Rowling isn’t my name, nor is Tolkien.

Oddly enough, this is the second of three HP stories this month. The first was Bhaalson Remodel, my HP/Gamer/Baldur’s Gate patty on crossover. The next will be Magic of the Force, which won the large story poll. Fate won the small story poll, which astonished me, but I hope you all enjoy this.

**{funny fact? Looked at the timeline of Arda. It has Balin – the oldest looking dwarf in the movie and acting in the book – as 3 when Smaug attacks. Thorin is 36 or something. Weird}**

This has been edited by…

**Chapter 10: White Water Barreling**

The plan Bilbo came up with was audacious, all the more so when between them Harry and Thorin forced him to share much of its details. In particular, they were interested in the most important point: how in the world they were going to escape the Thranduil’s halls without having to fight their way through Taur-e-Ndaedelos beyond. The answer to this question was they weren’t going to go out via the city. Indeed, they were essentially going to go out with the trash.

“Barrels?” Harry questioned, sitting back on the edge of the bed, his back against the wall as he looked at Bilbo thoughtfully on the other side of the bars. “You expect us to float downriver?”

Bilbo had explained that the elves drank wine like water, every one of them putting away more wine then even dwarves did, and that a goodly portion of their supply of wine came from a place called Lake-town. Full wine barrels were shipped by donkey to the edge of Mirkwood, and the empty ones were sent back downriver to the lake Lake-town resided on. “So the river, I think it’s simply called the Forest River, will carry us straight to the lake.”

“And the lake is overlooked by the Lonely Mountain,” Thorin nodded slowly.

The other dwarves objected, and for a moment, their voices caused a minor clamor there in the jail area, which had Bilbo wincing and looking over his shoulder. They didn’t like the haphazard nature of it, they didn’t like the fact it involved water – no dwarf was at home on the water – and that they would most likely be helpless while doing so. There was also a bit of simple wounded pride involved, which Dwalin gave voice to. “We are not parcels to be so used! To hide away in barrels, that is beneath the dignity of a dwarven warrior!”

“Enough,” Thorin growled, and every dwarf silenced instantly, hearing or perhaps even feeling this subterranean anger in their king’s voice. He stood up, moving slowly and deliberately to the bars, staring down and across at the other dwarf, locking eyes as best he could with each of them in turn. “I will reluctantly admit that we needed this rest. We needed a time of, if not comfort, then safety. But now, we are getting close to the time when the hidden entrance to Erebor will reveal itself. We must be in place to find it, or we will be forced to wait another year!”

Thorin’s jaw clenched, his beard bristling as his eyes hardened noticeably. “I refuse to allow that to happen. We have come too far, fought through too many dangers to be dissuaded by this one. “Grumble all you like when we are getting into the barrels, but unless any of you have any other plans, we will go with Mr. Baggin’s plan.”

One by one, the dwarves slowly nodded their heads, with Balin going so far as to reach for through the bars and grab Bilbo’s shoulder companionably. “We apologize for our disrespectful and petty attitudes, Mr. Baggins. You have done a workmanlike job since we were captured. Acting so arrogantly was beneath us.”

“Agreed,” Fili nodded, getting to his own feet next to his uncle, moving forward to also clasp hands with Bilbo. “And when we get out of this Bilbo, do not think that this is going to be forgotten. You might have signed on as a mere member of this company, but you have proven a true ally to our people.”

Thorin nodded his head firmly, looking at Bilbo’s embarrassed face with a faint smile.

“Continue Bilbo,” Harry said from behind the dwarves, not moving from his position, even though he was smiling slightly. “You were saying something about timing?”

“There is a festival coming up, the king’s birthday in point of fact, or something similar, something to do with him anyway. The elves are sure to get a drunk as lords every one of them then. That means more empty barrels and lax security. It is due to start in four days.”

Harry rubbed at his scraggly beard in thought. It had been sprouting recently, much to the approval of the dwarves, although Harry felt it was just bloody itchy. “All right, but remember, I have to get my sword. We’re not leaving that here, nor,” he looked over at Thorin. “are we going to leave Orcrist here. When elves act no better than the trolls whose lair we found it in, they no longer deserve to own such a weapon, in my opinion.”

“Here, here,” Thorin muttered, looking back at Harry then at Bilbo. “But how?”

Biting his lip, Bilbo frowned. “I know where the weapons are being kept, your sword, Harry. Orcrist is begin kept by Thranduil himself, but he leaves it in his quarters, so perhaps it will be a simple matter acquire.”

“My sword will probably be with Tauriel, or in her quarters.” Harry shrugged. “You’re going to have to follow her back to them at some point.”

“That sounds remarkably dirty, for some reason,” Bilbo muttered, looking away. “That leaves the problem of getting you out of these cages and into the cellars themselves. That, and timing. We will need to move extremely quickly once we start, as you, your weapons, Harry’s swords, the keys. Each portion of that list is a way for our escape to be discovered. Worse is the area betwixt here and the kitchen and cellars.”

Thorin’s brows furrowed, then nodded. “I see. The Cellars are beneath the rest of Thranduil’s halls, aren’t they? Whereas we are off to the side. We’d have to go out onto the stairs to the floor of the main hall and then from there into the kitchens, I would guess.”

“Exactly. Which means using Harry’s cloak and moving two or three at a time at most through that area. Silently too. Unless you think you could use magic to silence all of us? I doubt any of our dwarvish companions could be trusted to not make a clatter.”

Harry winced. In his talks with Thranduil, it had become clear the man was just as much interested in keeping Harry under lock and key as he was in coercing Thorin to either give up his crusade or agree to a deal which would let the elf get something he wanted from the dragon’s horde. And Thranduil had proven several times that he was aware of Harry’s magic every time he used it in his lands. “If I start using my magic, Thranduil will be aware of us. But if you think we will be in such danger, then perhaps…” Harry suddenly chuckled, scratching at his chin some more. “I’m going to have to make an ass of myself, I think.”

Everyone that could see Harry at that moment looked at him in confusion, and Harry smirked, looking past Thorin and Fili at Bilbo. “When in the woods do you notice every bug that flies around you or only the first few?”

Bilbo frowned for a second. Then as Harry’s meaning came to him, Bilbo began to laugh. “You’re going to start using your magic more regularly?”

“Exactly. Small stuff. Transfiguring a mirror and a razor for myself if I can remember what a razor looks like, or a knife if I can’t. It wasn’t as if I had much experience with them before coming to this world, after all.”

Many of the dwarves shifted at that droll comment, looking away from their human friend. It was so easy to forget that much of Harry’s seeming age had come upon him while he was battling the creature called Tom Riddle, instead of actually living those years for himself. Beyond that was the idea of someone shaving their beard at all. Ori in particular looked a little sad about the idea that Harry would shave his face, considering his own lack of a good beard, even if Harry’s was rather too scraggly to take any pride in.

“But the more I use it, the more it seems to be a false alarm, the more certain Thranduil and the elves will be that I can’t use magic to escape. Eventually, Thranduil will get to the point where he will just ignore it. Well, he’ll ignore it if I only use it in small lots.” Harry amended. “I would wager he would notice large scale spells or multiple spells one after another, so unfortunately that particular weak point might remain. Still, I should be able to silence the loudest of you, and once free, I can use my own spells to keep myself hidden, while you all keep using my cloak.”

“You mentioned keys, Bilbo,” Bofur spoke up from his cell down at the end of the hall. “Seeing as we want to cut down on the number of spells Harry’ll be tossin’ ‘bout, where are you getting the keys?”

“One of the elves in the palace serves as, well, a head servant, a butler of sorts. They call him the Keeper of the Keys. I’ll have to study his movement for a bit, then steal them off him.”

“And you expect to steal something off an elf? I know you’re good, Bilbo, but that good?” Balin shook his head. “No lad, you were worried about our passing through the main hall, but it seems to me that those keys are the real weakness.”

He was about to say they would have to rely on Harry or brute force, at least to access the cellar, when Gloin spoke up, moving to join the older dwarf at the bars of their cell. “Hold there, Balin. Bilbo, you mentioned that part of why this festival will be the right time to go is because all the elves are going to get good and soused, right?”

“Yes. All of the elves have been talking about it, and it sounds like quite a party. I can’t honestly imagine how much wine they will be put away given how much Thranduil and the other elven lords drink normally, but yes. Why?”

Gloin grumbled something under his breath, then shook his head. “Tis for a good cause. If you know where they took our bags, mine will contain two flasks. One will be smaller than the other and is full of moonshine. It’s potent stuff, mind you. A tot of that mixed in with the wine won’t change the flavor overmuch, but it will change the impact.” He smirked, tugging at his beard in pride. “I don’t think any elf used to drinking their watered-down swill could take more than a few sips of the real stuff without being knocked on their bony asses.”

Nodding at that, Bilbo looked around at the others, waiting to see if anyone else had any more objections. When no one spoke up, Bilbo exchanged a final handclasp with Thorin before he disappeared down the corridor, pulling Harry’s invisibility cloak around him.

As he went, Bilbo reflected on the nature of the two items on his person that could give him invisibility. When he put on the ring, Bilbo felt strange, almost set apart from the world around him. Bilbo knew he wasn’t, that this was a sensation, not a reality, and the ring had proven it’s worth before Harry had given Bilbo his invisibility cloak and told Bilbo about the mokeskin pouch.

But when faced with the choice between the two, Bilbo could not get over the fact that he had sort of stolen the ring from Gollum. That Bilbo had killed Gollum when he tried to take it back. That still tainted the ring in his eyes. Because of that, Bilbo had not used it since gaining Harry’s invisibility cloak.

*Although I will probably have to use it as we travel downriver,* Bilbo thought with some reluctance*. But before that, I need to free my friends.* He pulled up the hood of the cloak and stood in a dark alcove for a few moments, watching the elves come and go reflecting once more on the difference between these elves and the elves under Elrond as he started forward once more.

A moment later, Bilbo was forced to practically leap aside as several elves raced past him towards where the prisoners were. *Harry could have at least given me a few more minutes to get away,* he grumbled mentally. He then noticed that two of his particular targets for the next few days were among the elves who had raced past, with Legolas leading them. *Or perhaps not. It appears Lady Tauriel has returned*. He settled in for a wait, wondering what was happening, secure under Harry’s overly large invisibility cloak.

Scene break

“What are you do…” Legolas paused, staring at Harry, as Harry held up a mirror he had conjured into being, shocked beyond all imagination. “How, you were searched thoroughly! There were no mirrors upon you!”

“I am a wizard,” Harry retorted. “Search me all you like, you’ll only find things that I want you to find. And right now, I desperately need a shave.”

The strange word was one that Legolas had never heard before. Elves didn’t grow facial hair, or much hair at all, in point of fact beyond what was on the top of their heads. The idea of shaving was therefore completely foreign to them. “What do you mean? You are…pruning yourself?”

“You haven’t noticed how I’ve grown hair on my face?” Harry queried, before noticing Tauriel behind Legolas. He smiled slightly, nodding to her, then looked back at Legolas, ignoring the other elves with them.

“Of course, human men do that I’m told,” Legolas shrugged. “Beorn certainly does, as have those few of Lake-town I’ve seen. What about it? What about your beard made you use magic to create that mirror?”

“The fact that it itches like blazes! And frankly, I don’t think it does me much credit.”

Tauriel nodded. “The beard does seem to make your jaw lose much of its impact.”

“My jaw?” Harry repeated, somewhat nonplussed.

Legolas also look at Tauriel, who shrugged. “It’s true, Harry has a rather strong jawline.” She then smirked. “Also, I don’t think that human beards are supposed to look so…unkempt.”

“Hurtful, but accurate,” Harry grumbled as he raised a small transfigured dagger to his face, staring into the mirror. The dagger had been part of their last meal, transfigured from a spoon, just like the mirror had been the bowl before. “Right… how do I do this again?”

As the elves watched in fascinated amusement, Harry cut himself several times before he got the hang of it and began to scrape off the hair. It dribbled into a tin cup that also had been from their latest meal.

“Sad,” Thorin shook his head, tugging at his own beard with smug complacency. “The beard was adding some gravitas to your visage.”

“Not everyone wants to look like a well-trimmed bush, dwarf,” one of the elves shot back.

“Hah! As if an elf would know anything about beards,” Bifur barked.

Harry shrugged, not looking away from the mirror which Fili was helpfully holding up for him. Even so, Harry nicked himself more a few times, but the hair was getting removed, and the action seemed to have completely disarmed the elves. Indeed, he could hear a few of them laughing quietly at his expense while others traded barbs with the dwarves about beards and the lack thereof. It was rather like hearing check and cheese try to argue about smell, Harry reflected. There was really no place where they could meet.

*Keep laughing and joking boys.* *You’re being pranked, and you won’t even know it until the final act dawns,* Harry thought, fighting to keep a vicious smile off his face.

Eventually his hack job was completed to Harry’s satisfaction and he nodded, rubbing at his now cleared chin and cheeks. “That’s much better!”

Legolas shook his head, having watched this activity while not taking part in the taunts or japes, much as Tauriel had. “And… and creating that mirror was the magic the King felt? How often do you think you’ll have to shave?”

“No idea,” Harry shrugged, even as the mirror finally started to dissipate, shifting slowly back to the plate it had once been. At the same time, the dagger also shifted back to its previous shape. “I’ll probably have to shave at least once every other day, perhaps once every day to keep my face completely smooth.”

“And you will have to use her magic again to…whatever it is you did to that plate and fork?”

“Transfigurations don’t last very long. It seems to go against the rules of the Malar,” Harry nodded, then smirked. “OF course, you could just let me have access to a real dagger and mirror, right?”

“And who knows what you would do with them? You truly do not understand the fact you are a prisoner, do you?” Legolas scoffed, shaking his head. Honestly he didn’t think there were any fell magics that could be created using a simple dagger and mirror but giving in to Harry’s demands was something even Legolas had an issue with considering their respective positions. And his father would never countenance it. Not until Harry agreed to teach Thranduil his magic.

“I was told once that elves felt captivity the worst of crimes,” Harry snarled, all humor banishing, as he reached for the bars gripping them in both hands while behind him Thorin and Fili moved forward backing Harry up, their own humor dissipating. “And yet, you are so quick to do it to those whose only fault fault was to attempt to ask for your aid in passing through your lands. Odd that. In answer to your question Legolas, I do understand this whole prisoner thing. Far better than you can imagine.”

While the other elven guards grumbled or moved forward with their spears ready to prod the dwarves away from the bars if commanded, Legolas glared back, but deep down knew that his father was in the wrong here, and eventually had to look away from that emerald gaze. Those eyes were deeply unsettling when Harry was angry, he reflected. If we bring you items for shaving, will that stay your idle use of your magic?”

“Perhaps, but you still haven’t done enough to deal with our waste, so my use of spells to keep the air clear down here is going to continue.”

That caused Legolas to grimace, but also nod. The jail cells had never really been intended for long-term use after all, they had no toiletries or sewage to speak of. These cells had been made for short term prisoners, after all. Sighing, he nodded his head. “Very well, we will so inform our king.”

Tauriel stayed a moment, looking at Harry’s face. “You will need some bandages for that, that inexpert job you just did. It reminds me of my first attempt at whittling frankly.”

“Ouch,” Harry mimed holding a hand to his chest as if he had taken a mortal injury. “You wound me deeply.”

“No, I think you did that on your own,” the elven woman replied dryly.

“Another point for her,” Fili chuckled, leaning back and looking at the elfin woman.

“But I take it you approve of the no beard thing?” Harry questioned, his lips quirking into an almost shy smile as he tried to ignore the rolling eyes of many of the dwarves around him.

“I would prefer the no blood thing,” Tauriel shot, making the word ‘thing’ sounds like a foreign concept, before nodding abruptly and turning away, leaving the conversation with a suddenness that surprised Harry.

But she had to. Tauriel was not going to admit that she had been about to say that being cleanshaven made him look more handsome than the beard had. The beard had added age, perhaps, but nothing more.

Behind her, Thorin smiled. “I think that went rather well, didn’t it?” as Harry smirked, Thorin became serious, grasping his friend’s shoulder. “Are you certain you will be able to keep using magic?”

“I’m certain. Though I’ll keep the transfiguration to a minimum. That took it out of me. Creating smells or other such though, that I can do easily,” Harry shrugged philosophically. “Besides, easy or hard, I have to keep doing it, don’t I? There’s no way Bilbo could get the weapons and us out alone. I’ll do my part to force the Thranduil to drop his guard on the magical side, never fear. Beyond that, all we can do is put our trust in Bilbo.”

“True, although after the past few weeks, I am far more confident in his abilities than I was before.” Thorin snorted. “It still irks me to be so dependent on one person, when that person is not me, but…” he shrugged. “You are right. We have no choice but to place our fate in Bilbo’s hands.”

Later that night, Bilbo proved once more that he was worthy of that trust. First, though, Tauriel came back later that evening to speak to Harry once more. Watching her walk down the passageway towards them, Harry found himself smiling for no reason he could discern.

But he noticed that when she stopped in front of their jail cell, Tauriel too was smiling. “I would have asked earlier, but all of you seemed so enamored of my shaving I didn’t get a chance. How went the patrol?”

Tauriel’s smile slid into a grimace at that. “More spiders than I expected. After your unplanned culling of them, I would have thought that their numbers would have decreased. Instead, it doesn’t seem to have done more than embolden them. And at times…” Tauriel shook her head. “I have spent the past half-day giving a detailed report of my patrol to Legolas and the king. I would prefer not to talk about it further. It will only make me more frustrated. Instead, tell me more about Rivendell. Tell me about the architecture of the place.”

Looking at her, Harry noticed that Tauriel looked wan and tired. So he simply nodded. “Well, first of all, Rivendell is really a dell, a valley I mean. And while the sides seem open, they are not. It is a very…”

For a time, their talk centered around Elrond and Rivendell. Of all of them, she seemed to be the most convinced that Harry and the others had indeed been there. Of course, the King knew as well, but Thranduil did not care to allow the Council to influence in the affairs of his own nation, or indeed his own when dealing with outsiders. Frankly, Harry’s magic was far too enticing for him to let the young human go, especially given the danger of letting him and the dwarves continue their self-destructive quest.

Legolas and Tauriel were not nearly so close minded. Legolas had in fact argued with his father after Harry had convinced him that Harry had not only met Lord Elrond and Mithrandir but Saruman and Lady Galadriel. He’d been soundly told to mind his own business. But Tauriel had, after her earlier run-ins with the King, decided to keep her thoughts to herself.

But Tauriel had heard from Legolas about this latest little name-drop, and eventually asked, “Legolas mentioned you met the lady Galadriel in Rivendell as well?” The respect in her voice deepened noticeably as she mentioned Galadriel.

“The Lady was there with the Council,” Harry said, smiling at the memory even now. There was just something about Lady Galadriel, which had that impact. “I won’t tell you what we talked about, but I can tell you about the pranks we played on the others in the Council.”

Tauriel chuckled at that, shaking her head. “You and pranks. What is it with you and pranks?”

Harry shrugged. “It’s good training in magic oddly enough, and my father apparently was a bit of a prankster. A little too much of one, with the most caustic bend to it, but still. Since I never met the man, I like to think that I have at least one thing in common with him. And as for the prank I played on Elrond…”

The conversation was short, but still fun, which made it all the worse for Harry when he remembered that he was setting Tauriel up to be followed back to her home or room by Bilbo so that Harry could reclaim his sword. Admittedly, the elves had sort of stolen it in the first place, but still, that didn’t make Harry feel any better about it.

And later that evening, or whatever, they still couldn’t tell time here, Bilbo returned to report. “Tauriel actually has quarters here in the King’s halls. She and several other officers of the Unseen Host. Beyond that, I have discovered enough of the plans for the festivities to map out our escape in more detail, but still have to follow the Keeper of the Keys. Which is going to be difficult since that is one busy elf.” Bilbo shook his head with a sigh, not mentioning the number of very close calls he’d had that day. “Harry, do you think you can get your weapon from Tauriel and Orcrist from the king’s room?”

“With my magic available to me, easily.” Harry nodded, smiling thinly. “In which case, I have to keep making an arse of myself. Let’s see how much of a bug I have to be before the king stops noticing my buzzing around his head.” **{Would have used ‘my buzz’ but something feels off about it}**

Scene break

Over the next few days, Bilbo basically began to stalk the keeper of the keys, the Elven King’s equivalent of chief butler. The elf who held the key to the wine cellar, and to their freedom.

He got to know the route to those cellars like the back of his hand, including the servant’s path. He discovered where the elf sat at the table and where he would sit during the feast coming up. From there, listening to conversations eventually told Bilbo what his favorite vintages were.

With that, and with his previous knowledge of where the dwarves’ confiscated items were stored, Bilbo was ready for the next phase of the plan.

Every day, Bilbo saw guards going down to the cells as Harry used his magic. Each day they rushed down, and each day they came back up, muttering to themselves, some in humor, some not. It was evident to all that Harry was now using his use of magic to rebel against his captivity in the only way he could.

This escalated until the day before the festivities when Thranduil himself came down, only to leave quickly, angrily, and with his hair changing to its normal silver sheen from a putrescent mustard color as Bilbo watched. Bilbo nearly let loose a laugh at that, and for a moment he feared that the king had seen him as Thranduil stopped, looking around. But then he was moving again, and soon Thranduil was back with a large group of his guardsmen. These elves who wore ceremonial armor and heavy plate even here, in the heart of the elven kingdom. They were also armed with long spears.

Fearing trouble, Bilbo moved to follow them.

“You will cease this, this magical misuse of your powers!” Thranduil growled as the hobbit arrived, watching with something approaching amused concern as he looked into the cage. Harry hadn’t gone through with his threat of adding anything. Transfigurations and conjurations were next to impossible to make permanent, after all. Instead, he had seemingly carved out segments walls to the next jail cell over and then levitated the bare saw mattress shifted bunkbeds into one, allowing the other one to be turned into a makeshift exercise area for the dwarves. The jail cells also smelled better than the rest of the hallways did.

Harry looked at the King, then shook his head. “Without exercise, even if you keep feeding that us that tasteless muck you do, we will wither away. Why in the world would I go along with that?”

“Because you are a prisoner, and if that happens, you have only your own stubbornness to blame. Guards.” At this command, the armed elves moved forward, several of them thrusting with the butt of their spears through into the other jail cells, forcing the dwarves within backward, while the one housing Harry Thorin and Fili was opened by several more guards.

Instantly the three of them leaped forward, but the spear-butts thrust and Fili stumbled back from a blow to the sternum. Thorin dodged around one blow and grabbed another spear-butt before it could land in his hand. Pulling hard, he dragged the elf forward into a hard right punch that caught him in the jaw. The guard was stunned for a moment, his helmet not having any armor on the bottom of his face, which was proven to be a detriment a second later as Thorin kicked out, sending him reeling into another guard.

Harry also dived forward, and although he didn’t have any real hand-to-hand skill still laid out two more elves with point-blank stupefy spells. Then he saw stars as the side of a spear caught him on the side of his head, sending him reeling. He was then dragged out of the cell as Thorin was pressed backward deeper into the cell at spearpoint, the remaining guards in the cell no longer willing to play nice.

“You have apparently forgotten, human. Magic user or no, you are still a prisoner. And you have disobeyed me.” At Thranduil’s two of his men hesitated a moment, then raised their spear-butts high, bringing them down on Harry’s back.

Harry grunted, but to the king’s surprise, didn’t cry out. He simply looked at Thranduil, then moved his hands ever so slightly, drawing attention to them, the scars dark and painful looking on his now-pale skin. “I fought for year’s against the creature that did this to my hands as he tore at my flesh and mind. Do you think that you can break me with pain?” Harry laughed, the sound both wild and dark. It cut off abruptly as his look turned into a glare. “I will remember this, Oh king under the forest. I will remember this, and I will see you pay for it.”

Thranduil glared, close to losing his cool, before shouting out a command. “If pain will not cause you to see reason wizard, then think of your companions.” He looked at his guards then around at the dwarves. “Two more strikes each, then toss him back in and drag out the others one at a time. Two strikes for each dwarf.”

Harry kept the glare going. Indeed, it didn’t even look like he moved, and with when it came their turn, the other dwarves took it grimly, with Dwalin going so far as to bellow out “Harder lad! Why me dam gave me a smarter rap on the skull the first time I gave her cheek!”

Even the youngest of them, Fili Kili and Ori took their blows, although Ori’s family had to be restrained when he was dragged out. ,The anger and hate in the dwarves eyes burned into Bilbo from where he watched this. *Damn Thranduil! Elrond would never stand for this! Is his pride so important to him that he would treat prisoners so foully? Or does he believe himself so strong, none can gainsay him here in his halls?*

Unlike the dwarves, Bilbo also watched the face of the elves doing it, and noticed that none of them were enjoying this, not even the king, for all that he watched as every blow was struck. *The king might be ordering this, but doesn’t take pleasure from it. He must really want Harry’s spells to be so determined to force Harry to submit.*

As Ori was tossed back into his cell where Dori caught him, the strongest dwarf in the band looking like he wanted nothing more than to tear the elves apart, Thranduil turned to look at Harry. “I see you are still defiant. Cut down their rations by half. Half water, and half gruel. No more bread, no more meats, nothing else.” The dwarves had been getting meat before this for a single meal every other day, while bread came with every meal. “They are looking far too hardy as it is. Let us see if you can live off your magic.”

Harry bared his teeth at the king but said nothing, which apparently pleased Thranduil, and he turned away, leaving Harry there.

Bilbo was about to make his way forward, as the dwarves and Harry talked quietly to one another, Harry apologizing for the pain, and the dwarves simply shrugging her shoulders. Hardship was something to be endured, regardless of the cause. But before he could remove the cloak’s hood, Bilbo paused as he heard movement from further down the passageway.

Several elves appeared, people who had been bringing the food for the dwarves, Legolas, Tauriel, and one of the elves who had actually been administering the beating, his helmet off now and his face regretful. Tauriel spoke for them all, gesturing at what she held in her hand. “Poultices for your bruises.”

Looking at her, Harry held his hand outside the cell, turning to hand the poultices over to Thorin, who instantly went to work on Fili, as the other elves handed more into the other cages. Dori, though, had to be calmed down by Nori before he would accept them.

Looking at Harry, Tauriel tried and failed to think of a joke that could alleviate the tension. But all she could say was, “I’m sorry that the king felt this was necessary.” The others, even the guard who had been part of the act, murmured their agreement. He would have done it again, Thranduil was king, and the prisoners were outsiders. But even so, it hadn’t been an act he could take pride in.

Harry sighed. “I don’t have anything against you, or even you,” He replied, looking at the royal guard. “You weren’t enjoying it, you were just following orders. Just remember in the future, just because he’s your king, doesn’t mean he can’t be a douchebag.”

“Would you like some help with your back?” Legolas questioned, wondering what a douchebag was and filling it had something to do with excrement.

Harry cocked an eyebrow at him, his gaze going to Tauriel, who was suddenly looking at the other cells and shook his head. “Thorin will do well enough at that, thank you.”

Legolas nodded, having expected that answer, although there was a part of him that did not like how Tauriel and Harry seemed to be so friendly. Still, that was a petty part of him, and Legolas could ignore it well enough. “And will you stop using your magic?”

“I’ll tone it down a little. But knowing that I’m getting under your king’s nose is actually more incentive than not,” Harry answered bluntly.

That actually caused Tauriel to snicker, perhaps the most un-elfish sound Harry had heard from any of that race so far. “I could have told you that,” she joked.

 “Yes, I do rather think that was an obvious one, wasn’t it?” Legolas groaned.

Bilbo nodded behind them as he turned away. Harry was doing his part, and Bilbo would do his come drought or famine.

Scene break

As the night of the escape began, the sounds of revelry and merry-making spread everywhere within Thranduil’s Halls. Bilbo waited, watching as the king came down from his royal apartments to sit at the tables set into the center of the main hall. The door to the city was also open, with more tables set up across the bridge, well-wishers from the rest of the elven city coming in and out. All the while, Bilbo watched, hidden somewhat ironically enough in his opinion, underneath the stairs leading up to the royal chambers. He remained there long enough to tell that the king and everyone else was on their way to becoming sodden with drink.

*Whether or not that is enough to actually make them drunk, I cannot say. Still, this will be our best chance. And at least the king didn’t personally come down yesterday when Harry used his magic.* Bilbo grimaced under the hood of Harry’s cloak, then resolutely stood, moving out of his hiding place and to the side of the hall. There, instead of heading to the jail cells, he turned to the left, heading down a corridor that led to the kitchens then down to the cellars.

Ten paces down, Bilbo was forced to duck away, dodging around and then under the tray an elf was carrying past. *Right, invisible does not mean ghostlike, they are not going to pass through me.* This wasn’t the first time Bilbo had to remind himself of that fact, but going down the much thinner, more utilitarian staircases in the servants' area was rather fraught until he passed by the kitchen. After that, there were far fewer elves moving around, although the two which were there, were hauling up a large barrel held at chest height between them, grunting under the strain.

Staring at it, and the two elves carrying it, Bilbo froze for a moment, then he shook his head, and with one hand holding the lip of the hood over his face, charged forward. When the two elves were a few stairs below him, Bilbo launched himself down and into a roll underneath the barrel. He couldn’t stop the noise from echoing as his body thumped several times on the stairs, but Bilbo grit his teeth, trying to not let a single grunt escape.

“What was that?” one of the elves asked, and Bilbo huddled there on the steps, the cloak over him and hoping they hadn’t heard anything.

“That was my back and patience breaking as one. Come, let us get this up to the party. It’s the second to last full barrel, and once the next one is up there, we’ll be able to join the festivities.” At the mention of the party, the first elf, who, unknown to B

Bilbo had been looking right at him, nodded and turned away, having seen nothing at all. The odd noise of something impacting the stone must have come from one of their feet scuffing the steps, nothing more.

Halfway down the stairs leading down to the cellars, Bilbo found what he had been looking for. The Keeper of the Keys had made plans for himself and two of his cronies. Once all the work was done, the food served, and the wine up in the main hall ready to be tapped, he could relax and would do so in a little alcove to one side of the stairs leading down to the wine cellar.

Here Bilbo found several wine bottles, many of whom were marked in Silvan rather than Common, one of whom was already opened.

Bilbo instantly moved to it, putting a bit of Gloin’s moonshine into that one, then doing the same to the four other bottles, opening each in turn before recorking them as hard as possible.

At that point, Bilbo was forced to hide in the corner, as the keeper of the keys came back with his cronies, although Bilbo honestly doubted that the word ‘crony’ would even have occurred to an elf. But it certainly fit these two, who seemed to spend most of their time toadying up to the keeper of the keys. *Really, my time in Taur-e-Ndaedelos has taught me one thing. While High Elves certainly are magical beings, removed from hobbit and humanity, these Silvan elves are far more like us than they probably would like to admit.*

“Well, that’s everything done for now.” The keeper of the keys set down in his chair, taking up his wine glass, and pouring in a healthy dollop of the spiked wine. He drank deeply as his friends put down two plates of food, meats, sweetbreads and what looked like a turkey leg to Bilbo.

Although he had yet to actually see any turkeys in his explorations. *Mind you, they probably wouldn’t keep them in the palace, now would they?* Bilbo shook his head. *Stop that, Bilbo. Keep your mind on the prize, not on normal hobbit matters. You’ve already had your evening repast anyway.*

He waited in that corner as the three of them toast one another’s health, then the King’s. At that point, the trio of elves began to simply chatter, enjoying putting their feet up and the music that wound down the stairwell from above. At least in that area, the Silvan elves were very much like their Noldor or Sindar brethren.

How long he was waiting for Bilbo didn’t know, but two bottles of the spiked wine had disappeared before Bilbo noticed that the trio of elves was starting to slur their words were, and they were slowing down on the wine intake. Soon one of them fell, to the floor, having just stood up and declared something and Elvish, his words so much gibberish thanks to the alcohol he had taken aboard.

That’s Laurelen for you,” the keeper of the keys cackled as he took a deep draught from the last bottle of spiked wine, which was half gone.

Seeing that Bilbo was suddenly worried that he hadn’t spiked enough of the bottles. Thinking quickly, Bilbo moved forward, and as the wine bottle was set down, tipped a little more of the moonshine into it.

However, Bilbo’s luck failed him then. The second crony was still somewhat sober, and he peered blearily at the bottle for a moment, having spotted something dribbling down the interior of the wine bottle. Then a second later, he waved his hand through where Bilbo’s hand was as if he wasn’t certain what he had been seeing.

His eyes widened quickly when he felt the hand hit something, and he rose to his feet, reaching forward incredulously, “What is the name of the Malar…”

That was as far as he got before Bilbo dodged backward then raced around the now frowning keeper of the keys, barreling into the elf who was already standing. The elf, inebriated if not entirely drunk, had not been expecting an unseen weight to slam into his midsection, and Bilbo tackled him to the floor, landing with Bilbo on top. The hood of Harry’s cloak fell back for a moment, and the elf stared up at him wide-eyed before Bilbo reached forward and grabbed at the elf’s hair, slamming his head back down onto the stone.

Then he looked over the keeper of the keys, who was blearily trying to get to his feet. But he was almost four sheets to the wind, and could barely get his feet under him quickly, let alone reach for Bilbo. He stumbled back into his chair, and Bilbo realized with a start that his legs were near enough to kick out at it.

A second later, the chair went sideways as Bilbo kicked one of its legs, dumping the keeper of the keys out onto the floor. On his way down, his head cracked against the side of the alcove, and he slid further down insensate. When he didn’t immediately start moving, Bilbo quickly turned his attention to the elf underneath him, who had just reached up towards Bilbo, his eyes seemingly unable to track. Yet his grip on Bilbo’s shirt was strong, and his other hand was pulling back in a fist.

“I’m sorry about this.” Once more, Bilbo grabbed the elf by his hair, with both hands this time, and he slammed his head down hard on the ground until the elf’s eyes rolled up in his head, and he stopped trying to fight back. Then Bilbo rolled off him only now, starting to hyperventilate as what he had just done hit him through the wall of his adrenaline.

It took a bit for Bilbo’s heart to stop racing, and he spent all that time watching the open doorway into the alcove, waiting for an alarm to be sounded, or someone to shout ‘what was that’, or indeed recognize at all what it just occurred. But no one was near enough apparently to hear the noises, and he breathed a sigh of relief and crawled over to the keeper of the keys, grabbing up his jingling keychain from his belt.

“Well, that wasn’t how I wanted this to go,” the hobbit murmured as he got to his feet, only now realizing that he had bruised his shoulder with his shoulder charge into the elf that he had just knocked unconscious.

Looking down at the unconscious form of the keeper of the keys and his fellows Bilbo sighed, then he grabbed the bottle of spiked wine and another one from the nearby wall, before liberally pouring both of them over the elf’s chests. “The waste was very great,” he murmured, before moving out of the small alcove, leaving the three unconscious elves behind him**.**

When he appeared before their cell doors, Bilbo saw Harry blink and sniff the air and look at Bilbo, one eyebrow raised. “Don’t ask,” Bilbo answered quickly before Harry could get the words out. “Just don’t. I suggest we all get a move on, wizard and good dwarves.” With that, he started opening their cell doors, nodding to Harry. For a moment, he thought about giving Harry the ring he had, albeit accidentally, stolen from Gollum. Since, obviously, that would allow Harry to not use his spells.

But the thought passed as Harry exited the cell. Harry wouldn’t need it, and after all, his using spells during the merry-making to twit Thranduil would make sense even to the king. There was no need for Bilbo to part with the ring, and he might need it himself, after all. “Go, I’ll lead Thorin and the others down to the cellars. But you need to get the swords.”

scene break

With a Disillusion charm covering him and a silencing spell on his feet, Harry snuck through the halls of Thranduil, seeing revelers everywhere, drinking and feasting, singing and laughing. It was clear whatever his feelings about the man, he was popular among his own people. *I wonder if that would change if all of them had to spend time in his cells or be the object of his ire. Or even near Thranduil for any length of time.*

By this point in the festivities, everyone was sitting down and drinking, singing or telling songs. Very few were on their feet, thankfully, and that allowed Harry to slowly move through the main hall towards the series of stairs, which would take him up to where Bilbo had reported Thranduil and his most trusted advisors stayed. Thranduil’s private rooms would be on the topmost floor, which Harry remembered all too well from their first meeting. Before that area would come the floor where Bilbo had told them Tauriel and other officers of the Unseen Host had their quarters.

Deciding to retrieve his own sword second, Harry moved up to Thranduil’s quarters. There he blinked in surprise. *What the? Thranduil just, just left it there?* Orcrist was indeed just lying on the table where Thranduil had been sitting when he had interrogated Harry and Thorin those months ago. *If the bastard hadn’t been wearing it a few times when he came down to try and intimidate me in the past few days, I might even believe it.*

Circling around the outskirts of the room, Harry put himself between the trees that were placed to allow Thranduil privacy from the main hall below and the table, staring out and down at the king for a moment. The king hadn’t made any move to leave the table and indeed seemed to be having a good time, smiling at some of his people who were now singing some song or other. As tense as Harry was, the voices hadn’t registered. Now Harry watched out of the corner of his eye while reaching with one hand toward the sword, then grasping the hilt and lifted the ancient elven blade up off the table.

Thranduil hadn’t moved. He hadn’t reacted at all, instead simply nodding and smiling at another one of his people as they came forward, bowing deeply. “…and may your reign continue for another age, great King of Taur-e-Ndaedelos.” The words made their way up to Harry, as did Thranduil’s polite response. Nothing hinted at anything untoward.

*So, he really was just that arrogant? Or maybe there’s a trap if you move directly into the room rather than around the edge like I did?* Regardless, Harry quickly stuffed Orcrist into his mokeskin pouch, then retraced his steps back to the stairs leading downward. **{Should there be a trap on the blade itself, or is Thranduil arrogant enough to believe that it was not necessary?}**

Following Bilbo’s directions, Harry wound his way down two floors, one of which Bilbo had said was the royal family’s area. The second, where he stopped, was for high lords, or since they were one and the same for the most part, the leaders of the Unseen Host and Thranduil’s army. Moving off the landing, Harry entered the corridor, leading deeper into the rock and ear that the back of Thranduil’s hall.

Harry started to pass doors leading into small but very well-appointed rooms. Most of them were open at the moment, but the one leading into the room Bilbo had discovered was Tauriel’s was closed.

Harry, having seen others that were also closed, thought nothing of it until he had carefully, silently opened the door, closing it behind him just as silently. Inside, the room was almost sparse. There was a painting of a tree that, if you looked closely, looked as if it was a forest itself, with hundreds of smaller trees in the branches of the larger. A large bed dominated the room, it’s sheets soft-looking, but green and gray, almost drab. There was a table by the bed, a dresser built into the far wall, and a doorway there leading to another room beyond. Everything was elvish, to be sure, and well-made, extremely detailed and everything, but Harry, looking around, could tell this place was where someone came to sleep, rather than really lived in.

It was when he began to move deeper into the room, however, that Harry started to make out the noise of water in the room beyond. And splashing, accompanied by someone humming under her breath. Harry froze instantly, staring at the opposite door in shock. *No, oh* ***no****! I can’t be that unlucky, can I?*

Harry moved around the room, trying to find his sword, only to notice it in a corner, hanging by a set of daggers, a bow and a quiver of arrows, almost hidden by the dresser from the doorway leading out to the corridor.

Standing in front of his sword, Harry was about to lift the blade off the wall when the door to the private bathing room at the other side of Tauriel’s room opened, steam flowing out behind the elven woman. Not that Harry could bring himself to care about the steam at present. No, his attention was entirely on Tauriel.

The elven woman had retired to her room earlier, indeed as soon as she could politely get away. While a part of her still respected Thranduil, the way he was acting so self-centered when it came to the dwarves and Harry in particular had been added to his lack of action on the spider front, which still annoyed her.

Tauriel’s long, light red hair was platted to her neck, shoulders and collarbone, the robe hanging loosely on her spare, extremely trimmed frame. The bathrobe allowed an indecent amount of décolletage to be seen. Harry could tell just by looking at that heavenly valley that her breasts whose size Harry compared to green apples perhaps, enough to fill the hand, but not to overflowing. Their perkiness was incredible, riding firm and high on the elven woman’s chest, her nipples just barely covered by the bathrobe.

Below that, the robe, either silk or something else equally slinky, Harry had no idea, was tied tightly around Tauriel’s waist by a wide purple belt, a startling contrast to the green of her robe or the pale pink of her skin. On her feet, she wore amusingly pink slippers, not that Harry could bring himself to care, given the amount of delicious leg on display.

Harry couldn’t stop himself from taking a deep breath at the sight before raising a hand to his mouth. *COCK!*

For a moment, just a moment, Harry thought he had gotten away with it. Tauriel didn’t do anything or even twitch. Instead she moved past him, moving over to a table where a single glass wine lay. Then she swiftly twirled towards where the sounded come from, flinging the drink forward. The glass thumped into Harry’s chest, splashing his face and upper chest with wine and the Disillusion charm faded.

Harry stumbled back at the impact and the surprise of being found, then Tauriel was coming towards him, a dagger that Harry had missed by the glass outstretched and thrusting a grimace of anger on her face. “You dare!”

Unfortunately for the elven woman’s righteous anger, Harry’s was still able to see, the wine not having gotten in his eyes and he twisted, grabbing at her outstretched arm and pulling her around, pinning her against the wall before twitching to one side as her knee came up aimed at his boy bits. She twisted out of his grip and would have thrust with the dagger again, but Harry slapped a palm into her stomach, thrusting her back into the wall as he used the sticking charm Epoximise, which acted as if you had splashed the object targeted with super glue. In this case, Tauriel and the wall right behind her.

Her eyes wide, Tauriel felt the spell wash over her, and though, as an elf, she had some inherent magic of her own, Tauriel had never used any magic beyond that needed to feel the pulse of the forest and move silently. Never had she had to defend herself magically.

The spell stuck, and Tauriel found herself stuck against the wall of her room. She glared, her eyes literally flashing in fury as she stared into Harry’s face. “You…” she ground out. “You…”

 “I am sorry Tauriel. I didn’t, that is, I, I didn’t come here to peep or something. I, I’m just here to reclaim my property.” Even as he stuttered Harry kept his eyes locked resolutely on the wall beside her head, not letting his eyes travel past Tauriel’s forehead to take I the view of her body once more, since her robe had become even more disheveled than it had been before. “The, um, the timing is against me I’ll admit, and I apologize **deeply** for this invasion of your privacy. But, well, that sword is mine after all. And we have need of it.”

 A human would’ve continued raging, far too angry to speak of anything else other than the invasion of privacy. But Tauriel was an elf, and while they had even greater level of body modesty than humans, they also had greater levels of emotional control. She saw Harry’s face and embarrassed blush and realized that this had indeed been simply bad timing. *I am still going to hold it against him, but as I cannot do anything about it now. Perhaps instead, I can gain more information about their plans, if this is, as I suspect, some part of a larger escape plan.*  “Do you truly believe the poison on that blade is enough to help you slay a dragon?”

Harry shrugged, answering obliquely. “Gandalf thought it worth a try.”

“Mithrandir is not here to pay the price if you are wrong. You passed through Mirkwood, our lands. And while we have not treated you all well, much as I hate to admit it, if you fail…”

“Then we won’t fail.” Harry interrupted her, smiling thinly. “An all or nothing roll of the dice, my lady. You could say,” he went on as he took the sword from the wall and placed it back in its sheath and then tied it to his waist. “that I am more than used to such bets.”

“More stories from your past I haven’t heard yet?” Tauriel said, her lips quirking almost unwillingly into a smile. Even with what had just happened, there was something about Harry’s confidence, his weary, but determined eyes and the wry twist of his lips that interested her. Then she turned serious. “We will come after you know. My King will order it.”

“You are welcome to try, and indeed, I would rather like to see you again,” Harry chuckled wanly. “And not like this either.” *Or more accurately, not just like this. Merlin, she’s gorgeous.* Shaking that totally inappropriate thought off, Harry went on.“But if all goes according to plan, by the time you realize we are gone, we will be well beyond your realm.”

Tauriel’s brows furrowed at that, but then her eyes widened as Harry leaned in, grasping her robe. She was about to shriek when, to her surprise and relief, Harry pulled her robe tight around her, not even looking as he did it. Holding Tauriel’s robe tight by her neck with one hand, he pulled the sash tight so that it would remain like that with the other, covering her body from neck to ankle. The Robe was still suggestive as all heck, but it was certainly not showing as much as before.

She raised an eyebrow at him, and he shrugged. “I figure someone’s going to come and get you eventually, and I have no idea how long that sticking charm will last. So I might as well do what I can to preserve your modesty after I challenged it so much.”

“…Thank you,” Tauriel mumbled, before plastering a scowl on her face. “But you cannot honestly believe that I won’t shout the moment you…” She paused as harry took up a belt and one of her bracers, the scowl now having no trouble staying on her face. “You wouldn’t…” She tried to twist her face away, and then inhaled to shout, willing to put her modesty to one side in favor of her duty. But Harry quickly stuffed the soft leather bracer into her mouth before tying it there with the belt, the belt going around her head several times before he tied it off.

Once more glaring at him, Tauriel tried desperately to convey the depth of her anger to Harry at this treatment, but he just looked back at her with a faint, sheepish smile on his face. Then he did something that surprised both Tauriel and himself.

Leaning in, he kissed her cheek gently. “Bon voyage.” Blushing brightly now, Harry moved off, leaving a stunned Tauriel behind him as he wrung the wine off his invisibility cloak, pulling up the hood as he moved away.

With both weapons in hand, Harry made his way back down to the main hall, where he was happy to see that the week of messing with Thranduil, and the party and the wine, no doubt, had conspired to make Thranduil not react to the earlier use of his magic. *And maybe he can’t tell a direction the spell is coming from when he’s so close?*

Soon he was past heading up the stairs to the entrance to the side passages that led to cellars, once more following Bilbo’s directions. Pausing only once to look in amusement at the two unconscious elves in the side room, Harry wound his way down to the bottommost cellar.

Entering, Harry found the dwarves once more arguing about the plan, as if they had any alternative at this point. None of them had even looked in Harry’s direction as he entered bar Throin and Balin, who was examining the mechanism in the center of the room. This thing was apparently the apparatus that controlled the trapdoor in the center of the room

“We’ve no way of knowing what’s down there, whether or not we’ll be able to come out the other end intact, or even if these casks really can be made airtight! We might drown!” Nori shook his head firmly.

“Aye, and how do you expect some of us to fit in them! We’re not all twigs like Fili and Kili!” Bombur grumbled, staring up at the mountain of empty barrels. They were only as wide as two men, after all.

“And even if it works, we might be sitting ducks on the river,” Dwalin warned.

“There has to be a more dignified way out of here!” Bifur piled in with a nod.

“There is no way out, you ungrateful shits,” Harry growled, reaching out to grabbing Bifur’s beard and tugging hard, causing many a dwarves eyes to widen. You just did not do that to a dwarf! “Bilbo has been planning this for weeks, while all of us, including me, have been forced to stay stuck in those damn cells. Now we are free, and this is the only way forward. Unless you really think we can fight our way through an entire city of elves?”

Dwalin looked as if he would like to try, but the others quickly subsided. This was aided by the fact that the clamor had arisen somewhere else in the halls above, shouts of worry and concern, as well as tramping feet. While Bilbo’s ruse with the keeper of the keys had worked, unfortunately, Legolas had decided to stop by the jail cells and share out a single bottle of wine with the prisoners to drink his father’s health. He had thought it might be amusing to see which of them would be able to actually give a toast to that in return for wine.

He had found the jail cells empty and had instantly raised the alarm. But since, with the party going on, no one could have gotten out by the main entrance, that meant the dwarves had to be somewhere within the king’s halls still.

Harry waved his hand towards the doorway shouting out “Protego!” A shield pf blue energy appeared there, before he turned back to the dwarves and Bilbo. “Let’s get a move on!”

“I will volunteer to go first. Fili with me, Dwalin, Kili at the back with Harry and Bilbo.” Thorin ordered, moving towards one of the empty barrels, and, as Gloin and Ori held it still, climbed up into it. He looked at Bilbo as Bilbo made to put the lid on, shaking his head slightly. “If this works, Bilbo, you will never have to buy a flagon of ale ever again so long as a dwarf is nearby. But if it passes, prepare to be haunted by thirteen dwarven ghosts.”

“And isn’t that a terrifying thought,” Bilbo laughed, then very firmly set the top of the barrel in place, tamping it down with a bung mallet.

Fili was next, then the others, one after another. They did have a problem with Bombur and Dori. Dori had to move this way and that, before basically scrunching himself up into a ball, looking horribly uncomfortable with how scrunched he was thanks to how wide his shoulders were. And Bombur looked as if he was simply wearing the casket like a second skin and was unable to duck his head enough that the others could put the top of the barrel on.

As they were working on Dori, though, there rose a clangor behind them. The door burst open, and shouts of alarm from the elves could be heard as they looked through the remains of the door and found themselves faced by Harry’s magical shield. For a moment, the elves stared, then there was a barked command behind them. “Hit it with your blades! Nothing of magic can withstand sufficient blows.”

The door was quickly hacked to pieces, and then blows were landing directly on the magical shield. Each hit caused it to flicker, and Harry knew it was only a matter of time before the shield failed.

As the last dwarves, Bombur, Dwalin and Kili fell down into the river below, Thranduil himself arrived. With a roar and cry of something Elvish, he brought a sword down onto this shield spell. Both spell and sword shattered, and the elves poured in.

“No time for it now!” Harry said, pulling up his hood and grabbing onto another empty barrel, before raising a hand to the rope mechanism that activated the trapdoor. Bilbo, who had just gotten into his own barrel with difficulty, nodded to him, and Harry launched out a cutting spell. The trapdoor opened, and both of them fell towards the river.

The elves raced forward, staring down at them, but none had thought to grab bow or arrow. And even if they had, the dwarves were falling too rapidly into the dark of the short tunnel down to the river for any of them to get a good shot off.

**OOOOOOO**

Standing apart from his guards, Thranduil stared into the hole leading down into the shaft for a moment before turning away, glaring at his son. “After them. I want them back under lock and key within the day.” *I will have access to your magic wizard. And I will never allow you dwarves to bring the wrath of the dragon down on my people.*

“Why?” Tauriel questioned as she arrived at the doorway to the cellars. Luckily the first two to find her had been women, and she had thrown a cloak on over her bathrobe but was otherwise not clothed or armed at all, save for a dagger. “That river is going to take them well out past our realm. Ergo they won’t be our problem.”

Thranduil looked at the surrounding elves and, taking the hint, all of them quickly bowed, before racing out of the cellars. Legolas remained, knowing he could catch up to them and wanting to know the answer to Tauriel’s question too.

But Thranduil did not answer, instead staring hard at Tauriel. “I warned you before about questioning me.”

It was not a question, but a flat, threatening statement. Yet Tauriel took her courage in both hands and pressed forward. “I believe that the wizard and the dwarves have a plan to deal with Smaug, should he still inhabit the Lonely Mountain. I believe that they were telling the truth, that both Mithrandir and Lord Elrond were involved in planning this action, and that no one of the Wise would be part of so foolish an endeavor without a plan they felt could work. Surely you can trust Mithrandir if you do not trust Harry.”

“I believe you have gotten too close to Harry during his time here, Tauriel. Your emotions are clouding your vision of the future. You need to ask yourself this question, what if they fail?” Thranduil gesture slightly with one hand above them, indicating the forest above and all around Taur-e-Ndaedelos. “A dragon could scorch Eryn Lasgalen from one side to another in a day, and we could do nothing to it. Further, there is the wizard to consider. With his magical abilities, I could make our borders secure against any threat.”

“I understand that, but taking counsel solely of our fears is not the way forward.” Tauriel shot back. “You would have us not act at all for fear of making things worse. But waiting allows the threats facing us to get worse every day! The spiders encroach, the dragon lingers. The threat in the south beyond the spiders grows. We have the strength now, without your need to have access to the wizard’s spells, to do something about at least one of those things, perhaps two. But you will not…”

“Enough,” Thranduil growled, stalking forward towards Tauriel. “You will not…”

“Father, Tauriel, arguing serves no one,” Legolas interjected, moving between them. “Tauriel, my father is right. Even if they do have a plan for Smaug, we cannot afford to take the chance that they will fail. The dragon will know that they came through our territory, and Smaug’s vengeance will be terrible. We have to stop them before that happens.”

Tauriel scowled, then remembered that Harry had told her that he’d be happy to see her again, even if they were just coming after them. That caused Tauriel to subside almost unconsciously as she wondered why she wanted to see the young human wizard again herself. *Beyond slapping him for the kiss and everything else anyway.*

Legolas took her silence as agreement, as did Thranduil, and Legolas turned back to her father. “I will put together a full company of the Unseen Host to go after them. But the word should be sent to the Watergate. If we can stop them there, this will be a very short hunt.”

“I’ll go get dressed and meet you on the trail,” Tauriel added, turning and racing off before the men could say anything.

Thranduil shook his head slightly at that, then turned to stare down towards the river, hands clenching and unclenching. “When you catch up to them, realize that all of them do not need to be brought back in one peace,” he said, not looking at his son. “The wizard is the priority. I will have his spells, one way or another.”

Legolas paused that but nodded once before hurrying off.

Scene break

The fall was just about as unpleasant as the fall into goblin town had been, and Harry wondered if he could figure out a way to fly in the future. “It would certainly save time, and painnNN!” he groaned, as his shoulder slammed into the wall before curling into a ball to protect his head, grimacing as he felt his shirt tear along one side of the shaft. Then he heard the roar of the water suddenly grow louder and straightened his legs desperately, hitting the river like a fish.

The current was extremely strong, but Harry was able to resurface a moment later, mentally thanking Gred and Forge for teaching him how to swim as he broke the surface. But the current was so strong he couldn’t do open more than keep his head out of the water and use his feet and hands to ward off the rocks. *I suppose it’s a good thing it’s so deep then,* Harry thought, then heard a voice yelling his name.

Bilbo had come down before Harry, his own barrel, like Bombur’s, not having a lid on it, although not for the same reason. The fat dwarf simply had not been able to lower his head, his girth having filled the barrel so much he wore it like a second skin. Bilbo had been able to crouch in the barrel and had waited until the splashing had subsided before poking his head out. He then saw Harry in the water and cursed himself for a fool. “Of course, a human wouldn’t be able to fit in the barrel, not even crouching. Hold on, Harry!”

With effort, Harry raised an arm towards the voice and found a surprisingly strong grip latching onto his wrist, finally making out that it was Bilbo’s voice he heard as the hobbit shouted out, “Hang onto the side of my barrel here!”

Harry did so, his fingers scrabbling for purchase and finding none on the smooth would, eventually having to just grab the top of the barrel pulling his upper body out of the water as he did, kicking off hard as he felt something scraping his side or legs to do it. Then they were out past the edge of the tunnel and into the open air of the river.

The previously muted starlight grew then, and Harry gaped up at the stars through an open sky, seeing more of the night above than they had glimpsed since entering Mirkwood. That really drove home the fact they had escaped to Harry, and he then smiled widely at Bilbo. “For that view alone, Bilbo, I would say that the breakout was worth it. Thank you, my friend.”

“Yes, well, let’s wait for such talk until we are all out of elven territory and dry, shall we?” Bilbo replied, somewhat embarrassed. “After all, without your mokeskin pouch and Invisibility Cloak, we would all be in a much worse way than we are now.”

“I think you both did a magnificent job, but couldn’t you have found a larger barrel for me!?” Bombur nearly roared from nearby. “Honestly, if I were not a dwarf, I would have lost my brains more than once before the barrel righted itself.”

“Yes, all you dwarves do seem to come with an extra-thick skull, don’t you?” Harry quipped, before grimacing as his leg started to scrap on a rock. “Just keep holding on, Bombur, that’s all you can do for now. Me, on the other hand, I might have to let go.”

As he tried to pull Harry further out of the water, Bilbo realized that Harry was right. There just wasn’t enough buoyancy to the barrel he was holding onto for both of them. Harry realized this and forced him to stop.

“?So, do we have any idea how long,” Harry broke off as a bit of river water slammed into his face with all the force of a slap. This was followed by another slap of water before he could continue. “this will go on for?”

Bilbo shook his head. “All I know is that the river ends up at the lake. Once there we’ll eventually picked up by one of their boatmen and taken to Laketown.”

Harry nodded, then regretted it an instant later as it brought his eyes down right in time for the next wave of water. Much of that water was starting to go into Bilbo’s barrel as the river turned into rapids and with a groan Harry released his grip on the top, faster than Bilbo could grab onto his wrist.

“Harry!”

Harry found himself falling back into the water again, but Bilbo’s barrel bobbed up out of the water once more. For a few moments, Harry was too busy just surviving to try and concentrate on any spell, using all of his speed and reflexes to push himself off one rock or away from the other. Once more, time lost all meaning as Harry fought, and fourth the river and rocks as much as he ever had Voldemort. Only one reprieve allowed him to create the Bubblehead charm, and even that faded. Thankfully he didn’t hit any undertow, simply battered along on the top of the water.

Yet even so, Harry could see the stars above occasionally, and that was enough to keep him going, as well as the occasional words of encouragement that reached his ears from Bilbo and Bombur. That even was enough to put a smile on his face, as well as the odd thought, *you know, this might have been fun if I was in one of those, what did Hermione call them, a kayak? Something to think about when I get the chance to get to the side of the river.*

Then the rapids were past, and they were into a calmer portion of the river again. Harry gasped, his arms breaking out of the water, and seconds later felt to different pairs of hands grabbing onto him. “Hold hard there, Harry,” Bilbo said, his tone gentle as he looked at what he could see of his human friend in the moonlight above. Harry’s back and shoulders looked beaten and bloody, his shirt torn in multiple places, and it was relief that Bilbo noted his head and neck didn’t seem to have taken more hurt than scrapes and bumps.

With Bilbo and Bombur’s help, Harry got his feet up in time for the next rock, and road the water almost as it pushed him, then pushed them all sideways around a large rock, wondering if he would get a reprieve anytime soon. Above them, the sky had started to lighten with the gleam of dawn.

OOOOOOO

Benjamin had waited for weeks, more than a month in point of fact, enough time travel to back home for further orders, and then back. At first, in doing so, Bolg had feared he would be punished for having lost his quarry, but that hadn’t happened. Instead, he had been ordered back, his forces tripled in strength. And his orders had not come just from Azog, but the great Master himself.

“**WITH THE DWARVES, THERE WILL BE A HUMAN. A MAGIC USER OF SOME KIND. CAPTURE HIM. BRING HIM TO ME. I WILL HAVE THE POWER HE WIELDS. DO NOT FAIL ME,”** the great Master had ordered in the Black Tongue of Mordor, while beside him, the unconscious form of the one called Gandalf had hung in a cage, unconscious.

There was only one reply Bolg could make to that, and he had raced back to the rebel-held portions of Mirkwood. Using the spiders and a few goblins as scouts, he had set a strong watch on the outskirts of the Elven lands and had placed himself between the hated elves and the lake where a small town of humans resided. Bolg knew if the stinking elves let the dwarves go, there was no chance of the dwarves turning back at this point. Thorin Oakenshield would see to that.

When the spiders and the goblin riders who were tasked to remain near the river reported some unusual activity, he had gathered what he could of his band quickly and made his way over, just in time to hear a report about how the dwarves had somehow escaped from the elves and had been seen bobbing down the river on barrels. It was incredible, insane, and yet, all of the watchers agreed that was what it happened.

“After them!” he roared. “Follow them along the river! Send word ahead with our wargs!” like the wolves they were bred from, wargs could run insanely fast through the forest. “Cut them off at Elvish river gate! This hunt ends today!” Luck was with him, and Benjamin had no intention of letting it go.

OOOOOOO

As dawn really started to lighten the world around them, Bilbo stared ahead of them, then raised a hand in delight. “Oyyy! I say oyy!”

Bombur turned in that direction and saw that Kili Dwalin and Bifur had all smashed the top of their barrels open and used the bits of the top as paddles. Here, the river was almost calm, if deep and still going quickly. The three of them had gathered up the others, aided soon by Thorin and Fili, who had somehow passed Bombur and the others due to his lighter weight and the fact his barrel had been closed.

With effort, Dwalin and his fellows created a chain out into the river to grab at the trio who had fallen behind dragging the three of them towards the side of the river where a small culvert was. The current wasn’t nearly strong there as it was elsewhere, and Harry was able to pull himself out of the water, feeling quite the bedraggled rat at the moment, grimacing as now that he was out of the ice cold water, he could feel the various wounds he had taken. “I wish to God I knew more about healing spells here,” he grumbled to himself, before finally giving into the urge to just lay out on the side of the river, staring up into the now blue sky.

Thorin’s face occluded his vision as he stared down at Harry, concern for his human friend marring his features. “Your bits all still work, Harry?”

“Nothing seems broken, but I won’t know for a bit. Now move your mug Thorin, I want to take in the view for a bit. I swear I’ve nearly forgotten what daytime is supposed to look like.”

“Get up!” Barked Oin, reaching down and pulling the protesting human to his feet. “Keep moving, stretch your muscles and arms out, don’t just lay there. You’re body will tighten up and you’ll be the next best thing to immobile for the pain.”

Balin smirked, and moved over, putting one arm around Harry’s waist and pulling him along, forcing him to move around the small culvert while more dwarves, who had found themselves held up momentarily here and there along the way were brought in. “Come on, laddie, listen to the healer aye? Oin knows what he’s talking about.”

Watching for a moment, Thorin shook his head before looking over at the others. “Let’s get a bit organized. Bilbo, do you have enough energy to climb one of these trees and give us a lookout? We won’t be here for long, but the elves might well be after us and I don’t want to be caught unawares.” When Bilbo nodded tiredly, Thorin turned back to Harry. “Or unarmed. Harry, your pouch, please.”

Nodding, Harry left off letting himself be moved around by Balin and Oin, pulling his pouch open. Bilbo had gathered the majority of their weapons from where they had been stored after the elves had captured them before ambushing the keeper of the keys. “Right, everyone, let's get armed, shall we?” Harry announced as he pulled out the sword of Gryffindor and the sheathe that he had gotten from Elrond for it, hanging the blade on his belt, noting idly that his pants had also been torn in various places. *Might want to look into buying a pair of leggings somewhere.* Then he pulled out Orcrist, handing it over to Thorin, who took it gratefully.

Soon the other dwarves were lining up to take their weapons, as above them, dawn fully broke overhead, lightening the sky further.

While the dwarves rested or worked out with their weapons, Harry, now feeling all his aches and pains, began to use a cutting spell on a fallen tree limb. He was trying to remember what he could of the boats that had taken him, Hermione and the other First years for that first magnificent view of Hogwarts, which would become his new home for all of its dangers and annoyances. Eventually, a tiny, one-man canoe began to take shape, and Harry smiled even as he started to feel the strain of using his magic on top of his numerous wounds start to grow.

He still had to hollow it out, but before he could start on that aspect, there was a loud howling through the woods, and he turned, staring, wondering where the wolf cries were coming from. An arrow zipped past Harry’s head, and he gaped at it, and the sight of a goblin coming out of the woods. “What the…”

Bilbo crashed down next to him, having been up in the trees above him. For a moment as the hobbit passed Harry’s hands twinged, but it was so swiftly over Harry didn’t even notice. “Goblins, goblins on wargs! We must fly friends!”

Thorin scowled, staring hard into the woods, his knuckles going white around his blade but then he shook his head. They couldn’t stand and fight here, not while they were still within Elven territory, and not when they didn’t know the strength of the enemy. While a part of him was unwilling to just run away again, they’d been doing that far too often of late for his pride, Thorin had to face facts.

“Into the river,” he ordered. “Fili, you first.”

His nephew, and heir, although neither of them liked talking about it like that, nodded, grabbing his brother and moving over to the riverbed. Kili took a second to launch an arrow in return then with Gloin holding his barrel, still clambered into it, following Fili out into the river.

Thorin ran into trouble though with Bombur who growled angrily, slapping his stomach as he shouted out, “What do you expect me to do, you can’t force me again into that small space Thorin, no, if I’m going to…”

At that point Thorin didn’t bother arguing, he simply grabbed the other dwarfed by the ears, and hauled him sideways. “Dori!” Between the two of them they stuffed Bombur back into a barrel before pushing him off of into the water, where Balin tossed him a piece of wood to use as a makeshift paddle.

Soon the others were in the river and as Another arrow flew by, Harry leaped onto his canoe, pushing it out into the river. A second later, he was out into the main current, and the force of the river claimed him once more, causing Harry to cling to the wood desperately.

The canoe proved to be more river-worthy than the barrels, and he was soon shooting past the dwarves. Tilting the canoe via his weight this way and that he was able to turn it in the river, allowing him to slow it down as he shouted, “They’re following us!” He raised a hand for a second and a cutting spell lashed out, before grimacing and ducking as more arrows began to fly from deeper in the woods.

 Warg riders pushed out of the woods, racing along the edge of the river to either side. Some goblins even leaped down towards the dwarves with their daggers intent on grappling with them in their barrels. Others remained where they were, the wolf leaping up right and trying to snap down at the dwarves, while the orcs aimed long spears at those who were nearest that were near the riverbed.

Harry targeted one of the orcs that he noticed was close to attacking Bilbo. A cutting spell cutting him in half even as Harry grimaced, feeling the drain on his magic. A second later on the other side of the river a hasty transfiguration spell enlarged a large stone into a wall just as an orc rider was about to leap from it across the river, his spear flashing down towards Bofur.

The spell struck, and the stone between Bofur and his attacker rose becoming a wall just as the orc was poised to leap, causing the wolf to crash into it, rather comically in Harry’s opinion. Wolf and orc fell into the water, and while the wolf swept his safety, the orcs tried to grab onto the next barrel coming past, only to have its hands chopped off by Thorin, the Orcrist in his hand as he shouted out a warcry Harry couldn’t make out over the tumult of the river.

Kili shot two more wargs out of the water, and then the last fell to, of all things, a hurled cob of wood from Dwalin. But there were others in the woods, their cries echoing out for a time before falling silent, and Harry looked at Thorin as he once more twisted his body to slow his makeshift canoe down. “There will be more out there, I think.”

To that the dwarven leader could only nod grimly.

**OOOOOOO**

Thanks to Thorin and company stopping as they did and their wargs’ speed, the o goblins sent ahead to the elves’ outer river gate were able to get ahead of the fleeing dwarves. The leader of this smaller band hissed in anger at seeing two elves on guard at the stone column arcing over the water. The grate there, a remnant of a bygone wall that had once stood here in defense of the elves when they lived more spread out through this area of Mirkwood, was up at present. But if the grate was dropped, the dwarves would be trapped.

Even better, the goblin realized, the area of the river here was rocky in the extreme. The warg riders would be able to close with spear as well as stand off and shoot the dwarves full of arrows like so many barrels of fish. The wizard would probably still be a threat, but not an insurmountable one. “Kill them,” he hissed before voicing his earlier thoughts. “Then we will lower the grate, and the dwarves and the wizard will be trapped!”

The others all nodded, any as they moved off, he hissed out “Remember, we are to take the wizard alive. The Great Master has plans for him.”

Elves had preternatural senses in comparison to every other race. They had reflexes that were more akin to Harry’s than a normal man’s and attention spans equal to how long they lived. Yet they could still be surprised. Not suspecting anything, the two elves on watch were not at their best, being on punishment duty while the rest of their people were back in Taur-e-Ndaedelos enjoying Thranduil’s birthday party.

One elf fell with an arrow in the chest, the arrow punching straight through his chain mail. The other stumbled back, an arrow going through one shoulder. Then a wolf rider was there, hacking down at him. The elf raised his spear, blocking the blow, but couldn’t dodge the wolves charge, which headbutted him off the gate to crash down onto the rocks to one side of the river. Two more arrows quickly found him as the goblins got into position on the gates. Soon the two of them were working on the grate, lowering it into the river.

**OOOOOOO**

Bilbo, Kili, Balin and Bofur, the companions with the best eyes, had been ordered to try and get ahead of the others, while Bombur, Dwalin, Oin and Thorin took up the rear. Harry, with some difficulty, was in the center of the group, able to project his magic any which way. Bilbo had also given him some Lembas that he had stolen while reclaiming the dwarves’ weapons. The four at the front were able to see the goblins arrayed alon the edge of the river, and ahead, the archway over the river. Bilbo too saw the grate leading down into the water, and his heart almost stopped. *No, no! to come so far, but to fail here!?*

The others might have felt the same despair, but Kili at least had a way to reply. An arrow left his bow slamming into the chest of a warg as his rider had been preparing his own bow, a shout leaving his lips at the same moment, “THORIN! HARRY! Goblins! Goblins and a gate into the river!”

The next second, dozens of arrows were flashing towards the dwarves in the river. But thanks to the warning, Harry’s Protego flashed into being, guarding the first dwarves to come into arrow range. Yet the distance with which he had to conjure the spell, and the length of those shield he had to create left him gasping for a second before he could get his air back.

But from his vantage point at the back of the group, Thorin started to bark out orders. “Dwalin, Fili, Gloin, with me to the sides, Harry, clear the way for us!”

Grimacing Harry did so, sending a Bombarda flashing towards the nearest riverbank, where goblin archers on wolves had appeared on the various stones there, most of them flat hence Thorin’s order to try and get out there. The spell hit, although it didn’t do as much damage as he had hoped, the enemy was just a little too spread out. Only one of the wolf riders exploded in a welter of gore. But the noise and the sudden shower of blood spooked several more wargs, and Harry’s next spell, another Bombard, crashed into a tree, sending shrapnel exploding everywhere. That did more damage than Harry had hoped and he nodded in satisfaction as six goblins and their wargs fell screaming or howling in agony from the bits of wood.

With the way now clear, Thorin and the others crashed their barrels up onto the rocks, scrambling out while Fili shouted at them to kick their barrels back into the river so they could use them again later. Dwalin immediately charged into goblin that had been flung out of the saddle by his warg, smashing him into the river then twirling his axe around to block a blow from another goblin with contemptuous ease. The next second the goblin’s sneering face disappeared into so much offal as his Hammer crashed into it from the side.

“Leave them, go for the grate!” Thorin shouted, knowing they couldn’t stay and fight here, not without being ground under by their enemy’s numbers or caught by the elves.

At his shout Gloin and Fili joined him, with Harry moving after him. Thorin hacked the legs out from under one goblin, and the next fell screaming to a arrow in the gullet while Harry paused, creating another shield over the river as his last dissipated under the hail of arrows still aimed towards the dwarves in the river. With Dwalin guarding their back the others clambered up the stairs set into the outer-side of the archway, with Thorin dueling with one goblins for a brief second before hacking him down.

Thorin then turned his attention to the grate but hissed as he realized the mechanism to lift it had been broken. That left only main strength and he reached down into the grate. “Dwalin up here!”

Dwalin switched places with Fili, who found himself pressed backward by two more goblins as they hacked and slashed at him while their wargs bit and lunged. He then flinched as arrows hissed toward him, only to blink as a portion of the stone stairs he was standing on shifted upwards into a wall. On the other side of the archway, Gloin too found himself pressed backward, but there didn’t seem to be as many archers any longer. Kili had been shooting them down in turn from where he now crouched, soaked to the bone but with his bow dry, Harry had no idea how, but he now crouched nearly hidden by the spraw of the water on the rocks below the arch, his eyes wild as he roared out, “Baruk Khazad! Khazad Ai Durin Nur!”

This was answered by the two dwarves on the grate as they heaved it up with all their might. “Khazad Ai Durin Nur!”

Gloin hissed as a warg nearly bit his head off, dodging at the last second to one side only to take a slice across his chest. His axe caught the warg and rider both, hacking through the goblin’s leg and into the warg’s side, and shoulder thrust with the wounded shoulder sent it crashing off the steps of the arch. But then he dropped to his knees, his free hand going up to the wound in his chest. It wasn’t deep, but it was intensely painful, and bleeding badly.

“Gloin GO!” Harry roared, leaping down the step with his sword out, a cutting spell taking the next attacker on that side, cutting him in half. He helped the wounded dwarf over the side of the arch where he stumbled down to where the others grabbed him, helping him through the wild packed scrum at the grate into one of the empty barrels. “Thorin, now would be a good time!”

“Shut up human, this cursed thing is heavy!” Dwalin bellowed back. Thorin didn’t reply though, simply redoubling his efforts to lift the grate.

So busy was Harry with his own enemies, using the Protego spell to help the others, and cutting down enemies at range he could, it took him a moment to realize he could help with the grate as well. When it did, he twisted his head just enough, to see the two dwarves had raised it enough so that he could see it sticking out of the top of the slit in the archway. Disengaging from the warg rider he had been dueling with – there being only room for one on the narrow archway, he pointed a finger between the two dwarves. “Wingardium Leviosa!”

The next instant both dwarves blinked in surprise as the weight nearly disappeared from the grate and it started to float upward. Thinking quickly, Thorin realized Harry must have done and he twisted around just in time to leap forward, deflecting a blow that would have taken his nephew in the side. Fili took advantage of this to kill the warg the goblin was riding on, before Thorin finished the goblin, shouting out, “Couldn’t you have done that sooner Harry?”

“It was guarding the others with shields or getting the grate Thorin,” Harry shouted as he retreated from two orcs who had just arrived. They had dismounted from their wargs and raced up the steps to challenge Harry and Dwalin.

Moving backward, Thorin pushed the grating, which had risen entirely out of it’s aperture, sending it floating on a diagonal away from them. There it seemed to lose the magic and crashed down as below them the other dwarves now tumbled through in a mass. Kili was the last one through and he had dropped his bow into his barrel and was holding onto one empty barrel with each hand as the river carried him through. “Thorin, Fili!”

The next second Fili Was leaping off the archway. His aim was good, and he actually landed directly into one of the barrels, making Kili shout in triumph. Dwalin wasn’t so accurate, and landed behind the barrel as the river carried them all off.

“Time we left Harry!” Thorin shouted as he slew a goblin before turning and, sheathing his sword, leaping out into the river, not even trying to aim towards one of the barrels.

With the orcs in front of him held back by another bit of transfigured arch for just a second, Harry retreated to the top and was about to leap after his friend when an arrow found his thigh, while another hit him high in his side. That one was barely a grazing blow, but the one in his thigh sunk deep, and he lost his balance as he paused for just a second to chop it off close to the skin with the sword of Gryffindor. He then toppled forward into the water.

A few seconds of bobbing later, Harry broke water and watched as another orc leaped up onto the archway a bow far larger than that of the goblins in his hand. He stared downriver at Harry as he pulled back on the bow, grinning toothily.

Instead of quailing or looking afraid, Harry simply snarled back and raised a hand. He was bleeding, he was battered, but despite his weariness, Harry wasn’t defenseless. The spell took the orc right in the center, cutting him in half and spreading his guts across archway and river.

Goblins on wargs once more appeared to pace the dwarves on either side of the river, their own bows notched. One of them fell from an arrow from behind Harry, and Harry recognized Kili’s arrow for a moment before he stared at the other orc, whose neck had been pierced from one side to another with another arrow.

Elves began to appear out of the woods, attacking the orcs and goblins, forcing them to turn.

One orc, larger and more built than the others, bellowed something, blowing on a horn. A second later, he broke off from the river and advancing elves, racing alongside the river and away.

Harry watched all this, then, his body had finally decided that he had lost enough blood. Harry felt his consciousness starting to flow away and used an Accio on his canoe, which had been left behind by the others to bob in their wake. He barely grabbed onto it before it sailed past him, but then he quickly used a sticking charm on himself, before with a last effort pull his upper body up onto the canoe, before his eyes started to close, and he knew no more.

Scene break

Tauriel pulled her dagger out of one orc, flipping it up and cleaning it on a passing piece of branch above her head, before sheathing it, grabbing up her bow once more to stare around her, as nearby Legolas and several others from the Unseen Host began to finish off their own enemies.

“More of them escaped, we should hunt them down!”

“We have no orders to do so,” Legolas shook his head. “Orcs and goblins attacking our people, killing elves within our own borders?” It’d been obvious to all of the scouts what had happened here, the guard on the Watergate having been slain by orcs, their places taken by goblins in an effort to ambush the dwarves and their wizard companion. The wizard had seemingly dealt with the grate, and then he and the dwarves were way.

Tauriel’s scowled, shaking her head. “They were after the dwarves. We follow them, we will find the orcs and discover why they feel so strong enough as to dare something like this.” *And perhaps discover that Harry’s hint about the darkness to the south was all too true.*

“You do not see the full picture,” Legolas sighed. “This,” he jabbed his fingers towards the dead bodies scattered around them, “is a symptom of something great, not just the dwarves and their troubles finding their way here. Now, we will return and report this. With this, perhaps my father will allow us to start cleansing the forest of the spider filth.” He snorted, pointing downriver. “Besides, we know where they will go, be easy enough to find a trail of.”

Tauriel nodded, understanding his point, but not happy about it, even if it would prove her earlier supposition. This emotion was reinforced a second later as Legolas looked at her sideways. “Nifaleen and Rasuldar spoke of how they found you during the dwarves’ escape. But what exactly did Harry…”

We will not speak of it,” she interrupted with a scowl, her fingers twitching. Legolas wisely backed off from that, then turned with Tauriel as one of the other scouts announced they had found a goblin still alive and able to answer questions.

Scene break

Well beyond behind the dwarves now, Bolg gathered what remained of his followers. They had been decimated both by the dwarves defense during the running battle and the ambush by the grate, and then the elves. But as the day wore on, more goblins began to gather, until, at around evening, he had gathered about thirty goblins and twenty orcs from a band of over a hundred. Still, it was enough to deal with the dwarves and capture the wizard for their Master.

“Lake-town,” he growled. “We will find them there.” He pointed at one goblin. “You. Head back to Dol Guldur, and tell the Great Master what has happened.” As the goblin gibbered and quailed at the very idea of speaking to the Great Master in person, Bolg turned back to the others. “We march now. I want us in Lake-town tonight.”

Scene break

Legolas stared down at the dead orc, then up at his king, while nearby, Tauriel narrowed her eyes. “You gave it to your word that you would release it?”

“I did. I released it from life.” Thranduil said, stalking to the table where a detailed map of his realm lay. “Besides which, it lied. It said things that could not possibly be true.”

“Harry, he spoke of it as well, the white Council’s fears that…”

“You will be silent!” The Elven king spat, turning his head to Tauriel. Then he seemed to calm down. “If true, the council is already getting ready to act. I will leave them to that. Beyond the borders of my realm, I care not for the doings of men, goblins, orcs or dwarves. They are gone, that is all. Redouble the watch on our borders. You have my leave to act against any spiders or orcs which enter our lands. If they think us weak, let us show them we are not.”

“And the dwarves? They could still rouse the dragon,” Legolas warned.

“The humans in Lake-town are pragmatic. They well know that their entire existence relies heavily on their trade with us. If the dwarves interact with them, we will soon know of it. But so long as they remain outside our territory, they are not our problems. They will need supplies and aid to chance the mountain, and we can make certain that such will not occur. For now, you have your orders.”

Tauriel’s eyes narrowed, but she bowed and left the royal pair quickly. She should have been eager to obey the king’s orders. After all, Tauriel had long been pushing for just such an action. But Tauriel felt that while it was the right move, he wasn’t doing it for the right reasons. *No, say it truly, Tauriel. You are worried about them. You are worried about Harry and the others. That goblin, he told us Harry had been struck by an arrow. And such things are often fowled beyond human understanding.*

She paused for a moment in a corner of the hall, for once torn by indecision. Then she nodded sharply and moved off. Picking up a quiver of arrows and a short sword from her room, she set off, leaving Thranduil’s halls and Taur-e-Ndaedelos behind her.

Later, as evening began to fall, Tauriel stood on the edge of the forest nearest Lake-town.

“Where are you going?”

She turned, raising her bow before the voice registered, then she sighed, letting the bowstring go slack. “You know perfectly well where I’m going. The dwarves and the wizard fascinate me.” She admitted. “I have finally found something more interesting than simply following orders and watching over our forests.”

“We were ordered to remain, to guard our borders. Is that not what you have wanted?”

“That is what I have been saying we should do. But now, I am uncertain about whether or not that is what **I** want. It was simply what had to be done.”

“Harry…” Legolas intoned slowly, annunciating the human name in common, the word standing out against their much more lyrical Elvish tongue. “He fascinates you, doesn’t he?”

“I am uncertain if it is Harry who fascinates me, or what he and the dwarves represents: the world beyond our borders. Whatever it is, for some reason, I wish to at least track them to Lake-town.”

“You would give up your position? You would disobey the king? You would leave me?” Legolas questioned rapid-fire.

“The King has rarely if ever heeded my advice as he should, given that position. If he had, perhaps the orcs would never have been able to gain entrance to our lands. And his recent action have torn at the foundations of my respect for him. As for your last point… Legolas, I like you. But you’re not my One.”

Legolas sighed, understanding her points, but thinking there was more to this rebellion than what she was admitting. “And is Harry?”

Tauriel’s head reared back, her eyes widening as if that was the first time that thought had occurred to her, which it was. But after a moment, she simply shrugged. “I do not know. But considering his magic, unless something kills him, the two of us will certainly have enough centuries to figure that out. Right now, I just wish to catch up to and slap Harry. Courting Harry was not on my mind.”

Legolas chuckled at that, then sighed. “I will travel with you. To Lake-town, no further. And if you think you will go up that mountain and face Smaug, Tauriel, you are wrong. I will knock you out and drag you back if I have to.” Tauriel scowled, but Legolas went on evenly. “Think about it. If the Dragon is still alive, and the dwarves and the wizard anger it, Smaug’s anger will not be assuaged merely by their deaths. It will seek out anyone or anything that has helped it. Our woods felt the sting of dragon-fire in the war against Morgoth. We cannot let that happen again.”

Tauriel scowl disappeared at that, and she nodded acquiescence. “That is acceptable.”

Agreement reached, the two expert Elven Rangers turned, and without a word raced on through the woods, tireless and surefooted as the wind passing through the trees.

**Scene break**

Harry woke up groaning as someone slaps something over the wound on his thigh, teeth gritted in pain. “Wha.. OOHHWWW, what the hells are you lot doing!?”

“You need to stop getting hurt Harry,” Thorin ordered, his tone light but his dark eyes worried as they peered down at Harry.

Harry looked up at Thorin, one eyebrow rising. “Tell the enemy to stop attacking me then.”

The other dwarves chuckled at that as Harry realized the wood underneath him was moving. Not a lot, bobbing was perhaps the word he thought, as he looked around at the dwarves, then over the side of what appeared to be a large barge of some kind. It was crudely made, but sturdy. In the center was a single mast, and at the front, a man was working the ropes until he had them right where he wanted them, after which he tied them off and turned his attention to a tiller.

“That wound looks bad,” the unknown man said, looking through the dwarves at Harry. “Still, I’m glad that the dwarves knew you were out there. I would not have been able to find with the mist as thick as it is.”

Harry nodded, then made of points to pat his pouch, which was still there, before asking, “Who are you?” forcing the words out through the pain of the thigh that the doctor was still examining.

“My name is Bard, Bard the Bowman. And occasionally, boatman,” the man replied, gesturing down to the barge.

Harry nodded, studying the man. He was not like the few other humans, those in Bree, that Harry had seen at up to this point. For one thing, he stood taller, his eyes and hair were darker, more akin to Harry’s. His shoulders were wide, his stance certain. This man was a fighter, whatever his name might indicate.

“So tell me,” the man went on looking back at Harry levelly, then around at the dwarves, “What brings a group of dwarves, and one human man, wounded mind you, to Long Lake? And that, coming down from the Elven lands in our barrels?”

Thorin opened his mouth, but Harry knew that he wasn’t the one to come up with a good lie on the spot, and they didn’t really know anything about the Lakemen other than the fact that they were allied with the elves in some fashion. “We were traveling and waylaid by orcs,” Harry shot out, grunting in a little in pain as Oin prodded his wound. “To try and get away with them, we ran into further trouble with the elves, and then when we finally were able to talk our way out of that, the orcs came back, forcing us to use the river and your barrels to escape, a bit of last-minute trickery. It has not been a pleasant time for us.”

“And where is your destination on this journey? Bard asked shrewdly.

“What businesses of that is yours?” Thorin interjected, his automatic defensiveness coming to the fore.

“Considering you are on my boat, good dwarf, and I would wager that none of you know the first thing about wind or sail, I would say that you would be best served to keep a civil tongue.”

“I’m getting sick and tired of people telling me they know better than I what I should do,” Thorin growled, but when Fili gripped his shoulder, causing him to wince, he sobered a little. Thorin, like Harry before him, had been horribly battered by the river.

Bilbo Nori spoke up then before the tension could get any worse. “Tell me, sir, has the dragon been seen in your lifetime?”

The man blinked at the apparent non-sequitur but shook his head. “No, it has not. There is a rumor that Smaug is dead, but I don’t believe such. Evil like that must be banished. It will not fade away on its own.

“You speak as if you saw its evil firsthand, and yet you say it has not been alive in your lifetime?” Nori inquired.

Bard scowled, looking away. For a moment, he was silent, almost long enough for Harry and the dwarves to think that he wouldn’t answer. And when he spoke, his voice was low, bitter and full of pain. “While it has been several generations since the fall of the Erebor and Dale, some memories do not fade as the generations do. And my family’s line has always had long memories.”

At those words Thorin blinked, then he moved closer, gesturing Balin to him as he made his way forward. “Look at him, Balin. Did you see it?”

Balin looked at the human male, not having done so before this, having been busier with his brother's injuries. Those were scrapes and bumps for the most part, although his arm had been wrenched somewhat badly by his needing to hang onto one of the barrels after the battle at the grate. While Harry had taken an arrow wound, everyone else had been battered from the journey down the river. But when the white-haired dwarf looked at the boatman, his eyes widened. “By the blood of Durin! He has the look of the last king of Dale to him!”

“Who are you to have seen the last king of Dale,” Bard questioned with a scowl. Then he seemed to subside, turning to look out over the lake. “Bah, what does it matter. There are no kings anymore. My line failed, the weapons of the dwarves we were gifted with failed. Dale burned. All that is left…” he turned away fully, twisting the ropes a little to shift the sail slightly. “Is Lake-town.”

“Perhaps, but what was destroyed can be rebuilt,” Thorin said firmly, although inwardly he was annoyed about the comment on his people’s weapons. They probably hadn’t even failed, really, they had just proven not up to the challenge of the dragon. “Dale was the friend of my people, our alliance made us both stronger. I would see that alliance restored!”

“Hah! I just said it, dwarf. Even if it has not been seen, Smaug still exists. Erebor is gone forever. And who are you to speak of alliances anyway? Twelve dwarves, a young being from a race I’ve never seen, and a human?”

“I am a hobbit good sir,” Bilbo bowed from the waist to their savior. “And as for the rest, I believe that Thorin can do whatever he sets his… mind… to…” Bilbo’s voice trailed off as he stared upwards. The fog had faded as they had talked, and now, the sky above them had cleared. This allowed the vista all around and above them to be seen.

The lake was massive. Harry couldn’t see the ends of it from where he was, not even where the stream had deposited himself and his companions in its watery embrace entered it. And yet, the entire lake was dominated by the shadow of the mountain. It rose, like a lonely sentinel set onto the land. Its sides were mixed green and stone, rising up to disappear into the clouds above, where the green faded and white began.

Harry had seen pictures back on Earth of various mountain ranges: the Appalachians, the Himalayas, and Mount Everest occasionally when he was over at Hermione’s, and she was in her ‘force Harry to have some common knowledge’ stage. And here on Arda, Harry had seen the Misty Mountains and had even hiked through them, at least to a certain point. But Harry had never seen the like of the Lonely Mountain. Only his semi-dream of Taniquetil came close to this sight.

As one, the dwarves turned and looked to where Harry and Bilbo were staring. The side conversations all fell silent as Thorin Balin and the others just stared, awe filling them. “The Lonely Mountain,” Thorin breathed. “Erebor, my home. My birthright!”

Bard let them have the moment, leaning on his tiller, slowing the boat for a moment, and letting the sale go slack, pink-hued in the light of the evening tide. Then he broke the silence.“I say again, who are you?”

Thorin looked at him, his face conflicted for a moment before he decided. “My name is Thorin Oakenshield, son of Thrain, son of Thror, last King under the mountain. I have returned to reclaim our ancient lands.”

Bard fell silent for a moment, staring at the King, then shook his head. “Madness. You cannot hope to kill Smaug, can you?”

“Madness and magic often go together,” Harry grunted. A second later, he was suddenly holding his sword, having pulled it out from the bottomless pouch. He handed the pouch over to Fili, who gleefully pulled some Lembas and handed it on to the others.

Bard stared, stunned, and Thorin decided to take advantage while he could. “Bombur, prove to this goodman that we are not destitute vagabonds with only our weapons to our name. We will pay for his help now, and whatever we can get in Lake-town.”

“Oh, of course!” Bombur grumbled. “Always you people are demanding more money for this, more money for that…”

“We haven’t asked you for anything since we wound up at Mr. Baggin's door!” Bofur scoffed. “Yes, you sponsored much of this companies material, but can you deny us anything now when we are so close?”

With a sigh, the fat dwarf wiggled, reached under his back to a hidden cummerbund tied so that it hid against the small of his back, and pulled out several dozen gold coins. He looked down at it, then sighed, just handing the cummerbund wallet entirely over to Bard. “Take it. Take it all. They’re right,” he mumbled lowly, turning his eyes skyward once more, something most of the dwarves had not yet stopped doing. “For that sight alone, I would pay.”

“You realize that if Smaug kills you all, it will surely come for Lake-town as well? You have made me complicit in madness!” Bard shot back weakly. More because of the conviction he saw in Thorin’s face than the money, though. Bard was not well off, his family’s old failure still dogging their steps. But he was not a man to value money highly.

“Yes, we have,” Harry replied dryly, but not without some compassion. “Welcome aboard.”

Bard’s eyes narrowed at him, then glanced down at the wound on his thigh. “Is that serious?” Bard wasn’t about to leave a wounded human man unattended despite his anger at being made to eat either be seen as an accomplice to these dwarves' actions or turn them into a man he despised. The master of Lake-town and Bard did not get along.

Harry shrugged. “I’ve taken worse.”

“And you’re showing no sign of fever either, which you should be,” Oin grumbled, staring at the arrowhead he had pulled out of Harry. The pain from that action had been what had woken Harry up. He rolled it on the leaf, watching the leaf intensely, and soon enough, portions of the leaf turned black. “This had poison on it. A very strong, very nasty poison that should already be working through you. But you’ve got no fever. Indeed, the poison is doing nothing to you.”

Harry chuckled, shaking his head. “Remember what is on my sword, my friend. The poison of that beast sunk deep into me at one point. I’d wager any a poison less than that will have no effect at all on me.”

“Poison? So you’re not just hoping that Smaug is dead? You actually have a plan?” Bard questioned, grasping at that.

“Oh, yes. We have a plan. I can’t say it’s been smooth sailing,” Thorin waited then for the cracks of laughter from his fellow dwarves, Harry and even Bilbo, to subside before going on. “But we do have a plan.

With a sigh, Bard let go of the tiller and sat across from the dwarves, looking at them steadily. “Your actions will endanger my home, my people. Convince me that that is the right thing to do that you actually have a plan that can deal with Smaug. Do that, and I will help you all I can.”

Looking around at the others, Thorin got nods of approval from Balin, Harry, Fili and Bilbo, while Dwalin, Gloin, and Bofur all shook their heads. The rest seemed undecided. Turning back, Thorin decided. “Very well. I will not tell you everything, but…”

The boat drifted for who knew how long as Bard posed question after question about the journey, about their dealings with the Elves, and above all, their plan to deal with Smaug. Poison might not be enough, after all. But Thorin had thought long and hard about this and had devised a way to trap Smaug and use some of the smelting equipment in the mountain against him.

Eventually, the plan convinced Bard. Or rather Thorin and the others did. The plan seemed to be too filled with unknowns for him, really. No, it was the people who were explaining the plan that sold Bard on it being viable. To have come through all the trials they had, to face the dangers of orcs, goblins and everything else, was a tale out of legend. It told of a group that would not be stopped, whatever they put their minds to. That and a few examples of Harry’s magic was enough. “Tell me what you want me to do?” **{not certain I like that line?}**

**End Chapter**

This chapter doesn’t cover nearly as much as I hoped, but I think it covers enough for now. This way, Lake-town and whatever happens there can be paired with more about Gandalf and the Council and Sauron. Then I’ll be able to devote an entire chapter to Smaug, as he deserves.

Anyway, hope you all liked this, and as always, please leave a review.