

I am not Amazon (I have an imagination and can write), Tolkien (I would never assume to reach so high), or Rowling (I have some understanding of romance).

Hey, folks! As you can see, this is the winner of the small story poll. It is one of two fics updated here on fanfic this month. **ATP** is still being gone over by Observanc3, and he has done such a great job editing it since he began that I am happy to let him keep it as long as he needs to. Observanc3 has told me he is nearly finished and I would say next week is a likely timeframe to shoot for.

For those who have been wondering, once **ATP** is done (three or four chapters more), **FILFy Teacher** will return to the polls.

In no way should you take this fic being updated as a shot at Rings of Power. It's shit, and Guyladriel offends me greatly (the dwarves are good, some of the background is good too, Elrond and his interaction with the dwarves are funny at least, and some of the outfits are okay, if you ignore some of the armor, er... that's about it...oh, wait some of the responses on YouTube are hilarious, and I have loved seeing the pushback from fans) but that in no way made me vote in my own poll. There was no need to do so.

This chapter has not been beta-read by anyone save myself and a smidgeon of Grammarly work.

Now, without further ado, let the journey continue!

10/1: Corrections pointed out by various reviewers: the mistake noted by Nikolas Budka have been corrected - Anakin has now disappeared, and the one place where I used Bilbo's name instead of Estel's have been changed. Lore mistakes have also been changed. Thank you to PR2 for pointing them out!

Fate Touched: Every Step Forward, a New Note in A Song

Despite having been traveling through the Shire for most of that morning, Harry was amused to note the two humans still got some odd looks from the short denizens of this land. More than one mother shooed her children away from them, and many a farmer turned their heads away. Yet most were quick to notice Estel and calm down somewhat, and just like before, their thoughts were obvious: though big people might be automatically dangerous, there was a difference between a single, unpredictable and dangerous human and a father traveling with his son.

Hearing that comment more than once was a little strange to Harry even now. Oh, he had long wanted a family, both to have parents and be a parent or maybe even a big brother to someone else. But hearing it about someone who he honestly wasn't all that close to despite the fact they'd spent several days together was a bit strange.

Still, for now, he was willing to use the locals' prejudices for his own interests and several times, he had them pause so he could talk to farmers who looked slightly more friendly than their fellows. As they near the river Brandywine, Those answers became less and less brusque and dismissive, which was a good sign in Harry's opinion, and he commented on it to his young companion. Either rumor has gone around that you and I are utterly harmless despite being Big Folk, or we're getting near where the Brandybucks held sway. According to Bilbo, they are more open and adventurous than the rest of hobbit-kind."

"That wouldn't be very hard," Estel muttered, shaking his head and looking a little annoyed. "It's not going to be like this all the way back, surely? I wanted some adventure, some exploration, not this, this nice land with its standoffish people."

Harry blinked and looked down at him, one eyebrow cocking upwards. "Why do I get the impression that someone skipped out on geography lessons?"

Estel flushed a little, looking away and whistling in an effort to look innocent, failing miserably.

"Nice try, kid," Harry snorted, gesturing towards where he could now see a small band of blue through a break in the hills. "That, I believe, is going to be the river Brandywine. On the other side of that, we'll enter Brandy Hall. I think it's an actual hall delved out of a hill, although I'm unsure. And from there, we'll head into the forest, where your exploration will begin. Cross out the other side, find and follow the river Bruinen straight to Rivendell."

"Great! I'm looking forward to it." With that, Estel ran ahead, waving cheerfully at all the hobbit children he could see, who waved back, some of them with happiness, others a little warily.

Staring after him, Harry sighed. "Damn me, was I ever that eager for adventure? I hope you can keep that thirst for exploration and innocence as you grow, Estel. But I rather think this world might pound you flat in time. What you make of yourself then will be interesting to see."

With that, he hurried his steps, catching up to his young charge.

Soon they came to the river, where, after exchanging a few coins and some stern injunctions to be on their best behavior in Brandy Hall, the two of them were ferried across the river.

As they did, Estel looked over the side, commenting that, "It looks like it's very deep here. It is not as wide as the Bruinen, but it looks deeper than most."

But his attempts to make small talk only evinced a few short answers and Estel was happy to leave the surly ferrymen behind on the other side. The ferry deposited them at the center of what looked like the outskirts of a small town, indeed built into the side of a hill. There were dozens of small paths and roads leading up to various doors of various sizes, with only a few houses built up out of the hill rather than inside it. But there were more houses out to either side of the main Brandy Hall spreading out of sight in either direction.

This was Buckland, which was, according to Bilbo, an almost separate colony from the rest of the Shire. The number of hobbits that were visible as they walked through seemed to prove that out. Moreover, these hobbits were slightly taller, their eyes a little more fearless than other Hobbits as they looked at the two Big People with interest rather than wariness, although their shoulders were not as broad as other hobbits.

Still following the direction of his initial spell, Harry and Estel moved through Brandy Hall, exchanging greetings with those who gave them a few questions and, at one point, buying food for a few days in the form of meats, cheeses, bread, and even fruit and vegetables. Although Harry's attempt to buy mushrooms failed horribly as he could not find any farmer willing to part with them, something that had him laughing after his third attempt.

It was after that third attempt that Harry and Estel first spotted the High Hay. This was a large, thick hedge set between those parts of Buckland which abutted the Old Forest, which ran for twenty miles. The thickness of the hedge and how well it was kept surprised Harry, and what surprised him even more was, as they came closer, to see it was being patrolled by a group of Bounders. They were armed with bows and arrows, and having seen Bilbo with his bow and arrow, he knew that hobbits were pretty good shots, so that made sense. Yet it seemed to Harry that the number of torches held on their backs was just as important as the bows, given how many each hobbit had.

"Ho, there, Tall One!" one of the Bounders, a slightly older hobbit but one with a long bird feather in his cap, shouted to the two humans, sounding both wary but curious. "Now, where do you think you're going?"

Harry shrugged his shoulders and upon reaching a comfortable speaking range, opined, "The roads leading us back home meander greatly, and Estel and I wish to take a shortcut."

"Shortcut is it?" the hobbit laughed while one of his fellows who looked older frowned, shaking his head as if at a bit of prime foolishness.

"Going through the Old Forest and calling it a shortcut? Best you be thinking twice about that. I'm not willing to stick my nose at others' business, especially one of you Big Folk, but if you're thinking about taking yourself and the young lad there through, I will urge you to think again."

"I'm not young. I'm over eleven. And I'm as tall as you!" Estel protested.

"Eleven!?" That won more shock among the hobbits than Harry's original statement. "Why, you're but a babe, not even into your terrible tweens!"

Estel snorted. "I'm also human. We age way faster than you short folk."

"Still..." The leader of the Bounders on watch of the High Hay shook his head. "Well, as I said, your business is your own. Seems a darn shame."

"If you could explain that?" Harry inquired politely.

“Well, this might sound unbelievable to you Big Folk, but the Old Forest, it is a dangerous clear place. The trees there are alive and don't like people. As in, they will block out the sun, drop branches on you, and even attack you. At one point, they attacked the High Hay, grew up right against it and tried to pull it down years ago. We had to create a firewall to push it back.”

Estel frowned, thinking that sounded like a spell a group of Elves could perhaps have cast on a portion of the forest, but when he brought this up, the hobbits laughed. Several said elves didn't exist, a statement that had both Harry and Estel widen their eyes while the other hobbits were quick to start an argument on that point. The leader held himself aloof for now, simply saying, “Nay lad, if all that has been said of the elves is right, this is not an enchantment that comes from them. The feel of the forest is foul indeed and will fill you with fear. It is not a forest even elves would find welcome in.”

“... Regardless, you're not saying there are orcs or other evil creatures within, just that the trees attack you?”

“That and the general feeling of the forest. It's, it's a very treeish forest, the trees are alive, and they are filled with malice. I know that sounds odd, but if you go in there, you will discover what I mean. I urge you not to, but again, if you big folk want to kill yourselves, it's no business of mine.”

Somewhat annoyed by the hobbit's passive-aggressive tone, Harry waved him on. “Fine, fine, it's our choice to go through. Now, unless you are going to tell me fire doesn't always work on these scary trees of yours, we'll be heading on.”

Estel winced at that, looking a little affronted at the idea of someone setting fire to trees, but the hobbit simply snorted, gesturing for Harry and Estel to follow him. He led the way to where a small tunnel had been dug through the ground, leading under the hedge. He opened the heavy metal-reinforced door there, gesturing them through.

On the other side of the tunnel, Harry and Estel came out in the cleared zone before the hedge, which even now looked scorched and blackened, despite the fact that the fire was years past. That was strange to Harry, but he still didn't see the point of being scared of a bunch of trees. *Now, if they were those Ents that Gandalf mentioned once, I would be scared. But so long as they aren't that alive or mobile, I don't see the threat.*

Harry and Estel entered the forest, and at first, neither of them saw anything unusual about it beyond the burned-out areas near the High Hay. Indeed, Estel quickly found them a trail heading in the general direction Harry's Point Me spell was pointing, and Harry was forced to hurry after the kid as he bounded ahead.

When Estel was about to race out of sight, Harry used a spell to trip him up and drag him back. Staring down at the now-bedraggled youth who had just been dragged through the loam of the forest, Harry shook his head. “While I might not be worried about the danger of these woods, that doesn't mean I'm going to let you borrow trouble like that. Stay in sight, alright?”

Somewhat cowed, Estel nodded, and the two of them walked side by side for a bit in silence before the youth stated, "This doesn't feel like Rivendell, not even the outskirts of it. I am not certain I have felt the like."

"Mmm, it isn't quite as dark and dank as Mirkwood was passing through the first time. Nor is it as open as the second time," Harry mused, feeling a pang of pain going through him as he remembered traveling with Tauriel. "Instead, this reminds me more of the Forbidden Forest around Hogwarts," he said aloud, shaking his head with a chuckle to banish that pain. "I wonder if there are any spiders here too? There certainly were in Mirkwood, and I loved how they burned."

Hmm, am I becoming a pyromaniac? Huh... oh well, maybe if the list of things to burn was smaller, I'd be more worried than that, Harry chuckled internally.

His words caused Estel to stop in shock, and he turned back to Harry, face both interested in the story and concerned about the topic in question. "What do you mean? I know about giant spiders, and you've mentioned Hogwarts before, but not the forbidden Forest. Do, do you really think that there are spiders in here?"

"Well, it's either spiders or a Ford Anglia," Harry chuckled, shaking his head as Estel just looked more confused. "A kind of magical cart, I suppose you would call it, one that very accidentally was given something of a personality."

Estel's eyes widened, and Harry told the story about how Ronald Weasley, one of his on-again, off-again friends as they walked deeper into the woods. This led to an explanation about house elves, a story that horrified Estel, as house elves were as far away from real elves as possible to imagine. "Those are not elves! Those sound almost like magic using good goblins somehow enchanted to do good around the house if such a thing was possible."

"No one quite knows where they came from I don't think, and I have mentioned a time or two that I'm not native to Arda, Estel," Harry answered with a snort, ruffling the kid's hair. "Now come on, our telling slowed our pace down too much. Let's push on."

Once more, the two of them fell silent as they made their way through the forest, with Estel still looking around at the trees in interest as they passed, the look segueing into awe as they pushed deeper into the Old Forest. "While this forest doesn't feel like it, some of these trees look as old as the trees in Rivendell, maybe even older. Truly, this forest could be a remnant of one of the original forests, the ones that covered Middle Earth before even the elves awoke..."

"I wouldn't know. I'm not much of a woodsman myself, although I tend to think that I will gain that skill as my life here in Middle Earth continues," Harry answered drolly. While he couldn't call himself a city boy, Harry had not spent much time out of the woods, primarily because, as he had told Estel, the forbidden Forest had been forbidden and was the only forest he had any knowledge of before coming to Middle Earth. Since then, he had indeed developed a lot of woodsman skills if not much knowledge, despite his talks with Tauriel.

For his part, Harry was slowly becoming aware of a subtle pressure, something building just outside of his senses. He couldn't tell where it was coming from, but Harry reckoned it probably came from the trees if the hobbits' tales about them were accurate.

Estel started to slow his pace as well, his gazes towards the trees turning from admiration to worry as the trek continued. The sun above was now almost entirely hidden behind the green foliage above, and it was hard to tell the time of day beyond the fact that it was still day rather than evening or night. And the trail they had been following how to properly end a time or two, forcing them to double back and try and figure out another way through the trees, which were now far closer together than Estel felt was altogether natural.

They were still able to make progress forward thanks to Harry's spells, keeping them pointed in the direction they wanted to go. This grew harder and harder until it felt as if they were making no real progress in the direction they wanted.

"This is getting annoying!" Estel muttered, his admittedly limited woodcraft somewhat insulted at how abruptly, how **unnaturally** the trail had just ended. He was also looking around warily, keeping close to Harry as he stared apprehensively around at the trees. "Do you think we should continue to follow this and double back?"

Harry frowned, staring at where Estel was pointing behind them to a trail to one side, an offshoot of the one they had been following. Or perhaps that was the original trail, and they had been following an offshoot? It was very hard for Harry to tell with his limited woods-knowledge. What was certain was it was not going in the direction they wanted. Indeed, it looked almost to be going in the west rather than north and east as they wanted.

What was also certain was that Harry could not remember having passed it. So the trees were very certainly playing silly buggers and were determined to block their way forward. *Still, I am a wizard, and magic can be seen as the ultimate multitool.*

He held up a hand to one side, holding it out into a small beam of light that came through the foliage above, and with an effort of will, crafted a spell that concentrated the light around one of his fingers, pointing it towards the large boulder that seemed to be blocking their path forward. "No. I think it's time this wizard made his own path."

Before Estel could say anything, the laser spell flashed out, slicing around a hole through the foliage ahead of them as Harry directed it with his fingers, grimacing at the faint exertion this caused. For a moment, there was no sound other than the faint sizzling sound as the light-based spell did its work. Then there was a series of crashes as the bits of branches cut away fell to the ground.

"Come on, let's get moving," Harry smiled.

But even as he and Estel stepped through the cut Harry had made, the feeling of the forest went from being only slightly felt at the periphery of their minds to an almost oppressive

feeling. Where before the forest had been somewhat unaware of their presence and only automatically antagonistic towards them, now it was very aware, and that antagonism had risen to the fore.

The anger, the sheer oppressive air of the forest pushed it on them hard, and Estel stumbled, staring around him as Harry scowled. But the trail was ahead of them again, and he pushed Estel to keep moving as he stared around them, nearly shouting the words. "In the name of the Valar Yavanna and the lady of the sun, Arien, I ask you not to interfere with us again. Let us pass, and we will be on our way with no further violence."

The names of the Valar and, in particular, the name of the Maiar from whose mind all growing things had sprung should have evoked a response from the woods, if there was any kind of under arcing intelligence there and if it was anyway good or touched by the light. If it had been something of the dark, the naming of Yavanna should have weakened the presence within the woods as all evil things feared the Valar.

Yet there was nothing like that. Indeed there was no response to his words at all, which was quite odd. Still, it proved that whatever was in this forest was not something of Sauron's working. *Something of Morgoth's maybe, or peripherally created from his actions?*

As they continued to travel, that oppressive feeling slowly redoubled. What light there was now was the greenish, shadowy light of the deep forest rather than unimpeded sunlight. The humidity in the air also began to rise, causing both Harry and Estel to start sweating profusely. And once more, the trail ended ahead of them, twisting along to one side away from the route they wanted to go.

Estel was all for following it, but Harry paused, staring around them, his eyes narrowed. "Again, that doesn't lead in the direction we're trying to go, Estel. In fact, I would wager it bends almost entirely away from the direction we need to be pushing toward, just like the first one."

"But we can't just go around cutting into the forest willy-nilly. You can feel it can't you? The forest is rejecting us now. We don't want to give it any more reason to start actively attacking us like that hobbit told us about. Or you'll be using your magic from now until the time we get to the forest's outer limit."

Somehow Estel's words roused even further anger towards them, the oppressive feeling beating into their skulls so much that Estel gasped, while Harry simply stared around them in rising anger of his own. "They apparently don't like that talk about forest limits, Estel. But if they anger me further, the edge of the forest is going to be the least of its worries.."

He held up a finger, shooting up a fire spell a few feet into the air above him, being careful not to hit any of the intervening foliage between him and the sun. "I have warned you already, forest!" *And I am not feeling somewhat silly addressing a forest like it was a single living being, but given my recent experiences, I suppose this is not the oddest thing I could think of.* "I am not

willing to destroy willy-nilly, but neither am I going to be led around by your false trails or let your continued interference go by without a response.”

Estel shivered as the trees roused themselves to yet a higher degree, becoming angry one and all at the fire Harry had conjured, the movement of leaves and branches becoming oppressive, the heat rising further. Harry felt it too and was about to release his fire, but Estel stopped him, grabbing his arm and pulling it back to his side. “No! You can’t just go around burning whole forests, Harry! That’s not right. That smacks of something the Great Enemy would do, not something those of the light should consider. These are just trees. They’re not smart enough to truly form personal enmities. They’re just trying to protect themselves.”

Feeling the pressure building up in his mind, Harry didn’t agree, and the two of them started to argue about it while the treeish feeling of the forest pressed in on them from all sides. Harry maintained that simply cutting their way through would not do much harm. “I won’t let the fire get out of control, Estel. But these trees are obviously not intelligent enough to be reasoned with, and whatever spirit or spirits are driving them, we will need to push through. Heck, I don’t even need to use fire. I could use cutting spells.”

“Even a wizard can’t promise a forest fire can be controlled!” Estel answered incredulously. “Besides, what would Elrond think if we just went around burning forests? There has to be a way to calm the trees down enough to let us go.”

Harry scowled and was about to argue back, but Estel glared back up at him, showing a fierce glare that took Harry aback for a moment, making him wonder if this was what he had looked like occasionally on his adventures back home. Looking back at the youth, Harry eventually sighed, then the fire in his hand went out, taking with it quite a bit of the light. Somehow as they had traveled it had pushed into evening, making the forest seem even more unnatural to Harry.

Still, he asked Estel, “All right, so long as my solution remains on the table, you tell me what we should do. I don’t have much knowledge of woodcraft to find us a way forward without just cutting our way through their branches at least, and no knowledge whatsoever about any magics to try and appease tree spirits.”

Estel faltered, not having realized that the decision of what to do would fall on him. But he bore through it quickly, far quicker than Harry would have perhaps in his place with none of his friends around him and instead an odd adult who had just thrown the problem back at him.

Another pang of pain went through Harry at that, but Estel surprised him, coming up with a solution quickly. “All good things love the elves for the gift of language, for the elves gave it to them long ago. You used the name of the powers beyond the sea, but that is different. Only those plants and animals with enough intelligence to recognize the names would know of them. But all know the Elvish language. And perhaps can be appeased by it.”

Harry's eyebrows rose, but he shrugged his shoulders and gestured for Estel to try whatever he was thinking.

Breathing deeply, Estel prepared himself and then began to sing, his voice more sonorous than a youth his age should have been able to produce yet untried for all of that. Still, as he sang in Elvish, there was a power to the words that Harry could feel, just as he had initially felt the oppression of the forest. The Song was the *Lay of Fingolfin* and spoke of the First High King of the Noldor in Middle Earth, his heroic stand against Morgoth, and his death at the hands of the evil Ainur.

As Estel sang, it was as if a fresh breeze had moved through the forest, with much of the treeish nature that had been pressing in on them fading away. But it didn't last for very long. As Estel paused between songs, the feeling returned, more directed this time, angrier and fouler. Estel's song faltered, fear beating against his mind even with Harry grasping his shoulders. As he did, the thought came to Harry that some of the youth's strength had been poured out into that song somehow to give it power, and he was no less defended than before.

But a moment after Estel fell silent, a response came in a way that Harry had not anticipated. In the distance through the trees, there came an answering song, not in Elvish but in the common tongue. And it was far less formed as well, more about noise than tune, even if much of the words rhymed. "Oh, Tom Bombadil is a merry fellow, bright blue his jacket is, and his boots are yellow. What do I hearken hear a voice on the wind~! Welcome here, oh elf friend. Now let the song begin! Oh, elfin friend, welcome to my home! Fear not tree or land, for Tom Bombadil and the River Daughter welcome you!"

From the same direction, a female voice rose as well. "Let the song begin. Let us sing together for this merry meeting! Elvish touched, sing to us of the springtime, of glades far away, of Elvish doings and learnings~~!"

Harry and Estel turned in that direction, only to see the trees had begun to part ways all around them, no longer crowding in, and Harry touched Estel's shoulder again, gesturing him to resume singing. This he did, belting out the lyrics now of a song he had learned from Elrond himself, the *Song of the Great Hound*. As he sang, both of the voices in the distance began to make strange, almost instrument-like noises, the woman's voice rising into a lilt, a sonorous drone, while the man let out booms and loud laughter as if both were as musical as the mysterious Tom's words had previously conveyed.

Soon out from the woods came the man himself, Tom Bombadil. He was shorter than Harry, and yes, his jacket was bright blue, his boots yellow. They looked almost like rain slickers but were made out of leather colored yellow rather than rubber. He had a short but luxuriant beard that even a dwarf would have approved of, shaggy hair, sticks in his hair here and there, and a hat on his head. Between beard and hat, he wore a merry grin, and his eyes were a sparkling blue, a sky blue that gave him an innocent yet mischievous cast.

“Oh ho!” He shouted as Estel fell silent, and the strange man danced around them. Normally Harry wouldn’t like to be circled by someone like that, especially after the fraught journey to and from the mountain, but this man didn’t give him any kind of impression of danger. Rather, what he felt most from this man was welcome and protectiveness.

“Oh, ho! Do my eyes deceive me? Humans now come into the forest singing Elven songs! Yet old Tom Bombadil is not so old as that, nor so blind! He can see beyond the surface, to the truth within, and can tell there is more to both of you than can be seen on the surface. Now, tell me, good fellows, where do ye be coming from, and where to ye be going, coming through the woods like this? Do you not know its truth, the power that remains here along the Withywindle.”

“Greetings, master,” Estel said before Harry could do anything, bowing grandly to the man. “I am afraid you have the right of it. While we know which direction we should go, this forest has started to fight us.”

“Now, now, let us not be hasty, my little fellow! No bowing now, not for such as you nor to such as me. I am the master, but only here in this place. As for this forest, the forest will is that of Old Man Willow. Deep his roots are, mighty like the spring is his strength, yet gnarled is his heart. Still, old Tom Bombadil has a song for him, Naught will harm you so long as you are in my protection,” Tom answered, dancing back from the young man.

He stopped in front of Harry, looking up at the slightly taller man, his grin widening. “And here he is! Here he is. The new note to the song, the new refrain added. You come from outside in the dark beyond the world, with the light within you, now Harry Potter, be welcome in my hall. Follow me to my home. I must be returning. There my pretty lady is, River-woman's daughter, slender as the willow-wand, clearer than the water. Goldberry, Goldberry, can you hear her singing?”

With that, he turned aside, heading in a different direction, towards the female voice shouting over his shoulder, his voice still the same singsong it had been. “Be welcome in my hall, for the night is calling. Food and drink will be waiting, hearth and home will be open for you, Ring-a-ding dillo!”

At that, the distant female voice joined in adding its words to Tom's, and Harry and Estel hurried after the odd man. If he was a man at all, Harry wasn't certain, but he definitely gave off a feeling of strength, not like lady Galadriel or Elrond or Gandalf, but something more primal, maybe? Harry wasn't certain how to describe it, still very much learning about the new senses he had developed since connecting to Arien and being connected through her sponsorship into the song of Arda.

The man raced off so quickly that if not for his continuing songs and shouts of old Tom Bombadil, they might have lost, but soon they came out into a small clearing in which a small house stood, well-maintained and clean.

At the entrance to the house stood a woman, taller than Tom Bombadil, fair and pretty where he was wild. She had golden hair falling down to the small of her back in long ringlets, with flowers in her hair and a necklace of flowers besides, which seemed to still be in bloom in the light of the house within. Her eyes were a light green shade, like a green leaf being looked at up into the sky. And when she moved, she moved with a distinct grace, unlike Tom's overdone, seemingly wild, uncoordinated stomping.

She seemed a little more ethereal than most of the elven women Harry had met like Tauriel, although she wasn't as good-looking in his opinion, although Harry knew he was somewhat biased. She also had far less presence than Galadriel but more than Tauriel or any of the Elven women that Harry had seen in Rivendell.

Her good looks and presence were enough to awe Estel as she spoke. "Welcome, welcome elf friends! We did not look to see any such coming into our woods this day, but welcome you are beside."

Harry simply nodded his head and said, "I thank you for your welcome, lady Goldberry."

Beside him, Estel seemed almost smitten, as he too bowed, far lower than Harry had. "Fair lady, your welcome is humbling, your kindness as touching as your beauty is daunting, oh fair River daughter. Your eyes are as a forest, your hair like the sun, and your smile worth a thousand days of singing."

Goldberry laughed, reaching out and ruffling the youth's head, before shifting her hand underneath his chin, forcing Estel to meet her eyes. "Elf Touched and Elf Friend I name you, and forever you will be welcome in these halls. I thank you for your kind words, young man, but now do come inside. We are so fond of parties, though we have them seldom in this age."

"Yes, yes, inside now, come along with you. The night is upon us, and food and ale are calling! Tales and stories we will share, songs around the hearth and warmth against the darkness!" Tom sang, clapping both of them on the shoulder, then dancing around all three and entering the house with a mad clatter of his boots on the floor and still more musical noises. Goldberry gestured them in and closed the door behind them.

Even as they entered, Estel couldn't take his eyes off the Goldberry. Seeing this and deciding to have some fun, Harry leaned down with a smirk on his face as he whispered, "Just remember she's taken, lad, and you're probably a few Ages too young for her."

Estel's spluttering response to that was all Harry could have asked for, and he easily caught the youth as he stumbled, causing Harry to laugh, along with Tom who had overheard his words. "Now, now don't be sour, the youth has yet to his lady, and afterwards, all others shall pale. Little I can see of the future, little I would care to, I have my own doings, my own work here, not for me are the grand doings of men or elves. But that much I can see," Tom sang, winking at Estel.

Estel blushed but took the cup that Tom handed him, as Harry did the same, and Goldberry and Tom bowed over their own cups towards them, formally offering up their hearth, before the formality fled like a frightened bird as Tom set his cup down and clapped his hands loudly, dancing over towards the table laden with food. "But come now, come now! This is not a time for seriousness! It is time for parties for tales! Tell me of your journey, young Estel, and you too, Harry Potter, for you are a new note to the song, and I must know of your nature!"

Despite feeling as if there was far more to that request than the words could convey, Harry laughed, and Goldberry led him and Estel to the table.

Scene break

As the night flowed over the old forest, the evening had reached Gandalf as he rode through the outer wall of Orthanc. This was an ancient tower sitting at the southernmost feet of the Misty Mountains in a pass between Dunland and the lands of Rohan, once called Calenardhon. Built in the Second Age, it still stood, a reminder of the power of the Dunedain at the height of their power after the fall of Numenor, before much of their knowledge and strength had fled, been diluted or been overcome in turn by the strength of Sauron.

There were a few servants nearby, tending to small farms scattered throughout the interior of the mighty outer wall of the fortress. Gandalf knew that they served Saruman for the occasional gift of glasswork or other items of his craft. As a Maiar of Aulë, Saruman was immensely skilled, his hands dexterous and his mind quick when it came to crafting anything from wood to steel, although he specialized in metal and glass. Saruman could work wonders with both that would be the envy of man, dwarf or even elf.

Yet he had no knowledge of food, animals or growing things, hence the need for servants. After all, he and Radagast, the wizard with the most knowledge of such things, didn't particularly get along. Their personalities were too different to mesh well.

Gandalf didn't exactly approve. The Istari had not been sent to Middle Earth to rule, after all. But Gandalf knew himself to be far more of a wandering sort of fellow to understand the need to have a single home like this that had driven Saruman. *I am of the air, of Manwë, and he of Aulë, to each their own. He needed a home to practice his craft, and he chose well.*

More, Gandalf had never seen or heard a rumor of Saruman using such people as more than farmers or occasional messengers, and he knew all were well paid for their service. An item from the Tower was worth its weight in gold, was a rule of thumb followed in Rohan, among the Dunlendings and even further afield of Orthanc. And while Saruman did occasionally put on airs, Gandalf himself did much the same when dealing with humans occasionally.

Nor did any of the men come into the tower. Saruman did not have personal servants. This was proven as Gandalf strode up to the tower and heard a booming voice from above rather than someone else announcing his presence. "Up here, Gandalf. Join me in my room if you please. I regret to say that I am in no shape to travel back down those dratted stairs to you."

"I will be up presently, my friend," Gandalf replied, his own voice carrying quite far, as he turned to the nearest farmer and asked politely how long it had been since food had been sent up. The farmer quickly made up a basket for him, and Gandalf carried it up the steps to the tallest interior floor of the tower, looking around the interior with a tiny bit of sadness. *Once again, I am reminded Saruman served Aulë here, not Yavanna or any of the others.*

The interior of Saruman's living quarters was quite austere, in a way.

There were a few potted plants here and there, but they seemed more to provide scent, lest the smell of coal and melting metal overpower, for massive forge and a large kiln sat to either side of the central room, dominating it. To one side, a small entryway led into a bedroom, where a metal bedstand could be glimpsed. Here in the main room beyond the forge and kiln, there was a high-backed, extremely ornate chair set on a small dais. Gandalf knew from previous visits it could be turned to stare out over the horizon from a balcony set behind it or various windows situated around the room.

When Gandalf entered Saruman's bedroom, he found his fellow wizard lay abed, propped up against the back of it. One arm was held out to the side on a small table, a sling around it tied tightly, something which could be said about his ankle and foot as well. Some of his luxuriant hair had been burned away, leaving a ragged seeming burn mark on his head, currently covered with what looked like a freshly replaced poultice.

The expression that glared back at Gandalf looked annoyed, acerbic, and unhappy about being stuck in bed. But given his body, it was clear Saruman wasn't in any condition to leave it anytime soon.

Seeing all this, there was only one thing Gandalf could ask. "How in the world did you get up those stairs with a wounded foot?"

"Through great perseverance and the help of a hastily carved crutch. Alas, I came back on market day, and the two youths who had been left behind to pay for some transgression or other were not up to helping me. Still, they did race off to their folk, and one of their healers followed my orders as I told him what was wrong with my arm and foot, so I should be on the mend soon enough," Saruman answered dryly, gesturing Gandalf to sit at the foot of the bed opposite the wounded foot. "I suppose you are here because Radagast told you I had returned?"

"He did, and I had hoped to ask you how your pursuit of Sauron went. But looking at you, I am certain I can divine the answer."

"Indeed. I was harrowing that foul spirit as much as I could, weakening him, trying to force it away from a straight run back to Mordor. Yet even so it must have communicated forward in some fashion, for I was ambushed." He looked sternly at Gandalf, his eyes troubled. "Yet not by orcs or trolls. No, it was Easterlings who ambushed me. An organized company, as if they were patrolling the woods and had simply seen me from afar. I do not think they could feel the

power of Sauron as he passed them by, but he certainly had power over them, as my voice did nothing. The implications of that is..."

Gandalf rubbed one hand down his face and stood, looking around as he set the basket on the bed by Saruman. Understanding what he wanted, Saruman pointed in the direction of the cupboard, where Gandalf found some pipeweed and a barrel of ale. He poured them both a generous mug, handed Saruman one, and took a long sip of his own before leaning back in his chair and propping his feet on the bed as he considered. "That is grim news. Have you sent word to Gondor?"

"I have sent a messenger, yes, both to them and to the Rohirrim. They will be warned of the rising power of Mordor, although I do know if Gondor has the strength to do all that much against the Easterlings. The terrain would be very much against any kind of preemptive invasion there, I fear."

"And you say they were under his sway?"

"The timing was too much to be a coincidence for certain. And as I said, my voice did nothing." Of all the Ishtar, Saruman's voice was easily the most powerful when it came to influencing the minds of those he focused it on. "The only reason I was able to get away only partially scathed after the initial ambush was because they did not anticipate some of my surprises."

Gandalf nodded, knowing Saruman always carried a few of his own creations on him. These were bags of some kind of explosive mixture he made that with the right touch could create loud noises or dangerous explosions. "Tell me how they fought then, and where did you meet them?"

"Meet them, such a polite phrase," Saruman muttered, but he gestured, and a map flew out from another alcove, along with a second folding table of ingenious design. This went over his legs, folding into place to create a table with enough room for map and food alike.

The two of them poured over the map, and Saruman pointed to where he had been ambushed, which was well within Mordor's ancient borders. They then talked about the kind of numbers that the Easterlings might have, where Gondor would have to prepare itself for them if they proved to be truly under Sauron's sway, and where Elrond and the rest of the White Council would have to be on the watch for Sauron's creatures in the future now that he had, escaped and would no doubt be able to rebuild his personal power once more. Both agreed it would be centuries before the Ringwraiths could reform and more before Sauron himself could push his influence out too far through earth and air. Saruman was quite proud of how hard he had harried the former Maia, but when Gandalf pressed him, Saruman acknowledged that the watch on Mordor had ended centuries ago, so who knew what strength could have been remade at the old fortress of Barad-dûr. Its foundations had ignored all attempts to destroy them, and given time, it could be made horrible once more.

Neither of them touched on what the fact the Easterlings were under the sway of Sauron might mean for their fellows, the two Brothers Blue. Alatar and Pallando, two of their fellow Maiar, had gone east to combat the rising strength of Sauron there. Neither Saruman nor Gandalf could say how they had fallen, as no news reached them even through the winds of Manwë. Yet fall they must have, for the Easterlings to be under Sauron's sway... or swayed to his side. A horrifying thought, one Gandalf was loath to even contemplate.

Eventually, Gandalf began to answer questions Saruman posed to him intermittently as they continued to talk, speaking about Erebor and the dwarves. This slow shift in the conversation continued until it had turned entirely to the Battle of the Lonely Mountain and the death of the Dragon Smaug. So subtly had this occurred that Gandalf didn't even notice that he was now giving information, some of which he might have wanted to keep to himself, while Saruman fell silent about his own dealings...

Scene break

Harry and Estel spend the night and much of the evening with Tom Bombadil, talking about their adventures and learning bits and pieces of knowledge from him. Tom knew more about woodcraft, plants and the movement of animals than anyone Harry had ever had such a long discussion with before. Indeed, he almost reminded Harry of Radagast, and when he mentioned this to Tom, Tom boomed out a laugh.

"Oh yes, oh yes! Radagast is a wise one. His eyes are clear and discerning, concentrated on the world around him, and there is dirt under his fingernails. Not for him are great things, much like Tom himself. But Tom is older by far. He was here before the river and the trees before the first rain came. Tom made paths before the Big People came and the Dark Lord from outside, when the night was fearless. Oldest and first I am, and I have forgotten things that Aiwendil has never learned."

Tom seemed almost to fall into a funk as he mentioned his ancient age, staring not at Harry or Estel but into his own fireplace as he hummed and Goldberry moved around the place. He shook his head then, turning back to Harry. "But enough about maudlin thoughts, enough of deep thinking and worries. Come and sing, sing of stars and water, flowers and stone, and trees!"

From there, Tom Bombadil launched into a song about the Withywindle and how he'd met the river daughter Goldberry on its shores, how the lands had changed in the distant past when Numenor had been sunk beneath the waves, singing sadly of how many types of birds and animals had been washed away in that great tragedy, never to be seen again. Of how the forest had come to be as dangerous as it was, of the spirit he called Old Man Willow, a tree touched by the greater darkness whose roots had spread throughout the valley.

Eventually, Estel fell asleep and was gently carried by Harry to a bed, but Harry stayed up listening to Tom singing some more about the trees of old, about the Ents and of the first songs

of the elves when they were first awoken under darkness and learned to love the moon and stars above all else. About the time the Noldor returned to Middle Earth to combat the darkness which was yet before them, growing stronger with time. About Fëanor, and his madness, the oath that pitted elf against elf and shaped everything that came thereafter.

Yet even Harry eventually became tired, and after thanking Tom, who Harry was now certain was at least a Maia, maybe more, Harry retired to his sleeping bag for the night. He fell asleep quickly, lulled by another song from Tom.

That night, although they did not speak of it then or indeed ever, Harry and Estel shared a dream. Up to a point, at any rate. Fueled by Tom's tales of ancient days, the dream started the same for both of them, of two massive trees the size of which dwarfed any red oak planted in Valinor, which gleamed silver and gold, lighting the world.

From there, elves could be seen, and Harry recognized one of them instantly as Galadriel, her hair almost the same color as the two trees, her face more boyish than he had ever seen it but wise beyond her years as she spurned another elf. Black-haired he was, grim of face but fast of hand and quick of mind. As the dream continued, he captured the light of the trees in jewelry. Almost like pearls, they were but enhanced in some ways.

And then, both of them saw the encroaching darkness, the giant spider Ungoliant and Morgoth. Both beings of evil yearned to dominate the light yet instead destroyed it as they approached. The twin trees died, but for a single sapling, while the jewels, the Silmarils, were clasped in Morgoth's hand, burning it. Yet he could not let them go, so precious were they.

Staring at that, dream-Harry could only scoff in disgust. Why in the hell would anyone care so much about baubles? The light within them was important, to be certain, but even so, they were just pretty jewels. Harry had not understood this the first time Gandalf told him the history of Arda and did not understand it now.

And as that thought came to Harry's unconscious mind, laughter seemed to reverberate all around, and the dream changed.

For Estel, the dream then flashed forward, where he stood on the prow of a magnificently huge ship leading a fleet that stretched from one hot horizon to another. In his hand, he held a tree branch, glowing like the trees he had seen earlier in his dream. Estel, or whoever he was in the dream anyway, pointed ahead as he led his people away from the island and those who had persecuted them for cleaving still to the Valar and the elves. Ahead were new challenges in a now-changed world.

Harry's dream was very different. Instead, he kept following the original characters, so to speak. He saw images of the Kinslaying, fueled by Fëanor and his mad hauteur. He saw the two sides fighting and many a Noldor turning against their fellows, led by Galadriel and another golden-haired man. Galadriel and many others were then left behind by Fëanor and his followers in

their mad pursuit of Ungoliant and Morgoth. A pursuit that ended in tragedy as Fëanor and much of his host were slain by the Balrogs of Morgoth.

As Fëanor died, the dream changed, diving almost into the very spirit of Arda. Harry's dreaming mind dove into the magic of the ground, the air, the wind... and saw how that magic had already been fundamentally corrupted long before even the elves were awoken. He saw the end of each Age consecutively then: the creation of the world, which he had seen before, Melkor being imprisoned, Morgoth destroying the trees, then being imprisoned in the Unending Void, and finally, the rising of the ocean under Ulmo's command as Sauron instigated the Númenóreans against Aman, the land of the West. At each point, the magic of the world changed fundamentally, shifting, becoming more or less, as Middle Earth and Aman split every wider apart.

Then that extra-sensory view reached the moment of his own arrival, affecting the magic of the world like a flash of thunder and lightning across the sky. And then, once more, he was back almost to the beginning of the dream, where he watched the dark-haired Fëanor work on crafting his greatest work. Not the capturing of the lights of the tree. No, the dream concentrated on the creation of the outer shell, the material that contained those lights. Meanwhile, a voice whispered into his ear, speaking a word out of legend. "Silma..."

Only upon waking did Harry realize that although he didn't really feel refreshed. He'd had no nightmares, something that had not been the case since he had left Elrond's halls, but his spirit was drained as if he had been exerting himself mentally the whole night through.

In contrast, Estel bounded out of his bed with a gleam in his eye as Tom sang from the doorway, his voice a boom of joyful noise. "Up, up you get, the day has well begun! A day of happy wind and merry light awaits us on this morning. Hey now, Hoy now, you must be on your way, for Tom has much to tell you!"

"But first come and eat. We will not send you on your way just yet," Goldberry announced from behind him. "Bacon and potato, mushroom and bread we have for you. But harken to the Master as he speaks."

"That is right. Tom will escort you to the end of his lands, but after that, you must be on your way. This forest is no home for man or wizard, whatever their lot in life. Yet even beyond the forest, old Tom has some kernels of wisdom to share." Tom waited until Harry and Estel were sitting at the table before he began, pointing in the direction they would be traveling. "That way lies the straight path to Rivendell, but between hither and yon, you will face danger. The Barrows they are called, where the restless dead resides. Wights and their dread song, which can ensnare the minds of folk big and small."

Tom looked at Harry with a gimlet gaze, smiling slightly as Estel tucked into his meal with all the gusto of a growing boy. "Bringing light into those places would be a good deed but make

certain you keep young Estel close by. The dead may call, and although you may be immune, he will not be at so young an age.”

Harry nodded, wondering what kind of undead these spirits would be before Estel began to ask Goldberry and Tom questions of his own. Both of them took delight in his questions. Indeed despite the fact they were both hurrying the two travelers out of the doorway, they seemed to enjoy having them around. It was a strange dichotomy, but Harry didn't call them on it,

Instead, he pondered the snippets of the dream he could recall from last night and who Tom Bombadil really was to awaken such visions in him. A wild surmise was growing within him that Tom might be a... well, a bit of the original song of Eru Ilúvatar somehow given life. He didn't know how such a thing could be possible, yet Harry somehow felt that Tom had not said a single word of falsehood when he spoke of how long he had been around. Harry didn't know how he knew that, but he did.

Which meant that Tom Bombadil really was the first, here long before the elves awoke, here before the Maiar or Valar, which should have been impossible. But if he was part of the song itself, then many things made sense. The dream Harry had, the music he was even now subconsciously humming under his breath, the power of Tom Bombadil's songs and the depth of his knowledge, along with how little he cared about things beyond his borders.

Regardless of his origins, however, there was no denying Tom Bombadil had a way about him, imparting bits of knowledge to both an absent-minded Harry and a very intent Estel that both would remember for years to come. And just like the evening before, Tom Bombadil's presence and booming nonsense songs seemed to calm the woods so that the three of them made excellent time.

It was a little past noon when the forest began to end, and Tom called a halt. “This is where I leave you. Beyond this border lies your journey, but here old Tom will remain. I have my singing and my walking. And Goldberry is waiting for me.”

Estel sighed at that, and Harry very deliberately ruffled his hair just a little harder than he needed to. “Enough of that boyo. Remember, she's married.” He muttered under his breath to the young boy. “And probably older than humanity.”

Louder Harry said, “I thank you for your help Tom, and for the gifts of knowledge you passed on. Are you sure you don't want some recompense, some ward stones?”

Tom Bombadil burst out into laughter, loud and infectious as always, waving off Harry's offer, as he had last night when Harry had made the same offer during dinner. “Oh, Tom Bombadil is not so blind as all that. Tom was not saving the wizard Harry Potter so much as saving his own forest and maybe young Estel's sensibilities.”

Then he shook his head, wagging a finger in Harry's face. “But wise is as wise does Harry Potter, and often times the wisest thing one can do is to know when not to use a power. Walk

your own path, the pair of you, but always be aware of what is around you and that sometimes, the straight path isn't always the best."

With that, he clapped them both on the shoulders one after another, turned, and raced off once more through the woods. He was soon out of sight, although it was quite some time before the sounds of his passage finally faded out.

Harry and Estel stood there for a time, staring after him before Harry shook his head and gestured out over the lands beyond the forest, which here turned into green scrub and brush. "Come on. Back to Elrond and your mother." *And then back to Tauriel for me, as fast as my feet can take me.*

The two of them traveled quickly, hiking through grassland and scrub, the land around them changing as they went. Soon the trees were long gone, and the grass became a memory soon after. They were replaced by small bristly bushes here and there among the stones that seemed to take over the land from one horizon to the other.

Here, Harry began to see fog occasionally and little pockets coming up out of the ground despite the fact that Anar was high in the sky. "Stay close to me, Estel," he ordered, glaring all around them. "We must be coming close to the barrows Tom warned us about."

"What was that?" Estel stated, suddenly staring all around them, his eyes widening as he locked on a ridge in the distance, trying to peer through it to what lay beyond. "I can hear other people, and, and the sound of a fight over there! Let's go see!"

Only Harry using a spell to make his feet stick to the ground, kept Estel from running off. While before Harry had taken Estel's impetuosity in stride, Harry now upbraided him, shaking him slightly from the shoulder. "What did I just say? What did Tom Bombadil? And you're just going to rush off?"

Now admittedly, this makes me feel a bit of a hypocrite, but at least I knew the adults in my life were blind shites more often than not or just lazy gits. And I never ran to the sounds of a full-on battle!

Estel had the grace to look abashed and made no further move to leave Harry's side as they continued on, which Harry was pleased to see. "You'll get your adventure in a bit, lad. Never fear. If the Barrow-wights are so foolish to attack, we can deal with them then. Just keep your wits about you and your eyes peeled."

With a mission to think of, Estel calmed down further, and he stared all around them, frowning.

Eventually, the patches of fog rose all around them, connecting to one another and flowing over the two travelers. With that came the sounds of violence to Harry's ears as well. This came in the form of a distant horn call responded by a series of drums, the shouts of men fighting one another. Some of these shouts echoed Harry's memories of the Battle of the Lonely Mountain. Others were larger, more violent. Almost at certain points, words could almost be

discerned on the wind as the fog grew ever deeper. If Harry wasn't gripping Estel's shoulder, he doubted he'd know where the boy was, so deep was it.

Soon the two of them began to feel a chill, and it was then that Harry's still scarred hand began to clench in agony from the wounds that Tom Riddle had given him in the beyond. That was a certain sign that whatever was causing this was connected to the dark or death, and the chill touch began to drain both youth and man of energy.

This was proven soon after as both of them felt presences rising all around them. And Estel cried out as hands reached out of the ground almost, eager to trip them, feeling a dread power washing over him, direr than the chill, yet creating it at the same time.

But Tom Bombadil had been correct. Harry's various abilities made him anathema, undead or creatures who could not stand the light.

Clenching his teeth against the pain in his scarred hand, Harry thrust out his other hand as he pulled all of the fun memories from his journey with the dwarves and Tauriel, with Bilbo and Estel in this new life of his, as well as from his old. "Expecto Patronum!" he shouted, his voice reverberating with more power than Harry had wielded before this save in the battle against Smaug. Only this time, it was not accompanied by the feeling of creeping exhaustion.

His voice echoed around them, crashing like waves against a cliff, blasting the fog away from them, and a moment later, a giant stag appeared in front of the two travelers. It stood several feet taller than Harry, blazing with white light and golden color, reminding Harry very strongly of the Two Trees of Valinor that he had seen in his dream. Regardless, the spirit or spirits that had summoned up the fog could not stand the light, and the fog instantly began to dissipate, accompanied by several screams.

Estel's eyes were wide as he looked at the stag and then around at the dissipating fog, but rather than simply staring, Harry was surprised to see that he was looking for something. "Over there! There are a series of caves over there, one to a hill, and the fog is still thick there. Those must be the barrows!"

"Good eyes Estel," Harry said, not having noticed that. He gestured, and the stag began to circle them, and Harry started to summon light down from the sun into his unwounded hand. The one still scarred by his fight with Riddle-wight was still clenched at his side, made useless by the pain he was feeling.

The fog and a kind of pressure began to build against them as they moved through towards the Barrows, but unlike Old Man Willow, the spirits had no defense against Harry's abilities, and he smiled grimly as he moved forward into the first of the barrows. The light of his stag blazed all around, keeping the wight of this Barrow at bay, but not, he was annoyed to see, dissipating it. "Hmm... so not like a Dementor then. What is a wight anyway?" Harry had assumed they would be like the spirit of Riddle, like a Lethifold or Dementor. But now he was wondering if there was some other component to their power.

“An undead spirit kept here on earth by oath or by curse. I... the curse would be on some object, maybe,” Estel muttered, then pointed forward. “There!”

In the light of the Patronus, both Harry and Estel could see several small piles of refuse, bits or broken weapons, and a few pieces of jewelry and gold. Instantly, Harry ordered his stag over, and although the wight, now invisible, screamed all around them as the stag stamped its feet into the mounds, it didn't dissipate.

Estel shook his head, charging forward and grabbing up armfuls of the stuff. With the wight suppressed, nothing happened, and he turned towards the entrance. “Carry it outside. Get it all into the sunlight. The sunlight has ever been the bane of dark creatures and magic alike!”

“Good thinking,” Harry answered, impressed again by Estel's calmness in a strenuous moment, as well as his insight.

With Harry concentrating on keeping the Patronus going and making certain the wights couldn't somehow attack them despite its presence, much of that work fell on Estel. By the time they had gone into three barrows, he was sweating. By the time they were done with five, he was looking ragged but persevered, going into a further four, leaving none of the wights they could see from their starting point uncleaned.

The stuff they had brought out had all been separated into different piles, with Estel pointing to some of them and saying with a look of revulsion, “Those are weapons from the evil kingdom of Angmar. Lord Elrond has shown me some examples of those before. And these, these are different, Númenórean design maybe? Or later but from the same kind of style?”

Harry looked at them all and then very deliberately had his stag move among the piles, stomping hard on the weapons of Angmar, turning them into so much trash, touching his horns against the weapons of Numenor. Once more, there was a series of screams, but Harry could still feel the wights around them, hiding in what shadows there were or in the earth itself.

“What should we do now?” Estel asked, somewhat stumped now that his idea to remove the treasures from within the Barrow had not worked.

Harry looked up at the sky, seeing Anar in the distance and smiled. “This time, Estel, it's on me. Step back for a moment.”

Seeing his wizard acquaintance raising his hand and the stag slowly dissipating as Harry drew power from it, Estel did so with alacrity. A moment later, Harry shouted, “In the name of Manwë and Arien, vanish in the light!”

A flash of light passed towards them, impacting the now far more diaphanous stag. Harry hadn't expected that. He'd expected the sunbeam to hit the pile of treasure. But as that beam hit his Patronus, it exploded, the light coruscating like a rainbow all around them, passing into and through the ground, the nearby Barrows, and the treasures all as far as Harry could see in every direction.

There was a loud thunderous crash as the Barrows collapsed inward. Each hollowed-out hill fell, stone crushing upon stone as there seemed to be a bubbling noise near the center of this destruction. But louder by far was a shriek, not a chorus of shrieks on the wind that faded out quickly, replaced by a voice in Harry's head. *"That is what I wanted! This is what I hope to see. Banish the darkness wherever you may find it, Harry Potter, and never will I regret taking you on as a follower."*

Harry chuckled quietly to himself as Estel blinked the glare out of his eyes, gasping at the scenery around them, which had changed dramatically. All of the Barrows around them had collapsed, shattered one and all, spreading out in every direction from them. Instead of hills, what remained were small wall-sized clumps of rock shaped like so many crowns sticking out of the ground.

Close by, the weapons of Angmar had been destroyed utterly. Sword, broken bow, axe, or shield, it didn't matter. All had been made into greasy smears on the ground. Much of the jewelry had also been destroyed, melted into puddles that were even now continuing to spread along the ground in every direction, creating strangely colored puddles that had yet to begin cooling.

But a few pieces had been left behind. The weapons Estel had identified as Númenórean and a few pieces of jewelry.

Harry let Estel sift through this, putting them in his pouch for now, but Harry would leave it with Estel when he left Rivendell. The youth instantly grabbed up a sword, too long for him at the moment, but well-made and finely balanced. A belt studded with silver discs and a gem at the clasp for his mother was next, and finally, he began to look at the various daggers that remained.

Harry turned away from the weapons as Estel began to test them one after another. Instead, a single jewel called out to Harry, a green gem cut to fit into a pendant. He held it up, turning it this way and that as the last rays of the setting sun hit it, reminding him of his dream from the other night. In particular, seeing a gem like this reminded him of the image of Fëanor at his smithy and the Silmarils. And, alas, the trouble they had caused.

How long he stood there, Harry didn't know, but eventually, Estel came over to him and poked him in the side with the now-sheathed dagger he had chosen for himself. "Come on, Harry! Even with the Barrows destroyed, this is not a good place to spend the night. We have to push on."

Harry nodded, setting aside the dreams of Fëanor and of Silma for now, looking back down at the jewel as he lowered his hand, realizing only now that he had been holding it up for so long that all the blood had long since left the limb. He then looked towards the sun, laughing to himself as he put the jet jewel away. "I much prefer the sight of the world from my own two

eyes rather than through the lenses of a jewel, but it is a pretty enough gem, I suppose. *If the elves have things like wedding gifts, I think I just found one for Tauriel.*

That brought Harry up so short he nearly stumbled, and only a giggling Estel's hand on his arm kept Harry from taking an ignominious tumble. *God, am I actually thinking of that far in the future with Tauriel?*

The answer to that was yes, and Harry smiled before gesturing to Estel to find them a path through the shattered barrows.

Alas, true to Estel's prediction, they'd spent too long loitering over the destruction of the barrows, and they were not yet through that territory when night fell entirely around them. However, Estel had been well trained by the elves, and he knew how to pick out landmarks easily. He spotted a tree through the darkness in the distance and pointed them towards it. The two of them rested there for the night, hidden once more underneath Harry's runic arrays.

They slept in the next day, their spirits exhausted by the ordeal of the day before, even if their bodies were not. Yet they were pushing on a hard before morning fully ended, and another half days' worth of travel brought them to the edge of the river Bruinen.

"We follow this, and we arrived back in Rivendell," Harry nodded with some satisfaction. "Soon, this little venture of yours is going to be over, Estel. I trust you got enough fun out of it for a time?"

"I think that my mother is going to require lots of those pieces of jewelry to get over my running away to have an adventure with you and Mr. Baggins," Estel answered, looking worried.

"We could throw Bilbo under the cart," Harry said hastily, changing what he had been about to say just a bit. "After all, he's not here."

"Precisely. Which means my mother won't want to blame him. You and I will be right there. In yelling range," Estel shook his head. "No chance she would ever believe us, even if you hadn't left behind the impression of being a trickster."

That caused Harry to wince inside, debating for a moment whether or not he could leave Estel at the edge of Rivendell and just push on.

Estel's growl of, "Don't even think about it!" Made Harry realized that he had spoken aloud, and the two of them continued on their way for a time bickering with one another as they went, one eager to get this over with and move on, the other dragging his heels in childish fear of the tongue-lashing to come.

Scene break

“Attack,” Tauriel ordered, her voice no more than a whisper on the wind, as she waved in every direction, including directly above into the foliage of the trees.

At her command, four elves moved through the forest nearby, firing ahead of them into the webs that festooned the forest so thick you could not move before hitting one of them. So thick that if you did hit one, it would ensnare you rather than allow you to break through it. The arrows of the elves struck several spiders deeper into the warren of webs, and soon a great chittering went up from the spiders holed up within their webs.

At a sharp noise from Tauriel, those four elves retreated back along the way they’d come. When the spiders raced out after them, ten more elves appeared, five on the ground and five in the trees, firing at the spiders as they charged after their former quarry.

Those two squads each faded away into the woods, with the spiders still chasing after them. A moment later, they ran into still more elves. The same action occurred once more, elves attacking and then fading away in smaller groups, which in turn led the spiders to break up in turn. Without the Great Enemy guiding their tactics, the spiders were quite easy to lead by the nose.

Above in the trees, however, was where the most vicious fighting occurred. Spiders could simply move through the foliage of the trees faster than the elves could, and if the elves attempted to use the same hit and fade tactics up there, they would swiftly be overwhelmed.

Instead, the members of the now-reinforced Unseen Host stayed together, and every four rangers had a single elf who had originally been part of the regular army with them. These groups of five defended single trees throughout the forest, acting almost like small towers, firing out through the Woodlands at the spiders trying to make their way through the foliage as their fellows retreated.

And now, as the spiders were dispersing through the forest, the other half of the unseen host attacked their dwelling from behind. In the light of the moon and the stars above, they moved forward, arrows killing any spiders still on guard until they closed, using dagger and spear to finish off the adult spiders before doing the same to their young. For the get of Ungoliant and servants of the lesser shadow of Sauron, there would be no mercy.

Tauriel killed several spiders herself but, in the main, kept more of her attention on the doings of the various teams. Each team leader had a whistle with them, which let loose a distinct noise, the sound of which she could discern and discover through the darkness. It was this bit of organization that allowed her to direct the troops this way or that, assist or retreat as need be.

Throughout the night and well into the morning, the battle continued, the elves ceaselessly working showing the endurance of their folk, as they first fought the spiders in their preferred nighttime and began to finish them during the day. This vast, acres wide warren of webs was the last vestige of the spiders within Mirkwood. Never again would the unnatural giant spiders make their home so flagrantly where elven arrows could reach.

Eventually, all of the team leaders announced that they had no threats and site, and as several of them began to tear away the spiderwebs, others began to gather the bodies in small lots. This was an order from Legolas. "Although it is not the Elvish way to use fire in warfare, for these foul creatures we must make allowances as we would with orcs and goblins. Place them in small lots to control the flames so it does not spread through the forest but make certain that no spider remains alive to Harry our folk ever again."

This wasn't just to take care of the physical bodies of the spiders. Rather, it was a way to destroy the taint within those bodies instead of letting it enter the ground. The creatures of Sauron were unnatural and gathering enough of their dead in one place could poison the very ground underneath them. Not to the point where the ground would spawn orcs, as the ground did in areas where Sauron himself resided, or, it was whispered, the other fell lieutenants of the Greater Darkness which still remained hidden in the dark places of the world. But it still could have tainted the ground, made living things unable to grow there, or perhaps poisoned and twisted them in turn.

This effort to the rest of that day and well into the night, and then the next day before Tauriel and the other leaders of the unseen host were satisfied. Tauriel ordered most of their force to disperse back to the Elven city, while smaller bands continued to spread out, making certain there was no trace of the spiders. Tauriel led one such, but once she was certain there were no more threats to Taur-e-Ndaedelos, Tauriel returned and formally relinquished command of the Unseen Host to Legolas.

That very day she left the city, heading out into the woods alone with naught but her bow, arrow, and dagger. Unencumbered by her fellows, Tauriel ranged from one segment of Mirkwood to another, listening to the spirits of the trees and air, trusting them to bring her word of the one she was waiting for.

One night, as she rested under the stars, Tauriel found her dreams were no longer her own. Normally, Tauriel dreamed of her personal past, most particularly interesting hunts that she had been on, or one or two battles. Since meeting Harry, her dreams had been dominated by the discussions they'd had, even, although it was somewhat painful to admit, when Harry was still in his cell, and they were just beginning to get to know one another. Even then he had left an impression on her, and it had only grown since. Such dreams were a part of the Elvish manner of courtship, as she well understood having seen it several times.

But tonight, Tauriel found her dreams were not entirely her own.

Her presence was somewhat more solid than in most of her dreams, and Tauriel found herself in a forest, but it was not a forest she had ever seen before. This was a little less wild, the trees far older, and there were rivers running through it in various places that looked so clear as to be made of crystal, with a few stones stabbing out of the ground here and there, worked into fantastical shapes, {written language} covering them or written into various trees. Over everything was a golden light which seemed to filter through the trees, turning the ground green and gold in interspersed patterns.

More important than how it looked though was the fact Tauriel had never seen anything like it before and she frowned as she looked around, before nearly gasping as she felt a presence move through the woods towards her. It was a presence Tauriel had never felt before, yet the warmth, the inviting, welcoming nature of it, put Tauriel at your ease, and the bow she had been reaching for dropped to the ground, along with the arrow Tauriel had found in her hand. Pulled from her imagination, both disappeared back into nothing.

The individual who walked around the trees towards her was also someone Tauriel had never met before but even so, Tauriel knew her. Indeed, every elf still in Middle Earth knew her: the Lady Galadriel.

Tall she was, taller than Legolas or indeed most men of elves and men that Tauriel had seen, her face the picture of elvish beauty, yet beyond that or her silver and white raiment, her hair drew the eye. Falling down her back and chest, Galadriel's hair glowed with silver and gold light, a light that seemed to cover her entire body in an aura here, in the dream realm. In her eyes was wisdom, and in her aura the strength of one born in Anar, the realm of the Valar.

For a moment Tauriel simply stared and then she bowed profusely from the waist towards the other woman. As she bowed, Tauriel felt herself thinking about what she had been taught about the woman in front of her. Never having left Mirkwood in her nearly five centuries she had never personally met anyone from Lothlorien, let alone one of its leaders. Yet when learning about her role in history, there had been something that had always struck Tauriel as odd when she had been taught of lady Galadriel.

Why was Galadriel simply called 'Lady'? Why was she not called Queen?

Indeed, as daughter of Finarfin, king of the Noldor who had remained in Valinor, and niece to Fingolfin, High King of the Noldor in Middle Earth in the Second Age, and great aunt to Gil-Galad, who she had helped raise to High King in the Second Age. Surely, then, she was a queen, or at the least, a princess, many times over among the Noldor? Galadriel was also married to Celeborn, only surviving family member of King Thingol, King of Doriath and the Sindar, Tauriel's own people. So again, why was she not a queen? Especially now when she led Lothlorien, one of the last elven settlements in Middle Earth.

And yet, it was rumored that Lady Galadriel had never wanted to be called such. That simply being Lady was enough for her.

Now in her astral presence, Tauriel thought she might understand. While King Thranduil had always had a certain regal air about him, a stern, cold command, there was nothing cold in lady Galadriel. Regal yes, commanding certainly, but beneath that was a warmth and understanding, a discerning gaze that looked through you and understood you, accept what you were in a way that perhaps a queen could not, needing to put the welfare of her people over that of any single person.

There was a great deal of strength there as well certainly, but it wasn't the kind of marshal strength that a king or queen might wield even among elves.

Lady Galadriel led because she was wise. Not because she was strongest, although she was that too, and Tauriel well knew it. Few indeed on this side of the world could project their thoughts into the minds of one that they had never met before like this. And as such, had no need of crown or sword.

"Lady Galadriel I am honored," Tauriel said still with her head bowed in profound respect.

“Raise your hand, daughter of the Sindar. If you know ought of me, you know that I do not require such obeisance,” Lady Galadriel answered, a faint smile on her face and in her voice. And as Tauriel raised her head, she reached forward gently, taking the far younger elf’s chin in her hands as she looked into her eyes. *“Whispers on the wind and chatter of birds have reached me speaking to me of a connection between you and the one called Harry Potter. A young individual I have already taken some interest in. As such, I wished to see the Elvish girl who had apparently made the incredible decision to connect her life with his.”*

“We, we haven’t gotten that far my lady, I, I cannot deny that it is moving in that direction, but we have barely known each other for a few months,” Tauriel protested.

But it was the protest of a weak branch in a gale and by the widening smile on lady Galadriel’s face, she could tell as well.

“I, I found myself drawn to him,” Tauriel admitted. *“His sense of humor, his drive, his energy. I...”*

“Say no more my dear. The energy and drive of humans have aught been fascinating to elves at times. Indeed, neither you nor I would be here if not for such unions. But, you must understand what this means for you going forward.”

Galadriel sighed, letting her hand fall from Tauriel’s chin, and walking off through the woods. Tauriel fell into step beside her, walking in awe through the golden trees around them, listening raptly as Galadriel spoke. *“Though their willingness to interfere in events in Middle Earth has grown small, do not think that the Valar, aye even as high as lord Manwë himself, have turned their gazes away from us here in Middle Earth. This includes Harry Potter’s arrival. When he was injured in the Misty Mountains, I helped his Fëa cross to Valinor so they could know his worth.”*

“He told me of that, my lady, when... when my former king had imprisoned him and the dwarves,” Tauriel grimaced as she admitted that.

But Galadriel simply nodded, seeming to not care overmuch, for that was the case. Far too often in human and elven history were the living held accountable for the actions of the dead, and that was a mistake she had no desire to repeat. *“I understand. But even with that meeting, Valar are still somewhat confused about Harry’s presence. He is neither fish nor fowl as the humans would say, neither totally human and thus mortal and bound to Middle Earth, and nor is he totally a Maia, immortal, tied to Arda as a whole. Nor does he have any knowledge of Eru Ilúvatar.”*

Galadriel paused in her walk, turning to gaze at Tauriel. *“Yet the Valar have long decided that Middle Earth should be for humans alone eventually, and that we elves are all to journey into the West. Every year that call grows stronger. Even among your fellow Sindar elves the call has grown, so strong that children are no longer being born in Lothlorien.”* Galadriel’s realm held both Noldor and Sindar in equal measure, and even some Teleri, the seafaring elves. *“When was the last child born in Mirkwood?”*

Tauriel thought about it for a moment and realized with a start that the youngest Elven child she knew of was in his twenties. That was still young for their people obviously, but the fact that there were no other younger children, that was startling. *And some of those young children were lost to the spiders, curse them!*

Tauriel's last thoughts must have shown her face, as once more lady Galadriel gently touched her chin, forcing Tauriel to look into her eyes. *"My question caused you pain and I am sorry for it. But you see what I mean."*

"There are only twelve children below seventy in Mirkwood, two in their twenties the youngest of them all." Tauriel murmured. *"I, I have heard some of the older elves, I am only in my 500 as myself, speak of the call to the West, but I did not put that together until right now. Yet what has this to do with Harry and I specifically? You think... do you think I will feel the call and he will not?"*

"...Although it is odd for us who have seen how far their eyes can see, and how wise they are, truly, the Valar are deeply uncertain of what Harry's presence might mean. They have studied him and have determined that he did not meet with the Greater Darkness in his journey to our realm through the void, and that he is of the light as much as any of them. Yet he is an anomaly, whose impact is beyond even their ken to understand."

Galadriel's gaze sharpened, and once more Tauriel felt as if she was being studied, and she was reminded of the stories that told of lady Galadriel's ability to discern a person's truth and worth at a mere glance. *"And here, we also must speak of you, Tauriel of the Sindar. For as uncertain as Harry's place in this world is, so too will become yours if you tie yourself to him. I wish for you to understand this. But now, having seen you, I do not think you fear that uncertainty do you?"*

Tauriel's eyes flashed, and lady Galadriel released her chin and let loose a laugh. The sound was like the tinkling of bells and sent a shiver through Tauriel, but she bore it, staring back at the older woman. *"Indeed not! You see that is a challenge to you not? As much as you are concerned about the uncertainty, you wish to push forward, to strive. Excellent."*

At that, Tauriel's face turned away with a faint blush on her expression. Hearing the approval in lady Galadriel's voice was an immense boost to her ego, so much so it embarrassed her.

"In that case my dear, nothing more need to be said. I sense that Harry Potter is on his way back, and when he arrives, he will wish to travel on to meet with me once more. I have felt his nightmares or time or two when I have looked in on him away from Rivendell, and I sense that he has learned some other bits of information that interest and disturb him for reasons I cannot quite discern. Nonetheless, he will come into my woods, and you will come with him, will you not?"

That was even a question, and as her Fëa soared at the idea that Harry would be back with her soon, Tauriel nodded firmly.

Lady Galadriel looked at her once more without approving expression on her face. *"Good. I look forward to meeting you in the flesh."* She stared out into the distance for a moment, her eyes seeing beyond the horizon of this strange vision. *"And perhaps, perhaps there will be someone else here to meet you as well. As I said, the Valar are still considering the future. I wish to warn you against that sending too. Gird your mind and will, young elf. You will have need of it."*

Although confused by that, Tauriel simply nodded, wondering what the woman meant but sensing that Galadriel would not, or perhaps could not say more. So she simply bowed once more and replied, *"I look forward to that moment as well lady Galadriel."*

A moment later, the dream shifted, and Tauriel somehow knew subconsciously that lady Galadriel's presence had faded away, returning to her own body in distant Lothlorien. The dream was now entirely her own, and so, when spiders and orcs appeared, Tauriel bellowed a warcry and charged them, bow and arrows appearing in her hand as she did, a fierce smile on her face, but a glad laugh on the wind. Harry was coming back, and Tauriel was finally finished with her own duties. They could once more be together, and thus, all was right in her world.

Scene break

In Lothlorien, Galadriel smiled, her eyes remaining closed. *"It is done, my Pengolodha (teacher)."*

"Thank you, my Nolemo (student)," Another voice replied, its mental tones equally feminine, but deeper, stronger, older even than Galadriel, yet filled with grief in equal measure. *"While it is not yet certain, I think the Hunter, at least, will jump at the chance. And if so, I would rather like that young elf to be prepared."*

"You have not explained why as yet. I sense there is more here than a fear of Sauron..." Galadriel began.

"I will in time, but only when I am given leave. Preparation is one thing, speaking of such even mind to mind is another," the voice answered, and Galadriel sighed, feeling the presence of the Maiar Melian leaving her once more. She would get no answers from that quarter just yet. But Galadriel was patient. An answer would come in time. *And in the meantime, I have Harry Potter's arrival here to look forward to. That will be interesting indeed.*

Scene break

"How dare you!? How dare you abscond with my son! Do you make a habit of stealing away young boys or was this just a crime of opportunity?" an angry female voice bellowed in the halls of Rivendell. An oddity to be sure, but most of those watching believed that Gilraen, the mother of Estel had a right to being angry.

In front of the normally placid woman, Harry stood stoically, taking his verbal lashing with stoicism, while Estel stood hangdog to one side, his head bowed as he too took his lumps with a surprising amount of courage. Harry likened it to being yelled at by Professor McGonagall back in Hogwarts, only Gilraen had a louder voice and far more anger in her tone than disappointment. *The amount of righteous indignation is about the same, though.*

Nearby Elrond was watching on with a faint smile on his face, while several other elves watched from around corners and windows. Despite the semi-silliness of such ancient beings taking delight in watching a man being chewed out by a woman, their faces were neutral. Yet their eyes showed the amusement they felt at seeing the prankster's comeuppance. None of them had forgotten Harry's little pranking spree when he last passed through Rivendell, and while elves were hard to rouse to anger, they were not quick to forget slights either.

But Harry simply took it, letting his mind wander keeping only enough attention on the actual remonstrances coming his way to apologize dutifully at the appropriate points, saying 'no ma'am', 'yes ma'am', 'I'm sorry ma'am', when the occasion warranted. Finally he sensed that the woman was beginning to wind down, she had called him a poltroon at least twice in a row now, and he deftly nudged Estel with his knee.

Taking his cue, Estel spoke up, his tone humble as he looked up at his mother from under his long eyelashes. "I understand why you're angry mother and looking back I suppose we were kind of two lackadaisical about our trip..."

"And cowardly for not telling me that you wanted to leave! Especially you, Harry Potter! You are a man grown and you should have at least notified me you were, were taking my son away like that!" Gilraen answered sharply.

"Er, yes, that. B, butut we could at least come back with souvenirs," the young boy he went on, holding out the scarf that he had bought in Bree, and the belts he had found the Barrows. "Here mother, a sign of my affection for you, and a promise to always listen to your advice going forward."

His mother smiled at that, shaking her head. "You have developed the silver tongue of Lord Elrond and his people at least. Still, show me what you have that you think will assuage my anger."

Stepping forward, Estel reached into Harry's mokeskin pouch and, having been couched on its use, to put the belt around her waist, holding the scarf as she looked at it with a smile on her face. The scarf Estel had found in Bree was a far more normal make than the belt, which had inlaid silver discs here and there on the surface, with a tiny red Ruby set into the clasp. Though the belt was ancient the leather was still supple to the touch. The scarf, in contrast was simply a scarf, made of blue and white cloth, but was soft on the skin at least.

Rubbing it against her skin, Gilraen smiled a bit, before looking down at her new belt, one cool eyebrow rising as she smiled at her son. "I suppose if you had decided to bring back something from this foolish trip of yours these are fine gifts at least. Yet I do not recognize the style of the belt. Where did it come from?"

Behind the youngster Harry grimaced and was about to kick Estel in the back of the leg to try and get him not to say anything, but he was too late.

"We went through the Barrows!" Estel said excitedly. "We saw strange ghostly figures and the fog, and they tried to attack us with the cold and these skeletal hands, but Harry has this spell that was able to make them all run away. And then he cleared the Barrows, we pulled out all of these old skeletons and the weapons and everything else that had been gathered there, and..."

That was as far as the excitable youth could get before his mother exploded, rounding on Harry once again. "You took my son through where?! Those ghosts are the dead of our ancient enemies, they are death on everything with Dunedain blood, you, you, wizards are supposed to be wise, but all I see in you is fool not fit to be a jester!"

Harry sighed and endured another lengthy histrionic bout of shouting. Eventually however, he was able to target the mother onto her son, mentioning that they were never in any danger in the Barrows. "Except that Estel tried to rush off leaving me behind at the start. I mean really, we had Tom Bombadil's words still in our minds and he decides to ignore them and my order and rush off? That is the only thing that really

At that point Gilraen quickly turned on her son, her eyes wide and wrathful, and Harry hastily made his exit, walking past the snickering group of elves. Outside he found Elrond, who had earlier removed himself, no longer finding amusement Harry simply allowing the woman to shout at him.

“Did you actually learn anything from her shouting at you? I thought that I sensed your thoughts wandering more often than not,” Elrond teased.

“She certainly gave me a lot of food for thought. I will think very, very carefully if I decide to try and kidnap Estel again. I will probably still do it after I think if I want to, but I’d stop and think rather than simply do it on the spur of the moment as I did this time,” Harry replied dryly, before shaking his head, asking seriously, “Tom Bombadil. Who is he?”

“Iarwain Ben-adar?” Elrond answered, humming thoughtfully under his breath for a moment, as if recalling an ancient song he had heard in times long past. Harry and Estel had explained their adventures to Elrond as they were escorted through Rivendell to where Estel’s mother awaited them, but the woman had come to meet them so quickly that they hadn’t gone into detail on their meeting with Tom.

“Yes. He is indeed the master of the woods and fields as he says he is and is as old as he says too. Iarwain Ben-adar was there when I was young and wandering the world, and was a master of the wood even then, deep in knowledge, powerful in song, mysterious by nature. Indeed, many a Noldor or Silvan has thought on his true identity. With Tom Bombadil, it is very hard to discern where one ends and the other begins.”

“Much like you elves, then?” Harry questioned archly, becoming more certain on his theory about Tom Bombadil’s real identity. *It would certainly explain the breadth of the dream I had, even if I can only remember bits and pieces of it now. I get the impression it was very important.*

Elrond chuckled at that, nodding his head as if indicating a point. “For me it was not so much the mystery of the elves that made me decide to follow that aspect of my heritage, but the music and art they had created. Still, I am not immune to the fact that at times when dealing with humans and even dwarves, we elves do come across as mysterious and all-knowing. Would that I could say that truth matched that reality. Rather it is simply that we have a far longer history of mistakes, triumphs and tragedies to call upon when discerning the flow of events. And even so, we are as often wrong as right when dealing even with predicting the actions of other elves, let alone other races.”

“Life wouldn’t be worth living if you always knew the answer to every question,” Harry answered.

“Truly spoken.” The two of them walked for a time, and then Elrond asked quietly, “So how long will it be before Estel forgives you leaving him to be lectured on his own?”

“He threw me under the cart first when he mentioned the Barrows. And even before that when he said it was my idea for him to run away with us. I think we can call it even now,” Harry answered virtuously.

The two of them looked at one another, with Elrond giving Harry a very deadpan look then shared a quiet laugh.

Harry looked around at that point, even as he answered a question Elrond posed about Bilbo, and whether or not he would really fit in again with his fellow hobbits, realizing that Elrond had been leading him back to the edge of his land heading up into the Misty Mountains. He looked over at Elrond, who was now looking at him, a faint smile on his face, a smile born of memory as much as anything else and nodded in thanks to the Elvish lord. “Thank you.”

“Well I understood that you would not be tarrying here any longer that you had to. I would like to question you about your cleansing of the Barrow Downs, but I can wait. That is most certainly not something I could replicate. Keep darkness out, yes, I can do that well enough.” And here, Elrond touched a ring on his finger gently with a finger from his other hand, before shaking his head from side to side. “But cleansing the darkness already there, one powered by the ghosts of the dead? I cannot do that. And from what I understand even hobbits could only perhaps cleanse the ground, not banish the spirits there even with the help of the sun.”

“The spirits were bound to their armor and weapons, when we melted them with Arien’s power and shattered their ghostly forms, we broke the enchantment,” Harry shrugged, looking pensive. “It was Estel’s idea to be so thorough as to take everything out of the caves. I was at a loss when cleansing them with my Patronus didn’t work. But he had the right of it there, and the Barrows fell once the wights were destroyed.”

He paused then, looking at Elrond thoughtfully. “There is a certain amount of willpower in that young boy Elrond. He showed it then and with his song before when he tried to calm the Old Forest, a magic within him. Maybe not enough to learn true spellwork, but perhaps. I hope you can cultivate it in the future.”

“I believe I can, yes. And truth be told, although he is young for it, I see quite a bit of Elros in him already. And a bit of Isildur, too,” Elrond answered smiling fondly now.

Snorting, Harry turned his attention to more serious matters. “Has there been any word from Gandalf or Saruman?”

Elrond sighed, his good humor vanishing as if it never been. “Saruman was able to follow Sauron’s spirit and wound him several times apparently, nearly dissipating it. Killing him however was beyond Saruman’s abilities. Saruman was then ambushed in turn, and Sauron escaped to Mount Doom. I have ordered a watch placed on Mordor, and Saruman has already passed word to Gondor and Rohan. In these parlous times, we needs must rely on the shields and swords of those two nations above all else. Still, it is hopeful that as weakened in spirit as he is, Sauron will be licking his wounds for several centuries.”

Trying to keep his eyes from crossing at the idea of thinking in terms of centuries between conflicts, Harry nodded, knowing enough about Mordor to understand why Elrond wasn’t calling for a general assault on that land already. It was protected by mountains that were literally impassable even for elves, and the orcs would undoubtedly know the land better and be numerous enough to defeat armies of men or elves. They wouldn’t be organized thankfully, and they shouldn’t have sufficient numbers to break Gondor’s watch over their lands. But they could defend their own well enough. *Then too, as Elrond had said before, the elves military strength is far less than it was in the past.*

“In a similar vein, will you join the Council? Your disparate skills set and your ability to fight the darkness is something we would all be very happy to see among our number.”

“No,” Harry’s answer came immediately as he shook his head. “I don’t exactly consider myself wise, nor experienced as you all would measure things. I’m more than willing to give my opinion on the tactical level if asked but I have little to no knowledge of the geography of Middle Earth beyond what I’ve walked, so I would not be any help on the strategic level. I have heard of Gondor and Rohan, but I have

no knowledge of them. I have heard of Sauron, but I didn't fight him, only a single army of orcs. Ask me again in a few hundred years and maybe I'll have learned enough not to make a fool of myself."

The very idea of actually around in some hundred years was startling to him. Wizards could live that long sure, but to think in term of century-long conflicts or any kind of plans? No, that was not something he was used to thinking about. Yet despite knowing that he might live for several hundred years or several thousand years, Harry still anxiously glanced towards the river and out past it up into the mountains, still felt himself anxious to get back to Tauriel, and to start getting to know her better, to start traveling with her and see where that led.

Elrond could see this in his face, it was why he had led the two of them to this place in the first place. Elrond Half-elven could well remember how his very soul had been pulled towards Celebrían upon meeting her, and how any time apart in those first few years of courtship had seemed a hardship like onto a battle. And for all that Harry might have been human at one point, it was very clear now that his Fëa was being affected in much the same way as in Elvish soul would.

Truly, Elrond wondered why that was. *Should he not have a soul more like that of the Maiar, like the other Istari?* Yet that kind of thinking was well beyond even his knowledge, he could help heal Fëar, but understanding why Harry's had become more Elven than Maia was beyond him.. All he could do was facilitate Harry's departure.

With that in mind he held out a small bag of square pieces of lembas. "Take this my friend. Well I know I cannot keep you here any longer, and truly, you have answered all the questions I have for you that are pressing. The knowledge that you can banish spirits like the Barrows is a fascinating one, but one whose usage is not immediate at present. And if it is something that can be learned, my wife's mother will share it with me. Go with the blessings of my house, and the knowledge that you are always welcome back in Rivendell whenever you have need of rest or advice."

"Thank you for your words my Lord Elrond, and for your friendship. Both are more precious than my weight in gold. Perhaps in some distant time we will see one another again. In fact, I can almost guarantee it." Harry said, his tone somewhat mocking, but his face and eyes serious as he clasped arms with the elven lord. "Give my regards to Estel... when his mother is done with him. I think I'll see him again too sometime in the future."

Without another word Harry raced off, actually running now, rather than just hiking, his feet splashing across the Ford in the river and up into the path that would take him through the Misty Mountains.

From that point on Harry rushed through the mountains, barely pausing to eat Lembas, so eager was he to see Tauriel once more, and so decidedly not eager to have further dreams as he'd had on the way to Rivendell again.

He only paused once when he got through the High Pass as night fell. He decided to spend some time that night on the project he had put to himself, creating his own, somewhat more versatile Pensieve. He wished to share some of the music he could remember from his own world with Tauriel. Indeed, he generally just wanted to share more of that world with her (and maybe Thorin and his other friends eventually), seeing it as a part of his own story.

Unfortunately, so busy was he on working through a particularly hard portion of the array that Harry had completely forgotten the need to put down ward stones to defend his camp.

The first Harry knew of his danger was an arrow slamming into his shoulder, causing him to cry out in pain and topple sideways. The rock he had been leaning on was hit by two more arrows from behind, which bounced off it and into the darkness.

“Bloody fucking, grah!” Reaching up, Harry tore the arrow out of his shoulder and used a quick Episkey spell to close the wound, ignoring the fact that the wound was a bit too deep for that kind of spell to really work on, and the blood was still flowing down from his arm. Glancing over the rock he’d been using as a chair, Harry saw several goblins rushing towards him with clubs or swords in their hands. They didn’t have any armor and looked somewhat sickly even for goblins but were still moving quickly.

Grabbing at his sword, Harry pulled it out of the sheath just in time to block a blow from the first goblin who had been sneaking up on him before his fellows prematurely fired at him, battering his dagger to one side and cutting him across the chest with the sword of Gryffindor. “Lucky for me you lot suck at working together sometimes!”

Harry then dodged backward, leaving that goblin to die screaming as he used sword and finger to aim. Several cutting spells clashed out from him, slicing the five archers into pieces as he dodged from cover to cover. Three more goblins charged him, and Harry idly had a moment to be very thankful they weren’t riding wargs before he became far too busy dodging strikes from small clubs and swords, blood still trickling from his arm.

Harry finished two more off with slashes from his sword, then dodged away as they fell screaming, tangling up the legs of the other two even as one other swords nicked his leg. Quick stabs ended their lives in turn, and then Harry was looking around, a spell on the tip of his mind as he made certain that there were no more goblins in sight.

When he was certain that was the case, Harry began to heal himself in the only way he could given the fact that he didn’t have any medical supplies. While the second wound he took was small enough an Episkey could work, the large wound to his should where he had torn the arrow out needed to be closed via a fire spell instead. This obviously, gave him a small burn scar there, but otherwise dealt with the wound.

Of course, for most the wounds themselves would be the least of their concerns since goblins routinely used poison on their weapons. But Harry had been bitten by a basilisk and had developed an immunity to it after a phoenix cried into the wound. No poison was going to bother him overmuch, and the heat would have gotten rid of any actual germs.

Once he had seen to his wounds Harry went around, bringing the goblin bodies, muttering to himself all the while. “Let this be a lesson to you, fool! Even a wizard can be overcome if he’s too damn confident, and too damn stupid! Put down the damn runic arrays first, every damn time.”

With a sigh, Harry packed up his belongings and pushed on forward several more hours, only to find himself running into a snowstorm, which caused him to seek shelter. Magic could keep him warm, but he couldn’t do that and see where the hell he was going, and up here, what you didn’t see could very, **very** easily kill you, even without goblins around.

A small area underneath two rocks which created a small triangle free of snow became a tiny igloo, warded away from anything seeking him out, and he stayed there until the sounds of the storm abated, finishing the work on the runic away Ray he wanted, before pushing out into what amounted to a mountain winter wonderland, the storm having left several feet worth of snow.

“Well, there’s a thing,” Harry muttered, hitting himself with another warming charm, before starting to trudge through the snow, grumbling about how he needed to figure out how to make snow boots. But since he’d never actually seen any, he had no idea what they looked like.

Several hours of travel later Harry finally left the last of the snow behind just in time to see a group of men and dwarves ahead of him. They were working together to gather the bodies of goblins that they had apparently ambushed. Or at least Harry assumed that as he came closer, seeing as none of their own were even wounded.

One of them hailed Harry, and Harry slowed his progress down, speaking quietly to them. “I ran into a group of goblins up near the High Pass. Have they already begun to reclaim their territory?”

“Nay, none of the bands we have seen are looking to create goblin holes,” the dwarf said gruffly, shaking his head. “It’s only been in the last three days which we’ve seen any goblins all, and they are but roving bands, going hither and yon, looking for something we think, then heading back south. They can traverse the mountains as well as we can, better in some cases, but they aren’t numerous enough to matter just yet. And as long as we keep pressing them, they won’t be able to reclaim their old dwellings and repopulate them.”

Grimacing, Harry scowled, having a feeling where this was going. “You say they are acting as if they are searching for something? Someone perhaps?”

“Aye,” the dwarf answered, looking at Harry with one eyebrow raised. “Think you they could be after you? The goblins somehow heard of your part in the great battle?”

More like Sauron wants me as a prisoner or at worse removed, Harry thought grimly, agreeing aloud with the dwarf’s words. He added that he had been attacked similarly by a band of warg riders in his travels to bring you back to the shire. The dwarves promised to be on their best watch as the humans nodded grimly.

Harry spent about ten more minutes talking to them about the goblins in the mountains, before pushing on, leaving them to their fell work. Deciding she didn’t really want to deal with Beorn and his folk, Harry turned southeast, making his way through the foothills to reach Mirkwood at a different point than the path would intersect it. He didn’t run into any more goblins thankfully, and as evening began to fall the day after, reached the edge of Mirkwood.

While the sun began to set, Harry moved under the eaves of the forest. He was still traveling as night fell, the woods lit by the light of the stars above, the moon not making an appearance just yet. Staring around him however, Harry realized there was a small problem. He didn’t know where the Elvish territory began, or where Tauriel was.

The first time, the elves had been on the lookout for him and Bilbo, and so Tauriel had been waiting for them at the edge of the forest. Now that was no longer the case, unless somehow Elrond had sent word

ahead faster than Harry had traveled. *Which, given that my trouble with that snowstorm is possible, but not very likely.*

However, Harry need not have worried, for as anxious as he was to see her, Tauriel was anxious to find him too, and unlike Harry, Tauriel had both access to the king of Mirkwood and his Legolas's spellwork and knowledge of woodcraft.

So it was that Tauriel came upon Harry, leaping down from the darkness of the foliage above into a moonbeam ahead of the young wizard.

Harry stopped, drinking in the sight of her as she did the same, holding out her hands to him. Harry enfolded her in a hug, a tension he had been feeling since leaving Mirkwood first time at the back of his head even in Rivendell disappearing as he could feel the same tension leaving her, the meat song of the musical in the background. "Tauriel," he breathed, and then, her lips were on his, and Harry once more fell at peace.

End Chapter

Now, the end of this was a bit rushed, but really, I didn't want to get slowed down by travel time again. I also don't think it's necessary to go into further detail on Harry Vs Goblins. Once the initial ambush was blown, they didn't really pose a danger to Harry. Still, he and Tauriel are now together, and are off to see the Lady of Lothlorien. While in the background plans and powers are moving, including several plans that even the wise could not foresee...

Anyway, I hope you all enjoyed this, and again Rings of Power? Given the lack of respect they show Tolkien, I reject it utterly.