The elf knew, long before the trees of Ithilien began gossiping among themselves, of the king's coming. He knew, too, of the great boughs sweeping low in reverence as the man strode up the avenue of taniqueils. Not just because the brush of the twittering leaves touched both his mind and his ears, but because he'd woken them with his song and taught them the homage long ago.

He had come this evening for solace; to be soothed among the aldeon he'd raised from seedlings. A hundred years had passed; a hundred years since he'd first ushered the King of Gondor down the crushed white sea shells marking the path. More than a hundred years since he'd hung up his bow and quiver to learn the gentler arts of grafting, espaliering and pleaching from Samwise the Brave.

The river of memory had been flowing through his mind for days now, sometimes meandering as slowly as the waters of the Enchanted River, sometimes, around the most vivid reminiscences, as swiftly as the River Running. Settling with a sigh in the topmost crook of the tree, Legolas waited, letting his mind drift in reverie.

As far back as his memories took him, a brief period only in the elven measurement of time, his goal had been single-minded and purposeful; to become a warrior in defense of Middle-earth, to defeat the enemy, Sauron, and return to his people the lives of prosperity and peace they had once lived.
For centuries, destiny had withheld its hand, until by fate, or the wizard's maneuverings, the Heir of Isildur had appeared in his home wood, unleashing a succession of events few in Middle-earth could have imagined, much less engineered. And Legolas had found himself unexpectedly in the middle of it all, bound to a mortal in a way he would never have believed.

The Greenwood flourished once again, as did Ithilien, and there was renewal in Lothlórien and Rivendell as well, though the life even of those green places would be counted in centuries now, rather than the ages of Middle-earth.

In achieving his goal, he had helped to usher in the Age of Men. He did not regret any choice he had made, but the reward seemed fleeting in comparison with the endeavor. A hundred years has passed seemingly in less time than it took a flower to open from bud to full bloom. A hundred years gone by like the swift waters of the Forest River sliding beneath the bridge to his home. A hundred years spent between one broken heartbeat and the next.

He had refused to listen to the gentle pleading his friend had been inundating him with for months. Instead he had compensated for the man's fading song by amplifying it so Aragorn felt again its radiance and fire, had been warmed by the glow of its incandescence. Fiercely he'd fought the swift march of mortal time, shoving it back and back with all the elven strength at his command, joined in this, at least, by the Undómiel. She who had named him once, in jest, Amrûnel; Aragorn's sunrise to her evening star. In truth, the barb of the jest had been fletched in green, the color of covetousness for the whole of her husband's heart, for though she held by far the majority of that venerable organ, she had been aware of the fractured and torn remnants given wholly into the keeping of the Mirkwood Prince.

That relationship, tempered in the furnace of shared hardship, privation and grief, had kept the elf's restless fëa tethered to his home here in Middle-earth far longer than he would have been able to manage otherwise. Though Gimli's solidarity and camaraderie, too, had contributed greatly to his ability to deny the sea-longing that found its way like irritating damp sand into every nook and cranny of his soul.

Sighing again, Legolas pushed out his senses, brushing lightly against the determination he felt striding up the path with as firm a footstep as ever had come before.

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The sweeping boughs of the shimmering taniquetil brushed the ground before and after him as the king reached the crown of the low hill where the first great tree had been sown and nurtured to maturity. The elf's first, and still most revered experiment, had been named by Sam after the great white mountain of Aman. The hobbit had remarked that the avenue of immense trees reminded him of the old stories of the halls of Ilmarin from whence Manwë and Varda could view all the world, even to the Gates of Morning. The trees had been known as taniquetils since.

Legolas called them merely – his trees. The elf, with centuries of nuanced court protocol ingrained in his very being, had taught them to bow at the coming of the king. A tribute, he'd offered slyly, all those long years ago, well aware of the ranger's impatience with the officious courtiers sprouting like mushrooms in the palace of the White City.

A smile curved the stern mouth at the memory now as Aragorn strode up the path.

He had not meant to neutralize the elf's impudent gesture so effectively, but at the sight, the king had thrown back his head and laughed until tears had streamed down his face, saying only that of all his court, he could trust the trees to offer honest fealty.

"Legolas?" The king stopped at the outskirts of the great mountain of a tree to wait. There was no
need to raise his voice, it carried easily on the still night air. "Your steward told me I might find you here." He waited with a patience having less to do with the changes wrought by the mantle of kingship than his days as a child in Rivendell. "May I come up, or will you come down?" he inquired at length - when the waves of resentment and sorrow finally ceased to beat upon him like the blunt edge of a blade. Turning his gaze to the stars that shone as though Galadriel's phial has spilt across the sky and Eärendil's light splintered at the spilling, he waited again.

Until at length the elf responded. "I am yours to command, as ever, my liege. As you desire." But no movement portended any disposal to descend on the part of the prince.

A moonlit leaf brushed the man's face as a bough bent before him. It had been long since he'd shod his feet in the elven boots he wore this night; longer still since his soul had found solace in the leafy bowers of any tree. Age was upon him now, and like frost painted autumn leaves, it had fingered strands of silver among the dark locks; yet strength remained. Elessar flexed age-stiffened fingers lightly around the limb and swung, perhaps with less legerdemain than a hundred years ago, to the next and the next and the next until his still keen eyes spotted the glint of moonlight on the gold of spilling hair, the silvery-green tunic making the elf nearly impossible to distinguish from the massive tree trunk.

"You've not been to the city this month and more." The king curved a hand over a branch above his head, his voice steady despite the elf's despair flowing over him like the falls of Imladris.

Legolas lifted his dark gaze slowly. "I would have come, had you called."

The bough the mortal stood upon bent no more than if the man already weighed less than a memory. This, however, was not Elessar, nor even Elfstone, balanced lightly upon the slender branch. This man bore more than a passing resemblance to a Dúnadan of the North, though the sheath upon his belt bore no ranger's humble weapon. This was the black-clad shadow that had shifted so easily between realms of men and elves and dwarves for more than two hundred years.

Legolas was first to look away. "I have whiled away the days accomplishing nothing since first the murmurings smote my heart."

"The hour approaches, though you refuse to pay heed." The man sighed. "Would you have me do otherwise?"

"Yes!" The cry was wrung from the elf with such vehemence the tree shook with his passion. "Do not ask this of me, my lord."

"I come not as Elessar," the king spoke softly, "you know this, Legolas." The reiteration was intentional. He came not as the king to a prince of the realm, but as friend to friend.

"There is time yet, you do not have to make this choice now!" In the imperative there was both pleading and pain such as Legolas had never experienced. He dealt daily in the world of Men, had known, from the beginning, where this path led. But he had thought to ready himself, to withdraw slowly from the bond, so neither felt it so keenly; this knife twisting now in his breast until breath refused to draw.

"The river of time runs swiftly, my friend; the end of this journey is near." Aragorn paced the curve of the branch into the heart of the tree, graceful as always, though the knees protested volubly as he turned his back to the trunk and slid down gratefully beside the elf. The tree made room for him so elf and king sat shoulder to shoulder, surveying the moonlit landscape toward the east, whence their blessing and their bane had been won.

None but an elf, or one raised by elves, could have sat in such harmonious silence, one with the
trees and the night and the earth born fruits of this sylvan bower.

In the years since the return of the king, the land had thrown off the shadows of gloom, waking from its long dormant sleep to rejoice with the heirs of the Children of Ilúvatar in the passing of the Third Age and the dawning of the Fourth.

Like a great garden it had become. Where fire and ash had laid waste, plants whose origins had been lost in the mists of the song's creation, sprang forth, and had become known by the names of the Valar: Elentári for the tiny white stars that sprang up in the footsteps of Arwen Undómiel; a new kind of flax from which the finest cloth in Middle-earth was woven, named for Vairë; hemp that came to be known simply as Aulë for its strength, outmatched by even elven rope; purple flowering trees that grew up by the seas and the rivers were christened Ulmo; and the bards and singers had immortalized the taniquetil in which sat Legolas and his companion.

This tree, and its nearby kin, were young yet, had known only the joy of the sun and the wind and the rain, the morning mists that jeweled the great gardens of Ithilien, the evening sunsets that painted their leaves crimson and soft pink, burnt orange and umber, the stars that danced and sang overhead with voices as beautiful as their creator.

Grief had brushed them only lightly, for never before had the heart of their maker known such sorrow. Anxious this night, to alleviate some of the crushing weight borne by the architect of their awakening, at the direction of the firstborn among them their twittering gossip had drifted into song as they had offered their veneration before the king.

Aragorn tilted his head, wondering creasing dimples beneath the trim beard, more silver now than sable. "I have heard their song before, but never quite like this." His quiet words broke the not-quite-strained, though uncomfortable silence.

"The veil is thinning, despite our efforts." Legolas wrapped his arms around his drawn up ankles.

"It is one of the lullabies you used to sing when the Fellowship halted in the evenings; especially when the hobbits were restless." Aragorn understood the words clearly, his humor alighting with the sound of the syllables elongated with a hint of Entish protraction. "You taught them to sing?"

"I woke them only, and encouraged their court comportment, the rest they have divined on their own."

"And so they sing to the accompaniment of the wind in the woods and the harmony of the rill below. Your talents are innumerable, my friend." Leaning back, Aragorn pulled his legs up as well, resting his elbows atop his black-clad knees. "May I speak freely now?"

"I have no desire to hear, though I will listen because you ask."

The king did not begin immediately, but plucked a silver leaf, turning it over and over between his fingers as if seeking to draw wisdom from its shape. His voice was barely a whisper when he did speak. "I would ask a favor of you my friend. You are free, as always, to deny the request; but I must ask."

Beside him the elf jerked as though he'd been struck by one of his own arrows.

"Do not, Aragorn. Do not, I beg of you. For if you ask, I must comply."

A tattered wisp of cloud sailed across the face of the moon, momentarily obliterating its silver light.

Into that darkness, Aragorn poured the bitter words the elf had kept at bay for so long. "The sands
in my hour glass run short, Legolas; we both know this. I must set my house in order ere the sands run beyond my choosing – and selfishly – I would have this of my own choosing. In this only have I acted in accordance with my wishes alone."

Legolas sighed, a whisper of sound that set the leaves trembling, such was the sorrow in it. "Nay, Aragorn, no more selfish than my own desires." He had thought his sorrow at the loss of Éowyn, then Faramir, devastating; it had been as a candle to a bonfire in comparison to the rent in his soul at the thought of losing, forever, this companion. He had not even Arwen's consolation, that one day, even if far distant, she would be reunited with him beyond the circles of this world.

A breeze trailed playful fingers through the waters of the Anduin's tributary Legolas had diverted from its source, rising to breathe its cool mist upon the unlined brows of the two who sat high among the shimmering boughs.

"There is no other I would entrust with this behest."

"Elladan and Elrohir—"

"Trifle still with the choice of immortality," Aragorn interrupted, though not unkindly. "And I do not believe in the end they will choose the Gift of Men. Regardless, they are not the steadying influence a young ruler will need."

"Elboron—"

"Is younger than Eldarion. Would you have me loose the two of them upon the kingdom ere their youth is spent? With Elladan and Elrohir to back their mischief?"

"Elboron bears both his mother's intensity and his father's wisdom."

"And has admirably fulfilled the responsibilities of all his inherited titles since the passing of Faramir. He will have a long and prosperous life, but he is not yet ready for the role of counselor. Eldarion is prepared for this eventuality, but he has not been tempered by the adversity that shaped our providence. He will need guidance for some while yet."

"Surely Arwen—" The utterance died before it was a fully conceived thought. Legolas dropped his forehead to his knees. Aragorn swallowed a painful sigh. "In truth, I fear for Arwen's reason. She says her choice is irrevocable, though so long as there is essence it must be that choice remains. I see the uncertainty, though she acknowledges it not, and it weighs heavily upon her spirit." He dropped the leaf he'd been worrying and watched it drift lazily down through the moonlight dappled branches until it was lost from sight. "I know the sea song overwhelms your heart and you have fought it for my sake, but it is not just Eldarion, the court will also need someone they trust to turn to. It is unlikely that in her grief, Arwen will be able to fulfill either role. Neither does she possess your gift for hearing and augmenting the songs of others. If there is one among us who can turn grief to gladness again, it is you. You are … our sunrise."

The elf was silent for a long time. He did not believe he would have the strength of will to turn even his own heart to gladness again, let alone the hearts of others. When he spoke finally, he turned the subject. "Have you noticed time lies more lightly on the mortals who bear your company most often?" Legolas turned his head to observe the king's noble bearing. "I've thought, always, it was a quality you and your lady wife imbued in those who surrounded you most closely."

Aragorn met the gaze directed upon him, a smile ghosting across the taciturn features. "I believe
there was a renewal with the blossoming of this Fourth Age, and all things living benefited from the wellspring Frodo and Sam wrought open with their sacrifice." The king hesitated. "I do not make this choice lightly, Legolas; but I make it with no regret."

"None?" Legolas found it difficult to voice the single syllable; his throat felt pierced clean through by a poisoned shaft.

"You have walked Arda far longer than I, and know me, perhaps, better than I know myself. Because of course you are right. But my regrets are only for those I leave behind. And the dearest of them, I would entrust only to you." Aragorn closed his eyes against the mourning visage etched clearly upon the face of the elf, but he reached to lay a hand on the bowed, shoulder. "Turn your grief outward, Legolas, do not let it spiral into despair. I would ask that you stand as advisor to my son until such time as you deem him worthy to rule as a wise and fair sovereign. Linger on these shores but a while longer – for the sake of all I love. Lean on Gimli, he will gladly bear the weight, for sorrow rests lighter on dwarves than men and elves. And when that time has come, take then Arwen into the West where she may pass among her own people if that remains her choice. Perhaps reunited with her own kind, she will find the will to live on."

"You speak of those you love." Legolas, in turn, closed his eyes, the intensity of the spirit shining through the fading humanity almost too much to bear. "Am I not numbered among them, that you ask me to bear this anguish as well?"

The grey eyes flew open, shimmering with a desire that was the only gift, other than time, the man could offer this night. Fate had brought them together in need, only to tear them asunder by need as well. A need far greater than either man or elf, and one Aragorn had long since learned required immeasurable sacrifices. He had made them freely, though not without suffering.

Only once before had he witnessed tears in the elf’s eyes – when they’d thought Gandalf struck down by the balrog in the mines of Moria. Pain pierced him in a way no sword could ever thrust. "Trust your heart, my friend. It is faithful and true, and keeps ever a steady course. It is for this reason I ask these things of you. I will ask no other; even should you decide I ask too much."

Among mortals, the elf had gifted his heart to only two and the entwined roots of both had sunk deep into fertile soil; to draw out either would pull out, also, great chunks of his spirit. There might be nothing left to take ship from the Grey Havens if he acceded to this request.

But how could he not? Always he had trusted this mortal; he could not now deny this last request, though the thought of the imminent loss threatened to unravel pieces of his soul he knew not he’d given into Aragorn’s keeping.

"Weep not for this passing life." Aragorn moved his hand from shoulder to head, as if in blessing, as the elf turned his face into his knees again. "It has been full and gifted beyond measure with affection such as no man before or after will ever know. The song of our sun’s rising and waning will go on for eternity; trust this, Legolas. Trust me."

"I will do this thing you ask," Legolas replied eventually, his voice muffled, "but ask me not to do it with heart. For I do not know if I can bear this parting, Aragorn."

"Sorrow shared draws out its own poison," the healer returned, his voice softening yet more. "Arwen will need you, Legolas. You may find in one another, the gift of solace in shared remembrance. I will not ask of you to offer it, but promise me - if she offers, you will not turn away."

It was long before Legolas replied, and then only with great difficulty. "I will not turn away." Grace already fled the sundering of his heart. He could not, for a long moment, find the strength to
raise his head. His hair was tucked behind his ear and callused fingers lingered for a moment, tracing to the point and back down.

"Did ever I tell you how much I desired elven ears? Not just for the absurd hearing, but for their grace and symmetry."

Legolas, with a huff, turned his head sharply, chary of shifting emotions. "You jest."

"Nay." Aragorn smiled again, the light of it in his eyes kindling a matching spark in the elf’s. "I would have given much for elven ears." He withdrew his hand, crossing his arms back over his knees. "Speaking of elven hearing - I’ve forgotten; how many legions of your kindred live within earshot?"

"This tree was intended for privacy – when I wished to be alone."

Aragorn sighed. "Should I not have come then?" He stirred when there was no immediate response, adjusting Andúril as if to rise. "I will take myself off if that is what you wish."

"Nay! Do not." Legolas sat up abruptly, stretching out a detaining hand. "My father tried to warn me it would be thus, but I paid little heed. Would that I had listened and prepared for this day better. Stay, please. I do not want to be alone this night and I would have your company as long as you are able to endure me."

"You well know I do not suffer your company. But neither do I wish to bring you more pain than I have already inflicted." Aragorn leaned back against the tree, the sheathed sword rasping softly against bark as he settled again. "I am sorry to be so miserly with my time, but I have only this night."

"Then I will not waste it with regrets, but honor these hours with the joy of a gift received."

Silence descended once more; though wedged with sorrow, it was less weighty. No doubt it would fall again, and with the swiftness of a dwarven axe, but Legolas set it aside, his grief momentarily overridden by this unexpected visit. He would not let it shadow his friend’s parting, for part they would at the end of this night.

Purposefully, he turned to their shared pleasures since the breaking of Sauron’s power: the rebuilding of Minas Tirith; the discovery that they shared a knack for negotiating; the many pleasant hours upon hours they’d spent in philosophical discussion with Gimli; horticulture – much to Sam’s delight; and the peace and prosperity that had come to Middle-earth under Aragorn’s reign as Elessar.

More silences came and went, but the night passed with a sharing they had not achieved in many a year. Legolas stored it up in his heart to revisit in the joyless days to come.

Eärendil lay on the far horizon as the hush of night gave way to the song of dawn. Birds began to twitter and then to sing as light brushed a sheen of misty brilliance over the new born world. And as day burst night’s cool cocoon, Aragorn stretched and rose with the help of a pliant limb. "Will you come? When it is time?"

A leaf was mashed to pulp, staining fingers whose calluses came no longer from a taut bowstring or sword, but from shovels and hoes and tilling forks. "I will be there … Aragorn." Brushing off his fingers, Legolas rose as well and clasped the outstretched arm tightly. "I was wrong to despair. Forgive me."

"As before, there is nothing to forgive," Aragorn repeated, the shared memory sharp and clear in both minds. "Be well, Legolas Thranduilion. And may the wind bear your ship lightly over the
waters to Valinor when that time comes. But I will say not my final farewells until I have looked into your eyes one last time."

"And I will take them with me into the undying lands."

A moment of silence draped the early dawn: the babble of the little rill below stilled, the birds ceased their singing, the cheeks of the breeze puffed out as it held its breath, even the leaves of the trees hushed their murmurings. In that reverent moment, a shaft of newly risen sunlight bent with purpose through the still leaves to crown the king with a halo of golden light. Within it, the spirit of the man shone like mithril and Legolas instinctively bowed deeply.

"Rise, mellon nîn." An age-worn hand cupped and lifted the elf's chin. "Do not bow to me; we have ever been equals, you and I." Expressive grey eyes met indomitable green as the ranger in the king, hand to his heart, dipped his head in the old habit. "Until we meet again."

… and he was gone.

~*~

Aldeon – Avenue of trees

Amrûnel – sunrise elf (With thanks to Darth Fingon for conjugation.)

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