

I would never call myself as amazing or erudite a scholar as J. R. R. Tolkien. I'm better than that asshole Simon Tolkien, though. Nor am I British at all.

HEYO! Instead of posting stuff over on fanfic today, I finished this off. I even Grammarlied it, though it has not been edited by anyone but myself and that big green G.

Chapter 22: A Home Is What You Want It to Be

Harry and Tauriel made camp with the dwarves several miles away from the dual pyres that the dwarves had said to destroy the bodies of the goblins they had fought. It was dual pyres because most of the dead had been spread out between two specific points on the battlefield, the ambush point and the area around the cave entrance, and none of the dwarves had wanted to spend any more time than necessary gathering the dead bodies. One of them had even joked about it. "It's just like when you are clearing out your stall at the end of a busy day. You don't want to sweep twice, so you use little piles everywhere."

Of course, Harry helped to light the fires using his magic, similar to the way he had destroyed the cave on top of the hill. This made all of the dwarves in the patrol thankful for his aid again, although a few were still looking at him a little askance.

That was fine by Harry. He had gotten used to those kinds of looks from the majority of dwarves in Erebor before he and Tauriel had begun their journey to Lothlorien. He knew that some dwarves would always look at people from other races askance, regardless of the specific individual in question.

The camp was made in the lee of a hill, where a tree had fallen and created a small wall to one side and a hole at the bottom where the roots had been pulled out of the ground as the tree had fallen. The dwarves spent a few moments carving the edge of the hole to make it more uniform, then lit a small fire there, covering it up with a tarp to kill any bugs or whatever might have been in there, before removing the tarp to let the smoke loose and to use the fire for cooking.

Once the camp was set up, several dwarves took out small bits of whetstone and began to work on their blades or some other bit of maintenance as a general conversation began, including Harry and Tauriel in their discussion by switching to common. By this point, the dwarves had accepted them both as welcome as they could, and Harry was astonished to learn that Gimli, although quite young for his folk, about the same age as Kili, was the leader of the group. He remembered that Gloin had told him that his son had decided early on he would be a warrior first and foremost, but Harry hadn't anticipated that to mean he would be so well trusted as to lead others at such a young age, which Harry knew was unusual. Even Fili and Kili had only recently been allowed to command others, and they were literal princes of their people.

Yet, while he was young, Gimli was affable, intelligent, and seemed to have a decent sense of humor judging by the laughter he sometimes got when he switched to Khuzdul to joke as they marched away from the battle site. He also seemed to run a very tight ship with his patrol. Everything around the camp had been seen to quickly and efficiently, with everyone having tasks, including cooking.

Seeing a dwarf start to cook over the small fire in the hole in the ground at the base of the fallen tree, Harry decided to broach the subject he had hoped to do since recognizing Gimli. "By the way, you

wouldn't happen to have any of your father's special mead, would you? Once you taste such as that, no other drink can quite compare."

Gimli laughed raucously, shaking his head even as he padded a small, barely a finger's length, flask at his side. "I have some on me always. For special occasions, you understand. But it is not the kind of thing that I will give out even to someone with your reputation, Harry! If you want some of my family's special mead, you will have to earn it."

"I did help you with the goblins," Harry retorted.

"Bah! Goblins! That is no proper fight. If they had been orcs, perhaps. But good Gloin-made mead cannot be earned by simply killing or frightening any number of goblins."

"How about an offer to cook, then?"

That caused the dwarf at the fireplace to look up sharply, but instead of the look of annoyance at someone else trying to take his job, the dwarf in question, who had been introduced as Volu, looked extremely happy at the idea that someone could take the onerous task off his shoulders. "That would get my vote."

"Can humans even cook properly?" Came another dwarf, sounding sour and shaking his head.

"Harry has done all of the cooking for the two of us since we have been on the road, and I know for a fact that he did a large portion of the cooking for Thorin's company as well," Tauriel interjected, speaking up before Harry could defend himself. "We also have fish to add to your supplies and medical skills if any of you are injured. I know you dwarven folk make light of such things, but as we have now established our camp, I thought it prudent to offer."

The dwarves all shook their heads, indicating that they hadn't taken any injuries from the goblin attack. "Their weapons weren't nearly good enough to get through our chain mail, Tauriel," Gimli said somewhat hesitantly. While Harry had been quickly accepted by Gimli and the others under his command, Tauriel was still an elf. Having heard tales of how she and Harry were a couple was one thing. Accepting an elf was entirely another matter. While none of this group had suffered directly from elves like the dwarves of Thorin's company, all could remember the fact that the elves had not come to the dwarves' aid after the desolation of Smaug.

Gimli then grinned. "And if it please you, Lady Tauriel, don't sing. I've heard tell of Elvish singing, and if we wanted long, sad and sonorous, we could do that ourselves."

Tauriel laughed. "While Harry seems to enjoy my singing, I would not be reckoned a singer among my folk. I am but a warrior, a member of the Unseen Host of Taur-e-Ndaedelos."

Seeing that there would be no mead on the authoring, Harry sighed theatrically, then asked, "Tell me, is it normal for your patrols to be this far out from Erebor? We can't even see it from here, after all, and given the size of the lonely mountain, that means we are well away from it. Or did you have some idea that goblins were in the area?"

"Nay, we had no idea. That was why we were out here in the first place." So saying, Gimli looked over at one of the other dwarves, who scowled back. Both Harry and Tauriel sensed, however, that this

wasn't the scowl of someone being unfriendly. Simply, it was his normal state of being. "Are you certain we should..."

"Are you saying we cannot trust our king's word that Harry and Tauriel are trustworthy, Woli?" Gimli asked softly, his eyes narrowing dangerously.

Woli grumbled a bit but said nothing further. He reached into his pack, and brought out two folded pieces of parchment, a thin book and a tiny ink pot of ingenious design. The quill had a little cap to it, providing both quill and topper in one, while the majority of the pot was made of metal bar to small strips of glass, barely a finger's length worth, indented into the metal of the pot and so protected by a small outer rim which could be used to check how much ink could be seen.

Spread out, the first folded piece of parchment was almost as large as the dwarf sitting down. On it was something that Harry could only loosely call a map, with very little detail. The next one was of a smaller area, as shown by a key to one side. Harry couldn't read the numbers as they were written in the dwarfish language, but he could at least see that it was a measurement key of some kind. While smaller, it was far more detailed, showing a series of rolling hills, a few places where trees had been noted, and so forth.

"We are not only a patrol. We are a survey team. Woli here is apprenticed to a master mapmaker of our people, Kiflo of the Blue Mountains. He and his fellow apprentices are out on patrols like ours, surveying the area that had originally been controlled by Dale and then further afield. We're at the outer outskirts of Dale now and will be making a wide circuit north and east around the lonely mountain until we meet up with another group at one of the stopovers that have been refurbished since Erebor was reclaimed," Gimli explained, thumping the other dwarf companionably on the shoulder with a fist that would probably have brought Harry to his knees. The other dwarf simply took it stoically, his scowl lessening slightly.

With a small *lumos* giving them more than enough light to see by, Harry and Tauriel examined the map closely, and Harry hummed thoughtfully. "You know, while you're showing hills, streams and everything here, and I would never denigrate your work, I remember seeing maps in my old home where I came from originally." He had no idea how much of his past Thorin had told his people or what rumor had said of his past, so he kept things vague for now. "Those maps used different colors to denote height, as well as steepness and other things."

He began to explain some of the maps he had seen back on Earth, with Woli listening avidly, grabbing the parchment of notes from a grumbling Gimli and staring at it, then back to Harry, tapping it thoughtfully with the quill before marking down some things. Tauriel also listened, leaning into Harry's side, her head on his shoulder, smiling faintly as his arm went around hers automatically even as he continued the discussion.

Woli asked several questions, by which point the food, such as it was, was ready. Barely softened earth-bread and barely charred meat was not what Harry would call a meal, although the taste of the bread was interesting despite how poorly it had been made.

The conversation on maps ended on that note, but as he was eating, Harry looked back at Gimli. "But is there a specific reason for your surveys? Or is it just Thorin and Bard wanting to know more about the area around them?"

“There are reasons we’re this far out, aye,” Gimli said between bites. “We’re finally getting some real responses to King Thorin’s overtures of marriage contracts and so forth. Whole trade convoys are due along with delegations are set to arrive from several of the other dwarf and houses.”

“It’s taken this long to get that going? And here I thought the Stiffbeards we ran into were going to be late to the party,” Harry mused.

Tauriel and the dwarves stared at Harry, and he shrugged. “What?”

“My heart, it has only been a year since we have been away from Erebor. Any political discussions about trade or mutual defense or so forth would normally take at least a decade or more among my people,” Tauriel explained. Such was rare, but occasionally, it had happened in the past between nations that were predominantly made of one of the three elvish tribes: Teleri, Sindar or Noldor.

“It does not take that long for us, but a year or two is normal for our fol. And it is not as if this kind of thing, diplomatic marriages, I mean, is normal among dwarvenkind. Most of the time, the Houses of the Dwarves stick to their own. Very rarely is a king of such import or in such a position as to be required to reach out to one of the other houses for a spouse. We dislike such political marriages, after all, as you probably know, Harry.”

Gimli’s tone made that last sentence a question, but Harry nodded understanding. He did know that and both Harry and Tauriel had learned more of how the dwarves conducted personal relationships and so forth when he was last in Erebor from Dis, Thorin’s sister. Most of the courtship was in the hands of the woman, particularly the final decision, and that decision was based almost entirely on personal attraction and attachment, if the woman in the relationship had found their One, the one dwarven male they could come to love. Regardless of anything else, that last, the personality compatibility would be very important, and was the area Dis would be looking for more than trade deals, mutual defense treaties or anything else.

“Beyond that, trade with the Iron Hills is picking up. All of the stopovers between the Iron Hills and Erebor, which our people built in earlier times, have been repaired or rebuilt by this point, and trade caravans will soon be moving large amounts of goods in every direction,” Gimli said, smiling faintly.

One of the others grinned. “Aye, it has been some time since steel has flowed into the Iron Hills in any quantity. It will be good to get the price of steel and weapons and armor down again.”

“I’m sorry, I would’ve thought that a place named the Iron Hills would have enough of their own steel,” Tauriel said apologetically. “If not, why are the Iron Hills named so?”

“Because we are all iron-headed!” All of the dwarves there chorused, then burst out laughing as Tauriel blinked.

Harry chuckled, understanding that she had just given them the best opening for an ongoing joke of their people than they could’ve hoped for. Eventually, however, Gimli explained, “What the Iron Hills have in abundance is **iron**, lass. Steel is different. Iron will travel one way to Erebor, and steel will come back.”

“But surely dwarves can make their own steel regardless of where it comes from,” Harry said, confused. “I thought all dwarven nations could work with metal to a certain degree.”

“We can, but only the dwarves of Erebor and Moria before them know the secret of creating so much steel so cheaply and quickly. The secret of the heat needed, the secret of what to add, how to make it in large quantities without harming the quality at all? That is the secret of my folk,” Gimli said with a chuckle.

“And setting such a system up in the Iron Hills during our exile would’ve taken all of our funds and then some. We would’ve bankrupted our entire folk even further at a time when we are at our lowest ebb already,” the oldest dwarf in the patrol, a gray-bearded dwarf almost as old as Balin, whose name was Vuli, stated. “It was the choice between feeding ourselves, feeding our children and dams, or trying to set up something for the future. Thrain and Thrór before him decided to save our people.”

For a moment, there was silence around the campfire as the dwarves there remembered those times. Gimli might’ve been a child at the time, but he could still remember how many days he’d gone without food, how close to death his mother had come through disease or lack of food herself. Those thoughts were not any such that any dwarf could remember with equanimity, and he was one of the youngest there. For someone like Kinli, there were even more such memories to deal with even now.

Harry let the dwarves have their silence, reflecting that had they been human, any human would probably have gone into debt to whatever king ruled the new country they were in trying to do both. But the very idea of going into debt to someone who had already opened their homes and kingdom to them would have been anathema to dwarves, even if they all came from the same House.

Eventually the silence was broken by Gimli, moving the conversation along briskly. “Regardless, it is why Erebor was the center of the steel trade for so long. Soon, new full plate suits of armor will be made for the first time in numbers since Smaug.” He grimaced, shaking his head. “Such heavy plate was next to useless against the dragon, but against normal weapons, well, Mithril, they are not, but they will be the next best thing. And we dwarves can wear that kind of armor without losing much in the way of endurance, unlike you humans or elves.”

“And what of speed and mobility?” Tauriel asked archly. “To my mind, those are even more important than endurance.”

“Yes, well, you would think that, wouldn’t you? You’re an elf,” Gimli said, causing more laughter, which Tauriel joined in. “But we have chain mail and other types of armor for those who want it. But I, for one, am looking forward to seeing a true...”

Here, Gimli segued into Khuzdul for a moment. The other dwarves all nodded, and Harry frowned, trying to think of a translation. “Anvil Corps or Anvil Company?”

All of the dwarves stopped and stared at Harry, tensing, and Harry waved his hand. “I don’t speak your language, but I could make out one of the words there. I’ve heard it before with Thorin when we were in the smithies back in Erebor. And I’m not going to ask for a translation, either. The only words I know in your language are battle cries and curses, and that’s all I need to know.”

“AH, well, those we allow!” Gimli laughed, shaking his head. “And while your translation was nowhere near in terms of what we call them, I suppose in context, it’s quite close. It’s how that kind of

formation fights, a solid line of armor-clad dwarves, clad head to toe in unbreakable metal. They stand on the defense and will take any attack on themselves, becoming the rock on which our enemies will break like water.”

There was a lot of grim pride in Gimli’s voice, and Harry laughed with them, thankful that the moment of tension had passed. The dwarves were extremely protective of their language. Indeed, he doubted anyone elf or human had ever been allowed to learn Khuzdul except, as Gimli had said, curses and battlecries.

“And you are reckoned something of a runesmith, are you not, Harry?” Woli asked, leaning forward in interest and equally willing to move the conversation away from Harry’s attempt at translating their language. “Were you taught that by your parents? Is it a common skill where you originally came from?”

“Somewhat common, to a certain degree. Few are as capable with runes as I have become, and no, neither of my parents taught me them or anything else. They were killed when I was a baby. And as for my greater family, I never learned anything about them,” Harry said with a shrug. That was an old pain, and it no longer hurt to think of his parents or the lack of knowledge he had about them.

However, all the dwarves were shocked and appalled by this, with many of them asking questions about whether or not his parents had any family friends who could’ve at least set him in the right direction. Family knowledge and craftwork were incredibly important to dwarves, and all of them became incensed when they were told that even Harry’s teachers hadn’t told him much about his family. Only that his father was a prankster, and his mother a highly intelligent witch. A word that needed some explanation, as it had negative connotations in the common tongue, but which did nothing to lessen their anger.

One dwarf, however, had remained silent throughout this conversation, frowning, trying to figure out what had been bothering him by what Harry or Tauriel had said moments ago. Then he clicked his fingers as he got it. “Wait, you mentioned Stiffbeards, didn’t you!? Have you run into Stiffbeards, Harry? If so, you and Tauriel went well out of your way from where the Elvish woods of Lothlorien are supposed to reside if rumor is right.”

“We ran into one of those convoy/delegations of yours. It was under attack by trolls south of here around five days ago,” Harry explained. Tauriel took up the tale, explaining more about the territory they had been in, as well as what happened to the trolls before Harry described the dwarves in question.

“I am somewhat bemused they weren’t using long spears...” Gimli murmured, stroking his beard thoughtfully, causing Harry to smirk a little, still remembering the picture of Gimli as a youngling without a beard. “The Stiffbeard’s spear formations are rightly famed. What weapons were they using instead, Harry?”

“Crossbows, some ingeniously created ballistae on their carts, and double-handed war hammers, for the most part,” Harry explained. “I was somewhat astonished at how uninformed they all were in their mode of dress, how they kept their beard and weapons, really.”

“The Stiffbeards are like that, extremely organized, and I suppose the phrase communal works? It is not quite accurate, but it’s close enough,” Gimli said, thinking about it. Then, one of the other

dwarves said something in their own tongue, and he nodded firmly. "You are right, Carn, I had forgotten. That weapon denotes that group as an elite unit among the Stiffbeards. It is nice to know that they are treating the idea of a marriage alliance with King Thorin so seriously."

"Or are so desperate," Tauriel said, shaking her head and looking over at Harry, who grimaced but nodded and began to describe how the two of them had been treated by the Stiffbeards. Even the dwarves who were the most put off by Tauriel being an elf looked aghast at the amount of negative treatment they'd gotten, and Gimli shook his head. "It is hard to hear of you being so ill-treated by any dwarf, let alone by what is a royal procession, Harry, especially after the two of you help them defend what dams they are traveling with regardless of station."

"Still, considering how much trouble they have with the Southerners, it is understandable," Woli said, shaking his head. "And you know that the iron fists already said they could not send even a single trade convoy, let alone a delegation to discuss a marriage alliance."

Harry and Tauriel looked at him, and the dwarf shrugged, gesturing over to Gimli, who replied with an equally grim tone. "While the Stiffbeards are in conflict with the men of the South, the iron fists face both southerners and Easterlings. The men of the south make war on our folk once every other human generation or so, but conflict with the Easterlings is never-ending."

Woli nodded. "I once got drunk with one of the iron fists on a trade trip down from the Iron Hills. The iron fists are masters of defense and terrain, but there are just so many damn Easterlings! There's always some kind of conflict, small skirmishes, or outright invasions every few years or so. The men of the South, have discipline and their giant elephants. The Easterlings have numbers, some strange chariot units and a warrior culture that the man's expansion at the cost of others. They war among themselves almost as much as with their neighbors and have been pressing the iron fists hard for several hundred years, even before the fall of Erebor. But the iron fists hold their land as hard as they can. They are the most stubborn of Houses, and thousands upon thousands of Easterlings have died trying to shift them."

"Really? There's another group out there that is even more stubborn than you Longbeards?" Harry asked dryly, and the dwarves laughed, some of the grimness leaving them at Harry's joke. "Oh, and the southerners are called Haradrim."

"The Stonefoots are already in Erebor. A few families had come one after another to join us, but a delegation and trade convoy soon followed." Gimli snorted, shaking his head. "When you get to Erebor, you will notice them right away."

Harry looked at him quizzically, and another dwarf snickered, a grin nearly hidden behind his beard. "The Stonefoot warriors are bald to a man. Apparently, it is a sign of their devotion to combat or something. They wear fur over their heavy armor and wield spears in the main, along with large shields, although without any of the unit cohesion of the Stiffbeards. They're also wider than most of our folk."

"Aye, they eat a lot. I remember once, when a group of them came to the Blue Mountains, Bombur got into an eating contest with a few of them and actually lost!" Gimli declared with a laugh.

Harry nearly fell off his seat at that, while Tauriel's eyes widened, and she asked hesitantly, "Are we talking about the same dwarf? Bombur, the most... round... of the fellows of Thorin's company? The

one who looked as if he weighed about as much as any two or even three of the other members of Thorin's group?"

She did not want to speak ill of the dead, but honestly she hadn't really understood why Bombur of all the dwarves she had met had been one of Thorin's companions. Even the news of how much he had helped to sway the people of Lake-town to the dwarves' cause did not offset how... ill-suited Bombur had been to the traveling life in Tauriel's view. Not a day had gone by while the dwarves languished in Thranduil's jails that the fat dwarf had not complained about the lack of food. While, Tauriel had later learned, being fed more than he would have otherwise thanks to Bilbo's burglary.

"The very same!" Gimli chuckled again, along with one of the other dwarves, who had been there at the time. "But don't let their seemingly overweight looks fool you. Most of them are powerfully strong, stronger than most of our folk."

"Are they up to Dori's strength?" Harry asked interested.

"No, nor that of our king." At that, the dwarves all laughed louder, slapping their knees in memory. "One of their guards said something, and Thorin took exception to it. The two of them had a wrestling match, and it was a sight to see! Thorin still bested him two falls out of three, though."

"Only among you dwarves could a king get involved in a public wrestling match and not have it be a thing of scandal," Tauriel said with a shake of her head, but she was smiling as she did it, so none of the dwarves took offense even as she hid a wince, wondering how such a show would've been taken by any elves in Erebor at the time.

"The problem the Stonefoot house has been facing over the past hundred years, however, is no joke. They are the most north and east of our Lonely Mountain. Their holds are the only ones still in the Grey Mountains and they must deal with not only the weather but orc excursions and even a few drakes appearing every decade or so, along with far-reaching raids from Easterlings."

Harry and Tauriel glanced at one another at that, and Tauriel nodded slightly, tapping the bow that left wrist at her side. The two lovers understood that they would probably be heading in that direction at some point over the next few years. Hunting down such creatures was part of the task that had been laid on Tauriel's shoulders by Oromë after all.

"But I have to say that I doubt that Thorin will ever enter into a marriage alliance with them. There are many families among our House, and theirs that have intermarried since we had a kingdom of our own to the north generations ago," Gimli opined. "They remained in the Grey Mountains while we returned to Erebor, bringing it to its greatest power before Smaug followed us from the north."

Harry hummed thoughtfully, leaning his head sideways against Tauriel, feeling her hair under his cheek, the scent of her in his nostril soothing him. "And the Firebeards and Broadbeams are to the west, correct? In the Blue Mountains near the Shire, from what I remember."

He felt Tauriel twitch and knew that she remembered a tale that Celeborn had told them of the invasion of the dwarves of Nogrod and the sacking of Menegroth. King Thingol had asked for their help to pair a necklace of dwarven craft with the Silmaril Beren and Luthien had taken from Morgoth and given to Thingol as the bride price for Luthien's hand in marriage, losing his hand in the process and being tortured by Sauron along the way.

The piece of dwarven craft in question was the Nauglamir, the most beautiful necklace to ever be made in Middle Earth, in which jewels of Valinor rested. Crafted originally by the dwarves of Nargothrond, it had been reclaimed from the dragon Glaurong's horde after Turin, the doomed Hero of the line of Hurin, had slain the dragon with his black blade.

Turin, one of the greatest heroes of the wars against Morgoth, later killed himself in grief at the knowledge he had wed his own sister, Niniel. The young woman had taken her own life when she had learned that from Glaurong, leaping off a cliff. As long as Morgoth had resided in Middle Earth, tales of joy and triumph over evil had been few and far between, and even fewer such tales were not tainted by tragedy, such was the power of the Black Foe.

Hurin, their father, was the one who reclaimed Nauglamir. He had been captive of Morgoth after refusing to tell him of where Gondolin was hidden, and had been cursed to watch the Curse laid on his family take hold, seeing their tragic adventures. He had then eventually, with the Nauglamir, reached the land of Doriath, where he was taken to the king. Hurin tossed the Nauglamir at Thingol's feet, railing at him until Melian, the Maia, had healed his mind of the weight of Morgoth's influence.

The Nauglamir, untainted by its time as a dragon's bauble thanks to the jewels of Valinor set within it, was the only thing on Middle Earth that could possibly hold a Silmaril. It was worked with such skill and magic that it weighed next to nothing, and could gift the wearer with greater nobility, grace and beauty, as if a spell had been cast on them by a Maia.

The dwarves had agreed. But in the creation, the dwarves had been driven mad with the desire of the Silmaril. Thingol recognized this, and when the dwarves tried to claim that he had no right to own the Nauglamir after setting the Silmaril within, Thingol had attempted to use words to shame them. Only for it to backfire and for the dwarves to attack him in their need of the Silmaril.

When Eru Thingol was slain, his wife, Melian the Maia, had fled Middle Earth in her grief only sending a warning to her daughter Luthien the Fair, who was dwelling with her husband, Beren. The two of them had been given a second life by Mandos, who had been moved by Luthien's grief.

And as Melian went, the Veil of Melian had fallen.

While the forces of Morgoth had not been in a position to take advantage, a few of the dwarves had survived and fled to their folk in Nogrod. Nogrod had then gone to war against the folk of Doriath, laying waste to Menegroth, which had once been the most ancient of Elven cities in Middle Earth in their desire for the Silmaril. Their army had been ambushed in the forest by the men of Tol Galen, the elves and ents in the battle of Sarn Athrad. All the treasure of Menegroth the dwarves had carted off were cursed by their king, but Beren had not wanted any of it, regardless. He had it all tossed into the river Ascar. All save the Nauglamir and the Silmaril set into it, which Beren brought back to his wife.

The dwarves of Nogrod had been Broadbeams or Firebeards. Which it was, was lost to time. As Nogrod itself was. Nogrod had been destroyed when the Ered Luin mountain range was shattered by the Valar during the Age of Wrath.

"Nay. Neither of those houses has ever truly recovered from the ancient wars against the greater darkness and others..." Vuli said, now actually glaring at Tauriel. "Which is why they allowed so many of our own folk to move there."

Tauriel glared right back, pushing away from Harry as she did so and closer to her bow and arrow. "While I am far too young to remember such times, I am a Sindar elf, dwarf. And I have been trained by Lord Celeborn over the past year. I have been told of some of the treachery of your folk. If you want to hold whatever ancient evil is in your head that you think my folk did against me, I will say that when it comes to ancient wrongs, it was you and yours who began such exchanges."

"Say that to the petty dwarves who your folk hunted as animals! Say that to the dwarves of Belegost, forced to flee their home after being friendly to the dwarves since well before the Battle of Unnumbered Tears, where it was the dwarves who took on the first dragons! But no, the dwarves of Belegost too were forced to flee after the sack of Menegroth, because all dwarves were seen with the same suspicion," Vuli barked back. "To say nothing of what your own cursed king did. Turning away from our folk after Smaug sacked Erebor, acting the role of coward and Oath Breaker! But what could be expected of an elf?"

For a moment, tension crackled in the air between the ancient dwarf and the Elven maiden before Harry gently took Tauriel in his arms again, shaking his head. "You're right. Many of these wrongs are ancient, from the First Age when we now live in the Third as reckoned by all folk of Middle Earth who know of such things. Neither of you were alive back when the bad blood between elf and dwarf began. I would dare say that even your parents were not involved in them?" When Tauriel shook her head, Harry went on smoothly. "Then let us leave those wrongs where they belong, in the past."

He now glared at Vuli, his emerald eyes hard and cold. "I was among Thorin's company as you know, Vuli. I know well the feel of captivity by Thranduil, how harshly he treated us then, how harshly he treated your people before. But Thranduil is dead, slain in battle at the feet of the Lonely Mountain. And even though she helped to capture us, Tauriel had no part in any cruelties laid against us. Indeed, she railed against such. Do not paint Tauriel in the same color as her now-dead king, or her ancestors."

"Agreed," Gimli said instantly, glaring across the fire at the other dwarf. While he was somewhat leery about Tauriel as an elf as well, he was also something of a student of history, not just the history of his folk, but history as a whole of Middle Earth. And he knew that particular sorry chapter in Middle Earth's history had been the fault of the dwarves more than anyone else.

The elves were not blameless in his eyes, particularly not the elves of Mirkwood, considering how many hundreds of his people died during the long exodus from Erebor when they wouldn't have if the elves had just helped them with food and shelter, let alone actual military aid. But he wasn't going to hold that against Tauriel. Like many others, he had heard how much she had resented the former king of Mirkwood and his heavy-handedness, his cowardice when it came to dealing with the spiders of the 'Necromancer'.

"Even if you do not wish to set aside your prejudice against all elves, Vuli, you should do so in this one case. Tauriel proved to Thorin and those with him that she was a friend. And remember also that her people stood alongside ours in the Battle of the Lonely Mountain and took on the brunt of the troll forces that Azog brought to bear against us. Neither you nor I were involved in that battle, but we have both heard the tales, true?"

"... True. I apologize for my tone, Tauriel of Mirkwood. I will watch it in the future. I... I remember all too well the time of the exodus and how your people turned away from ours is one memory I will

never truly forget. It makes my knowledge of even more ancient wrongs harsher for it. But I will not bring up past wrongs in your presence, Tauriel. That, that was wrong of me," Vuli stated with some reluctance but also some honest regret for how this confrontation had begun.

"If you forgive my words, I will do the same to your tone. Truly, what my Harry said is true: that ancient wrong is indeed ancient even as my people reckon it, and even my parents were not born at the time, both having been born during the Second Age. It is simply that Celeborn, who was there at the time, told such a stark tale that I found myself sympathizing with those who were. I will not bring it up again, and I will try not to let such color my interactions with any Broadbeams or Redbeards I happen to meet, let alone Longbeards such as yourself and those who dwell in Erebor. For truly, you did have a proper grievance against Thranduil," Tauriel answered equally formally.

At that all the dwarves, including several other, older members of the party all relaxed, and Harry nodded, although he kept one arm around Tauriel's waist, pulling her against him lightly, even as he turned to Gimli again. "I will note that there is one more house you haven't spoken of, the Blacklocks?"

"Hah, yes. I suppose in looks, they are somewhat like the Stiffbeards in that they all habitually have black hair, but that is where the similarity ends. Their skin is more golden tanned than black as night, and in terms of how they keep their beards and hair, they are much like my own folk, such is an individual choice regardless of your path in life" Gimli said, eager for the change in subject. "Snorl, you've been among them, haven't you?"

"Aye. My family and I traveled to the Blacklock lands during the exodus and remained there for a few years. We had escaped Erebor with a lot of cloth and sewing material and knew we would be able to find a good price for such among them as well as learn more about our trade. And we did. They are an interesting folk, and if you deplore the idea of static defenses and simply letting your opponents come to you, lady elf, then you would like them. They disdain the heavy armor most of our folk use and instead wear gambesons of amazing quality matched with axes and massive shields along with forearm bracers." Snorl answered with a faint smile of memory. "They welcomed my family for a time, and we were able to recoup enough money to set ourselves up in the Iron Hills in such a way that we could begin our craft once more. They are also great singers, even poets. And Blacklocks are some of the best when it comes to working with glass."

"Beyond the Stonefoots, the Blacklocks will have the easiest time trading with Erebor. With the Iron Hills between us, we can perhaps create a trade corridor and patrol it," Gimli said, "Far more easily than we could do with any of the other houses. Up to this point, only small-time traffic has made that long journey, but you've already seen one example of a joint Blacklock and Longbeard creation. The quill and inkwell that Woli carries. There is tremendous incentive there, and the more time goes on, the better our control of the trade roads will be."

Harry nodded, and the discussion turned to the Stiffbeards, what they had looked like, and the strangeness that Harry had noticed among them. Other dwarfs spoke of the other houses. This gave Harry and Tauriel more of an idea of what separated them in terms of looks and attitude from the Longbeards of Durin's House. Eventually, however, Gimli decided it was time for them all to head to bed.

He was about to assign watchers, but Harry reminded him of some of his runes, at which point Gimli watched as Harry put the runes around the camp, hiding them under a Notice-me Not array. "While this territory is not as wild as further south, we still need to be on the lookout. I don't suppose I could have some of those stones of yours, Harry? Or that you would mind traveling with us for a time as we finish our circuit?"

From the previous conversation, Harry knew this would mean that they would be on the eastern side of the Lonely Mountain, straight east from the Lonely Mountain towards the Iron Hills. But there would be possibly a road there by this point, which would make travel to the lonely mountain easier. Harry was a little reluctant to do so but decided that getting to know Gimli more was enough of an incentive to put off heading straight back to Erebor for a time.

He looked over to Tauriel, who nodded firmly, gesturing back south and east to where they had left the funeral buyers, which was still burning, sending smoke up into the nighttime sky that Tauriel could still see clearly. "If there are other goblin habitats like that around, dealing with them is always a good thing, Harry."

Harry nodded and turned back to Gimli. "In that case, you have two more for your patrol, Gimli."

The young dwarf nodded, smiling faintly, and then held out the small flask of his father's best mead. "In that case, and if you agree to put up those runic stones around every time we make camp, I believe you have earned this."

Harry took it and savored the mead going down with a loud and appreciative "Ahhh..."

Scene break

The next day, Tauriel woke before Harry, looking down at him, where Harry nuzzled into her chest. Both of them were naked from the waist up. While neither had been willing to be as open with their affections when surrounded by dwarves as they had become accustomed to while traveling alone, that hadn't meant that their clothing had stayed on or that they had gone to bed without kisses.

Kisses which Tauriel remembered now as she stared down at Harry, Tauriel gently passed her fingers through his hair, slowly tracing the lightning bolt mark on his forehead, a warmth and feeling of fulfillment filling her. *Yes. This is what I want to wake up to every morning. This man is who I will spend the rest of my life, however long it might be with. Whatever comes, my wizard and I will face it side-by-side.*

After a few moments, Harry stirred, looking up at Tauriel, and Tauriel stared back down, smiling at him, feeling as if she could see Harry's very soul in those emerald eyes of his.

For his part, Harry was lost in Tauriel's and pulled her into a tighter hug, leaning up slightly to give her a gentle kiss. "I love you."

"And I, you, Harry," Tauriel said simply but with feeling.

For several moments, they simply lay there, looking into one another's eyes. But then the noise of the camp around them began to rouse the pair, and they quickly rolled away from one another, grabbing at their clothing as Gimli's voice shouted from outside, "Up you get, lady elf and Harry! The sun

is up, and we must be moving. We have a schedule to keep, and you are now on a dwarven patrol! No simply gallivanting around or taking your time as you elven folk do.”

Tauriel shouted back, “I will take that as a challenge, good dwarf! And I promise that this elf will keep on going long after you and yours have marched your legs into mere nubs. Not that, given the length of those legs, that will take long.”

The dwarves all laughed, and Harry finished pulling on his shirt, making sure he didn’t look as if he’d just been making out with his lover, even though he would’ve liked to do so. He gave her a kiss on the neck, leaving Tauriel to prepare herself as he stepped out of the tent, heading over to where he left the room stones the night before. Within thirty minutes, all of the tents had been folded in, and sleep roles put away in packs, which are set on sturdy dwarf and backs, and the group was off.

Over breakfast, Harry decided that yes, he would be taking over cooking for the band as none of them seemed to be able to cook even as well as Fili and Kili. “And that is saying something. They could literally burn soup, for goodness sake!”

Regardless of the nature of the breakfast, the scouting party was soon on their way once more. Woli tended to lag behind, making notes as they went, while Gimli led from the front, making certain everyone was keeping watch on their surroundings as they went and that Woli had a minder at all times. They were following a noticeable route, with Gimli pointing out this or that landmark as they went. Many of these had obviously changed over time since the last time any dwarf human or even elf had passed through here, but dwarfish memory, written records in this case, was long, and the shapes of hills and rocks changed slowly.

For the first few hours, the group was silent, moving along and watching the area around them with only Gimli’s shouted commands, breaking the silence. This territory was mainly a series of rolling hills and flatlands, marked occasionally by a tree here or there. The soil was rocky for the most part, although there were areas of almost startlingly abundant grass or shrubbery. It wasn’t quite as rocky and inhospitable as it was further south, but it was close. More than that, Harry and the others saw some signs of ancient battles. Here a spear tip sticking out of the ground. There, a shield, the wood having rotted away only to leave the circle of metal around the edge, set in such a way within a series of rocks that it almost looked as if it was a broken monocle laying atop an eye staring down at the surrounding area.

Harry and Tauriel easily kept up with the dwarves, although they set a brisk pace, not quite jogging, but certainly moving faster than a walk. Harry remembered Hermione saying something about her mother liking to power walk as exercise, and the pace the dwarves set themselves was something like the image Harry had of what that term meant, although he doubted that any human could have kept up this pace for overlong with the burdens the dwarves carried. All of them had chain mail over gambesons, gauntlets, helmets, weapons and shields on their backs. The helmets were the simple type that just protected the top of the head shaped in a bowl, but even so, they looked to be weighty things, to say nothing of the rest.

Yet the dwarves, like Thorin and company before them, bore their burden stoically, marching on throughout the day. As the sun began to rise and finally burn away the last of the fog around them, they even began to joke, keeping their discussions in Common for Harry and Tauriel.

At first, all of them plied Harry with questions about the journey of the company, which Harry was happy to talk about, even those tales that dealt with his friends who had died in the battle of the Lonely Mountain, Bombur, Bifur, and Ori. Thanks to Galadriel, Harry had been able to deal with those losses as well as some of the continuing mental trauma of his time in the great beyond and Hermione's death back on earth. To say nothing about the physical damage done to his brain that had locked those memories in the foreground of his mind. Now, Harry took some pleasure in those stories most of all, remembering the good times he had with Bombur and Ori in particular.

He earned many a bemused scowl when he told them the story of how Thorin refused to not give him his payments due despite Harry's protests, and two of the dwarves even took to lecturing Harry about knowing his own worth, which Tauriel was happy to see judging by the laughter in her eyes as they did so. When Harry was able to explain that he had been convinced of such before they subsided, thankfully, and after a moment, Gimli hummed thoughtfully. "I am intrigued that Thoren said that you and your lady would both be given armor made for you by our forges. I wonder what kind of armor it will be. I cannot remember any non-dwarf being given our armor before, and this will be new-built, not gifted from an existing supply."

"Gambeson for certain for the lady elf," Vuli said definitively, nodding his head towards Tauriel, who nodded back. The two of them were extremely polite to one another, not wishing to have another confrontation as they had last night. "For the human, brigandine."

"That is the name that came up in discussion, yes. I confess that I don't know what that is. My own people never use armor of any kind. We relied far too heavily on magic," Harry admitted. "I would like something that is relatively quiet, easy to move in, and yet offers decent protection on its own." *And that is not mentioning whether or not I and the dwarven runesmiths can add a bit of magic into it in some fashion, as I hope.*

"Brigandine will do that. It isn't as good as dwarven-made chain mail, but it will allow you a greater range of movement. We dwarves tend not to rely on much in the way of movement when engaged in combat," Gimli said dryly. "As for being quiet, bah! Good dwarven mail does not do more than jingle. You can wear a shirt over it, and I would wager an elf would not hear a thing."

"Now, that sounds like an interesting experiment. As for not moving much once a battle begins, for such stout, short fellows as you, it makes sense. Not for my love and I," Tauriel said dryly. "For myself, I will approve of any kind of armor that protects my man when the two of us undoubtedly get dragged into trouble once more at some point in the future. Once Harry has told you more about his past life, you too will understand what I mean when I say he is a bit of a trouble magnet."

As magnets, or loadstones as they were commonly called, were known among the dwarves, this phrase needed no translation. It also worked to cause laughter throughout the group. Such exchanges continued throughout the day, the dwarves proving to be a rather upbeat lot.

This was a marked contrast to the journey with Thoren and Company. While Harry and the others did have moments of jocular and laughter, in the main, the journey from the Shire to the Lonely Mountain had been a serious affair, the shadow of Smaug and the need to right past wrongs hanging heavily over the dwarfs' heads in a way that only the youngest Fili, Kili, and Ori, did not seem to feel on occasion. But the dwarves of Gimli's patrol knew that their home had been reclaimed, knew that

their people were forging a new nation on top of the rubble of the old. While trouble persisted, and problems remained both within the realm of Erebor and without, the future was bright for Gimli and his band, and their banter reflected that.

Harry was also amused by many of the jokes and comments passed around. Dwarven humor was not like human humor. There was no joking about affairs of the heart, there was no joking about parentage or anything of that nature, which Harry had known long since thanks to a certain punch to the gut by Thorin. There was some of what Harry called bathroom humor and details of when dwarves were young, the mishaps of youth, were a source of much of the humor the dwarves shared, even if some tales had been passed on to the new teller through many other mouths before.

And when the talk shifted away from jokes, there was a great deal about various professions, blacksmithing, clothing making, textile work, jewelry, and so forth. Not about trends and not much about what looked good either. Rather, the discussion was simply about the quality of the work, whether or not this or that dwarf approved of what another dwarf had done.

And even there, the dwarves are very different from humans. A typical group of humans in this world would have conversations about the weather, farming, food, or the market for such.

None of that mattered to the dwarves. Even when Harry asked questions about the underground farms of Erebor, these particular dwarves didn't know anything about them. "For more information about how those have grown, Harry, you would need to ask those who have been involved in that from the beginning. While dwarves do not look down on any kind of work, only so many of us are called to work with things that can grow. Mahal did not infuse us with any great joy in such things when he made the fathers of our Houses," Gimli laughingly explained.

Snorting, Harry knew that to be the literal truth in a way that perhaps the dwarves didn't, as he remembered some of the tales of the creation of the world that Gandalf had told him. While married to Yavanna, the lady of growing things that Bilbo revered above all other Valar, Aule had not confided the fact that he was trying to create life to Yavanna. Thus, dwarves had literally no knowledge or love of things that grew. The fact that they had gained such to the point where they could maintain their underground farms in the first place and even some farms on the surface was a testament to their stubborn desire to survive rather than any sign of appreciation for such work.

However, that memory sparked another question, and Harry asked, "By the way, has Erebor had any word of Gandalf? When we left Lothlorien, The Lady passed on that he intended to head into Gondor, but I wonder if any further information has reached the mountain of his movements."

Gimli shook his head. "Nay, word of Tharkûn has reached us. I think you still do not understand how large Middle Earth is, Harry, and how slowly information moves through normal methods. Nor have we had any dealings with the other wizards you and Thorin met, Radagast. Radagast has been seen in Mirkwood by the elves, but that is all we know. We dwarves and the men of Dale have had our own issues to deal with and have not looked beyond our borders save towards our own folk."

"I suppose it was somewhat naïve of me to think that he would have somehow gotten in touch with you all," Harry sighed, although amused that Radagast apparently hadn't interacted with dwarves enough over the centuries to earn a dwarfish name.

“Do not forget, my heart, that eventually, you and I will be traveling into Gondor ourselves,” Tauriel said with a smile. “Some time among the dwarves so that you and you the dwarves and rune crafters can exchange teachings, then to the north on the errand given to me. And then traveling into Gondor or elsewhere was our tentative plan, I believe? I have never been in a nation of men, so it should be interesting.”

The dwarves all looked at the human and Elven pair questioningly, but Harry didn't enlighten them, watching instead as his lady began to pick up the pace, passing the other dwarves quickly. “And now, with the sun well above us, I believe that I am done keeping pace with you slow folk. I will range ahead of you and search for signs of goblins or orcs in the surrounding terrain. I will find you this evening, Harry.”

Harry nodded, although a part of him wanted to go with his lady love. Since he could keep up with her now, that would've been no hardship, and while he loved watching Tauriel go, he hated to see her leave despite the many days of alone time they'd had before meeting with the Stiffbeards. But it would perhaps have seemed somewhat churlish to the dwarves if they both left after agreeing that they would join the scouting party, and he also wanted to keep talking to the dwarves. So Harry merely said, “Stay safe, love.”

“My dear, there can be no danger to someone who walks unseen as I can.” Tauriel laughed, pulled up the hood of her cloak, and raced forward now, going on light feet as only elves could, covered by the cloak that she had been given by the elves of Lothlorien, which allowed her to blend into the surroundings almost as well as Harry's invisibility cloak could have hid him from sight. Within 20 yards of having left the party, none of the dwarves could pick her out among the surrounding area. Within another ten, even Harry couldn't. Tauriel was gone, without even a bent piece of grass or disturbed pebble to mark her passage.

“...No wonder elves are seen as such uncanny folk,” Gimli muttered, tugging at his beard even as he and the others continued their own methodical advance. “Can you do the same, Harry? You have spent some time among Elvish folk, after all. That always leaves a mark on humans or dwarves, at least according to old tales.”

Harry laughed, remembering suddenly a young boy who had wanted to go on an adventure away from the last homely house, but he understood the truth behind Gimli's words. Being around elves did indeed have an impact on people. “I can do the same, yes, but I would need to use my invisibility cloak to do it. Although I will say that I can also move as silently as Tauriel now, thanks to her kind tutelage.”

“And isn't that an uncanny thing to think of, a human and an elf together. I've studied the history of Middle Earth as best I could, and I know that it has occurred before. Yet even so, it is still uncanny,” Gimli said, then grinned, and punched Harry in this side, causing Harry to grimace despite the blow being the dwarves and equivalent of a friendly tap. “And yet, all of us could see the love that is between you, Harry. I am happy that you found your One, and I wish the two of you happiness and a long life.” He laughed again then. “Although I suppose long life can be assumed among wizards and elves alike.”

Harry laughed along with the other dwarves and began to ask Gimli and the others questions about their families, the Iron Hills, and other things of that nature. All of his questions were answered

readily and proudly. Dwarves liked nothing better than to talk of their folk, their deeds of hand and skill. And while more serious than the earlier banter, it was still welcome to the dwarves.

That evening, as she had said she would, Tauriel returned as the dwarves were thinking about places to put up camp, reporting that she had discovered a small area between three Hills where they could easily make camp and have access to a small stream of running water. Soon, the party was settling down, and Harry gained several new fans for his cooking.

The next three days passed like this, the only difference being that Tauriel would leave the group after breakfast, heading out on long ranges around the party, coming back with information she would share with Woli to the point where he could draw a map of the area well out beyond the patrol route in either direction. He was even able to start using some of the ideas Harry had given him about adding more information to the map in terms of terrain, height and so forth.

And as they went, heading north and east, the land began to change. The land itself became less rocky and more grassy, although what rocks there were were of far larger size. Hills became taller, while what little in the way of streams there were disappeared almost entirely. Yet the area was still greener than further south, which hinted to the dwarves that there were underground water sources.

This hint proved to be fact when they came upon a small hamlet, long deserted of human folk, so much so the wood had all rotted away, leaving only stone walls behind, with even those having collapsed in places. In the center was a well. It was dug deep into some underground water source, where they were still able to pull up several helmets worth of water.

Harry and Tauriel examined the homes carefully, looking for any signs of violence, but this place had been abandoned for so long that there was no hint as to if the people who had settled here had moved on willingly. Still, the area here was decent enough, and hard-working humans could make a farm out of it that was clear. This would be good information to take back to Dale for certain, especially as, according to Tauriel, they hoped to expand westward in time.

The hills became even larger as they went. As the fifth day of their journey with the dwarves reached midmorning, Tauriel came back early from ranging ahead of the party. "At the speed you all are moving, it will take you another day to reach them, but I have seen signs of goblins," the elven huntress reported briskly. "I think it is a larger group than the one we discovered you fighting further south. There are also numerous animals about. Deer in the main, one of which I felled with an arrow but a few leagues ahead. Rabbits and other smaller animals as well are more prolific around here."

Further south, that had not been the case, a trend that had only begun to change the day before they found the abandoned hamlet. Before that, the only animals they had seen were birds and extremely small animals like chipmunks or gophers. Even the birds had been crows and ravens, not the most pleasant sort of birds to see. The band had also eaten their way through the fish supplies that Harry and Tauriel had so carefully built up down by the River Celduin before crossing, so he was not alone in smiling happily at Tauriel's report.

Tauriel saw this and smiled. "Harry, if you would like to follow me? By the time these good dwarves join us, we should have it skinned and ready for cooking." The way Harry's eyes lit up as he looked at her made Tauriel's heart pound, and her smile turned a bit softer for a moment as he began to speed up his pace, shifting along the flank of the dwarven party.

“Before you go, tell us more about these goblin sightings you said you had seen,” Gimli ordered, hiding a smile at the way these two were around one another sometimes. “I know you said it would take another day and a half to reach where you saw such signs, but still.”

“I came upon one of their kills first of all and then spotted a few goblin footprints and other markings, along with a crushed bracelet of bone. At that point, I decided to turn back rather than explore further given the distance involved,” Tauriel reported before going into detail more on the markings she had seen, noting that they looked as if the goblins had been in the area for quite some time. “Their smell is prevalent in the area to the point where it is making most animals shy away. The only animal trail I spotted after that point was that of a badger, and that species is notoriously uncaring of danger.” She shook her head with a sigh. “Unfortunately, there is little a badger can do about arrows.”

“When we ambush them, I’ll transfigure some stones and other things into badgers to fight the goblins in revenge, Tauriel,” Harry joked lightly, although he was partially serious too. He had spent some time on this portion of the journey thinking about the proper mix of spells when facing goblins, orcs, and other creatures. A mob of transfigured creatures to lighten the load on his allies and to allow him to keep his distance and thus use more spellwork rather than swordwork was one such idea.

Tauriel smiled slightly at that, nodding her head, and after Gimli asked him several other questions, she and Harry raced ahead of the rest of the party. And by the time the dwarves caught up, the two of them did indeed have the deer carcass bled out and its meat roasting on a small fire.

Not that preparing the deer had been all the two of them had done. Even in the privacy of their tent, neither was willing to do more than cuddle and kiss lightly when surrounded by dwarves. Even with Harry’s spellwork, there was just something about being surrounded by dwarves that put both of them off more physical signs of affection. Away from the party, that had not been the case.

But thankfully, Tauriel’s tunic and cloak worked to hide the hickies that Harry had left on her neck and collarbone, and Harry’s shirt did the same for him. And if any of the dwarves noticed how the two of them were even more touchy-feely for a little bit after the dwarves arrived before settling down again, none of them saw fit to comment.

True to Tauriel’s words, late in the next day, Gimli and the others finally began to make out the same signs in the surrounding area of goblins being nearby that Tauriel had seen. It was quickly decided to set up camp then and there, pulling back over another hill to the west. That night, as the dwarves prepared their weapons and gear, Harry and Tauriel scouted the area in a wide area around where Tauriel estimated where the goblin’s main camp would be.

They saw goblins almost instantly. The goblins were hunting around in pairs, moving as silently as they could through the area. Bypassing them was child’s play, and the pair pushed beyond them, searching for the goblin’s main camp. That took them most of the night, and scouting around the camp to make certain they had seen everything they needed to see took the rest. By the time they returned, it was near dawn, and Gimli was pacing around where the dwarves had made camp, just at the edge of the Notice-Me-Not array that Harry had set up before he had left.

A Notice-Me-Not array that worked on Tauriel, Harry was amused to note. Every time her eyes grazed over the camp, she turned her attention away to look around them again, unable to notice

anything within that area. "This does look like the area where we left our fellows, Harry, but I cannot see them anywhere."

It was only when Harry crossed over and tapped the runestone to cancel the ward that she noticed that the dwarves were there, and her eyes narrowed at the smiles she saw on many of the dwarves' faces. "I don't know why you all are so amused. You would've been tricked too. And none of you have the magic necessary to use that particular runic array, now do you?"

All the dwarves grumbled a bit at that, but it was the truth. Runes that needed activation like that, which created an effect that went well beyond the runestone itself, needed magic to activate. Gandalf and the other wizards of this world, Galadriel, Elrond, and so forth, who could direct their own magic, would be able to make use of them, but dwarves could not do so. They imbued their runes with magic during the crafting process tied into the art of crafting itself, like Harry had seen once back in Erebor, and could not do so on command or by themselves.

"They seem to have something of the same setup as the other group of goblins we dealt with when we first met," Harry reported as Tauriel knelt on the ground, beginning to mark out an outline of the area the goblins seemed to live in. "There's one main entrance and two side entrances to the cave system we saw. There are several goblins outside at all times, including during the day, ostensibly hidden underneath an awning of tree branches here." As he spoke, he gestured down to where Tauriel just finished marking that out on the ground. "We saw at least four groups of goblins out hunting, although one could've been the same group twice. They seem to like to go out in groups of two, but I didn't see anything I could use to identify them. Tauriel?"

"I think it was the same group. One of them had a mark on his ear as if it had been cut by a dagger, and I saw the same mark on one of the two goblins in the fourth group we saw Harry," she replied. "There might also be a fourth entrance on the back most of the hill here. There was a suspiciously large group of rocks there, which may or may not have been set there naturally. I would have had to get much closer to see if it was or not. But as the night wound on, the goblins became more active, moving around the area, skinning the carcasses their hunters had brought in, and gathering what roots and berries they seemed to add to their normal meal of pure meat."

Orcs and goblins both ate far more meat than any of the other races and could go for longer without eating than dwarves or humans, let alone hobbits. Their marching speed over long marches was also incredible, better than any dwarven or human infantry, regardless of terrain or weather.

"I didn't see any orcs among them, but they have at least a hundred, maybe more goblins up there," Tauriel finished, both speaking and putting the finishing touches on the makeshift map of the area she and Harry had seen.

"Rust and botheration! That is a far larger force than we expected to find. I wonder... have they built up their numbers since the battle of the Lonely Mountain, or was this group not involved in it at all?" Gimli mused, tugging at his beard. The other dwarves nearby all stilled at that, and Harry scowled, crossing his arms while Tauriel looked pained. "Still, I believe we can take them during the day."

Harry frowned, pointing at himself and Tauriel as if to ask if Gimli thought that because of the two of them being there, and Gimli laughed harshly. "If we were able to take them unawares, Harry, we might be able to push them back into their holes during the day. Goblins are easily frightened when the

sun is high." Which would indeed be the case today. The last of the night's clouds were disappearing already, and it was already getting a bit warm for a morning.

"If we could wipe out the groups of hunters, then come at them unawares, yes, we could've pushed them back in. Once in position at the entrance we could do it with four of our number as the others race to collapse the other entrances. That would be tough, admittedly, but if they were in position beforehand?"

"Wishful thinking," Vuli and one of the other older-looking dwarves muttered, causing Gimli to glare at them.

"I've led groups before that have done it!" The two dwarves acknowledged that, and Gimli went on, his tone more conciliatory. "Although those were combat missions rather than scouting ones. Still, at that point, we would probably have had to pull back or station a watch while sending one of our fellows back to Erebor for aid in clearing them out. And it would've been hard going with once the night came on. But depending on the state of their weapons, I might well have ordered that, even if I knew we were going to take losses."

There are seven dwarves in the patrol, and if Gimli sent one away, that would've obviously left only six to hold the goblins in their warren throughout the night. Depending on the size of the entrance and the marksmanship of goblins, by which Harry meant both their ability to shoot at what they were aiming at and their skill with making arrows and bows, it could have been possible, but Harry thought that, like the older dwarves, Gimli was overestimating their abilities a bit.

Of course, that is without myself and my lady here. "And with us, I presume that you do believe we can still take them?"

"During the day, easily," Gimli said grimly. At that point, he began to give out orders, and seeing as they were extremely sensible ones, neither Tauriel nor Harry objected when he gave them their orders as well. Harry and Tauriel would first ambush the goblin hunters if any were around during the day, while Gimli and the other dwarves made their way towards the front entrance to the goblin hovel. Killing the goblins on watch near the main entrance would be tough but necessary.

Once the dwarves were in a position where they could see the cave entrance, Harry and Tauriel would meet back up with them. Harry and one of the dwarves would then move around the area, making sure that Harry and Tauriel were right in saying that there were only two, possibly three, more entrances before collapsing those entrances. The dwarf with Harry, a young dwarf around Gimli's own age named Colu, would be able to tell if there were any more thanks to his family being miners.

"At which point the goblins will try to come out of their entryway sun or not. And we will have a bit of a fight of our hands. But they will eventually retreat into the ground again, even against so few, once they see Harry's magic in play."

Ambushing the few goblin hunters out during the day was easy. The dark-loving creatures spent most of their time complaining in loud voices about having been chosen for the duty, vowing vengeance against their fellows. Right up until the point, Tauriel's arrows found them in the neck or skull, or Harry's Mufflatio washed over them before further spells followed. Five goblins died before the sun was

marking midday, and three more died before the dwarves got into position near the cave entrance, including one who was very obviously skiving off when he should have been hunting.

As Harry and Colu were quickly sent off to close the other entrances, Gimli got the rest of them in position, separated and hidden in scattered places around the entrance so that they would come at the cave in a half-circle formation. Tauriel was behind them, directly in front of the cave further down the hill. This close, even with the incline getting in the way, Tauriel could see into the darkness of the cave. There, two more goblins lounged. But they were well within bow range, and when she saw the pair of them look agitated, turning to gaze deeper into the cavern at something, Tauriel loosed her first arrow.

The arrow made a whistling noise as it passed over his head, and Gimli barked out a command in Khuzdul. "Up and at them! Bharuk Khazad, Khazad ai Erebor!"

"Khazad ai Erebor!" In the rumbling reply from his fellow dwarves, and then they were charging through the woods towards the entryway.

Both goblins in the entrance into the caves below turned, and one of them died with an arrow through the side from Tauriel, who scowled a little. She had actually been aiming for his head, but he'd stood up abruptly and turned away, the shot going through his side rather than forehead. Then Tauriel was moving forward as well to where she had the best position she could to aim into the cave entrance, as a few more goblins came charging out, hissing and whimpering at the first touch of the sun above.

Although I did not actually cause physical pain, the gaze of Anar certainly weakened the creatures. It also practically blinded them at this time of day, just past midday.

Gimli hit the first goblin to come out of the cave in a running charge, his shield up and slamming into the goblin's center of mass, lifting the creature up off of its feet and hurling it backward as if it weighed nothing before he hacked out at another. His sword, its edge sharp as a razor, cut the creature's arm off just above the elbow before a backhand blow cut it across the throat.

The dwarven warrior Ibûn was next to reach the cave's opening, his axe slamming into and through a hasty spear into the head of one goblin before getting caught in its skull. A hasty kick sent the body off of his weapon and into another goblin, which died through another axe strike, although the kick nearly had Ibûn falling back on his side.

Two more dwarves quickly joined their fellows, and as Ibûn got to his feet with a curse, between the four of them, they held back the goblin rush. All four took hits on their chain mail or shield or even helmets, but none penetrated the good dwarven steel. Gimli's thoughts on that score were quickly proven correct, as more often than not, the rusted, ill-maintained weaponry of the goblins broke on impact with chain mail or steel helmets.

Meanwhile, Tauriel aimed around and above the dwarves, firing deeper into the cave. Whereas anyone of non-Elven lineage would've been simply firing blindly into the dark and assuming they would hit something, Tauriel's shots were aimed. Each arrow took a goblin, dumping them to the floor where they were quickly trampled or tripped their fellows.

This close, Gimli could hear a distant rumble coming from the warren ahead of them a second later as Harry closed another entrance into the cave system. This was followed moments later by a third

sound and a cry in the Black Tongue of Mordor coming from the goblins. None of the dwarves or Tauriel knew that tongue, but it was clearly a lament, a cry that their secret escape route had been closed.

That seemed to buoy the goblins on for a few more moments, and another dozen goblins rushed out of the darkness of the cave, losing several of their numbers to Tauriel's arrows to try and battle through the dwarven line at the entrance. But with the dwarves within reach of one another, none of the goblins could get through, and soon, the bodies began to pile up so much that they got in the way of their fellows.

At that point, the goblins retreated, shouting to one another, pulling completely back and away out of even Tauriel's line of sight into the earth of the hill.

All the dwarves had taken a battering, their chain mail punctured lightly in places, their helmets a little dented. But thanks to their armor and general level of toughness, all they had to show for the short, sharp battle was a few bruises and a cut to Ibûn's cheek.

Tauriel instantly began to see to that, using wine to wipe the wound down, and then placing a small poultice on it, one of the medical supplies they had been given in Lothlorien. Bruises are fine, but anything that punctured skin would have to be seen to quickly, considering what vile gunk goblins and orcs routinely put on their weapons.

Ibûn thanked her, touching his cheek gingerly over the bandage and nodding his head towards Harry and Colu as they came through the woods. "Well done on bringing down the other entrances! That would normally be a chancy time for any pair of dwarves and should've taken far longer even at the best of times."

"Magic is good for many things," Harry said glibly, his eyes raking up and down Tauriel's form. First, to look for wounds, then, as he wiggled his eyebrows at her, with different intent, his emerald eyes sparkling with good humor.

Tauriel laughed at that, rolling her eyes, but she did cock her hip just so as she turned away to look towards the entranceway, feeling Harry move up behind her to put his arms around her waist for a brief but heartfelt hug. "I take it that everything went well here?"

"Indeed. And now, we smoke the goblins out." Gimli said grimly. "I will not lead my band into a goblin warren, not even with a wizard and an elf beside me. Especially considering neither of you will be able to stand upright in there."

While the entryway into the underground warren was human-sized, Tauriel could easily see where the tunnel narrowed to goblin-size within.

Within moments, the dwarves not on guard at the entrance had gathered brush, twigs and logs enough to create a large bonfire. This they set in the entrance into the caves, before lighting it up. At that point, Harry helped to create a wind, calling on a spell that Galadriel had taught him in Lothlorien, one that she had apparently learned from Gandalf in the past.

In this, Manwe was quite forthcoming of aid, and the wind around the dwarves pushed into the cave, bringing with it the smoke. This kept it out of their own faces easily and filled everything underground with smoke.

While having none of the secret fire of Ilúvatar, goblins and orcs still needed to breathe like regular living beings. Using smoke like this was a tried and tested manner of literally smoking them out of their hiding places like they were bugs. The dwarves had used this method times uncounted over the ages, and it never ceased to work. It was either to come out and fight the dwarves in a standup fight at the entrance or remain where they were hiding away and die.

With the sun still very visible in the sky above, that was not an easy decision for any goblin. But neither could they survive till nighttime with the smoke filling their living areas. Thus, first in small groups, then in a rush, the goblins tried to charge through the fire towards the dwarves.

The first few died easily. Tauriel and Harry could both fire through the smoke and, well, fire at the entrance, hitting the targets of the goblins beyond before they could even come close to the actual flames with arrow and spell, Rifelas to start with and then others as the goblins kept coming. The rush was more difficult to deal with as the goblins had organized themselves a bit. First came dozens of goblins bearing large buckets of mud and dirt, with others grabbing up the bodies of their fellows and using them as shields.

Had he and Tauriel been alone at this point, Harry would probably have brought down the entire entryway, burying the goblins, if not for the fact that they were very good at mining. *Or perhaps a horde of conjured creatures, such as I mentioned to Tauriel, to hold the other side of the fire and a Protego on ours to keep the smoke within? Conjured creatures don't need to breathe, after all.*

But this was Gimli's show, and he wasn't going to step on the young dwarf's toes. It looked as if Gimli was working off a tried-and-true playbook by this point, and Harry was willing to simply add his own abilities onto that rather than take over entirely. *I might change my tune if it looks as if the dwarves are going to start taking actual dangerous wounds or, Valar forbid, actually lose someone, but until then, it seems as if Gimli has this well thought out.*

Instead, he watched as the bodies and dirt and mud were tossed onto the fire in an effort to put it out while other goblins raced through their fellows working on that, trying to close with the dwarves. Only for the dwarves to stand strong, cutting down any who could make it through the fires. Harry and Tauriel helped as best they could with spellwork and arrow.

But eventually, the fire was out, and the goblins began pushing the dwarves hard.

A barked command came from Gimli in Khuzdul, and the four dwarves at the entrance took a single step back, spreading out as they did. They still held the line, but now they were a little further back, allowing more of the goblins to press forward a bit out of the entryway but also for more of the dwarves to step up. Harry stood to one side of that line, sending spells into the mass of goblins, searing and burning them to ash with light-based spells, more to basically sear away the dead bodies than because they were actually more effective than exploding spells. Over-powered Bone breaker curses, for example, were incredibly effective when tossed into large groups of goblins, something Harry noted for continued use in the future. Overpowered enough, the curse would literally have bones exploding in every direction when it struck, and this would allow Harry to target one goblin and kill six or seven in the resulting viscera-filled explosion.

For her part, Tauriel aimed at any goblin who seemed to be trying to stay back of the others. Whether or not these goblins were cowards or trying to actually give out orders, she didn't know. But

with the dwarves holding the line so strongly and Harry's spellwork it seemed a better use of her time than to simply add to the carnage at the forefront of the battle.

By evening, though, the goblins had put out enough of the fire that they were then able to retreat. The dwarves, however, simply relit the fires, and they did so, with Gimli actually rotating out the four dwarves who had been at the forefront of the battle to begin with, getting them some rest while the others took their own watch. Soon, the fire was lit again, and Harry's spell was once more wafting the smoke deeper into the tunnel.

When the goblins came again, they were even more angry and furious and no longer feared the light of the sun. But once more, dwarven steel and armor were up to the task of holding the entrance, with Tauriel and Harry taking out any of the goblins who tried to stay back from their fellows and fire at the dwarves with arrows. Without the fire or the light of the sun blinding them, the goblin archers could have perhaps turned the tide of the fight. But not with Tauriel there or with Harry lobbing Lumos spells into the darkness of the tunnel.

The spell had shifted since Harry had linked his magic to Arien. Instead of a simple, blue-white light, it caused tiny sun-like lights to appear. This, in turn, caused keening wails and shrieks of fear from the goblins thus revealed. No creature of Morgoth could suffer the light of Anar for overlong, not without something like the paste the trolls who fought in the Battle of the Lonely Mountain had been given.

Once more, the fires were put out during the battle, but the goblins were no longer coming out at them, and Harry estimated that they'd killed at least eighty goblins or more throughout the day. *There are undoubtedly more down below who've died of smoke inhalation. "What now?"*

"Now we keep the fire going throughout the night, completely smoking them out. I will send Vuli and Colu around the hill to make certain that they haven't been able to open up one of the entrances you collapsed, Harry, and to listen for any digging going on, just in case. Even my folk would have trouble carving through the earth around here to make a new tunnel in time to save ourselves from something like this, but it's possible. And I don't want to leave anything to chance. Lady Tauriel, if you feel up to it, would you mind scouting out and around the area to make certain that there are no other goblin warrens around?"

Tauriel nodded and, after refilling her quiver for the third time that day from her and Harry's supplies, raced off without another word. Harry made certain that several of the dwarves that weren't on watch at the entrance got some food, then helped create a small berm in front of the entryway to further block the entrance. Soon, only two of the dwarves were on guard at the entryway while the others rested, saw to their weapons, or ate something.

All of them were still in fine form despite having fought throughout the day, showing Harry once again an example of the dwarves and endurance. Most humans would have been completely knackered after an on-again-off-again fight that had lasted for so long.

Harry himself felt somewhat tired. *Different muscle groups from hiking throughout the day with Tauriel at even at elvish speed, I guess.* However, there was a question he wanted to ask. "Why didn't you have me just..." He gestured vaguely with one hand, "Take all that fire and send it straight down into the tunnel to burn them out rather than smoke them out?"

Gimli scowled a bit, looking away, then back at Harry. "You said that you and Thorin fought an orc encampment shortly after meeting one another. Surely you saw the what the kept as spoils? We do not want such to be damaged beyond recognition if any such remains within. And there is something else that might be there as well if this place has been here as long as it seems to have. Burning is a horrible way to go regardless of race, and smoke at least is less painful."

Harry grimaced at that, understanding what Gimli was alluding to, and now very much worried about what they would find within. "I can only hope that we find some of the Darkened Earth then, and not the, the other method which orcs and goblins can use to multiply..."

So it was throughout the night. The fire was kept up, and although Harry slept occasionally, he found he did not need much to rebuild his magical or physical reserves. Every few hours he renewed the spell wafting the smoke deeper into the cave, keeping it away from the dwarves on guard near the entryway.

Twice more some goblins tried to rush out, their noses and mouths covered by cloth wetted down by something, hurling buckets of dirt ahead of them or the bodies of their fellows. But there weren't enough of them to put the fire out now, let alone get past the dwarves at the entryway, even without Tauriel around to snipe at them.

The next day, Harry and Colu went around to the other entrances, opening them up again to let the smoke out, while the fire was put out by the dwarves by the entryway, who, like the goblins the night before, were wearing cloth masks dipped in water. By the time they were done with that, Tauriel had returned, having pushed out in every direction around them for the equivalent of several days of travel by anyone but another elf. "Once more if we consider how fast you dwarven folk can move, we are within a full day's march south of what looks to be some kind of semi-kept up road heading west and east. In the distance I could see some kind of large dwelling along the roadside. But I saw no sign between there and here of goblins, nor anywhere around. It seems as if this place was on its own."

"Yet well-placed for all that if it is so close to the main road leading from the Iron Hills to Erebor," Gimli grumbled. "We will wait a few hours for the smoke to clear, then we will enter."

"Actually, if it is just an air issue at this point, I can help there. I have a spell called the Bubblehead Charm, and I can use it on all of us so that we can move through the smoke."

"At this point, it is just that, so let us begin. Hopefully, we can start leaving this place behind by midday," Gimli shook his head, although he was smiling as he did, thinking of the amount of help Harry's spell work it already been.

The group had to push through the bodies of the dead goblins and all of the dwarves, and Tauriel began to thank Harry profusely when they realized that the bubbleheaded charm didn't just block out the smoke but also the stench. Goblins were foul creatures of the best of times. When they were burned to a crisp, as many were near the entryway or just simply dead by asphyxiation, they were far worse.

However, Tauriel ran into a problem soon after the tunnel narrowed down to dwarf or goblin height. She shivered suddenly, stopping in place, grateful that she was at the back of the band. "Harry, I... I feel... closed in here. I, I cannot..."

“Of course, love.” Harry answered instantly. “You can turn back Tauriel. I suppose I just want to see if there’s anything to indicate this group preyed on humans, you don’t need to be in here for this.”

“Thank you!” Tauriel breathed, shaking her head. “I, I knew before this I did not like being in Erebor’s halls for more than a few hours, but this is far worse, far faster than that. I will await you outside.”

Harry nodded and turned, watching Tauriel turn around and head back up the tunnel, before turning back and hurrying as much as he could crouched over as he was to catch up with the dwarves.

The warren underground seemed to be composed of several different interconnecting caves, only a few of which looked natural, including the entryway and a few deeper in. They found a small source of water coming up from below, an area that was possibly some kind of larder, and what had to have been sleeping quarters for many of the goblins. There, the dwarves began to root around what little the goblins had owned, coming up with several dwarven-made items, each of which was carried out and placed on a tent tarp laid out on the ground for cleaning and inspection. If there was a maker or family mark on any of it, it would be returned to the next of kin if possible.

Several human items were also discovered, and Harry was asked what they should do with them. A farmer’s tine, a sword made by human hands, all that was left of it being the hilt, the rest of the rusted blade having shattered during the battle. A small painting of a family set in a locket was the most poignant and Harry’s opinion, and he stooped in the center of the goblin tunnel for several moments looking at it.

It was no great painting. In fact, it might’ve been made by a child or young woman of an evening rather than someone who painted for a living. But the smiles on the faces of the people within told the real tale, and it had somehow wound up here in a goblin cave.

“This I will keep, and we will set up outside along with the weapons of the dead goblins by the entryway and the hilt that you found,” Harry said solemnly, shaking his head. “It will make a good marker for a cairn.”

He should have looked ridiculous really, crouched over as he was. But the solemnity of his voice and face offset that.

Gimli nodded, and then Vuli, who had gone ahead of the others, came back. He spoke in Khuzdul as he shook his head, pointing back over his shoulder. Gimli and the others all stiffened, and then Vuli looked at Harry. The human looked highly uncomfortable, but what they were about to see would make them even more so. “Harry, what you are about to see is one of the horrors of the First Enemy. Steel yourself and if you feel the need to throw up, you will need to renew your Bubblehead Charm afterward almost at once, there is still enough smoke down here to kill if you are not careful. Unless solid things can pass through this air bubble, Harry?”

“No, you’re right. I will need to renew it. I have been sufficiently warned, Gimli. Lead on.” Harry said his face still set in grim lines. Moments later, he found himself in a cavern where he could stand upright without banging his head or back, but that was scant comfort to what lay within.

Harry had seen horrors before. Cedric’s corpse, the goblin lair underneath the Misty Mountains, Hermione’s dead eyes staring at nothing, bodies and gore galore since coming to this world, and the

strange, eldritch abominations hidden within the Department of Mysteries. What was before him now made nearly everything he had seen before pale in terms of sheer, vile, **wrongness**.

The corpse ahead of him was large, many, many times larger than a normal goblin or even a human or elf, although not quite the size of a troll. It looked kind of female, if only truly around the eyes and face, although the dead being's mouth had distended open, gaping open like a ghoulish well beyond anything a normal jaw should have been capable of. But the eyes were still human or perhaps dwarven, although there didn't seem any hint of a beard, so Harry thought it more likely this being had once been a human. A human girl, judging by the small size of the head, who had cried so often her cheeks were still stained with the signs of it even now.

The body below the relatively small head was like some unholy cross between a queen ant, mud, and black, vile-looking sludge. The sludge in question had poured out of orifices like pustules spread out across the mass. Perhaps thankfully that mass did not have anything about it that could be called female bar certain... hints of darker skin that could be nipples. The mass of the woman had somehow been mutated in such a way her body had distended outwards well beyond the point of obesity the flesh of the monstrosity looking as if it was both goblin flesh, human or dwarven flesh and mud combined.

Gimli, Colu and Harry had never seen anything like it, and all three stared at the dead thing in front of him, bile rising in their throats until they all turned away. The dwarfs backed away out of the horrifying birthing chamber, keeping their gorge from rising with difficulty, while Harry could not move fast enough, crouching down as he was. Instead, Harry was barely able to turn and aim for a corner before he began to lose every meal still within his stomach, falling forward even as he through up. He was only saved from the ignominy of falling into his own sick by the quick actions of Vuli and one of the older dwarves, who grabbed his arms, keeping Harry upright, pushing him against the wall.

Harry closed his eyes, trying hard not to see the eyes of the creature, those eyes which told him of pain and fear and screaming, soul rending horror, to which death had been the greatest mercy. "That, that was once a human girl, wasn't it?" *I, I had thought that when captured, women and girls were, were raped or sexually abused. But this... this is... I cannot say it is worse, but it is far fouler.*

"Aye. We know not what foulness Morgoth wrought, but this is one of the ways in which goblins and others can repopulate themselves. They take a woman; any race will do, curse them to the blackest pits of the ocean!" Vuli growled, his hands clenching and unclenching as he continued to curse in Khuzdul for several moments before he seemed to calm himself, staring now with pity and sadness at the creature. "They take women, they starve them. Eventually, if they do not bite out their own tongues or otherwise kill themselves, the women are forced to eat goblin or orc meat, force them to eat meat of their own race or others. And in so doing, they force a... change upon the woman. The creature thus made does not birth goblins so much as simply create them. From her very flesh will form pustules as you see, and out of those pustules will come goblins, or worse, orcs. It is a horrifying process, and the change occurs over many years. But when it is done, you get a creature like this, a creature which can repopulate a goblin warren within months, not decades as it is for tainted ground."

The other older dwarf, a silent fellow by the name of Rori, who was Vuli's cousin, bowed his head towards the dead creature. "Aye. But we seem to have slaughtered the goblins here fast enough that the monster she had become could evolve further, and there's no hint of any of the tainted ground either. We bury her, no goblins will be birthed from this foul place again."

Harry nodded slowly, fighting the urge to lash out with his magic or stand upright and turn away and keep his gorge from rising again. The first would be useless now, the creatures who had done this were already old dead. The second would simply have hurt. Instead, he murmured a prayer to the Valar, to Mandos in his halls, hoping that this human's soul would've passed through those halls to be cleansed before going on to join Ilúvatar as was the right of any soul of humankind.

But as he looked at the horribly tainted, mutated creature that had once been a young human girl, Harry finally understood the true depths of the horror that Celebrain, Elrond's wife and Galadriel's daughter, had been saved from by her sons and husband. He didn't know where along this process Celebrain had been before she had being rescued, but he understood now why she had so quickly decided to head over the Belegear Sea and enter Aman. Some things are just too horrible for anyone to bear, and he hoped she had found healing within the Blessed Realm and the light of the Valar.

Beyond that, though, Harry also understood something that perhaps the dwarves and maybe even most elves did not.

Gandalf had told him about the original creation of the orcs and goblins, how they had been created by twisting and breaking many of the first elves to awake on Arda, long before the dwarves and humans awoke. How Morgoth could not create life, he could only twist it. And he had long wondered how goblins and orcs could seem so lifelike, twisted though they were. Now he saw how. Because he would bet anything that with every... birth she gave, the woman who had been turned into the monster before him had given of her own life force, her own portion of the Sacred Fire Ilúvatar had breathed into all living things. And in so doing, had given a kind of life to the goblins that came from her person.

"What... what are we going to do?" Harry asked, gesturing to the creature. "Is there some kind of ceremony or..."

"Nay." Vuli shook his head, gesturing around them. "This place, like others before it will serve as a monument, a resting place for her. When we are done within, Harry, you may bring the roof down again all throughout this warren. Bury this doomed soul, as well as the creatures who made her. That is the only way we can honor her now."

Harry nodded, answering that that was one task he would see too with relish, and he began to move around, noting support beams, crude ones admittedly made by the goblins, weak points in the rock above, and other areas. When the call came from Gimli and the others that they were done, he started at the deepest point, and began to methodically destroy each weak zone, until bits and pieces of the roof were almost coming down on his own head. Then he moved to the entryway as fast as he could, still lashing out behind him with Bombarding spells.

It was a sober group of dwarves who reported back to the camp they had made before the battle, well away from the goblin cave system, the whole area having collapsed inward. As Tauriel joined them, Harry and the dwarves looked at one another and, without even speaking of it, packed up, and moved away. They pushed hard until was deep into the night, putting as much distance as they could between them and the horror underneath the rubble behind them, while Harry reluctantly explained what they had found underneath the hill. Behind them, only a few human weapons stuck out of the ground, with a small locket of bronze dangling from a long string, shifting this way and that in the wind.

That night, Harry and Tauriel were the first to retire, entering their tent even as the dwarves began to look over what they had collected from within the goblin warren, singing old dirges in their own language. Harry put up a Mufflatio, and feeling Tauriel's arms around him, fell back onto their sleeping bag, hugging her tightly as if to never let go, taking comfort what in one another, trying to blot out the horror of what they had seen with one another's company.

Scene break

The next day, the patrol was still somewhat subdued by the horror they had discovered and the various proofs that the goblins there had preyed on dwarven humans alike. Tauriel was even worse, silent and solemn, her eyes hooded, walking along beside Harry rather than ranging ahead of the party. Not because of fear but because she did not want to be alone with her own thoughts after having been told of what Harry had discovered. Not that he or any of the dwarves could blame her. Even secondhand, that kind of horror was something that would darken the mind of anyone.

But halfway through the day, Harry decided enough was enough, and he went about raising everyone's spirits a bit. *And what better way than bringing back an oldie but a goodie.* With that, Harry glanced around and, deciding that Gimli would be the least likely to be infuriated by this, aimed over the head of the other dwarves toward where Gimli raced along ahead of the others. The sudden bout of snickering and confusion from behind him caused Gimli to turn, and he growled out, "What is wrong with you lot?"

"I do not believe that bright pink is your color, Gimli. In fact, I would go so far as to say it is no dwarf's color," Vuli announced, glancing over his shoulder at Harry, who was obviously the only person who could have done something like that.

"I'll admit I'm not the best at colors, but I wanted to see what it looks like. Do you have a preference, Gimli?" Harry said, changing the color of Gimli's hair to rainbow for now, causing even more snickering and even for Tauriel to smile slightly.

Gimli tried to look up at his hair, then down at his beard, noting that it hadn't changed. Knowing how touchy dwarves were about their beards, Harry had decided he would aim only at Gimli's hair rather than both beard and hair. "So long as you don't touch the beard, I've always wondered what I would look like with dark blue hair." The other dwarves all looked at Gimli in surprise, and he shrugged his shoulders. "It was but a passing thought when I was a youngling."

"So, about two years ago?" Shouted more than one dwarf, to which Gimli replied in Khuzdul in such a way that several of the dwarves cracked up, with Gimli joining them a second later. Tauriel joined them a moment when Gimli reached down, picked up a portion of hard-packed dirt and tossed it with startlingly good accuracy into Harry's face. Since they had all been moving at the same brisk pace the dwarves had sustained since meeting Harry and Tauriel, this caused Harry to stumble, and he fell to his ass, wiping at his face with both hands.

"So even the mightiest of wizards can be taken down by simple mud and dirt?" Gimli guffawed. "Perhaps you will keep that lesson in your mind in the future."

Once Harry got back to his feet, he pushed himself a little bit further to catch up with Gimli at the front of the group, laughing and teasingly changing his hair to the dark blue that Gimli had professed

to wanting, shouting out over his shoulder if anyone else wanted to see what they would look like with different hair color or just a different color overall. Once Colu was running along as a pine green dwarf from head to toe bar his beard, Tauriel got into it, asking if she could get her hair color changed to golden blonde or raven black.

Without giving any reasons for her sudden desire to do so. Although a wise soul might have felt she had ulterior motives to choose the hair colors that Galadriel and Arwen.

Harry's look of horror, however, caused Tauriel to laugh aloud, the sound a bright, clear note uplifting the spirits of the dwarven Harry just as much as the previous moments of joking had. The group continued on their way in much better spirits, although Tauriel did not leave the party again to range ahead of them, instead staying by Harry's side, smiling the entire time as he joked with the dwarves.

Before midday, Tauriel paused, staring ahead of them. "I see a tower in the distance, the construct I saw ranging out after we attacked the goblins. It has the shape of a rectangle from this angle, but one portion of it looks taller than the rest. It almost looks like a keep of some kind."

"That will be one of the way stations. In fact, if we have followed our route as well as we could have, that will be one of the heavy way stations, one of two on the road to the Iron Hills, set where Erebor and Dale's joint borders had been in ancient days. Although obviously none of us are under any illusion as to what territory we can actually claim at this point," Gimli explained, before going into detail on the route between the Iron Hills and Erebor, as well as the way stations themselves.

Around evening, the scouting party reached what in Harry's old world would've been called a Mott and Bailey. It was a kind of keep, a fortification that was rectangular in shape, with an inner keep set to one side of the rectangle and tall walls going forward to the gate tower at the other end. Much of it looked like old construction, and Harry was once more stunned at both the industry of the dwarven how well they could work with stone.

There was one other question that he had to ask as the portcullis ahead of them opened, with a dwarven officer of the watch shouting in Khuzdul some message to someone inside. "This place looks extremely formidable. I can understand why it was possibly abandoned after Erebor fell, but did you all have to kick orcs or goblins out of it?"

"Dain did," Woli stated, exchanging a wave with one of the dwarves on watch above them. "Our folk retained control of this and several of the other way stations for a time during the Exodus, which saved hundreds of lives. And after, with Dain's help in supplying them even though there was no reason to do so for a few years before we pulled back into the Iron Hills. Then, orcs came down from the north, taking this and several others over. But such folk couldn't maintain them, not after we had torn down segments of the wall ourselves when we left, removed the doors, and some other bits."

"Which obviously made it much easier for us to repair them when we came back and made it equally harder for the orcs to hold them against us. Dain slew them all before he and his forces joined with hours in the war against the orcs within the Misty Mountains under Thrain," Vuli stated. "There was some concern in the decades since that more would return, but none ever did. Of course, we learned why they weren't so interested in building up forces between the Iron Hills and Erebor when Azog led his army against the Lonely Mountain and the allied forces."

Harry nodded as that made sense. After all, why invest a fortification like this if it wasn't all that good, and there was no reason to do so? But now there was a reason, and Tauriel and Harry both took in the rebuilt outpost for a time, watching the dwarven patrol speak to their fellows within the keep, getting news and reports from other patrols in their own language.

Gimli came up to them soon, indicating the keep portion of the Mott and Bailey then pointing to a group of donkeys who were grazing in a trow nearby. "They've room for us and more within. The owners of that lot are going to be leaving soon, heading towards the Iron Hills, with weapons, gold and jewels, as agreed upon by some of the contracts and agreements reached with those of the Iron Hills."

Harry and Tauriel could both hear the pride in the dwarf's voice, could see it in the eyes of several of the others, but said nothing, knowing that making certain that contracts were immensely important to dwarves, particularly when it came to family business and debts owed, as those of Erebor did particularly to the families of those dwarves who had died in the Battle of the Lonely Mountain. "Tis the last installment in many cases. But we are to stay here for a time before heading back to Erebor. Mapmaker Kiflo is here and is waiting for two more patrols to come in as he builds a map of the area between the Lonely Mountain and the Iron Hills."

At that, Harry asked if he and Tauriel should stay to talk to this master mapmaker about the ideas he had shared with Woli, but when asked, Gimli shook his head. "If you want to, you may, of course, and you will be welcome here. But remember that Woli took copious notes of what you described and even started to use some of the ideas you gave him. He will be able to pass them on to his master, and Kiflo is a very open sort about such things. He does not care where an idea comes from, only that it works to make a map better. If you wish to travel yourselves towards Erebor, I do not see any reason for you to stay."

Harry and Tauriel exchanged a glance, and in that glance both of them saw that the other wanted to have some alone time. Traveling with the dwarves had been a great deal of fun despite the goblins and the... revelation of where such creatures could come from. But their own senses of propriety had put a damper on certain 'couple business' between them. Having some time on their own before reaching Erebor seemed a good idea to both of them. "In that case, Gimli, I think we will take her leave now. It has been good to get to know you, and I hope to continue our acquaintance when you arrive in Erebor. But for now, unless Kiflo wants to talk to me in person, I don't see a reason for the two of us to stay."

"It's been nice to meet you as well, Harry, to put a name to the tales my father and his friends told me. And to meet you as well, Tauriel." Gimli actually winked at Tauriel, a small smile appearing through his beard. "I have long wondered if perhaps the tales of Elvish beauty had been exaggerated, but I see they have not been."

Tauriel laughed aloud, reaching down to clasp forearms with Gimli even as the other dwarves all around them started at the noise, smiles tugging at their lips despite their best efforts at the sound as those who hadn't noticed Tauriel was an elf did so now. "If you can say that of a mere warrior like myself, wait until you see some of the true beauties among my race. But I thank you for the compliment nonetheless."

Harry took his own turn to shake Gimli's hand, then waved farewell to the rest of the party before he and Tauriel turned and exited the keep. Minutes later, they heard the portcullis close behind them and began to speed up from a walk to the normal ground-devouring lope of the elves.

At the normal speed the two of them could maintain without really pushing themselves, it took three days to reach the lands around the Lonely Mountain, where they surprisingly started to see more dwarven humans about. There seemed to be several farms or rather land that was slowly being converted into farmland here under the shadow of the mountain. Dwarven humans were working together in a way that Harry knew would have seemed impossible anywhere else. Small houses had already been built in range of Tauriel's eyes, although they looked more like temporary domiciles than anything permanent.

Nearer the mountain was a different story. There, astonishingly, real farms were visible, with several rows of wheat fields being seen in the distance, coming closer to the dwarven road leading eastward, along with watchtowers and groups of people working the fields. The two travelers were not seen from afar thanks to their cloaks and startled many of the peasants as they moved along the road at the same pace they'd kept since leaving the dwarven outpost. But Harry was recognized almost at once by many, causing Tauriel some annoyance when a few of the women in the fields waved at him merrily, calling for him to stop and talk with them.

Harry ignored them all, moving along at the same pace. "I wonder why Bard and Thorin have pushed to start farms like this all the way out here? I know that there were dozens of farms nearer to Dale's capital."

"Perhaps the soil there was not as rich as they thought?" Tauriel shrugged. "I know trees and forests, Harry, not soil and human-style farms."

Harry snorted at that, but he knew it was simple truth. Neither Lothlorien nor Rivendell or even Taur-e-Ndaedelos had farms, as any human would understand the term. Lothlorien produced wheat and other such crops but did so in the center of a forest, with trees, even the mighty mallorn trees, growing in the center of the farmland without in any way disturbing the crops.

They soon saw that this kind of build-up was exceptionally spotty, giving some credence to Tauriel's hunch. There were still leagues around the Lonely Mountain, the area that had previously been called Dale, where there were no farms and no people.

For a time, the pair saw more humans than dwarves, small patrols of four men moving around the area, men manning the watchtowers in the distance that only Tauriel could see or along the road, and men working at making new roads or something else that Harry couldn't identify without stopping to ask. Numerous times, the pair saw heavy carts moving out into the distance loaded with stones and others loaded with soil heading towards where Harry estimated Dale the city resided, proving Tauriel's guess accurate.

Not that she cared over much. Instead, Tauriel was stunned by the sight of entire trees being transplanted and moved, shifted out past them on the road or further south from ahead of them somewhere. Every time they saw a cart carrying a tree in such a manner, Tauriel would just stare until their pace moved them out of range, her head cocked to one side in a rather cute expression of complete confusion. As if she could just not understand why anyone would up and move an entire

But soon, the two of them were moving around the Lonely Mountain towards the entrance into Erebor, and the land once more changed. It became steeper, for one thing, with more trees and more rocks sticking out of the side of the hills leading up to the mountain, whose shadow had covered them for quite some time by this point. The watchtowers here looked to be more permanent constructions, with what Harry recognized as some kind of signal flag system at the top of them. There weren't all that many dwarves, but there were still more of them here than there had been since the initial farming zone near the dwarven road.

There were even a few dwarven-run farms here, although they were predominantly orchards. Apparently, at the backside of the Lonely Mountain from the entryway, there had been several orchards before the coming of the dragon, and astonishingly, many of the trees therein had survived throughout the years. There, Harry stopped and asked a dwarven farmer about it, who told him that they'd needed to bring in some soil and had to shift away many a tree to allow others to grow better. By this point, they were actually going to be able to produce a somewhat decent supply of fruit going forward.

That had certainly not been the case the last time Mary and Tauriel had been in Erebor. Then, Erebor and Dale were relying on the elves of Taur-e-Nddaedelos for food. It was good to hear that food was no longer a problem, despite families and clans of dwarves and still more humans coming into the area from the north and even the south.

When they reached the road leading up to the entryway into Erebor itself, they saw more evidence of the dwarven industry being hard at work, more humans, and, surprisingly, a pair of elves. The pair were standing together and looked like messengers of some kind, sharing a meal as Harry and Tauriel loped forward along the road. One of them called out to Tauriel in Sindarin, waving his hand, and Tauriel waved back before looking at Harry quizzically.

"You can stay and get some news if you want," he answered easily. "I want to go find Thorin and see where we'll be staying. Who knows, maybe the dwarves have finished work on our house by the lake?"

Tauriel's eyes lit up at that idea, and she quickly leaned in, giving Harry a kiss on the cheek, pleased by that idea and the idea of not needing to live underneath so much stone before heading over to her fellow elves. Their recent experience in the goblin cave still haunted her in a way that had nothing to do with the horror within that Harry had seen.

Harry smiled as he watched her go, then turned and headed up the path to the entryway, nodding to an eight-man strong group of guards that were on duty outside along with Balin, who was greeting a group of dwarves personally for some reason. The guards seemed mostly ceremonial but also served to answer questions from humans and newly arrived dwarves, of which there were still many arriving every week despite how long Harry had been away. Several of the guards recognized Harry and raised their fists in salute, something he returned, while the newly arrived dwarves looked at the human askance, although not just Harry but all the other humans around.

Inside, the bazaar took Harry's breath away. It was even busier than last time even more colorful. Many of the buntings that flew from stalactites above have been replaced, and the lighting system had been rebuilt almost entirely. Massive chandeliers of thousands of candles burned through out the massive cavern, lighting the entire area as much as it would have were Arien able to guide the sun into

Erebor directly. Dwarves and humans mingled throughout the area. Harry even saw Bard speaking to a group of old, fatter-than-normal dwarves, a large cart and several other men behind him. What kind of goods the cart carried that would demand the 'King' of Dale himself to come into Erebor, Harry didn't know, but the man recognized Harry, and the two exchanged waves, even as Harry forged his way through the crowd towards stairwells leading down. Balin had told him he would find Thorin down in the smithy rather than in the King's quarters or the King's Hall.

Moments later, Harry became very happy that he was so much taller than dwarves because this allowed him to see over the crowd of strangely silent dwarves that were blocking his way down into the smithy, the noise of the bazaar muting quickly. At first, Harry thought to ask them to let him pass, but the silence had him staring ahead of him and down into the smithy, and when he saw what was going on there, he understood why everyone was silent. Because Thorin wasn't just working in the smithy. He was instead taking part in some kind of ceremony.

Harry's friend stood, his arms behind him, staring straight at the ground by his feet in the center of a small ring of far older-looking dwarves, all of whom Harry recognized from having seen them in the smithy before. They were all senior mastersmiths, men who had reached the pinnacle of their craft after decades and been allowed to create their own maker's mark.

Between them, they were passing a gauntlet sized to fit a dwarven hand. The gauntlet was a double-sided type, with fully metal fingers, palm and wrist and would cover the hand up to near the elbow, slightly bigger than a normal dwarven hand, so the wearer could wear a leather or cloth glove at the same time. Its fingers were extremely well articulated, judging by how the judges were moving them one after another, gazing at the joints, sniffing, and even looking at the metal occasionally.

Harry wasn't thrown by that. He had seen the dwarves similar things before. They had a knowledge and feel of metal that was well beyond what Harry could understand.

As the gauntlet went around, questions were thrown at Thorin in Khuzdul, some sharp and almost growling, others long and involved. Thorin answered all of them, not looking up from where he was staring at the ground, looking almost humble in a way that Harry had rarely (if ever) seen from Thorin. His hands were clasped in front of him, and Harry realized with a start they were actually chained together. The chains were very small, incredibly intricate, almost looking like a band of dwarven chain mail rather than actual handcuffs or chains, and Harry knew his friend could probably have turned that kind of thing into a weapon if he so wished, let alone broken out of it. But he kept his hands and front of him, his whole manner respectful and, it bore repeating, humble. *THORIN. Humble. Is, is the world ending?*

By the time Harry had arrived, whatever ceremony was going on had been in full swing for a while. The gauntlet was being held by a dwarf almost behind Thorin, and the questions continued as the gauntlet was passed to others until it arrived back in the hands of the dwarf facing Thorin. The oldest one there, this dwarf's hair, was completely white, and he looked as if he would need help to get up a decent-sized flight of stairs.

Yet around his neck was still a heavy chain of gold, silver and other metals, including, Harry was certain, judging by the silver sheen of it, either platinum or mithril. From here, he wasn't certain which.

But he was certain that if there was a Mithril link in that chain, this dwarven master was someone of extreme importance.

He took the gauntlet in his hand, seeming to weigh it, then tried to bend a portion of it before twisting it around, looking at the edges on the other side. He then put it on, without an accompanying, clasping the metal clasps at the end into place.

Only dwarves would be able to create a gauntlet that looks more like a modern-day ski glove made of metal, Harry reflected with some amusement. He also noticed now that Dis, Fili and Kili were near the front of the crowd with Dwalin and Gloin, both kinsmen to Thorin through a great-great grandfather.

But his attention was drawn back to the ceremony as several of the dwarves in the circle around Thorin stepped backward and then pushed a series of objects forward. First, a large cob of wood. Then, a series of weapons followed by a large piece of stone around the size of a dwarf's body and, finally, an anvil.

As Harry watched, the cob of wood was struck by the gauntlet, the blow knocking out chips of wood despite the age of the dwarf doing the blow.

Only now were there some murmurs of appreciation from the crowd, although they quickly died down again as the old dwarf raised his hand, flexed his fingers in the gauntlet and turned it this way and that to look for damages. He even pulled out a small monocle, a jeweler's magnifying glass looked at the hinges closely before pulling the gauntlet off. He had been silent since the items had been brought out but now said two words in Khuzdul and passed the gauntlet to the next dwarf to the left. "Gab Sog! (well made)"

And so it went as Harry watched. Some of the dwarves were more concerned about how the gauntlet could grip around a weapon shaft, and went through a series of strikes and blows with it, aiming at a shield or piece of armor. Each time, the gauntlet was removed and passed on. Others attempted to smash it down into stone or anvil, while still more hit it with weapons, seeing how it would hold up.

By the time the gauntlet reached the ancient master once more, there were a series of small dents in it, but that was all. And Harry was interested to note that the weapons actually seemed to have fared worse. In particular, the sword they had used was now chipped, and the tip of the spear looked as if it had been bent a little, although the spear had done a much better job of trying to penetrate the metal than the sword had, being the cause of one of the deeper dents.

That's interesting and makes me wonder exactly how much of those movies Hermine made me watch occasionally were accurate. Now, it might just be that dwarves make armor to a far higher standard than most, which is certainly possible, but still. I wonder if that was all, um, what would you call it, artistic license? That full plate armor could be cut or punched through so easily?

He continued to watch as the gauntlet was handed back to the ancient Grand Master, who slipped it on again and began to move his fingers. Despite the punishment the gauntlet had taken, all the joints still worked, he could still grip a weapon, could still take the gauntlet on and off without help. He then pulled it back off and looked inside, shouting something ostensibly for a light as one was quickly

offered. This was a small, intricately made lantern that the dwarf placed inside the gauntlet to allow him to look at the interior of the metalwork, letting it fall into it without the light going out.

The thing made Harry remember the amazingly well-made portable inkwell Gimli and Woli had used, and with a start, Harry looked around the area, noting a few dwarves with extremely curly Blacklocks, tanned skin, and wearing slightly more colorful outfits than the other dwarves in the area. He also noted a few bald dwarves watching on, the only ones in the crowd making any noise, speaking quietly to one another despite the glares they were getting from the Longbeards around them.

Once more, Harry turned his attention back to the ceremony when the small light was dropped back out of the gauntlet into a waiting palm and handed over to an attendant. The ancient dwarf looked at it for a few moments, then at Thorin, and spoke a long line in Khuzdul, raising the gauntlet high.

Thorin's shoulders drew back, and he finally looked up, his eyes glinting with what Harry knew to be victory as a chant went up from the surrounding master smiths. It began low before building slowly, with many of the watchers joining in. The Blacklocks were first, their voices lighter, more lilting than any Harry had ever heard from a dwarf, their Khuzdul less sharp, almost lyrical. They were quickly followed by the rest of the crowd, with the Ironfoots being the slowest to join in.

And as they all did, Harry twitched, feeling something with his magical senses. A kind of magic grew around them, just like the kind Harry had experienced before in the smithy. Here though, it was much sharper, more directed. Not part of an intricate web, it was instead directed into Thorin as two of the dwarves move forward, carrying a small, perfectly rounded stone tablet and a chisel. The chisel was intricately marked and carved, the markings seeming to gleam with gold inlay, the tip sharp and pointed, capped with copper. The stone itself was smooth and uniform in color, shape and thickness.

His chain on his hands broken at his feet, Thorin leaned his head back, his eyes closing as he too joined the chant, hands outstretched for the items. He took them, and Harry watched as he slowly brought them together, holding the stone in one hand, the chisel in the other as he chanted. For several minutes, the chant continued to build, and then, as the magic seemed to reach a crescendo, Thorin began to mark out something on the stone with the chisel.

This didn't take very long at all, but soon, he was holding the chisel up, and the magic snapped suddenly, disappearing. Then, the chant became a simple roar of acknowledgment as their King held up his new Master's Mark to the crowd.

The crowd continued to cheer and roar as Thorin's family moved forward, the other blacksmiths removing the items used in the ceremony. Fili and Kili slapped their uncle on the shoulders, grinning at him, while Dis embraced her brother, his own arms going around hers. Then he saw Harry over the crowd, and he grinned at his friend, nodding his head towards Harry. Harry nodded back and waited there like a stone in the crowd as it began to disperse, only a few moving forward to congratulate Thorin in person, including several of the Blacklocks, one who, Harry thought, could be a woman. With dwarves, it was often hard to tell unless you heard them speak since both genders had beards.

"That was fascinating. I take it you are now a Master Smith?" Harry asked rhetorically. "What was that at the end there?"

“I am not surprised that you were able to feel that something strange was going on. But that is normal during a ceremony of mastery.” Thorin said, the two friends clasping arms. “It is said that when it comes time for a master to create his mark for the first time, he is guided by the touch of Mahal himself.”

“Well, I can’t tell you whether or not that was directly from Mahal, but there was certainly a lot of magic involved. It’s good to see you, Thorin, and once more, I am amazed at how far your people have come since the last time I was here.”

“There is still more to do, but yes, my people now have enough food coming in from our own hands and from the farms of the humans. The smithy is back to full operation, and the lights have been repaired. Erebor is not quite where it was before Smaug, but I would give it another year, two at the most before we are,” Thorin said, a quiet pride and certainty in his voice.

Not for himself or the work of his hand, which he had just celebrated, but for the work of his people, for what they had built and would continue to build in the future. It was subtle, but the way he looked around him, the smile on his face for his nephews and sister, for the dwarves around them, told the tale to Harry.

“But come!” Thorin suddenly exclaimed, looking back up at Harry. “We will adjourn to the King’s quarters, where we will share many a glass, and you will tell me what you have been up to since leaving! I take it that you are healed now in the head?”

“As subtle as ever, although the idea of mead certainly sounds nice. I will even go so far as to wager that I will drink more than you without getting drunk,” Harry teased.

“Would you care to wager on it?” Thorin asked, his eyes gleaming.

“What will you put up as stake?”

“A barrel of Gloin’s finest!” Thorin said.

“... Agreed. And I, in turn, will put up a barrel of pipe weed from the Shire.”

This caused an ooh sound from the dwarves nearby, friends and family alike, and the odd pair, human and dwarf, turned, making their way up the stairs as Harry continued to speak, explaining about how he and Tauriel had met with Gimli and his patrol and the two battles they’d taken part in against goblins. By the time the group got through the crowd and into the King’s Hall, where several other dwarves were already waiting to speak to the King, Harry’s tale had gotten to the meeting with the Stiffbeards. Hearing how he and Tauriel had been not only not treated very well but been insulted by one of the younger Stiffbeards caused the royal family to growl angrily, but Dis brought her three menfolk up sharply, speaking a few lines in Khuzdul the meaning of which like much of that language escaped Harry.

Although at least chagrined, henpecked expressions are universal.

Despite that somewhat amused observation, Harry did his part to calm them down, saying, “Given the kind of enemies they are used to fighting, I can see where their antipathy towards humans came from. I still will not forget the insult, but neither do I want all of their dealings with you and your nation to be colored by it. My personal interactions with them, though, most certainly will be. As in, I will

keep such interactions to a minimum, and I will go out of my way to make certain that none of them get any benefit from my magic or runes until they apologize appropriately.”

“That is more than fair, and as for your runes, are you and Tauriel going to stay here for a time? My own runemasters have been champing at the bit to see about some crosstraining between you and them, Harry,” Thorin said, waving several other dwarves away, speaking a few words to a young-looking dwarf who had a pair of wire-rim glasses on, perhaps some kind of aid to Balin, who Harry knew was Thorin’s chief advisor. The younger dwarf looked somewhat put upon but put on a brave face as he looked over at the other dwarves waiting in the King’s Hall, speaking loudly as the royal party passed them by, heading towards their quarters.

The sight of a human going with them caused a few rumbles, but that stopped when Harry turned his head so that most could see his eyes. While a human could be, well, any human from the back, Harry’s emerald-like eyes and lightning bolt scar were what most dwarves who had heard the tale of Thorin’s company used to recognize the wizard friend of their King. And with that, much of the irritation with him going before them passed quickly.

“I will be yes. Tauriel and I decided we were going to spend at least a year here, perhaps a little more, before heading north on a... task she has been given by an august personage, shall we say. A task that will have us seeking out evil creatures and making certain that they will be unavailable to answer the lesser darkness’s call,” Harry said obliquely, unwilling to state in this public place what all that was entailing.

“You boys get started on the drinks. I will send a messenger out to Tauriel and will conduct her myself through the hall if she wishes to stay here with us rather than outside,” Dis suggested, turning away, a faint smile on her face, as she also mentally composed a message to be taken back to Mirkwood by the two Elven messengers that were currently waiting Thorin to finish a letter to their King. After all, some things, dwarf human or elf, were universal. And a mother and father certainly had a right to meet their daughter’s perspective husband. *Although I will have to pass it to them in such a way that Tauriel is unaware. She seemed the type to object to others meddling in her affairs,* Dis thought with amusement. *Unfortunately for her, part of my role as sole Lady of my family is to meddle, and given her relationship with Harry, I will cheerfully spread that role to include the two of them.*

Inside the King’s quarters, Harry found more evidence of how life had changed for the dwarves of Erebor. When Harry and Tauriel had left, a lot of the furniture had been barely repaired, or simple furniture carried by other dwarves to Erebor and purchased for the King’s use for a time. Now, all of it had been replaced. They were large seats, and although they did have some cushioning to them, they were not exactly comfortable in human terms. They were seemingly enough for the dwarves, though, and four of them and a sofa large enough for three dwarves or two humans dominated the personal sitting room where Thorin entertained favored guests or family members. There was even a rug now to go with the tapestries that had been here before, and several of the tapestries had been replaced to boot, the simple ones being moved out to the receiving Hall to make room for new ones.

A few Harry could tell were far older than the others, perhaps carried away during the fall of Erebor. Or made in the time of exile in the Iron Hills or the Blue Mountains. When he asked, Thorin nodded and pointed to one of them in particular, saying that one had been made in the Blue Mountains

by some familial connection to his sister's husband that Harry could barely follow in common, let alone in the original Khuzdul.

"As for the rest of the furniture here, Kili actually made much of it. He is the best of us when it comes to working with wood, and he worked with Journeyman Cori and his master to craft many of these." He winked at his youngest nephew, a small smirk of pride on his face. "He is decades away from getting his own Maker's Mark, however."

"True, and you became the youngest since the time of the last Durin to earn your mark. So, we will allow you to retain your ego for a few days. That is a tremendous achievement in the life of any dwarf. However, after a week, I will feel it incumbent upon me and perforce my sons to once more bring him down to size," Dis quipped.

"Well, Kili, I have to say that I am pleased to have a chair properly sized for me to sit in," Harry chuckled, causing Fili to laugh and admit that he had actually begun to make things in larger sizes because it was easier to get the fiddly bits right that way.

Apparently, most of the wooden furniture in here could actually be taken apart, moved separately and then put back together again, a new concept that Kili had come up with after hearing all of the tales of how much had been left behind in Erebor after Smaug had sacked the mountain fastness. "I hope to eventually start selling to the Stiffbeards and the Ironfists because both of them don't actually have much in the way of wooden material for things like furniture, particularly comfortable furniture."

Harry replied with what he had been working on since waking up, teaching Galadriel his own spells, learning some in return and how he had been taught sword work from Celeborn and continued his personal education on room work. "In fact, I had finished one thing before Tauriel and I reached the Lonely Mountain after I came back from dropping Bilbo off in the Shire. It is called a pensieve, and it allows me to share memories with other people. I haven't tested it on other people using memories, but I'm going to start working on another one for Lady Galadriel at some point. I was thinking I could use it here to show you some things from my world, as well as the destruction of Dol Guldur, which Lady Galadriel saw to."

"Truly!?" Thorin leaned forward, some of his affable happiness at his own accomplishment and Harry being back disappearing, revealing the King underneath. "While that fortress is in no way close to the lonely mountain, Azog proved it could be used to launch a war against us. Even with Sauron retreating back to Mordor it could've been a dangerous forward position, separating us from Lothlórien and the human realms beyond, if we had cause to open discussions with them in the future. While Erebor is still in no position to do so yet, I can envision such a time a hundred years or so down the line. Especially as I know from speaking with the Blacklocks and the two lone Stonefoot representatives that Gondor is an enemy of the Easterlings and Southerners."

"The Haradrim," Harry said, giving the Southerners their proper name as he had to Gimli and his patrol, to which Thorin simply nodded while Fili leaned forward, asking Harry if he knew anything about them. But Harry had to admit ignorance there. He'd heard a few stories, and he had learned much what they knew, that the Stiffbeards and Ironfists were warring with the Haradrim occasionally, and the Ironfists had to deal with both the Haradrim and the Easterlings.

Conjecture on what those wars looked like went on for a time, with all four of the men sharing ale and bread as Dis left and returned with Tauriel, smiling a small secret smile into her beard behind the Elven woman who looked around the small room, smiling pleasantly at the three dwarves who rose along with Harry as she entered. She exchanged handclasps with Thorin and Fili and Kili before sitting down next to Harry on the two-person sofa that he had commandeered, leaning into his side as Thorin smiled.

“I take it that your relationship has proceeded apace then?” He asked.

Tauriel smiled demurely. “It has proceeded indeed it has done so far faster than the Elven method of courtship, but you will not find me at all displeased by that. Quite the opposite, in fact.”

With Tauriel’s help, Harry explained more of the journey to Lothlorien then back up, admitting that the pair of them had gone well out of their way to the east and then even further out of their way, accidentally going straight up rather than at the proper westward facing angle they should have to reach Erebor sooner. When it came time to explain how they met with the Stiffbeards, all of their listeners scowled a bit and how the two of them had been treated.

“That the Stiffbeards would treat strangers brusquely comes as no surprise, but to treat you so ill is grossly disappointing. Still, to hear that they sent an elite unit with this trade convoy and the princess of their people speaks well of their commitment, or it could speak to their desperation,” Dis mused, a steely tone segueing into one of simple thoughtfulness.

She was the one who would be the final voice when it came to any marriage alliance that Thorin might wish to reach with one of the other dwarven Houses. While Thorin would try (emphasis there) to decide such matters purely based on politics and the needs of Erebor as a whole, it was Dis who, if the worst happened and he didn’t fall for any of the ladies in question, would make sure that he was at least compatible with the woman in question and that both of them would be happy in the marriage. To dwarven sensibilities, no amount of fiscal or societal aid was worth the trouble a bad marriage would bring to both parties.

This was a nod to the fact that among dwarves, even among royalty like Thorin, it was the womenfolk who controlled the courtship. Men wooed the women, but it was the woman who made the final decision whether or not to go with one of the men who were interested in her hand or to pursue someone else entirely. Or even no one at all. Even in the last choice, no other dwarf would gainsay a woman’s right to choose. The idea of finding The One was that important to dwarven society.

“That was my thought later when we learned that the hammer wielders were an elite force amongst the Stiffbeards,” Tauriel admitted.

“That makes sense, but still, that final insult to the pair of you, to call you grave robbers. Even if it was instantly denounced by the rest of the Stiffbeards there, to have it tossed your way in the first place is a grave offense!” Thorin grumbled. “We will not rake them over the coals overmuch, but at this point, it is doubtful that any personal marriage of alliance will occur there.”

He heard something in his friend’s voice then, and mental ears pricked for a moment, but before he could comment, Fili began to talk about what he had been up to since he had last seen Harry. Thorin had used Fili several times as his voice on matters outside of the mountain since being King rather neatly

nailed Thorin's own feet to the mountain itself. Fili had forged a firm friendship with Bard, led expeditions around the northern edge of the long lake, and had worked closely with the mapmakers closer in to start devising a road network for Dale and what little of Erebor existed beyond the mountain fastness. Similarly, Kili had been involved in much of the forestry and remodeling work going on outside and inside the mountain, along with Nori and Dori.

The discussion and tales being shared were so interesting that Harry and Thorin forgot all about their drinking contest, although all four men started to put away copious amounts of dwarven ale while Dis and Tauriel stuck to Dalish wine, which was, according to Dis, being sold for quite a high price now.

Laketown had been nearly abandoned except for fishermen and winegrowers. Bilbo's work on turning much of the previous farmland around the lake that had been devoted to wine to other crops had borne tremendous fruit since then, and wine was seen as more a relic of the past than anything else.

Most of the time, the discussion wound around what the dwarves had been up to, what Tauriel had been up to while Harry had been unconscious, his brain being healed of the damages done to it. It came as a surprise to the dwarves that while Harry had been getting his mind healed, Tauriel also had a mental visitation from a Valar. While the dwarves did not revere any of the other Valar anywhere close to the level of their own creator, Mahal, they knew of the Hunting Lord. To hear that he was concerned about fallen creatures flocking to Sauron's banner was somewhat worrisome, and Thorin promised to send messages to Dain and other leaders of the Longbeard house elsewhere to pass on word of any such. "Although the only one that comes to mind at present is the ice drakes of the north and, of course, Durin's Bane in Moria. If it still resides there."

"That is not known, even to Lady Galadriel and Celeborn, nor do they know what manner of monster it is. They have guesses but did not share them with me," Harry glanced to his side at Tauriel, who shook her head to indicate they hadn't told her either. "What is known is that orcs and goblins have made their home there and are still in large numbers there even now after the rest of the Misty Mountains emptied to augment Azog's army.

"But you need not worry. My mission is a very long-term mission. It is not to deal with a present threat, one that has to be seen to immediately," Tauriel soothed.

That sat well enough with the dwarves, who considered that they and Erebor as a whole had more than enough on their collective plates at present. At that point, the conversation shifted to what other plans Harry and Tauriel had made, with Thorin passing on the information that their house was nearly finished building. "Your timing could have been just a little bit better. There is ever more for me and my advisors to see to, especially with me pushing for my mastery in Smithcraft. Still, give Balin and his workers another week, and they will be finished. Then you can move into the final product rather than see a preview now."

"I will keep living in the Elven lodges that you built outside Erebor," Tauriel decided. "Being under so many tons of rock might be fine for you folks, but I prefer the open sky and the light of Tenuviel's craftsmanship above me rather than anything made of mortal hands."

Harry looked at his lady, squeezing her hand briefly in question, wondering if she wished to leave, but she shook her head. In places like this, which were warm and, more importantly, large enough that she didn't feel entirely confined, she could deal with the feeling of being underground for short

amounts of time. But she would be leaving that evening to stay outside, and Harry instantly decided that he would leave as well. "While I appreciate the fact that you are more than willing to put me up for a few nights, do not take it wrongly, but I think that I prefer the company I can have if I follow Tauriel outside."

"I would see if there was something wrong with you," Thorin joked, and Harry laughed.

Soon, it was deep into the night, and all four of the menfolk were looking a little tipsy even as the conversation continued about what the dwarves had been doing and Harry and Tauriel's hopes to travel to Middle Earth in the future.

"If you're going to do that, then I demand the two of you stay here long enough to get those rooms meant off my back and for us to finalize your armor, Harry. We already have prepared sufficient cloth and material for a gambeson for Tauriel. But we need your measurements. I've finalized several of the plates for your Brigantine already, but I'll need your measurements to finalize the other ones, and the outer shell hasn't been finished yet. Speaking with the Blacklocks after their arrival gave me and our cloth makers some new ideas that we will be using in its design."

Once more, there was something in Thorin's tone, and this time, Harry was able to speak up quickly enough to follow up on it. "That is the second time you've mentioned the Blacklocks. Both times, there seems to be a little more going on there, Thorin. Is there something you would like to share with the audience?"

Dis smiled, shaking her head as she looked up from where she had been pouring another glass of wine for Tauriel. "Thorin seems quite taken with the black rock princess, Ani Redring. And I have seen no sign she finds him repulsive either."

Harry blinked at that, intrigued on many levels. For one thing, dwarves typically did not have a second name in Common. Even among friends like now, Thorin and the others would not tell Harry their names in Khuzdul, let alone the name of their family. To earn a second name, like Dain had in the term Ironfoot or like Thorin had in Oakenshield, was a sign of some single tremendous deed because such names were given to you by the larger dwarven community you were a part of rather than something you took for yourself.

And on the other hand, the fact that Thorin now looked to be blushing a bit and looking away from Harry was just hilarious. "Oh?" He asked, giving that word quite a bit of meaning. "And does this Ani meet with your approval as well, Dis?"

"Somewhat yes. I would've hoped for someone a little... Softer perhaps? That isn't quite the right term, but I would prefer someone who could act as a weight on the other end of the mace that Thorin can frequently act like in political and social circles. But then again, he seems to have mellowed considerably since taking on the kingship."

Harry, Fili and Kili looked at one another but said nothing. All three remembered how Thorin had changed after overcoming the Dragon Taint on the horde, thanks to Bilbo's aid. And how Thorin had humbled himself to ask for forgiveness for his actions under the Taint. It didn't really surprise Harry that Thorin had a softer touch as King since that ordeal, to say nothing of his bonding with the Arkenstone. The heart of the mountain had been specifically created by Aule to give those who were worthy of it

special physical and mental abilities beyond those of other dwarves, and only after that transformation had Thorin proven worthy.

“How did she come to be called Redring?” Harry asked. “Judging by the fact that you say that she isn’t the type to soften Thorin, I imagine it has quite a tale.”

“It is indeed. Ani Redring comes from one of the cities of the Blacklocks, and it was raided by a major Easterling incursion. The city was taken, but Ani led her people in a clandestine war against the Easterlings, leading them out of the city, getting the children and womenfolk someplace safe and then organizing months’ worth of engagements against the invaders until aid arrived from other cities to finally push them entirely out of the territory. She then led her people for ten years as they rebuilt until her younger brother was able to take over for her. Ani is a little older than most of the other prospective brides that have come here, but she has an excellent head on her shoulders, and although Ani is somewhat soft-spoken when it comes to personal matters, she knows more about terrain and warfare than any of the others. Ani is also a journeyman jeweler of some renown, hence the ring portion of her name.”

Kili, who was the drunkest of the four men, leaned over theatrically towards Harry, almost dropping out of his chair as he made to whisper in a loud tone, “That, and she created these strange devices for her fists, they go over her knuckles and are made of steel, with small spikes. Because she didn’t know how to use any weapons, Ani Redring instead just used those and her fists to fight the Easterlings personally.”

“I do not know where you got that story from, Kili, but I can inform you that it is not true. Ani did not involve herself directly in any of the fights. She simply directed them. Many of her city’s warriors lost their weapons, however, and did take to melting down the broken weapons of their foes and creating what they call knuckle maces from them. That way, there was enough metal to go around for all of them to have weapons,” Dis retorted angrily.

“Which is why a large portion of the trade between the Iron Hills, Erebor and Blacklocks will be for weapons going the other way?” Harry asked, pulling off some of the heat from Kili, who wilted under his mother’s glare at the very idea that a woman would be involved directly in fighting.

Women could enter any craft they wished in dwarven society, even if the woman was married, so long as they did not travel. But they could not become warriors. Considering that there were four or more men for every woman, that simply made far too much sense for any woman, no matter how outspoken to argue against. Women dwarves were equal to their menfolk in every way that mattered socially except in how expendable they were.

“Exactly. The trade with the Blacklocks is not as lucrative a trade as it would be with the Ironfoot tribe, but neither is an alliance with them as necessary. It’s nowhere near as lucrative as it would be if we made an agreement with the Stiffbeards or the Ironfists if the last was in a position to offer much in the first place,” Thorin shrugged, turning his attention to the kingly side of things. “There are the Stiffbeards to consider, of course, but distance and travel time there is a major factor.”

“More importantly, unless one of the womenfolk that the Stiffbeards have sent to try to see if there can be some personal connection with Thorin... sweeps him off his feet, I believe that is the human phrase, although why I don’t know what sweeping has to do with matters of the heart,” Dis faltered for a

moment, showing that even she was feeling the wine that she had partaken in, before continuing firmly, looking over at her brother. "Unless all that happens, then I will approve a continued courtship with Ani. I can tell she is interested in him to a degree as well."

Thorin smiled a little, although he looked almost terrified of the idea of truly courting someone, an expression that jumped to Kili when Dis rounded on him. "And don't think, I have not seen that you have been trying to court young Solu, Kili! You know the first thing she said to me when we talked with one another was that she had someone that she considered her one back home. You aren't so old that I can't take you across my knee, young man!"

"It isn't like that! I'm interested in her Aun..." Kili began before realizing that Dis was grinning at him and slumped forward, causing Fili to laugh aloud and Thorin to chuckle, seeing the ploy that his sister had used.

"Well, it's good that you admit that. You're still somewhat young to look to be settling down, but Sia is certainly not, and if she has expressed interest in you, then perhaps something more can be discussed," Dis said, leaning backward in her chair with all the ladylike smugness that she could convey. Which turned out to be quite a lot.

Harry leaned over and topped up Kili's ale for him, patting him on the back. "Best to go along with it for now, Kili. Although, if you're not serious about the lady in question, now is the time to up-stake and move on to the next mine, so to speak. Not that I would personally know anything about such," he added virtuously, winking at his own lady as he sat back.

Tauriel simply smirked back at him, leaning away from Harry and then crossing her legs in a way that drew Harry's eyes like a lodestone, as she knew it would. For a few seconds, Harry just simply stared at her legs before shaking himself and turning his attention back to his drink and the conversation while Tauriel smiled even wider.

The rest of the evening passed companionably, with jokes and easy-going talk of the future now dominating rather than tales of the past or, worse yet, romantic stuff. Kili was the first to crash, slumping forward until he lay half on, half off of the low table set in the center of the room. Fili, who had been matching Harry and Thorin drink for drink, decided to bow out at that point, leaving with by far the lion's share of the dignity to be found on the male side of the room at that point, considering that Harry and Thorin were both now slurring their words. Soon enough, with a whisper and a tug of a hand, Tauriel led Harry off as well, and he found himself passing through the night-still area of the King's Hall and then out into the bazaar beyond.

At night, almost all of the lights from the hanging chandeliers scattered throughout the massive cavern were put out, giving a semblance of nighttime time, complete with a few gleaming like small suns, giving enough light to still walk by. The silence of the area was worse, with only a few sounds of night watchmen moving around, the muted conversations of a guard at the door of twenty men under the command of a bluff, no-nonsense-looking dwarf. He looked like someone Harry had been introduced to at some point, or at least Harry thought he did. His mind currently was addled by drink, but the dwarf certainly looked familiar, perhaps one of Dain's commanders during the Battle of the Lonely Mountain?

Regardless, Harry slurred a hello to him as he and Tauriel wound their way outside. Tauriel wasn't all that much better than Harry, and the two of them had a devil of a time making it the few

hundred yards or so away from the entryway into Erebor they had to go before reaching the first of the small Elven houses built in and among a series of trees. The houses here weren't finished, much like the house that Harry and Tauriel were being given down by the Long Lake, but they had shape to them, and Tauriel led Harry to one, opening the door and leading him inside.

They were barely within the doorstep before they were falling forward on their faces, giggling and laughing and then kissing.

Luckily, or unluckily, depending on who you asked, both of them were far too inebriated to do anything more than kiss as they had over their long courtship. To add injury to annoyance, both of them were dealing with hangovers the next day, proving that there were limits to how much more physically capable elves or even wizards could be than normal humans.

The dwarves, including Dis, were also dealing with hangovers, although they at least were able to eat. The mere sight of the normal heavy breakfast spread the dwarves put on had the young lovers racing to the nearest latrines. They then stayed in the same sitting room as the night before until the world stopped spinning, and the noises of the King's receiving hall did not fill them with murderous thoughts.

That day and the next two disappeared in a welter of greetings, backslapping, and friendships being renewed between Harry and the dwarves of the company. Nori worked extensively with Kili around the Lonely Mountain, and most of that day was taken with the pair of them showing the various farms and other work going on there.

Although, Nori was proudest of the home he and Dori had taken over in the upper reaches of Erebor, near the farms for their extended family. The pair had convinced their entire clan to migrate to Erebor in the second wave of returners. Dori controlled a business of movers and also regularly trained with Dwalin and the city guard. Dwalin, in turn, was head of Thorin's royal guard. He took pride in showing the colors they were given, a dark blue surcoat over chainmail, its uniform nature and the tininess of the links showing the typical dwarven quality, the first sets of chainmail made in Erebor since the dragon. Both he and Balin were extremely proud of the important positions they

Gloin laughingly took Harry and Tauriel on a tour of his still, happy beyond words, as he introduced them to his wife. Both parents were happy to hear that Harry had met Gimli and befriended him while on patrol, although the tale of the battle against the second group of goblins had worried the pair.

The only one missing was Bofur. Bofur had left soon after Harry and Tauriel had, returning to the Blue Mountains to bring word of Bombur and Bifur's death to their clan. He had gone with a full group of dwarves and ponies, bringing with him as he was three portions of the treasure of Erebor, all of which was owed to him and his dead cousin and brother. The ablest woodsman of the company had not returned to Erebor when the dwarves sent with him had. Instead, he had sent a message to Thorin, informing him that Bofur would be staying with his clan in the Blue Mountains. None wished to immigrate to Erebor, and he had no desire to leave them, which Harry could well understand.

On the fifth day after they had arrived in Erebor, the runemasters were finally able to meet with Harry. Although if they were annoyed by the fact they had to wait, they didn't show it, and Harry was pleased to make the re-acquaintance of the two senior rune scribes from the Iron Hills.

Harry and the pair of them spoke for several hours in a small alcove off of the King's receiving hall that was used for private meetings with important locals or delegates, working on commonalities between the runes of the dwarves and the runes that Harry was used to, as Harry followed up on Thorin's words the last time Harry had spoken to these two: that he would not be teaching them anything if they were not willing to reciprocate.

Even though both of them had agreed in principle with this prior to Harry and Tauriel leaving Erebor before, it was still a **big** issue. Dwarven runes were interconnected with Khuzdul. And once more Harry was coming up against the realization that dwarves were almost paranoid when it came to keeping their language a secret from others. But with their King having made his own views on this matter plain and with so much abilities and knowledge ahead of them to gain, the two dwarf and rune masters were forced to agree to it, and better, Harry also wanted to follow dwarven custom and put that agreement in writing.

Balin would take a few days to write up a formal contract to signify the agreement between the two runic Masters and Harry. Such needed to be marked down and agreed upon ahead of time, especially when it came to trading information.

The extra time would allow Harry and Tauriel's house to be finished and for Harry and Tauriel to make a final decision on whether or not they would be staying at their home down by Long Lake for a few years or less.

While Harry was meeting with the two rune scribes, Tauriel made the acquaintance of the Blacklocks, one of whom had been commissioned to help create her gambeson. She found the Blacklock in question was somewhat standoffish at first, which was to be expected considering everything, but also talkative.

His voice, like the Blacklocks who had been chanting during the ceremony that Harry had witnessed, took her by surprise, being almost human in how lyrical it was. Tauriel was also quite taken with some of the colors that the Blacklocks were able to put on different fabrics. The crimson color that was woven through the cloth maker's own clothing was quite amazing, better than anything she had seen in Taur-e-Ndaedelos. Not quality in terms of the make of the material, but the coloration was incredibly striking in a way that the muted or natural colors she was used to were not. She had only occasionally seen such vibrant colors even in Lothlorien, and white, yellow and bright blue had dominated there. A red like this was entirely new, as was the copper color woven into the arms of the clothmaker's shirt. By the time the Blacklock clothmaker and the group assigned to create her gambeson had her measurements and requirements, Tauriel had made a decision to see if this man could make her a few more items of clothing in colors like that.

"While too much red would probably not go with my hair color, some of that copper, interspersed with white, might work quite well in a formal dress," she explained later that evening to Harry.

"I am more than fine with whatever purchases you want to make, love. Personally, I'm looking forward to experimenting with the dwarven runes and, more importantly, how they work them into metal. Some of the other hints of things they've been able to do with runes fascinate me. Not just on things like the secret doorway either, the way it hid the door so well, but sharpness runes added to

weapons, runes of protection, of defense. They're not as powerful as my shields, but they were still fascinating. Other runes and other ways to add longevity to items, anti-rust protection, and so forth. Limited, but still fascinating."

"Limited only to you and your magic, my heart," Tauriel quipped, shaking her head. "And did you also get fitted for new clothing? The two of us will be on display tomorrow evening when we are formally introduced to the representatives of the Ironfoots and Blacklocks."

"Actually, Thorin said he was putting that off until the Stiffbeards arrived so that he could rub it in their faces that he considers us friends and get a formal meal over with all in one," Harry said with a wry little grin. "But he did also mention something along those lines. Richer, finer clothing for important functions, I believe he called it. And durable to boot."

Harry then became serious, taking Tauriel's hand and squeezing it gently. "Are you certain that we can spend so long here? I don't want my agreements with the rune scribes to interfere with our desires to travel north and deal with whatever is going on up there that Oromë hinted at."

"When I was given the task by Oromë, I felt that I had time to do it, Harry. Now, looking back on it, I believe I will be able to tell if that changes. For now, we are fine. We can spend three or four years here among the dwarves, I think, and then travel once more. I am certain that I do wish to travel again in the future, even setting aside the duty laid on me by the Huntsman," Tauriel answered, cocking her head as she looked back at Harry, squeezing his hand in turn.

"Me too. A home is nice, and I'm looking forward to seeing what the dwarves have devised there. But home is where the heart is, and my heart is with you. So if we also feed my interest by traveling, I am twice blessed," Harry said, bringing her hand up to kiss it lightly.

"I could say the same, my heart." Tauriel smiled and leaned in, capturing Harry's lips in a long, drawn-out kiss.

Then she pulled away, and the two of them continued towards the elven houses arm in arm. Both of them were smiling, leaning against one another as they reentered the house they had taken over for their stay until their actual home was finished.

But those smiles went away instantly as they entered the house, replaced with expressions of surprise on Harry's part and shock on Tauriel's. Because inside the house, they found visitors. And not just any visitors either.

Harry recognized only one of the three elves sitting at the small table within the house. Legolas, former Prince and now King of Taur-e-Ndaedelos, here for some reason that Harry did not at first understand. That only lasted a second, as the identities of the two other elves sitting at the table were revealed by Tauriel's shocked exclamation of, "Mother, Father! What are you doing here?"

The pair smiled back at their daughter, and Harry could see some similarities with both. Tauriel had the same color as her mother, while her eyes matched her father's. Her face was more sharply defined than either, but she came closer to her mother, who shared Tauriel's curves if what Harry could see given the Elvish dress the woman was wearing. Tauriel's height matched her father more than her mother, who barely came up to her daughter's shoulder as the two came forward to exchange the light, gentle hugs of elvenkind.

“Why, daughter, it sounds as if you are surprised to see us. Surely you were going to come home and introduce your young man to us **eventually**, weren’t you?” Her mother asked sharply, smiling very thinly indeed at Harry, who began to feel a certain sinking feeling come over him.

End Chapter

This chapter didn’t quite go as I thought it would, but I wanted to show Gimli a bit, and then finally show the last manner in which orcs and goblins can repopulate themselves. This concept was basically a shift on the Brood Mothers introduced in Dragon Age for the Blight, and I wanted to make certain it was as horrifying as possible, a stark contrast to the simple sense of wrongness mud and dirt so steeped in the powers of Morgoth or his servants appeared before this. In this manner, I hope to show why orcs and goblins can rebuild their numbers far faster than any of the natural races, and also show once more how horrible Morgoth was in his original twisting of the Avari elves who fell into his hands in the days following the Start of the First Age, which was started by the Awakening of the elves in darkness, before even the Trees were planted. This is seen as his most vile act for a reason, well beyond anything else he has done.

I’m also not quite happy with how the chapter ended. Perhaps I should’ve ended it after the ‘What are you doing here’ line, considering that the rest seems to cut abruptly off?

Regardless, I will be interested to see what you all think of this. In particular, the aspects of dwarven society I showed near the end of this chapter and the idea that going forward, we will have at least one chapter dealing with just the dwarves, runes and magic. That one chapter will encompass, however, seven years, being the first of several large-scale time skips that I will be doing. During it, we will also take a brief journey over into Rivendell and the Shire to check on a few other characters.

Until that time, folks, I hope you enjoyed this and are staying safe, warm, cold or whatever your preference is. You all will be seeing this now, and I will post it over on fanfic by the end of the week, taking in any corrections you all see. Have a good night (or whatever)!