Ain’t named Tolkien or Rowling.

**Author’s Note:**

As everyone who reads my stories should know by now, I run a series of polls to determine which story will be updated in any given month. The choices here on fanfic are limited somewhat, but I routinely have two or more polls going on over on my pat r on page. This was the case this month: I had three polls going over there, two of which linked back together afterwards, with the two most popular choices being the two small stories I update here. I did this so that I could give some of my stories that are still technically active but which haven’t been updated in a while a shot in the arm. I am happy to say it worked.

With a staggering showing, Fate Touched won first place. It brought in 295 votes here on fanfic, letting it take second place and, once the pat r on votes were added in, took in a total of 1,527. This puts it far and away the winner.

In second place, by the narrowest of margins, is another story that hasn’t been updated in a long while: Anything Goes Game Changer. It brought in 176 votes via fanfic, with a total of 1184 votes.

Nipping at its heels was the first place winner here on fanfic, FILFy Teacher. It brought in a total of 1177. AGCC won by only 7 votes.

I thought FILFy would win and actually put in several days’ worth of work on it, but, the people spoke, and I had to listen. Then, too, AGCC is one of the two stories I can see ending sometime this year if it keeps winning.

In fourth place, with a decent showing, was Stallion of the Line with 962, 213 of which came from fanfic votes. Scoring an even 200 points here and bringing in a total of 874 was GDWHOM. Semblance just can’t seem to bring in enough votes here on fanfic to really contend without massive pat r on support: it only brought in 80 here and won a total of 500.

The other choices were for pat r on content which will remain a mystery unless you go and sign up LOL.

NOTE: I have used the words of both versions of the Goblin song and mixed them. I will not mark them out beyond underling them so as to avoid breaking the story flow.

This has been betaed by *Michael* and by *Nad Destroyer*. And with that on with the show!

**Chapter 6: Mountains Are Not As Solid as You Think**

Harry was in the center of the company, since he was still dealing with the exhaustion of having pulled an all-nighter, and an intensely emotional one at that. He was also going over in his mind what he had done with runic arrays the evening before and also about how Galadriel had guided him to open up. Even when he was away from her presence, the feeling of being near Galadriel, the power of her simple goodness, still lingered in Harry’s mind. Harry likened it to what he might feel if someone had cast a low powered Patronus right into his head.

The trail they were following was wide enough for two ponies to walk abreast, but it was somewhat steep, so it was slow going, slower than they’d ever moved before this. More than once Harry and the others had to lead their mounts, since even donkeys couldn't take the trail with riders on their backs. And, according to Elrond’s description of the trail that Thorin had relayed to the others, they all knew it would get tougher still.

At one point they stopped to feed their mounts, and Balin came over, bringing Oin and Dori with him. Dori held the sack that contained many of the runic stones which Harry had created the night before and had put on one of the other ponies. “So, lad,” Balin said, touching the sack with one hand and making a motion for the other dwarf to set it down. “You say these are runic arrays, and you have described some of the things you think they'll do. Is that all your runes can do?

“That was just a sample,” Harry said with a sigh. “Outside of direct offensive spells, specific ones like Bombarda or Reducto, runic arrays can do pretty much anything spells can, and for longer too in many cases. Setting them up takes time, however, and a lot of prior knowledge: Ancient Runes was one of the most work intensive classes I ever took.”

Oin nodded too, leaning on his mace-staff. It was an odd weapon, as long as a staff, but the head was that of a flanged mace, and Harry had seen him use it in the fight against the warg riders to devastating effect before they fell back into the shield wall defense. “Any undertaking worth doing is hard, laddie. And I imagine that if you get even one rune slightly wrong, you'll ruin the entire array? That was the way it worked for our own rune smiths.”

“Exactly,” Harry said with a nod. “The effects of such an array once powered up run the gamut from the bizarre to the dangerous.”

“How permanent are they?” Balin asked.

“That depends on what you want the array to do. These should last us for months if we’re careful with the rune stones and I make sure they are taking enough power from the world around them. If you wanted the runic array to, say, add toughness to something you're using in battle, then I'd be worried about it running out of magic or failing mid-battle. On the other hand, from what I remember, the runic arrays I put up around our camp after Thorin and I met didn't fade when the goblins came close to it.”

“Can they add the same defensive abilities you used on our line of battle against the orcs?”

“Mmm, some. The spell that made your shields as if they were extensions of the ground they can’t do. But I've also never worked with metal,” Harry said with a shrug. “I can't use magical fire to make the markings into the metal. The magic of the spell would interfere with magically charging the runes. That's why we use granite; it's about the least magically responsive stone in the world other than…” Harry frowned, clicking his fingers. “Some kind of black stone made in volcanoes… Can’t remember the name.”

“Basalt?” Balin supplied.

“Yes, that's it. But that stuff is hard to work with because it is fragile, and, if you're not careful, you'll crack the stone.”

“So you're saying you wouldn't be able to work with metal? That’s sad.”

“No, I said I wouldn't know how to. My rune carving set won’t work metal. I'd be willing to try once I find out what metal to make the carving stick from, but not with any of the armor we have now. We, after all, are going to need it,” Harry said dryly.

That naturally brought Harry's thoughts to the discussion he’d had with the White Council back in Rivendell. *I’ll talk to him about that and all of the implications about it when we set up camp.*

“I say it for the second time, I know, but we really must introduce you to our own rune-smiths, laddie,” said Balin with a cackle. “Seeing what you and they could come up with together would be astonishing, I think. Why, it could lead to a revival of the art among us!”

Harry nodded, sitting down on the ground and accepting a piece of hard tack and bread from one of the others. “Tell me about them. Thorin has told me some of the things they could do, but not a lot of details. Gandalf told me what he knew, but that was second hand at best.”

Balin said sighing sadly. “Yes, I imagine he wouldn't. For many, remembering the amazing things our rune-smiths did brings to mind the fact we’ve lost much of that knowledge since the fall of Khazad Dum. Erebor, our nation, we specialized in machinery, with only a few runic creations. Still, I'll tell you what I can.” He pulled out a pipe to smoke, smiling happily over at Harry as he forced his mind away from the bad memories of Erebor’s fall to think only of the good times.

“Khazad Dum was where our best rune-smiths lived until its fall. In Erebor we didn’t have nearly as many. But the crystal caverns that dotted the mountain here and there, ah, they were lit up, and mirrors were set up to reflect the light throughout the mountain. Our doors, they were a mechanical construction: massive, yards thick, made of metal and stone. But they were reinforced by runes too, which glowed as the lights hit them just so. A few forges, too, were reinforced by runes. I watched some of our rune-smiths at work many a time.”

Dwarves needed scant urging to talk about their deeds of hand and craft. Dori and Gloin came over and eagerly supplied their own memories of the many wonders they had seen both in Erebor and elsewhere in the Iron Hills and even, from Oin, elsewhere in other dwarven realms. As a merchant he had traveled between dwarven realms occasionally.

Thus time passed quickly until they were interrupted by Thorin’s shout. “Time to get moving. The scouts are coming back.”

Fili and Bofur had gone ahead of the rest of the party on foot to see what they could expect from the rest of the trail that day. “The going is tough but manageable, we think,” Fili reported to the group. “It gets even steeper and thinner as we go along. We'll have to watch our footing very carefully at a lot of places; the stone of this mountain isn’t the strongest.”

“Bah, shale,” Bifur, a miner, said, spitting to one side. “It infests this mountain despite the fact that these mountains have deep, strong roots to them.”

Thorin nodded. “With the high passes closed to us, this path is the only way over the mountains. Whatever we run into along the way, we must persevere.”

That was the crux of the matter. This trail wasn't really designed for most people to get over the mountains. That task had been that of the High Pass, part of the Great East Road, an actual road complete with large bridges over some of the crevasses and a gentle slope up and down the mountain. However, the main expanse of it was also very high into the mountains, as should be supposed by the name. And Elrond had warned them that it was being interdicted by the goblins of the mountains. Given how the company had been pursued by creatures under the command of the Azog, none of them were willing to chance the Pass.

“We can use it as far as we were able to go before having to turn back to report to you, uncle,” said Fili with a shrug. “Beyond that… Well, it’s not an easy going by any means. Still, you’re right.” The younger dwarf visibly threw back his shoulders and looked over at his brother and all the others. “This is the only way through, so we’ll see it done.”

“Good lad!” Thorin said, clapping the young dwarf on the shoulder. “Continue to lead the way Fili, Bofur. Kili, Dwalin, take up the rear.”

Their slow but steady progress continued for that rest of that day until darkness began to fall. Then they made camp, with Kili and Bilbo heading further ahead to see if they could hunt something up for dinner. Bilbo had been spending most of the journey to this point with Bifur and Nori, the most experienced mountain travelers among them, being warned of the dangers the mountains posed.

At the same time Harry went around setting up the defensive rune stones he had created, watched by the dwarves as they could from their own tasks, continually being asked questions by Balin and the others. Many of them were still a little bemused by how open Harry was with his craft, but their concern on that score (he was their friend, after all, and they didn’t want to see him taken advantage of) had faded sharply when Balin examined one of the stones he had created.

These stones were about the same sizes as two human hands pressed together and about two inches thick. The edges could be jagged or soft, which didn't seem to matter to their effect. Inscribed in each of them were intricate arrays of ten to fifteen interconnected sigils, not a one of which Balin recognized, causing the old dwarf to laugh. It was very obvious that not only did Harry know how to create runic arrays but the runes themselves came from an entirely different language than what the dwarves used.

There was also no sign of them being related to the elven written language, which was the same as the tongue they used in some of their magics. Balin had learned their written language when he was chancellor of Erebor and had to deal with the nearby (relatively) elves of Mirkwood.

Then again, elves very rarely worked in stone at all, so Balin hadn’t been worried about Harry using the Elvish runic language that much. There were tales of one ancient group that had, but they were long gone, swallowed up in the dark times of Morgoth’s wars. The elves who remained in Middle Earth worked almost exclusively with gems, silver, cloth, and, of course, wood, when they used runes at all rather than spells.

That night Harry asked Thorin to come and speak with him alone, moving away from the rest of the party, down the trail. Since there was no place to pull off the trail, the group had simply set up right there on the trail itself.

It wasn't that Harry agreed with the Council about how they needed to be aware of treachery, he trusted the dwarves of the company enough to keep anything he asked them to themselves. But frankly they all had enough on their plates as it was; worrying about the distant future was something that should be left to the leaders. In this case, Thorin.

“What is it, Harry?” Thorin asked.

“You haven't asked about the meeting between me, Gandalf, and Elrond back there,” Harry said with a sigh. “I'm glad you haven't, but there are some things you need to be aware of.”

“So this is a serious discussion,” Thorin grunted, moving over to sit on a nearby boulder, leaning his back against the side of the mountain. Here the trail wound between large protrusions of stone that jutted out of the mountain, almost cutting off the view of the trail both back down the mountain and forward. Once past this point, however, Fili and the other scout reported they would have perhaps a morning's worth of somewhat calm going before it became even steeper.

“Let me warn you before we begin, only Gandalf and I felt you should be told this. The others, they were concerned about you telling anyone else and that it would worry you unduly, telling you about things you could not influence. It involves that weapon that Radagast showed us and what it implies. If you don't want to know about it, if you just want to concentrate on our current mission, I’ll understand.”

But Thorin quickly shook his head, staring at Harry intently. “Tell me,” he almost ordered. “If it is something that will eventually threaten my people, I have a right, no, a **need** to know. Such is the burden of kingship.”

“First, two other powerful people were there. First was another wizard, named Saruman. He seemed to be the organizer of the group. The other, the other was Lady Galadriel of Lothlorien. Have you heard of her?”

Thorin snorted, shaking his head. “Lad, I didn’t leave my mother’s hearth yesterday. Of course I’ve heard of the Lady of the Woods. Though hearing that she left her realm for this, that is worrying. Now, tell me the rest!”

The orcs are on the move in the north, around Mount Gundabad, in the Grey Mountains,” Harry said bluntly. “Gandalf was concerned long before that information reached Rivendell, but combined with the sword…”

From there Harry described as much of the discussion last night as was pertinent for Thorin to know. He had to stop at one point as he explained how Elrond had learned about the orcs being on the move, putting it together with what Harry and Thorin had heard about Azog still being alive after they met.

At that Thorin stood up and began to pace along the trail, cursing luridly in Khuzdul as he made the connection between Azog and the returning darkness. Harry made a note of some of those curses; they were quite colorful when Thorin cursed the Necromancer. Though he didn’t think they would scan very well when translated into Common. *Pity, that.*

Eventually Thorin wound down and turned back to Harry. “How much more dangerous will this make our journey?”

“Very dangerous while we’re in the mountains, but, then again, we already knew that. Hopefully not so much once we leave Mirkwood behind, but, again, we knew some of the dangers we might face in Mirkwood already.”

“But after that, after that we will face threats on the road all the way to the mountain. And even after we reclaim Erebor I will have to be prepared to defend my mountain almost immediately, won't I?” Thorin said tiredly. “Our return to the Lonely Mountain will be marked, and I am not so foolish as to assume that the Great Enemy, should this Necromancer indeed prove such, would be without spies in the region. Especially if he is trying to recruit Smaug, if the dragon is indeed still alive.”

Thorin looked sharply at Harry at that point. “So, it was not just friendship that convinced Gandalf to aid us. The dragon… If Smaug could be controlled he would become the most dangerous weapon in all Middle Earth. What city or nation could stand against him in this Age of the world?”

“Exactly,” Harry said with a sigh. “I'm sorry; I should've told you earlier, but I was still dealing with my own personal issues, frankly, and I couldn't really concentrate on the bigger picture even after I started work on my rune stones.”

Thorin waved that off. “You told me eventually. However, I think I need to ask you to help us on our journey further. As you said, crossing the Misty Mountains is one of the most dangerous portions of the journey. We must push through as quickly as possible. Can you silence us all that long?”

“No,” Harry said with a shake of his head. “Oh, I can silence the harnesses of the ponies, the jingle of armor, even our voices so long as we remain somewhat quiet: no shouting from one end of the column to the other, for example. But I can't do anything to silence our passage entirely. Watch.”

He stood up, and moved away from Thorin, gesturing down to his feet, where there was a brief movement of air. “I just cast a spell that should silence the movement of my feet, but…”

He moved away, and for a moment Thorin didn't understand why Harry said it wasn’t working. Then he heard the noise of stones against stones, and realized that the trail was just too rocky for that kind of spell to work. Oh, Harry's actual footsteps were silenced, but each step caused a slight cascade of rocks, and, after a certain point, that cascade of sound still came through to Thorin's senses.

“Further, silencing spells like that are tougher the more noise the individual you're using them on makes. I could silence one or two of us with barely any effort. Yourself and some of the more heavily armed dwarves like Dwalin? That would take a bit more.

“However, I can use a spell to give whoever is on night watch the eyes of an owl, though I would recommend they go around the next day with their eyes covered for a bit to get over it. That spell is painful if you overuse it. Then there is my Feather Weight spell.”

“Featherweight?” Thorin asked. “It sounds like somethings humans would say of one who could not hold their drink.”

“True, but it is a spell to lighten the weight of anything. I haven’t been using it before this because there was no need, and because if you get used to something feeling as if it has no weight you forget that the weight is still there in terms of momentum,” Harry replied.

Dwarves were supposed to make light of hardship, and normally Thorin would've rejected any idea of lightening their burdens out of hand as unnecessary frippery. But right now speed and stealth were their greatest defenses, and he couldn't afford to look a gift horse in the mouth regardless of where it came from. “Very well,” he said, gesturing for Harry to join him and moving back towards the camp. “I’ll warn the others we’re going to start setting a faster pace. Tomorrow morning we’ll push on as hard as possible.”

**OOOOOOO**

As Harry and company were settling down that night, Galadriel was leaving Rivendell, traveling unseen by any as she moved southward around the Misty Mountains toward her home. She traveled on a white horse. It was a small horse but perfectly proportioned, with intelligence to its eyes that belied its breed, and no sign of shoe, saddle, or bridle could be seen.

The horse knew the way back home as well as Galadriel, and with her magic surrounding them both they would pass unseen by any mortal eyes for good or ill. This let the ancient Elven Queen to allow her thoughts to travel back to the discussion from the night before and young Harry. She smiled as she contemplated the young wizard as well as the feeling of the world around her. Elrond might still have doubts. Saruman certainly did. But Galadriel knew that Harry had been allowed into this world on purpose.

As she moved, she gently reached up to touch this or that tree bough, the woods around her beginning to reverberate with the feeling of her presence as she began to hum under her breath, the magic potential of the world gathering at this light touch. *The Ainulindalë*, she thought, thinking back to that most ancient and powerful of magics, which was long before even her time, of course, and that of her race entirely. The world had been sung into being by Eru Ilúvatar and the Ainur. But Melkor had corrupted the world from the very beginning. Evil itself had been built into the world at that moment, bringing with it sadness, madness, and conflict.

*And yet, and yet... From the great Void between worlds Harry Potter has been allowed to enter here by the Ainur. I can sense their touch in this, even if it is subtle, and Harry himself does not know their names or glories. A foreign note, perhaps added to the song of the world to offset the sour notes that Melkor left behind, which linger even now when he is personally trapped in the Void. A song of goodness and change.*

*That is,* Galadriel thought, her feelings turning somber as they were wont to at times as she contemplated the passing of the ages, *if he survives the trials ahead*. She turned to look towards the Misty Mountains, her thoughts going out towards Harry, though she did not send her mind out to find him. Not yet. There would be time for them to speak in that manner in the future. *Remember my offer, young one,* she thought. *Return alive to me at my own halls, and we can finish what we began back in Rivendell.*

Continuing on through the woods, Galadriel’s thoughts turned to another much loved wanderer and the others who had been part of the discussion last night. “Kind, courageous Gandalf,” she thought with a laugh, the sound sending the nearby trees to shivering in delight. *And yet you too are all too eager to throw yourself into danger, much like Harry. My message to you will be as simple as mine to him. Come back to us. No amount of information is worth the loss of one whose light is so bright.* *Grateful am I that Elrond will be watching his progress from a distance.*

She shook her head with something approaching amusement as she contemplated her son-in-law. Galadriel herself had been deeply wounded by the death of her daughter and the torture she had been put through by the orcs. But Elrond had borne through that well enough. Yet later Elrond had been deeply hurt after the last war of Elves and Men against Sauron. He saw what occurred afterwards with Isildur as a betrayal of the alliance between their species.

*Still, he did recently allow one of Dúnedain to enter his house and live there for a time. That speaks well of him, and while Elrond is still somewhat skeptical of humanity and dwarves, he is willing to be proven wrong. That is enough.*

*The same cannot be said about Saruman*, she thought, a frown crossing her features. She had always liked Saruman—not as much as Gandalf, but she respected the White Wizard. His deeds of hand and mind were such that even Galadriel was impressed, and his councel had always been intelligent and accurate.

But there was something…off…about Saruman of late. It was not apparent when she was in his presence, but it began to niggle at her mind whenever Galadriel left him. Something had changed within the Valar-turned-Wizard. His arrogance was becoming stronger, as was his pride.

*Perhaps it was wrong of us to choose him to head the White Council. That sort of thing could go to anyone's head, mortal or immortal. And he does not wander as much as Gandalf. Losing the common touch is another aspect, I feel.*

*Still, he is still willing to do what he has to and cares for us all in his own haughty way. Glad I am that he was willing to volunteer to go and create a circle of watch around Moria. Between the three of them, I feel….*

Galadriel paused, frowning, because even with all three of them on the job she felt worried suddenly. Very, very worried. She gently tapped her horse on the back of the head, causing it to halt as she turned around, staring all around her. She reached out past the impact of her own passage through the woods, touching the pulse of Arda and frowning slightly. Then Galadriel leaned forward and whispered in her horse’s ear, turning it slightly eastward off of the trail that they had previously been following. Her destination had just changed.

**OOOOOOO**

Two days hard travel found Thorin and his people having made fantastic progress through the mountains. With all of them able to sleep at night thanks to Harry's runes and with his spells during the day aiding the ponies and dwarves, they had made fantastic time. Nori estimated they are almost at the halfway point, the trail they were following almost becoming level at times, despite the fact that it was getting thinner and thinner and far more treacherous.

The third day out from Rivendell, however, their luck in terms of weather changed to horrible. The dwarves were all woken up from their bedrolls by the peal of thunder overhead, and large rain pellets began to fall out of the morning sky.

Thorin jumped up, shouting orders immediately. “Secure our gear! Make certain the tents are under cover! We need to push on quickly; we can’t just stay here and get drenched.”

Bilbo quickly leaped to his feet in turn, racing around and helping the dwarves, none of whom were very quick to rise in the morning unless there was some immediate danger. Harry did much the same, exchanging a wry smile with his small friend. The two of them hadn't had much time to talk since they had begun their push through the mountains, the pace that Thorin had set leaving both human and hobbit without breath at times to talk. *Whoever thought dwarves were slow never really understood the idea of strategic speed over tactical,* Harry thought rather wryly.

About an hour later the rain was coming down in sheets, soaking through their raincoats, many of which had been replaced in Rivendell by elven work. That kept them relatively dry underneath, but made them no less miserable for all that, and the ponies were becoming more fractious as the day wore on. They weren’t goats, after all; they were not at home on a trail like this, which was both steep and dangerous at this point.

Then the trail became even more dangerous. Fili turned back from where he had been scouting ahead, coming back down and shouting over the noise of the ongoing storm, his words interspersed by the thunder of thunderclaps and the flashes of lightning lighting up the sky from every direction. “The trail narrows even further! It’s barely a trail at all from here on, and it winds around the mountain side rather than directly up it.”

Scowling, Thorin ordered the party to a halt, then ordered each dwarf to grab what he could from the ponies. They would have enough trouble with the rambunctious animals without needing to face the danger of losing their equipment.

Seconds later there was a booming crash from on high, forcing all of them to turn in that direction. Lightning from high above them had caused a landslide, and they could see dozens, hundreds of rocks of various sizes hurtling down the mountain towards them.

Harry quickly raised his hands, pushing outward with them towards the oncoming rocks. “Protego!” he shouted. Instantly the shield of energy appeared above the party, spreading out quickly from the point of origin directly above Harry. Normally the shield would have been invisible, but it became visible, and soon it looked more like a shelf of energy was holding the boulders above their head, directing the landslide out into space to one side.

Some of the boulders still got through, however, before Harry’s spell could spread enough to cover the entire company. One smashed two of the ponies off the side of the mountain with whinnies of pain and despair.

Kili, Gloin, and Bombur were also struck by fist sized stones, having pressed themselves against the mountainside to avoid some of the larger ones. They were able to retain their footing or, in Bombur’s case, roll into a ball, taking the stones on the back of their armor.

Bilbo also was struck in the shoulder and was nearly smashed off the trail entirely. Nori, however, saw that and grabbed him. But he in turn began to lose his footing. Worse, none of the others were close enough to help, separated from the two of them by one of the ponies, all of which were pressing against the mountainside in turn, their eyes wide.

Thinking quickly, Bilbo reached down to his belt buckle. “Oh, this is such a bad idea!” Despite his own words Bilbo pulled his belt out, flipping it to one side around an outcropping of rock below him and pulling it tight. “Rescue me when you can!” he shouted, then let go of Nori’s hand to swing there, using the outcropping as cover.

This allowed Nori to regain his own footing, and Bilbo simply hung there for a few moments as the rest of the party got the chaos above him under control. “Master thief, you are certainly braver than anyone your size should be,” Nori shouted over the sound of the rain.

“I’ll agree to that, but I think I can make his ascent far less fraught than his descent.” With that Harry waved a hand towards Bilbo, gently pulling him up towards him with a simple Wingardium Leviosa.

Nori smiled at the hobbit, clapping him on the shoulder. “That truly was fast thinking, my friend! A pity none of us could think fast enough to save those ponies.”

“Let me try something,” Harry said, leaning over the side of the trail to stare down the mountain where the ponies and, more importantly, the packs had disappeared. Holding his hand out, Harry intoned the same spell that he had used to pull Bilbo back up onto the path. He then tried an Accio, thinking that it would have a longer range.

But after a few moments it was obvious that nothing responded. “They must be stuck somehow down there,” he said shaking his head, shouting to be heard over the sound of the storm. “Maybe underneath the ponies? I could try to lift one of them up.”

“What did we lose?” Thorin asked from his position near the front of the column. Like too many of the others, he had been unable to help, given the ponies in the way.

“One of those ponies was carrying the majority of your rune stones, Harry, and that carving set you were using to create them,” Balin said after taking stock, wincing.

“Dammit,”" Harry muttered, turning back to the crevice as he held his hands out once more and used Accio. He tried different words—runic stones, rune carving kit—but nothing worked, and Harry had to turn his attention back to the ongoing fall of rocks above them, renewing his shield spell. “Dammit!”

“Forget them,” Thorin ordered, gesturing for them to get moving along the trail. “We move on.”

“Thorin, we have to get out of this storm somehow!” shouted Balin. “It was only because of Harry that we didn't lose any lives with that avalanche, and it's only a matter of time before we run into another”.

“Agreed,” Thorin said, turning back to his nephew. “Lead on, Fili! Try to find a cave or something to get us out of this weather.”

“A thought,” Bilbo said suddenly. He slowly wound through the ponies, able to duck underneath them far more easily than the dwarves could. Pulling out ropes, he began to tie the dwarves together, the ropes winding underneath the ponies.

Bifur slapped both hands to his forehead, growling, “How did I not think of that?!”

Each group of four tied themselves to one another, with Harry and Bifur the only two remaining free, bar Fili, who was now out of sight, up the trail. On Thorin’s orders Bifur moved to join Fili, tying himself to the scout and moving on with him as rapidly as possible.

In this manner they were able to push along the arduous path despite the rain and the weather threatening to pull them off the trail into the air beyond. Three times more they had to deal with avalanches, but Harry's spells protected them each time, though he could feel the drain on his magic as they went.

Using a protective spell against an avalanche like this was the equivalent of creating a shelf out of your mind and then standing still, holding it up in the air as someone else began to pile things on it. In other words, it was quite tough. By the time Fili finally reported that he had found them a suitable cave, Harry was just about ready to collapse.

“Where is it, Fili?” Thorin shouted.

“Around this next bend! We’ll have to climb up a small ledge, but it's there!” the younger dwarf shouted, staring worriedly at Harry over his uncle’s head. The taller human’s face was visibly pale.

“Can we get the ponies over the ledge?” Thorin asked.

“If we have to,” Dori replied before Fili could.

“I can knock them out; make them deadweight if I need to,” Harry said.

Dwalin laughed, holding up a fist. “You think we’d need much help if we want to put these fool animals out?”

Harry chuckled wanly at that one, and the party continued up towards the cave.

Soon enough they were at the cave, which was actually a greater find than Harry had anticipated they would be able to find on this trail. It was quite large inside, large enough for the entire party to enter and actually spread out comfortably. It was also dry away from the entrance, which was a blessing after the day’s weather.

Harry moved through the cave to sit against one wall, staring around him as two of the dwarves started a fire in the center of the cave, and the others worked to get the last pack mules up over the ledge into the cave. Surprisingly, only three of those mules had been knocked out and carried over like that; the others seemed smart enough not to make a fuss, as they were lifted into what looked like shelter away from the weather. But again, Harry’s Featherweight spell was proving its worth, and the work was proceeding quickly.

“Bilbo, could you do me a favor?” Harry asked thoughtfully, looking around the cave.

“As I am a relatively useless in helping with the pack mules, I would do so gladly,” Bilbo said from the side. “It's either that or help with the cooking, and the cook threatened to cook me the last time I thought to aid there beyond providing game for the pot.”

Harry smiled at that, then gestured around the cave. “Could you take a look around? It might just be paranoia, but this cave, it's almost too good a find.”

“I'll look around, but I think you're just jumping at shadows,” Bilbo said, pushing himself to his feet and undoing the clasp on his drenched cloak, letting it fall to one side. He picked up one of the sticks of wood which had been used to light the fire and began to move around the cave, looking for anything out of the ordinary. There were some signs of someone else having used the cave, but, given its place on the trail, that wasn't unusual.

So Bilbo returned and reported to Harry, who had moved over to help with the fire and the cooking. Once Bilbo finished his report, Harry struck up a conversation with the hobbit about gardening, of all things. Most of the conversation went over the dwarves’ heads, but Harry and Bilbo soon became immersed in it.

“You know a lot about gardening, but nothing about farming. That is a very odd combination,” Bilbo said with a chuckle. “Especially from a Manling. I’ve always understood that gardens for the sake of beauty were seen more as a feminine thing among you tall folk.”

Harry shrugged. “Like cooking, I tried to use gardening as an escape from my hellish relatives.”

“Relatives, not family?”

“Relatives. I never call them family,” Harry said bluntly.

That told Bilbo enough, and he dropped the subject. Instead, he began to weave a tale about his own family and his adventures as a youth, including the first few times he had snuck up on fellow hobbits. “Among my people it was almost a rite of passage, stealing mushrooms from any nearby farms. My people love those as much as humans tend to love meat or gold.”

With Bilbo telling tales and generally trying to make light of their current situation, the dwarves, exhausted to a man, slowly began to drift off to sleep as the storm continued to rage outside. The crashing and blasting noises of numerous small avalanches roused a few of them from their sleep occasionally, but, for the most part, they slept through it all.

Soon enough Harry and Bilbo were the only ones awake, and they voluntarily decided to split the night’s watch between themselves. Bilbo even brought out his little elven short sword. They had been told that it and Orcrist, Thorin’s sword, would glow in the presence of enemies.

For his part, with the loss of most of his runic arrays, Harry was left with only a few, which he had already set up around the entrance to the cave, just in case. But even so, it was better to be safe than sorry, and, despite his own mental fatigue, Harry was determined to see the night through.

**OOOOOOO**

That same night saw Gandalf setting off into the mountains on his own, intent on catching up to Thorin’s company. “Are you sure you cannot wait until the storm passes?” Elrond asked, looking up as Gandalf did the same, staring up into the mountains as the storm raged. Though it was kept away by the magics woven into the valley, they could both sense it out there.

“I sense that Thorin and his fellows are already too far ahead of me as it is. I will need to press hard to catch up to them soon or run the risk of not meeting them before this side of Mirkwood,” Gandalf said, shaking his head wryly. “I suspect Harry’s influence there, or can you say you have not felt him using those spells of his?”

“They do seem to make a splash on the tone of Arda,” Elrond said with a faint smile. He hadn’t particularly enjoyed being the butt of Harry Potter’s odd sense of humor, but the magic he had on call was most intriguing.

Gandalf nodded. “They do that, though I have found that it is almost impossible to correctly guess the intent of the spell unless you are seeing its effect first hand.” With that he abruptly changed the subject, turning from the vista beyond the balcony where they were standing to stare directly at Elrond now rather than out into the mountains. “Your sons returned this afternoon did they not?”

“They did, and they brought many of the Dúnedain. I will use them to send them out to the various dwarvish and human nations, warning them of the growing threats of the orcs. I’ll have to be vague since we can't give away any of our own plans, but that will be enough for many of them. Especially Gondor. They will need to redouble the watch on the old borders. At the same time my sons will take groups of my warriors to interdict the orcs around Gundabad. We need to halt any attempts at communication between the disparate orc and goblin nations.”

Saruman had already left, of course, to create a magical watch over Moria. Given the Nameless Doom within, one of the Wise had to be involved in that for now, just in case it was stirring, since the upstart darkness, Sauron, who was but a shadow of the Greater Darkness, was stirring too.

“Good,” Gandalf said, gesturing once more into the mountain range above them, his eyes dark and grim. “For that is not the only storm brewing.” He held up his hand and Elrond responded, the two of them saying goodbye in the elven fashion. “Farewell, my friend. Until we meet again.”

Without another word, Gandalf turned and exited the balcony. Moments later Elrond saw him marching off in pursuit of the dwarves, his legs carrying him as fast as a trotting horse. No pack was on his back, no pouch at his side. The only things he carried were the staff in his hand and his sword at his waist. He looked almost like a wandering vagabond but for that last touch, and Elrond smiled seeing him move so.

That smile didn’t last long, however, as he turned to the southeast and then the north, still wondering where the true strength of their enemy lay. *Why do I think we will not learn the truth of that until it is too late?*

**OOOOOOO**

True to his internal promise, Harry remained awake throughout the night, leaning against the wall of the cave. Bilbo was curled up next to him in his sleeping bag, a gift from the elves, his small elven blade laid out between them in its sheath.

Despite that there didn’t seem to be any danger. The rune stones by the entrance seemed to be keeping back anything dangerous. Indeed, Harry was just about to nod off when the short sword began to glow. Harry's eyes widened, for a moment unable to register what was going on, he was so tired. But then his eyes flicked over to his rune stones, which were still there, and then around the cave. There didn’t seem to be any threat, but the glow of the sword was getting brighter as he looked at it.

Turning away, Harry leaped to his feet, kicking Bilbo with one foot as he shouted out, “Danger! Everyone up and armed!”

Dwarves rouse themselves slowly, but the shout did its work for Bilbo, who quickly grabbed up his elven blade, looking at its glowing surface owlishly. “The elven blade is glowing; there must be orcs or goblins about!” he added to Harry’s shout, grabbing his bow and slinging his quiver over his shoulder as he moved toward the entrance.

At the use of those hated races’ names, the dwarves roused themselves swiftly, grabbing weapons always close to hand, donning their armor, and moving into a circle to join Bilbo and Harry at the entrance. “Where are they?” Thorin growled, staring at his own blade which had begun to glow as well. “What is the range from which these Elvish blades can sense the enemy?”

“I don't know, and I don’t know,” Harry muttered. The sword of Gryffindor was at his side, not yet unsheathed, his other hand twitching occasionally as he thought about what spells to use. *Perhaps a cast Lumos to give us better light?* Casting a spell like Lumos meant you flung the spell, which would normally simply light up the tip of your wand. Since Harry no longer had a wand, this was about the only way he could cast the spell anyway.

They were all still staring out into the darkness beyond the cave mouth when the floor of the cave underneath them suddenly gave out as if a trapdoor had opened. None of them could do more than squawk in shock before they were falling into the darkness below, dwarves, human, hobbit, and ponies all. An instant later the trapdoor clicked shut above them, making it seem as if the cavern had never been disturbed.

The floor underneath was not solid stone as they had all thought, but a long tunneled shaft, heading downward at a steep angle like a water park’s thrill ride. Only the edges of this shaft weren’t smooth, there was no water, and normally park goers were not tossed into a scrum with several dwarves and ponies that were yelling, kicking, and generally flailing about.

Harry’s head slammed into a hard dwarven shoulder as the screams of the ponies and dwarves mingled in his ears, a kick from another dwarf nearly catching him in the unmentionables as he fell. Despite all the distractions, however, Harry was able to thrust out his hands to either side and concentrate on the image of what he wanted to do as he gathered his magic, shouting, “Arresto Momentum!”

Being heavier, the ponies had been falling fast ,and they fell out of the spell’s reach before he could cast it. The dwarves and Harry, on the other hand, slowed down almost entirely. “Get ourselves organized,” Harry shouted over the sound of the still cursing dwarves, many of them having lost their weapons mid-tumble. Only three of them had retained their weapons: Thorin, Dwalin, and Bilbo, of all people. He had lost his bow but retained his grip on the elven blade.

Harry, however, had a solution for that too and pointed downwards, shouting out the same spell he had used to try and regather their lost packs after the first avalanche. The effort of keeping two active spells was draining, especially after having had no rest, but Harry managed. “Accio dwarfish weapons!”

Several of the weapons moved back toward them from below in the dark tunnel, and the dwarves began to arm themselves. Though not all of them. Some of the weapons hadn’t returned with Harry’s spell. *Huh. Could Accio have a limited range on this world? Well, one that is far shorter than the one it had in my own world, anyway.* There the spell could reach out for over a mile, but no more than two. Here, it seemed its range was far less for some reason. *More of the magic of the world fighting against the effect of the spell?*

“It must be goblins down there,” Thorin said, growling angrily. “Among the evil races only they have such a way with stone and contraptions.”

Balin nodded, though he was not looking happy, his weapon having been among those permanently lost to the drop. “Our own people could devise something like this easily enough, but what would be the point? A door to guard the entrance to the cave, aye, but a trap underneath the cave? The entire setting was simply a trap to catch the unwary.”

“Agreed. Harry, can you levitate us up back the way we came?”

“Maybe,” Harry grunted, shaking his head as the strain of the spell on top of yesterday’s exertions once more began to tell. “But I couldn’t get us through the stone at the same time. I had trouble casting a noncombat spell a second ago, and I doubt I could get through the stone without letting you drop or causing blow back.”

“If we cannot go back the way we came in, we needs must go down,” Thorin said decisively. “They may be ready for us down below, but let us face them with steel in our hands and courage in our hearts and see if they are ready for prepared warriors instead of shocked travelers.”

Down below in what the goblins laughingly called their ‘receiving area,’ a group of a hundred or so goblins stood atop a long wooden contrivance that held at its end what looked like a net-like bowl of some kind. It was built across a large chasm in the stone of the mountain, which ran down into darkness well below what anyone could see.

Several dozen more goblins had already carried off the dead ponies, the fall having snapped their necks and legs. The meat would make fine eating, but those who remained were confused. They had expected to get both animals and owners in one group, but they haven't. For some reason they had only gotten the ponies. But that left the owners. It was taking so long that the goblin’s song they had been singing in exultation of new prey had stumbled to a halt as the gathered goblins began to realize something was wrong.

“It's not like they could go back up der slide, yea?” asked one of the stupider goblins.

“Hah! An ’ow you suppose they do that, then?” said one of the others, cackling. “Fly?”

“Elven magic, mayhap?” said a third.

“Bah! We'd never have even captured a pointy ears in the first place. Do you know the last time one of those pointy eared fools was stupid enough to get caught by such as us? Besides, elves don't use ponies,” said another one, slightly taller and better built than the other goblins.

Just then there was a clattering noise from above, and a few of the other goblins stared up, one of them even remarking, “Well, here they come at last!”

“Maybe someone had some rope and tied it off to something?” speculated one of the others, still chewing at the whole not arriving with the ponies thing.

The goblins nearby slapped the questioner roughly, shouting about how it didn't matter now and to get ready. But none of them could be ready for what happened next. There was a shout from above them and a flash of something slamming into them. Twenty goblins were turned into so much mush as they exploded away from the point of impact, and then the owners of the ponies fell down into the horde of goblins.

That was, at least, what it looked like to Harry. Harry’s spells had blown open holes in their mass as the rest of Thorin’s company felt down into them. A quick Petrificus Totalus spell followed, impacting the rope net and giving them solid footing to fall on, but also giving the goblins solid footing.

Better, the dwarves were armed and ready for the impact; the goblins were not. Several of them were felled before the rest got over there shock and began to pile in. Harry personally dealt with four of them with his sword, trying to clear the area around him enough to concentrate on more spellwork while also mindful to not nick his fellows, but he couldn't. There were just too many goblins.

Strangely, the goblins generally ignored the dwarves’ weapons, grabbing at arms legs or anything else and simply piling in more and more trying to confine the interlopers. Soon only a few dwarves at the far end could move, and not even them for very long as more goblins piled on them from every direction.

From along the causeway they charged forward, going weapon to weapon with the dwarves who could still move before they could turn to help their fellows. From up over the edge of this odd contraption they had been dropped into the goblins climbed, throwing more nets over the entire group and obstructing their movement. They were soon pressed so tightly that Harry was forced to sheathe his sword lest he poison the nearest dwarf, who happened to be Oin.

The only one who could still move was Bilbo, who had fallen to the back of the net-like contraption. From there Bilbo stabbed a few goblins in the back, hacking at one after another as he balanced on the edge.

Harry, still constrained on all sides, could no longer even use any spells for fear of harming his friends. They were just too close! He was, however, still the tallest one there and was able to watch as Bilbo tried to kill enough of the goblins along the side of the fight to free up his friends. But it didn't work, as goblins were pouring down the causeway towards them with nets and ropes.

As Harry watched, Bilbo's good luck ran out. A goblin had crawled up from the underside of the capture net, pouncing on Bilbo.

Before Bilbo could regain his balance, the goblin had him by the leg. Desperately Bilbo kicked out, catching the goblin in the face but only succeeding in forcing the creature to let go with its other hand to paw at its battered face, releasing its grip on the underside of the net. The sudden weight of the goblin pulled Bilbo off the edge of the net into the dark below.

“No!” Harry shouted aloud, trying to force his magic to push the rest of the pile away from him in order to get free and try to get to Bilbo. It worked for a brief second before more goblins piled in again, blocking him from seeing Bilbo's continued descent. A second later iron clamps slammed down onto his wrist as a few of the goblins began to tie them up, one after another, as they all began to sing. “No…”

**OOOOOOO**

Bilbo fell through the crevasse hidden under the mountain’s harsh exterior, falling away from the light of the goblin-infested areas above and his friends both. But this was not a gentle if terrifying passage through the air. His fall was a painful one interspersed with smashing into, falling along, hitting, and then bouncing off rocky protrusions and pieces of heavily angled stone. The goblin whose dead weight had dragged him off the contraption above was smashed free of his leg. He could feel the arrows in his quiver shatter under the repeated blows before it was torn entirely off his body. His clothing, the sturdy, well-made clothing which had seen him through the journey up to this point, was soon shredded, and he was bleeding and bruised, his teeth gritted and his hands white on the hilt of his elven blade as he held the flat of it against his body. And still he fell.

Eventually the fell fall ended, and Bilbo found himself slamming into something with enough of a lack of angle to it to constitute the ground: in this case, a large boulder sticking out of the ground. He hit it and tumbled down one side to land on his back, which knocked the air out of him.

For a second he lay there, feeling all the little aches and pains, but Hobbits were made of stern stuff, and nothing had been broken despite the fall. Rousing himself quickly, Bilbo pushed himself to his feet, staring around him with the light of his elven blade helping him.

That sight made Bilbo blink. “Right, Bilbo me lad, time’s past to start sneaking rather than fighting,” he said in a near whisper, trying to keep his spirits up with a bit of wordplay. “But a blooded blade needs a name. A name…” Bilbo thought for a moment, then smiled. “Sting. I will call you Sting, because even the largest animal should fear the sting of the wasp.”

Looking around, he found his sheath and belt, which, like his quiver, had been torn from him. Of that there was no sign, which Bilbo regretted now as he quickly sheathed his sword and stared around him.

While the shaft which had deposited him had narrowed all the way along, here, it seemed to have come out into a large cavern. Bilbo couldn’t see the far end of it from where he was even after sheathing Sting and letting his eyes adjust to the dark. Like dwarves, hobbits had far better night vision than humans, but even so the far side of the cavern was impenetrable. He could hear the sound of something plunking into water, but that was all he could hear for now.

Moving forward, Bilbo began to call upon all his skill at moving as silently as possible. *Well, if you look at it in a certain way, it’s a bit of a* *relief being away from the rest. Humans and dwarves, clonking around in those huge boots of theirs, making such a racket.* Of course this was more bravado than anything, but after his fall Bilbo was eager to look at the bright side of things. *Now, where do I go from here*?

A few steps took Bilbo around the boulder he’d hit. There he stopped, moving backwards quickly and hiding in among some smaller boulders. There lay the goblin he had fallen with, having bounced a different way after being smashed free of his grip on Bilbo’s leg. There were no major wounds on him, and Bilbo had a horrifying thought of the creature coming alive.

But even worse was the fact that Bilbo could make out the sound of steps in the distance coming closer. An instant after he hid himself, Bilbo saw a small creature, the likes of which he had never seen before, climb over another large boulder to stare down at the dead orc. The thing might well have stood slightly taller than Bilbo, but it was hunched and rail thin with wiry, almost spider like limbs and a head that looked too large for its small frame. Its face was dominated by two large, luminescent eyes and a mouthful of fangs which were currently on display.

“Another goblin falling into the cave. Hmm, it looks tasty, it does, Gollum, Gollum,” the creature muttered in disjointed common, its voice a low rasp. “Red meat, mmm, much better than fishies, it is, Gollum, Gollum.”

The creature leaned forward, reaching down to grab at the goblin, which suddenly came alive, roaring and grabbing at the creature. “Nasty goblinses, stay dead!” the creature shrieked, bringing a heavy and very sharp looking rock down on the goblin’s head three times before it fell limp.

Then the thing leaped down and began to feed right then and there on the goblin. Watching this from his hiding place, it was all Bilbo could to do keep his stomach from rising. *I have to get out of here!*

Faced with being alone with this creature who was a cannibal, panic finally began to set in, despite Bilbo’s best efforts to keep it at bay. He slowly backed away, putting another small boulder between him and the creature, then turned, making his way away from the scene of the butchery. He crouched low, making certain his footsteps made no sound and that there was some of the rubble between him and the creature.

Bilbo was trying to desperately look in every direction, including behind him, only to frown and look down as his big toe touched metal rather than stone. Looking down, he found his gaze suddenly grabbed by a small, innocuous golden ring lying on the ground of the cavern like someone had lost it out of a pocket. Reaching down, he picked it up, examining it closely before, almost unconsciously, slipping it into his breast pocket and moving on.

A few steps after that Bilbo began to see the nearest wall of the cavern through the darkness and breathed a sigh of relief. But just as he was about to turn and follow it in the hopes of finding an exit, Bilbo’s foot tripped on some debris underfoot, making a small noise which nonetheless carried throughout the cavern.

*Darn it, Bilbo! Almost home free and look what you did! That’ll teach you to never count your mushrooms until they’re sliced.* With that thought Bilbo pulled out his blade and turned, pressing his back into the wall of the cavern as his eyes sought out any sign of movement to indicate that the creature had heard him.

Despite that, the creature was almost able to take him by surprise. Bilbo also noted that Sting didn’t light up as the creature suddenly hopped onto a nearby rock, blocking Bilbo’s way forward. “Mmm, what do we have here, my precious? Some odd little creature, not goblinses, no, Gollum, Gollum. What is it, then?”

Summoning up the same well of courage that had seen him in good stead all along this trip, Bilbo brought up Sting, pointing it at the creature’s face. “Isn’t it polite to introduce yourself first? But nonetheless, I am Bilbo Baggins, a hobbit, not a goblin. They are my enemies, just as they are yours.

The creature cocked its head, smiling evilly. “Gollum, Gollum me name; a Hobbit, is it? What is a hobbit? Where does it come from? Is it tasty; is it good to eat; will it fill the belly!?”

Gollum made to leap forward, but Bilbo whipped his blade back and forth, crouching low and pulling it back to thrust all in a second. Thanks to Thorin’s insistence, Bilbo had gotten some training in the blade, and, despite Gollum having a bit of a reach advantage, Bilbo knew he could hurt the other being badly if pressed. “The kind that would cost you more to take than you’d get!”

Hissing, Gollum backed away, and Bilbo continued to speak, keeping his voice calm with difficulty. “As I said, Gollum, I’m not your enemy, not unless you attack me. Now that we have established that, can you tell me how to get back up? Back where the goblins have their trap? Or, barring that, a way out of the mountain?”

“No, nos, Gollum, Gollum! Cannot lead you there! Many, many goblinses in the caves and tunnels above, Gollum, Gollum,” Gollum replied, trying to circle around Bilbo, but Bilbo stood firm, and Gollum harrumphed, leaning back as a look of cunning intelligence came into his luminescent eyes. “Besides, what is in it for Gollum? Hmm?”

“What do you want? Besides to eat me, anyway,” Bilbo asked, not making any move to lower his sword. It was getting a little heavy, but there was no way he wouldn’t keep it at the ready when facing this creature.

“Nothing, yous has, nothing but the meat on you that Gollum wants! Such tasty, thick meat it is,” Gollum replied. Then he smiled, his fangs all showing at once as he looked at Bilbo. “Still, it’s be a long time since Gollum spoke to someone else. We plays a riddle game, a game! If yous win, Gollum shows yous the way out. And if Gollum wins, Gollum eats you!”

Bilbo frowned. “We each must both answer and then stump the other person. And I will have your word not to attack me if I win, correct?”

“Yes, yes! But Gollum goes first, he does, and Bagginses must not threaten him with bright blade,” Gollum retorted.

“Fair enough. I agree.” With that Bilbo moved away from Gollum for a moment, sheathing his blade in its battered scabbard. “Let’s hear your riddles then, Gollum. I’ll warn you, though; I’m a dab hand at riddles!”

**OOOOOOO**

*Funny. If not for the manner of the beings who live here, this would be an amazing place,* Harry thought, pushing his anger and grief down with difficulty as he was manhandled through a veritable horde of goblins alongside his friends. His hands were bound behind him, but that wouldn’t have mattered at all if his friends hadn’t been nearby. None of the spells he had which could do enough damage to free the group wouldn’t have hurt his friends at the same time, just as before.

*Well, except for mass animal conjuration, but that would probably be too much weight for this wooden bridge thing we’re on. Or it might push some of my friends over the side along with the goblins. Best to bide my time. They’ve kept us alive for a reason; that means we might have a chance to break free soon.*

With that in mind Harry tried to concentrate on taking in the sights around him with some difficulty. The fact that they were being dragged along the ground was one thing; the song, the song the goblins were all singing, was another.

The dwarves were carried to near the top of a huge cavern the size of a football field, with far more depth to it than Harry could see. Dozens, perhaps hundreds of small wooden enclosures and decks jutted out of the sides of the cavern, some of which, Harry could see, led into tunnels beyond. There were hundreds of ropes leading all around with no set organization to them, along with numerous wooden and rope bridges connecting all of the wooden decks. Directly above them and stretching nearly down to their current level was a gigantic stalactite with thousands of candles stuck on crevices carved out of the rock. Together with numerous scattered torches they lit up the cavern so that even Harry could see easily.

And everywhere Harry looked there were goblins. Goblins hung from the ropes or climbed across them. Goblins congregated on every surface and climbed up the sheer rock face in places. There must have been thousands of them, an uncountable horde of goblins here, hidden underground.

And they were all singing as if someone nearby was directing a choir. Each line of the song was sung by a different group of goblins, the song moving all around the cavern. And they were all singing in Common rather than their own language, making it an obvious attempt to intimidate the group. Alas, that didn’t make it any less effective or irritating.

“Clap! Snap! The back crack! Grip, grab! Pinch, nab! You go, my lad! Ho, ho! And down, down to Goblin Town you go, my lad!” At that the goblins around the dwarves and Harry snapped whips above their heads and onto their backs, joining in with the chorus. “Down, down to Goblin-town. Down, down to Goblin-town. Down, down to Goblin-town you go, my lad! Ho, ho! My lad!”

“Clash, crash! Crush, smash! Hammer and tongs! Knocker and gongs! Pound, pound, far underground! Ho, ho! My lad! You go, my lad!”

This was followed instantly by the goblins all around them punching, kicking, or hurling stones at the prisoners. Many of the dwarves turned their heads to their shoulders or hid them, but Thorin didn’t, taking a rock to the side of his face, and Harry did the same as the goblins once more shouted out that chorus before moving on to the next line of the song.

“Swish, smack! Whip crack! Batter and beat! Yammer and bleat! Work, work! Nor dare to shirk, while goblins quaff and laugh! Batter, jabber, whip, and tavver hoooooo! Below, my lad! Ho, ho! My lad! Down, down to Goblin-town! Down, down to Goblin-town!” shouted groups of goblins as they passed, yelling and tossing foul smelling offal at them as, once more, other goblins cracked whips at the company’s backs.

The song ended as they were pushed out onto a long platform which led to a circular dais set into the middle of the cavern. It was held there by massive chunks of wood made into an arch below the platform and steel chains thicker than a man’s body dangling from the stalactite above.

Standing there was a massive goblin, so corpulent he looked as if he could eat some of the smaller goblins whole. On his head he wore a crude crown, gleaming gold in the light. He was wielding a large scepter of wood which had a skull set on top of it with something rattling around inside it, which he shook at the dwarves, bellowing out his laughter, the sound carrying both amusement and disdain.

“Hahahaha! I do hope that you’ve enjoyed our song, strangers! It might be the last thing you hear! Now, tell me, what are these foul outsiders which you have brought before me?” the large goblin shouted, waving his scepter around.

Like magic the background music cut out, and one of the goblins who had captured Harry and the dwarves moved forward. “My king, these are indeed strangers to our land, as you can see. We found them loitering on our front door! They come armed into your mountains, your munificence.”

“Who among you speaks for your rabble?” the king asked, striding forward on stumpy legs which were as fat as the rest of him.

“I do,” Thorin said boldly, standing upright from where he and the others had been forced to their knees in front of the goblin chieftain. He was quickly brought forward to the front of the crowd, which began to shout and jeer at him until the king once more gestured for silence. With that incentive, Thorin spoke up quickly. “My name is Ladem Ironhand. My companions and I were attempting to join our brethren in the Iron Hills. We had no idea we were trespassing and no wish to do so. We were peaceably sleeping in a cave after we sought shelter from the storm when we were set upon by your alert guards.”

“A likely story, dwarf! After all, I see a human there among your party. What of him?” the king asked, gesturing to Harry.

Harry too stood up tall and was quickly brought forward to stand beside Thorin. This was fine by Harry, as it brought him free of the others so he could finally start using some spells. Taking his cue from Thorin, he bowed his head toward the king. “Your Majesty, I am a farmer of some repute in my homeland. Ladem and his folk commissioned me to come and live with them to teach them my farming techniques.” He then smiled slightly, looking around at the underground kingdom. “If I knew we were passing through goblin territory, I would have demanded more money up front. Hazard pay, you understand.”

As the goblins laughed, Harry’s fingers were moving, generating a tiny cutting spell. He couldn’t point at his own bonds, however, so he was slowly cutting at those of Thorin beside him.

“Hah! You would make a good jester, I think, human, but you and your companion’s words do not persuade,” the king intoned. “I…”

He was interrupted by a shriek to one side of him. One of the other goblins on the dais had been bringing the weapons they had captured forward to be inspected, and he had just pulled Orcrist out of the pile. He now screamed as the blade lit up like a small star, the blade’s light and its touch actually paining him, causing him to drop the sword. The light had initially gone out when Thorin had killed the first goblin, part of its magic dousing the light after the warning had been given. But the touch of one of the fell races on its hilt had activated the enchantment once more.

“You see!” the king shouted, pointing at the blade as the goblins all around scattered or began to beat on the captives in return. “You see! They have proven themselves enemies from that weapon alone! It is the Goblin Cleaver, the Biter!”

The king whirled, moving surprisingly quickly for his bulk as he moved to stand in front of Thorin. He gestured and the guards stood Thorin upright once more as the king leaned down into his face. “And even without that I would know you, Thorin Oakenshield. Your description has spread throughout these mountains, sent there by an old friend of yours. A white-skinned orc, riding a white warg…”

Thorin gritted his teeth but said nothing, having just felt his bonds part enough that he felt he could snap them easily. Any more and the effect would have been seen.

“Send a message to the White One. Tell him we have his prize!” the king shouted, pushing Thorin back with his free hand even as he turned to shout this at a small messenger goblin. The tiny thing nodded, writing down the words, and then shoved off, moving along a rope in a tiny cart out into the rest of the cavern.

As it did, though, the king turned his attention to Harry, the malicious gleam in his eyes not fading at all. “Ah, but you travel with someone even more infamous. A young…magic user. Did you think I would not understand what you did to slow your friends’ descent down our little trap? You have made a quite a splash, wizard, and we have orders about you too. Orders from on high, orders from someone beyond even the White Orc… You, wizard, are to be turned over to the master’s servants at the earliest opportunity. They will be coming for you…”

Harry didn’t understand why the king was putting such an emphasis on the word servants, but the master bit, **that** he understood well enough. *Well, I wanted an opening, and this looks to be the best I’m going to get...* “Yes, well, the thing about wizards is, even tied up, we’re never unarmed.”

With that two cutting spells lanced out backwards, blasting several of the goblin guards directly behind him into bits. He turned at the same time, his still tied up hands facing backwards toward the pile of weapons. “Accio Orcrist!”

The blade flew through the air, causing the king to stumble out of the way along with several of his guards, which in turn allowed Thorin to break his weakened bonds. Kicking off of Harry’s hunched back, he leaped further into the air, catching his blade and bringing it down and around, slicing the king’s head from his shoulders.

Turning, he quickly cut Harry’s bonds, and Harry swiftly began to lash out with cutting spells, cutting down the guards around the rest of the dwarves as Thorin roared out, “Take up your weapons and fight!” With that he charged forward to hold the bridge to the dais as his friends ran the other way, grabbing their weapons once more.

For a moment the goblins crowding the cavern’s walls stared in shock. Then a screeching roar rushed toward them as the goblins pushed forward. Hundreds came at them across the bridge to the dais, while hundreds more climbed up the ropes or down the chains or even up from the arch below. Worse for Harry, the miasma of this many Morgoth-created creatures began to sap his magic power almost immediately. Not, thankfully, as badly as it would have against an equal number of orcs, but it still forced Harry to overpower his spells something fierce, but they worked to thin the horde on the causeway. With Thorin guarding him from the goblins coming at them from below, they held for a moment, alone.

A moment was all the dwarves needed to rearm themselves and rush to their king and his friend’s aid. “Baruk Khazâd! Khazâd ra Durin Nur!” They bellowed their defiance as they hammered into the horde, pushing into it and scattering the goblins off the bridge, their impact nearly causing as many deaths that way as their weapons.

Now Harry began to use spells not only to attack but to defend his friends. More than one blow was turned aside by a hasty Protego, as cutting and a few fire spells cut through the horde.

Thorin cut one goblin down and leaped over another, letting Kili gut it, then pushed on, ducking under another blow, Orcrist slicing the goblin near in two as he whirled to cut into another. With that he had reached the far side of the causeway from the dais, and he began to look around, trying to decide where to go.

This was a problem in all the dwarves’ minds, and even as he pushed a goblin off the edge of the causeway and made to join his king, Bombur roared out, “Where to! Where should we go!?”

Balin nodded too, following his bellowing brother as he moved to stand with Thorin, guarding one side of the passage. Kili, Fili, and Gloin barged around Balin, hacking down four goblins and pushing more back, carrying conjured shields from Harry and moving in step like a line.

“Aye, Thorin, we have no idea where to go, but we have to go somewhere! They’ll overwhelm us soon enough!” That his last word was punctuated by Balin bringing down his sword on a goblin’s head as the creature tried to climb up the side of the platform was lost to no one.

Following at the back, Harry looked around, wondering if he should try and figure out where Bilbo was, just as a goal, but there were too many goblins now on the causeway, charging at the company’s open side. “BOMBARDA!” he yelled, bringing his hands forward and lashing out with the explosive spell at the causeway.

A second Bombarda followed the first, shattering the arch of wood holding the dais beyond up. Now held up only by the chains leading up to the stalactite and the various ropes, the edifice began to shudder and then tear itself apart, most of the pieces collapsing and taking the mass of goblins that had been coming at them that way to their doom.

An instant later something else was added to the battlefield. A massive arc of lightning slammed through the mass of goblins to the side of the platform closest to where Thorin and Dwalin were holding the line. Another even larger blast of pure white light lanced out, blasting more goblins off the platform as it blinded hundreds more. That light slowly rose into the air of the giant cavern, blinding more of the goblins before they could climb towards the dwarves. Dozens, perhaps hundreds of goblins screamed and clutched at their eyes, falling from where they had been climbing.

As the dwarves gaped, Harry began to laugh. “Now that is an entrance, old man!”

Gandalf moved out of one of the tunnels, standing and glaring up at them from a platform just slightly below the one they were fighting on, connected to it by a plank bridge. “This way, you fools! Fly; this battle is unwinnable for us all!”

Tying the sword of Gryffindor to his side, Harry nodded in thanks to Bofur, who had been the one to grab it from the pile. “Move, gentlemen!”

Thorin and Dwalin reached Gandalf first, and he directed them down the series of interconnected platforms and plank bridges. “Down! Head down as often as you are able! The only exit for us is away and down! Hopefully it will carry us through the mountain as well!” Gandalf said as the dwarves joined him, followed by Harry.

For a second he and Harry smiled at one another. “How exactly did you catch up to us?” Harry asked.

“How exactly did you end up in this predicament?” Gandalf retorted tartly, his eyes twinkling in good humor in a way that worked more for him than Dumbledore’s overdone expression ever had for him. The goblin blood splattered over his grey robes helped quite a bit. “I do not suppose that this timely rescue relieves me of the burden of your anger at my manipulations back in Rivendell?”

“Get us out of here and all is forgiven, Gandalf,” Harry said, and then turned as he stared up at the top of the massive stalactite which hovered in the air over the area where the dais had been before. He held out his hand in that direction and sent out the most powerful Bombarda spell he could. It smashed halfway through the base of the massive stalactite, but no more. “Well, it was worth a shot,” he said, shrugging and following after the rest of them.

Now with the dwarves all around him and Gandalf leading the way, Harry fell back into the group using long-range spellwork, hurling out fire for the most part behind them and cutting spells in front along with the occasional defensive spell. The fires soon spread, causing even more chaos. Gandalf added his own spells, feeding the fires and sending the smoke into the faces of their enemies from behind, even as he wielded Glamdring with skills and speed well beyond his apparent age.

At the front Thorin busily organized his friends while also cutting down the enemies piling into them from the direction they were trying to go. “Ori, Nori, Dori, cut any bridge we pass; we must cut down the avenues they can attack us from! Gloin, Bifur, Bombur, watch out below. Balin, Oin, Bofur, watch out above!” With him, Gandalf, and Dwalin forging ahead and Harry standing behind Fili and Kili at the back, they continued on as more and more enemies appeared, racing through the spreading fires to get at them.

**OOOOOOO**

Though he had thought his attempt to bring down the large, kilometer high stalactite had failed, Harry’s attack had an effect. The stalactite weighed many times more than Hogwarts, and now half of its support was gone. Hidden under the sounds of battle and the crackle of the spreading fires, the stone began to creak in agony.

OOOOOOO

Deep below the main section of the goblin kingdom the sounds of battle did not penetrate. Instead the hidden underground lake reverberated with the words of a contest of intelligence rather than martial prowess.

“No-legs lay on one-leg; two-legs sat near on three-legs; four-legs got some!” Bilbo said, smiling at his enemy. He had actually been having fun with this, though Gollum certainly was beginning to become more anxious as the competition continued.

Gollum paced back and forth, crawling, then flipping from hands to feet, then climbing up a boulder. “Fishes on a table, that is the first… Gollum, Gollum… Cat get the scraps, that is the last… The middle…the middle one…my precious, what is it!?”

He paced back and forth, and Bilbo began to hope that this would mean an end to the contest. The more time he spent with the little creature it became more obvious that he was unhinged. At this point, despite his own enjoyment of the contest, Bilbo was starting to fear for his life. “Two out of three, my friend, but that won’t be enough. Soon you’ll have to do as I asked and direct me out of here.”

“Gollum! Gollum! Gollum hasn’t lost yet, my precious!” Gollum shouted, and then smiled as it came to him. “Man on a stool, yes! That is the middle one, my precious!” He rolled off the boulder he was sitting on, righting himself as he landed to glare at Bilbo. “Now it bes your turn to guess the riddle, yes, my precious!”

“That was the rule. Ask away,” Bilbo replied, cursing inwardly. *I thought I had him there! I’ll have to start using some of the riddles Harry has told me about. They were new, so there’s no way this Gollum creature could have heard them before this.*

Gollum cackled and then went on, his tone becoming almost deep, with a malicious tint to it. “This thing all things devours: Birds, beasts, trees, flowers; Gnaws iron, bites steel; Grinds hard stones to meal; Slays king, ruins town, and beats high mountain down. What is it?”

Bilbo frowned, walking around as energetic hobbits were wont to do if they were deep in thought. “Let me think, let me think… It is all one thing…”

“You cannot ask questions like that! Unless you are conceding, my precious?” the odd little being across from him said, bouncing from one area to another, sniffing the air in anticipation. “Is it tasty; is its meat good; will it need to be tenderized?”

“Oh, definitely I would be after this trip, I think,” Bilbo said absentmindedly, then nodded resolutely. “So it is not in fact an element. So it isn’t wind, it isn’t rain…” With a grin he turned, pointing at Gollum excitedly. “I have it! Time! The answer is time.”

Now Gollum truly began to show his anger at how the game was going. Instead of taking it good naturedly as he had the first few iterations, he slammed his large hands down on the ground followed by his head before he rolled around angrily. “He guessed it; the Baggins guessed it! We cannot eat him yet, my precious!” Then it seemed to sober up, rolling onto all fours and glaring angrily at Bilbo. “But that does not mean that the Baggins has won yet! It must ask its own question!”

Bilbo began to pat the front of his chest in thought, and for a moment he felt the golden ring he had found before inside. The oddly quixotic idea of simply asking, ‘What have I got in my pocket?’ came to him, but that wouldn't be a riddle, and he discarded it immediately in favor of one of the riddles that Harry had told him about from his own world. *I sure would have liked to have met this friend of his with the very odd name. Padma, wasn’t it? She seems to have been an interesting sort of a young lady even for human.*

“I have one,” he said, “I'll warn you, though, I think this one is one of the toughest ones I have.”

“Ask it!” Gollum grumbled. “We are getting hungry, my precious!”

“Some say we are red, some say we are green. Some play us, some spray us. What are we?” Bilbo asked.

Gollum continued to mutter under his breath, and Bilbo gave it time. But eventually he began to feel very anxious and said suddenly stood upright. “All right, I've given you more than enough time, Gollum. It is now time for you to either try your guess or admit that you lost.”

“No! No! Gollum will not lose, my precious! Baggins must give it three, three guesses!” the little creature said, growling angrily and staring hard at Bilbo.

“Why would I do that? It's a riddle, not a guessing game!” Bilbo retorted incredulously. “I've given you more than enough time. If you don't know the answer, then I've won. Those are the rules of a riddle game; you can't suddenly change it.”

“But wes can, my precious!” Gollum said, once more sounding cunning as he crouched on top of a rock between Bilbo and the direction he had been following along the cavern wall. “You still need Gollum to get out of here, yes, my precious! So you will give me my choiceses.”

“Two chances,” Bilbo said firmly. “Then we go our separate ways, and you'll have to live with being a sore loser. Remember, friend,” Bilbo said, pulling out Sting once more, “I'm not entirely defenseless! Taking this hobbit might cost you more meat than you'd get off my corpse.”

Gollum growled, rolling this way and that on top of the rock before standing up abruptly, poised to leap. Bilbo brought up Sting, pointing it directly at Gollum, and Gollum huffed, sitting back down slightly. “Very well, nasty hobbitses,” he spat. “Two answers. But then you must wait here while I get something from my hut. Yes,” he said, his eyes narrowing as a malevolent light began to fill them. “Yes, my precious! We must get the precious before I lead you out.”

“That sounds fair enough,” Bilbo said slowly, only lowering his blade, not putting it away. “Now for your answers.”

“A bloody corpse!” Gollum rattled out one right away, and when it was proven to not be correct, he paused, thinking, leaping over another rock, sliding down it, and then moving around on all fours as he thought before shouting out his second one. “Leaves!”

Bilbo shook his head. “I'm sorry, but no. The answer was a pepper. For they come in green and red. Nasty things, too spicy for my pallet, but…”

Gollum glared at him before throwing a massive temper tantrum, rolling on the ground and thumping it hard with his hands and feet. “Lost! Gollum has lost! No, my precious!”

“That's right, friend, and that means you need to lead me out of here,” Bilbo said firmly.

Again Gollum showed that disturbing ability to change his mood at the drop of a hat. He abruptly stood up and nodded resolutely. “Wait here you will, Bagginses,” he said. “Go to retrieve the precious up, Gollum will.” He smiled, but there was no warmth in it. “Then lead you out I will, my precious, yesss…”

With that Gollum pattered away, reaching the edge of the lake swiftly. There a very crude log boat waited, which he moved out into the water with his wide, almost paddle-like hands and feet to a small island in the center of the lake. There he began to search around an incredibly crude lean-to, his movements becoming more and more desperate with every second that passed without his finding what he was looking for. “**No**! No, it is gone! The precious is gone, **lost**! Think…” Gollum stopped suddenly, staring out across the lake. “Think! Where could the precious be? Where could it have dropped…”

Gollum’s shrieks had filled the cavern, and Bilbo shook his head. *It’s time to give this up as a bad idea and move on quickly, very quickly. Gollum’s limited sanity seems to have cracked entirely from that noise he’s making, poor creature.*

With that in mind, Bilbo turned resolutely in the direction he had been following before. Gollum had always put itself between Bilbo and this direction, so Bilbo supposed this was the right way to go to find the exit to the cavern. And, if he could find that, Bilbo supposed he could find his way out entirely eventually.

Behind him Gollum's raging ceased, and he raced towards his little boat, paddling it back over quickly. Hearing the noise of Bilbo's passage, he moved in that direction, roaring his anger. “What did Gollum say! Gollum said to you to stay still, my precious! Cannot enter the other cavernses without the precious!”

“That matters not to me,” Bilbo said bluntly, Sting once more in his hand as he stared at the oncoming Gollum, having stopped and put his back against the wall again. “You promised to take me out of here. That is all that matters. Unless this precious of yours is a map to show us the way out?”

Unbeknownst to Bilbo, his free hand had begun to fiddle with one of his pockets, and for some reason Gollum's eyes tracked that movement. “What has it got in its pocketses?” Gollum said suddenly, his voice low and malevolent, far more dangerous than even the worst Bilbo had heard before this moment.

“Nothing that concerns you,” Bilbo said, scowling angrily at Gollum. “Now show me the way out of here or else just let me try to find my own way. If you're too scared of the goblins, that is understandable, but I must brave them to get back to my companions.”

“What has it got in its pockets!?!” Gollum shouted, making to reach forward.

But Bilbo directed his sword upwards, threatening Gollum once more. “Nothing!”

Once more Gollum seems to do a 180, his attitude changing abruptly. “Very well. Gollum will shows you the way out, nasty Bagginses.”

Uneasily Bilbo followed after Gollum, keeping Sting in hand just in case and staying several paces back so the creature could not leap on him suddenly. He no longer had any trust for the creature’s sanity.

They were barely halfway to the entrance when there was a loud booming crash above them, and the ceiling began to cave in. Large chunks of rock slammed into the ground around them and into the lake beyond, splashing the water everywhere, drenching them both and hurling both Gollum and Bilbo off their feet. “What's going on!?” Bilbo shouted.

Gollum didn't reply, too terrified by the sudden noise and violence of the cave-in, racing towards a shelter underneath a large, shiny looking rock near what looked to be a fissure in the rock face of the cavern wall. Bilbo made to move after him, but stumbled, falling to his face. At the impact his breast pocket opened, and the little ring escaped, rolling in front of him on its side.

That glint of gold somehow caught Gollum's attention, and he turned to stare, then shriek. “Thief! Thief! You had it all this time! The precious!” Now unmindful of the rooftop collapsing down all around them, he raced towards the sprawled Bilbo, his large hands extended to grab and strangle. “The precious is mine! You will never have it, filthy Bagginses!”

From where he had sprawled Bilbo heard this and looked over, then back at the ring. *All this trouble for that little ring?* He stared at it, and, as he did so, another large boulder stuck nearby, causing the ring to jump up off the ground where it had landed, balanced against a small rock. Now it began to tumble towards him, and Bilbo found himself holding his hand out towards it. Then, in a sign of incredible luck, fate, or an unseen hand, the ring hit a small stone and hopped into the air, before falling neatly on Bilbo's finger. The next second Bilbo had to roll away as another boulder crashed down where he had been sprawled on the ground.

Between one minute and the next, just as Gollum was about to leap towards him, Bilbo disappeared from sight. “**No**! The precious!”

For a moment Bilbo didn't understand what was going on. Then, as Gollum's eyes scanned over and him and did not see him, Bilbo realized. *The ring! It's like those spells of Harry's! It made me invisible. Amazing!*

Slowly Bilbo pushed himself to his feet, making an effort to make no noise. What little noise he made was covered by the sound of the ongoing cave-in. *Now to figure out where to go.*

“Think!” Gollum shouted to himself, dodging to one side as a large piece of rock slammed into where he had been standing before collapsing against the one which had nearly crushed Bilbo. “Think! Bagginses must make for the entrance, yes. Can get there first, we can. We will reclaim the precious!”

With that he raced off, heading towards the cleft in the side he had initially been moving towards when he had spotted the ring. Bilbo followed him on his heels, careful to still make no noise, hiding Sting under his shirt for now, having no way to know if the invisibility would cover its glow if it began to do so. This worked until right before he could reach the crack in the cavern’s wall.

The water from the lake had spread throughout the area, creating a puddle in front of the crevice leading out of the underground cavern, where Gollum had situated itself right in the entrance way. The puddle was hidden between a few rocks, and Bilbo walked right into it, causing a splashing sound. At that noise Gollum turned and snarled, leaping towards him. “Even with the precious, Gollum can still hear you!”

Hastily Bilbo raised Sting, and Gollum smashed into him, taking the blow on his side but bodily slamming into Bilbo, bearing him to the earth. Sting had cut along Gollum’s side, but had been knocked out of Bilbo's hand as Gollum had slammed into him. Now they rolled, Bilbo's invisibility no longer any help whatsoever now that Gollum had a hand on Bilbo. “The precious will be mine!”

One of Gollum’s hands tried to find Bilbo's unseen neck, only to be blocked by one of Bilbo’s own hands in its efforts to squeeze the life out of him while Gollum’s other hand picked up a large rock. An instant later he hammered it down into Bilbo despite not being able to see them, thumping Bilbo several times on the shoulders and chest, leaving large bruises and maybe even breaking a rib, but Bilbo ducked and dodged this way and that, the stone slamming down all around his head.

But there were other small rocks around, and Bilbo’s scrambling hand found one. He raised it and slammed it into the side of Gollum's head, sending him reeling, though the creature somehow retained a grip on Bilbo's arm. But that momentary break allowed Bilbo to grab Sting once more.

Gollum lunged towards where he felt Bilbo was, given the grip on his arm, his mouth gaping in an effort to bring his teeth into play.

But Bilbo punched Sting forward into its chest. The two of them stared at one another, one unseen by the other, as Gollum gaped, staring down at the sword thrusting through its chest and out the other side.

“Why did you make me do that?! Why!” Bilbo shouted, distraught. “We could have parted; you could've lived!”

Gollum made no reply, stumbling backwards, pulling Sting out of Bilbo's hand, and falling to his knees and finally onto his side, shuddering. There the light of life disappeared from his eyes, the shuddering ceasing quickly thereafter.

For a moment Bilbo slumped, staring. This was not the first life he had taken, of course—he had killed several orcs and goblins by this point—but all he could feel now was a well of pity rising up within him at the sight of the small body. “I'm sorry it had to be like that. I'm sorry your madness had such control of you.”

Sighing, he moved over and pulled Sting out, wiping it off on the ground before sheathing it once more and turning and racing towards the crevice, which hopefully would lead out and away. Unbeknownst to him at that moment, the ring was still on his finger.

**OOOOOOO**

Several minutes before the cave-in began, in the main cavern the battle was not going well for the dwarves. Three times their progress had nearly ground to a halt by the sheer number of goblins coming at them. Twice they had had to double back into the fires that Harry had caused before leaping down to a lower causeway rather than to brave the sheer numbers that had gathered in front of the way they had been going.

“For every one of these beasts we kill, twenty take their place! How did they grow to such numbers, Gandalf?!” Balin shouted, wrenching his stolen sword out of a goblin and kicking another in the head as it tried to climb over the edge of the causeway they were racing along.

“A goblin can grow to maturity within a year, and it only takes a dozen or so to create a mud pit, Master Balin. The only way to make certain they will not come back is to cleanse every area and hidden hole they have used,” Gandalf replied. “Here in the Misty Mountains that would include Moria, and is thus impossible, though the strength of this den so close to Rivendell is most worrisome.”

Harry shuddered, hearing this over the tumult of battle. Thanks to Gandalf and Thorin he knew how goblins and orcs had been created in the first place, and their reproduction was not something he ever wanted to see. “If you have any ideas how get us out of here, now is the time, Gandalf!”

The dwarves were slowly flagging, and Harry could feel his own exhaustion creeping up on him like a blackness at the back of his mind. He had been using attack spell and defensive spells almost exclusively, but had slowly begun to fall back on a purely defensive role as his mind began to fade under the effort.

Everywhere he looked there was fire, smoke, and gathering goblins, always more of them. Despite the sheer number of the fires he had started along their route, the goblins didn't seem to care; they simply pushed through the fires and the smoke too. Harry saw several of them actually lighting themselves on fire from getting too close, or gasping and falling back from smoke inhalation, but there were **always** more.

The only reasons they hadn't been overwhelmed by this point were Harry's defensive spells, Gandalf, who seemed inexhaustible, and the fact that they kept moving. Though Harry felt it also had something to do with the fact that even goblins couldn't climb up the sheer rock faces under them or above them without using both hands. This naturally limited their effectiveness once they actually reached the dwarves.

“We’re going too slowly!” Gandalf replied. “We have to speed our descent somehow.”

Harry looked around then a wild idea came to him. “Hold here!” he shouted, looking down and further down. From what he could tell there were only two, maybe three platforms directly below them. After that it was darkness all the way down. “If we take this shaft straight down, do you know where it will lead, Gandalf?”

“There should be a series of passages and caves down there that could eventually lead us out,” Gandalf said, grunting his words as he thrust out Glamdring, catching a goblin in the side of the head as it tried to land on Gloin’s back. A blast of wind sent upward caught several other goblins, hurling them off the cavern’s sides to their deaths. “What do you have in mind, Harry?”

“Something insane,” Harry said, laughing wildly now.

He crouched down and put his hand on the floor of the platform they were on, using the same spell he had used to reinforce the strength of the dwarves’ shields. Then he ordered four of the dwarves to start cutting away at the supports and the ropes that connected the platform they were on to the bridge they had traversed to get to it. They moved away from the sides where they had been fighting off the goblins, weakening the line for a moment, but Gandalf was able to take up the slack.

Thorin grasped what Harry was trying to do almost immediately as he watched his youngest nephew chopping away at the supports. “Harry, by the beards of my fathers, what are you doing?”

“Hopefully saving us, if in a decidedly insane manner,” Harry said, moving to each dwarf and casting a sticking charm on their feet. More than one of them gasped as they found they couldn't move their feet away from where they were standing, but just as that was about to be a liability, the final pieces of support gave way behind them, and the entire platform instantly began to fall, sliding down the side of the cavern wall.

“Hang on!” Harry whooped, moving over to the side of the platform and holding on with one hand, his other hand thrust out and down below.

The platform below them came up to towards them quickly, the goblins on it staring up at them in shock. Harry didn't give them any time to try to escape, thrusting his hand out and shouting, “Bombarda!”

The spell, which at this point caused Harry to start to see spots for a second, hit about three seconds before the descending platform would have, blowing the goblins and the platform below them into pieces. Their own platform slid through the remains, bouncing and twirling, but it was still in one piece and going downwards in a semi-controlled manner.

Again and again Harry spells lanced out, transfiguring the side of the cavern wall, making it smoother as they passed. Indeed, Kili stared upwards along their route. “Harry's created sections of glass!”

“Oddly, it's one of the easiest transfiguration spells,” Harry said, grunting with the effort. “Turning stone to glass, that is. I suppose it is because glass comes from sand, which is just ground up stone. Even here that isn’t so hard, since I’m not changing one element to another, I think”

Beside him Bifur, who still retained one of the defensive spells Harry had last cast on his shield, moved to shield Harry as arrows began to fly, plunking his shield down right next to Harry so tightly that Harry could only look out over the side as his hands remained there, thrust out. “Do your work, Harry!” the dwarf said grimly. “Let us shield you in turn, my friend!”

“Erm, right,” Harry muttered, putting aside his musings on how magic worked here in Middle Earth to concentrate on the here and now.

Soon they all saw the bottom of the cavern racing towards them from below. “Brace yourselves!” Harry roared, using a sticking charm a second before thrusting his other hand forward, trying to create a cushioning charm below them, even more spots appearing in his vision. The spell was weak, and there was a thunderous booming crash as the reinforced platform finally shattered, unable to withstand the impact. All the dwarves were flung this way and that, but when the rumbling of their crash ended they were all still alive. Bruised and battered, but alive.

Harry and Gandalf quickly began to move around, canceling the sticking charms and letting the dwarves move. “We must hurry!” Gandalf said.

Blearily Harry pushed himself to his feet, aided by Bifur and Dori. All three stared upwards as did many of the others in growing horror. Above them the entire cavern wall from one side to another was filled with goblins racing down towards them, climbing so quickly they looked more like spiders than anything normally bipedal.

Gandalf too looked upwards and then shouted aloud. “Run! Do not just stand there and gape; run!”

Harry, however, didn't run immediately. He stared upwards and then at the side of the cavern all around them. Breathing in deeply, he banished his tiredness through strength of will alone and thrust his hands outwards, channeling the same transfiguration spell that he had been using occasionally on their descent at the walls all around him, heading upwards as fast as he could.

The walls of the cavern turned to glass as the dwarves watched, and Gandalf gaped before racing over towards Harry. “Harry! We can’t hold them off”

“We can't let them rush after us all the way to Mirkwood either, Gandalf!” shouted Harry, his eyes beginning to twitch and his fingers shake even as he continued to use his magic. “Let me work.”

Gandalf took one look at Harry's determined face, then nodded. “Dori and Bifur. Protect him, and if he tries to stay any longer than it takes me to get out of your sight down that passage, knock him out and drag him! The rest of you, follow me.”

Thorin paused to grab Harry’s shoulder as he passed by. “Remember, you are worth more alive and breathing than as a martyr, my friend, and there are many here that would miss you should you be gone.” With that said, the gruff dwarven king turned, racing ahead and shouting, “Fili, with me! Let us make certain the trail is clear!”

Smiling grimly, Harry continued to use the spell for a few more seconds, as above them the goblins continued to careen down the walls. The first few soon reached the areas of transfigured glass where they realized, to a goblin, that climbing glass was much more difficult than stone. Behind them the rest of the horde started to slow as their fellows started to fall to their deaths, splattering all around the trio still standing there.

Just then there was a mighty crash, unseen by any of the dwarves or Harry. Though they did not know it, that was the sound of the massive stalactite in the main cavern finally letting go, millions of tons of rock coming loose and careening downwards to slam into the ground far, far below it, into the top of the underground cavern which held the Lake on whose shores Bilbo and Gollum had been having their contest.

To Harry and the others the rumblings were a distant thing, but growing. “Time to go!” Harry shouted, turning and stumbling, his mental exhaustion carrying over into his mind as Dori and Bifur fell into place beside him.

They all raced for the cavern entrance that the others had entered previously. There Ori beckoned them on, shouting encouragement. “Come on, brother!”

When Harry reached Ori he turned. Above them ropes began to come down from on high, and the goblins still chasing after them were now climbing down once more despite the whole cavern shaking from the distant impact. *Time to add just a bit more to it!* Harry aimed his hands at the now glass wall of the cavern and shouted, “Confringo Vinculum!”

Unlike the Bombarda, which acted like an explosive shell going off when it struck something, Confringo detonated the object itself. The Vinculum variant simply created dozens of further explosions in the object targeted. The spell barely registered against magical shields, unable to find anything to latch onto, and stone would have simply absorbed the explosion after it created a small gouge out of it. But glass…

The glass exploded in every direction, causing Harry to dodge backwards into the tunnel, pulling Bifur behind him as Dori did the same for his younger brother to protect them from flying glass. Above them the explosions then traveled upwards, cracks flowing in every direction

But that was not all. As with the stalactite, Harry had removed the support of the rock directly above where his transfiguration spell had ended. Several hundred meters of stone, cracked and weakened by the still ongoing reverberations, began to tumble down, bearing with it much of the goblin horde.

Those reverberations continued to spread throughout the rock. The goblins had not been kind to the mountain as they ripped out their hidden town, and they certainly had not thought about support, structural integrity, or anything of that nature. The small earthquake that Harry had caused with the stalactite reverberated, gaining momentum when it reached the areas where Harry had performed his last few spells.

The result was that the whole mountain began to shake, if only slightly. Above them, on the surface, animals and birds quickly began to become alarmed, racing away, and more than one avalanche was caused in sympathy due to what was going on underneath.

None of that mattered to Harry and his fellows ,however. What mattered to them was that, in consequence of this, the roof of the tunnel that they were in began to quiver and shake. “What did you do, Harry!” Dori shouted incredulously.

“I have no idea,” Harry answered honestly. “My spells shouldn't have caused this large an effect!”

A stone from above came loose then, slamming into Harry's shoulder and the side of his head, knocking him reeling. This proved too much for Harry, and he fell unconscious as his head smashed into the tunnel’s floor.

“Wonder how it's happening later,” Bifur ordered, pushing Ori ahead of them. “Dori, grab him! We need to get out of here now.”

“What a magnificent idea,” said a new voice as Bilbo emerged from a side tunnel seemingly like magic, moving forward to take Dori’s weapons and pack from him. Dori in turn pulled Harry up into his arms and raced on as if the human weighed next to nothing.

“Master thief!” exclaimed Ori, clapping Bilbo on his shoulder as they ran alongside the others. “Where did you come from?”

“That is a tale, my friend, and one best told around a campfire, I feel.” Bilbo ducked to one side, dodging another rock. “That was my subtle way of saying we should all save our breath for running!”

Ahead of them Gandalf and several of the other dwarves, including Thorin, were waiting for them anxiously. Behind them the light of day could be seen through a crack in the mountain’s side. Gandalf stood in the center of the group. His staff was alight, his equivalent of Harry's Protego spell blasting out of it in an umbrella of energy, holding back the stone.

The wizard breathed a sigh of relief as he looked at Bilbo and Harry, his eyes turning worried as he saw that Harry was being carried, the younger man’s face developing a large, rather spectacular bruise.

Thorin also gaped at Harry, racing forward with Balin to check his pulse before breathing a sigh of relief and ordering the rest out, taking a moment to stare at Bilbo now. “Master Baggins! You return to us in a timely manner.”

“Thank you for your welcome, but once again, such things can wait!” Bilbo yelped, leaping aside as a rock tumbled down from the tunnel’s roof. As they went, several of the dwarves were hit by falling debris, but thanks to their helmets and thicker than normal human skulls**,** they only got rattled a bit, not slowing at all as they raced out of the mountain to whatever lay beyond.

**End Chapter**

A natural place to break off the chapter, I feel. Next chapter will take us through meeting a certain skinchanger (Harry: Animagus!), a white Orc, Harry being used as luggage, a talk with Bilbo, giant eagles, Gandalf once more leaving, and giant spiders who realize very quickly that attacking a wizard with a penchant for lighting things on fire is not a smart option before Harry is forced to admit that, yes, there are elves who are just assholes regardless of their race.

The poll should already be up. As always, if you want to have more say in what stories I concentrate on, please consider signing up over on my Pat R on page. There you will get four votes in each poll for every dollar and access to my Ranma/Fairy Tail crossover, Making Waves, as well as several teaser chapters, omakes, and future story concepts.