucked away his pipe with a sigh.

Legolas kept his back turned, listening to the telltale rattles and clanks that spoke of a dwarf removing his armor. Gimli wore only light leathers and a bit of chain, for this was a place and time of safety, but Legolas had never seen him without at least so much, and he bit his lip to forestall a soft bleat of sound that wished to escape his throat. He wore a mantle over his own tunic and breeches, and bethought himself to remove it, fussing about hanging it on its peg behind the trunk.

He glanced briefly to Gimli from the corner of his eye and beheld the dwarf in only his underlinen, sweat-stained and wrinkled; his fingers clenched involuntarily in the hem of his tunic, but as the rustling behind continued and a soft thump issued as cloth struck the talan, he steeled himself and pulled away the covering, leaving himself standing in only his leggings and soft shoes.

Silence ensued, and Legolas’s face flamed. Had he done too much? Did Gimli stare and repent their bargain? He knew he was comely-- well-muscled and unscarred, his body yet hard from daily use of his bow, for he hunted often, though the war had ended five years ere this. It was no
great matter for an elf to go unclad before others of his kind, and Legolas had often bathed in clear streams when in company with the Fellowship, thinking nothing of what he did. But perhaps the dwarf had no desire to see him thus, peeled like an autumn sapling.

He hung his tunic, swallowing hard and struggling to compose his face, chiding himself for foolishness.

Two loud thumps announced the removal of Gimli’s boots; heartened by the sound, Legolas raised his hands to unbind his hair, and then stopped. Such would truly show him unclad— to loose his hair from its warrior’s braids and let it flow free before another!

He stopped himself for the moment and reached to remove his shoes. He should have worn a breechclout beneath his covering, but he had not thought of a need for it when he clad himself this morning. He clucked his tongue— sometimes men went clad in coverings even in their beds; he would do likewise, at least this much.

He turned back, hearing the rustle of Gimli drawing back the coverlet, and beheld the dwarf.

Gimli stood with his back rounded upon Legolas; his hands arranged the coverings upon Legolas’s low couch. The sight sent Legolas’s mouth dry; Gimli was likewise unclad to the waist, burly and stout, but rippling with hard muscle.

Legolas hardly knew where to look; his eyes roved in swift passes, each capturing a different part of the dwarf: candlelight gilding the curve of biceps and rib, dusted with a fine mat of glowing golden-red hair; the curl of his long braid drawn over his shoulder, the faint hint of dip at the waist vanishing into his breeches; the heavy knobs of his spine, the dark filigree of ink ringing his upper arm with runes.

Gimli seemed to sense the pressure of his eyes and fled into Legolas’s bed— that small dark body laid out in stark relief for just a moment against the pale sheets— then drew the coverlet up over himself so that only his head emerged. He turned over, revealing a final flash of powerful shoulder, and settled with his head upon the pillow, his back turned.

Legolas stood still, frozen as still as a deer in the forest that sighted the hunter who stalked it. For a long moment he stood thus, amazed, then forced himself to move. The couch was narrow, but he might lie upon it without disturbing Gimli, who had arranged himself at its farthest edge. He sat down lightly, took a deep breath, and stretched himself on his side, back to Gimli’s as they would have slept in the wild— the better for each of them to keep watch, their vulnerable backs safe.

Yes. You are safe here. Even from me. The vow came fiercely to Legolas’s heart. I will protect you, meleth. He settled gingerly onto the pillow, not reaching for a share of the covers— the night was cool but mild enough for the likes of an elf, who did not suffer the cold as mortals did. Indeed, the coverlets were only here so that Legolas might take them and cover his friend if he lingered and succumbed to weariness; many mornings had found Gimli swaddled in them upon the floor while Legolas lay comfortable upon the bare bed.

This was not so different, surely.

It was nonetheless, a long time before Legolas found reverie, lying quiet but intensely aware of the heat of his friend warming the bedding just at his back.
Gimli awoke slowly, with the strange drifting feeling of waking in a bed not his own, body in unaccustomed orientation to his surroundings. Pale light filtered in through his eyelids, and he kept them closed, taking a moment to orient himself.

The air was chill around his cheeks and nose, but the rest of his body was warm under covers. Too warm, he thought. Unusually warm. And the bed beneath him was too soft, and he could hear the sound of another’s breathing--

His eyes snapped open in a moment of half-awake panic, and then it all came back to him.

The chill in the air and the birdsong in his ears were because he was in a tree, which in itself was not as unfamiliar as he would have liked to have it-- but the warmth and softness were new because he was not on Legolas’s floor but in his bed, and Legolas was still lying beside him.

He had rolled over in his sleep, he noticed now; his chin was just inches away from Legolas’s shoulder and his right arm had moved forward to drape across Legolas’s chest. He pushed himself up in a panic, extracting his arm as quickly as he could, and Legolas blinked up at him.

“Good morning,” the elf said in a whisper. “You are awake early.”

“You are--” Gimli did not even know what to say. “Still here?” was what he settled on. He had not known exactly what to expect the night before, but it had been beyond his hopes to imagine Legolas still lying beside him when he woke in the morning.

Legolas’s eyes flicked down and away. “I hope I did not offend,” he said haltingly. “You were-- your arm was--” He made a non-expressive gesture, and then said simply, “I did not wish to disturb you.”

“No.” Gimli could feel blood rushing into his face then, and he lowered himself back down: on his back this time, staring up at the odd sight of interlocking tree branches twisting up into the dawn-grey sky. Asleep, apparently, he had fewer qualms about taking liberties. “I hope that I in turn did not offend.”

“No.” Legolas did not speak further for a moment. “Did you… sleep well?”

“Well enough.” This was unbearable; such awkwardness had never been a part of his other imaginings of rising together in the morning. “And you?” was all he could think to add.

“The same.” Gimli was glad he could not see Legolas’s face, but he imagined the elf struggled similarly with the discomfort. Perhaps this had not been such a good idea after all. “Galion came to clear away the dishes this morning.”

Well-- good or not, it seemed that the wheels had begun turning. “Did he say anything?”

“I feigned sleep,” Legolas confessed. “Though in truth I woke early, waiting for his reaction. He is difficult to read, but I think that news will be sent to my father soon enough.”

“So it begins, then,” said Gimli. He pushed himself up and looked to the east; the sun seemed only just preparing to begin its journey over the horizon. It was earlier than he usually rose, and he was torn for a moment-- part of him desired to spring free of the blankets and run back to his own lodging, there to hide his face from Legolas until he felt he could show it once more. But the other, somewhat larger part drew him back down into the pillow - no longer touching Legolas, but
still lying by his side, loath ever to rise again. Legolas’s body temperature was always cooler than he expected it to be, as though outside on an overcast day without a jacket, but it was warmer this morning than usual. They had both ended up under the blankets at some point during the night, and Gimli supposed that after lying as close as they had been, some of Gimli’s own warmth had seeped into Legolas’s skin. He could feel it, even with the inches between their bodies, urging him closer.

This was no way to begin their ruse-- by letting his guard slip the first moment they were together. And yet-- it might test the elf’s resolve, and the depth of his fortitude. For must they not endure many more moments like this one-- and even more intimate, if they were to succeed?

Gimli sighed, needing the chamber pot, and moved to escape Legolas’s hold-- but his braid had worked out of its clasp in the night, and now the long red strands of his hair lay pinioned beneath the elf’s shoulder and arm.

“Drat.” He colored deeply and reached to try to pull himself free-- conscious of the elf’s own golden hair, which had tangled itself with his, the strands twining like the lovers he and Legolas were not. “Elf, I must touch your hair--”

Legolas’s cheeks were rosy with embarrassment. “Such was our bargain, to share intimacy as needed to advance our ruse. We must free ourselves,” he said, but his tender lower lip crushed between his teeth nonetheless as Gimli gently worked to separate them, and his gaze rested on their snarled hair.

Gimli began teasing gently at the tangle as if it were delicate wire to be filigreed upon armor, and soon had them separate; it had looked worse than it was.

Gimli could not resist a final touch of that spun gold-- it passed between his fingers briefly as he smoothed the lock against its brothers. Then he withdrew swiftly, smoothing his own hair. “I have slept on the clasp,” he muttered, withdrawing it from beneath his side. “It is no wonder I thrashed thus and trapped you, with this beneath to gall me!” He held up the barrel clasp and scowled at its inner teeth, which had failed to grip his hair in the night.

Legolas lay still, staring at him as though hypnotized -- paralyzed, perhaps, by the liberties Gimli had taken-- and Gimli huffed with embarrassment. “Will you rise or must I climb over you? I have to piss,” he said, and Legolas scrambled up with all due haste, depriving Gimli of his warmth, a consequence Gimli repented sorely.

“I will go down and call for food.” Mercifully Legolas gave him solitude to tend himself, and when he was done he put his tunic back on in haste, though the elf had gone down in naught but his breeches to ask for their meal.

Gimli glanced back at the bed, rumpled and still bearing the indents of both their bodies. A soft glint of gold called to him, and he approached, reaching to the pillow and finding a treasure there: a strand of Legolas’s hair, perhaps torn free in the tangle.

It was not freely given like the Lady’s, but though offered unwitting, it was a gift Gimli would accept. He took it stealthily and twined it about the clasp that had failed him, alongside a few strands of his own. He hastily tucked the clasp into his pocket where his theft would not be seen and straightened, hearing the elf approach.

“There is a fire near the southern hall, and in the king’s honor, we prepare a breakfast after the manner of men.” Legolas’s voice turned wry. “Galion says it is a wonder we have wakened in time for you to take advantage of it, but since we have, we are welcome.”
“I suppose it will be as good a chance as any to display our ruse.” And perhaps the public aspects of this pretense would be even more satisfying than the private, for they could not allow the awkwardness of last night and this morning to belie their actions and statements. Now, he might treat Legolas as his lover and watch him respond as though he wished it.

“That was my thought as well.” Legolas made his way to his clothing hook with tight, quick steps and donned his tunic and soft boots once more. Gimli noticed that while Legolas had full access to the rest of his wardrobe, he too had chosen the same clothing as last night. They were to play this out in full, then, and he supposed it saved him a trip to his own lodgings to change.

Gimli set to the task of fixing his braids; he would have to reuse his hair clasp, he supposed, so he sought to distract Legolas from him while he fetched it. The elf’s hair was mussed as well, strands rising in wisps out of the braids he had left in while he slept. “Your braids, Legolas,” he said, and Legolas’s hands flew to his hair, his cheeks flushing.

“Of course.” He glanced at Gimli, then at the floor, and then retreated to the bed and turned his back.

Gimli had hoped for this reaction; Legolas was touchy about his hair in a way that was similar to and yet different from Gimli’s own tendencies. He turned his own back out of mercy, to give Legolas the privacy he desired, and used the chance to fish the clasp out of his pocket and carefully untangle the mingled strands of hair. Those he twisted together, and then coiled carefully to stow them away once more before rebraiding his beard and setting the clasp in it.

The idea struck him then—something that would have to be done, doubtless, if they were to convince dwarves of the truth of their union, but something that would be more of a feigned intimacy even than sharing blankets. And yet, did it not mean to him exactly what it stated, feigned or not?

“Legolas,” he said. Licked his dry lips. “Ought we to change our braids? To reflect our—wedded state?”

“Oh.” There was a rustle, and Gimli dared to turn. Legolas had finished with his hair and risen from the bed, hands wound tightly together in front of him. “I suppose you are right. It would certainly be fitting of our changed status, but I would not—” He glanced down, then back up—“dishonor you, or take advantage—”

“You would no more be taking advantage of me than I did of you last night,” Gimli interrupted, “for one is as real as the other. We have shared blankets, so that any of your kin who knows will think you wed; I ought to make as much a declaration to my own.” And if he wore the braids proudly, the braids of his and Legolas’s mutual design, it could mean in his heart what it would mean to his kin, and Legolas would never have to know.

“Yes.” Legolas looked uncertain, but perhaps convinced. “You are right, of course. It is well that we are not yet among dwarves, so we may buy ourselves some time, but when you return to Aglarond you will need to return changed, I suppose, particularly as I will not accompany you.”

“It will speak louder than any words, I think,” said Gimli, “to my kin in Aglarond and in Erebor alike.”

“Yes, of course.” Legolas came towards Gimli again, and offered his arm. “We shall make our plans and preparations after breakfast, then; for now, will you accompany me as— as my beloved?”

Hearing the words said in pretense sent a strange, sweet ache through Gimli’s heart. But for the
moment, he could pretend that there was no bitterness to the word, and so he swallowed and took Legolas’s arm.

“I will,” he said.

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Ally or no, Galion had performed his duties well. Breakfast was already laid for the company when they arrived, around a table large enough for all of Aragorn’s small party. Aragorn and Arwen, of course, sat at ease at the head; places had been left empty for Legolas and Gimli at Aragorn’s left. The rest of Aragorn’s company-- a few guards and minor advisors-- filled in the rest of the seats.

Legolas held tight to Gimli’s hand as they approached, squeezing harder than necessary in an attempt to keep himself from pulling his hand free and hiding it behind his back. He forced his shoulders back and chin up to meet the gaze of the king and queen.

Aragorn was smiling, so broad and delighted that Legolas could not hold his gaze for long. He looked to Arwen instead, and she at least seemed to glean that all was not as it seemed. She raised an eyebrow at Legolas, and he, so subtly as to be nearly imperceptible, shook his head.

Her lips tightened on one side, and she sighed. As Legolas took his seat beside Aragorn, he saw a look pass between them, but he knew not what was conveyed there. All the same, he was sure at least that Arwen would not now inadvertently give away his secret.

“It seems congratulations are in order,” said Aragorn. “And perhaps gratitude, that you were willing to rouse yourselves for our sake.”

“And certainly a meal,” added Arwen, her eyes gleaming with mischief. “For surely you have worked up quite an appetite.”

In fact, Legolas’s stomach still churned with the same apprehension as last night-- for this was the first test here, and it was to be held before one who knew intimately his own heart! But it had been nearly a full day since he had eaten, and he was hungry indeed, so he forced himself to load up his plate, even as Gimli did the same beside him.

“Our thanks for your congratulations,” said Legolas. “But how could I forget courtesy owed to my liege-lord and my friends? Of course we would not miss the chance to bid you farewell.”

“And,” said Gimli, “we would have a word with you in private after, if the two of you would grant it. There are matters that must be discussed for the upcoming council, of organization and of a more-- personal nature.”

“Of course,” Aragorn said, though his delight now seemed somewhat diminished, at least in Legolas’s eyes. Arwen patted his shoulder gently, as if to comfort him, as they moved to sit down before fruit and bread.

They paused in speaking for some time while they ate, and Legolas had more success in that than the previous night, though the food tasted dull in his mouth. He was too aware of Gimli by his side, blustering and cheerful as ever; apparently nerves (if, indeed, he felt any) did not trouble his appetite. Legolas made a strong effort to match his mood; it would not do to appear pensive on this, the morning after they chose to wed.

Luckily all he need do was smile and return an occasional jibe; the rest of the time he could content himself with watching Gimli, who appeared to bask in the attention, thriving on it like a vine turning its leaves to the sun.
Gimli was beautiful, as vibrant and joyous as he should be on such a day, enjoying the company of kin and friends in true dwarven fashion—devouring enough bacon for four, along with flagons of juice and loaves of bread with cheese and fruit. Legolas looked on him and tried to envision how he might braid Gimli, if he chose—surely a suitable occupation for a smitten new husband! He might stare at Gimli all he chose, stare his fill, and claim it all part of their ruse.

Gimli would be beautiful with any braiding. To do it properly, though Legolas must make the braids ones that would suit both of them, while neither impeding their prowess in battle nor taking too much time to make each morning. They must be able to do the braidings themselves, if they were separate. And the braids must indicate their regard for one another. Gimli, with his wealth of curling auburn hair, was truly a worthy canvas for Legolas’s skill.

Legolas grew aware of Arwen’s concerned gaze resting on him, observing him; she was canny, and he guessed she might have guessed already the truth of how and why his and Gimli’s bargain had been made. Perhaps she would disapprove. Legolas flushed with discomfort at the thought. At least he and Gimli did not plan to lie to their closest friends!

“Go onward and take our possessions to the boat,” Arwen directed their retinue when breakfast was finished. “We will follow behind with our hosts.”

When the others were away, Legolas called for Galion to bring horses, deciding there would be less chance of being overheard if their party rode out to the edge of the wood and said their farewells in a wide clearing by the river.

After the beasts were brought they set out at a mild pace, weaving between the trees with Legolas in the lead and Aragorn behind. Soon they reached their destination and dismounted, awaiting the provisioning of Aragorn’s boat.

“I would congratulate the two of you on your wedding,” Aragorn said without effort to dissemble. “If wedding it were, but as my closest friends, you are plain to me in a way you would not be, perhaps, to others.

“I must admit to some confusion; I can guess at the reasons for your choice— or I think I do. It is harder to disprove a common belief than to embrace it and use it for your benefit, maybe?”

“That is much as we discussed,” Gimli said, and Legolas assented with a nod. “It will be easier for us to preserve amicable relations in the long run if we are believed to be thus.”

“But harder to establish them at first,” Aragorn murmured.

“Do not be foolish, my husband.” Arwen laughed merrily. “They do this for spite!”

“Of course they do.” Aragorn drooped his head and rubbed the bridge of his nose. “But they will be lucky not to spite one another as well as their kin!”

“My husband,” she chided him, gently. “Such close friends surely will not run astray; they will face any trials this brings and be made stronger thereby.” Her eyes danced merrily at Legolas for a moment. She leaned in to Aragorn and whispered briefly in a tongue Legolas did not know—Quenya, perhaps; Thranduil would not have the language of the Noldor spoken in his court— but whatever her speech, it seemed to quell the man.

Aragorn merely lifted his eyes to the heavens and heaved a great and terrible sigh, shaking his head, staring upward as if to implore mercy from the Valar.

“May you be as right as you often are, my wife,” he said. “Though I have often had cause to wish
you were not, in this at least we are agreed.” His eyes narrowed as he lowered his gaze to Legolas and Gimli. “I will not gainsay this deception, though I will not advance it,” he said. “Do as you will in this, and may your scheming serve you well.”

“Your permission is appreciated,” said Legolas tartly. He understood Aragorn’s misgivings, of course, for did he not have the same? But his and Gimli’s decisions--and mistakes, perhaps--were their own to make, and at least in this they were agreed.

“Now, now,” soothed Arwen, “let us not part on bitter words. Aragorn speaks only out of concern for you both, but you know that we stand beside you, whatever your decisions.”

“I know,” Legolas said, the fight draining out of him. “And I am grateful for it.”

“We are grateful.” Gimli stepped up to stand at his shoulder and slid his hand into Legolas’s--so easily, it was as though it needed no thought at all! “I return to Aglarond shortly, and there I will speak to my advisors and begin making arrangements for this council. We will correspond regarding the details, yes?”

“You may rely on it,” promised Aragorn. “And it is as Arwen said: we stand beside you, as your friends at least, and you know that we, too, wish for the best of outcomes.”

“The very best,” echoed Arwen, and she met Legolas’s eyes again as she said it.
In Eryn Lasgalen, the king’s life went on much as it had since the Second Age-- a daily progression of orderly events. Breakfast, wine, minor matters of rulership… or not so minor. Thranduil glared savagely at the emissary returned from Gondor, who bore word that while the King of Gondor was sympathetic to the plight of his trading partners, he might not decree terms and enforce them upon the Lord of the Glittering Caves, as it was not his purview but rather the responsibility of the King of Rohan.

Likewise, the upstart spawn of Númenor hesitated to enact law and enforce it upon the Lord of Ithilien, especially as disputes between Ithilien and Eryn Lasgalen seemed a family matter, better fitted to discuss between kin.

He did, however, generously offer to preside over a trade council between the various realms whose concerns he had heard, set on the neutral ground of Rhovanion, where all complaints could be aired and disputes reconciled.

Thranduil dismissed the messenger with a snarl. The fool of a king was playing coy--arrogance to be expected of an upstart scion of a broken line, raised to kingship by the despised half-elven fool, whose own family had been utterly destroyed both by its contamination with mortal blood and its association with the accursed line of Fëanor!

“Your Majesty, one of your pigeons has arrived. Galion sends word from Ithilien.”

His new attendant knew better at least than to open and read a message from that source marked for Thranduil himself. Thranduil put aside his seething wrath, the better to let it age and mature, like a fine vintage. He ascended to the dovecote with sweeping grace, ignoring greetings from his retainers, and took the small slip of paper from the bird’s leg.

It crumpled in his hand, but Thranduil gave no other sign of its contents, staring into the northeastward sky from whence the bird came. He reached at length to the desk beside the nest boxes and took out a paper of his own. He wrote for a time, then selected another bird, affixing the little capsule to its leg.

“Fly swiftly,” he told it, and launched it from his lifted hands. It vanished toward the east and south, and Thranduil swept down the stair again, fixing his second, Tawar, with a baleful stare.

“Prepare my escort. We depart to attend Elessar’s council as soon as the date is decided,” Thranduil hissed. He would deal with his wayward son in person.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the short chapter, but we’ve posted lots for you to read this week! A regular chapter will be posted as usual next Thursday. :-)

Chapter 9

Chapter by TAFKAB
Gimli was glad he was not aboard the king’s boat as it sailed down the river Poros toward the Anduin. He waved to the queen as she stood watching Ithilien recede behind them, until she could be seen no more and he and Legolas were left standing alone together beside the dock, unsure of what they should say or do.

Gimli harrumphed to himself as the uncomfortable moment stretched. “I should have brought Arod. I would, had I known I was to ride one of those dreadful beasts.” He began to stump back toward Legolas’s small, rustic city on foot, ignoring the horses and leaving Legolas to bring both them and his pony.

Legolas swiftly caught him up, riding one beast and leading the others; when he reached Gimli’s side he alit lightly and walked alongside him, humming a lively song Gimli did not know. He seemed remote and beautiful, otherworldly, the light of the sun caught in his glowing hair.

Ah, Gimli was a thief-- no better than Mîm of the Petty Dwarves, who had stolen the necklace they made to bear the silmaril. He had stolen something more precious than his own worth, and must surely pay for his crime. He was stealing it even now-- imposing on Legolas's faith and his trust, pretending to be his dearest friend while secretly yearning to be his lover!

He vowed he would make it up to the elf somehow-- perhaps with a fine gift, finer than any he had yet made, worth the fortune of a king. Not that any gold or mithril could touch the elf’s value, or outshine his golden hair!

“Let us polish our plans, elf. I must cut my visit short and fetch my companions for the return to Aglarond, but I would not do it before our course is set,” Gimli said.

“A wise idea, my friend.” Legolas’s gaze was still warm when it met his, and Gimli took heart from that.

They retreated together to Legolas’s talan once more, the better to discuss their plans in private. Gimli had not liked the way Aragorn had looked at him: almost with disapproval, as though chiding Gimli for taking the coward’s way out of his dilemma--and yet those looks had strangely stiffened Gimli’s resolve, making him more determined to see this through. Who was Aragorn to make judgments of his plans or his choices? King of Gondor he might be, and Legolas’s liege, but he did not govern Gimli’s hearth or heart. The purpose of the ruse was to show that their personal decisions were above the dictates of others!

He thought for a moment of his own liege-lord, and wondered what he should tell Éomer of the matter. The king of Rohan had become a dear friend, certainly, but more in the manner of allies and drinking companions; Gimli had never spoken to him of his heart, nor had Éomer ever shown an inclination to ask-- that he could remember, that was. Perhaps he ought to say nothing of his plans to Éomer, that fewer people would know of their deception.

“I thought, during breakfast,” Legolas said once they had seated themselves on his couch--side by side, this time-- “that is, I contemplated braiding patterns.” His hands were twined tightly together in his lap; he glanced up from them to look at Gimli. “If that does not overstep?”

“Of course not. As we have agreed.” Gimli wondered if Legolas had regrets, now, of this decision; the elf’s discomfort in the last hours had not escaped him. He almost regretted it himself,
if he was to see Legolas fumble reluctantly through the motions of the next weeks without true enthusiasm. It was not the astonishment he had anticipated, but a thinly-veiled distress that was as much an insult to Gimli’s mind and heart as he had feared.

But then, they were still finding their way through the permissions and boundaries of this ruse, and perhaps it was merely Legolas’s desire not to overstep the bounds of their friendship that drove his discomfort. That must be Gimli’s hope, to hold onto to prevent the breaking of his heart-- and in any case, the decision was made and declared, so there was naught left to do but live with it. “I would gladly hear your thoughts, and then perhaps we may see if they suit us both.”

“Yes. And once we have settled on a pattern that is to both of our liking, we will plan how to comport ourselves in the weeks we are apart, and then when we are together again at the council.” Legolas smiled then, tight and thin-lipped, his eyes alight with a fierce sort of excitement. “I must admit, I cannot but anticipate the fury in my father’s face when he witnesses the nature of our relationship for himself.”

His face had transformed, his chin lifted and his jaw set behind that tight smile, his eyes burning. No longer was he awkward, uncomfortable, a deer ready to flee; Legolas had transformed from prey to predator, every part of him radiating the contained wildness that Gimli had so long been warned that wood-elves possessed. And instead of putting him off, the sight heated his blood, quickened his heart, and he felt himself smiling in much the same way.

He remembered Arwen’s words to Aragorn earlier. Spite, she had said.

Well. Perhaps it was as good a reason as any other.

“What braid would you put on us, elf?” he asked.

Legolas hesitated. “For everyday wear, I would give you a crown,” he said softly. “With the strands turned up, and adornments of fine gems and truesilver set in them. The tail would go down your back in a braid, as yours does now, that you might fight at need-- though it would be burdensome to wear such a braid under a helm, and if you meant to fight, I should give you another less bulky. And for feastdays, a third, more beautiful than the others, befitting your,” he faltered. “Your worth as a warrior and your status as a lord. I would build that so as to accommodate the circlet of your lordship, and to offset its fine craft. It would be of many strands, letting your hair fall down beneath them like the torrent of Rauros in flood.”

“You speak not of yourself.” Gimli tried to keep his voice casual, and was not sure he succeeded. “Would you wear yours thus?”

“I would.” Legolas swallowed visibly, but met his gaze without flinching. “As near as I might, but I have no beard.”

“And how would you treat with mine?” Gimli dared to ask, and watched Legolas’s gaze flutter away like a startled bird.

“I would braid it simply, starting a thick strand on either side of your face and joining them beneath your chin to symbolize the union between us: our friendship to us, our marriage before all others,” he said. “Braided down from a clasp much like those you wear, they would be clasped anew near the tip with one of my own design, bearing a gem to shine next to your true heart-- and to be humbled by it, for no gem could shine as bright.” He flushed and turned to pick a loose thread out of his cushion, seeming abashed.

Gimli found that he had to turn away as well. He knew, of course, that Legolas held him in high regard-- such was the nature of their friendship-- but to speak of such intimate matters as braiding,
and to hear himself thus praised, was almost more than he could bear. It tugged at his heart: the words coming so very close to that aching emptiness at the center, while still failing to fill it.

“Such a design would be to my liking,” he said, gruff, forcing the shields around his heart higher. “If you would show me the everyday braid in your hair so that I may see it with my own eyes, I will try to duplicate it in mine.” Legolas looked for a moment stricken, and Gimli cursed himself. “I would turn my back while you braid, of course. If that would be more to your comfort.”

Legolas swallowed visibly and moved his hands to his hair. “No-- no,” he said, though it sounded more as though he were trying to convince himself than Gimli. “No; if we are to convince others that we are wed, we ought not to worry about such things. And after all--” He hesitated, his gaze flicking up to Gimli and then away again, very quickly, “-- whatever other lies we may tell, you are my dearest friend, and-- and I trust you.”

Touched beyond all expectation, Gimli fumbled with his tongue for something to say, and found nothing. And then he was speechless for another reason entirely.

Legolas’s fingers toyed with the end of his long braid-- so much Gimli had seen him do many times-- and then undid the small clasp, to begin combing through the sections of hair. And for the first time in his memory, Gimli watched his friend unbind his hair.

Even in the most urgent days of their Quest, even when most other boundaries of propriety had been breached between them, Gimli and Legolas had each clung to their particular modesty: Gimli had never yet been fully unclad before Legolas, and Legolas’s hair had never been entirely undone. And he watched now with fascination, pretending anticipation of seeing the braiding pattern, but in truth reveling in each small section of hair that was freed, until all the braids had been undone and Legolas’s hair flowed free.

No dwarf had such hair: so fine and smooth, but thick nonetheless; it seemed there was more of it than he had thought after seeing the top layer always braided back. The parts that had been braided rippled in with the rest, crimped from their binding and storing the darkness where the rest of the hair caught the sun: valleys of darker gold amidst the lighter. It looked smooth and soft as silk in the light, and Gimli fisted his hands in his own clothing to keep from reaching out to touch it.

It was not only the beauty of Legolas’s hair that struck him thus, but the meaning of the act: this was one of the deepest forms of intimacy to elves, he knew, and should another of Legolas’s kinfolk come upon them in this position, more would be proven even than the knowledge that they had spent the night in bed together.

Legolas’s cheeks were deep red, even his ears flushed pink where they peeked out amidst his hair, and his hands did not seem to want to leave it. Gimli wondered if it was more for the comfort of having something to hold, or if he felt that his hands were shielding him, somehow, from Gimli’s eyes. He felt a voyeur suddenly, and after all, was he not, staring so while Legolas bared himself beyond his comfort?

He blushed himself, and cleared his throat. “The pattern,” he reminded Legolas.

“The pattern.” Legolas moved over closer to him on the couch, and bent his head so that it was at Gimli’s level. Their thighs were pressed together, now, and though it was not an entirely unaccustomed position, the warmth of the contact burned through the fabric of Gimli’s breeches and into his blood. As he bent thus, the ends of Legolas’s hair brushed Gimli’s knees, and he held his breath, unwilling to speak of it for fear that Legolas would move farther away again.

He forced himself to watch Legolas’s fingers instead, and that was no great hardship. His fingers
were nimble in a way other dwarves might appreciate, were they not so disinclined to find favor in
an elf: slender and deft, dancing along the length of the quick-forming braid as gracefully as he
had seen Legolas himself dance at various festivities. They moved with the speed of one practiced
in braiding, and Gimli did his best to focus on the pattern and the way it repeated, and not become
distracted.

Legolas finished all too soon, and then seemed to realize. “Oh--was that too fast?” he asked. “I
meant to show you, but--”

Gimli had to take a moment to collect himself before he could speak, and then it was a great effort
to force the tone of playful offense. “Do you doubt my ability to replicate a pattern?” he made
himself growl.

“Of course not.” Was it his imagination, or did Legolas seem relieved at the lessening of the
tension? “Then show me, if you will, so that I may be certain that my demonstration was
sufficient.”

“Very well.” Loosening his hair before another, so long as it remained untouched, was not as
significant to Gimli - or would not have been, if Legolas would not stare so. Was he taking his
revenge for the discomfort of Gimli’s attention? If so, Gimli almost regretted his own staring, for
Legolas’s eyes on his hair as it was unbound made him feel nearly as naked as he had felt the
night before. He swallowed down the guilt at having inflicted such feeling on his friend and went
about loosening his hair as quickly as possible, and then rebinding it.

Legolas’s demonstration had been quick, but Gimli’s dwarven crafting abilities did not fail him.
He replicated the pattern with little trouble, and then patted the side of his head, testing the
unfamiliar weight and pressure of the braids. “Well, then?” he asked. “Am I a suitable spouse for
the Lord of Ithilien?”

“I can find no fault with you,” said Legolas, though his eyes would not meet Gimli’s. Gimli found
himself glad of it as he braided his beard as well, quickly now that he understood the pattern, and
affixed the clasp he had made of Legolas’s gift. Their friendship, Legolas had said this braid
would symbolize-- well, it might symbolize more, in Gimli’s mind at least.

“Elves are strange creatures, to be so vain and yet to hang no mirrors,” Gimli said, needing
suddenly a jest to break the strange heaviness between them. He might almost think the elf
yearned to sink his long fingers into Gimli’s hair, though surely it could not be so. “Yours looks
well,” he added abruptly, feeling it polite to reciprocate the praise, then felt terribly gruff and ill-
bred when Legolas blushed deeply and tugged at the end of the braid. “Just as I would have it,
were we wed.” Only he would make the braiding himself, would sink his fingers into Legolas’s
sleek hair and let them trail through it like water...

What a pity that they were not truly wed!

“Now it remains only for us to let others see,” Gimli said. “After this morning Galion, at least, will
not be surprised.”

“Galion has pigeons from the greenwood in his cote,” Legolas said. “He will send one to my
father with news of our wedding.”

Gimli might not touch Legolas’s hair, but he made free to lay his broad palm over the elf’s back.
“Shall we unmake these braids, then?”

“No,” Legolas said at once.
“Let us walk abroad, if you are resolved, where we can be seen. You can show me whatever new plants have arisen from the mould and tell me their names.” Legolas loved to do this, though Gimli could scarce tell one from another. He would far rather watch the elf’s face quicken with joy, his eyes sparkling, and watch him run a gentle fingertip over leaf and blossom as he bent to greet the plants in his own tongue, praising their bloom.

“You can show me whatever new plants have arisen from the mould and tell me their names.” Legolas told him eagerly. “And there are pink and yellow orchids to be found hidden beneath the trees in the hollows, if one knows where to look.”

Gimli smiled to himself; Legolas always knew, and took great joy in showing Gimli small growing things, flowers shining like jewels in the dim of the wood-- just as Gimli took joy in directing the elf’s attention to the delicate veins and patterns of a bit of carved jasper. “Then show me,” he said. “And after, we will come back and have a sup, and then perhaps a game of cards.” Legolas was hopeless at gambling, and Gimli took pleasure in winning small forfeits from him while also working to teach him the way of wagering.

“And then to bed,” Legolas said, and blushed again.

“Aye, and then to bed.” Gimli wondered how he might bear the slow passage of the many hours that yet lay between him and having the elf at his side abed, sweet bare skin soft beneath his arm. “And perhaps then we will make sounds for others of your people to hear, lest they think a dwarf does not know aught of bedcraft!”

Legolas crimsoned so deeply his cheeks rivaled a sunset; then he laughed softly. “We would not want that, no indeed, nor for any to think that an elf was found cold and silent in answer!”

“Your father will flay us both ere this business is done,” Gimli chuckled. “And mine will help him, mayhap.”

“It is not their business to decide our doing,” Legolas said. “We will teach them.”

“Aye.” Gimli followed Legolas down from the talan. The elf seemed almost to have forgotten his new braiding already, but Gimli was free to admire it and to dream about the silk of living gold under the pads of his coarse fingers. Legolas reached for his hand when he was upon the ground, and Gimli took it with a scowl, letting himself be tugged forth and taking care not to smile upon the elf-- better by far to maintain his usual gruff manner than to let his growing fondness show.

“Even you will smile when I show to you the kits of the brocks playing in the wold. They emerge from the roots of the trees at dusk,” Legolas said, joyful. “They wrestle among the heather, and they growl as if they were dwarflings playing at battle. There are foxes with pups, too, that we may see if we are lucky.” He led Gimli away, chattering happily, as was his wont.

If curious eyes followed the lords of Aglarond and Ithilien, and if unkind tongues remarked upon their new braiding, they cared not.
“I confess,” said Legolas, “I know not where to begin.”

It was dusk, and they sat again side by side upon his bed, unclad again but for their undergarments. Perhaps, he thought, perhaps eventually they would come to the point of removing those last layers of clothing, but at least for today he had clothed himself suitably that he need not leave his leggings on in bed.

Gimli sat beside him, their thighs close enough that the hair on Gimli’s brushed Legolas’s skin, waking all the nerves with a burning chill that raced through his body. He tried not to tremble, and thought he did not succeed. “That is no concern,” said Gimli, his voice an octave lower than usual—perhaps with the same embarrassment, but it made Legolas shiver. “I will teach you.”

It was exactly as Legolas had imagined it—only not. In his wilder dreams they had been together, yes, but in truth, not only in name. He had fantasized that Gimli would meet his gaze, that he would see his own love reflected back at him, that Gimli would touch him deliberately, that he would divest Legolas of his clothing with desire in his eyes and his hands, instead of looking down at his own knees, instead of preserving this careful space between them. He had dreamed that he would peel Gimli’s clothing from him in turn, would finally see Gimli willingly bared before him. And he had imagined this moment: he had imagined the exact words Gimli had just spoken—but in his dreams, it had always been real.

Ah, well. If this was all he was to have, it would have to be enough.

Neither of them moved for a moment, and Legolas took a deep breath, gathering his courage. “I suppose we ought to be lying down,” he said.

“Some say that is the first step,” agreed Gimli, though there was a laugh in his voice that made Legolas wonder if he was being mocked. He knew, of course, the basic mechanics of the act they were about to feign performing, but little else, and he was glad, suddenly, that his face was averted. He had not imagined demonstrating his ignorance to Gimli in such a context!

Lost in his thoughts, he did not move, and then Gimli’s hand was on his shoulder, warm and rough and so sudden that Legolas almost started. “Last chance,” he said softly. “If you are unwilling, we may still call off this jest and rely on our friendship to be enough of a shield against our kin’s censure—and enough reason for the favors our lands extend to one another in trade. Feigned or real, this is not meant to be a hardship, and I would not impose it on you.”

“No.” Legolas turned at last and met Gimli’s gaze, and he did not see the ridicule he feared. “No; we have promised that our friendship is true enough to hold through all that this ruse may ask of us, and I hold to that. I am committed to seeing this through.” It was not quite the confession he yearned to make, nor quite the words he wished to hear from Gimli, but it was real enough to carry him through all that they had planned. “You must merely be patient with my… inexperience.”

“Inexperience is by no means undesirable in a partner,” Gimli explained kindly as they rearranged themselves, lowering their bodies until they lay again side by side, their arms brushing now. “Only apathy is truly to be disparaged, for a partner who cares not for learning will never perform well.”

“Ah. Well you shall not find me apathetic,” Legolas vowed, which made Gimli laugh a roaring
laugh of great delight.

“Already you are not, for you have agreed to do this here, abed. It is well; any who peered in on us from afar-- which all could do if they liked; these dwellings of yours are hardly arranged for modesty’s sake, elf!-- would wonder greatly if we made such sounds as we are about to make, while sitting apart or across the room!” Gimli slapped his thighs. “We need not start loudly all at once; it is like playing music. One must warm both the instrument and the mouth.”

Legolas stared at him, wide-eyed and hardly able to credit what he heard. Of course, if a mere innuendo was enough to discomfort him so, how would he ever survive the noises Gimli would soon make?

“One must breathe, too. It is a chorus of breath and voice-- and of furnishings, though your bed has no springs to squeak, as do those of men. I will ensure that this awful platform of yours moves sufficiently to pay tribute to my prowess.” He moved then, a firm shift of body that pressed the platform through the mat beneath them, and made it sway in a great rustle of leaves. “Thus,” he said. “For though elves are featherlight and move without sound, a dwarf is never so, not at such a time.”

“I see,” Legolas said faintly, though he did not, quite.

“I will need to prompt you at first, I think.” Gimli frowned, turning toward Legolas. “I will set my hand upon yours, and when I squeeze, you should make a cry. If I squeeze lightly, the cry should be soft. But as I squeeze harder, you must make more noise-- you will not be alone; I will make sound too. And at last, we will finish-- the most noise should happen then, of course, a chorus of cries such as you would make in pure abandon, with no thought for dignity or shame.” Gimli’s frown deepened, then, and Legolas wondered at his expression; it seemed almost one of exasperation.

“What sort of cry?” he asked, though he had on rare occasions heard such-- most often when he roamed abroad among men and took lodging at an inn. But Gimli need not know that.

“Any sort, truly, that sounds as if it is made in pleasure. You should not cry out as if you are being murdered in your bed.” Gimli frowned again. “Moaning. Gasping. Yelping.” His voice grew gruff. “Perhaps toward the end, one might think you were being murdered. But pleasantly so.”

Legolas could not help but laugh at that. “Very well, my friend. Correct me if I do not do it rightly.”

“I will.” Gimli reached and took Legolas’s hand.

“Ai, Gimli,” Legolas breathed, a shiver curling through him.

“Yes, elf. That is the way,” Gimli said. “Again. Purr for me like a cat.” His fingertips stroked Legolas’s hand, and Legolas let himself loose a low, breathy moan, humming softly.

Gimli growled in response, and Legolas’s skin lit up as if aflame. His next sound was not at all false, a long low moan mingling with Gimli’s rough voice in a chorus of delight. Gimli’s hand squeezed his and he sharpened the noise in response.


Legolas would gladly give more, and he chorused with Gimli in delight, gladly shaping his sounds to match the dwarf’s, learning the rhythm of the pressure of his hand. Silliness rose in him along with lust, and he found himself giggling helplessly between soft cries; Gimli glared at him with exasperation.
“I am hardly laughable abed, elf!”

“I laugh for joy,” Legolas protested, and Gimli too laughed then, eyes shining.

“I might have known you would be thus,” Gimli said. “I will have to silence you!” He lifted a hand and covered Legolas’s mouth with its warm, hard palm. “I would kiss you now,” he whispered at Legolas’s ear. “Muffle your sounds.”

Legolas obeyed, glad of Gimli’s palm, for he might not betray himself with speech while it rested there— and its warmth and weight were welcome.

Gimli began to move as promised, rocking against the *talan*, making it shift and rustle. Legolas blushed, realizing the dwarf would be rocking against him if he moved but a few inches closer— and he wondered, suddenly, if Gimli’s flesh had answered the sounds they made and the motion of his rocking.

Surely Legolas’s own had, though it would not be apparent to Gimli, as it was hidden by the blankets and the distance between their bodies. He gave a long, shuddering cry at the thought of Gimli pushing against his thigh.

“Perfect, elf,” Gimli murmured, so near the heat of his breath brushed the delicate skin of Legolas’s ear. “Now we are properly in tune!”

If only they were! Legolas gave a sad cry as the dwarf’s hand moved, but it crossed his body and clasped his opposite hand, and directed him when and how to make his moans even as Gimli’s rough voice filled his ear, choring alongside him. Ah, but Gimli was breathless— truly he was, though it might only be from the effort of making the *talan* move in the night. Legolas’s eyes filled with tears and his heart ached; he would have Gimli atop him if he could, and would have the dwarf cry out in pleasure, not in falsehood.

Gimli’s hand led him onward, and Legolas’s aching flesh cried out for more, driving desperation into his voice; at last, after a flurry of cries, Gimli whispered “now,” and Legolas shouted obediently for him, desperation making his voice pierce the night so loudly birds arose, startled and flustered, from the trees around.

He lay there trembling, trying to catch his breath. “It is not right,” he said at length, striving to keep his voice even. “You did not match my cry; the others will believe I did not satisfy you.”

Gimli laughed. “Will they not, elf?”

“They will not, Gimli,” Legolas said, making himself sound cross. “And I would not have it said you bested me in this combat!”

“Is that the way of it then?” Gimli chuckled, rich and warm; his body had warmed the inside of the blankets, almost as well as if he lay atop Legolas. “We will battle again for their ears then, Legolas!”

“That we will. And this time I will guide,” Legolas matched word to deed, taking Gimli’s hand.

“A willing student, I see,” Gimli said, before Legolas turned the tables and silenced him. He soon found that this was better than lying passive; turned on his side, he might angle his body so that his flesh pressed against the bed, and thus achieve relief— when pleasure drove him near it, he need not even think as he squeezed Gimli’s hand, provoking cries from the dwarf that maddened him to the climax of passion, his body singing in harmony with Gimli’s voice as he found release.
“Well done, for a beginner,” Gimli said, hoarse, when their breath evened again.

Legolas lifted his head, indignant. “You are arrogant, _meleth._” The word slipped from him without his meaning it to, but Gimli did not seem to mind. “But you will not best me here— no more than you can in battle!”

“We shall see about that,” Gimli said. “Let not those who listen think a dwarf lacks for stamina at bedsport!”

And so they bickered over who provided the best performance for many hours, until Legolas and Gimli each were hoarse and the birds had found better trees for their roosting. None who slept nearby that night could think the Lord of Ithilien had failed to marry, or question to whom he wed himself, that much was sure— and even Legolas himself, his breechclout a mess, had little doubt that he pledged himself in truth to Gimli.

Though Gimli did not know it, Legolas vowed he would have no other throughout the long ages— and he did not begrudge it, for Gimli lay close to him now, and they laughed and strove together well, though not perhaps as fully as might be wished.
Chapter 12

Chapter by TAFKAB

Again Gimli woke in a tree—and he now wondered wryly if this was one of the unforeseen consequences of their ruse; that he would now be expected to sleep in a talan every time he came to visit Ithilien. He supposed it was a small sacrifice for the privilege of waking in Legolas’s bed, with the warmth of his friend beside him—only this morning, he realized now, he was in the bed alone.

He sat up, looking around for Legolas, and as he did, another unforeseen consequence made itself known to him. His thighs stuck together as he shifted, hair and cloth and skin caught together in the sticky mess of last night that had dried on his skin, when he could not even desire to make an excuse to leave the bed.

*That* was something to regret.

“Good morning.” Legolas was sitting across the room, perched on the edge of one of his small stools. He smiled at Gimli, but there was an unfamiliar edge in his eyes that caught Gimli’s attention, and made something strange stick in the back of his throat. Had Legolas noticed, last night, the real feeling behind Gimli’s words and actions? He had hoped that the elf’s inexperience would lead him to accept Gimli’s moans and cries as acting, would disguise his shudders through real climax—and again he felt the dried mess in his undergarments, the awkward motions of his legs, and he was glad of the shield of the bedcovers.

He tried for a normal tone. “And a good morning to you as well.” He needed to rise, to relieve and to clean himself, but he feared to move with Legolas’s eyes on him, and he feared even more to leave before he knew that he had not given himself away. “Have the birds returned to their nests yet?”

Legolas laughed, still a little oddly. “Their song this morning was particularly peevish, so although they have found their nests once more, I do not think they have forgiven us the disturbance.”

Gimli chuckled, trying hard to keep the ease between them. “And surely the birds are not the only ones. I can hardly think there is an elf in Ithilien who will doubt us now.”

“No.” Legolas gazed down at his lap. He had dressed and braided himself already, Gimli could see, and he felt even more bare in contrast, pulling the covers up once more to his shoulders. “And word will surely be sent to my father, if it has not been already.”

“So it begins.” There was no chance at turning back now; the decision was made, for better or for worse.

They stayed there in silence for a time, and Legolas showed no sign of moving, continuing to stare at his own knees as though he found them fascinating. But as Gimli’s discomfort increased, he finally cleared his throat. “Legolas. I need—”

“Oh!” Before he could even finish, Legolas had jumped to his feet. “Of course; I forgot. I will—”

He gestured at nothing, and then fled down the tree to the ground.

It was well that he had thought last night to bring up clothing for this morning. There was a chamber pot and a washstand in the corner, and Gimli made use of both, peeling the soiled breechclout away from his skin and folding it tightly inside an undershirt that also needed
laundering. He would do that task himself, when he found the privacy to undertake it.

He thought suddenly with a bolt of alarm of the sheets; glancing over the edge of the platform to be sure that Legolas was still away, he rushed back to the bed to inspect them. Much of the mess had stayed inside his clothing, it seemed, but he could smell it on the sheets, and here and there he could see the evidence of his own lack of restraint.

He panicked for a moment—he could not insist on washing Legolas’s sheets for him, but he could not leave them thus, for Legolas would know either way. But then—after the noise they had made last night, it would be more suspicious if Legolas’s bedding were not laundered. He might bundle the sheets up himself and give them over for washing, and whoever undertook the task would not be surprised at the telltale signs.

He stripped the bed, then, and rolled up the sheets so that Legolas would not know what was inside them. That done, he reached for his clothes.

As he dallied in dressing, he allowed himself to relive the bittersweet memories of the previous night—he avoided focusing too intently on the details, for fear that another problem would arise, but he remembered the warmth of their bodies in the bed; he remembered Legolas’s innocent confession of inexperience and how willing he had been to let Gimli teach him. He remembered Legolas laughing: with joy, he had claimed, but although that was not true, Gimli had not felt himself mocked. Rather, it was a game of the sort they had always played, a feigned competition that both, in the end, would win.

Gimli tried not to think about how in this case, he had already lost.

It was almost as though the closer he came to exactly what he wanted, the less able he felt to speak of it. Gimli’s heart sank to think of his cowardice. If he had been reluctant before, opening his heart to Legolas was now nearly impossible. But at least he could speak of it now, could bring all the desires of his heart almost to fulfillment—even if he felt himself draining emptier by the moment.

When he could delay no longer, he pulled on his clothing once more, braided his hair into the new pattern, and glanced again over the edge of the platform to see if Legolas was there. And soon enough, Legolas was scampering back up the ladder and settling himself at the table.

“I have wandered in the surrounding woods,” he said in a whisper, “and have listened to the murmurings of my kin. It seems that they needed little convincing, as it happens, so Aragorn and Arwen were right to bring this rumor to our attention. Their belief would surely have caught us unprepared, had we not made plans to face it.”

Gimli was unsure whether to be relieved or pained by this: how could everyone else in Arda, it seemed, see what Legolas could not? “And do they agree with our fickle kin from Erebor and Mirkwood that such a thing is an insult to our peoples?”

Legolas looked up, his eyes bright. “Some do, of course, mostly those who were closest to my father before coming to follow me. But most were more matter-of-fact than I had expected, and Hannien wished us joy when she saw me.” He smiled, and now it was a smile untinged with whatever discomfort had remained from last night. “If this is to be a test of the friendship between our realms, I find reason to hope we will pass.”

“The friendship between our realms, yes.” Gimli heaved a sigh—it was time to speak of more serious matters. “Legolas, I must return to Aglarond as soon as possible to make preparation for the parley. My people will simply need to cut their mining and exploration short, so that matters of state may be attended to. Aragorn has promised that we may find arrangements and compromises—
- perhaps involving Gondor and Rohan-- for the problems of trade that have arisen. But we must decide how we are to comport ourselves at the council, and in the time we are apart. I must know: should I tell Éomer of our falsehood, or allow him to believe it? Should I send word to my kin in Erebor, or wait for them to discover our wedded state when they arrive?"

“I say let them discover it.” That tight smile was back on Legolas’s face, his eyes bright with the same predatory gleam. “I will tell my father nothing unless he deigns to contact me first. Oft has he thought to cow me with his disapproval, or to win my compliance by punishing me with pointed silence. Well, he shall see that in his absence I can do-- and have done-- as I please.” He tossed his head, his braids catching the light like a golden crown.

“I think you are enjoying this too much,” said Gimli, but he could not hold back his own relief. If this was to be a game between them, at least they would stand side by side in it. “Very well, I shall do the same. Unless approached directly, I will say nothing of it-- but I will inform my kin in Aglarond of our ‘marriage,’ or betrothal, so that they know as much as your people here.”

Legolas nodded. “That seems wise. Those in our own realms have stood beside us through these last five years, regardless of the nature of our relationship; best accustom them to it now and be sure that they will continue to do the same.”

“Then I will tell no one else that it is only feigned,” concluded Gimli. “For the fewer who know, the less chance we have of being discovered.”

“And--” Legolas hesitated, and then stopped.

“And?” Gimli asked.

“No,” Legolas said. “It is no matter.”

For all Gimli prodded him, he would get no answer, so he changed the subject. “We ought to--” He felt himself blushing again, but forced himself to speak. “As we agreed earlier, we must act as though we are in love before all others. Were you truly my husband--” He had to stop then, as the pang of pain shot through his heart, and to gather his courage to make the suggestion-- “I would kiss you in farewell, and in greeting. Are you willing?” He grimaced, apologetic-- but his words made sense above and beyond his secret desire to taste the elf’s mouth.

“I am,” said Legolas. “It should be no great matter, not after what we have already forced my kin to witness.” He laughed, covering his mouth with a hand for a moment. “And should we not prepare wedding gifts?”

“Aye, we should.” Gimli felt his heart swell with love-- and with grief equal to the love. “For though this be not a marriage as it should between us, it is perhaps an earnest payment toward a greater wedding: the joining of our peoples and the mending of the rift between them, long overdue. The free peoples of Middle-Earth should not be at strife.”

Gimli drew a deep breath. “Though I know that the elves are sailing, it will be well to put paid to old strife before they go. It is not wise to sleep on grievances, for that is how they grow and extend. Our peoples will no longer sleep in the face of wrongs they have done one another, Legolas, but go forward hand in hand, eyes open, for as long as we may. As it should be. This I vow to you.”

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Gimli’s words resounded in Legolas’s heart: pleasure and pain mingled, as so much of this had already been. He sought for words to match Gimli’s, but all he could find to say was, “I accept
your vow, and pledge likewise.”

He reached and laid his hand over Gimli’s heart, then retrieved it to lie over his own. Ah, he must withdraw, or he would spill all his love now in words, and shame them both! “Gimli, I must speak now to Galion, and perhaps in so doing I will determine what he may have said of us. He has never been one with a head for wine; if I may beguile him with orders to tour with me and sample our most recent vintage, he will let secrets slip that he would rather keep. Will you await me here in the afternoon?”

“Aye,” Gimli said, gruff, his eyes bright. “I will, if you will bring back enough of your good wine for me to sample as well, but my heart misgives me. I must go to my people and see what of this has reached their ears, and prepare for the king’s council-- and prepare your gift, for its crafting will take time and thought.”

“It is well you were to depart soon as it is,” said Legolas-- and though his heart sank at the thought of Gimli’s departure, it would be best to have the time before the parley to clear his mind. “I will go, then, while you make whatever preparations you need.” As he made to leave, his eyes fell upon a heap of fabric. His bedsheets-- Gimli must have stripped them away, and his heart nearly stopped in horror. “Are these-- did they--?” His voice came out more as a croak than anything else.

“Oh.” Gimli went red. “I thought it best your people have no reason to suspect that last night was anything other than what it sounded. It would be suspicious if you did not change your sheets.”

Suspicious! Legolas’s face, neck, and ears felt submerged in boiling water. He had not thought to check the sheets this morning, for all he had carefully cleaned himself, and now Gimli had handled them! Did he know of Legolas’s reactions to him last night, and was now trying to spare him embarrassment with the excuse? Or had he somehow failed to notice?

Praying for the latter, Legolas scooped the sheets up into his arms. “I will take these down, then, for washing. Perhaps I will even launder them myself, to improve the ruse--”

“No, I think there is no need for that,” said Gimli hurriedly. “I mean--surely they will not pay such close attention--”

“Perhaps not,” said Legolas; he would say anything at this point, to keep Gimli from belaboring the subject. “Well, I will simply get these out of our way.” He could smell Gimli on the sheets, the scent of his sweat and pipe smoke that had become so familiar to him, but there was an unfamiliar salty tang along with it that must be the result of Legolas’s own indiscretion, and he could not bear for Gimli to realize what had become of them-- if he had not already! “I will meet you back here, then, once I have taken care of a few matters.”

And without waiting for any further response, he fled down the tree, sheets in his arms, praying that his face would stop burning.
Gimli could have groaned, flopping onto the bed in the talan and yanking at the end of his braid in dismay. He needed make little preparation for his departure; he would meet his folk tomorrow and order them to pack up their things, and his own packing would be short work as well. Now, he could only make use of the time while Legolas was away to compose himself.

It would be best for him to flee this place immediately; if he did not, he would surely commit some unpardonable indiscretion that could not be escaped. And what was worse, for all they had discussed the necessity of exchanging a kiss of affection at parting, he had no way of knowing if it would truly be welcome, or how deeply he might dare kiss Legolas when the time came. Though Legolas had agreed to kissing, he did not know if elves made a habit of such displays of affection; it seemed they were far more likely to place a hand over their hearts or on their shoulders than to embrace to express emotion upon the occasion of parting.

As to the question of spending tonight in the elf’s bed--!

He had greatly overestimated his ability to dissemble, that much was plain. Dishonesty was not a habit for Gimli, and thus in practice he was clumsy at it, and prone to allowing himself to be discovered. Would Legolas blame or forgive him for this falsehood? “Mahal help me,” he muttered, though he did not deserve aid.

No answer came save the rustling of the leaves. Gimli made himself release his braid and sit straight, anticipating the elf’s return. He must be mad to have suggested this plan! Sitting in treetops and eating leaves had addled his wits. The tight spot he found himself in could not help but improve were he surrounded on all sides by good solid stone, the better to shore up his wandering mind. The better to hide from the disapproving stars--

Gimli gritted his teeth and scowled at the sky. The dratted elf would have him seeing a Vala in every passing cloud! “My business is my own,” he told the clear blue, squinting up into brightness through the lace of leaves.

It did not respond.

If the Lady were here, or Gandalf, they would chide him sorely. Gimli sighed. At least those were two judges he would not have to face when his reckoning came.

He must just brazen it out and hope for the best.

After some moments, he managed to compose himself enough to make his way down the ladder of the talan and return to his own hut-- the inside of which it seemed he had scarcely seen in the last days. But it was where his belongings were, so he occupied himself with packing and tried to distract his thoughts-- to very little avail.

At last, when the sun had begun making its way towards the west, he roused himself and made his way back to Legolas’s talan with a small semblance of a plan, if nothing else.

“Well, elf, are your people singing tonight?” he asked when Legolas returned to meet him, hectic roses high in his ivory cheeks. “I have a mind for song and wine, if I cannot get ale.” He would drink himself so deep into his cups that there would be no danger of similar indiscretions. That would be the saving of him if naught else.

“We sing every night,” Legolas said. “In gladness, to greet the stars, to think on memories of old,
“I would go and listen, if you have brought the samples of wine you promised,” Gimli said.

“I did, but you have never wished to join us before.” Legolas’s brow crinkled in the faintest frown. “Galion did not speak. He barely drank, save to taste and judge, and only spoke to me to agree or decline; he is rarely so guarded. That more than anything persuades me he has told my father all he guesses.”

“We suspected as much-- and could not have avoided Thranduil’s knowledge of our ruse if we wished,” Gimli said gently, hoping Legolas was yet resolute.

“It is painful nonetheless to see him so changed; he once greeted my patrols with wine and song in exchange for tales of the spider nests we had vanquished, and was pleased to call me by name,” Legolas murmured. “But now it is only ‘Yes, my prince,’ or ‘No, your highness.’ I mourn the friendship we once had, which ended long ere this, I think-- perhaps when he left the wood to come here. It seems likely he did so at my father’s command, not for love of me.”

“I am saddened to hear of his coldness.” Gimli grieved indeed to see Legolas’s joy dimmed, and it gave him a pang of regret for other friends that their deception might cost the elf-- he could bear such slights on his own side, but to see Legolas suffer was far worse. “I fear he will not be the only one so inclined. Do you regret our choice to leave the lands of our fathers?” It was all he could bring himself to ask-- he could not speak of whether the elf regretted their ruse, not with this pain writ clearly upon Legolas’s face.

“I do not,” Legolas whispered. “For I have found far more joy here than otherwise-- and we have many friends.” His eyes shone suddenly.

“Indeed; I have met some of them. Perhaps they will be at the singing tonight,” Gimli suggested. “And then you will be happy again, Legolas, and I will be glad of it. It is fitting for a proper husband to share his husband’s joys even when they are not always his own.” He allowed himself a smile now, hoping it would draw a similar one out of Legolas. “Though be warned-- in kind I will expect you to share ale and boasts by the fireside in Aglarond, though it be less to your liking than escaping to stroll under the stars of Helm’s Deep.”

“I am willing,” Legolas said, the smile that Gimli had hoped for spreading over his face, more beautiful than the dawn. “If you are.”

“I am,” Gimli said, slapping his thighs and arising. “Lead me there, elf. I will even stay myself from singing; I should sound like a bullfrog amidst a chorus of skylarks, should I try!”

“And yet there are those who enjoy the call of frogs greeting the spring,” Legolas said softly, and led him down.

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Gimli, it seemed, had not overstated his desire to drink tonight; Legolas watched in some combination of amazement and horror as glass after glass of wine disappeared, long past Gimli’s usual stopping point.

The gathering was informal, smaller than usual; Legolas noticed that many of the elves his father had selected to accompany him were absent. Those who attended were effusive in their praise, as though to make up for the absence of their fellows. Legolas kept an arm around Gimli’s shoulders, as much to hold him up as to play out their charade, nodding and accepting the well wishes of his people.
Gimli retained his tongue, at least, responding to congratulations with his usual grace, but he swayed against Legolas as they walked, and called ever for more wine.

“You spoke truly when you said you had a mind for wine,” he murmured into Gimli’s ear after a time. The other elves could hear him, he knew, so he kept his words vague. “Is it the joy of our union that drives such a mood for celebration?”

“How could you think it otherwise?” Gimli responded, turning his charm on Legolas as well, even when he could hardly stand. “I am merely demonstrating my appreciation for the ways of my husband’s people.”

“Of course,” said Legolas, though his heart sank.

It could only be because the true meaning of what they were doing had finally made itself known to him. And what had been the blow that struck him? His mood had changed so rapidly this morning; it could only be the bedsheets, his knowledge of Legolas’s desire for him-- for Legolas had indeed washed them himself this morning, and had seen the proof there for himself. Perhaps he realized what Legolas had done, that the marriage had turned from a false one to a true one, and he could not bear to face other elves knowing this. Or he could not bear to say it to Legolas himself, so he moved to keep his mind clouded, to avoid the horror of the truth.

“And a fine appreciation you show, Master Dwarf,” said Eithon, who had approached them without Legolas’s knowledge. “Surely your admiration will be conveyed to the vintners. They will be glad to have tempted the tongue of a dwarf.”

“They are not the only ones to have done so,” said Gimli, or rather slurred.

Legolas started, though perhaps he should not have been surprised that Gimli maintained his wicked humor even several cups in, and Eithon roared with laughter. “I suppose not!” he said. “Are you sure you ought to be out in public? I think the birds have yet to recover!”

Legolas blushed; he could not help himself. But Gimli, even now, retained enough wit to respond. “In truth it is a ploy,” he said, as though confessing. “Perhaps if I am unable to walk before we retire, my husband will not see fit to haul me into a tree once more. Then, I think the birds will thank me.”

“I believe he is honing his tolerance, the better to match my father goblet for goblet when they meet,” Legolas said drily.

“I see.” Eithon dipped his head to Gimli, as though in respect. “Well, you have my admiration both for your wine tolerance and your courage in sweeping away the king’s most prized treasure.”

“And a treasure indeed he is,” said Gimli, smiling up at Legolas with a softness in his eyes that made Legolas’s heart ache for wishing. “One worth more than my regard, but it is an honor to me to be allowed to bestow it.”

Legolas’s face grew warm, and yet something colder and harder than a gemstone welled in the back of his throat; the yearning for the falsehood to be real, to hear such words spoken in truth and not in deceit. And suddenly he felt that he could not bear to be here anymore, with Gimli forced to spin lies about love, with all these well-meaning well-wishers who could not know the pain they caused. “That may be,” he said, forcing a smile, injecting lightness into his words. “But I believe it is now time for said treasure to do some sweeping of his own.”

And so saying, he turned Gimli with the arm laid over his shoulders and steered him in the direction of Gimli’s lodgings (the dwarf had spoken true; the talan would not be their destination
tonight). Laughter followed him, and a ribald joke or two, and he closed his eyes for just a moment against the bitterness of their teasing.

The decision had been made well, he thought; Gimli was clearly tired, moving where he was guided with little protest. There would be no feigned lovemaking tonight, it was already clear, and Legolas was not sure whether to be more relieved or disappointed. But Gimli did unclothe before him, and allowed himself to be tucked into bed, falling into drunken slumber with an ease that Legolas envied.

Perhaps it was for this reason that Gimli had imbibed so freely tonight-- that he would be tired enough to avoid even the possibility.

“Does it distress you so,” Legolas whispered, watching the rising and falling of Gimli’s chest, “the thought of loving me?”

Of course, Gimli gave no answer.

Legolas sat and watched his supine form long into the night. But before he slid beneath the covers to find his own reverie, he could not resist bending over Gimli’s sleeping face, the concern of before calmed now in hopefully-pleasant dreams, and brushing his lips over his broad, strong brow.

Just once.
Morning dawned soft and grey, the air thick with mist. Outside Gimli’s cottage, spiderwebs festooned the trees, each laden with thousands of droplets of mist, silver as mithril, swaying gently in the faint breeze. The firs sagged heavily toward the ground, water-laden, and the silver lawn showed no footsteps across its width. Legolas stood on the doorstep and stared about, loving his land— even the calls of bird and beast were hushed beneath the heavy sky, but the green scent of growing things and the soft earthen mould was heavy in the air and sweet in his chest.

Behind him Gimli yet lay snoring; left to himself he would doubtless sleep until afternoon, then awaken with a fierce headache.

At Gimli’s bedside Legolas left a pitcher of clear, cold water, a goblet, and a basin for washing, and also a few pieces of fruit and a loaf of bread waiting in a basket. Afterward he slipped out, wishing that Arwen was still in Ithilien; he sorely needed the counsel of someone wiser than he.

He could yet feel the warmth of Gimli’s skin beneath his lips, memory undimmed. The clarity of morning showed him the likely shape of the day ahead: he and Gimli would have to part, and when they did….

Legolas shivered, feeling the patter of cool droplets upon his head as the wind echoed his unease. He could not help wondering now, now that it was too late to go back, if all this had been nothing but a mistake.

The rustling behind him of light feet announced company—elvish company—and Legolas turned around to greet his companion.

It was Eithon, who had congratulated him last night. Legolas had found, in the years following the War of the Ring, that having discovered such close friendships as he had found within the Fellowship, his bonds with his kin had lessened, diminished, in the face of such powerful mortal love. But Eithon had always been a companion, a close enough advisor now, if never so dear a friend as Aragorn or Gimli. Perhaps Legolas had neglected an opportunity to make a dear comrade. If so, he was glad he might yet have the chance to amend his neglect. And yet… the falsehood now lay between him and his kin, even those who were friendly toward him.

The falsehood. Doubtless his ‘marriage’ would now be discussed, and Legolas steeled himself.

“Good morrow,” Eithon said to him as he approached. “Does your husband sleep off the excesses of last night?”

Legolas forced a laugh. “I think I shall not pry him from his pillows until noon at least,” he said. “And then he will doubtless grumble at me for having allowed him to lie so long abed on the day he is to return to Aglarond!” That much, at least, was true.

“You seem troubled,” said Eithon to him, and Legolas winced, regretting as ever his own inability to mask his emotion. It was a skill he had long envied his father, yet never mastered himself. “Are you concerned about the reaction of your kin to your marriage?”

_Among other things_. If he could not hide his disquiet entirely, he might as well admit to a part. “I admit that it troubles me,” he said. “Though I am eased in part by the warmth of your reception.” He had had faith that his people would not abandon him, at least, for his choice, but had hardly
He had had faith that his people would not abandon him, at least, for his choice, but had hardly expected such simple acceptance.

Eithon shrugged. “We have had time to accustom ourselves to the idea,” he said. “In truth, the biggest surprise is that it took so long in coming-- I know many of the dwarves of Aglarond thought you promised long since.”

That was right, Legolas remembered now-- Eithon was one of the elves with friends among Gimli’s people. Perhaps that explained something of his generosity and acceptance now. And yet it stung a bit, to know that his people would have aided the elves of Eryn Lasgalen and the dwarves of Erebor in spreading the rumor about the nature of his and Gimli’s companionship. Perhaps it was right after all that they had come up with such a plan to meet the assumptions.

“It will cause problems among the other realms,” he murmured, looking past Eithon now into the distance of the woods.

Eithon waved a hand. “Those problems exist already, and would even without you,” he said. “No, in truth, I am grateful to you, and I am not alone in that sentiment. Had you not brought us here, and had you not persisted in friendship with Aglarond, we would have been forever denied the pleasure of dwarvish companionship-- if not in the same manner as your own!” He gave Legolas a knowing smile. “And, on a more personal level, I am glad for you. If you will forgive me my boldness, your regard for the lord of Aglarond was not well hidden, and it is a pleasure to see such feelings rewarded at last.”

Legolas bit his lip. He had been obvious, then, to all other folk if not to Gimli himself, and he could not but feel grateful for the dwarf’s obliviousness even as he mourned it. Still, Eithon’s words brought him comfort. He and Gimli had planned this for more reasons than mere spite, after all-- they planned to protect their realms and build a friendship between dwarves and elves stronger than the hardest metals and more fruitful than any flowering tree. And to hear that there was gratitude among his people for this-- to know that their labors were not, had not been, for naught--!

“Thank you,” he managed at last, “for your support. It is a comfort to know that there are those of my kin-- and, Valar willing, of Gimli’s-- who believe in the love between us and the friendship that can be forged between our races.” And, almost to his own surprise, he found that he meant it.

“We are fading,” Eithon said gravely. “But we may yet do good works before our time in Middle-Earth is ended.”

“I feel unsuited to be a leader of our people in such a time, I admit,” Legolas said. “I meant only to come here and form a small outpost for our folk to stop and rest in as they journey down toward the sea. But now we have mines and trade and a duty to our race and to the other peoples of Middle-Earth, and owe fealty to Gondor… it is all very complicated. I do not recall my father ever dealing with so many demands on his time and leadership.”

“It is long since he has, in truth,” Eithon said, “Though some would think me treasonous for saying it. Thranduil sought isolation always, and withdrew within our borders, preferring for others to come to us in need-- petitioners, owing favors and craving boons. That was his way. He seeks to force you inward, as well-- inward toward him and away from other races and peoples.”

“If he would truly withdraw from the races of dwarves and men, he should take himself to Valinor,” Legolas said, his voice dry.

“He resists the call of the sea,” Eithon said. “All remark upon it, but you would know his reasons better than I.”
“He would rather be the king of a failing realm than the subject of a shining one,” Legolas said grimly. “Here he need bend knee to none.”

“That is also whispered,” Eithon said, bowing his head.

“Perhaps it is fitting, then, that his son should be the one who refuses to bow to his will, and who teaches him that things may not be always as he would have them,” Legolas said. “I have the will and the resolve to make it so, and to work with those he has refused or neglected. I have good friends and wise counselors; I have the support of the King of Gondor and the Lord of the Glittering Caves-- and likely of Rohan as well. And I have the power to make more allies, by adjusting our trade to their liking-- inasmuch as it benefits our people.”

“Now you are thinking like a king,” Eithon smiled. “Perhaps it is the influence of the dwarf on you.”

Legolas blushed. “My father will think me greedy and grasping, obsessed with power and rule,” he said. “I shall turn his own words back upon him, and show him he is the one they truly fit.”

“Hst,” Eithon said, nodding forward at a figure nearing them through the silver-grey trunks of the trees.

“Galion,” Legolas greeted the newcomer. “I require records of our dealings with others since the foundation of this realm. I would review them before attending the council.” It would be a way to bury his thoughts of Gimli, and he should have this knowledge at his command before negotiating anew.

“I will provide them,” Galion said smoothly.

“Thank you.” Legolas inclined his head, gracefully as Thranduil, to dismiss him. “Walk with me, Eithon, and we will greet the dawn,” he said. Then he would return to Gimli and rouse him, that he might set forth on his journey before the day was wasted.

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Returning to his supposed husband, Legolas found himself of new resolve and strengthened mind, reinforced by the support of his people. He seated himself at Gimli’s side and laid his hand on the dwarf’s bare shoulder. He felt warm like a patch of sunlight on living rock, and Gimli shifted lightly under Legolas’s hand, rousing.

“Meleth, I would let you sleep away your morning head, but you proposed to return to your people anon, and the day grows no younger,” Legolas said softly. “There is clear water to drink and here are fruit and bread. Let us break our fast together before you must go.” He reached and poured a goblet for Gimli as the dwarf struggled to sit upright, groaning and cursing mildly.

Gimli drank thirstily, water trickling to wet his beard, and accepted bread, nibbling at it slowly at first, then with growing enjoyment as his stomach settled. “Your folk make good bread,” he said. “It is not the same as lembas of Lothlórien, but it has its virtues.”

“I have not the power of the Lady,” Legolas agreed. “She did much with Nenya before the failing of the Three.” It was an intimidating thing to think that he must take up her mantle now that she and Elrond and Mithrandir had departed Middle-Earth. But that was exactly what those who remained must do, though they might never hope to rival their departed betters.

One day, Legolas supposed, he would sail also, and he would pass into legend-- and then those who came after would perhaps despair of rivaling him! It was both an encouraging and a humbling thought.
“We are the legends of tomorrow,” he said softly, and dared to think of Celebrimbor and Narvi. Their friendship—if it had been only that—ended in horror when Sauron’s treachery was exposed and he took Celebrimbor, then slew him cruelly. But Legolas and Gimli had succeeded in helping eliminate the menace of Sauron’s evil from the world. Might they rival Celebrimbor and Narvi, or even surpass them, in other ways also?

“You and I are the legends of today,” Gimli answered him—a bleary-eyed, rumpled legend, his hair badly mussed, but Legolas knew he would go down among the great dwarves nonetheless. He emptied his goblet and stood up to fish for his clothing, still gnawing the heel of the bread. He dressed himself and donned his armor on top of the lighter clothes, readying himself for travel.

“Will your folk be ready to depart?”

“They will yet be about their exploration and surveying among the mountains of shadow,” Gimli said. “I will find them and cut short their endeavors. They can always return another time.”

“Yes. Aragorn permitting, for that land is not under my leadership.” Legolas smiled faintly and dared to broach the topic that truly occupied his mind. “We must part today as befits those newly wed,” he said.

“Aye,” Gimli said gruffly. “We must share a kiss, as we discussed.”

“Yes, that seems best.” Legolas could not think too long on that in seriousness, for fear his eyes would reveal his heart; he sought refuge in jest instead. “Shall I have an attendant bring a box for you to stand on so I may kiss you without doing myself injury?”

“I had thought to seize your braid and haul you down,” Gimli chuckled. The dark rich sound of it made Legolas’s belly flip with delight.

“If that is the dwarven way!” Legolas returned, pleased with Gimli’s mood. “Or perhaps I will pick you up as if you were hên.”

“It matters not if you mean child or chicken,” Gimli glared up to him, a glint of good-humor still twinkling in his eye. “If you do so, I will kick you in the knees!”

“If you can reach them.”

“This is why our people have spent so many millennia at war, elf!” Gimli jabbed a thick finger at him, accusing. “If I cannot reach your knees, then you should look to your balls!”

“The purview of a husband indeed,” Legolas returned, laughing in spite of himself. “Though a proper husband would avoid them in hopes that they would be used in his service later!”

“Listen to you. A day ago you were but an innocent.” Gimli puffed up with amusement and self-satisfaction. “Now you make bawdy jests worthy of a man!”

“A little education is a dangerous thing.”

“Dangerous indeed. Whatever would become of you if you received a true dose?”

“I should become a threat to all the maidens of Middle-Earth, of course!” Legolas laughed. “And thereafter, farmers would guard their daughters from any elf who drew near their cots.”

“I’ll make a dwarf of you yet,” Gimli cackled, well-pleased. “But time is passing.” He stood, almost seeming reluctant—and Legolas’s heart yearned sorely in that moment; he longed to hold
Gimli close and entreat him not to leave. But he could not.

“Let us go forth, then, and enact our plans,” Legolas said, his heart racing.  
“Aye.” Gimli jammed his axe into his belt and rose. “Let us go.”

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To Gimli’s relief, the mood between them did not sober immediately the way it had so often in the last days. Whether it was determination on both of their parts to retain the appearance of newlyweds, or leftover humor from the jests of earlier, they exchanged light words as they rode through Ithilien towards the north-- but not too far; the best places for mining gems and lodes of precious metal were deep in the Mountains of Shadow and the Morgai opposite Orodruin, where mining was both treacherous and rewarding thanks to the volcano’s baleful workings. Orodruin was much diminished in wrath since the defeat of Sauron, yet its fires had not entirely abated.

They rode double, as they had in days past. Legolas claimed it was so that he would not have to lead a second horse home alone, and Gimli had no desire to question him. It reminded him of older days, to sit close at Legolas’s back with his arms snug around the elf’s waist. He could cling more obviously now than he had in days past; if Legolas asked, he would claim that it was for the benefit of the elves who might see them on their journey. But Legolas did not ask.

“It will be for the best,” said Legolas eventually, thoughtfully, “that we will part before your people. Mine, I think, are sufficiently convinced of our wedding; your own case may benefit more from a display.”

“You speak truly,” said Gimli, and wondered if Legolas could feel his heart beating against his back even through his mail and leather.

The talk between them lessened as they rode, but not uncomfortably so. Gimli preferred it this way, now; if they spoke, they would discuss plans and falsehoods, and even if they did not, those thoughts would always be on the back of his tongue, just before the truths that choked in his throat. Quiet, it was better; he could feel the warmth where their bodies pressed together, and the way Legolas’s back and waist expanded and contracted as he breathed; he could rest his head against Legolas’s shoulder blade and hope for the shift of his body that would send the long braid brushing against his own cheek.

The braid that now symbolized their union.

His dwarves would need no greater physical display-- they would see his heart in his hair, and it would mean more to them than any perfunctory kiss. But he would not speak that to Legolas, for fear of changing his mind and frightening him away. If all he would have was pretense, he would drink of it until there was nothing left, and wait until the bottle was empty to mourn its loss.

So he told himself, anyway, even as he gritted his teeth against the pain of their parting.

The journey was quick--too quick, Gimli thought, but again, he would not say it. Soon enough, they had arrived at the small encampment where the rest of his escort would be found.

They were not all there, of course--it was midday, and many of his companions had already departed to the mountains where their work was being done. Enough remained to meet him, and to wave as the horse approached.

Legolas called them to a halt, and dismounted first before turning to offer Gimli a hand. Gimli would have refused it, citing his ability to take care of himself, but he took Legolas’s hand today and did not let it go once he had slid to the ground.
“Well met, my lords,” said Gimli’s second, Bera, inclining her head in greeting. “Lord Gimli. You return to us earlier than anticipated.”

“Diplomatic matters call us home in haste,” said Gimli. “We must bid the others cut short their exploration, so that we may return to Aglarond with all speed.”

“Is something amiss?” asked Gundur.

“That remains to be seen,” said Gimli, tilting his head to draw attention to his new braids.

He saw them realize it, could see the flash of eyes between Legolas’s hair and his beard, and then down again to their still-clasped hands. But there was little surprise in the faces arrayed before him, and he forced his own to remain expressionless. So they had known, too, then. His subtlety, it seemed, was lacking--to all but Legolas himself! (Or so he hoped.)

“It seems congratulations are in order,” said Bera. “And I think the word ‘finally’ is also warranted here.”

Gimli glanced up to see that Legolas was blushing. “You have our thanks,” he said. “It remains to be seen how many will share your attitude, but I at least am grateful for your acceptance.”

Horvari glanced at Gimli. “Perhaps I understand what you mean by ‘diplomatic matters,’” he said. “Well, if there are any faces that need smashing, you have only to say the word.”

Legolas laughed. “My thanks, again,” he said, “though I hope that will be unnecessary.” He squeezed Gimli’s hand, then turned to face him. “I must return now, to begin making preparations for the next few weeks,” he said, “and you ought to gather your people to do the same. Shall we?”

Gimli’s heart gave several fast beats in quick succession before suddenly slowing: a cold, hollow pounding deep in his belly. “You are right,” he said, managing to keep his voice even, “loath as I am to be parted from you.”

“Do you need a moment?” came the voice of Signi, but she was quickly shushed into submission. Legolas took a deep breath, and it seemed something like panic flickered in the depths of his eyes. “You are right,” he said, managing to keep his voice even, “loath as I am to be parted from you.”

“Soon,” he echoed, and he reached up to lay a palm on Legolas’s cheek and draw him down. Legolas resisted for half a second and then went pliant under his hand, bending until their lips met.

This was no time for instruction or exploration, so Gimli kept the kiss short and shallow, but every second expanded in his mind, the sensations branding themselves on his skin: Legolas’s lips, soft and clumsy and slightly parted against his, the heat of his face under Gimli’s palm and the silk-soft edge of the braid against the pads of his fingers. One of Legolas’s own hands came to rest at the back of Gimli’s neck, and he could feel prints of fire where every finger lay, gooseflesh erupting where those fingers stirred the wisps of hair there.

One short eternity, and then he forced himself to draw back.

“Soon,” he said again, his face burning, his body burning. “Farewell, then, my love.”

“Yes,” Legolas breathed, the blush in his face narrowed to two burning patches high on his
cheeks. “Yes, farewell.”

He stumbled-- **stumbled!**-- backwards, laying a hand on the horse’s neck, mounting without his usual grace, and waving one last farewell before turning and urging the horse into a gallop.

Gimli watched him until he could see him no longer, and then turned back to his people. “Well, what are you looking at?” he blustered. “Gather your tools and call for our companions. Mark any promising lodes or veins of gems; we will return one day and resume this work.” Aragorn and the powers willing, it would be soon. He turned his gaze toward the patch of woods where the elf had vanished, longing for one last gleam of sun on golden hair, but Legolas had gone.

He vowed to himself to find the courage to tell the elf the truth as soon as this matter was settled, and to accept the consequences of his deception. Even if it meant he would no longer have Legolas at his side, relaxed and easy in their friendship, he could not continue as he was, not for always.

“How will return ere long,” Gundur said, clasping his arm with a rough but compassionate hand. “And then your One will be glad to greet you.”

“Aye,” Gimli said, feeling oddly at sea; he had expected at least some complaint. Legolas was an *elf*. Surely old grudges did not die so easily! He shook his head, forcing away his fears. There would be many who did not approve; he should be grateful that none of those now present had seen fit to profane their parting. He would have been forced to challenge the offenders and fight, if so, to defend his husband’s honor. It was better not to have to raise his axe against his kinsmen.

Leaving a part of himself behind, Gimli led his kinsmen away from the mountains of shadow, fording the river at the shallows and winding westward through Rohan and proceeding afoot, towing the small carts that held their mining and surveying tools.

He would stop at Edoras and find the lay of the land with Éomer, the better to know how he must prepare himself at the Council. It might well be that the king would offer favorable terms to Aglarond and support Gimli in his bargaining; after all, Éomer had benefited greatly from the expert stonemasonry that even now bolstered the defenses of Helm’s Deep— and also the works of both stone and steel which strengthened the walls at Edoras. And speaking of diplomatic matters now might serve a useful distraction from the more painful feelings that throbbed in his chest as he left Ithilien behind.

Chapter End Notes

If you’re interested, you can click [here](#) for an outtake from this chapter!
Chapter 15

Legolas leaned forward over his horse’s neck, keeping his face rigidly forward both to fight the urge to look back and to keep his burning face in the wind, in the hopes of cooling down the fire that burned in his cheeks. He could still feel the ghost imprint of Gimli’s lips on his, a sensation he had never felt before, and he imagined a red outline of pulsing sensation on his face exactly where Gimli’s hand had rested.

He waited until he was a good distance away before slowing the horse to a walk and then reaching up to touch his own lips, fingers ghosting just over the place where Gimli’s own had touched and raising new tingles. The unfamiliar braid pulled more of his hair back from his face than he was accustomed to, and Gimli’s fingers had brushed the exposed underside of his hair in a way no one had ever touched him before.

Secure now in the knowledge of his solitude, Legolas slumped against the horse’s neck. Part of him wished almost to weep, but the emotion came out in laughter, instead: breathy, almost hysterical huffs of desperate mirth. It was done now, done not to be undone-- not that he would ever have wanted to undo it! But he could sense himself yearning now in a way he had not before. His lips knew his love’s kiss, now; all his flesh and blood sang Gimli’s name; his body had awakened to a new hunger that would not be satisfied until they were together once more--

And not even then.

Oh, it was good that Gimli was gone, for all that it tugged at Legolas’s heart; one moment longer in his company and all of his long-withheld sentiment would have been spilling out his mouth: all his love, all his longing, the truth of his pledge. For all that Gimli knew about elven marriage, he did not know, perhaps, that there would be little doubt from those who knew Legolas best; they would have only to look upon him, and they would know his heart was given to Gimli. His people here all knew; Arwen would know. His father would know. His father.

He could not imagine how his father could ever forgive him. He had grudgingly allowed him to bring elves with him to Ithilien; he had written Legolas yearly letters about matters of trade between Eryn Lasgalen and Ithilien, but nothing more. Legolas knew that the coldness was due to his continued friendship with Gimli, his connection with Aglarond-- but he had held out some hope that he might be forgiven those. But that hope was less now, if not vanished altogether. Legolas might be forgiven friendships with mortals; even these trading matters might not have been enough to cut their bond entirely-- but if there was one thing Thranduil of Eryn Lasgalen would not forgive, it was marriage to a dwarf. Legolas could only think that the new truth of his binding to Gimli would sever his relationship to his father for good.

Well. At least that relationship would be broken irreparably for a truth, not a deception.

And if it were to be broken, it might as well be on Legolas’s own terms.

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Hannien, the jeweler, stared at him in flat astonishment.

“You want what?” she said.

Legolas repeated himself.
“You, ah,” She swallowed. “You know how much that will cost, do you not?”

“I know.” Legolas withdrew a small pouch of coin. It was all from his own pocket, accumulated over years of his own work and drawn not at all from Ithilien’s treasury, so no other realm would be able to complain of it.

Not, of course, that certain people would refrain.

“All in mithril,” she repeated, “set with alternating sapphires and white gems.”

“Meant to weave through the braids, thus.” Legolas showed her the design he had sketched—such was not beyond his ability, if his skills were lacking in the crafting itself. “Like a crown, but more subtle.”

“Subtle, of course,” Hannien murmured. “Subtlety is the true purpose of a gift like this.” She looked up at Legolas, and pinned him with knowing eyes. “Remind me again, Lord Legolas, how many of these gems does your father wear on his person?”

He drew himself up. “I know not,” he lied stiffly. “It has never interested me.”

“That I do not doubt,” she said, “but ignorance does not always follow from lack of interest, and I find it hard to believe you would have forgotten.”

“Hannien,” he said, warning. She too was a friend; she too had congratulated him on his wedding, and he had come to her for this reason. But that did not mean that he wished to see the judgment in her eyes as she interrogated his purposes. “This is none of your affair.”

“I know,” she said. “I merely wished to warn you that your purposes will be clear to all who notice—and that will be most elves you meet. And I worry that you are asking for more trouble than you truly desire.”

Legolas sighed, but he kept his posture upright. “I asked for the trouble long ago, Hannien,” he said. “I am merely determined now to meet it on my own terms. I understand if you do not wish to involve yourself in it, but I will have this gift made, by you or by another.”

She smiled, a closed-lipped smile that somehow still managed to contain a suggestion of teeth. “There is no need to find another,” she said. “So long as you know what you do, I do not decline to take part in it.” Now her lips curled back from her teeth, and she took the design and the coin from Legolas’s hands. “Life could do with a bit of excitement, and I cannot turn down the chance to help make it.”

Legolas gazed at her in what he thought might be amazement. “You have spent too much time with dwarves, I think,” he said.

“Said the pot to the kettle.” Tracing her finger over his design, she did not even look up at him. “Now go away, my lord. I have a gift to make.”
Chapter 16

Gimli suffered not at all leading his company across Rohan, though they avoided the roads and took a straight line toward Edoras, trotting across the rolling grasslands and splashing through narrow streams and rills. He had done the same as one of the Three Hunters, and had kept pace with the long legs of an elf and a man, so running with his own kind held no fears for him.

They set a firm pace, but allowed nightly rests, and they made it to Edoras on the eve of the fourth day. The stone outcrop rose out of the plains abruptly, an intrusion of the heart’s blood of the earth thrust up through the plains, once the bed of some long-forgotten sea. The Misty Mountains upon the horizon were younger and far taller, but made of much the same stone as Edoras: a ridge where great reefs of earth had driven together and thrust up out of the depths of the world.

The seat of King Éomer’s court, Edoras revealed the new prosperity of Rohan, its slopes buzzing with activity as dwarves and men alike worked to fortify the city, setting stout walls in place of wooden ones and cleverly affixing spikes and deadfalls upon the mountain to await darker times of war. Bands of horses galloped free upon the plain at the hill’s feet, and riders bustled up and down the road to Meduseld, passing between burial mounds crowned with shining white flowers-- Théoden’s the latest of them, still decorated with freshly cut flowers, which those who remembered him bought out each day. Atop the hall’s crest, the white horse of Rohan flapped and flowed in the brisk wind.

Gimli’s band did not go unnoticed; presently a group of riders issued forth to meet them, winding down from the city gate and across the grassy plain. Gimli nudged Bera, who blew the horn-call of Aglarond in greeting, announcing them as allies.

Gimli soon made out his old comrade in arms, Elfhelm, at the head of the éored, and he let out a shout of welcome, standing upright on the crest of a low hillock and waving to guide the men to his party.

“Well met, Lord Gimli. The king has received tidings out of Gondor that there is to be a council in Rhovanion,” Elfhelm said. “We were told to expect you upon the messenger’s heels, and also sent word of--” he lowered his voice, glancing to Gimli’s companions. “Of your good news. If you will come to Meduseld, the king will feast you in celebration.”

“My news is no secret-- but I will accept this courteous request with gratitude, and be glad of a feast. Running is thirsty work, though those who ride may not think it so!” Gimli bowed low.

“You know well that you have chosen to go on your feet, for as the king’s friend, you could have your pick of mounts,” Elfhelm laughed. “I would offer you horses, if you would accept; it will be slow and dusty going back to the city without them.”

“Perhaps it will be, but if we would share news, you will pace along with us as we go,” Gimli said. “And I will tell you what I have learned from King Aragorn, and you shall share with me the news of Rohan that I have missed on my journeys.”

“I will,” Elfhelm said, and his men turned about to ride parallel Gimli’s dwarves, escorting them into the city with many a merry tale and jest.

Éomer awaited upon the throne where Gimli had first seen Théoden, sitting tall and proud in the prime of his majesty. He arose when Gimli entered, handing his scepter to his thain as he smiled, stretching out his hands.
“My friend, be welcome with all your kin! I am glad your travels have brought you here. I would be glad if you had time to inspect the defenses of the city, but at least come and feast with us tonight. Let me treat you to as much ale as you can drink, in celebration of your… I know not what to call it! Your marriage to the lord of Ithilien.” Éomer met him halfway down the hall and clasped his hands.

Gimli felt a pang of guilt at his deception of his friend. “I will come to your feast if you will allow me to repay the favor when next you visit Helm’s Deep.” He beamed up at Éomer. “We have yet to settle the matter of which of us is best at gambling with cards!”

“I would wait to play in company with the elf, so I will stand at least a chance of winning more than I lose,” Éomer laughed. “You and I will break even, I think-- for though you are a canny player, you do not bluff well.”

“It may be that I do not,” Gimli conceded, ashamed of himself. “But I’ll wager I could beat you at throwing dice.”

“And I will win my coin back at thimble-rig,” Éomer chuckled. “Come in, rest yourselves. The men of the house will show your folk to lodgings where you may wash the dust from yourselves before the feasting.”

Éomer himself led Gimli to a room within Meduseld, lavishly appointed with furs and tapestries after the manner of Rohan. “Here you may stay while you are in Edoras,” he said. “But I hope you will go out with me before you rest, to see the state of our wall.”

Gimli was not weary, so he agreed. Soon they strolled out along the ramparts, where Éomer pointed out the small problems and triumphs of their project.

“Let us go and consult the master builder,” he said. “In the absence of Lofar, the dwarf Orm has taken up the challenge. He is thrifty and shrewd, and has saved much by using the natural rock of the mountain wherever possible rather than quarrying stone and having it brought here.”

“Aye,” Gimli harumphed, taken aback. Lofar had been an excellent mason, skilled in creating plans, at times unscrupulous enough to use them all, even the unfair tactics. His daring had excited Gimli, in his younger days; now it impressed and discomfited him in equal measure.

Gimli was unsure how he felt about seeing him again tonight; doubtless he would be a useful ally and Gimli would be glad to have Orm by his side, should he concede to give aid-- but he could not help but fear that there would be words between them. Words concerning Legolas.

And perhaps not without good reason.

Orm was on the wall when they arrived, supervising and calling out orders-- but he removed his helm when he saw them coming and called a brief halt to speak.

“Your Majesty,” he said, bowing to Êomer. “And my lord Gimli! I did not expect to see you returned so soon!” His eyes held a challenging gleam, and Gimli saw them flash down to his braids, and then narrow.

“I imagine he did not wish to return so soon,” chuckled Êomer, clapping Gimli on the shoulder. “But it is to our fortune that he was called away, is it not?”

“It is indeed.” The expression on Orm’s face changed so subtly that Gimli was sure Êomer would not recognize it-- but he knew that there would be words between them. “In fact, I would be glad to speak to him now, if you would be so kind, King Êomer. There are some matters that require discussion.”
“Of course!” Éomer indeed remained oblivious to the mood of his builder. “I will leave you here, then, and plan to see you at supper. You will sit by my side, of course, and I shall ply you with as much ale as you could desire in congratulation!”

“And I shall be glad to have it,” said Gimli, “after so many days of elvish wine, followed by a long and dusty journey afoot.”

“Then I shall leave you to your plans, and I bid you farewell for now!” And with a last thump to Gimli’s shoulder, Eomer was away, and Gimli was left alone with Orm.

Orm braced both hands on his hips. “So.”

“So?” Gimli echoed, knowing what Orm wished to say, but unwilling to say it for him.

“So you have made your unnatural tendencies public now,” he said. “No longer to hide behind a thinning veil of propriety and honor, you wear the evidence of your deviance in your hair for all to see!”

Gimli bristled. “I should challenge you to a duel for speaking so of my husband,” he hissed. The word came easily to him; it felt less of a lie now, not when all else was true. Unnatural tendencies! Such he too might have thought once, in his younger days and even recently, when he had still been drawn to Orm. He was, after all, a fine dwarf, exactly the opposite of Legolas’s long body and bare-chinned face-- the sort of dwarf that any might lust after. And yet now Gimli looked upon him and saw nothing to admire, neither in the dark, clever eyes that had once been so intriguing to him nor in the thick black beard that had given Orm any number of suitors, even after the loss of his wife. Unnatural tendencies indeed! Nothing was more natural to Gimli than loving Legolas, and whatever the truth of their relationship, he would bear no insult to him.

But Orm was unimpressed. “Challenge me,” he said, “and announce publicly that you have turned your back on your kin. Force the king to choose sides between the two of us, despite the gratitude he owes to us both. And announce to all that you have forsaken the chance to take a mate from among your own kind.”

Gimli gritted his teeth. “I have,” he said. “Legolas of Ithilien is my One, and I will have no other.” But all else that Orm said was true, he knew, and for all that he yearned to have out his axe and put deed to word this very instant, he knew not if he had the support he needed among his kin to publicly issue such a challenge. Not when the news had not yet been spread to all the rest of his people!

“Your One, perhaps,” Orm said, “but not your husband, for all that you may claim it. You may wear his braids, but that does not make a false statement true.”

“We are wed,” he growled, “in all but our own custom, and promised in that. Ask any elf in Ithilien, and whether they approve or not, you will not receive a contrary answer.” The lies were easier to speak to Orm than they had been to those who wished him well; now in anger and defiance, Gimli could almost think that their pretense was true and that Legolas was his husband indeed.

“But you need not wed according to the standards of the elves of Ithilien,” Orm said. “That is the problem-- you put too much stake in elvish custom, and you forget yourself and your people. The dwarves of Aglarond rely on you, my lord,” he emphasized that last heavily, and Gimli could not fail to take the meaning of the words, “to provide a leader who will speak for our interests and hold true to our customs. A leader who may provide an heir who will carry on our traditions. Your elf--” and Orm’s mouth twisted around the word, as though it tasted foul-- “can provide you with none of that.”
“And you can, I suppose.”

Orm inclined his head, just slightly, posture submissive without any appearance of giving way.

Gimli felt his own posture changing, shoulders drawing back, arms tensing, readying himself for a fight though he knew there would be none. He knew that there was precedent for Orm’s words, knew even that it would be easiest for him to take a mate who already had a child— but the longer Orm spoke now, the more Gimli’s previous regard soured, until all that had ever attracted him was curdled into anger and disgust.

“You could,” he said, trembling with rage and grief. “You could provide me with a suitable mate and an heir, and a lie. I would have known my One and turned away from him in the eyes of all our people. You speak of upholding dwarven traditions— well, what dwarf would I be if I did not hold true to the knowledge of my heart? Indeed, if I allowed myself to be swayed by one who would have me play false with all my kin?” For whatever the nature of his vows, the truth of his heart was not to be denied, and in the rush of anger, the words were spilling out, perhaps to his own detriment. “Know this, Orm son of Orin: after what has passed between us today, I would not have you, not even if I had a mind to turn from the one I love!”

“That is your right,” Orm said, also quivering with anger. “As it is mine to refuse your rule and return to Erebor, where my gifts are valued— after I have collected my fee here.”

Gimli scowled and nodded— but though he felt guilt for Orm’s pain and sympathetic understanding for his disappointment, he was relieved by the other dwarf’s planned departure. He did not need a discontented subordinate lingering in his realm, fomenting chaos and discord against him at a time when he must accomplish delicate political maneuvers.

“Then show me your works, as the king commanded,” he bowed low, turning the order to a request, and Orm stalked off— stiff-backed and stiff-legged— to comply.

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Orm was in no better mood by the time he presented himself at the feasting. Though he was seated only two positions down from the king’s right hand, that placed him at Gimli’s side— doubtless Éomer intended it as a mark of honor, and to let two who had much in common sit near one another so they would have occasion for pleasant talk, but such was not to be.

“The fortifications for the wall look quite well advanced, and strong,” Gimli tried to placate the builder by making a favorable report in public, but he was thwarted in his hopes of establishing a truce between them.

“And why would they not?” Orm answered in a tart whisper. “I need no axe-swinger to verify that the work of my hammer and mattock are sound.”

Orm’s voice was masked beneath the pleasant uproar of the mead-hall, where many mingled to eat and drink; Gimli kept his expression smooth and composed. He accepted a mug of mead and handed it on to Orm, taking the second for himself.

“A toast!” Éomer shouted, and all in the hall fell quiet, even the musicians in the corner. “A toast to the lord of Aglarond, and to his blushing bride!” All present who knew Legolas laughed at his jest, and the company turned eager faces to hear Gimli’s response.

“You would not speak so if he were here, I judge,” Gimli shouted back, provoking gales of laughter. “Lest you sprout arrows in an inconvenient location that your own blushing bride have cause to lament!” He gestured to Lothiriel, who sat in her place of honor at the table’s head,
nursing a swollen belly beneath her rosy cheeks. “And congratulations, too, are in order to the King of Rohan. May his line endure long and rule in peace and plenty.” Gimli lifted his mug.

Beside him Orm scoffed. “Well enough to wish that upon this man, when you would leave your own folk leaderless and in strife to pick a lord!” He smiled too broadly at a nearby man and turned up the bottom of his mug, draining it neatly. “You are not wed yet,” he said again when he had finished. “Not truly, which perhaps the king would be most interested to learn!”

“But even by custom of the dwarves, I am betrothed, and may take no other,” Gimli said, wondering if he could edge away from his unwanted companion—perhaps to make his personal compliments to Éomer’s queen. Her forbidding formality and her fine dress of Gondorian wool, had left a lull in the crowd about her; the people of Rohan were yet shy around this daughter of Imrahil, who had grown up around ships rather than horses and who cut her meat from the joint with a knife and fork rather than raising the bone to her lips with her hands.

Yet around her, many adopted the same manners, perhaps out of courtesy or a desire to ingratiate themselves. Gimli shook his head. Raising the bone to his mouth would be good enough to suffice for him or any dwarf, and elves also ate with their hands, quite tidily, as they neglected to thank their hosts with a seemly show of gusto and liking. The preoccupation of men with fastidious manners would baffle any sane species.

Gimli took advantage of a lull in the crowd to press through to the table. “Queen Lothiriel, truly the air of Rohan suits you,” he said. “Your cheeks glow with health, and your husband with happiness.”

“My lord of Aglarond.” She did him a seated curtsey, inclining her head and shoulders. “My husband has warned me of your silver tongue and your eye for beautiful ladies, but it seems his worries were in vain.” She smiled, one plump cheek showing a dimple.

“My eye for beauty is undimmed,” Gimli said, his throat tightening with emotion as he thought on Legolas. “My husband is as fair as the stars over Belfalas at midsummer.”

She smiled on him kindly. “I saw Prince Legolas at the king’s coronation, and again at his wedding,” she said. “Perhaps your esteem is not misplaced, though I must confess I had eyes only for my lord Éomer.”

Gimli grew conscious of Orm standing at his shoulder, listening keenly. “My queen, may I present Orm, Master Builder? Or have you already made acquaintance?”

“Queen Lothiriel.” Orm bowed with a great show of respect. “I regret our imposition on your time. Thank you for this audience.” He hustled Gimli away as the crowd surged around them--some of the revelers had begun to dance, and the press cleared a space upon the floor.

“Would that I had known long years ere this that you would manipulate any creature with a fair face and ears to listen to your blandishments,” Orm hissed, no longer even pretending at friendliness. “I might have listened the less to your flattery and the more to my brothers, who told me to beware of a lying scoundrel with so much firebeard in his father-tree!”

“This hall is not my own, so I will not answer your insult to my fathers with the coin it has earned,” Gimli hissed through clenched teeth. “But I say to you, Orm, if you should set foot in my halls again after speaking so, I will have you stripped and flogged from my door to the nearest border.”

“An empty threat indeed, when I have already said I would not return willingly to Aglarond!”
Gimli minded himself of his vow-- could it only have been made a week ere this?-- to remain patient and keep hold on his temper. “Orm, we have ever known that we were not the other’s One,” he said. “Your thwarted desire for your daughter to rule Aglarond has turned you to rude talk and anger, not my regard for Legolas at all.”

“You will be ruler of nothing when what you have done is made known to dwarfkind,” Orm spat, and turning on his heel, he stalked away.
Chapter 17

After Gimli’s troupe departed from Edoras, well fed and watered (and in some cases more than slightly hungover), only a short journey remained to Aglarond. When the sentries spied their return, a horn-call went up, echoing between the tall cliffs and bringing both dwarves and men pouring out onto the ramparts, waving to greet their companions home.

Gimli found it pleasant to return to his chambers, though they were lonely indeed without Legolas. He reached into his pocket and drew out his little bundle: Legolas’s stolen hair, neatly coiled. He gazed up at the shelf which bore the mementoes of his journeys, where Galadriel’s tresses stood displayed, embedded in imperishable crystal, as he had sworn to do. He had braided them, then coiled them in a delicate interlaced knot. He might do the same for Legolas’s hair, but he could not display it with such pride-- not when it had been given unwitting and unwilling.

If he tucked it into a drawer it would be lost; left in the air, it would eventually perish. Gimli chewed his lip and lifted Galadriel’s token, holding it to the light; next to it, Legolas’s hair shone equally beautiful and bright in his eyes.

“Forgive me, milady,” he spoke aloud, disturbing the quiet of the room. “Wise were your words when you warned me to take my axe only to the right tree!”

He could imagine her smile, and hoped she would have sympathy on him in his plight. He might braid Legolas’s hair into his own, but there was too little of it to do that….

Perhaps a casket ring, one of the finest craft-- but not made to hold poison or a pomander; rather, to cradle the lock. He might wear it in Legolas’s absence to keep a bit of the elf by him always.

There were other matters he ought to have attended to first: there were trade agreements to review, a diplomatic entourage to assemble, if nothing else there was Legolas’s gift to craft, to give credence to their ruse-- and yet Gimli could not bear to wait. He always felt empty inside when he parted from Legolas, but it was worse now: as though some acknowledgement of his feelings had strengthened them, like sap boiled into thick syrup. The part of his heart that belonged to Legolas ached still, rubbed raw, and despite himself he found himself moving to the smithy. Some time crafting would do him good, and after, perhaps having the token with him would set his mind and heart at ease.

He spent many days in the smithy, as it happened, between making the arrangements that he could and ensuring that the word of his marriage was spread to all who would be accompanying him. It was as good an excuse as any, as it happened-- his people were more inclined to forgive the wanderings of a lovestruck mind, and they were correct in their assumptions of his distraction, even if they knew not the full reason.

He made the ring first, the one to keep to himself-- but after, he set himself to the contemplation of Legolas’s wedding gift. Pondering what sort of token to make also served as a useful distraction from his more maudlin thoughts: if this was to be the last gift he would give the elf, he would make it one that surpassed all he had ever crafted-- and yet, it must be something useful, something that would be appreciated. Legolas had never had any great fondness for gems or decorations, and yet the gift must also be appropriate for a declaration of love-- something dwarves and elves alike would see as a pledge. No, arrowheads would not suffice this time-- it must be something worn.

The appropriate gift for a dwarf would be a hair clasp, and this thought gave him pause at first-- he had only ever crafted for his own hair before, and knew not how such an item might be made to
hold Legolas’s. But the time spent weaving and setting the stolen strands of hair served him well, for had he not spent hours sliding the strands between his fingers, learning their exact texture and imprinting the sensation into his mind before finally letting them go? And such a clasp would satisfy Legolas’s desire not to draw attention to himself, while allowing Gimli to feel a proper husband— and even if he were not allowed to run his fingers through Legolas’s hair as he longed to do, he would at least be able to see his own craft displayed there.

He twined mithril wire and set faceted emeralds into the design when it was ready, and engraved the clasp last of all, rendering an intricate pattern of interlaced knots at the top and bottom of the pattern to represent the future he hoped for them, whether friendship or more. Finally he inscribed delicate, almost invisible Cirth upon the clasp with needle-fine tools: the words in Khuzdul, so he might speak the truth of his heart, but Legolas might never discover how to read it.

When it was finished, the clasp was small, but it glittered and gleamed like a myriad of silver and green stars set in a golden firmament, and he knew it would shine beautifully in Legolas’s hair, so well-matched to its recipient that none would guess a dwarf had made it— save by the intricate skill of its crafting. Any who beheld it would envy Legolas his husband’s skill.

Between the time spent at his workbench and the necessary business of Aglarond, and also the preparations for the trade parley, time sped past as if on eagles’ wings, and before Gimli was ready (and yet, somehow it seemed as if many years of loneliness had passed), it was time to set forth for Rhovanion with his most trusted advisers and his new ring upon his finger— and Legolas’s clasp concealed in his pocket, tucked into a fine velvet bag filled with diamond dust and embroidered in silver, ready to be given to his beloved.
Chapter 18

Nerves fluttered in Legolas’s belly as his convoy drew nearer to the place in Rhovanion where the various embassies were to meet-- the same nerves that had plagued him for weeks, but worse now as he knew each minute that passed brought him one minute nearer to seeing Gimli once more. His pocket seemed to drag him down on the right side, feeling heavier even than the weight of the jewels warranted-- the jewels of Gimli’s gift, which he had wrapped carefully before stowing away, despite Hannien’s assurances of its durability.

She rode beside him now, and had developed the unfortunate habit of shooting him unsubtle glances every time his hand strayed toward the aforementioned pocket. As much as it irked him, he could not deny that he was glad to have her by his side. She had practically insisted on coming along (taking advantage, no doubt, of what his father might call his lax attitude toward ruling), but he had needed little convincing to bring his closer allies along. Particularly when Galion rode close at his other side and looked studiously ahead.

His sharp eyes could make out the other camps and horses, the delegates already pitching their tents on the plains, long before any of the mortals would be able to spot their approach. For only mortals were there, yet: the delegations from Gondor and Rohan had arrived already, and the very faint sound of many heavy footfalls indicated that either Erebor or Aglarond was on the way as well. Of Eryn Lasgalen, there was no sign.

Legolas’s hand made its way toward his pocket again. There would be no private reunion with Gimli, then-- at least not at first. Perhaps, his traitorous heart suggested, that would be for the better. Surely an enthusiastic greeting would be expected.

As they neared the campsite, Legolas dismounted his horse and strode to the edge of the spot the sentries indicated had been designated for Ithilien, trying to steady his shaking knees-- better to be waiting, so Gimli would not see his nerves.

He could make out individuals now below an approaching cloud of dust; Gimli led the band, front and center, his red braid lying over his shoulder-- the one of Legolas’s choosing.

Legolas’s knees turned to water, and he would have grasped at a support if he could, but none was available; he steeled his disobedient body and tried to breathe deep and even. He almost managed to achieve calm before the dwarves crested the last rise, the thunder of their heavy boots shaking the ground beneath his feet. Gimli drew ahead of the others, running full out; he reached to seize his helm and cast it aside.

Legolas barely had presence of mind or time enough to brace himself before Gimli leaped and his arms were full of boisterous, exuberant dwarf; the world careened over and the ground came up to catch him. Gimli was there, laughing, hands cradled behind his skull to keep it from striking the ground-- then diving in to kiss him as he had never dreamed of being kissed. Rough and ready and smelling of dust and musk, Gimli devoured him, tongue sliding between his lips to stroke his own, thick stubby fingers buried in Legolas’s hair.

Legolas kissed back, lost in wonder, helpless to resist the pure enthusiasm of Gimli’s ambush-- meeting the tongue that twirled against his own and imitating it clumsily at first, then with growing urgency, forgetting everything but the glory of kissing Gimli with all his heart... at last.

When Gimli finally drew away, Legolas realized he too had let his hands stray; they framed Gimli’s round face, his fingertips buried in Gimli’s sweat-damp curls.
“A fine greeting, elf! I am almost convinced you missed me.”

“Almost?” Legolas managed, breathless, glad of his position on the ground if for no other reason than that now he did not have to try to hold himself steady. “Do you require further convincing?”

Gimli grinned, and Legolas had never imagined his friend might be so skilled in acting-- this felt so real that there was almost no need for the twinge of pain in his heart that reminded him of the falseness of it all. “I might well,” he said. “Alas, we do not yet have a tent set up where you might convince me in full.” If only it were possible to do so….

Before Legolas could muster up the courage for an equally daring response, there was a noise behind them-- extra loud footsteps, and a cough. “Greetings to you as well, my friends,” came Aragorn’s voice behind them. “I see you have found one another well enough.”

“Yes.” With Aragorn’s voice, it all came rushing back-- again, Legolas’s mind remembered how to separate truth and lies, and he disentangled himself from Gimli with reluctance and relief, feeling the tug against his heart as though an outer layer were ripped away along with Gimli’s touch. “Yes-- it is good to see you again, my husband-- and you, my friend.” He pushed himself up onto unsteady legs and let Aragorn clasp his arm in greeting. “As you can see, the delegation from Ithilien has arrived.”

“Yes, that I can see,” said Aragorn, with fond exasperation. “And the delegation from Aglarond as well-- the king of Rohan informed us that you would be arriving on foot.”

“As though the news surprised you,” huffed Gimli, “you who ran with me for three days straight, with hardly a rest!”

Aragorn smiled and clapped Gimli on the shoulder. “I am glad to see you again,” he said. “Both of you.” He eyed them shrewdly. “The camps of Ithilien and Aglarond are to be next to one another, so that their lords may share a tent on the border, if they wish. From the looks of you, I think that allowance will be welcomed?”

Was he assuring them that their deception was convincing enough, or warning them that it had become too much? Was this too much? Legolas glanced at Gimli, then away again. “Yes,” he said quickly, before anything to the contrary might escape Gimli’s lips. It would be a torment again, no doubt, sleeping so close-- but he would not turn it down, not when freely offered, and not when they had such a ready reason to do so.

“I thought as much.” Aragorn sounded dry, and Legolas gave him a razor-sharp look of warning, but it only made Gimli chortle.

Gimli seized Legolas’s hand. “Let us see to that tent, elf! It has been a long time.” He cast Legolas a bawdy wink. “I am impatient for bed!”

Impatient, more likely, for the chance to talk in private at last. Legolas, still half-dazed from the impact, could only nod-- but Galion stepped forward, catching his ear with a soft cough of disapproval.

“Prince Legolas, there is much yet to be done before it is time to rest. I would advise to let your retainers see to setting camp; I am sure the king wishes to confer with you, and there are formal greetings to be made, and courtesies to be observed lest other leaders take offense that your greeting to them is… lacking, compared to that you have extended to some.”

“I hardly plan to greet Prince Imrahil with a kiss,” Legolas said, startled to hear the frost in his own tone-- a coldness that might have rivaled Thranduil. “But I will greet him with the politeness
suited to a lord of men and an ally of Gondor, if that is your concern.” He cast Gimli a rueful
glance. The dwarf huffed, throwing Galion a sour look. “And my husband will extend his
greetings likewise.”

“I am sure he will,” Aragorn agreed rapidly, forestalling any protest Gimli might utter.

“A moment, if you will,” Gimli grumbled, his face turning vermilion. “I would not have my
husband go before the dignitaries of Middle Earth improperly clad!” He reached into his pocket
and drew out a velvet bag. “Until now I have been remiss, but now I make up for my neglect, if
my husband will accept this poor gift.”

Legolas could only stare for a few heartbeats, for all that he had known this moment was coming.
Though the giving of gifts was hardly unfamiliar to them at this point, it seemed-- different,
somehow. In the past, he had gifted Gimli with jewels or small trinkets with the knowledge that
while he imagined them as lover’s tokens, they were only received as gifts of friendship, just like
those he was given. To receive something from Gimli now that was stated to be a token of love--!
It very nearly overwhelmed his ability to speak.

Still, he reached into his pocket and drew out the cloth bag of his own. “That last I doubt very
sincerely-- but I have likewise somewhat for you. I would not dare call it poor, for I fear its maker
might remove my limbs in punishment--” he cast a wry look at where Hannien watched with ill-
concealed interest-- “but I can only regret that it was not crafted by my own hands, though I
designed it myself with your splendor in mind.”

“We will trade, then,” said Gimli, glancing around them and turning redder than before, “that we
do not delay the proceedings any further by inviting all around us to stare at what ought to be a
private moment.”

Legolas held out his hand; he had contrived to enfold his gift inside a cunning fabric of branches,
grasses, and leaves; he found the design of it pleasing, and hoped Gimli would also.

Gimli took it carefully, extending his left hand with the velvet pouch; they traded gifts at the same
moment, then hesitated together, debating whether to open them.

“Shall we turn our backs?” Aragorn inquired with something Legolas believed was less than
perfect patience. “To expedite this exchange? Lest the two of you pine and fret and fail to pay
attention to aught else but what you hold unopened the long afternoon through, when we should
be working?”

“I would have you open yours now, elf,” Gimli said, his voice rough with embarrassment. “So
that you may mark yourself properly wed before the council begins.”

“I say the same,” Legolas returned, breathless. “With your indulgence, my king,” he said
somewhat pointedly to Aragorn, who merely sighed.

By now Gimli had discovered the trick of Legolas’s weaving and was able to unfold the delicate
wrap, revealing a shimmer that played bright over his ruddy features and made him gasp.

Mindful of Gimli’s status as a lord, the different types of braids he might at times wear, and the
importance that dwarves placed on hair ornaments, Legolas had designed his gift to be something
between a hair clasp and a circlet: a strand of pure mithril that was sturdier than a chain but more
flexible than a bar, set here and there with clasps to hold his braids.

Each clasp was fashioned in the shape of a cluster of leaves, a reference to Legolas’s own name,
and at the center of each sparkled a perfectly-cut jewel: some the white gems that were even now
a matter of contention, the most precious gem that Legolas might give, to symbolize Gimli’s value in his heart; others sapphires, rich blue to contrast with the flame of Gimli’s hair and to match the formal clothing of one of the line of Durin. He had wondered if he had chosen well, but now the look on Gimli’s face sent a warm glow into his chest. If he could not have Gimli’s love, he had at least given him something that would bring him some delight, and that was a satisfaction that would have to warm Legolas’s heart when loneliness threatened to freeze it.

When he finally tore his gaze away from Gimli’s expression, he darted a glance over to Hannien. She was not where she had been only moments before, he noticed; now she stood among some of the dwarves of Aglarond, who seemed to be admiring her creation as well. It gave Legolas some pleasure, at least, to know that he had designed something worthy of the admiration of dwarven crafters, not to mention Hannien’s skill.

But then at last he looked down at the bag he still held in his hands, turning his attention once more to his own gift.

Gimli’s bag was heavy, and he could make nothing out from the size or shape of it; it did not seem to be large enough to contain a circlet or crown; he weighed it on his palm, trying to guess.

Aragorn’s gusty sigh at his elbow prompted Legolas to open the drawstring and reach inside. The contents shimmered and he blinked, drawing out a handful of fine sand that shimmered in the light and sifted between his fingers in a gleaming torrent, blowing away on the breeze-- fine diamonds ground to dust, he guessed, and his gaze darted to seek Gimli’s, but the dwarf looked away, cheeks flushed, a scowl plastered on his face-- no doubt to hide his embarrassment.

The glittering dust receded to reveal a small but exquisite barrel clasp for the end of his braid-- cast in gold and truesilver embellished with emeralds, tapered sharply and with a comb of teeth inside to hold it in his fine hair. Gimli had carved an intricate design all about the barrel of the clasp-- a true masterwork of the engraver’s art-- of trees with knotted branches, and Legolas’s keen eyes could perceive another design, smaller still, subtly concealed within-- letters of Cirth whose meaning he could not guess, entwined around the branches. He almost feared to touch it, lest he mar the perfection of the work, a shimmer of fine diamond dust still clinging to its surface.

“What does it say,” he breathed, trying once more to catch Gimli’s gaze with his own.

If possible, Gimli flushed even darker, and would not lift his chin. “It says that the owner of the clasp is Legolas of Ithilien and any who steals it will be cursed to wander always in darkness as payment for the crime,” he muttered. “And that you should put it in your hair so that we may be about the afternoon’s work ere our host the king becomes impatient and banishes us from the realm of Gondor for once and all.”

“As should you,” said Legolas. He was both glad of and disappointed by the presence of others around them-- to place their gifts in one another’s hair would be an intimacy too forward for the eyes of others. Now, at least, he could turn away and quickly replace his own clasp, without letting his eyes linger on Gimli weaving his gift through his hair and wishing to perform the task himself-- but again he was reminded that all of this was done in service of a lie, meant for the eyes of these others.

He wondered how clearly these others could see his heart in his eyes, and he could only hope that it was not as visible to Gimli as it felt to him.

When Gimli turned again to face him, it was all Legolas could do to hold back a gasp, as all the air seemed to have abruptly deserted his lungs. Gimli looked royal, truly: lordly and regal; the gems in his hair caught the sunlight, blazing against his hair and making him seem crowned in stars. For a moment Legolas was speechless; then he forced himself to smile.
“There,” he said, managing-- he thought-- to keep the breathlessness out of his voice. “Now you are suitably attired for the Lord of the Glittering Caves-- and the husband of the Lord of Ithilien.”

“As are you,” said Gimli, though his cheeks were still bright red. Was it the feigned intimacy of the moment that embarrassed him so? Or had he seen the truth of Legolas’s feelings for him, and he struggled now to think of a way to turn them down politely? He could not be sure.

“And now, if you two are quite finished,” said Aragorn from his position behind Legolas, “Perhaps we may now return to diplomatic matters-- which are, after all, the purpose of this parley.”

“Indeed we ought to,” said an elf from Legolas’s company. “For I hear hooves in the distance, and I believe some other delegation is approaching.”

That was enough to distract Legolas entirely-- he snapped his head around to look to the direction from which he too heard the hoofbeats, then relaxed almost as quickly. It was not his father’s escort, not yet-- but it was enough of a reminder that soon enough he would be here.

He cast another glance at the gems in Gimli’s hair. They shone among the red as though they belonged there-- and of course, Legolas thought, they did. The sight of something of his own adorning Gimli’s braids, the reminder that whatever the nature of their relationship, they were in this together-- that would have to be enough.

He took a deep breath, squared his shoulders, and prepared to turn to his duties.
Chapter 19

Thranduil rode leisurely toward the appointed parley, not bothering to rein or spur his elk to any greater speed than the amble it chose on its own. Great antlered head nodding, it nevertheless kept such a smooth gait that Thranduil knew he seemed to float above the crowd of onlooking retainers—dwarves, men from various regions of Gondor, men of Rohan and of Dale, and elves of Ithilien and Eryn Lasgalen, the latter following him in neat ranks bristling with arrows, as though riding to war.

By contrast Thranduil wore no armor nor bore any weapon; he was adorned in robes of trailing silver, with a jeweled crown of fern leaves interlaced with spring flowers atop his head, his long hair flowing down his back unadorned.

The elk stopped itself by the grand pavilion tent of the parley, where all the leaders now stood assembled, tending to minor matters as they awaited his arrival.

He slipped from the elk and stood proud as attendants bustled up to smooth and brush his robes, arranging them to trail neatly behind him, then picking them up that they might not be stained by the ground. One set a goblet of wine in his hand and he intercepted it without acknowledgment, sweeping into the tent when the guards awaiting there parted the flaps for him to enter.

Within stood a table and chairs were ranged about it; the leaders of Gondor, Rohan, Aglarond, Erebor, Dale, and Ithilien stood there. A place had been left for Thranduil on the right of the king of Rohan—a rudeness he regarded as unpardonable; he deserved the head of the table, where the upstart Númenórean who styled himself the superior of this gathering had instead made his seat.

Thranduil raised a brow, communicating disdain with a single austere glance about the table, and then accepted his seat with a haughty grace that made the edge of the table its end, for every eye in the place was caught and fixed upon him.

His fool of a son sat across from him, positioned beside the burly dwarf who plagued Thranduil now above all else; looking between them, he could see the rumors had not misled—at least not in the case of his son, who gazed on the dwarf fondly while he was not frowning toward his father with ill-concealed dismay. It was as Galion feared—the two were close, and yet Thranduil could not be sure they were wed; the marks of it were there in Legolas’s bearing, but not the surety. He frowned, wondering if his son might yet be salvaged.

The dwarf caught Thranduil’s eye as he relaxed into his seat, and he cradled his goblet in the curve of his hand as he regarded the son of Glóin—the sire of this pestilence had once been merely a lowly prisoner in his own dungeons. Yet this dwarf wore a crown of mithril braided into his hair and adorned with the finest gems, each with a pure star captured in its depths, winking soft white fire in the lamplight—a love token, without doubt, and a symbol plainly meant to spite his father, for these were the things Thranduil loved best in all of Arda.

Thranduil’s mouth tightened with distaste. So his son meant to stand against him? Legolas would soon learn to his regret that Thranduil had faced many sterner foes, and had never yet surrendered a victory.
Chapter 20

Legolas could hardly hear Aragorn’s speech of welcome; his voice seemed dulled into a droning hum in the back of Legolas’s mind-- which was focused on other things.

Every nerve in his body was buzzing, every muscle tensed almost to the point of snapping. He was acutely aware of Gimli to his left, warm and solid, and even more aware of his father across from him. Legolas had fought in hundreds of skirmishes and plenty of full battles, had led patrols against spiders that could move near-silently through the forest; he had stood before the Black Gates of Mordor themselves-- and never, he thought, had he been so braced for a fight.

It might have been better, he thought, had he had more of a chance to speak with Gimli in private, to solidify their story and perhaps warn him of what he had done. It might have been better had he forgone the urge to spite his father so blatantly. But he had not, and now he saw his father’s eyes narrow as they settled upon the gift Legolas had presented to Gimli upon their meeting here, and his hands quivered with the desire to reach for an arrow that was not there.

“...meetings will take place over the next week,” Aragorn was saying. “We will plan to meet here each morning an hour after dawn. Should other realms wish to make individual arrangements, they may do so, but all accords will be viewed by all realms by the end of the parley. Should any leaders desire an outside presence in their meetings, I will gladly moderate those discussions.” But he must have known that saying such words to elves and dwarves would be of little use anyway; they would have their feuds as they would, regardless of who was in the room. Legolas felt an almost hysterical laugh bubbling up inside him, and he pressed his lips together tightly to keep it inside. The plains of Rhovanion were indeed a central location-- and thus ideal for fights to break out.

Thorin Stonehelm, King of Erebor, cleared his throat; beside him, Legolas thought he could almost feel the air move as Gimli’s head snapped around to look at him. “The suggestion has been advanced, King Elessar,” he said, “that some leaders be required to have an outside presence in their dealings. To ensure that no private arrangements are made, to the detriment of other realms, as has brought us here.”

Legolas had not thought it possible for his jaw to clench any tighter. He had been wrong.

“The trading agreements will be made known to all in the end,” said Aragorn, frowning, “but it is not my place to dictate all that passes between individual rulers and their plans for their realms.”

Legolas saw Thranduil incline his head very slightly towards Aragorn, as though in agreement. He felt he could imagine why his father might agree with such a ruling, and fought down the sudden urge to beg Aragorn to accommodate Thorin’s requests.

Thorin himself did not argue, merely nodded, and Legolas thought suddenly that his purpose may not have been merely to achieve his stated request, after all. For he could feel all the eyes on him, where he sat beside Gimli; he knew, of course, why the council had been called, and everyone else in the room knew it as well. And though it had been a necessity, their earlier encounter had done nothing to mend matters, either; even now he and Gimli bore gifts that served to remind their neighbors of their preference for one another. They would have to manage carefully as they moved forward, showing that they meant to conduct their private business as they wished while also adjusting their public policies to accommodate the needs of their trading partners.

He could control his face, he could control his muscles, but he could not control the blood that rushed into his cheeks. Very studiously, he did not look at Gimli.
Gimli, though, did not bother to restrain himself. “If you speak of me and my husband, do not dissemble, but state it outright,” he said. “We have agreed to come to show our commitment to ensuring that our realms do not play false with any others, and we would not have our honor impinged upon without the opportunity to defend ourselves fairly.”

There was a tiny hiss from across the table; Legolas’s ears, if no others, were keen enough to hear his father’s intake of breath before he spoke. “I believe King Thorin,” his voice dripped with disdain, and Legolas wondered who his father considered his chiefest enemy, “merely means to point out and prevent potential conflicts of interest.”

Legolas’s nerves nearly snapped right then; he would have been out of his seat had Aragorn not spoken. “I would point out that at this table alone I can already spot four conflicts of interest that involve neither Aglarond nor Ithilien, and an additional three that do,” he said. “None of us are separate from one another, and that is, in truth, our greatest strength.” His voice swelled in power, and Legolas nearly forgot his building agitation in admiration. “We are here as the free people of Middle-Earth,” he reminded them all, “who have stood together against evil and tyranny, and who seek to stand together once more. Our strength lies in our unity, and our ability to meet thus to increase it.” He gestured around the table. “The goal of these meetings is to forge ties, not to break them, and I can only hope that no one here will contradict me.”

He swept his gaze around the table, pinning each one for a moment. When his eyes met Legolas’s, though his expression did not change, his eyes seemed to twinkle in reassurance.

“Very well,” he said, when no one spoke up. “Meetings will proceed, then, as a whole and as arranged by individual realms, to discuss trade and,” he glanced around, “any additional matters that must be brought up. For now, I repeat my welcome, and call to adjourn this greeting, so that all delegations may finish their preparations and meet tomorrow to begin negotiations in full.”

Legolas had expected his father to corner him immediately after the meeting, but he did not. He merely turned on him a gaze colder than a midwinter wind, before turning and sweeping out of the tent with no word to anyone else.

Legolas actually sagged once he had departed, as though the stress of his father’s presence had been the bar holding him upright. It was to his fortune that Thorin and Bard were already preparing to leave, and did not see him slump; beside him, he groped almost unthinkingly for Gimli’s hand.

He wondered after he had reached out if it perhaps had been an error-- they were still before others, that was true, but Aragorn at least knew their secret and they had not discussed what sort of contact was appropriate, or when. But Gimli caught his hand and squeezed it before he could draw back, and he inhaled, then, in relief at his friend’s support.

“Well,” he said. “No surprises here, at any rate.”

“No,” Legolas managed. “Gimli, perhaps I ought to have told you; my gift to you--”

Gimli shook his head. “You need not tell me; I gathered enough.” He laughed-- fondly? Legolas could only hope so. “You spoke true, then, when you said you anticipated his rage. Has it lived up to your expectations?”

“And more so.”

“If you anticipated that with any amount of pleasure,” said Éomer, rising from where he had sat beside Thranduil and taking the seat instead on Gimli’s other side, “then you have my respect, my friend.” He grinned suddenly, as though shaking off the mood. “And my congratulations! I wish
you joy of your marriage, and I assure you that your husband is eloquent in praise of your virtues.”

“As he is at every time,” said Legolas, but that same sweet pang shot through him. If this pretense was to continue before all, how long could he bear it? Already it was exhausting, the rapid swings between sorrow and guilty joy, and he could hardly bear the thought of declaring his love and yet not, lying beside Gimli and yet not. And what would they do once the council had finished, and they were to return to their own lives? They would have to speak of it, and yet he could not bear to breach the subject.

Gimli squeezed his hand again, and then stood. “Well!” he said with an air of determined cheer. “Now that the business dealings have been temporarily concluded, I have more important business with you, my husband. Will you come with me to our tent?”


They had set up a tent to share between the camps of their people, making all the arrangements before the eyes of others who thought them wed in truth, and had not seen one another in private since-- Legolas’s face warmed-- since their morning in Gimli’s hut in Ithilien. He awaited with both eagerness and dread their seclusion within the tent-- and when the flap fell closed behind both of them, the sigh that escaped them both was almost perfectly synchronized.

“Now we may be honest with one another,” Gimli said, seating himself on the shared bedroll. “And we ought to share what has happened in the time we were apart.”

“Yes,” Legolas said softly. “I have been surprised in my country that so few have apparent objections to our union,” he could not quite look Gimli in the eye when speaking, so he arose and busied himself filling mugs with mead for them both. “I think perhaps it is because Ithilien is a waystation for those who tarry before departure to Valinor. Those who go there have left the concerns of Middle-Earth behind them, and they care not for mortal matters, or for the affairs of those who will yet remain before departing to sail to Aman. This, too, is a reason that we have been so little concerned with the nature of our trading relationships, I suppose,” he added, trying not to sound as bitter as he felt.

Gimli merely nodded, seeming relieved that Legolas, at least, appeared not to have suffered his fellows’ disapproval.

“I am not so fortunate,” he said wryly. “No sooner had I departed Ithilien and taken refuge in Rohan than an old friend was made aware of our supposed union. Unfortunately, he was not pleased.” He scrubbed his palm over his face wearily. “Before the war, we were close. Orm had found and lost his One within the space of only a few years, and I had never found mine; we used to bargain that should I become tired of waiting, we might be joined for purposes of practical gain. He was not uncomely, and he was wise in craft and swift in wit. I found him pleasant company.”

Precisely how pleasant? A flare of jealousy lit in Legolas’s chest as he imagined Gimli lying with this unfamiliar dwarf.

“I am sorry to have spoiled your plans,” he said, and flushed. “It would be difficult to explain yourself in such a way that he might understand and continue your arrangement hereafter, I judge.”

“Indeed it would,” Gimli sighed. “And I have no wish to carry onward with that understanding now that he has revealed the truth of his nature. He flayed me with his tongue, Legolas, and with all the spite he could muster. I hardly recognized my old companion in his venom-- and yet, I
understand whence it comes. For he has a child from his marriage; a young daughter. He has always had great ambitions for her, so I suppose I should have expected this-- but I confess, I did not see it. He desires to be my consort, that his daughter might be named my heir and rule after I have passed. This hope has soured him with the poison of greed for power, as if he were a son of men.”

“He is to be pitied,” Legolas said softly. How would he respond if Gimli’s troth were all but in his hands, only to be given in the end to another? He suspected he would not be forgiving. Legolas’s heart rose up into his throat; it seemed all too likely that such a thing would one day come to pass, and he would be set aside just as Orm had been, yearning for what might never be.

“Orm will not thank you for your pity,” Gimli warned. “I have seen him among the delegates from Erebor; he has come from Rohan with the king and I expect he means to start trouble if he can. He would be as likely to spit in your face as to greet you, elf.”

“Many dwarves might do the same, and with less reason,” Legolas nodded. “I will not begrudge him this anger, nor will I blame him for it. A great prize has been taken from his hands, and I do not mean merely the leadership of Aglarond, nor the pride of raising its heir.”

Gimli looked on him then as if in pain, his face taut with anguish beneath his unfamiliar braidings.

“I have vowed to tell you more than this, elf, in honesty,” he began, but before he could explain himself, the flap of the tent rustled as a messenger slapped upon it with his hand by way of knocking. Gimli sighed and drew back the flap.

“Milords, the King of the Greenwood asks that his son attend upon him,” a pageboy said, shifting from foot to foot in agitation. “As his camp is now complete and his audience chamber made ready, he will brook no delay.”

“And so it begins.” Legolas set his jaw and pulled himself upright, determined he would face down his father as Gimli had endured the wrath of his one-time companion. “I shall attend upon him. Lead the way.”

“Should I come?”

“The king specified his son only,” the lad said in haste.

“No, meleth,” Legolas assured his friend-- hardly noticing the endearment that escaped him, he was so dismayed by the summons. “I am capable of meeting this menace without your aid. Another time, perhaps. First I will see what he has to say to me alone.”

That did not sit well with Gimli, and Legolas was touched to see his dearest friend bristle in his defense. Yet he could not be afraid, not knowing he had such a staunch ally.

Legolas went out, following the terrified young man and planning his strategy as he went. Thranduil liked to make a grand show, but Legolas knew where his grandeur was facade only. Likewise, he knew the line between threat and truth, and had seen his father employ his bearing to intimidate those to whom he spoke, and how he would pause to allow their fears to grow, and in fact his every artifice.

Legolas need only stand his ground and answer Thranduil as truly as he might, and he need not fear that his father might strike off his head; the worst he might anticipate would be personal insult, attempts to shame, or threat of banishment-- an empty threat, when he had in effect banished himself to a new kingdom and made a home there for himself and others.

It would be painful, but he would survive intact.
Legolas rustled at the flap of his father’s tent, and Thranduil’s bored voice bade him enter. He did so, finding Thranduil arranged on his traveling throne, still in his silver finery and with his crown of living flowers set upon his head. A bottle stood a quarter full upon the table; enough to lead him into the false hope that Thranduil’s wits might be dulled, but not enough to impair his father’s thoughts in truth.

Thranduil offered him no wine, sipping from his goblet-- or seeming to sip-- and letting the silence stretch as he sat at ease, that Legolas might be discomfited by it and lose his nerve.

“Whatever will the Lords of the West think of you now?” Thranduil drawled at length when the silence had stretched to a painful thinness, vibrating like a plucked harpstring between them. “Now that you have lain with a rat of the earth, surely you will never find the Straight Road.”

“I imagine Aulë, at least, will think no less of me for it,” Legolas responded, his blood singing in anticipation of a fight that would happen only in words. “And if the Straight Road would open for two not of elf-kind, I cannot imagine they would deny an elf who has gained respect and admiration for the mortal races.”

“Aulë.” Thranduil rolled the word on his tongue like fine wine. “A rebel against Ilúvatar, his act of rebellion indulged unwisely by Ilúvatar’s kindness in not slaying his misguided creations, as time has shown. The grief his spawn have caused is second only to that caused by men. His voice will not be enough to pardon you-- even if he is not jealous of one who would meddle with his precious dwarves, even if he speaks on your behalf. And think not that Mithrandir will intervene to save you, as he saved his precious halflings. You did not carry the Ring to Mordor, nor did you dispose of it in the fire. You will share the fate of Arwen Half-Elven, a fool bound to her mortal and to Middle-Earth, where you will fade and die.” His voice faded to pure cold, indifferent and remote.

Legolas forced up the much-abused shields around his heart, taking a moment to compose his face, not to reveal the pain of his father’s evident indifference towards his fate. Exactly this, he knew, was the desired reaction. “Perhaps,” he said. “But I did not think you one to care, for you have ever spoken with disdain of the Straight Road and those who choose to travel it. And now you invoke their names to me in an effort to sway my resolve-- because you know that your own voice will not be strong enough?” Something inside his belly quivered at his own daring; he held himself still and upright, determined not to give it away.

Thranduil’s eyes widened slightly, the only sign Legolas had struck home. “For our days are ending and our years failing. / I will pass the wide waters lonely sailing. / Long are the waves on the Last Shore falling, / Sweet are the voices in the Lost Isle calling,” he recited-- a song Legolas himself had sung many times since he first heard the cry of the gulls over Anduin. “My son, do not tell me you have not felt the sea-longing. What I wish is of no concern to you, it is clear. I seek only to show you how what you wish and what you have chosen are at odds, that you may yet reconsider your folly.”

“They need not be at odds,” Legolas said. Ah, but the rapid switch from haughty indifference to loving concern had disoriented him for a moment, as it was meant to do; he paused to collect his thoughts. “I do not think loving a dwarf an unpardonable offense; how should I be unkindly judged for giving my heart to one so true and generous as the one I have chosen? That which you call folly, I name love. And it matters not if it were; my heart will not be unbound, nor my decision unmade. This ‘folly’ will not be reconsidered.”

“Ever you have been willful and late to listen. I have been an indulgent father; I have spoiled you and let you run as you would, headstrong and untrammeled. It is my folly that has led you to this. How, then, could I not be harsh in a last desperate resort to turn you from this course?” Thranduil
mused, and sipped his wine. “You reach for the dwarf as a child reaches for the bright flame of a candle; you do not understand what you do, and I cannot suffer you to be burned in your innocence.”

“And a bright flame he is,” said Legolas, determined for the moment to speak a truth, even in the midst of a lie. “The light in the midst of a dark room, the warmth when all else seems cold and hopeless. You do not understand: whatever consequences await me at the end of his life, I accept gladly for the joy of the present. I accept the pain of the burn, if I may first know the warmth.”

“Fire is a good servant, but a poor master,” Thranduil rejoined. “Can you truly say the dwarf is tamed? Have you made a fire that will warm you for a day, until it is fallen to cold ash to leave you shivering in the night? Or have you set yourself ablaze, to be consumed?” He shook his head. “Either course is beneath your worth, Legolas. I would see you happy, even if it must be in the Blessed Realm.” His lips twisted at the thought. “Even if I must go there myself.” His eyes burned at Legolas suddenly, intense and almost mad with determination. “Shall I leave my kingdom and sail with you today?”

Legolas reeled. Of all that he had been expecting, this had not been on the list-- and of course, for exactly that reason his father had said it. “Would you?” he tried to snap back, tried to call his father’s bluff, but he could not fill all the breath in his voice with tone. “If I said yes, would you truly do it?”

“I will ride west and sail with you now down the Anduin, and on to the bay. Ships are ready to depart.” Thranduil drew himself upright and put down his goblet. “Let us go. Your mother awaits us beyond the sea.”

This-- this was not feigned, he could see it now. It was no bluff, and Legolas had to stop a moment to imagine it. Leaving, leaving now, leaving with his father. Following the call of the gulls to the sea, and then the Straight Road to Valinor; giving in to the song in his heart that called him ever west, west away, meeting his mother, whom he could scarcely remember, leaving behind the pressures of this council and the sorrow of Gimli’s inevitable rejection when their ruse finally drew to an end, along with the rest of Middle-Earth.

Leaving Middle-Earth. Leaving Ithilien, the land to which he had pledged his skill and his devotion; leaving the people who counted on him here and there. Leaving Aragorn and Arwen, who would never take the Straight Road to follow him. Leaving Gimli.

That last thought lanced white-cold pain through his heart, worse pain even than his earlier knowledge of the hopelessness of his love, and the manic energy of the thought drained away. He could not. Whatever the outcome, he could not leave Gimli behind-- that would be a pain worse even than his friend’s rejection of his suit.

He sighed at last, and all the fight left his body along with his breath. “I cannot,” he said. “Forgive me, ada. But I cannot.”

Thranduil stood very still for a long span of minutes, making no motion, his expression changing not at all. Then without warning he pivoted on his heel and went to the bottle, pouring out the rest of the wine. “Go, then, to your mortal lover,” he said. “He will be there for you, perhaps, for a short span of years, before you are sundered forever and you come to know the fullest grief of your choice. Tomorrow, you will not face your father across the bargaining table. You will face the King of Eryn Lasgalen, and it will go hard with you.”

Legolas would have liked to respond with something witty, something determined, something that would befit the end of such a conversation and tell his father that he had not ended the argument with the upper hand. But he could not. He could not speak-- could not breathe-- could hardly
bring himself to move.

At last, he nodded. “If I must,” he said, trying and failing to keep the tremble from his voice. “By your leave.” And he turned and left his father’s tent.

He made it all the way back to his own before giving in to his tears.
Gimli watched Legolas leave with the young page, who seemed frightened out of his wits, and despite Legolas’s reassurances, he could not entirely push down his own concern. He did not know Thranduil well, but enough to know he had no desire to further their acquaintance, and father or not, the thought of leaving Legolas to face his wrath alone did not sit right with him. Were he any less of a dwarf, he might have gnawed his fingernails.

To have Thranduil send for Legolas just as he had been prepared to spill his secret, too-- that felt almost deliberate. Almost as though Legolas’s father had somehow been listening to them, or as though some other power wished to interfere. Almost as though it were a sign.

And that thought, he sighed to himself, was a sure indication that he had been spending too much time with elves.

But… but he supposed it was well after all that he had not spoken; it would not do to sunder their seeming companionship on the first day of this venture, not when the success of their ruse was so important. Perhaps Thranduil had, however unwitting, done him a favor.

So long as he did not spoil the favor by sending Legolas back to Gimli in pieces.

Just as he was about to rise and leave the tent, risking unpleasant encounters in an attempt to avoid sitting here uselessly, there was yet another knock-- or, another slap of a hand. This one was accompanied by the slight clanking of metal-- whoever had approached wore armor-- and heavy footsteps. A dwarf, then-- and Gimli feared it was not a friend.

All the same, he supposed it was best to get it over with. He stood, made his way over to the flap of the tent, and pulled it open-- and found himself face-to-face with his own father.

“Gimli.” Glóin stood stiffly, looking terribly uncomfortable. “It has been long.”

“Aye,” Gimli said softly, regretting it-- it had been since the end of the Ring War, and his father had aged more than he expected in the interim, his beard even whiter and his worn face drooping about the eyelids. He felt a pang of shame; he should visit Erebor more often, but it was difficult-- especially given his yearning to visit Legolas whenever he might manage to leave his people for a brief time, trusting they would get on well enough without him.

“It is good to see you, whatever the rumors may be,” Glóin said. “Come. Will you not go to my tent with me and give me your news? All of it-- how goes the settlement of Aglarond?”

“I will,” said Gimli. For all his reluctance to leave before Legolas’s return, he could hardly deny his father such a request. He spoke as they walked-- lighter matters for now, skimming over even the subject of trade, and certainly of Legolas-- but all the while he watched his father carefully, one hand ready for his arm or back in case he should stumble.

His father’s tent was in the midst of the Erebor encampment, and they walked past many others as they went. Gimli kept his eyes on his father and his voice light, but he could feel the stares, warm on the back of his neck and heavy on his shoulders, and he knew that the jewels he wore caught the light and the eyes.

His father did not seem to acknowledge the stares either, though Gimli thought he noticed them. The matter remained unspoken between them, and Gimli thought with a pang that this was true of many things now. But Glóin led him on a straight path to his tent, pulling the flap aside and
ushering him in. A servant was within already, laying out rugs so they might sit in comfort, but he bowed and departed at Glóin’s gesture.

“Amad did not accompany you, then?” Gimli said, seating himself. “Is she well?”

“Your mother and I get on well enough. She does not care to travel and she is no longer able to craft jewels as she once did; her hands are stiff now, and they pain her when it is winter.” Glóin shifted in his seat. “But she is hale for all of that, and her tongue is as sharp as ever it was. She will yet last a few tens, I think, as will I.” He glanced at Gimli’s jewels again, then his eyes darted away with unaccustomed uncertainty.

“Good,” said Gimli, looking down for a moment at his own hands, “good, that is good.” It was as it had been between them for the last five years: for all the pretty words he might be able to speak to lords and kings, they all deserted him at will in the face of his father and a subject they both still-- after all this-- wished to avoid.

“I hope you will soon come to the Lonely Mountain and pay her a visit. Or at least to Dale. She would come so far as that, if you are not-- if it is awkward for you to come within the mountain.” Glóin swallowed sharply. “There are many dwarven lodgings to be had there, as our kin from the Iron Hills and the Blue Mountains yet visit us, but not all wish to stay within the mountain so close to the memories of Smaug.”

Glóin settled himself again, easing his old bones, and leaned forward to grasp a staff and rest his chin on its head. “You are missed. Your sister and the children ask after you.”

Gimli bowed his head. “Aye,” he said, “aye, I ought to do that. I would be glad to see them again. Adad…” He took a deep breath. Best have this out. “I… You did not only come here out of an interest in trade, did you?”

“I did not. I came to see my son.” Glóin drew a deep, pained breath. “And to see if the rumors concerning him were true. I cannot… you seem in the best of health, and your array is rich indeed.” Again the sidelong glance at his jewels. “I cannot say that you are as I expected. But you do not seem to have taken harm from the elf, even if what is said is true.”

Glóin fumbled at his pouch and came out with his pipe and a bit of weed to tamp into it. “It is said he is your One, Gimli,” he whispered. “That the two of you are wed after Elvish custom. Tell me true. Is this so?”

A thousand things Gimli might have said, but all he needed was one word. “Aye.” Though it was not the true answer to both questions, it was as true as it needed to be-- for Gimli’s father and for himself. “It is so.” He spoke, and then waited. He would make no apology or defense for it yet-- not until it was needed.

“An elf, Gimli. One of the dur’rugnul! This elf, the very one who took me prisoner, who stole my locket and insulted your mother, the same one who laughed upon your picture and disparaged your looks to my face! He jailed me and the rest of Thorin’s company!” Glóin’s hands shook, and he took a deep draw on his pipe, struggling visibly to master himself, beset with grief and rage alike.

Gimli sighed, remembering suddenly once more why it had been so long. “He did,” he said, struggling to remain calm. “Decades ago. As you reminded me years ago in Rivendell, and then again when I returned to the Lonely Mountain, and then again in letter after letter. I know what he did to you, adad, but even more I know what he has done for me. I know what he was and what he is, and I accept it all. He is my One, whatever you may feel about it, and whatever happened in the past, I love him as he is now.”
“If he harms you I will flay the skin from his bones with the blunt side of my axe,” Glóin hissed, sounding very much as though he believed it were inevitable. “Has he accepted you, then? You wear his jewels in your hair! If he does not do right by you after decorating your hair, your beard, I will—” He sputtered as he tried to think of a threat dire enough to suffice. “I will shave him bald and carry him back to his father lashed upon a spit for roasting!” He surged to his feet, squaring his shoulders as if he meant to go and do it even now.

Perhaps it was the mention of Thranduil, or the reminder that inevitably, when Gimli finally brought himself to speak the words in his heart, Legolas would indeed turn him down, but worry surged in Gimli’s heart, followed quickly by an impatient irritation with his father’s threats. “He speaks to his father even now, adad,” he snapped. “I shall be lucky if he is not returned to me already on one!”

“Of all the allies I should not want!” Glóin looked ill. “But if the elvenking speaks sense, the prince should listen.” He held up a hand rapidly, forestalling Gimli’s protest. “I know. Neither of you are so young as to be governed by a parent’s wish. But it is hard, Gimli. Our peoples have been at strife for many centuries. It is the symptom of a great difference between us— a gulf too wide to bridge. Thranduil has seen much, and even I have seen more than you.” Glóin paused, his mouth working.

“Thranduil no doubt witnessed the affair with the necklace, and the death of the elvenking who betrayed and hunted our people for it.” The words came only with difficulty. “That is how the elves work, my son. They do not grow, they do not change, they do not learn. They endure in folly for all the millennia of Middle-Earth! Your elf is of a kind with those who cheated us, took the spoils, and killed all of us they could. He is of a kind with those who refused our folk aid when Durin’s Bane took Moria— as is the Lady of whom you speak so dearly; where was she when Durin died? Lurking within the borders of her wood while our people perished! Thranduil himself turned his back upon us when the dragon came! I was not so young I did not see it!”

Gimli did not know exactly when he had leapt to his feet, but he was standing now, facing his father. “You have seen more than I, you say?” he spat, bristling with fury. “In years, perhaps, but your words are those of one who has spent his years listening dumbly to tales of prejudice, drinking the liquor of thousands of years of grudge without questioning the poison inside of it! You have seen more than I? You did not see the foul twisted faces of orc-spawned men, doing the bidding of a corrupt and faithless wizard! You did not see the despair on the faces of too few thousands of men, arrayed before the Black Gates before they opened to the doom of us all! You did not see the care lines of bearing the pure weight of evil carved into the face of a halfling!”

He was shouting now, heedless of who might hear him, leaning forward even as his father fell back. “You saw none of that, adad, but I did! And so did Legolas!” Indeed, he hoped the other dwarves were listening, for perhaps then they would see how foolish their years of prejudices were. “He stood by my side through it all, and a stancher and firmer friend I could not have asked for! What should I care what his people have done after that? Him at least I know I can rely on— unlike many of my own people, it seems!”

He could not stay in this tent any longer; he whirled and made to leave— before turning back once more. “And as to the Lady of the Wood,” he said, “I shall let that insult pass once, but only once. Repeat it again, and I shall be forced to settle it with steel.”

And with that, he pushed back the tent flap and strode away through the Erebor encampment, heedless of the stares and whispers that followed in his wake.
Gimli walked fast through the dwarves’ camp, looking only ahead, feeling as though the evening air steamed on his overheated skin. He continued walking when he had left the encampment, without any particular goal in mind. He had half a mind to storm straight into the camp of the Mirkwood elves, find Thranduil’s tent, and rush in to give the Elvenking a piece of his mind. But before he could decide to do that, he was caught by the forearm.

“Gimli!” said Aragorn. “My friend. Where are you going in such a hurry?”

“Anywhere but where I was,” Gimli blustered; in truth, he could not say. “I find myself with cause to lament the lack of orcs in this country, for I could use a large troop of them. My axe thirsts for violence, and I would spend my temper in such a way that it does good rather than harm, for too much harm has been done in the past by both my people and their elvish enemies!” He lifted his axe in its loop, shaking it; its edge would look well bathed in black orc blood, and he would welcome a weariness so deep that he fell upon his pallet at once and slept without dreams.

Aragorn laughed in a way that would have infuriated Gimli had it not been entirely lacking in true mirth. “Well, I have no orcs to offer you,” he said. “But would you turn down a drink in my tent? I have wine, ale, and whiskey, and if all that fails, I am sure you could find some satisfaction hurling the bottles at innocent servants!” He raised an eyebrow, as though hoping the jest would call Gimli back to sense.

“They are not deserving of such wrath,” Gimli said, begrudging the admission. “But if you are well-stocked with drink, then I would make an effort to deprive you of it all, saving only that which you quaff before I can get it.”

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They walked in silence for a time, and Gimli seethed anew, his conversation with his father yet replaying in his mind. Others whom they passed seemed to see it, for no one seemed inclined to look Gimli directly in the face. He could not bring himself to mind.

They passed Arwen, leaving the tent as Aragorn guided Gimli inside. King and queen stopped to murmur a few words to one another, and Gimli could not even bother to care what they said. He busied himself finding Aragorn’s liquor instead, selecting a bottle for himself. When Aragorn finally entered, he looked to where Gimli had made himself at home and laughed anew.

“Well,” he said, “best you begin yourself than work up any more rage waiting for me.”

Gimli knocked back his portion, swallowing as much as he could while the dregs ran over his beard— proper dwarf etiquette, though not normally that of men. He wiped his sleeve over his mouth and belched thickly. It was a weak ale, and he scowled at the bottle, turning aside to seek a
stronger brew. Perhaps the whiskey.

He seized the bottle and drew the cork, snagging it with his heavy thumbnail; it popped free and the strong fumes of alcohol burned in his nostrils. He turned up the bottle and took a deep swallow as Aragorn watched; he had no patience with building to a leisurely drunk this night.

“You may yearn for the father you did not know,” Gimli told Aragorn, gasping a little at the burn of the whiskey in his belly. “And I will not say that is folly. But I will say that you have been spared the pain of disagreeing with him, and of outgrowing his wisdom, yet being unable to make him see reason.” The words tasted nearly as raw as the whiskey, bitter on his tongue.

“You are not the first to strive with a father in service of love,” Aragorn reminded him. “But nor will I gainsay the truth of your frustration with yours. Perhaps especially not when much of that frustration was audible from even outside the Erebor encampment.” He chuckled a bit, pouring himself a mug of ale and sipping rather more slowly than Gimli had. “If it helps at all, I do not think it was audible to many farther away than I was-- though maybe you would prefer if it had been?” He sipped again from his mug, as though buying himself time. “Certainly, your regard for your husband ought to be beyond question by those of Erebor.”

“Then they should accept it and cease to torment me with attempts to change my thinking!” Gimli bellowed. “I have heard the same tired tales over and over again-- the same fears, the same angers, the same hates, worn threadbare but still kept steaming hot, trotted out to me as if I were a dwarfling in diapers who must be taught how to use a chamber pot!” He took another belt of the potent liquor. “I am fed to the teeth with it; I will spit it back in their faces. And if they will not listen, then I will at least teach them to be silent, for they know not how their words pain me! Legolas is a trusted friend and true; he is my heart’s One, and I will not hear malice spoken against him!”

“Indeed.” Aragorn set his mug aside and steepled his fingers. “And does Legolas know this?”

Gimli deflated, curling around his bottle as if to protect it-- or to huddle behind it and let it protect him. “The elf knows I hold him in high regard, as the best of friends: bâhelûh. He esteems me the same, I know it. I have no cause to doubt his friendship, nor he mine.”

“That is not the same,” Aragorn observed. “You are still avoiding the question, if not the answer.”

“I would keep him as my friend.” Gimli sought comfort once more in the bottle, taking a mighty swig. “I have vowed to tell him, but how may I when to do so would be to destroy all we have built-- all that he and I now sacrifice for?”

“Yet you have just assured me of your confidence in his friendship,” Aragorn said. “Even now he faces down his father for you, as you have done for him. He agreed to this ploy just as you did, and has matched your sacrifices step for step. And you say that after that, you doubt still that he would be by your side if you confessed that you wished it true?”

“Do not mock me.” Gimli knew he was being obstinate, but the fiery liquor in his belly gave him an excuse. “How could he continue to trust me if I reveal that I am false?”

“Say not false,” said Aragorn, taking up his mug again, “but rather truer than you admit yourself to be. You two have forgiven one another millennia of slights and wrongs, and even now move toward a similar accord with your peoples. Why should he blame you for stronger feeling? The only false you play with him is in not admitting it now.”

“I have lied.” Gimli felt despair seize his heart. “I lied to draw him closer when he would not have of his own accord; I have lied lying at his side and holding him while we chorused fit to
frighten the birds and deceive his people. Every moment of that night, I rejoiced—joy keen as pain. It is not a thing that can be forgiven.” The alcohol was potent, working on him swiftly and dulling his senses; soon he would succumb. He welcomed it.

Aragorn was looking at him strangely: one eyebrow up and the other down, mouth crumpled in towards the middle. He opened his mouth then, left it open for a long while, and then closed it again, shaking his head. Gimli tried to summon the same rage as before, but found that his efforts with the whiskey had succeeded in dampening it; all he could manage was a weak glare.

“Perhaps you have lied,” Aragorn said at last, “but I think it is a falsehood that could be forgiven. I implore you, Gimli, to tell him. For do you truly think you would feel any less pain if you admitted your lies to all others while keeping them still secret from Legolas himself?”

“I cannot bear the look that would dawn upon his face. I lie without sleep imagining the betrayal in his eyes.” Gimli tried to drink again, but perhaps the bottle had somehow leaked, for it was empty. Only a few drops trickled onto his tongue. He began to search for another, fumbling with the latch of the small cabinet. “How could he forgive me when I can never forgive myself?”

Aragorn handed over his own mug of ale when the handles continued to refuse Gimli’s fingers. Again Gimli tried to glare, but found his energy for anger drained with the whiskey bottle; he poured the contents of Aragorn’s ale down his throat. “How can he forgive you when you never give him the chance?”

Gimli nursed the tankard against his chest, hardly hearing Aragorn for wallowing in his own misery. “He is beautiful,” he said, articulating the words with great care, lamenting as if he had already lost Legolas’s friendship. “How shall I live my days without the starlight? I shall be lost and cold, and bury myself deep in the dark places of the earth; there I will live and there I will die and I will never see them again, shining through the moving trees while his home rocks me like a ship upon the waves, as if it would sail me away to his undying lands…” he trailed off, hiccuping back a sniffle.

“Yes...yes,” said Aragorn, sounding a bit bewildered. Gimli thought he might be looking at him strangely again, but his vision was going slightly fuzzy. “I think it is time we found you your bed, my friend. Can you stand?” He rose from his own seat, and Gimli tried to follow suit, only to find that his legs did not quite want to obey his command.

“Rug will do,” Gimli slurred. It looked soft and plush, round and just long enough for him to curl up on. It was comfortable there, though he was not sure when he had moved from contemplating the rug to kneeling on it. His head was spinning, and the tankard was comfortingly solid as he curled himself around it, wrapping his fingers around the handle tightly as he resisted the man who tried to pry it from him. “Go ’way.”

“If you insist,” he thought he heard Aragorn’s voice from somewhere above him. Something warm and heavy was pulled over his body, but he no longer had the capacity to determine what it was.

As he had hoped, he slept without dreams.
Legolas wept until his pillow was soaked, but felt no better for it; as the hiccups finally ebbed, he felt only shame. What if Gimli should come and find him thus? He could not bear the thought of it, so he arose and washed his face, mending a few wisps escaped from his hair, and took himself out to walk for a time, hoping he would find calm by looking up at the stars.

Unfortunately there were many fires in the camps of the men and dwarves; the orange glow caught in the haze above the plain, and it blocked out all but the brightest stars. Legolas pulled his cloak about himself-- his old one, from Lórien; it would help him fade almost into invisibility as he flitted from shadow to shadow.

His people were lying on the green, looking up, speaking quietly and singing among themselves; Legolas passed through them quietly, responding with a brief salute to their called greetings, then melted into the camp of the men of Gondor, who had encamped on their south side.

“Mae govannen,” a soft voice greeted him when he expected it least. He glanced up, finding Arwen waiting next to a tent, clad not in the finery of a queen, but in an archer’s leggings and long, split leathers, her hair tucked up under a helm-- an effective disguise, perhaps, from the eyes of men.

“Well met indeed,” he said heavily, but her company was truly welcome; the relief in his chest let him know that he had dreaded spending the long night brooding alone.

“You seem troubled,” she said. “And indeed, the news is hardly a secret that Thranduil of Eryn Lasgalen earlier requested an audience with his son. Am I wrong to assume that the one follows from the other?”

“Trouble follows my father as a shadow follows the sun,” Legolas sighed. “He has astonished me, Arwen, truly I say. He offered to go away with me to Valinor if only I would forsake Gimli and go with him.” He thought it impolite to mention Thranduil’s comparison of his situation to Arwen’s in terms of mortality and choice; after all, he was not half-Elven, bound by the choice of Elros. “I believe he meant it. He would go if only I would accompany him. Perhaps he loves me after all; I have never before heard him willing to speak of sailing.”

He had never seen the Evenstar shocked, and he would not go so far as to say that her mouth dropped open, but neither was it fully closed, and she was not able to entirely mask the widening of her eyes. “It seems you have a tale to tell indeed, my friend,” she said. “Come; will you walk with me to a place where we may enjoy the starlight, and speak away from prying eyes and ears?”

“I will go,” Legolas agreed. “For I am not fit to see Gimli, not in this state; I have wept and I am sore in need of solace.” He smiled at her in apology. “Shall we run?”

“None could fault you for it, I think,” she said, before nodding. “I would be glad to free myself for a time from this encampment of men, and there are few whose company would bring me more pleasure-- however out of sorts you may think yourself.”

So speaking, she pulled off her helm to let her hair stream free-- perhaps spoiling her disguise, but Legolas could not blame her for it. They set off at an easy pace, and the brisk night air rushed past them, stirring the strands of Legolas’s braids and soothing his sore eyes .

Legolas felt free and easy running under the stars, as he had not done in long months, so occupied had he been with matters of governing Ithilien and brooding over his fruitless love for his friend.
It was good to feel young and free, untrammeled by any dwelling, seeing only the surrounding horizon, the sparkling stars, and the waving grasses about his feet.

After a time, Arwen turned to him, speaking easily despite the effort of running. “There-- now we may breathe air free of the noise and disturbance of others who would encumber us. And will you not speak now, my friend? What passed between you and your father?”

“We spoke of the Valar,” Legolas said heavily. “What they would think of my choice, and whether they would admit me, should I pursue my folly. Perhaps he believes they will not; he thinks he will prevail upon them to admit me if he accompanies me there. I cannot believe he would go. He would be miserable upon those shores, subject to greater powers and unable to govern by his own standard.”

“He would indeed,” said Arwen. “I had not thought to be surprised by anything you would tell me, but I find that I was wrong. Such a declaration, from one such as your father… no greater token of love, I think, could be granted. And yet you tell me you have wept, and your heart is heavy.” She glanced at him, and then ahead, but he felt somehow as though her eyes were still on him. “So I can only conclude that you refused him.”

“I did, though he took the fault upon himself for being a poor father.” Legolas’s voice shook. “For giving me too free a rein, of course; he cannot see the ways in which he has truly failed me. But he took himself to task, and offered a great sacrifice, and reminded me of…” he hesitated, turning his gaze downward, and paused until they had leapt across a narrow stream in their path and were sure of footing once more amidst the tussocks of grass. “He reminded me of the brevity of mortal life.”

Arwen darted another glance at him, swift but sure enough that he knew she understood the other layer of meaning beneath his words. “I see,” was all she said at first. “And did his words find any purchase with you, Legolas? Did they put you off your course?”

“I would be glad to meet my mother, and to have our family united once more,” Legolas said softly. “And it is true, I have thought of the short span of Gimli’s years-- he may live another yên, at most, but what of me then? Will the Valar even--” he stopped himself, unable to speak further. “And how shall I be Legolas without him, be I here or be I there?” he whispered, stopping and sinking to the turf. “Without Gimli, what will there be left of me?”

Arwen stopped as well, and gazed at him with the deepest sympathy. “For that question, I have no answer,” she said softly, lowering herself to her knees beside him. “I am not the one to ask; the sacrifices I have made for my mortal love ensure that I will never have to answer it myself. But if I can aid you in any way with this…” She hesitated before speaking, looking up at the stars, the line of her face and neck a glowing silhouette against the night sky, and then back down at him and directly in the eyes. “I would tell you that I do not regret my choice,” she said. “Not after sixty years of waiting, and not again after five years as a queen of men who do not understand me or my ways, with my number of elvish companions dwindled to few and ever less. I do not regret it, and I will not, not even when my love’s life draws to an end and there is no Straight Road open for me.”

Legolas laid his hand over hers, and they sat thus for a long moment, acknowledging future grief. “If we were truly wed, I should take him with me, at the end,” Legolas whispered at last. “I would sail the sea with him and we would perish there together, if the Valar are not kind.”

“And why are you not?” she said. “Why, after all that you have said and done, are you not truly wed?”

He is a dwarf and I am an elf,” Legolas said simply. “He loves me well, but never have I seen
proof of anything more, no glance nor sigh nor yearning touch. He is content as we are. To try to make it more would be to end that contentment. I dare not.”

“Not anything?” she said sharply. “I see no difference between his actions and yours; even as you stood against your father, so did he do the same on your behalf. He wears your jewels and your braids in his hair; he challenges his kin for love of you-- whatever that love may be, these sacrifices hardly speak of one who would turn you aside at an admission of feeling, whatever the exact nature of his own may be.”

Legolas pulled his knee up to his chin and leaned upon it. “A truer friend there is nowhere in Middle Earth or beyond,” he said. “But these are not proofs of passion. How did…” he hesitated, hoping the question was not impertinent. “How did you and Aragorn learn of your inclination toward one another?”

“Our situation was somewhat different, I confess,” she said, “and I cannot offer you advice from experience. But I tell you that he loved me long and in silence, and I knew of it before I ever made my own choice. And even when that decision was made, he would not speak of it to me-- for he did not dare demand my immortality in exchange for his love. And had he demanded it I would not have given it to him. But as it was not for him to speak, the choice was left to me. And when I made it, I did not look back.”

“I cannot know.” Legolas bowed his head. “Or rather, I know, and I wish I did not. For if he did feel as I do, I would surely see it. I am alone in this.”

“Are you?” She raised an eyebrow. “I would not have asked this of you, Legolas, but while it is true that he is not knowingly wed to you, I can see a bond in you-- more than would be true if there were no connection. How might such a thing come to pass, if there were no feeling from both sides?”

“Then truly your time among humans has not enlightened you. They suffer such torments all the time-- the pains of love that is not returned. Even dwarves do so; they will not wed if they cannot have the one they have chosen. Perhaps Gimli is so-- he does not court any dwarves; he has spoken to me indeed of one who would have him, but he wishes it not. His heart was likely closed long ere we met.”

“You are being deliberately obtuse,” she said, “and I think you know what I am asking. Did you lie with him, Legolas? And if you did, how can you question that he does not feel more than friendship for you, regardless of the nature of those feelings?”

“We did not truly lie together,” Legolas whispered. “We agreed to pretend that we had, and we shared a bed, but though we made a great show of passion, with cries and even lying close should any witness us, he touched me not, nor I him-- and yet, I was not… unmoved. He did not know the effect he had upon me.” His face burned with shame.

“And still you fail to see my meaning!” she said. “Such an arrangement as you have is not one that any friend or shieldbrother would make! Would you have done such a thing with Aragorn?” She paused. “With me?”

“Nay, I would not suggest such a thing to you,” Legolas gasped. “Nor would Aragorn and I think to do such, except as a last resort-- truly I cannot see that it could happen; we are not placed as Gimli and I are in this.”

“And there is a reason you are placed thus!” said Arwen. “There is a reason that the leaders of the various realms of Middle-Earth came to believe you already promised or wed! Legolas--” She broke off, and paused for a long moment before speaking again, in a slightly gentler voice. “I do
not mean to speak so sharply. But I beg you to tell Gimli of your feelings. I fear he will not speak, if you do not, and-- and I do not think he will say you nay.”

“Then let us be resolved,” Legolas said softly. “We will let this pass, and we do not have to speak of it again. I will suffer as I must, and I will not presume upon your kindness with my personal failings.”

“Legolas, I do not like to do this, but you leave me no choice,” Arwen said. “If you do not tell him soon… I will do it myself.”

Legolas could scarce believe he had heard her, and sat astonished, staring at this elf whom he had counted among his dearest friends, trustworthy of his most secret confidences. “Arwen-- my queen, I--”

“I know you do not see this as a kindness, but it is meant so,” she said gently. “Even if Gimli does not greet the news gladly, you cannot go on thus in misery. You devour yourself just as a wolf gnaws its leg in a trap, my friend. I will see your suffering end.”

“Do you mean then to drive me to Valinor, with or without my father?” Legolas asked bitterly. “For after Gimli has rejected my suit, there will be little indeed left for me on these shores.” Not even her-- and he meant it to cut.

“If that is what is meant to be, then it is what will be,” she said, sparing him no mercy. “You may curse me now, Legolas, but you will thank me when it is done, I think.”

Legolas hardly heard her, drawing in upon himself in misery. “You make me regret the depth of our friendship,” he whispered. “And you abuse my confidence. Yet I am powerless to do aught but entreat you to reconsider.”

“I cannot.” Arwen spoke softly, her voice husky with grief. “I must trust that you will see my wisdom in time.” She rose, the light of the rising moon eclipsed by her cloud of raven hair. “I will give you until the end of this council. As we prepare to depart, if you have not yet told him your heart… I will.”

“You set a short limit upon my time as a whole elf,” Legolas whispered.

“You are already a shadow of yourself.” Arwen took two steps back, then turned half aside. “As you would see, if only you were not so tightly bound by your fear. You would see much that I perceive clearly, could you set your fears aside.”

With a whisper of wind no stronger than a breeze, she was gone.

Legolas sat long upon the ground, with damp seeping through his breeches and night insects flitting before his unseeing eyes. She must think Gimli would accept him, would return his feelings. He laughed, an ugly sound filled with pain. She was not as close as he; of course she could not perceive the truth he saw plainly: just as a potato was not a rose, it could not be.

Her threat did nothing to encourage him to encourage speedy negotiations; if anything he should seek to draw them out for as long as he might. Of course, he would not have to do so. Thranduil would see to it that no accord could be swiftly met.

For this, Legolas would have wry cause to thank him.

When the eastern horizon grew dim over the Ephel Duath, Legolas bestirred himself and rose. He had been away from their camp all the long night; Gimli would be dismayed and believe, perhaps, that Thranduil had spirited him away. He could not bear to think of his friend in further sorrow,
so he arose and took himself back toward the smoke of the camp, feeling none of the ease he had experienced as he ran westward with Arwen beneath the stars.

He would be just in time to change his clothing and freshen himself before time to meet with the other leaders in the central pavilion. And there, he would have to face his father, and to discover whatever vitriol Thranduil had planned. Knowing the King of Eryn Lasgalen, it would not be pleasant.
“Gimli?”

The voice filtered in very slowly through the thick haze in Gimli’s mind. The haze was nice-- warm, and he did not have to think there. Something told him that he would regret when it cleared away.

“Gimli,” came the voice again, a little clearer this time. A few of the clouds began to drift aside. Something was rustling.

“Mrph,” Gimli said in reply, curling tighter in on himself. There was something warm and soft on top of him, and something hard in his hands. Something hard?

“Gimli, son of Glóin, Lord of Aglarond! Open your eyes at once, or you will regret it dearly!”

Consciousness was slowly sliding back in, along with discomfort. He was lying on something hard beneath his shoulder and side, though it was soft against his arm. His head was twisted strangely to the side, and his neck ached. He had the vague sense that opening his eyes would be a very bad idea.

“G’way,” he mumbled this time, turning to nestle himself deeper into his covering.

Another rustle above him, and suddenly a blast of cold air hit him as his cover was yanked away. He fumbled to grasp it back, and the mug he had been clutching slipped from his grip and fell to the ground, rolling away into the side of a cabinet with a dull clatter that lanced pain into Gimli’s skull.

“Oh,” he managed to groan, a sentiment that needed no further words, but he added, “Great Mahal.”

“Rise and shine,” came Aragorn’s pitiless voice above him. “Sunrise is soon, and negotiations will follow shortly after. You would not represent your people in last night’s clothing, with tousled braids and an inability to speak in complete sentences?”

Gimli cursed-- in Khuzdul, for politeness’ sake.

“You’re welcome,” Aragorn told him without even a whisker of sympathy. “Shall I provide an escort to your tent, or are you able to walk on your own?”

“I will walk,” Gimli said with a feeble attempt at dignity, hauling himself to his feet through sheer stubbornness. He staggered out into the dim of early morning, groaning-- his head felt like an overripe melon that had been dropped from the top of a tall tower to spatter on the cobblestones below.

If only he could retreat to his tent with a flagon of water and lie down until later-- he might just feel like rising around the time the sun set. But there was the council to be got through, and without doubt, the delegates from Erebor and Mirkw-- Eryn Lasgalen, he corrected himself-- would not be the sort he wanted to endure on top of a morning head. What had been in that drink? Balrogs’ piss? Perhaps he should reconsider trading good steel for more of it.

Gimli did not remember Legolas might be waiting for him until he saw the elf standing over the pack and modest trunks that held his things, considering what to wear. Legolas glanced up to meet him, eyes shuttered and face oddly closed; the strange, tense look of him gave Gimli a pang
of dismay.

“Have you been out the whole night?” Legolas tried for lightness, but his eyes were sharp and his nose twitched-- no doubt detecting the scent of the whiskey Gimli had consumed. “You must have found pleasant company willing to share strong spirits. Did Orm at last succeed in his arguments?”

Gimli blinked at him, startled. “No. What think you of my commitment to our deception? I would not dally with another dwarf while everyone here believes us wed! Or at all, with that one.” He fidgeted under Legolas’s stern regard. “I was with Aragorn.”

To his amazement, Legolas stiffened still further, his eyes and lips narrowing. “Did you see the queen?”

“She was not with us,” Gimli said slowly. “What has you in such a foul temper, my friend? Is it your father? What did he say to hurt you?”

“My father said much.” Legolas relaxed nonetheless, and Gimli wondered at his odd manner regarding the queen. Could he be jealous of Arwen’s friendship with Gimli? Perhaps Legolas yearned for her herself, and could not speak for Aragorn’s sake. She was very beautiful, but the thought made Gimli’s uneasy stomach roll and threaten to empty. Legolas only needed to wait, and he might console her when Aragorn had passed. And Gimli, too, would be gone.

He wondered at his own maudlin turn of mind-- it remained, it seemed, with the effects of the whiskey that yet clouded his mind. But Legolas was still speaking. “Much,” he repeated, his eyes drifting somewhere into the distance, “most of which I expected, only some of which I did not. I suppose he will be convinced of our falsehoods, in any case....” He shook himself. “Forgive me, my friend; I am disquieted in my thoughts and you are an easy target. I spoke to Arwen last night--” again that odd stiffening and tightening of his face “--and she said you had words with your own father. Was that as distressing a conversation as we had feared?”

Gimli sighed. “Distressing, aye,” he said, “that is one word for it.” He shook his head, and immediately regretted the motion when it spun sickeningly. “He too said many things, as did I-- things I do not regret saying, but which might have been more diplomatically spoken.” He felt too bedraggled now to summon up the anger of last night.

“And so you betook yourself to Aragorn’s tent,” surmised Legolas, “there to drink yourself into a stupor.”

“That I did.” Gimli dragged himself forward to look for his own dressing things. “And now I shall face my former king having shouted sentiments both true and false for half his delegation to hear, and barely able to string my thoughts together to defend them.” He dragged a hand over his braid, feeling the clasps of Legolas’s gift dig into his scalp, loosened from having been slept on.

Legolas came and set a sympathetic hand upon his shoulder. “I hardly fared better,” he said, but then tilted his head. “Tell me more of your father’s words,” he asked, but set his finger before his lips and crept to one side, soundless-- and there, Gimli perceived a shadow lay against the tent: the shape of someone listening behind the canvas.

“He said my mother would like for me to visit her in Dale. It would be a lengthy journey, but I believe she deserves my attendance. I hesitate to ask you, of course, since you have your own realm to oversee.” Gimli dissembled, watching as Legolas reached a stealthy hand out and seized the canvas suddenly, yanking it asunder.

“Galion,” he said, sharply but without surprise. “So it was you who sent news of Gimli and me to
my father. It seems likely to me that you have precipitated this entire unfortunate affair.”

“My prince,” Galion drew himself upright with great dignity, “I do only as my king has asked me
to do-- to give him timely and true news of his son. I do not advise. His reactions are his own to
choose.”

“Long I have suspected you of carrying tales,” Legolas said. “And I consoled myself that there
was little enough to tell. But you are here now, when my father needs no news, and yet you listen.
Will you carry every word of our talk to him today, before he deigns to show himself at the
parley, that he may best choose how to use it against us?”

“I do as I must,” Galion said.

“Indeed,” Legolas drew himself up, austere and dignified. “As do I. You are not welcome to
return to Ithilien with me. You are loyal to my father and you are his spy; you will return to Eryn
Lasgalen with him and I will not have you darken my halls again.”

“That is your right,” Galion said calmly, seeming not at all troubled by Legolas’s decree. “And I,
in turn, will tell your sire that the two of you are not yet wed in truth, but that you carp at one
another in jealousy and feign your affection. I shall leave it to him to decide whether you have
spread this falsehood in order to shame him.” He turned on his heel and strode away, leaving them
to stare after him in shock.

The quiet lasted only a moment before Legolas dropped his wrathful stare and began to pace.
“This will not sit well with him,” he murmured. “After what I said to him… to think it is done
only in spite…”

“What did you say to him?” asked Gimli, and Legolas looked up at him, furtive, almost guilty.

“It matters not,” he said. “Suffice to say that he will be-- well.” He laughed, a breathless, half-
hysterical laugh. “He was already more than displeased, so I cannot even imagine his reaction
now.”

“Do you think Galion will tell?” asked Gimli. He did not know whether to anticipate the thought
with relief or bitter sorrow-- for the last weeks of pretense had brought him swells of joy and pain
sharper than any he had experienced before, and he had avoided speaking of its end for fear of
losing even the falsehood. Now that all, it seemed, had been taken in by their ruse; after what he
had said to his own father-- how were they to face their exposure?

This, he thought, they should perhaps have planned more thoroughly.

“I know not.” Legolas seized the end of his own braid and practically yanked on it before
dropping it in renewed agitation. “I thought yesterday I could anticipate my father; now I find I
have no concept of how he might react. He has no allies here, only more and less hated enemies,
so he has no one to stand by him should he expose us, no one to believe the truth of his words.
Perhaps he will say nothing for a time, the better to drive us mad with uncertainty; perhaps, again,
he will challenge us openly to defend ourselves. I know not!”

For all his own unease, Gimli found his head clearing at the sight of his friend’s dismay. He
stepped forward, ignoring the headache that still throbbed anew with every motion, and laid a
hand on Legolas’s arm. “Be easy,” he said, though he feared his tone belied the words. “We
knew that our ruse must somehow come to an end. And whatever happens, we have vowed that
we will stand together in the face of the fallout. I hold to that promise still, whatever your father
might unleash on us.”
Legolas looked over at him and managed a weak smile. “You comfort me,” he said. “And your steadfastness is a solid anchor in the midst of a stormy sea.” But something twisted in his eyes and face then, and Gimli caught a flash of what looked like agony, quickly masked. Legolas swallowed. “Still, I worry.”

“As do I.” Gimli gazed down at the trunk that stood open before him, holding his clothing. “But whatever comes, we must face it as it does.” He reached inside to search for something suitable to wear. “So let us ready ourselves, and sally forth to face our foes.”

***

It was agony in the bargaining tent.

Thranduil arrived nearly an hour later than anyone else, sailing along like a tall ship, his face stony as granite. Gimli tried to eye him without being obvious about it; the King of Eryn Lasgalen appeared to have been carved from stone from the neck up-- by a sculptor who had both the gift of Mahal and a burning desire to embody the essence of ‘cold rage.’ Just looking at the diamond-chiseled muscles of Thranduil’s jaw made Gimli’s own neck hurt.

Aragorn let the Elvenking’s entrance pass with a brief, polite greeting and continued laying out his vision of healthy trade among the nations of the east and north-- stressing how each possessed commodities that others did not, and that all could use, and explaining how amicable trade would be of benefit to each nation.

Éomer gave Gimli a smirk and a raised brow doubtless intended to comment upon his obvious discomfort; it did nothing but increase his chagrin that he must appear before his father-in-l-- in front of Thranduil, he amended hastily-- to such poor effect.

“One of the commodities in dispute is dwarven steel,” Aragorn explained, a steady drone that did Gimli’s thumping head and sloshing stomach no good. “I have already approached the lord of Aglarond with a proposal that we of Gondor should trade spirits to his people in exchange for metal--”

Gimli gave Aragorn a sickly smile; if anyone truly wished to quibble over conflicts of interest, it was all too obvious that such trades had already begun on a small scale. He heard a snort from the Erebor delegation and raised his aching head to behold Orm standing there, his eyes snapping with contempt.

Aragorn plowed on stubbornly, ignoring the byplay. “We will be glad to trade both spirits and steel to Eryn Lasgalen for their goods and to Rohan for crops-- including barley to make the malt,” he smiled. “I believe we can reach satisfactory terms for all--”

Frár from Erebor struck his gauntleted fist on the tabletop, and Aragorn stopped, polite, to listen.

“Satisfactory terms?” Frár shouted, and Stonehelm sat passive, allowing the outburst. “Aglarond will undercut the worth of Erebor’s own steel to buy Gondor’s friendship!”

“That we will not!” Gimli shoved himself up likewise, glowering at Frár. “I will not take the food from my own people’s mouths just to score off my kin who imagine me a traitor and a--”

“An elf-lover,” Orm muttered under his breath. “Foul and fickle breakers of bargains who would slay those they betray to hide the truth of their betrayal!”

Gimli clenched his teeth against the anger that joined his headache to pulse against the backs of his eyes. “It is true, I do not hate elves,” he said as calmly as he could, ignoring the last words-- they did not deserve a response. “But my husband and I have come here in good faith to trade with
other realms for the satisfaction Elessar describes. Elf-lover I may be; traitor I am not.”

Across the table, he saw Legolas’s eyes dart from him to Thranduil, but he said nothing. Neither, almost to Gimli’s surprise, did Thranduil-- but neither did the cold fury melt from his expression.

“Orm,” Thorin spoke up at last, raising a hand, and the dwarf subsided, eyes still burning in Gimli’s direction. “The Lord of Aglarond speaks rightly-- we are all here to forge agreements to the satisfaction of all. For my part, I shall not worry until he is closeted alone with the lord of Ithilien--”

“As he is each night.” This time, the mutter came from the corner where the Mirkwood delegation had assembled. “You waste your time in arguing during these meetings, when any arrangements that matter are made between them after sundown.”

Gimli darted yet another glance at Thranduil, waiting in something like terror for him to speak up, but to his surprise, Thranduil simply raised a hand as Thorin had done, calling his people to silence. He did not speak, however, and there was a tense but awkward silence as everyone waited for him to say something. He made no indication of ending it.

“Enough,” said Aragorn at last. “The trade arrangements will be visible to all at the end of this council; no private agreements will be passed. We meet as leaders and allies, but our personal sentiments we put aside when we entered this tent.”

Gimli, sneaking another glance at Thranduil, begged to differ.

But Aragorn’s words seemed to have settled the room, for the moment at least, and silence fell again until Ómer spoke up with determined cheer. “This settlement seems agreeable to Rohan,” he said. “We too have goods to offer, should Erebor be interested as Aglarond is in ales, meats, and other foodstuffs from our fields, such as milk and cheese. We may trade these items for steel and crafts from Erebor as well as Aglarond, and gems and honey mead from Ithilien. Rohan has fine beasts to offer to all who wish them, and our fields grow more grain than is needed. We will find an equitable means of exchange between us.”

“If ever the dwarves are allowed our say,” muttered Frár.

The talk of food did little to settle Gimli’s stomach, but he forced himself to smile at Ómer in thanks for his intercession. Ómer winked at him in response, covered by the great rustling of papers as the scribes of various delegations hurried to note down the suggestion.

The conversation devolved into a discussion of prices, to which Gimli listened with half a head-- which, today, was all he could spare. He could not stop his gaze from flickering back and forth between Legolas and Thranduil, who both spoke little. And even as he sat there, the tension in the room raised until he felt something must shatter.

“Enough,” he growled at length. “If my partners in trade will not agree on a value for barter, then I can set a value upon Aglarond’s goods in gold-- the same value always, for any who come seeking our wares. I reserve the right to change that value for all when conditions change, as we may encounter better or worse seasons in mining. But all must pay the same for each season. Will that suffice to satisfy your squabbles?”

Erebor scowled but made no protest-- of course; they possessed gold in abundance. Aragorn shrugged; Gondor also could pay. But Ómer frowned. “Rohan does not possess great stockpiles of currency or precious metals,” he said. “And we are your protector. We should be granted consideration for this.”
“Ithilien also has little coin. We have traded our wares only since establishing our settlement. My people mean to sail; they take little with them when they leave their homes and come to tarry with us. Gold would be meaningless in the Undying Lands.” Legolas gave Gimli an apologetic shrug.

“Eryn Lasgalen does not speak,” Aragorn noted. Thranduil merely elevated one eyebrow and raised his shoulder in the faintest of shrugs.

“If we were to agree upon a gold value for all commodities, then barter could be assigned an equivalent value in gold and fairness preserved,” Gimli said.

“Who would assign these values? Would they be the same in each nation or for each item? What if the harvest fails in Dale but is plentiful in Rohan? Must the men of Dale starve?” Bard II of Dale stood forth. “We could not compete with such a value. Or if the trees in Lasgalen fail, they may bear plentifully in the south of Gondor. And must we meet at each change of the seasons to agree upon an equitable value of exchange?”

“Elvish leather is highly sought after, more so than that produced in Rohan, for the craft of those who tool it,” Éomer said. “The value of Rohan leatherwork should not be adjudged as high as that of Lasgalen or Ithilien, or we will not be able to sell any of our goods, not even to those who wish to husband their coin and require utility over artisanship.”

Gimli scrubbed his hand over his beard in dismay. It was like trying to stuff cats in a sack; every time you put one in through the mouth, six others escaped, flaying skin on their way out.

“What if Ithilien and Aglarond do not trade with one another at all?” Legolas ventured, his voice hesitant. “It seems to me that matters of money are not the issue here, but rather my friendship—my marriage—” a red flush crept high on his cheekbones, “to its lord. If we do not exchange goods, then there will be no further cause to accuse either of us of favoritism. As these domains did not exist five years ago, they are not dependent upon one another now. All either kingdom requires may be obtained elsewhere-- and all our wares are available elsewhere, also.”

Gimli gazed at him in dismay. He had, of course, stated the exact nature of the problem— but had not their purpose in this ruse been to prove that they could separate their personal matters from their political roles? That they could do as they willed in their personal lives without allowing it to interfere with their trade relationships?

But he followed Legolas’s gaze once more to Thranduil, and he wondered if perhaps there were more to his statement than mere capitulation.

It was Éomer who spoke up. “There is no need for such speech!” he said hastily. “How could we claim ourselves above pettiness if we should forbid two realms from doing business out of distrust for their leaders?” He gazed around the room defiantly, meeting even Thranduil’s eyes (though Gimli could not but notice that he quailed a bit). “These problems of trade would have arisen, whoever is married to whom— this incident has only brought them to light.”

“That is easy enough to say,” interjected Thorin, “as the liege-lord of one of said realms. Your land will benefit at leisure from the goods and deeds of Aglarond, and the goodwill of its leader, as it has indeed already.”

Éomer blinked, and then his eyes narrowed. “You accuse me of currying favor from a realm within my own kingdom?” he growled.

Some of Gimli’s dwarves rose to their feet behind him, doubtless ready to stand behind Éomer; Gimli even thought one or two of Legolas’s elves had taken a breath as though to speak, and things might have gone ill had Aragorn not risen from his chair.
“Stop,” he said, in a voice that was even but rang with tones of command. “Such accusations and infighting do not become the leaders of the free peoples of Middle-Earth.” He scanned the room, and Gimli thought, knowing his face well, that he might be resisting the urge to roll his eyes. “I would suggest we call a short recess, so that delegations may discuss among themselves and tempers may cool. We will return here in half an hour.”

He had phrased it as a suggestion, but it was doubtless an order— and one none of the leaders would defy. With much grumbling and shuffling of papers, the delegations rose from their seats and exited the tent.

Gimli hesitated, as his delegation was further from the door, and watched Legolas withdraw with his people gathered about him. The elf’s shoulders were slightly lowered, as if he had lost his joyous nature; Gimli hardly blamed him. He would like nothing better than to go to his friend and offer comfort, but he had taken hardly a step in that direction when Orm interposed himself between Gimli and the party of elves.

“It matters not what agreements are made here, does it? You will deal with the son of Thranduil under the table regardless, and the king of Gondor will turn a blind eye!” He spat to the side, near the edge of the tent. “He, too, is an elf-lover.”

“You speak of beauty you have not the wit to understand, and degrade the dignity of your forebears,” Gimli said, stomping out through the tent flap and into the sun, wondering how in the world he might rid himself of this pursuit.

“As if you serving in the elf’s bed does not?” Orm missed neither a step nor a word.

“Keep your tongue behind your teeth if you do not wish to cross blades with a son of Durin,” Gimli grated, his jaw clenching tight. “Are you not satisfied with your banishment? Would you seek death in addition to that judgment?”

“I would duel you if I found you worthy. Doubtless the elf defended your craven hide in battle,” he said sweetly. “Or you would not have survived the Ring War. I have heard tales that he slew an oliphaunt single-handed, while you could not match his count upon the field.”

If Gimli had been more inclined to peaceful reflection he might have found Orm’s waspish talk understandable, even pitiable; he was, after all, the first dwarf in many a long age to be jilted for an elf. However, Gimli’s blood arose upon the word “craven,” and his axe flew into his hands as if conjured.

“Up with your axe!” he bellowed. “I claim insult, and we will settle this upon the field of honor!”

“So!” Orm declared in a mocking voice that rose above the din of all the other discussions, calling instant silence. “The lord of Aglarond draws blade upon his banished subject. Do you move to tyranny now, then, Gimli son of Glóin? Will the dwarves of Aglarond thus suffer for your proclivities, unwilling to speak up for fear they too should be similarly silenced?”

“No!” Horvari shoved his way through the Aglarond delegation to plant himself at Gimli’s side. “So you claim to speak for the dwarves of Aglarond, Orm son of Orin? You, who left of your own accord, out of spite for our leader and scorn of his choices? You, who seek to destroy the friendships and alliances we have built?” He unsheathed his own axe. “If our lord may not challenge you, I shall do it for him.”

“Wait—” came Éomer’s voice, sudden and strained behind them, but Gimli paid him no mind.

“This insult was directed at me,” he said, his mind still hazed with anger. “It will not be said that
Gimli son of Glóin allowed others to fight his battles for him.”

“Nor will it be said that those battles were his alone.” Bera surfaced beside Horvari. “You scorn and spite the purest truth of dwarfkind, Orm, and for the sake of our friendships and our lord’s honor in keeping his troth, we will not stand for it.”

“So!” An unfamiliar dwarf from the Erebor delegation spoke up now. “You admit it, then-- that your lord plays favorites and goes to his knees for the pleasure of a leaf-eater, and that you stand for it! That you support it, even!”

“Wait!” Legolas had broken away from his people now, and come to stand beside Gimli. “Gimli, Horvari, Bera-- do not fight your kin on my account. I would not be responsible for the spilling of blood--”

“Oh, and are you not already?” spit Frár. “Our memories are long, faithless wood-sprite, and we do not forget your slights to us! And this the largest of all-- that you would profane, despoil one of our own in your last effort to spite us--”

“You are the one who profanes a truth!” roared Gimli. “You belittle true sentiment in your accusations; you mock the tenets of our kind and our making, and I will not stand for it!”

“Enough talk, then,” snarled Frár, and, drawing his axe, he hurled himself forward.

There was a great clang as Horvari rushed to meet him, and their axes met in midair-- so hard that Gimli actually heard gasps from behind him from some of the men. And then all other sound was lost in the clamor of battle as he joined the fray himself.

He swung his axe, thinking of nothing but the joy of seeing it cleave the honorless dog before him-- but then his collar was seized and he was drawn back by brute force.

“Not at my parley,” Aragorn hissed through clenched teeth. Behind him, Gimli could hear shouts of dismay and anger; he spied Rohirrim and Gondorian soldiers alike plowing through the fray. “Call off your kin.”

The light of anger in his eyes sent a shiver down Gimli’s spine. Gruffly he shouted, “Stand down, Aglarond!” and as he did so, he heard the cry echoed in the name of Erebor. The ringing of metal and the shouting stopped.

Aragorn allowed Gimli to turn, where he beheld Frár hanging from Éomer’s grasp just as he hung from Aragorn’s. The dwarf shook himself free, scowling at Éomer and stroking the haft of his axe.

“Do not strike at the king of the Rohirrim, or you must seek trade in Eriador, for all in Arnor will turn you from their gates,” Aragorn said in a voice that could have frozen steel. “Will you seek to cart your foodstuffs from across the Misty Mountains?”

Frár let his axe sag, and it was ended.

“Disperse to your camps.” All the majesty of Númenor shone revealed in Aragorn, and he turned the withering flame of his stare across the delegates, who slunk away shamed, each group in the direction of its own lodging.

“Not you,” he hissed to Gimli, never letting go his collar. “You and I will talk. Now.”

Gimli let himself be ushered back into the parley tent and plunked down in a chair, conscious of Thranduil’s serene regard before they vanished within; the elf looked quite pleased with the entire
spectacle, which only made Gimli’s shame burn the hotter.

“I can forgive you burying yourself in your cups last night; I can forgive the hasty speech and the foolish grandstanding at our parley. Others will do as much. But this I cannot allow. You are letting your personal concerns cloud your vision, and the distress of your despair has burst forth in violence, inciting you to break the truce of this gathering,” Aragorn said. “You leave me no choice, my friend. Settle your affairs with the elf, or I shall settle them for you. Tell him your heart!”

Gimli gaped up at him. This was not the lecture he had expected— but he waited for Aragorn to speak further to no avail. When the silence had stretched so long that it was near unbearable, Gimli said weakly, “...What?”

“You heard me.” Aragorn’s voice was ruthless. “I have been patient with your delay; I was patient with your charade, foolish as I think it— but no longer! I had hoped you would work your way to the courage on your own, but I see it is not to be. If you can challenge your own kin at a diplomatic gathering—” he emphasized the words, and Gimli’s shame grew so large that it pressed him lower in his chair “—in the name of a love you deny yourself, you can name it to the one who receives it!” He seemed taller than usual, or perhaps Gimli merely felt smaller. “I am past suggesting; I am past pleading. I command you to tell him the truth, or I will do myself.”

“And how should that help matters and not make them worse?” Gimli found some room in his head for another spark of anger. “All that can do is break more relationships than before, without mending the ones that are already broken! My kin fought today in the name of the sacredness of a dwarf’s love— how should any of the realms trust us or one another again if they learn it all a ruse?”

“And how should they learn it a ruse if it ceases to be one?” Aragorn countered. “All that is yet whole will shatter as well, soon enough, if you do not speak; I see you shrinking, struggling to turn your heart to stone and exploding into violence when you prove unable to do so. Continue to deny yourself, and more will break ere all is ended.”

Gimli glared down at the table beneath his hands, clenching his teeth against the outburst that wished to erupt and prove Aragorn correct. “I cannot,” he said at last, barely able to form the words. “Do not ask me to do this, Aragorn.”

“I tell you again, I do not ask,” said Aragorn. “I order. I am past expecting you to handle your affairs for yourself, in your own time. I yet hope that this may force you to do so yourself, but if you continue to prove unable, I promise you that I will do it for you.”

Gimli laid his head down upon the table with a solid thump. He had never known Aragorn to speak false.

“Give me time,” he mumbled without rising. “I must prepare myself, and him, if I am to speak true.”

“You will have until the parley is finished,” Aragorn said sternly. “I will give you no more. Now go and calm your people, and let it be known I will brook no more displays from any here, be it man, elf, or dwarf. I will cast them out and another more level-headed delegate will be asked to speak in their stead.”

“I will spread the word,” Gimli said, and stamped out, trying to cover his dismay with a show of belligerence.
Chapter 25

Chapter by TAFKAB

Thranduil, King of Eryn Lasgalen, greeted the messenger of Gondor with great serenity. “Of course, there will be no sword, nor bow, nor knife raised by the elves of this party,” he pledged smoothly. “We had no part in the dwarves’ quarrel, and we do not seek another. I wish only to settle these troubling matters and return to my home.”

The messenger bowed and hurried off to relay the message to the King of Gondor; Thranduil sat back in his chair with a goblet in his hand and allowed himself the tiniest of smiles. Mortals were so tiresomely predictable! It was very simple to lay the seeds of discord and water them judiciously, then watch the vines of chaos sprout and lay waste the land while disavowing any involvement.

He need hardly be here; the dwarves would take care of one another without any elves ever having to intervene.

His smile faded, though, when he thought of his son. Duplicitous and sly, that one. Perhaps he had learned too well the ways of his father. Thranduil would never have credited Legolas with the wit or the boldness to enact such a brazen falsehood, or to pursue it even in the face of the greatest concession Thranduil had ever offered another elf.

Only to have it thrown back in his face.

It would have pleased him to see the Lord of Aglarond dismembered by his own kin; Legolas might be false in the matter of his marriage, but he had revealed the truth of his obsession with the mortal, and Thranduil knew the dwarf’s well-being was of great importance to him. If pain were repaid to pain, nothing short of the dwarf’s death would suffice to redress the grief Legolas had given his father.

It was unfortunate indeed for them both that Eryn Lasgalen stood between Erebor and the Misty Mountains, that it controlled the roots of Anduin, and that all peoples in the south and east relied upon the Shire for sweet galenas; losing the most direct route of access to their preferred supplier of smoke would be a sore blow for many of the foolish mortals. Perhaps in the face of such a threat, Legolas might be convinced to admit to his deception before the others, and the embarrassment might be used to drive a wedge between him and the dwarf.

He smiled mirthlessly. Perhaps he would have words with the dwarf the son of Glóin had banished from his realm; the news of it was discussed loudly and could be heard by anyone who wandered past the dwarven camps. That dwarf’s anger could prove useful indeed.

Thranduil laid his long, graceful hands upon the carved arms of his throne and reclined against its straight back. He had perfected the illusion of ease within it, but at times like these the unyielding wood galled him sorely.

“Call the dwarf Orm to me,” he said to Galion. “I believe he and I may find it profitable to confer.”
Gimli went abroad among the dwarves of Aglarond, repeating the king’s injunction. Though many grumbled, none ventured to gainsay his authority. He kept close watch upon them, noting that some faces remained too smooth and others curdled with distaste; those he would have to watch.

When he had passed among them and was satisfied that no immediate rebellion was forthcoming, Gimli skulked toward his own tent, wondering if the elf was within. He had asked for time; surely Aragorn would not yet have spilled his secret. However would he prepare either of them for it to be told?

And how might he face Legolas even now, having failed to lead his people in peaceful parley, the peace of the meeting lasting not even until time for the first meal to be served?

He slunk into the tent and pulled off his helm, waiting until he had laid it on a small side table before looking around for Legolas.

The elf sat in the corner of the tent, upon their shared cot. His knees were drawn up to his chest and his arms wrapped around them, and he watched Gimli with an unreadable expression.

Gimli swallowed hard, and raised a hand in weak greeting.

“You are well, then,” said Legolas, his voice odd: tight and restrained. “I wished to find you earlier, but Aragorn accosted me and sent me--”

Gimli’s head snapped up. “He did?” he said in a panic. Aragorn would not have-- he had promised Gimli the entirety of the council; he would not be so cruel as to deny him that time, at least-- would he?

“He did,” said Legolas, “and in a towering temper indeed, though I do not think it was directed at me-- or, not solely at me.” He cast Gimli a wry look. “He bade me go among my people and make them swear to raise no weapons-- and though I wished to find you, I think it is well that I did so; many seemed displeased with the injunction.” One corner of his mouth quirked in a half-smile. “It is perhaps not comforting that elves should hunger for violence against dwarves, but I confess I found relief in the fact that any raised voices spoke in your defense.”

“Of course.” Gimli relaxed, as much as he could with leftover adrenaline still rushing through his blood. “Aragorn commanded me to do the same. And I think I may say with confidence that his displeasure was directed at me.”

“I do not like to, but I fear I must agree with you.” Legolas rose, then, unfolding from his bundle and approaching Gimli to lay a hand on his shoulder. “You are unhurt, then? I tried to place myself between you and your foes, but I fear I was unsuccessful.”

“Unhurt, save my pride,” grumbled Gimli. “You would not be so convinced of my welfare had you heard the dressing-down I received from Aragorn. He--” He stopped, flushing, and then made himself continue. “It is a shameful thing, Legolas, to be scolded like a dwarfling by one sixty years one’s junior.” He sighed. “It is more shameful still to deserve it. I should not have let my temper run away with me.”

“No, you should not,” Legolas agreed, his face still tight with worry. “What brought you to challenge Orm so? Surely he could not have driven you to such extremes.”
“You entirely underestimate his ability to be infuriating,” sighed Gimli. “Once it intrigued me; I thought his wit enthralling and his self-possession admirable. But I am a different dwarf now, and especially now that he uses me as a whetstone for his tongue, I am inclined to regret my past choices. You will notice that he escaped the fighting entirely!” He seethed for a moment, and then sagged, unable to muster the energy for more wrath. “And I was in no fit state to negotiate today regardless, I fear.”

“No, I suppose not.” Legolas’s hand was still on his shoulder; he gazed away, somewhere over Gimli’s head. “Perhaps we should not have done this,” he whispered. “My own father’s rage I contemplated, but the rest of it—”

“Your father.” Gimli felt a chill run down his spine just thinking of him. “Your father’s rage boils beneath a layer of ice. I would never have thought such a thing possible after facing the assembled hosts of Mordor arrayed under Sauron at the Morannon, but the sight of his face in meetings opens new realms of terror.”

“He will never forgive me, I fear,” said Legolas. “I spurned him more than you know, and now with the knowledge of our—of our falsehood, I worry that I have broken something between us that will never mend.”

“I am sorry,” Gimli said. “I never meant it to go this far.” He hesitated. “Do you think—” He could not say it; for all the trouble it had caused, for all the pain and anger and near bloodshed, he could not call for an end to their ruse. Not now, not knowing that the end of their friendship was only days away— if Legolas was bound to know his secret, Gimli could not bring himself to ask for an end to the nearest thing to love he would ever have.

But Legolas seemed to understand him. “No,” he said fiercely. “No, I do not wish to end it. That they respond as they do is their fault, not ours— I must hold to that knowledge, even as it pains me. Even that you are willing to back down from our position for my sake places you higher in honor and in my heart than many of our people, including my father. If I am to lose him—” He gulped in a breath. “If I am to lose him, I can think of no better reason than you.”

Gimli’s heart leapt into his throat for a moment. “I—I feel the same,” he managed at last, husky. If this was the nearest he would come, it would be enough.

And yet he could draw nearer still, if he could bear to say it— and a kind of reckless courage overcame him. If he would have only these few days, he would have them as fully as he could. “I know,” he said, licking dry lips, “I know this is not something often done between us. But I feel lonely and empty tonight, worn down like sandstone after a thousand years of rain, and I—I would have you close to me. Will you—” It was harder to say than he had thought. “Will you stay beside me this night? Not in union feigned for the eyes of others, but as my companion and my friend?”

He could hardly believe his own daring, but the words were out now; his heart thumped blood in his ears with a sickening rushing sound. But slowly, Legolas looked down at him, and his eyes were not mocking; rather, the loneliness and compassion in them matched Gimli’s own.

“I will,” he said. “It would comfort me to have you by my side. For whatever in the world may try to come between us, I know that I am not alone with you.”

There was a pain in his eyes and his face as he said that, and Gimli could not even try to determine if that pain came from the same source as his own, or something different. For the moment, it was enough to simply be there with Legolas, to know that whatever falsehoods lay still between them, there was the truth of this, as well.

“You have not had enough rest, it is plain,” Legolas said. “Remove your armor and lie down; I
will stay close and keep watch.”

He turned back the bed as Gimli removed his armor, fussing with pillows and blankets and the soft mat of fresh-cut heather within the mattress ticking. Gimli could hear him smoothing his palms over the soft fabric again and again-- the elf was clearly in distress as well.

“You too seem weary,” he said kindly when he stood in only his shirt and breeches. He kicked his boots toward the pile of his armor, not caring where they landed. “Join me in resting, and it may be the both of us will be better negotiators for it when the parley meets.”

“Will you find it amiss if I….” Legolas gestured toward the bed, the motion graceless with tension. “I would not be away from you, lest some discontented and treacherous one among our peoples should come upon you, unarmored and defenseless in your sleep.”

“Rest where you will,” Gimli said gruffly. “I fear you not, elf. Do you not know it by now?”

“Perhaps I do not,” Legolas said, and his voice was so soft Gimli could hardly hear it. “Lie down, then, and I will lie at your side, and none will come to you unless they first come through me.”

“And if any come from the other side, they must come through me to get to you,” Gimli promised solemnly. “As it ever was.”

“And, I hope, as it ever shall be.” So saying, Legolas opened the blankets and Gimli slid between them, then closed his eyes and held his breath as the elf settled next to him, long and warm and tall, immortal strength surrendered to this tenderness, whatever it might be.

Why must it be ended? Miserable at the thought, Gimli turned despite himself and nestled against Legolas’s side, pillowing his head on the elf’s arm. It slid around him, reflecting back his own heat and warming his body as well as his heart.

“Sleep,” Legolas said, and began to sing-- a quiet wordless song that rocked Gimli into soft and dreamless peace.
Chapter 27

Legolas lay long at Gimli’s side, listening to the soft sounds on the air about them-- the murmur of elves and dwarves and men, the crackle of fires and plod of footsteps, the rustle and flap of their tent in the breeze. None of the sounds spoke of threat, and he luxuriated in the feel of Gimli tucked against him, sunk in trusting slumber. He was almost lost in reverie when a set of booted feet-- their stride too short for man or elf-- drew near the tent, a hesitant gait that spoke of uncertainty.

Legolas wore only his tunic and breeches, but he had a small dagger tucked away beneath the edge of the bed, and in an instant it was in his hand, ready to pierce any who sought to do harm to Gimli. He steeled himself, glaring a warning at the flap of the tent as it moved-- drawing away to reveal Gimli’s father, torment upon his face.

Glóin stepped inside, squinting, then fell still, startled to be met with steel. Legolas did not waver, neither advancing the knife nor withdrawing it-- not until he could be certain of Glóin’s intentions.

The dwarf raised his hands, both palms out, and Legolas relaxed. Drawing the blankets gently over Gimli and arranging his braided hair softly upon the pillow, he rose, conscious of the disarray of his own hair and of his own state of undress. Even his feet were bare, separated from the ground only by a thin woollen mat.

“He is unwell,” Legolas said, hearing the thread of steel beneath his soft voice. “He is resting.”

“I should have expected to find you here,” Glóin said harshly, but he did not retreat. “What is the matter with my son?”

“What is not the matter?” Legolas allowed the knife to fall to his side, but kept his fingers curled around it and his arm tensed-- after the commotion of earlier, he would take no risks with Gimli’s safety. Though he doubted Glóin would attack his son, Legolas did not quite trust that there would be no blows thrown inside their tent. “He is weary and sick at heart, and I will suffer no further pain to be dealt to him this night.”

“I came not to wound my son with words.” Glóin glowered at Legolas with dislike. “I came to assure him that the dwarf Orm did not speak on behalf of the embassy from Erebor. He attached himself to us as we traveled near to the parley, and we were unaware of the strife between him and Aglarond. Formerly, he and Gimli were great friends.”

“So I have been told,” said Legolas stiffly. He said nothing more of that matter-- let Glóin draw his own conclusions as to how much Gimli had told him. “I am sure that will be a relief for Gimli to hear. If you wish, I will pass it on to him when he wakes.”

“See that you do.” Glóin remained where he was, stubbornly ignoring the unsubtle hint that he might leave. “You touch his hair. His beard.” He might have growled the words, but they came out with more discomfort than anger. “Tell me truly, elf. Is he your One?”

Legolas could not help the blush that rose in his cheeks: he had forgotten himself before, when reaching down to tend Gimli’s hair. But he would not admit that to Gimli’s father. And he had asked for an answer in such a way that Legolas could give him the truth, regardless of their charade. “He is,” he said, lifting his chin. No more need be said.

“I like it not,” Glóin said simply. “For he is my son, and whether or not you are true, this course brings him pain.”
“It does,” Legolas agreed. “But I wonder if you have questioned whence that pain comes.” He might have been more diplomatic on another day, but not here, not now, not with Gimli’s sleeping form still nestled beneath the blankets on their bed, not with the weariness of the day before still heavy on his own shoulders. They had agreed, had they not, that the pain they felt came not from one another?

“He says you are different from how you were before, but I do not see it,” Glóin murmured, as if to himself-- a bass rumble of discontent. “You act your father’s son yet, the very elf who mocked my wife and child-- this child, the one you now take from me-- and called him the spawn of an orc. The insult was meant for me and his mother, but it was given to him. How now does he turn from me to you? I would not sully my axe with your blood over so old an insult to her and to me, though you have never offered apology for it. But for the insult to him, whom you now claim as your One, you owe penance.”

“When should I have--” Legolas clamped his mouth shut before the words could escape, and breathed deep. Those words, spoken long ago, felt almost as though they had been said by another-- one who had not seen the things he had seen, done what he had done, learned to love those he loved now. But Glóin was right, perhaps-- at least in part. “I regret my words to you,” he said softly. “I should have said it long ago, had I the chance. And my words of Gimli-- but that is a matter long since resolved between us. What penance would you have me pay, beyond being accused by all Middle-Earth as faithless because of whom I choose to love, beyond facing my father at a bargaining table as a rival-- even an enemy? I offer you apology; you are right, I should have done so long since. But who are you to demand penance from me on Gimli’s behalf, for something long put to rest between us?”

“I am his father, and whatever else may be said, I love him. I seek to protect him and ensure his happiness.” Glóin lifted his chin with defiance, proud. “I came here tonight to offer him my apology for the harsh words that passed between us before. I spoke in the care of my heart, meaning well, but I hurt him. I would it were not so.” Glóin stood square upon his stout feet-- a mannerism so reminiscent of Gimli it twisted at Legolas’s heart; just so would Gimli face a foe he thought might overmaster him; just so would he face his own wrongdoing: head on and determined to make right.

“But instead I find you set as guard, and must make apology to you, and drink the cup I have stirred with full bitterness.” Glóin reached up and cast his hood forward to cover his face. “Carry well my message to my son, elf, since I may not do so myself. Mahal will judge you as you act, in honor or in malice.” Glóin turned away, his feet shuffling upon the woolen mat, dispirited.

“Wait,” said Legolas as Glóin made to depart. The words rushed up in his chest-- drawn maybe by Glóin’s sincere apology, maybe by his regret at the part he played in this pain, for both Gimli and for Glóin. “Before you go, I-- I know not what to say to reduce your pain, for I know you would not have chosen an elf for your son. And for all I may have said, I know you have every reason to wish me ill. But I tell you I love Gimli, with all my heart, with all the blood in my body and all the song in my spirit. I would never hurt him, not of my own intention; I would give up all that I own and all that I am to spare him any pain.” He looked away, overwhelmed in the face of his own feeling. “I know you trust me not, but I promise you my sentiment is true. I can do no more.”

“Do as you have promised me this night, and I will forgive you,” Glóin whispered, his voice hoarse. “And welcome you at my own table, and tell my wife how it is between the two of you.” He turned back toward Legolas, his eyes flashing beneath the cowl of his cloak. “I care not what you charge for your wares, or Aglarond. That is for the king to say, and I come not as his mouthpiece here.” Rain began to fall on the tent, a soft whisper against the canvas, and Glóin drew his cloak closely about himself. “But ’ware Thranduil,” he warned. “If you do be changed,
then you should know this: he is full of pride and malice, and this strife is of his making. I have never seen him forgive.”

“I know,” whispered Legolas, his eyes falling to the floor. “Better than you do, I think.”

“That may be so.” Glóin peered out at Legolas again through the folds of his cloak, looking him up and down. “Do as you say, Legolas son of Thranduil. And I will be grateful to you.”

“As I am grateful to you,” said Legolas, and with a last nod, Glóin pushed aside the tent flap, head bowed against the rain, and Legolas listened to his shuffling footsteps make their way across the camp.

He looked down again, once the noise of Glóin’s departure had faded away, upon Gimli’s sleeping face. The heartsore frown and lines of weariness had smoothed away; his face was still and peaceful, his breathing steady and even in the patterns of deepest sleep. He would sleep still, Legolas knew, through nearly any disturbance, and he knelt again beside the bed, tucking away the knife, and laid a hand on Gimli’s forehead, brushing back an errant wisp of hair.

“In the midst of a falsehood, I spoke the truth,” he whispered. “I do love you, meleth, with every part of myself. And when I lose you, it will not matter to me what my father or your father has done, or what will become of either of our realms.” Very carefully, he drew back the blankets and settled himself beside Gimli once more, fitting his body like a shell around the curled form of the dwarf, his cheek pressed against Gimli’s hair.

“I love you,” he whispered once more. “I do. And soon enough, you will know it.”

It only remained to be seen what would happen when he did.
Gimli awakened in unaccustomed warmth, nestled deep in soft blankets, with living flesh breathing behind him, arms wrapped around him and one slim thigh slid between his own. He hardly recognized the barrier between sleep and waking, so gently did he rouse from sleep and so blissful was the comfort in which he lay.

“Good morning, meleth,” Legolas murmured softly, the purr of his voice vibrating through Gimli.

“I dreamed…” Gimli began, heart full. “I dreamed of you in the night, Legolas.”

“Did you?”

“I did.” Gimli stirred, setting his hand over the elf’s where it lay on his chest. Legolas’s breath rustled through his hair and warmed his ear; how might he ever give up such perfection as this?

“What did I do in this dream?”

“You spoke to me. Kindly.” Gimli’s heart rose into his throat. “We were not plagued with this infernal parley, or with the cares and weights of lordship. You were happy, as was I.”

“And what did I say?” Legolas sounded faintly frightened, the sound of it disturbing Gimli’s perfect peace.

“That all was right and ever would be,” Gimli said, helpless to spill the full truth of his heart-- that the elf in his dreams had spoken to him of love, offering everything that could not-- would not-- be, upon the waking. And yet it must be done. “Legolas, when this meeting is finished, there is much we must consider.” He stirred, turning over to look into deep, shining eyes. Legolas did not withdraw even yet, arms loose and gentle around him.

“There is that which I have thought on, and must say.” Their noses nearly touched and Legolas smelled sweet and fresh as morning dew. “It will not wait,” Gimli said, sober.

“No?” There was something strange in Legolas’s eyes-- something Gimli could not identify, but something that roused a tidal wave in Gimli’s belly, a sudden rush of soft-hard coldness. He realized he was trembling, and wondered if Legolas could feel it. But of course he could-- they were so close, he could feel everything. “That is well, perhaps, for I too have words to say to you, though I have not yet worked out how they might be said.”

“Accursed words,” Gimli huffed, feeling the icy anticipation in his belly dissolve into grief. “Too many must we endure today. It was easier when there were orc-necks and cold steel to do the speaking.” When he and Legolas could fall into the rhythm of battle, they were whole-- in perfect accord, trusting in one another, falling into battle-joy and striving to rid the world of all that was wrong. Perhaps they might yet find that joy, even when joys such as lying here abed were a fading memory.

“I must agree with you,” said Legolas. “And perhaps you are right to curse my words before even hearing them, for I--” He swallowed; this close, Gimli could practically feel his throat move. “Even now, even resolved, I fear to say them.”

“I do not curse your words, but rather my own. Any words that may end the way things are and
bring about a different morning.” Gimli pushed himself away from the elf, rising to sit upon the edge of the bed. “And yet they must be said, for what is can no longer continue.”

“In that, you are right.” The covers rustled as Legolas too extracted himself. “Before all is changed, then, I have a promise to keep. I spoke to your father last night; he had come to see you, but I would not have you disturbed, not when you were so weary. He wished to tell you that Orm did not speak for Erebor, and he-- I know not what harsh words passed between you, and neither did he tell me, but he regretted causing you pain. I told him I would pass on his apology to you.”

“You and my father spoke?” Gimli said slowly. “And yet, there is no blood upon the rug!” He gestured at its unstained surface, and could not resist a roguish smirk despite his heavy heart.

“No.” Legolas smiled faintly, shaking his head. “He was not pleased to find me keeping watch, but words passed between us that had long needed to be spoken. I told him-- I apologized, at last, for my part in his arrest years ago. And I told him--” He looked down and did not finish.

Gimli waited, but the elf had ceased to speak. What had he said? That they were not wed, perhaps, that there was no love, that he and Gimli would soon be parted and all well? He did not have the heart to press the elf for painful truths he was so reluctant to speak. That he would try to spare Gimli’s heart was kind, but the delay before its breaking… that was not. “It was well that you apologized. He has long held that injury as a grudge in his heart,” Gimli said, his shoulders sagging. “Would that there were now peace between you.”

“There might be,” said Legolas, “if you-- if we--” He seized handfuls of his hair in abrupt agitation. “Ai, this cannot be borne! How am I to speak-- and yet, how should I keep quiet?” He turned his eyes on Gimli, scorching with pain. “How can you not know already?” he said in a whisper that was nearly a cry. “Or perhaps you do, and you keep your silence to spare me pain-- or to prolong it! Tell me, Gimli! Do you know what is in my heart?”

“I do,” Gimli said, grief-stricken. The elf had guessed his secret, and it was obvious Legolas could not bear to hurt him, could barely bring himself to speak the truth, but it must be done. Very well, he would spare the elf and do the speaking for him.

“I have been a fool, Legolas, and I am sorry. I should not have allowed matters between us to come to this pass.” He arose and quietly began to unbraid his hair. “It was an insult to our friendship.” He combed out the thick red strands with his fingers, grief making him clumsy, and began to lace his old braiding anew. “We have lied to ourselves as well as our friends, that such a thing could ever be. We must make amends, and to one another first. Forgive me. For my part, I stand ready to be your friend again, and we need never speak of this.”

Legolas stared at him from where he sat, whiter than marble, breath coming fast through his slightly parted lips. His eyes were fixed on Gimli’s fingers in his hair.

“And thus it ends,” he whispered, seeming almost to himself. “And as I thought it would-- ah, she was wrong indeed, her promises as false as I assured her, and now what is left?”

“Legolas?” said Gimli, concern making his braids fall from his fingers even as Legolas turned his face away and buried it in his hands. Apology he had expected, some grief at the ending of what was-- but not this shock, this despair. “Legolas, are you--?”

“Well?” asked Legolas into his hands, his voice caught halfway between a laugh and a sob. “Of course I am not-- but I will be. I must be. Must I not?”

“As must I,” Gimli choked. “But if you are so aggrieved, then why need our friendship perish and cause yet more dismay? I am willing to put away my foolish heart, and to stand at your side
as we have always done. Though you have guessed my secret love, can you not forget it again?"

He stamped forward to stand before Legolas’s knees, belligerent, glaring into his face with his
shame and confusion feeding anger. “I will be as I was for you.”

“Our foolish heart?” Legolas wrenched his face from his palms in a motion that would have
made Gimli’s own neck crunch like long-stale bread. His eyes were wide, red around the edges,
blurred with tears. “Wait—wait, Gimli, you call your heart foolish; you speak of your secret love?
How can this be so? Do not mock me in this moment, my friend—do not be cruel when you
would break my heart and reject my love, which I have held to my heart in silence since ere we
left Lórien together, thinking it unwanted!”

“You?” Gimli blinked; without, the horn call summoning the delegates to parley had begun to
sound, but it fell upon deaf ears. “Your…. For me?” He stood astonished, disbelief filling his
heart. “Legolas, say it plain. You… love me?”

“How can you doubt it?” said Legolas, breath stealing sound from his voice until it was a raspy
whisper. “I thought you had known long since, and kept your silence to spare my heart and keep
my friendship. And now you speak of your heart, and you say—”

“Elf,” Gimli gasped, and seized him by the locks of his hair. “Be silent.” He crushed their mouths
together and devoured him in a kiss.

Any doubt he might have had vanished as soon as their lips touched—Legolas let out a little gasp,
and then his hands were clutching at Gimli’s shoulders, nails practically clawing at Gimli’s skin
even through the fabric of his tunic; his mouth opened under Gimli’s, and Gimli was lost.

It was as if a dam had broken, releasing all the gathered waters of the oceans at once to pour forth.
They clutched at one another, drowning, mouths clashing with awkward lack of skill, but they
ignored it, struggling to pull one another closer until Legolas fell over upon the bed and Gimli fell
atop him, shattering the frail wooden legs of their cot, which crashed to the ground with them atop
it. Gimli ignored the jolt—his hand was inside the elf’s shirt, gliding over the warmest silk, and
Legolas’s thighs were spread about his waist, the elf dragging him closer as if there were no need
to breathe, ever again—

“The parley is begun. Will the two of you not—” Arwen’s voice suddenly dissolved into laughter.
“I see you have spoken at last, my friends, though I could wish you had chosen a less
inconvenient time for it.”

“Yes.” Legolas detached himself from Gimli only slightly, only enough to speak. With the
distance between them, Gimli could see now that he was weeping, and to his surprise, he realized
that there were tears on his own cheeks, as well. “And it is as I said—” he gasped something that
might have been a laugh or a sob—“he could not forgive me my folly—” and then he burst into
helpless laughter, pressing his face into Gimli’s shoulder and rocking them back and forth.

“I will forgive you with my c—” Gimli stopped himself just in time, glowering with vexation; he
could not speak thus before the Queen of Gondor! “This accursed parley will be the death of us
all. If your father causes today’s session to run long, I shall eviscerate him.” He forced himself to
pull his hand out of Legolas’s clothes, flushing with awareness that the queen watched them with
great interest.

“I will leave you two to straighten yourselves out, then,” said Arwen, her words somewhat
impeded by the grin that stretched across her face. “But I think it would be wise for me to wait
outside your tent, that you not forget yourselves in my absence!”

Gimli tried to glare, but he could not; beneath him, Legolas was still laughing, shaking his whole
body and the broken bed, and his hair was a mess, his cheeks stained with tears, and Gimli had
never in his life seen anything so beautiful.

“Twill trade with you tonight, stroke for stroke,” Gimli promised, unable to resist stealing another
taste of the elf’s luscious mouth. “And let all who know of it say I favor you above all others.”

“Let word go out that the lords of Aglarond and Ithilien were so eager in negotiations that they
broke their bed.” Legolas’s eyes shone. “And none will mediate between them, ever.”

“Never again,” said Gimli hoarsely; he made to push himself away, but the tiny sound of protest
that Legolas made was his undoing, and he collapsed atop him again, mouths fused together, his
hands sifting through the gold-silk hair that he was at last free to touch all he liked--

Behind him, a throat was cleared. “If you are thus when I have yet even to depart your tent,” said
Arwen, “perhaps I had best stay, the better to drag you apart should it be necessary.”

“We are summoned,” Legolas sighed, making no move to release Gimli. “We must away.” He
frowned of a sudden. “But before we go, suffer me to remake your braiding, for I like not the one
that you have made! I would not see it thus again, if you love me.”

“I do,” said Gimli, giddy with the freedom, the ease with which the words could flow free now,
after so long holding them back. “I do, I do--” and then, for the second time in two days, he was
grabbed by the collar and bodily dragged away.

“I will chaperone you if I must,” said Arwen firmly, but her eyes were dancing with mirth. “Dress
yourselves and straighten your hair, fools, and then come to the parley-- and I feel honor-bound to
warn you that the besotted grins on your faces will not be to the liking of the king of Eryn
Lasgalen.” But there was no bite to her words.

“The king of Eryn Lasgalenpen-channas a uhunc ylf ernedui,” muttered Legolas, and Arwen
choked on a snort.

“Now it is we who delay the talks, and we who will suffer for it,” Gimli said sadly, sneaking
another swift taste of Legolas’s mouth. “And they had best seat us apart, elf, lest my hands stray
under the table.”

“We have seen to it,” Arwen said, her voice dry. “If you do not arise now, I will summon the
Guards of the Citadel to drag you apart!”

“Fine, fine,” Gimli muttered, suffering himself at last to be pulled away. True to her word, Arwen
stayed in the tent, turning her back politely when they undressed and remade one another’s braids.
It was likely good she was there-- else who knew how long Gimli might have stared at Legolas’s
body, finally bared for his eyes without shame, or might have allowed his hands to wander
through Legolas’s hair, letting the tresses flow between his fingers smooth as water. But her polite
throat-clearing spurred them on, interrupting when they might have become lost in one another,
until they were dressed and presentable.

“Let us go to the negotiations wedded in truth, then,” Legolas said, “and let us not be divided
again by doubt or fear or strife.”

“Or by anything,” vowed Gimli, “save a negotiation table.”

Legolas’s eyes narrowed. “The table is far sturdier than our poor cot,” he said, eyes darting
toward Arwen as if to say that he could not speak further.

“And it will be unguarded later in the evening,” Gimli mused.
“It will not,” Arwen chimed, struggling to suppress laughter. “But I am sure there are many quiet nooks in the land hereabout for those who do not want to disturb the entire camp with their enthusiasm.”

Legolas drew on his breeches, a sight Gimli greeted with regret. “Perhaps there are,” he said. “Do you and Aragorn recommend any of them in particular?”

“Elf, you are a brazen and shameless example of your people,” Gimli chuckled.

“I can commend the sheltered bluff bank of the stream which flows through the camp of Rohan and down toward the Anduin,” she said, serene. “Walk upstream and go several furlongs hence to find a fine sandy shore and willows over-arching the streambed, which offer a fine canopy to gaze through as you lie and talk, after.”

Legolas laughed. “We will make use of it, then, and be grateful to you for the suggestion.”

“Are you clad?” She surveyed them with a smile in her eyes. “Your belt, Gimli. There. All is in readiness,” she decided. “Precede me, or I yet suspect you may linger and undo all this good work. My lord would not be pleased with me if I fail to present you at the council!”

They went out with her chivvying them toward the pavilion, all good cheer and laughter, unable to dread what lay before them to be done.

Chapter End Notes

It finally happened!! We hope this was worth the six-month wait!

Translation of pen-channas a uhunc ylf ernedui: lacks intelligence and has had too much to drink.
Chapter 29

Legolas felt as though he walked on nothing at all as they made their way to the parley tent; a light, giddy buoyancy in his stomach lifted him as though he skipped over the crests of ocean waves.

Ocean waves… no, not even the thought of the sea could dampen his spirits today, not now, not after this morning. He knew he should appear solemn fit to suit the mood that would no doubt hold the other delegates, but Gimli’s fingers were laced with his, in true union now, not feigned display, and he felt that without them, he might well float up into the air on the sheer lightness of his relief and joy.

Not even the mood within the tent, when they pulled aside the flap to enter, could fully sober him—though it tried.

This morning, they were later even than Legolas’s father— who sat directly across from the door, and was the first sight that greeted Legolas’s eyes. The cold fury of his expression yesterday was gone now, replaced by a perfectly-carved serenity that Legolas liked not—or, would have disliked, had he not felt so giddy that nothing could touch him.

Aragorn sat, as ever, at the head of the table; he glanced around to see them enter and one eyebrow quirked up. “So, the lords of Aglarond and Ithilien see fit to join us,” he said dryly.

“Forgive us,” said Legolas, “we were somewhat-- delayed, this morning.”

“I can see that.” His voice gave nothing away, and Legolas wondered how much he could read from them— and what he thought of it. “Well, now you are here, so take your seats so we may begin.”

As Arwen had promised, they were seated separately— which was likely for the better, Legolas thought, for as it was his eyes would not stop straying to the corner where Gimli sat, looking at the braids he himself had made in his hair and remembering the way the strands had felt between his fingers. And more often than not, Gimli would be looking back at him, with a gleam in his eyes and a flush on his cheeks that spoke of this morning, of the promise of later.

It seemed they were the only two in the meeting to be occupied with more pleasant thoughts. The mood today was, if possible, even less amiable than it had been yesterday: instead of restless anticipation and quick temper, the proceedings took place in an icy solemnity. Aragorn held rigid control over the meeting in a fist of cold steel; it was clear that no such incidents as yesterday would be tolerated, and instead of rustlings and murmurings, the pauses in between speech were filled with a frosty silence.

While the meeting was far more polite on the surface, it was also unproductive. The delegates spoke at length about conditions in their lands, and the bearing of such upon the prices of their wares, and they guessed at how harvests might fare in the coming year, but there was no true parley, no offer or concession, no accord. It was not the point of the meeting, but Legolas supposed there was no choice other than to let them have their say; there might be value in feeling that their grievances had been heard.

Through it all, Thranduil said little, only a short occasional word or phrase offered seemingly at random, but Legolas was familiar with his father’s tricks, and he could see a pattern. From the tightness of his jaw, Aragorn could see it also: Thranduil was emphasizing statements that discouraged cooperation: small fears, isolationist observations, inflammatory comments— each was
met with at least a hum of encouragement from the Elvenking. None of the other delegates, not even Gimli, appeared aware of his tactics, but Thranduil’s contribution set Legolas’s teeth on edge and by the end of the morning, it had taken the heart from his good mood.

Aragorn called a recess for a meal near midday, but with a gesture, he indicated that Legolas and Gimli should stay behind when the other delegates filtered out of the tent to confer with one another in their own camps. He waved Éomer on when he would have stayed, watched Thranduil until he was out of sight, and then pulled the tent flap closed.

“You seem different today,” he said, with no other preamble. “Happier.” He glanced from one to the other. “I hardly dare to ask, but please tell me—”

“Yes,” said Gimli, without letting Aragorn finish, and he reached to take Legolas’s hand firmly in his own.

Aragorn let out a sigh that sounded like a dozen years of stored breath were let out at once. “Thank the Valar,” he said, slumping into a chair. “I hardly dared to hope that you might manage it on your own, and now I have one fewer concern here.”

Legolas averted his gaze, shamefaced. “We were blind,” he said softly. “Each of us thinking such a thing was impossible, and valuing our friendship so greatly we hardly dared acknowledge the other feeling until it was too great to reveal— and the risk of losing both it and the companionship we have known since the war was not to be borne. We listened to fears, and they kept us from seeing truth.” He thought for a moment. “It may be that all the rulers of the lands listen to their fears— and,” he lowered his voice, “my father would encourage them to listen. His contribution is meant to harm the talks rather than reach accord.”

“So I have observed,” Aragorn said heavily. “One bad apple may spoil a barrel. I will speak to Éomer; he will aid us. But Erebor… Do you think Glóin would listen to Gimli and gain the ear of the king to warn him likewise?”

“I may speak to that as well,” said Legolas. “For I spoke to Glóin last night, and he warned me of my father’s spite— though I needed no warning. And I think that all is set to rights between us.”

“That is right,” said Gimli suddenly, turning fully to Legolas without an eye to Aragorn. “You did not tell me what you told my father, when he spoke to you; you would not finish your thought.” Legolas blushed at the reminder; he had come so near to spilling his heart to Gimli in that moment, and now he wished sorely that he had, for he could have spared himself the crushing grief of seeing Gimli remove his braids and promise a return to the friendship of before. “I had thought I knew what you would have said, but as things are different than I believed them to be—”

“And do you not know now exactly what I told him, foolish dwarf?” said Legolas softly, placing a finger under Gimli’s chin— and ah, he could do so now, could handle his beard with impunity!— and tilting his head up. “Do you ask only so that I will tell you that I told your father the truth— that my love for you exceeds the number and brightness of stars in the heavens, the wealth of jewels in your Glittering Caves or water in the oceans? Did you wish me to say it all to your face, when fear held me so long silent—”

Beside him, Aragorn cleared his throat. “Glóin,” he prompted.

Legolas could not bring himself to be ashamed. “We will speak to him— or Gimli will.”

“Both of us, I think,” Gimli said softly. “Let us begin as we mean to go on.”

“Yes, meleth.” Legolas smiled at Gimli, and Gimli’s eyes shone to see it. “And one day we will
go to Erebor together, and I will meet your mother.”

“She will say you are too thin, and feed you until you plead for mercy—”

“Gentlemen!” Aragorn laughed. “Would it be too much to ask you to speak to Glóin before the day’s light is gone? For if I guess aright, the two of you will go with it, and we will not see you again until the morning!”

Legolas blushed and Gimli chuckled. “You have the right of it,” the dwarf said. “As soon as we may. Come, Legolas, let us see if my father may be found.”

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As he had so often before, Legolas followed where Gimli led—without hesitation, even if their venture brought them straight into the heart of the Erebor encampment. Legolas forced himself to keep his hand away from his knife when he entered, though the heat of sullen or challenging stares brought a flush to his face and neck. Aragorn’s edict had been spread through all the camps, and no dwarf would dare challenge him here— not so soon after the chaos of yesterday.

Glóin’s tent was near the middle, and Legolas could not help but wonder if that had been done on purpose— if the Erebor dwarves had thought that forcing Gimli to face as many as possible when visiting his father might help remind him of the kin they believed he had forsaken. But Gimli strode through the camp with confidence, and Legolas felt it as well— as though some very foundation of his being had been steadied, since even this morning. He had the right to walk at Gimli’s side, now; he was not feigning it to prove a point or to steal a beloved dwarf from his family and kin. His place was no longer stolen, but freely given, and he found that he could square his shoulders and stand beside Gimli with pride.

Gimli rustled at the flap of Glóin’s tent. “Adad?” he called inside. “Adad, I have come to see you.”

Glóin appeared, startlement and wariness evident on his face. “I had not looked to see you, my son.” He glanced at Legolas, and though the wariness remained on his face, hostility did not follow. “Have you come on business?”

“I fear it is so.” Gimli bowed his head. “My husband has observed his father, and would bring warning of his tricks to you and to the delegation of Erebor as a gesture of good faith.”

“Some among us might think with scorn of a need to be warned by an elf against any other elf’s tricks,” Glóin said quietly. “But for my part, I will listen to you, Legolas, and then decide if I may bring your case to my ambassador’s ear. There is a chance, of course, that I may not agree— or that he will not listen.”

Legolas was well-pleased with that answer; less than a day ago, none of the Erebor delegation would have listened to a word he had to say. “I thank you, second-father.” He bowed deeply, as a dwarf would, hoping the gesture would not go amiss. “It is a relief to be given your ear.”

Glóin looked slightly uncomfortable. “Well, come in, then,” he said, ushering them into the tent. “Such company is more than my dwelling was designed to hold.” Indeed, the canopy was scarcely above Gimli’s head, and Legolas had to seat himself upon the ground and fold his legs if he did not want to brush against it.

“I appreciate your courtesy,” Legolas said, conscious of the need to maintain Glóin’s goodwill. He glanced aside at Gimli and was reassured by his calm. “My father seeks to divide us all, and he believes he controls the forces that can do it. Did any of your companions speak to you of the
subtle intent when he spoke this morning, or show approval?” Legolas gave examples, and Glóin’s frown furrowed deep as he listened.

“I believe he has no intention of compromising on a solution that will benefit all. He wishes to drive dwarves and elves and men apart, out of spite or distrust or a desire for power, or perhaps all. I understand that Gimli and I--”

Legolas flushed suddenly, the words on his tongue gave him a glow of heat in his belly as they reminded him anew that he and Gimli were now truly of one mind and heart. “-- may seem a threat to others through our union, but we mean no harm. Speak to us the true concern of the king, and let us answer it-- we are your allies; Thranduil alone acts with hostility.” He hesitated. “I do not wish to name him your enemy, for I remember the Great Enemy, and my father is not thus, nor ever will be, Valar willing. But he wishes to sow discord and weaken us for his amusement, and for vengeance, though not truly for the sake of power.”

“Vengeance,” Glóin pounced on the word with a shrewd glance at Legolas. “Upon whom, and why?”

“Upon me, for denying his will. For betraying the prejudices of our people, formed of old. Ultimately, for… for my refusing to accompany him upon the Straight Road, and choosing your son instead, ere I ever knew his heart matched my own.” Legolas bowed his head.

Gimli drew a sharp, horrified breath. “You… what?”

Legolas could feel his stare burning into the side of his head, but he did not look up. “I did not wish to tell you,” he said. “Not before--” He waved a hand, not wanting to speak it before Glóin, not wanting to admit so soon into a tentative truce that he had deceived his beloved’s father even last night. “This morning. And I worried that you would gainsay my decision, when it--”

“You were right to worry!” said Gimli. “Legolas, I did not know-- you said you had exchanged harsh words; you did not tell me--”

“We will speak of it later!” Legolas interrupted him, desperately. “Please.” He could not have this conversation, not here, not before Glóin.

“Very well, amralime, but it must be soon,” Gimli growled, frowning.

“The straight road?” Glóin frowned, baffled. “Does this mean--?”

“The road to the utter West, where dwell Mahal and the one father of all,” Gimli grunted. “Even we know that is the way of elves.” His eyes narrowed at Legolas, who could almost see him remember Arwen’s fate as a flare of panic and dismay rose in his eyes.

“Peace,” Legolas pleaded, wishing he had held his tongue. “That is not our most pressing concern. This parley will be long settled and forgotten ere I will sail to join the lords of the west.”

“As long as you do,” Gimli said, partly pacified.

“I tell you of this not because I wish it known, but rather to show the depths of my father’s ire,” Legolas said sadly, and Gimli laid a comforting hand upon his shoulder.

“Do not despair, Thranduil’s son-- a father’s heart will turn to his son when no other call can move it,” Glóin said gruffly. “Your father can do little against the King of Gondor and his allies, I think, regardless of Erebor.”

“He has revealed nothing of his plans,” Legolas shook his head. “All I see is his rage, but I know
it drives his actions, and I believe he is angry enough to do whatever harm he may.”

“Well, we will be on alert, as you have warned us,” said Glóin. “I cannot speak for the king, but I will remind him of his disinclination to trust Thranduil, and will remind him to be on his guard— that much at least I can do.” He inclined his head to Legolas. “I thank you for coming to warn us. It cannot be easy, for a son to turn so away from his father.”

“That, I think, is how he sees it as well— that I have turned away from him. And perhaps with reason.” Legolas leaned into Gimli’s hand that still lay upon his shoulder. “And yet I cannot regret it.”

“Can you not?” Gimli tightened his grip for a moment, and then pressed harder down as he rose to his feet. “Adad, we must go. Talks will resume shortly, and I would have words with my husband ere they begin.”

As they walked back through the Erebor camp and then toward the parley tent, Legolas could practically feel Gimli humming with tension at his side. He did not speak for a time, though, and Legolas’s own nerves sang in tune until he felt they would snap.

He spoke, at last, when he could bear it no longer. “I had thought our next step— perhaps after the meetings today, or perhaps tomorrow— might be to go to some in the delegation from Eryn Lasgalen,” he said. It was more a half-formed thought than anything else, but he could not bear to be silent. “Most of the elves my father has brought are loyal to him, of course, but I am yet their prince, and perhaps some could be inclined to reason, or to advise him against whatever course he chooses to take. They may balk at choosing between father and son, or—”

“Stop.” Gimli placed a hand on his upper arm and urged him to a halt, glancing around to see that none were near them and turning him until they faced one another. “Your idea is a good one, but I know you speak only to distract me. Why did you not tell me your father offered to sail with you?”

“How should I have told you?” Legolas whispered, fixing his eyes on the center of Gimli’s forehead to avoid the burning gaze that still tugged at the corners of his vision. “To do so would have been to admit I loved you, and until this morning I thought that hopeless.”

“All the more reason you should have sailed,” Gimli argued. “I do not understand why you did not.”

Legolas flinched. “You do not understand?” he said. “I thought when we spoke of love, we spoke of the same thing— and you tell me you think me capable of leaving you behind?”

“That is not what I meant, and I think you know it,” said Gimli. “I mean only that I am humbled by the depth of your devotion— humbled and frightened for you, that is.” Before Legolas could ask what he meant, Gimli changed the subject. “Why did your father offer to sail? You have oft told me he feels no call to the West.”

Legolas did not wish to tell him, but Gimli’s eyes were pulling at his own, and when he met them, he found no more will to resist. “He offered, I think, because he loves me,” he said at last, reluctant, but paring down his thoughts to the most essential. “And now I have appeared to throw that love in his face, now that he knows— or believes, I suppose— that we are not wed in truth. He will believe that I spurned him out of defiance and not out of love, and it is obvious that he is not pleased.”

“But why should he offer?” Gimli persisted. “I know you are avoiding the question, Legolas, but it is one we must answer eventually. Why did your father find your situation so dire that he would
offer to give up his own desires to sail with you?"

“If you know we are avoiding the question,” Legolas said, “then you must already know the
answer.” The thought of Gimli’s death—so distant and yet so immediate in the face of the
vibrancy of his life—had taken up residence in a corner of Legolas’s chest, the back of his throat,
the insides of his eyelids. Arwen’s words—could they only have been spoken two days before?—
echoed in his head: *I do not regret my choice, and I will not regret it when my love’s life ends and
there is no Straight Road open for me.* For Legolas, that road would be open—he had to believe
it—and so he had no cause for complaint, not truly. And yet—and yet—

“I can think of two,” said Gimli. “Neither of which is to my liking. The one because it suggests
that for Thranduil, the humiliation of having a son bound to a dwarf is worth the sacrifice of a way
of life he holds dearer than nearly anything else. And yet, that is the one I find the harder to
believe.” His other hand rose until he gripped both of Legolas’s arms and held him captive, as
much through the strength of his grasp as through Legolas’s inability to pull away.

“It could be,” he whispered. But he thought that the guilt he felt seeped into his voice—the guilt at
letting his father take the blame for this at least, when he knew as well as Gimli that it was wrong,
at least in part. The truth was that part of him prized that offer from his father, even as it had
pained him; he wished to hold it against his heart like a diamond with edges sharp enough to draw
blood. For that was what his father’s love was: precious pain, edged and hard to earn, but
something to hold close and treasure, whatever hurt it might cause.

“It could be,” said Gimli, “but I do not think it is. To me, the second thought is more likely: that
your father knew what pain it would cause you to love a mortal and sought to turn you aside from
that path, through whatever means he could offer.”

Legolas slumped— for all his evasion and denial, he could not turn aside plain truth when it was
offered. “Perhaps,” he said. “But I think, in the end, he seeks vengeance on me because I would
not take the path he had chosen for me. Because my choices were my own, and because they
strayed so vastly from the options he offered me. To stop loving you was not an option, meleth, to
turn aside from you no choice. But once he learned that our marriage was feigned, I think that my
father believed not even that love drove my response.”

Gimli slid his hands down Legolas’s arms and laced their fingers together, the motion slow and
deliberate, almost wondering at the fact that he could do it at all. Legolas understood it because he
felt it: that disbelief, the ease of simple touch that he had so long thought would be denied him
altogether. “I think you are right in that,” he said. “But I confess that what concerns me is the fact
that your love for me seems to deny you a choice. I saw you after you heard the gulls, Legolas. I
see you when you long for the sea. I would not be the reason you abstain from the desire of your
heart.”

“You are the desire of my heart,” said Legolas softly. “Valinor offers comfort to elves sick at
heart or spirit; doubtless it could have dulled the pain of a longing I thought hopeless. But I would
not lose that pain at the expense of the joy you bring me. Even were my devotion not returned,
even had I been forced to watch you wed a dwarrowdam and sire children and begin a new life, I
should not have left you so long as you did not deny me your company. Ever have I thought that
I would take as much of you as you gave freely to me, and the pangs of heartbreak were a small
price to pay.”

Gimli said nothing for a time, but he looked long up at Legolas and his eyes shone with a softness
Legolas had never seen in them before, like the reflection of the moon on gently rippling water.
After a long moment he took his hands from Legolas’s grasp to lay them gently on either side of
his face, and drew him down into a slow, soft kiss.
As this morning, Legolas was immediately overcome: the softness of Gimli’s mouth, the wiry bristles of his beard, the feeling of being surrounded by his warmth, was the most intoxicating sensation he had ever felt. Still he knew little of what to do, but Gimli’s lips and hands were gentle against him, guiding him to tilt his head and part his lips just so. Here was none of the dizzy relief of the morning, none of the desperate joy—rather, it was as though a sweet melancholy passed between them, as though they had all the time in the world and yet no time at all.

And did they not, after all?

“You humble me,” Gimli said again, his lips brushing the words against Legolas’s mouth, his breath warm and damp between them. “Though I feel exactly as you do, I did not understand what you might be willing to give up for me. For the same reason, I could not dare to speak—because I never imagined that you in all your worth might feel the same devotion for me.”

“It is you who is worth all the devotion,” breathed Legolas, and he surged forward once more to capture Gimli’s mouth fully again.

A laugh came from behind them. In some dim part of Legolas’s mind, he thought he recognized the voice, but it was not important enough to convince him to pull away. He returned to kissing Gimli, instead, exploring the angle at which their heads tilted against one another, relishing the soft breathy sound that escaped Gimli’s throat when he parted his lips—

“Enough,” said Éomer’s voice. “Save it for your tent, you two!”

One of Gimli’s hands lifted from Legolas’s face—presumably to make a rude gesture, as Éomer only laughed again. “The recess is nearly over—you would not have the leaders of the other realms spy you thus on their way back to the bargaining table?”

“I care not,” Gimli growled. “Let them look to their own beds rather than envying mine!”

They separated with great reluctance and went on to the parley in proper state, even managing to enter separately, allowing Éomer to walk in between. But the afternoon stretched terribly long, and Legolas began to believe it would outstretch a yén and consume all the rest of Gimli’s short life before drawing to a close.

Thranduil resumed his old tricks, and Legolas could not discern whether the dwarves’ attitudes had changed, but he hoped for the best.

At last perceiving that the formalities drew near a close, Legolas rose with the first wave of departures and hastened out. Gimli’s subjects descended upon him with questions, and Legolas flashed him a secretive smile. Gimli knew where they would meet; Legolas would arrive there first and make ready to receive his love.
And now, the moment you've all been waiting for! (Presumably.) This is your official warning that this chapter contains mature-verging-on-explicit content, and also suffocating amounts of sap.

By the time Gimli escaped his subjects, the sun had vanished in the west and the camp was abuzz with activity as the delegates and their friends prepared for rest. Smoke drifted freely, both from pipes and cookfires, and mingled with mist that arose from the land. Gimli wrinkled his nose at the thick air, which also bore the distinct odor of chamber pots. It would be good to be away from this place for a time; he only hoped it would be far enough that there would be no scent, sight, or sound of the camp to intrude on his time with the elf.

He stopped by his tent only to find the elf had been and gone. Their bed still lay on the ground, though the covers had been tidied and the broken splinters of the legs collected and taken away. Legolas’s pack was absent from the corner, and Gimli saw that the elf had raided their meager store of wine, taking away two bottles.

Gimli smiled to himself and took his own pack, stopping briefly at the center of the dwarven encampment to gather bread and cured meat-- then paying a visit to the elves of Ithilien, where he obtained grapes and cheese and honey.

The stream was easy to find, as it passed through the center of the Elvish camp, and Gimli turned his course upward as Arwen directed, meandering through marshy tussocks that soiled his sturdy boots and left him grumbling, surrounded by clouds of midges.

Soon he abandoned the land and settled for stamping his way upstream from the middle of its course, splashing and making enough noise to alert anyone for a furlong in every direction, so impatient was he to find the elf. His axe hung at his belt, and he had no fear of any attention he might attract-- save only if it delayed his tryst.

The narrow stream grew broad and shallow, which made for easier going; as the camp receded behind him Gimli began to relax, appreciating the world around him as Legolas had taught him to do: the tranquil swaying grass, the twinkling stars above the rising mist, the ripple of the stream and the singing of crickets. He could see the stream’s path stretching ahead, a finger of thicker mist tracing along the base of the folds in the land. Soon a darker smudge resolved itself into the promised willow-brake, and Gimli paused, quieting his progress, though he did not doubt he had already been overheard.

He began to hum softly, an old mining song from his younger days, and ceased to stamp, walking slowly along and letting anticipation whet his eagerness to be with the elf. The willows closed in around him, graceful green fronds trailing in the water, and the bottom grew sandy underfoot.

Some sense Gimli could not name prompted him, and he turned about with a huff. “It is about time you showed yourself, L--” he began, only to stumble and fall silent, tongue tangling around itself as Legolas emerged from the drooping branches, his hair freed to tumble about his shoulders, his slim, muscular body completely bare.
“Rather more of yourself is on display than I anticipated,” Gimli huffed, well-pleased, when he found his wits again. It was not an easy task. The elf, divorced from all the trappings of politeness and civilized society, at one with nature in only his skin… Legolas put him in mind of the legends of naiads and dryads: his pale skin glowed in the moonlight, willow branches draped over his shoulders and leaves tangled artfully in his hair. Gimli stared on him with longing, eyes dazzled.

Legolas merely smiled, beckoning, arms outstretched to enfold Gimli.

It was no wonder legends told of mortals drawn in to their doom by fey spirits. Gimli was already drawn forward, his feet moving without conscious guidance from his mind.

“Will you make me wait for your kiss until the moon has set and the sun arisen, meleth?” Legolas murmured, his voice soft, caressing Gimli with breeze-light feathers of welcome.

Gimli took his time despite the heat in the elf’s eyes, sloshing forward one step at a time. He tossed his pack onto a sandy spit close at hand, and his cloak over it. “It seems food can wait,” he said hoarsely, and reached to pry the boot from one foot, sending it tumbling after his cloak. Then the other, and then his breastplate-- they thudded softly onto the damp sand, and Legolas smiled on him, eyes dancing with merriment and approval.

Gimli stripped down to tunic and breeches, then strode forward: one step, two, before Legolas’s reaching fingers tangled in his hair, pulling him forward through the veil of willow-wands into the shadowed dim behind them.

“You are in my power now,” Legolas whispered.

Legolas’s hand rose to stroke his cheek and Gimli nestled his face into it, kissing the open palm. “I yield myself to the lord of this place,” he said thickly. “Do with me as you will.”

Legolas smiled, pupils huge and dark; he reached to Gimli’s waist and tugged his tunic upward. Gimli raised his arms and let it go, his heart thundering hard as Legolas’s warm palms trailed up his back, exploring, the bowman’s calluses on his fingers tickling against Gimli’s skin.

“Beware any dwarf who wanders within my clutches,” Legolas whispered joyfully. “For I will never let him go.” His hands settled at Gimli’s waist, finding the size and shape of him.

Before he could blink, Gimli found himself lying on his back on the damp, sandy ground with Legolas crouched over him, a predatory smile playing at the corners of his lips. “That is better,” he said.

“Aye,” Gimli breathed. The elf’s long golden hair trailed forward, making a curtain about their faces and enclosing them in a private world all their own. His heart hammered a fast pace in his chest at the curve and promise of Legolas’s slow smile, and its speed doubled as Legolas touched his lips against the corner of Gimli’s mouth, nuzzling at his beard.

“How I have waited for this moment,” Legolas said, lips sending starfire sizzling through Gimli’s veins as they brushed their words against his skin. “Waited without hope, in solitude, never dreaming that you were also silent.”

‘Will you make me wait yet longer while you muse on our folly?’ Gimli tangled his fingers in Legolas’s hair and dragged him down for a deeper kiss. “I am a mortal, Legolas, and we are impatient folk.”

“We are ill-matched, then,” Legolas whispered. “For I have a mind to take my time, and to savor every instant of this night.” He suited word to deed, nuzzling his way slowly along Gimli’s chest and letting the thick mat of hair tickle his lips. Gimli rumbled something that might have been
either protest or contentment, lifting to guide Legolas to the hidden bud of his nipple, heavy hands gentle in his hair.

The night swallowed his gasps and moans as Legolas explored at length, slim hands thorough, until Gimli was laid open, trembling and undone, watching the wonder on the elf’s face as he surveyed that motion of his hands, curved warmly about the part of Gimli that needed him most, stroking and caressing until Gimli succumbed and could watch no longer, his head tipped back as he cried out his love into the stillness of the night.

When he was spent, he did likewise, and laid Legolas out beneath him, then took all the time he wished as the stars wheeled over them in the wide sky, the river mist flowing gently around them where they lay safely curled together in their cocoon of willows. When he closed his mouth around the elf’s straining length, they would have remained oblivious even if a troupe of orcs had marched past. Legolas’s long slender fingers dug trenches in the pale sand, the column of his throat working as he struggled to breathe.

Gimli cared for him tenderly, bringing him to bliss, then eased down to lie with him, the two of them tangled together anyhow. Legolas brought his arms about Gimli, smiling, his eyelids heavy with pleasure.

“Now we are wed in truth and in full, my love,” he said softly.

Gimli rumbled satisfaction, watching the shimmer of sand grains as they sifted easily away from the elf’s smooth skin and fell. Legolas’s throat bore the marks of Gimli’s lips, and he touched one with the tip of his finger, enjoying his husband’s soft shiver at the reminder of rough kisses given in the throes of need.

“Aye, perhaps,” Gimli said gruffly. “Yet I would be certain, elf, ere dawn!” His mouth descended again, and Legolas met it with a glad cry, long limbs opening to enfold him and strong slim body bearing his weight with ease as Gimli started them once more upon the path toward bliss, meaning to show his elf another of the delights as yet untried between them.

After, they lay gasping, twined together, slick with sweat where their bodies touched-- except for the gritting where patches of sand chafed between them.

A fine sandy shore, Arwen had said. That, Gimli noted, depended on one’s definition of fine-- and Arwen was one to talk. She, surely, had never experienced the sensation of having grains of damp sand stuck and clinging in various… crevices. He would regret this sorely in the morning, he knew, but he could not bring himself to rise and clean himself off, not when Legolas lay close and bare beside him, his limbs tangled with Gimli’s and his head resting heavy on Gimli’s chest.

Gimli could not repress a fond smile, twining his fingers through the golden hair.

“What?” asked Legolas sleepily. His own fingers had wound into Gimli’s beard, and he tugged gently. “I see you smiling.”

Gimli only smiled wider, helpless to stop. “I love you,” was all he could say.

Legolas craned his neck up to brush a kiss over Gimli’s mouth. “And I love you,” he said, easing himself back down into his former position, his hands continuing to thread through Gimli’s beard; the touch made Gimli’s body go loose and warm. “My husband.”

“For certain, now,” laughed Gimli. Half of him was still in awe of it, hardly daring to believe-- but the other half could not keep from berating himself for what a fool he had been, to delay so long.
Legolas’s mind seemed to be following a similar path. “Yes,” he said, but his eyes rested on the strands of Gimli’s beard between his fingers. “Yes, you are my husband now, and I need no longer hesitate to touch you—” He smiled. “You know not how long I have looked on your hair and yearned to touch,” he confessed. “Like flame it seemed to me, or the red of mallorn-leaves in the brightest parts of autumn— and like flame I yearned to thrust my hands into it, but despaired of being burned.” With that, he took up a lock of it, wild from their exertions, and pressed it to his lips for a kiss.

Gimli trembled, both at the softness in Legolas’s voice and eyes, and at the reminder of one last deception that remained to be confessed to. He wished he could have forgotten it, but he could not bear to lie to Legolas any longer— even by omission— and the guilt bubbled up in his stomach, unwilling to be ignored. “If you feel thus,” he began, and tried to steady his voice, “perhaps you will forgive me one last liberty that I took of you, Legolas.”

“I could forgive you anything, I think you will find,” said Legolas, but he rolled off of Gimli and onto his side instead. Gimli turned to face him, so that their noses nearly touched. “What is it that you would say?”

His hair had fallen forward to curtain his throat; Gimli brushed it aside and let his hand linger. “I, too, have longed to handle your hair,” he said. “Like starlight spun into gold silk, it is, and I yearned to feel it beneath my fingers—”

“Do not distract me with flattery,” Legolas said sternly, though his cheeks were stained pink and he leaned forward to nip at the corner of Gimli’s mouth. “Tell me what distresses you, meleth, that I may quickly forgive you and ease your heart.”

“I stole some,” Gimli blurted, and then he was drawing off the ring he yet wore and fumbling with the clasp to show off its treasure. “That first night we shared a bed— some of your hair had come loose, and I— and I took it for myself, so I might keep a bit of you by me, though you did not know it or give your permission. I am sorry; it was only— I saw the gold upon the pillow, and it seemed to me a more priceless treasure than any other I might think to possess—”

Legolas reached out and took the ring from his fingers, examining it silently while Gimli waited in agony. His stomach clenched with guilt, waiting for Legolas’s response.

“I can forgive you this trespass,” said Legolas at last, “under one condition.”

“Name it,” Gimli croaked, and at last, Legolas smiled again.

“That you make me a matching ring,” he said, sliding the token back onto Gimli’s finger, “with a lock of your hair similarly preserved therein. That I too might carry always a token of my husband’s love and a reminder of the brightness of his hair and his spirit.” He laid a long hand against Gimli’s cheek, shaping it to the line of Gimli’s face. “You fool,” he said softly, “you thought this would be too much for me to forgive?”

“I took it without your knowledge,” babbled Gimli, amidst the wave of relief and love that threatened to overcome him. “How was I to know—?”

“Hush, husband,” said Legolas, and leaned forward to kiss him.

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Legolas came awake from his reverie later than usual; it was already past dawn when he blinked back into full consciousness, the sun more than just beginning to spread over the horizon. He blinked a few more times, orienting himself, and letting his memories of last night seep more
thoroughly into him, matching recollection with sensation until the smile that spread over his face felt broader than the sunrise.

“So,” came a low voice from beside him. “He awakes.” Gimli’s hand came to rest on his forehead, sweeping back a lock of hair, and then trailed down the side of his face and neck onto his bare shoulder. “This must be the first time in our long acquaintance that I have risen before you-- have we at last discovered the activity that may turn an elf into a sluggard?”

“Mmm.” Legolas rolled over, trapping Gimli’s hand between his shoulder and the ground, and pressed his lips to Gimli’s forehead. “Good morning.”

“And to you,” Gimli chuckled as Legolas kissed his way up his arm, pushing up onto his elbow to reach Gimli’s shoulder and neck. “I see you have no interest in pleasantries-- I had even brought food for us, that we might prepare breakfast--”

“I have other appetites in mind,” said Legolas, nipping at Gimli’s earlobe in demonstration, “much more in need of satiation.”

“Alas, if you wish to pursue them, you must let me up,” Gimli grumbled, pushing at Legolas’s bare shoulder to roll him over. “I have to make water before I shall be fit to indulge you.”

Legolas released him with reluctance, rolling onto his back and watching with some amusement as Gimli scrambled up, spraying sand everywhere. He would need a bath.

Slapping at his skin and his hair and grumbling, the dwarf let himself out of their leafy bower to rid himself of the worst of the clinging sand and climbed the bank, moving away from the stream to tend to himself. Legolas yawned, his stomach growling-- they had entirely forgotten the evening meal; Gimli had not even had a smoke since they left the parley, and would likely be quite out of sorts when he realized that two of his hungers had gone unappeased while they satisfied a third.

“Legolas.” All traces of playfulness had left Gimli’s voice; his tone conjured Legolas off his back and onto his feet, and he hastened up the bank without bothering to dress, one of his white knives in his hand. The sand fell away from him at once, which he guessed would annoy his friend greatly.

“What is it, meleth?” Legolas said, but the words died in his throat as he beheld what Gimli had found: the prints of light elven boots pressed into the sand, quite fresh, as the crumbling edges were still damp.

Legolas jumped lightly to a nearby tussock and gazed down at the ground, tracking them back toward the plain-- and found more: the prints of an elk, its cloven hooves distinct, dotting the ground plainly as they turned about and vanished into the grasses toward the camp.

“My father,” he breathed. “He has been here while we slept.”

“Stand just where he stood,” Gimli insisted. “I do not have the height. What did he see?”

Legolas did so, stretching up onto his toes to gain his father’s view-- and gazed over the lip of the shallow bluff down through the leavy willow-wands and straight onto their bed, the imprints of their tangled bodies having disarranged the damp sand.

“Well,” Legolas said at length, letting his heels touch the ground once more. “He will no longer think we tell an untruth in saying we are wed.”

The pleasant arousal of morning had fled, and now the mist felt clammy about their shoulders.
Gimli shivered despite the waxing sun turning the air to gold and glinting off the rippling stream.

As they stood in dismay, a horn-call penetrated the fog, summoning the delegates to the parley; Gimli flinched at the unwelcome reminder. “It will be an hour or more before we can return to camp.” He shook his head and sand sifted down from his loosened hair. “I am a mess, Legolas!”

“Let us go down in haste. Stand in the water and I will rinse and braid you,” Legolas said, brisk despite the disappointment in his heart. “Then we will beat sand from our clothing and dress. After that, it is only a short run back to the camp.”

“And no time for breakfast, or for a pipe,” Gimli mourned. “Aragorn will have our skins, elf, for being late two mornings in a row.”

“Now you sound like a halfling,” Legolas said. “Come, we will eat bread and cheese as we run.”

They suited deed to word, and soon an uncomfortably damp but freshly braided dwarf stood arrayed in full armor, a heel of bread and a wedge of cheese in his fist; Legolas quickly skinned into his clothes and tended his own braids.

“The sun has risen two fingers’ width,” Gimli judged. “And it will rise another before we arrive at the camp.”

“We must ask Aragorn to delay the start of the proceedings until noontide for the rest of our time here, the better to allow us a honeymoon,” Legolas teased him, tweaking the clasp on one of his braids as Gimli took an enormous bite of his breakfast. “Let us run now.”

“Aye,” Gimli said with his mouth full, and together they set forth at a swift trot, passing sentries with a wave and a shout, as if they had nothing whatsoever to explain in having left the camp the previous night only to return well after dawn.
Glóin sat perched in a hollow atop a stone outcrop half a league from the encampment, smoking and waiting while false dawn gradually turned the morning fog from pitch black to sullen grey. He had much to think on, for his son and the elf were ever in the forefront of his mind, and he had yet to settle his thoughts upon them, even though he knew he must be resigned to the two of them together, and must sweeten his dealings with them if he wished to keep Gimli a part of his life.

He blew a long streamer of smoke into the eddying wind, brooding up at the canopy of fog that hid the sky. Gimli had not spent the night in the camp, and he was willing to wager the elf Legolas had not either. They had slipped away to be alone together, doubtless finding the limited privacy of their shared tent not much to their liking, and much though the thought rankled, he wished them joy of it-- what joy they might have before the full price of their choice settled upon their shoulders.

Motion caught his eye as he sat thinking, and he turned his head to watch as the silhouette of a great beast appeared from the plain-- an elk, and upon its back, the elvenking.

“Well met,” he said, trying hard not to sound as surly as he felt. “I see you have been abroad, pursuing the same thought that takes me from my blankets. How has your hunting gone?”

Thranduil frowned, but did not heel the beast forward yet, remaining still. “I went out to test the truth of a lie, and found that it was not a lie at all.” His gaze flashed toward the camp, and his heavy brows drew downward; Glóin guessed that Thranduil’s hapless informant would soon feel the sharp side of his tongue.

“Set you on your heels, did it?” Glóin could only guess at the contents of the lie. Perhaps, manipulated properly, the old fox might reveal it. Indeed, if Glóin could only keep his head during this conversation, Thranduil might be goaded into revealing even more, and the spider would find himself trapped in his own web.

“And you were in upon the falsehood from the beginning,” Thranduil ventured, probing, perhaps hoping to provoke an unwise response.

“I?” Glóin snorted. “Would that it had been a falsehood, or that the truth had not been so visible to me from the moment I first saw them together. How should I have been involved in the telling of tales when I yet rue that the tales must be told?” Perhaps, in a way, there was a sort of fellow-feeling between them, for all Glóin wished not to admit it-- a relief in acknowledging mutual dislike. He could not but resent the situation that had driven him to conversation with the Elvenking he despised-- in near-appeal for another he had disliked for exactly as long.

Thranduil wrinkled his nose. “You are smoking sweet galenas?” He tilted his head at Glóin’s pipe. “From the land of the halflings.” His eyes glittered.
Perhaps it was an attempt to evade an uncomfortable subject; perhaps not. Glóin took his pipe from his lips. "Aye. Men call it so, but my folk call it pipeweed. It serves to wake one who has not slept well. Perhaps you would benefit from a pipe of your own." He was not about to offer his to this haughty being!

"You found them, then, and they were entwined," Glóin guessed, and watched shrewdly as Thranduil’s lips narrowed. "That is why I went no further than I am. I had no wish to see a sight that would pain my heart. Yet you have seen it," he said, with growing confidence as Thranduil yet remained still. "And they will arrive late to the parley, and you will….” he let his words end.

"I will do as I see best," Thranduil said through gritted teeth.

"No doubt you will." Glóin allowed a note of mocking to seep into his voice. "You will do as you see best, and your son will suffer for it."

"And you speak for my son?" said Thranduil, mocking now himself—though the tone felt off, Glóin thought, still twisted with the anger and bitterness that played in Thranduil’s eyes. "You know what will make him suffer, do you, and you care that he does not?"

"I wish I did not," Glóin said, unable to keep all the heaviness out of his voice—but glaring up at Thranduil all the same. "I wish I were anywhere but here, speaking to anyone but you, of anyone but your son and mine. But I know that he suffers already from your choices, and since he seems to think it hopeless to speak on his own behalf—" Glóin made a sweeping gesture with one arm, and then raised his pipe to his lips once more, needing the settling smoke.

"So far is he fallen already, then," said Thranduil, "that he sends a dwarf to intercede with me for him? And thinks I may change my mind?"

Glóin suppressed a smile—Thranduil’s rigid self-control was failing; so he had a plan, then, and it was indeed born in large part of spite—but did not bother to hold back a scoff. "Hardly—do you think he knows you so little? Or that I would run his errands for him, like a kept servant? Nay— it is hardly his fault that I can be moved by the sorrow of a son heartbroken by the deeds of his own father."

"So you hold me responsible, then, do you?" hissed Thranduil, and Glóin spared a moment to congratulate himself—quite apart from the topic of their conversation, he was pleased to have scored such a hit on an old enemy. "You fault me for my son’s suffering? I would expect no less from you or from him, but you are wrong—his heartbreak he inflicts solely on himself, by way of your son." He turned abruptly away, though Glóin noticed that he still made no move to urge his steed forward. "You counsel me now to put aside my rightful ire, to grovel in apology to my son and the instrument of his death? To cease in my efforts to sway him from his course? Hardly."

"So you admit that you attempt to turn him away," said Glóin, though a surge of fury had erupted at hearing Gimli named an instrument of death— he pushed it down, though, as best he could, knowing that he would not be able to say what he must if he gave in. "And you think he will do so at your urging? I know your son not well, but enough already to see that his decisions are his own. You will not save him any heartbreak, but only bring him more."

"And why do you care at all for his heartbreak?" sad Thranduil, choosing, it seemed, to ignore Glóin’s other words. "Who are you to speak on Legolas’s behalf?"

"I am his father-in-law," said Glóin, “little though I may like it, and he is my son’s One. When Legolas suffers, so does Gimli, and I, at least, care for my son’s happiness.” Before Thranduil could respond to that pointed statement, Glóin forged ahead, remembering Legolas’s words of the day before. “I can guess at your plans for this council; driven by wrath at your son and all who
indulge him, you will close your realm to all who do not suit you and draw ever inward, refusing trade and negotiation and communication to anyone who does not conform exactly to your whim-- your son least of all.”

He continued to ignore Thranduil’s wrathful stare; he would have only a few more moments to speak, and he meant to make the most of them. “It is, of course, your right to do that. But I would advise you to consider this: you can burn your relationship with your son, and you can burn your bridges with all of Arda, but would you do both? What will you have left then?” He tapped out his pipe on the side of the stone on which he sat and pushed himself to his feet, grunting a little as his bones protested the motion. “Well, that is all I have to say. You may listen to me, or you may not. But I tell you this: I despise you, and I always will. But never did I imagine that I might pity you.”

And with those words as his last he turned and left before Thranduil could take his own leave, pleased at his last word-- and only hoping it could be of any use.
Chapter 32

Chapter by TAFKAB

Gimli and Legolas tried to slink into the parley tent without making a scene, but all heads turned to observe them and Aragorn fell silent in mid-sentence, giving them a glare that promised hard words in private. Queen Arwen sat near his side, and her look was far more gentle, though her eyes danced with humor. Legolas flushed red to the tips of his ears, but her smile only widened, so much she was forced to hide it behind her hand, coughing mildly.

He glanced away from her, trying to reclaim his composure, only to notice that Thranduil was absent, his chair conspicuously empty. Tawar stood by it wearing the chain of Thranduil’s favored lieutenant, signaling that he had power to speak for the elvenking for the day. Thranduil would not be expected, then.

Legolas was not sure whether to be relieved or dismayed by his father’s absence, and decided to take it as a good thing, since he had spent all his time at the parley attempting to sow subtle discord.

Aragorn, however, did not seem inclined to be patient with them today-- and his hard words would evidently not be saved for private conversation, as Legolas had imagined. “I have a proposal for the delegates’ consideration,” he said, his voice arid as the plains of lower Harad. “As it seems the hour of our parley is far too early for some of our delegates to show themselves in time to begin, I suggest that hereafter we begin an hour later than we have as yet attempted.” Legolas could not determine whether the words were directed at him and Gimli or at the elves from Eryn Lasgalen-- at least, not until Aragorn continued. “Unless, of course, we continue to see untimely arrivals. If such continues, we will commence the parley inside their tents so they do not have to leave their beds.” He quirked a brow at Legolas and Gimli. “This may require certain inconvenient rearrangements of particular delegates’ campsites.”

Legolas tried to maintain an innocent expression, but his face burned as the other delegates turned laughing eyes on him, and looked to Arwen as though for help. Of course he found none-- she had buried her face in her hands now, her shoulders shaking with laughter, and evidently given up all pretense at feigning indifference. He glared at her, though she could not see him-- she had wanted this; surely she could have pleaded with Aragorn on his behalf!

“Forgive us our tardiness,” he managed to say once he turned back to Aragorn, though his face still flamed with embarrassment. “It will not happen again.”

Éomer was snickering into the palm of his hand across the table from Legolas; Legolas took the opportunity to nudge his shin with his boot. After all, the King of Rohan was not his liege lord! “Excuse me,” he said very insincerely when Éomer glared. He settled back into his seat, composure somewhat restored.

“The King of Eryn Lasgalen wishes us to apologize for his absence. He is indisposed.” Tawar rose and bowed from the waist, his voice neutral. “I am to speak for him today.” He looked briefly at Legolas, his gaze measuring but not overtly hostile.

Aragorn raised both brows; Legolas knew well that the king of Gondor had been raised by elves and was fully aware they were not subject to illnesses of the body as mortals were.

“I trust he will recover ere long,” Aragorn said. “Lest we be forced to conclude our parley without his input.”
“And what a hardship that would be,” muttered someone-- Legolas thought it was one of the Erebor dwarves, though he could not identify the speaker.

“No such commentary is necessary,” said Aragorn sternly. “Now, if all personal matters are quite settled, and all groups represented at last--” he cast another look in Legolas and Gimli’s direction--“we may begin the day’s negotiations.”

Without Thranduil to encourage and inflame subtle hostility, the parley seemed to go well. Aragorn focused on ironing out minor matters between allies, which set a tone of cooperation and goodwill for the day. However, many delegates frequently turned their gazes upon Legolas and Gimli, their expressions ranging from amusement to hostility. Éomer in particular seemed ready to burst out laughing every time he laid eyes on Legolas-- which made him blush, a response that only inspired the King of Rohan to greater hilarity.

Likewise Legolas could not meet Queen Arwen’s eye, even though she had been the one to suggest their trysting-place. Legolas wondered if sand adhered to Aragorn as readily as it did to Gimli, and smiled quietly to himself as he pictured the scene.

Out of the corner of his eye he could see Gimli-- fidgeting for want of smoke, no doubt. The goblets at each delegate’s side did not offer anything stronger than water, and they had not had the chance to open the bottles of wine Legolas had brought along for their tryst the night before.

In truth, part of him was inclined to wonder if that was for the better; too often of late he had seen Gimli reach for drink to lessen discomfort. It encouraged him to know that he might be a greater comfort to the dwarf even than ales or spirits.

At last, shortly before the noon recess was called, the subject of trade was brought up once more. It was clear that Aragorn would brook no such uproar as had occurred the day before, but he allowed disagreements and debates this time. It was also likely that events ran more smoothly without Thranduil present-- though he had spoken only rarely in the previous days, his speech had always been meant to sow discord. Tawar too spoke only rarely, but he did not have the same skills for manipulation as Legolas’s father.

Indeed, the absence of Thranduil and the lightening of the mood in the tent, even from the delegates who had accompanied him, gave Legolas an idea.

When Aragorn called a midday pause, Legolas held up a hand to Gimli when the dwarf would have approached him, darting instead out of the tent to follow the delegation from Eryn Lasgalen. The majority of the elves there were his father’s people, loyal to a fault, but he knew some of them of old and had fought beside them for thousands of years. He could only hope that such bonds were not easily broken, for all they had been left to fade.

“My friends,” he said, “if you have time, I would speak to you.”

The looks that greeted him were cautious at best, some even hostile, and Legolas’s heart sank. He had not expected much better, not after he had realized Galion’s honest anger and dislike, but he had at least dared to hope.

Tawar’s face was as infuriatingly neutral as ever; he gave Legolas only a curt but polite incline of the head, an acknowledgment of one who outranked him-- but his next words reminded Legolas that Tawar answered to one higher in status than Legolas himself. “We are away to wait upon the will of the king,” he said, and swept out without looking back.

Some of the others followed him, but Linaewen and Galvorn lingered, giving Legolas shamefaced looks even as they darted anxious glances toward the tent-flap. He regretted their anguish, not
wishing to divide them between him and his father-- but then, he yet dared to hope they might need to be so torn. If he could only speak to them--

“Prince Legolas,” Galvorn greeted him. “Years it has been since you graced the halls of Thranduil with a visit.”

Legolas knew that it was true, and felt shame-- did his people feel he had abandoned them? “I have been occupied with many duties, both pleasant and not,” he answered. “But I have neglected my duty as both son and prince, and I am sorry. How goes life within the wood?”

“Well enough, day by day, and much of it goes as it did of old, though without your presence to lighten feast-days and long watches upon the borders,” Linaewen said. “The king broods, as he has ever done; he is troubled by the great change that lies upon the land.”

“The time of the elves is fading,” Legolas said-- this, indeed, his father both feared and knew to be true. “And the time of Man is at hand.”

“Aye, such is true. Rumors have it--” Her voice fell soft. “That now that Galadriel and Elrond have sailed, and Mithrandir with them, those who remain east of the sea will now dwindle until our past glories are forgotten and we are mere curiosities. There are those who say one day elves will come to be hunted, and must learn to hide if we do not wish to be caught and displayed like animals. It is said that even the Straight Road will close, and we will have no better choice than to seek Mandos by death.”

“Will you sail, then?” Legolas asked. For indeed the sadness in her voice suggested a great weariness, one he felt at times echoed in his own soul, even if many would suggest that he had become less of an elf through his love for mortals.

“I would but for my king,” she confessed, casting down her gaze. “I followed him at the Last Alliance. He led me out again alive, and all our folk save of course those whom we lost, not least of them your mother. Now that the power of the Three has passed, he is the greatest and oldest Elvish king in Middle Earth.”

“And for those of us who would not leave,” said Galvorn solemnly, “for those of us who yet love this land, he holds us here and together, so that we need not give up the land or the lives we love to find another.”

As you have. Legolas heard the words unspoken in what he had said, and he thought again on how his people might see his choice to bind himself to mortal love. “I wonder,” he said, nearly thinking aloud now, “if this is to be our fate, then-- that we must either pass away from Middle-Earth, or give up part of ourselves to remain here.”

“If that is true,” said Galvorn, “then there are those like our king who give up much of themselves so that others may remain as well.”

Legolas bowed his head, remembering once more his father’s offer to sail with him, remembering the mad hope in his eyes. What did his father think Legolas had lost? And what had Thranduil lost himself, in holding so fast to memory and realm that he would not accept anything new, whatever it might be? Perhaps if he would sail, he might gain it again-- but Legolas did not think he would be persuaded to do so.

“And for those who would see the world safe from new evils,” added Linaewen, her eyes fierce now. She had been one of his father’s most admired warriors since long before Legolas had been alive, and he could see it in her eyes, stronger even than the flashes of the longing he knew: her determination to protect herself and her realm-- even from an evil already vanquished.
He would not convince her, but he spoke anyway. “Sauron’s rule is ended, and he will not rise again.”

“So it is said by many,” she allowed. “Yet it is also whispered among the men of Dale that there are some cults of men who worship him-- a few only, but men are short of life and of sight, and long history has shown that they do not crave peace, save only when they suffer for its lacking. With ritual and effort, fools among them may yet retrieve Sauron from the Void-- or more likely replace him with some other power, one more fitting their stature, one who seeks mastery in the absence of good.”

Legolas set his teeth in his lip. “And do you think we are meant to stay to oppose them, should such a thing come to pass? Have we not done our part in the shaping of the future by ending Sauron’s threat? We are called home by the Valar.” He knew no longer what his intention was in this conversation, but it pierced his heart to see her torn as he was, by a longing that could only be overcome by the strongest effort of will. “Sauron was given power by elves and men and was a foe of both races; together we have defeated him. Yet my heart says men are fated to fight the foes they make by and for themselves, just as we were meant to fight those of our creation.”

Legolas looked toward Aragorn, who was yet young and hale, a figure of great majesty and wisdom. But he had seen many kings of men as they came and went, and had seen the good works of men wax and wane time and again over all the long yen of his life. His heart quailed within him as he thought of the future, when the potency of the blood of Númenor might again fade and lesser men arise to seize power.

It was perhaps a mercy that Aragorn would not survive to see such dismal things come of his legacy. And yet Legolas suspected he knew such failures would come to pass one day; such was the lot of mortal men. It was given to Aragorn only to safeguard his own time.

Thranduil thought much on this, Legolas knew; his father had seen many more of the cycles of men than Legolas himself. It was little wonder he held himself aloof, unwilling to aid those whose passing would be to him as little as a leaf upon the wind, yet suffering reluctance to go into the west, which would mean abandoning his realm and those few of his people who would not follow, only to yield himself up to greater powers.

“I know not why or whether we are meant to stay,” said Linaewen. “Yet I owe my king my trust and my loyalty, and I have sworn not to leave his side while I have the choice.”

Legolas nodded at last, quietly. How could he blame or shame his people for such feelings? It was a devotion-- to a king, to a past-- that he might have shared himself, even a few years ago. But how could he do so now, now that he had learned so much more of the world and those who inhabited it, learned depths of love and trust in change that he would never have understood before?

“If you stayed for the sake of your king, or to preserve the ways of old,” he said at last, trying for a neutral tone, “do you think that your king would lead you into another alliance with men if they needed help to battle evil? Would you make yourselves known to them or would you hide away? Would you support your king if he commanded you to hide?”

“T know not,” said Linaewen. “And, Valar willing, I will not need to know for some time yet. But I will not depart merely because all seems safe now; I have lived long enough to understand the illusion of safety.”

“I think you should sail if you have heard the longing,” Legolas said. “We are called by the Powers. It is to them you owe fealty, as do we all.” The words tasted bitter as ash in his mouth as he thought on Gimli and knew he would not answer that call, not while the dwarf yet remained
alive in Middle-Earth.

“There are many reasons not to sail, my prince, as I think you know.” Linaewen smiled, bittersweet with rue. “But we have delayed long and we must away, ere we stir the king’s wrath, for he is much occupied with struggle. He makes war within his own mind, and we know not which thought will be the victor.”

Together she and Galvorn slipped away, leaving Legolas once more torn-- with no better answer than he had had before.
Chapter 33

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the lateness of the hour, friends, but technically (according to one of our time zones!) we got it in on our schedule! Thank you so much for sticking with us this far!

When negotiations finished for the day, Aragorn caught Gimli’s shoulder before his people could descend upon him to discuss the day’s events. “I would not hold you from your fellows for too long,” he said, “but if you and Legolas find some time to yourselves this evening, we would be glad to dine with you, in--” his eyes twinkled mischievously “--celebration of your recent good fortune.”

“And in the desire to learn how it at last came about, after despairing for so long that it never would,” said Arwen, appearing at Aragorn’s shoulder.

Gimli flushed, but could not help smiling. After all the tension of the day, an evening with his dearest friends would be most welcome-- and he supposed that Aragorn deserved some consideration in thanks for the support he had given, welcome or not. “I will speak to my husband,” he said, relishing the truth of the words at last, “and we will attend you later this evening, so long as he too is willing.”

Legolas was willing indeed, and so it was that once they had both fulfilled their duties to their respective subjects, they walked hand in hand from their shared tent between their camps, through the gathered delegates to the encampment of the men of Gondor.

A page met them outside Aragorn and Arwen’s tent, letting them in with a bow and an unsubtle glance at their joined hands, and they went to the table where Aragorn and Arwen awaited them.

“My friends, sit down,” the king greeted them. Gimli spared a moment for guilt; Aragorn looked weary, and his queen’s hand was protective upon his shoulder. “I have wine--” not whiskey, Gimli noted wryly, “--and roast meat, and also such fare as elves favor. Today went as well as we could have hoped, I thought; let us sit and sup together.”

Gimli released Legolas’s hand with reluctance and the two of them sat, waiting until they were served and the servants withdrew before relaxing. Gimli cut his eyes toward Legolas, who was looking at him as if mirroring his thought; now came the time for questions and embarrassing revelations between friends!

“How fare you since last we met?” Arwen asked, her eyes sparkling with teasing merriment.

“Well enough,” said Legolas, his tone casual, though his eyes danced. “Save for a few small matters.” He glanced over at Gimli, who wondered exactly to which small matters he was referring: the general frustration of the negotiations, his despair that Thranduil would come around, or the fact that his father had seen much more of their marriage than any of them would have liked.

“Small?” said Arwen innocently. “Strange-- I would not have imagined that to be the case.”
Gimli turned purple and Legolas began to sputter denials, which only made Arwen laugh-- and Aragorn even harder. It was perhaps the man’s time to enjoy a laugh at their expense, given how their honeymoon behavior had made him suffer as the leader of the parley.

“Nay, my wife, do not call a dwarf’s axe small,” Aragorn said, wiping the corners of his eyes. “Not if you wish to keep your head upon your shoulders, for you will force him to wield it in proof, and none of us would want that in this time and place!”

Arwen was not quieted; she threw back her head and laughed at the jest. Legolas shot Gimli a mortified look and Gimli could only shrug, glad that his bushy beard covered more of his blushes.

“We only jest with you, as is proper for a married couple greeting newlyweds-- at least among men,” Arwen said at last.

But Legolas seemed to have regained some of his composure, and the look in his eyes was enough to set Gimli on edge as he gazed back at the queen. “You assume, then, that your jest does not strike truth?” he said, his tone cool but one eyebrow quirking in suggestion.

Gimli spluttered once more as the merriment burst out anew, but at last he could no longer restrain his own laughter. He did sneak a hand under the table to rest high upon Legolas’s thigh, and smiled in satisfaction at the tiny squeaking noise that escaped Legolas’s throat. Small vengeance would have to suffice.

“In seriousness,” Aragorn said at last, once they had calmed, “you will need to hone your skills in subtlety. Do not forget that many of the other leaders think you wed long since! Unless you wish your falsehood to be exposed now that it is no longer false, I would caution prudence in your displays.”

“Yes.” Legolas glanced at Gimli, then back over at Aragorn and Arwen. “Our ruse was, in fact, nearly revealed-- just in time for it to become true. And I wonder now what will come because of it.”

They gazed at him in puzzlement, so he explained. “My father learned of Galion that we were not wed,” he said. “He meant to expose us in the falsehood, I think-- yet ere he could, it was no longer false. He… verified this with his own eyes.”

Gimli harrumphed with dismay. “That spying, I judge, was the true reason for his absence today, and it dismays me to think what course of action he may have settled upon, and what he means to bring before the parley tomorrow. We have inconvenienced you greatly with our indiscretions, Aragorn, and this I regret.”

“No more than you inconvenienced us before they became overt,” Arwen interjected. “Whatever comes of these negotiations, I confess to great relief at seeing the two of you bound in truth at last.”

“Yes, I suppose you would.” Legolas shifted beside Gimli, and looked at Arwen as well. “I believe that you are owed also an apology for certain words that passed between us a few days ago. You were correct, as you so often are, and I am grateful for your attempts at speaking sense to me.”

“Words?” asked Gimli. Legolas’s tone sounded familiar, his words like to ones that he himself owed to Aragorn, and he glanced between the two with suspicion.

“My husband and I have labored long in service of your union,” Arwen admitted. “And at times
we have despaired of its coming. We agreed when we last departed your lands that if you were left to yourselves, it would never happen-- whether from pride, or from fear, or from simple respect of one another, you would never venture the truth. And so we vowed that if worse came to worst, we must make you speak.” She gazed at them with sympathy.

“It was not planned that each of us would make the same threat on the same day, but we do not repent of it. For here you are, and you seem quite happy-- if Gimli’s hand upon Legolas’s thigh is any testament to your joy in this new closeness!” Aragorn pointed out, and Gimli snatched his hand back defensively enough to provoke fresh gales of laughter.

“I suppose you are right in all to which you attribute our silence,” Legolas admitted, even as he fumbled beneath the table to catch Gimli’s wayward hand in his own. “And yet, as we find out, we lied only to ourselves-- and to one another.” He gave Gimli an apologetic look. “And now I know not how much my father may have guessed or suspected of our relationship. I did not lie to him when we spoke, but nor was I entirely truthful-- and now does he think that I spoke to him solely in defiance? Or did he, like so many others, perceive the truth of my words, even as I knew not how to speak them to the one who deserved them?”

“There is only one way to discover what Thranduil thinks-- and that is to ask. Yet even that may not suffice,” Aragorn mused. “He is a proud and willful king, torn hither and yon by grief and fear of grief-- and by his dislike of those who are not like him. Among them I name the dwarves of Erebor and of Aglarond-- and the Valar whose rule he would avoid, if he could, though his pride may cost him all he now holds and all he might ever hold in the west. And he also has little liking for men, or for other kindreds of elves. Gandalf believed Thranduil has listened solely to the thoughts within his head for so long his thinking is a maze of echoes, and he knows not how his mind plays tricks upon him.”

“Those words Gandalf said of another, once,” Gimli mused. He did not like to make the comparison, but he thought back to the weeks shortly after the Ring War when the Fellowship had all come together again at last and shared their stories-- and he recalled the tales Pippin had told of his time in Minas Tirith with its former Steward. He hesitated to label Legolas’s father with the same kind of madness-- well, he would not hesitate if left to himself, but he did not like to do so in Legolas’s hearing.

“I know of whom you speak,” said Legolas, his eyes clouded with sadness. “And I confess I have thought it myself-- but I know not what may be done about it. For if one’s mind may be turned so fully inward upon itself, what power is strong enough to inspire it to look again outside?”

“There is one important difference between Thranduil and Denethor,” Aragorn said gently. “Denethor looked into the palantir of Isildur, and through it he was deceived by Sauron, who guided what he saw and whispered poison in his ear. Thranduil has never hearkened to the Great Enemy, nor to the Witch King of Angmar, nor to any poison other than the one he brews for himself in the silence of his soul-- and that should give us hope, for Thranduil is not evil. He loves his son,” Aragorn looked kindly at Legolas.

“That he does,” Gimli said, gruff. “Or he would not have made his offer. Tell the king of it, Legolas.”

“He said he would ride the Straight Road with me at once if only I would leave Gimli and come away,” Legolas whispered. “I refused him.”

“Arwen spoke of this to me,” Aragorn said gently. “It gives me great hope, Legolas, that he may yet be reached. He will not be easy, but he may see reason, in time.”
“In time,” Legolas echoed, and he glanced at Gimli, then away, as though the sight pained him. “But in how much time?”

Gimli’s throat tightened. He felt as though he could understand the thought behind those words—for time was, after all, the one thing that he could not give to Legolas in abundance. Not enough—not as much as he deserved. He wished there were something, anything, he could say, but he could not—he could only squeeze the hand that still held his beneath the edge of the table.

It was Arwen who interceded, then, before the melancholy could grow any heavier. “That we cannot answer,” she said, “but I do not think it hopeless, all the same. Love may be a force as powerful as pride, and the hardest walls may be chipped away, given the right tools in the right hands. And those we have in plenty.”

“Or the stone of his heart may be worn away by love and remade. You have seen the caverns of Aglarond, crafted in solid stone by the Deeping Stream,” Gimli said, forcing an optimism he did not wholly feel. Thranduil was made of purest granite, after all, not of malleable limestone! “It may be yet that love will work great beauty in his heart.”

“You comfort me,” Legolas whispered to him, and the warmth of his gaze was such that Gimli near forgot Aragorn and Arwen sitting across the table from them, watching. He squeezed the elf’s fingers, his heart too full for speech at the look in Legolas’s eyes. Legolas was truly above mithril or all the gemstones in the earth; his love was worth the sum of everything Gimli had ever known—as superior to the trove of Smaug as a diamond was superior to a lump of coal.

“We have grown somber,” Arwen noted, “yet tonight was supposed to be a time of rejoicing, for your long wait has ended—and ended as we have all hoped.”

“Not only your long wait,” noted Aragorn, “but ours as well.” He let out a long, deep sigh and sat back, tipping his head back to gaze at the ceiling. “I confess, I had feared at times that it would never come to pass. I had heard tales of the thickheadedness of dwarves, and have had cause to witness the same trait in elves throughout my childhood, but never had I imagined the spectacle when the two were set against one another—perhaps even more so because you did not realize you were at odds!”

Gimli harrumphed to himself. “You have never made study of dwarven courtship, it is plain,” he muttered. “It is not unusual for the friends of both the undeclared couple to give them drink until they are in a stupor, then undress them and put them to bed together. We are not willing to suffer rejection lightly.”

“Ah, that is what we ought to have done, then!” said Aragorn. “While I had you laid out in a drunken stupor on my rug, I ought to have had Arwen knock Legolas out, spirit him back here, and chain you together—”

“I am sure it would have saved you—and perhaps us, as well—much misery,” said Legolas, shamefaced. “I am sorry again for the trouble that we put you through.”

“It is nothing to the trouble endured by other couples in the history of elves, I am sure. Take for example Eöl and Aredhel,” she said, wry, and Legolas laughed despite himself.

“Nay, do not say such a thing, for I would not force Gimli, nor would I be the death of him!” He sobered. “And yet—Gimli, I apologize for my lie to you. We agreed to pretend to be wed but to remain friends, and I vowed to this though I did not have merely friendship in my heart when I swore it.”

Still, some part of Gimli found it impossible to believe, after so many years of believing it
otherwise. But the more he heard his own heart spoken aloud in Legolas’s voice, the more certain he became. “In that, we are each as bad as the other,” he said. “For you know now that I felt the same, and though I told myself I would never ask anything of you beyond your comfort, I entered into our arrangement with false pretenses. I apologize as well.”

“And now all has ended well enough,” interrupted Arwen, “so let us not turn once more to melancholy thoughts! Your hearts were indeed the same, and now you know it in truth, so what is there to do but rejoice?”

“You are right,” said Legolas, and now Gimli saw the smile return to his face-- less reluctant, it seemed, than before. “And we owe you thanks as well, for your patience and support. As miserable as some aspects of this gathering-- and as joyful as others-- have been, we owe much of our comfort and happiness to both of you.”

“Indeed, and I am glad to hear that you are aware of it,” Aragorn couldn’t hide a grin, though he tried to sound stern. “For we have labored long and sorely in your service while you have resisted every attempt at tactful persuasion.” He shook his head at Arwen, who tittered, covering her mouth politely with her palm. “Indeed, I would have guessed you would choose an inconvenient time to reconcile yourselves, and so you have done,” Aragorn spread out his hands to indicate the assembled camp about them. “And yet, were you easy, perhaps your friendship would be of less value, being easily won and... husbanded.”

Hearing that, Arwen laughed aloud. “Ah, my lord, you have the tongue of a diplomat indeed; it is well that you are king.” She shot them a playful glance. “What he means to say is that we have resisted with difficulty the temptation to chain you together and abandon you in an empty chamber until you had finally spoken your hearts.”

“Well,” Gimli finally grumbled, “as Legolas said, we thank you for your assistance… and your restraint, I suppose.” When the laughter broke out this time, he joined in with less reluctance than he pretended.

“We are sure to call in our debt,” Arwen smiled on them both. “We will expect the best lodgings and feasting when we visit your lands, for example-- such things as our trade allies can hardly hold against us!”

“You will have them-- and the best of hunting, also, and of wine and the mead of Ithilien, which will be strong and sweet,” Legolas vowed.

“And you will have the finest chambers in Aglarond whenever you wish them, even if I must vacate them myself,” Gimli said. “And you will be allowed to pass within the deepest caverns where none go except on great holidays, for care of the delicate stones that still grow within.”

“Indeed, you promise much,” Aragorn laughed, and turned to Arwen. “Well, my wife? Does this satisfy you?”

Her eyes danced. “It does indeed. And while we tease you, you must know also that it is the greatest reward to see you united at last, freed from the prisons you created for yourselves.” She reached across the table to lay a hand over Legolas’s. “We find joy in your joy, my friends, and wish that it may be yours for the long years to come.”

“Yes,” said Aragorn, his voice turning serious again. “We know that the troubles and hardships of these negotiations are yet to be resolved, but whatever comes of these decisions, your realms will survive and your companionship will endure and grow ever richer.” His voice sounded suddenly almost as though he proclaimed some sort of blessing on them, and Gimli could not find it within him to resent it. “Whatever arrangements are made in the next few days, it gives me great
comfort to know that you have found what you have been seeking for so long-- for all that it was right before your eyes!”

“Yes,” said Legolas softly, and again his fingers tightened around Gimli’s. “Yes, it gives me great comfort as well.”

“It would give me even more comfort to hear it is time to retire to our tent,” Gimli said, giving Legolas a sly look. “For while your people have been assured of the enthusiasm of our union, my own may yet have doubts!”

Legolas blushed deeply, and Arwen laid a hand on Aragorn’s thigh; Gimli laughed softly at them all, guessing that he and Legolas would not be the only couple who enjoyed their solitude tonight.

“I will endeavor to be convincing, meleth,” Legolas said. “But we may have to try more than once to be sure.”

“Then we should not delay,” Gimli told him. “Nor should we impose longer on our hosts, for I perceive they are eager to be rid of us for reasons of their own!”

“We will go then,” said Legolas, his eyes bright. “I will race you to the tent!” And the tent flap rustled, leaving only a soft puff of cool air in his wake.

“Cheating elf!” Gimli bellowed, and charged off after him.

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“My husband,” Arwen said. “I fear we have created a most fearsome alliance indeed.”

“That we have,” he sighed, then laughed helplessly. “But that worry must keep until morning.”

“Do not worry,” she said, smiling and taking his hand. “It will.”
Chapter 34

Chapter Notes

Surprise extra update! Truth be told, we want to get to the end as much as you do. And at long last, here's a glimpse at the inside of Thranduil's head.

Be warned for alcoholic depressive breakdowns and excessive drama.

Thranduil sat in his tent, staring at the gently moving canvas, which swayed back and forth in rhythm with the night breeze, letting small puffs of mist creep in through the seams.

Everything felt thick with damp; it rose from the ground to saturate the canvas tent, to freight his elegant rugs, to weigh the folds of the silken tablecloth and condense on the glass of abandoned wine-bottles. Seven stood empty upon the table, and yet he held a filled glass in his hand, now warm from the heat of his fingers upon its sides.

A sour taste filled his mouth, echoing the bitterness in his mind. It refused to cease replaying the scene he had beheld scant hours before-- his clean, lithe son entwined with the squat, hairy dwarf.

Thranduil drank, grimacing, and abruptly hurled the glass at the canvas. Wine splashed on its grey fabric, trickling down and staining the cloth like blood. The glass thumped to the rugs without breaking and lay there in the dim on its side.

“I always feared that I might lose him to minions of Sauron,” he murmured to his reflection, which stared wild-eyed and ragged out at him from the mirror that stood in the corner. “But not to this. Not like this.”

He turned bitterly away from the spectacle of his defeat.

“Galion. More wine,” he called sharply.

“The stock you brought is finished,” Galion said. “I would have to ask abroad for more. Perhaps the elves of Ithilien--”

“Daro!” Thranduil snapped. “Leave me.”

He did not look up, hearing rather than seeing Galion’s departure. A rustling of tent-flaps, and then the air was quiet around him, save for the incessant breeze. It would not still around him; nor would his thoughts quiet. Satisfied at last that he was alone, he resorted to closing his eyes and pressing both hands to his ears, as though to dull the images that would not leave his mind.

It was done. Whatever Galion had overheard had been either deliberate deception or unknowing falsehood; Legolas’s spirit was now bound as fully as he had assured Thranduil that his heart was. He had seen the truth of it with his own eyes, and had been unable to face the parley tent for fear of seeing it in Legolas’s-- his eternal wedding to a dwarf.

A dwarf. Again the infernal images assailed Thranduil’s mind, and he looked around, wishing dearly for more wine, or-- if not that-- for something else to throw.
Finding nothing, he sat still, grinding his teeth until he thought they might crack. There was no farther to fall; Legolas had rejected his most desperate offer. What would it profit him now to enact his former plans? He might inconvenience a handful of men and dwarves, those who liked the Shire-weed, but they would swiftly go around him and find a way to ship the goods along the Greenway and through the Gap of Rohan. Even in that, he would be thwarted.

This entire business was without hope. He had extended the utmost force of his will only to find that he was powerless to move Legolas, and now he faced a bitter decision: to commit to the campaign as he had begun it, and to lose all, or to swallow his pride and retreat-- perhaps he might hope for better opportunities later.

After all, time would soon remove the dwarf. Perhaps then his son would become more malleable to his will. But he guessed Legolas would not. Thranduil’s heart told him he would swiftly lose his child to the west after Gimli died-- and he had no true wish to follow Legolas there.

Thranduil heard a shout, and it startled him upright; his fist clenched so hard the nails cut his palm. It was a voice he would know anywhere, and one that ground against the back of his mind: Legolas, crying out his pleasure before all like a wanton harlot in a brothel!

Galion pulled aside the flap and faced him, face hidden in the shadows. He held a wooden carton of slender bottles. “I have found wine,” he said. “It is poor stuff from Gondor, but you would not have me go--”

“Give it to me.” Thranduil seized the neck of a bottle and pulled the cork with his teeth. Galion brought the rest in and set it on the table. Thranduil waved him out and drank without bothering to find his goblet.

Again, memory rose to his mind-- a memory, once more, that he wished to suppress: the bearded interloper who had entered his realm without invitation and escaped his dungeons of old, the father of his son’s-- he forced himself to think it: his son’s husband-- speaking to him with contempt, with-- with pity, claiming to speak in Legolas’s defense, accusing Thranduil of burning all his bridges for good. He had spoken as though he knew with surety that Legolas would be all but lost to Thranduil if he kept to his path-- and it was a more bitter burn than the low-quality wine in the back of Thranduil’s throat that Glóin was right. He had seen it himself in Legolas’s face, had he not?-- if he were to choose between his father and his dwarf, he would not even hesitate to remove himself from Thranduil’s life forever.

There was only one road open to Thranduil now; he could see only one way to save face and keep some semblance of contact with his son while Legolas yet remained east of the sea, where Thranduil might nurture his slender chances of having Legolas back once the mortal had perished.

He must swallow the bitterness and deny that it existed. He must pretend this outcome was one he had wanted. He must halt all opposition to the trading agreement and say that he had planned his objections to his son’s wedding as a test of the couple’s devotion, and that he had brought all this company together as part of that scheme. He must say that they had passed, though the lie would sear his tongue.

He must tolerate the dwarf during the span of mortal years that remained of its life.

Long had Thranduil prided himself on being a nobler elf than any of the accursed Noldor-- their pride had been such they would never have yielded, would never have humbled themselves before an enemy. Yet in the end, to yield up his pride in defeat was a greater burden than ever he had imagined.
Thranduil cast the empty bottle aside and took up another.

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