

## **I ain't British.**

Hey all, here is the winner of the small story poll. It is kind of boring, but some important things happen during the world exploration, and I hope you enjoy it.

### **Chapter 17: A Journey Ends**

Harry and Bilbo continued on their way, speeding along at a rate that made their previous journey with Thorin and the others seem anemic in comparison. Bilbo pointed this out with a laugh. "My pony will become the envy of all others it meets, all this weight on it, and yet doing so little work. I have to wonder what Thorin and company would feel knowing you are so free with your spells now when before you were not. I mean, I know dwarves make light of hard work and hardship, but you are making that entire concept look silly."

Admittedly, Bilbo's good humor was somewhat forced. Away from Tauriel, Harry's good humor had decreased dramatically, and Bilbo could see him glancing over his shoulder occasionally. Thankfully, Harry's general demeanor seemed to shift as Bilbo cajoled him on, and soon enough, Harry was giving as good as he was getting, a faint smile on his face as he teased Bilbo about how "For a Hobbit who has always prided himself about the toughness of his feet, you don't seem to be using them much on this trip. Perhaps we should switch, and I can ride the pony."

Their jokes ended about two turns of the glass later as a series of growls echoed out of the scrub nearby, causing Bilbo's pony to freeze in place, his eyes wide with fright. Only Harry's firm grip on the bridle kept the beast from bolting.

"I do believe that Beorn has set an outer watch," Harry quipped, completely calm even as Bilbo fumbled with his bow. "I don't know about you, but I think we'll just wait here."

"Truly," Bilbo agreed fervently, lifting his hand from his bow. The small army of bears that Beorn had brought to the Battle of the Lonely Mountain was a memory no one who had seen it would ever forget.

Soon, a large bear poked its head out of the woods, staring at them myopically, and Harry nodded politely at it, remembering how intelligent many of the beasts that Beorn had kept around him were. *Let's hope that extends to the bears he can command, not just the goats and ponies.* "Good afternoon. Please inform Beorn that Harry and Bilbo hope to pass through his lands."

This straight talk worked as the bear simply shuffled back into the woods, disappearing among the trees and scrub in a way that quite startled Bilbo. "I do not like that something so large can move so silently or quickly. It isn't quite as good as a hobbit, but it is still too quiet."

Harry nodded in agreement, and the two of them continued to talk quietly, waiting where they were until another animal appeared. This time, it was one of the goats, bounding through the scrub in a very obvious manner toward them. The goat stopped directly in front of the pony, nodding his head once and then twisted around before looking over his shoulder at them.

With a shrug, the two travelers and their pony continued on their way, following the goat. A few miles later, they saw the first signs of habitation: a group of dwarves and men working on putting up a

house between several trees Bilbo identified as apple trees. "They seem bare and festooned with vines, but I imagine they can bear quite a bit of fruit with enough care. And that field over there? Remove the stones, and the soil underneath might yield a decent crop. Combined, you could have a nice tidy little farm."

"I will bow to your superior knowledge there, my friend," Harry chuckled, raising a hand towards the dwarves and humans who had noticed them. Only one of them broke off his work to wave back, and that kind of attention to their work continued as they passed another group of workers putting up another house. Again, Bilbo pointed out that it would probably become a farm.

Moments later, they were greeted by a booming voice from the top of a small rise ahead of them. "Wizard Potter and Hobbit Baggins! It is good to see you again, my friends."

Beorn strode down the small rise, reaching them quickly as the two of them made their way towards him. He clasped Harry's arm in a warrior's grip and then thumped Bilbo on the back with a slap that nearly knocked Bilbo off his feet, having gotten off his pony to pay respects to Beorn. "Never will I forget how you gave me those runic arrays Harry. They have been a magnificent tool, hiding my house when several large companies of goblins marched past to the muster down south. And of course, there was the battle against the orcs and goblins as well! If you were not in my good graces before that, you certainly were after! I understand that it was your spells that wiped out a large portion of the enemy army?"

"I suppose, although looking back, I think I could've done a better job, certainly in supporting the dwarves. But that is a guilt I will have to live with," Harry answered, shrugging before changing the subject. The loss of Bombur, Bifur, and Ori was still too fresh in his mind. And whatever Thorin had said, Harry blamed himself for their deaths.

Hearing that in his friend's voice, Bilbo looked at him sideways, a flash of concern on the hobbit's face before Harry continued. "I didn't realize how many people had traveled with you."

"Aye, I was surprised by it as well. But several families decided they wanted to make a clean break from the past, folks who wanted to learn how to till the land, work with beasts rather than hunt them, and get away from the shadow of the Lonely Mountain and their previous lives," Beorn explained. "There are also the dwarves on loan to me from Thorin. Although I nearly turned them down but for Gandalf's intervention, I must admit they have been a massive help. My new folk are willing and know something about hard work, but there is no fighter among them bar my prime wife."

"Prime wife?" Harry and Bilbo both echoed, confused.

Beorn chuckled wryly but didn't elaborate on that point, instead leading the two off a ways away from the others towards his house. Indeed there was a lot of space between each house, which Beorn explained as being both room to grow and necessary. "As much as I am willing to become a leader of men like this, I am not overused to the company of other folk. Having my house said far apart from the others is simply a good idea. On many levels, as you both know."

Harry and Bilbo both nodded, understanding why that was a priority. After all, just because Beorn could command the loyalty of his beasts did not mean that the bears, in particular, would take kindly to other people being around.

As they approached the small outer fence of Beorn's house, Harry paused, confused at what he was seeing. Within the outer fence, he could spot four women. Two of them were bent over some item or other, working with needles and other tools he didn't recognize. Another writing things down slowly and laboriously on a tree stump as two men talked to her. A fourth woman, who seemed a little younger – it was hard to tell from this far away – came out of the barn leading several ponies. "I thought you said you were still having trouble getting used to people's company Beorn."

Beorn coughed, looking a little uncomfortable but also proud at the same time. "The two men are our small community's chief carpenters. They and Mary are writing out a list of tools they will need. When the dwarves return to Erebor, they will take that list with them. As for Mary and the others... They are my wives. The one who is seeing to my animals is Leanna, my prime wife. The others are Clarissa and Cealla."

"..." For a moment, both Harry and Bilbo were silent, then looked at Beorn shaking their heads from side to side in unison. "What?"

Beorn chuckled, still looking a little self-conscious. "I am the last of my kind, the last skin-changer. And if that ability dies with me, it would be a tremendous tragedy and weaken our little community as well. I met Leanna first. She has a spirit and enthusiasm I quite admired, enough to offer my hand to her. She and I began talking, and she is not yet ready to become a mother, nor would she ever be willing to bear the number of children that could be necessary to carry on my line. So she and I agreed that I could take more than one wife."

Harry was flummoxed by this, but Bilbo slowly nodded, understanding what Beorn was trying to say. It was doubtful that his powers of skin-changing would breed true with every child, after all, so the more children he had, the better the odds that at least a few children would be able to carry on his abilities. And those abilities, this close to the Misty Mountains, which would almost inevitably fill up with goblins again at some point, were extremely important. *Honestly, in a way it is a sign of good solid sense that I would not have expected from one of the big people.*

"And the other women agreed to this?" Harry asked, shaking his head slowly from side to side. He wasn't entirely unused to unusual relationships. Fred, George and the three Flying Foxes had all been in a quasi-free relationship, so he understood that relationships didn't have to be between one man and one woman. But Beorn was talking about this as if it were a business transaction. *What do the women get out of this?*

"They did. All three are widows, none recent," Beorn hastened to add, indicating without saying it that their husbands had not died during the Battle of the Lonely Mountain. "But their sons and daughters are of an age where they are moving on with their lives and no longer need them. All three were happy to start a new life here."

"How would that even work?" Bilbo inquired, wondering both how the family dynamic worked and how Beorn and his primary wife had brought up the subject.

If he detected the multiple layers of that question, Beorn was in no hurry to explain what had been an extremely awkward and embarrassing discussion. "Leanna is the head of that side of the house. Beyond quite a few privileges, the others have specific duties they must see too, and..." Beorn coughed, looking away slightly. "There is a rotation schedule for... when they come to my bed. Leanna comes to

my bed once every two times for the other women. As I said, she is in no hurry to become a mother. And at her age, there is no real need as yet. Besides, doing so would take her away from other duties, and I have discovered that she is an excellent organizer and quite good with the animals, as you can see.”

Harry chuckled, realizing that this really wasn't a harem situation. Given the praise Beorn continued to heap on Leanna, it seemed as if the two were the real relationship in the equation, while the other three women were here to provide the next generation. *Beorn gets to father more children with them, and they get standing and houses to themselves, and so forth, I guess*, he thought with a mental shrug. It wasn't a system that Harry would've been happy with. He was very much a one-woman type of man. But he could understand – vaguely -why it had come about.

“And how many other folks joined you?” he asked as Leanna trotted up to meet them, exchanging happy greetings with Bilbo, who seemed to recognize her from his time helping the folk of Lake-town. Harry didn't, but he hadn't interacted much with the humans before the battle. And afterward, he had only interacted with those rebuilding Dale, by which point Beorn and his folk had left.

“Five families,” the young woman answered crisply. “All of whom have children. Boys, men, women, two young girls. All of them are hard workers, and they wanted a new start for one reason or another, just like Mary, Cealla and Clarissa.”

“Well, I suppose if all of them are happy, then who are we to point fingers?” Bilbo murmured, shrugging his shoulders.

“I will admit it is unusual, but there is a point to it,” Beorn murmured, looking sheepish in a way that looked out of place on his large, broad face, while Leanna just looked mildly smug. It was evident to Harry that however this highly unusual circumstance had come about, she had been one of the instigators, if not the primary planner. “But come! It is near dinnertime. We can put on a feast for the two of you tonight and give you some food to take on your journey,” Beorn chortled, gesturing Bilbo and Harry through the gate.

Harry cocked an eyebrow and then smiled faintly. “And would there be a reason you want to help us so much besides friendship's sake?” While Beorn was helpful enough, he wasn't normally that outgoing, and Harry doubted that had changed even now.

“Ah, the wizard has seen through me, I suppose. I would like you to prepare some more of your runic arrays if you could. If so, I would be heavily in your debt,” Beorn answered instantly.

Harry nodded, then said he would work on that during the meal if that was all right, not being very hungry. Beorn was fine with that, and Leanna quickly brought Harry the same tools he had used when he first stayed with Beorn.

Beorn brought back a large slab of granite about the same size Bilbo was tall. The size meant that the area covered would be larger. Once Harry made it, it would cover the entire small hamlet.

With both in hand, Harry set himself up to one side of the barn where he had done similar work before while others of the community gathered. It was obvious that dinners were a communal event here. As he worked, Harry heard Beorn and Leanna check in with the various families, ensuring that they

were working together and that no interpersonal issues were cropping up, and listening to a report from one of the dwarven warriors.

This last interested Harry the most, and he cocked his head, listening intently even as he began to etch out the first rune of the new array.

“We have not seen any evidence of goblins throughout the mountains we’ve been patrolling. Yesterday we reached the High Pass and only found a few signs of goblins. None were recent. The way will be cleared for you, Master Potter, Master Baggins. We also recently discovered the entranceway that we believe you and Lord Thorin and company used to escape Goblin Town. It’s mostly collapsed, but we have marked it out regardless and have begun to move North and South through the hills.”

“What is your plan there, Beorn?” Harry inquired. “Indeed, what is your purpose for this entire community? Honestly, I had no idea you were even looking for more than a wife after the Battle of the Lonely Mountain.”

“Busy as you were, your lack of knowledge of my affairs is understandable. As for what I wish to do here?” Beorn shrugged. “I wish to make a society here. I wish to see my powers continuing to the next generation, and I wish to see the goblins of the Misty Mountains kept at bay. To that end, I want to continue gathering men and dwarves of hearty stature to patrol the mountain passes. The farms we are putting up now will use most of the land around here that is suitable for wheat, but, we can charge a toll to pass through the Misty Mountains and use that money to trade for food in the future.”

That made sense, and Harry nodded. Leanna then asked Bilbo for help in making certain that they were setting up their fields in the proper places, to which he agreed cheerfully. As he did, Harry continued to work on his runic array before wondering aloud, “How exactly do goblins multiply, anyway? I know how at the beginning orcs were elves corrupted by the Greater Shadow.” Even Harry was unwilling to speak Morgoth’s name, knowing that though gone, his name held power still, much like the names of the Valar. “And goblins, no offense, were originally corrupted dwarves. And that trolls were made a mockery of the tree folk, pulled from the ground by the Greater Shadow. But how do they multiply now?”

*Surely Sauron is not so powerful that he can corrupt the ground from so far away that it would breed such creatures? Or did Morgoth’s corruption instill some kind of, of self-replicating feature of some kind into the very ground that then births these creatures? That’s a horrifying thought!*

Gandalf had told Harry about the orcs and Morgoth’s other creations when he ruled from Angband. The orcs and their lesser cousins were among his first creations made during the First Age, after Morgoth had shattered Almaren, forcing the Valar to choose between keeping the world whole and pursuing him. Thus Morgoth was free to act in Middle Earth even as the elves, the First Born, woke. Morgoth captured many and experimented on them during that age, but he was eventually brought to heel in a war that reshaped Middle Earth once more, although Sauron escaped. Later, after he broke free and turned on the other Valar, destroying the Two Trees, Morgoth returned to Angband, where Sauron had continued his work, creating an army of orcs for his Master.

There was, of course, a lot more to that story, but Gandalf had told it all to Harry. The wizard found it delicious that Sauron had created that army for his Master, but then they had almost lost it

entirely in their first campaign against King Thingol in Beleriond when he was able to get the Nandor and the dwarves to help him.

Silence answered his question, bringing Harry out of his musings to look up at the head table, finding everyone there looking back at him in shock. Even Bilbo stared at him in surprise. "No one has ever told you?"

"No. As I said, I know how the evil races were created originally. Gandalf even said that doing so was Sauron's chief work under his Master for a time while he worked on creating dragons. But I don't know how they multiply now," Harry answered with a scowl, a chill going through his body. "Why?"

"...Trolls still reproduce in that manner. It is why their numbers are so much smaller than the other fell races: because they can only be created in places where vileness has seeped into the very ground, and even then slowly. And the majority of orcs and goblins are created in that way, though none of us know how, it is clear that places like Dol Guldur produce more orcs than they should hold. But other, smaller strongholds of orcs and goblins... most of the time..."

The dwarf who had been speaking, an Iron Hill dwarf who had professed to no interest in Erebor but a lot of interest in killing goblins, paused, staring at Harry coldly. "Most of the time, those smaller warbands must steal away women from other species. Elf, human or dwarf, it makes no difference to them. Whatever comes out will be an orc or goblin, depending on the current torturer. They also must grow faster both in the woman's body and after, for goblins have been known to rebuild their numbers within a few decades in a way no real race would be able to."

Hearing that and understanding what it meant, Harry's teeth clenched, and he very slowly raised his hand away from his present work, unwilling to let anger cause him to make a mistake. "I see. That is... not something I was aware of. Now I am really wishing I could've slaughtered more of them!" *Damn it, Elladan and Elrohir told me their mother had been captured and tortured, but they never hinted that there was anything rapine in nature about it. Thinking about it, I would wager that is how orcs and goblins were designed: to repopulate themselves by praying on the other races in some way. Damn Sauron and Morgoth to the Void!*

Bilbo touched his shoulder gently from behind while Beorn chuckled in a forced manner. "Now that is something everyone here can get behind!"

Harry nodded, then bent to his work, taking it far slower now as he fought down a rising rage within him at the very idea, all too easily understanding that women so captured and used would undoubtedly face a horror that he could barely imagine until their bodies simply... gave out. The very idea appalled and infuriated him so much that Harry was having trouble working his way through it as he normally could when he became angry

Of the people nearby, only Bilbo recognized the tightness in Harry's shoulders, the glare in his eyes as he continued his work. As the others began to clear away the meal and Leanna and the other women of the household moved to prepare a place for the two travelers, he moved over to Harry, gently placing his hand on Harry's shoulder. "Harry, why don't you go take a walk? Clear your head a bit before finishing your work. You have all night, no rush. And moving around like that will let you work through your anger faster."

“...Thank you for that, Bilbo. I think I’ll follow that advice.” Harry finished the last of the runes he was working on, setting it aside to be activated and the blood of Beorn and his folk to be registered in the morning. “I don’t know why, but the idea of orcs and goblins propagating themselves like that is...” He shuddered, gritting his teeth in a paroxysm of fury.

Bilbo slowly nodded, realizing that this was just one further bit of anger, and perhaps self-loathing, he wasn’t certain, piled on other mental issues that Harry was dealing with. He had no idea, nor would anyone else on Middle Earth, of the term Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. But Harry was showing a distinct sign of that mental illness. Without Thorin and Tauriel around, this latest issue had definitely piled on previous ones to a degree that Harry was having trouble dealing with it now.

“I understand and do not feel sorry for your anger or hatred of them. Everyone has dark places in them, Harry Potter, but you have a lot of light. We also saw that the heat of your anger can serve very well so long as it is controlled,” Bilbo said slowly, fumbling for the words.

It worked, however, and Harry laughed, clapped him on the shoulder, and stood up from his work, cracking his neck and shoulders for a moment. “I will see you in the morning, Bilbo. For now, I will be taking that advice of yours.”

Without further word, Harry left Beorn’s homestead, passing out into the semi-wilds beyond until, somewhat ironically, Harry found his steps carrying him to the river nearby, the River Anduin. Ahead of him, he saw a massive tor, a multi-story rock formation jutting out of the river. At first, Harry was going to follow the river, but then he spotted a ford leading to the rock and, with a shrug, followed them instead.

As he did, Harry realized this was the Carrock, the place Bilbo and the others had described as the point the Eagles had dropped them off after rescuing them from Azog and his orcs.

Passing through the cave at the bottom of the rock, Harry climbed up to the top and laid on the stone, his hands behind his head as he stared at the stars. The sight of the stars and moon helped to calm him, and after several minutes, Harry shook his head with a faint smile, trying to remember some of the constellations that Tauriel and Gandalf had told him about, remembering fondly that the stars were supposed to be loved beyond all by the elves. *I wonder if Tauriel is looking up at the same stars right now? I can only hope that her mind is less tumultuous than mine at present.*

OOOOOO

At the same time Harry was taking his moonlit walk, Tauriel was waiting for the last members of her current force to assemble, carefully perched on top of a tree with several other members of the Unseen Host around her. Two of them watched the branches, another the ground below, while Tauriel found herself looking up at the stars along with several others. Truly on a night like this, when violence was planned, the sight of the stars allowed the Elvish soul some measure of peace.

Tauriel was not currently leading anywhere neared not the full strength of the Unseen Host. Instead, this was a single band of twenty of the nearly five hundred the Unseen Host could put in the field. Other bands of twenty were scattered throughout the woods doing much the same as Tauriel’s group, mapping out the areas where the spiders had spread and in what proliferation.

Most importantly, the elves needed to know how far the giant spiders' webs had spread. If they could be spotted before they could attack, the spiders themselves were not a real threat to any Elvish warrior. But their sticky, extremely strong webbing could be, and not only as a warning system. Over the years, several members of the Host had found themselves stuck in that webbing, their movement curtailed even as the jingling of the webs alerted nearby spiders that prey had wandered into their webbing.

Since Tauriel had taken command, the Unseen Host had pushed the spiders back several dozen leagues away from Taur e-Ndaedelos. This had protected the civilians within the city, although many an archer was still incensed that the spiders had been able to skitter away after capturing two Elven children. *There are so few young around these days. Fewer by far than when I was young four centuries ago. The world changes, and while our fëa remains strong, our will to continue to grow as a people wither. Worse, though, is how smart the spiders are fighting.*

The spiders were intelligent, almost as intelligent as an elf or human. They knew their advantages just as well as the elves did, and worse, they acted almost as if they were being guided even now with Sauron banished from Dol Guldur. The various nests didn't compete with one another for game and instead fought against the elves, each nest coming to the aid of their fellows.

This kind of cooperation could even be seen in individual battles. Some spiders would attack or retreat on the ground, while others would try to ambush the elves from above. Spiders could move through the trees so silently that even most elves had trouble spotting them. Others would occasionally launch webbing over the attacking elves from ambush as the elves concentrated on their visible foes. And whether or not they fought during the day or at night didn't matter. The spiders might be more at home at night but could see just as well during the day.

*And they do not fight to the death either. We kill several in each engagement, but most of the time, more retreat before we can finish them off. The spiders build up their numbers as they retreat, which is not good.*

Shaking her head from such thoughts, Tauriel turned her eyes away from the stars, staring towards the west, where she knew Harry would be, feeling the tug of her fëa in that direction. Having fully acknowledged both the depth of her interest in Harry and where she wanted their relationship to go, Tauriel's spirit was reaching out constantly now to meld with Harry's own, as it would in an elvish courtship. But Tauriel knew duty and obligation kept them apart and would not give in to her fëa's urging.

*But at least I have foes I can take out my irritation on. And that's enough woolgathering. It is time to see to that release of irritation.* Tauriel felt her lips quirked in a slight smile before banishing it from her face, knowing it had no place at the moment. She looked a little southward through the trees to the ground below, then nodded at the others, who were also looking in that direction. One after another, the elven archers slid through the trees to the ground below, silent as so many leaves. Once on the ground, they were met by eight regular soldiers astride stags, who quietly saluted her. All of them wore heavy thick cloaks over their armor. Even elven plate mail or chain made noise when the wearer moved, so the regular soldiers needed to wear more layers to block the noise and any shine it might have had.

At first, Tauriel had not been happy to have groups like this seconded to the squads most likely to run into trouble. But Legolas had convinced her that if the Unseen Host scout teams ran into trouble, it would be good to have a group of regular soldiers nearby ready to get them out. Otherwise, the mounted elves would remain well back from the skirmishers.

Tauriel nodded back and said simply, "Move out." Moments later, with Tauriel in the lead, the Unseen Host was cutting their path almost straight south, heading towards the concentration of spider nests one of them had discovered earlier that morning. The war against the spiders called to Tauriel, and she would see her duty through.

OOOOOOO

Harry did not sleep well that night. Rather, he was roused by a nightmare. It was hard to recall in the morning, but it had been dominated by his battle with the shade of Voldemort in the Unending Void. But in his nightmare, it wasn't just the two of them. Instead, Harry's friends were there too. And not just from this life, but the past one. And instead of just Voldemort, Azog and hundreds of orcs also invaded the dream. No matter what Harry tried, the tide of evil took his friends one by one, until all that was left was him fighting over Thorin's broken body as Hermione and Tauriel were torn from him out into the darkness of the Void by the endless horde of orcs.

It was madness. It was impossible, but it was a dream, and dreams, especially nightmares, did not need to make sense to be terrifying, and Harry woke up drenched in sweat, blood leaking from where he had nearly bitten through his lip.

But by the time he returned to Beorn's house, Harry had recovered, and he and Bilbo soon left Beorn and his folk behind, with none the wiser about Harry's nighttime horrors. The runic array Beorn had requested now stood in the center of the small hamlet. Larger and with a commensurately larger segment devoted to gathering ambient magic, it would cover the entire area. Although Harry had warned, people who joined them would have to be added into the runic scheme. There was no way to get around that unless people didn't want to leave the wards.

As he and Bilbo pushed on up the mountains, Harry reflected that having a hidden base of operations would undoubtedly help Beorn and his folk if the goblins eventually spread through the Misty Mountains in strength. *Especially if Beorn can pass down his skin-changing powers.*

The two of them pushed hard, hoping to make the High Pass in a few days. They succeeded, although Bilbo was somewhat unhappy that they had done so. The High Pass was not only high up in the mountains but also extremely cold. Luckily, he had a wizard along, and Harry's use of warming charms kept them going.

During this time, Bilbo also noticed his companion seemed to not be getting much sleep. But the two times he brought it up, Harry waved it off, and it didn't seem to affect his energy or use of magic much, so Bilbo let it rest. Harry had not desire to share his nightmares with anyone else as the horror of what could have happened to Tauriel had they lost the Battle of the Lonely Mountain or Hermione had been there was replaced by fields of dead, Voldemort coming back, and worse, including one dream of Harry himself being tortured and turned to the service of Sauron.

Yet despite Harry's nightmares, they, crossed through the mountains within six days of meeting Beorn, coming down from the High Pass to the other side without incident. Reaching the foothills in the afternoon, the two travelers were prepared to push on, hoping to make flat ground by that night. But near evening, Bilbo paused, staring into the area around them. "Do you hear something?"

Harry shook his head, but a moment later, Bilbo's observation was proven accurate as from over the hills came a small band of elves led by Lord Elrond. He smiled at them from the saddle as they pulled up in front of the two travelers. "Hail and well met, travelers. It is good to see you both once more."

"Well met, my Lord Elrond," Bilbo bellowed from the waist, continuing on Elvish, "the day is brighter for our meeting."

Elrond and his people all smiled at that, amused by his command of their language and enjoying the turn of phrase, while Harry just nodded hello. He could speak Elvish with the translation spell but felt that would probably ruin the impact of Bilbo's words.

"I would like to offer you the hospitality of my house if you wish it," Elrond replied, gesturing over towards the north with his left hand. "While we have had brief word of the battles of Erebor and the Lonely Mountain, first-hand information would be far better. And I know that the travel through the Misty Mountains is still a harsh one, if far less dangerous these days."

The two travelers looked at one another, and Harry shrugged. "It's your choice, Bilbo. Personally, Elrond is not the elf I most wish to see, but I won't deny that his hospitality was amazing the last time," he quipped.

Elrond smiled at that, while Bilbo seemed to think about it for a moment. While he did want to hurry home to his little hobbit hole, it would not be polite to deny Lord Elrond at the moment, and two days would probably not matter much. *Besides, Rivendell is so amazing that it would be the height of folly to not take the chance to stay there again.* "I think we will take you up on your generous offer Lord Elrond. Thank you very much."

Without a word or command, Elrond's troops turned, and he began to lead the way back towards the borders of Rivendell. However, as he did, he looked at Harry quizzically, who had already swung himself up on a spare horse Elrond's people had brought along. "At first, I thought it was the Lady Galadriel you meant by your joke, Harry Potter. Yet now, thinking about it, I am no longer certain. Something in your face and eyes speaks of another source of your joke."

"You see rightly, Lord Elrond. Harry met a young Sindar elf named Tauriel when we passed through Mirkwood, and they have since begun courting," Bilbo said, speaking up for Harry could try to avoid the conversation.

He blushed a bit, looking away as Elrond and the rest of his folk turned towards him in surprise. "Truly? Congratulations. I doubt not that many elves might look askance at the idea, but it would be grossly critical of me to do so. Yet you will run into significant differences in how elves go about courting compared to what you might know as a human." He paused, looking at Harry's face, then said slowly, "Someone else has already told you about the bare bones, I suspect, but not the reason why you are now feeling as if you are out of sorts on many levels, correct?"

Harry blinked at that, and Elrond chuckled faintly, spoke a single word in Elvish, and then dropped to the back of the party, gesturing Harry to join him. Two other elves took the lead, guiding the group forward as Elrond began to speak. "There is a reason why Elvish and human relationships are so rare, Harry Potter. Love among elves is not a thing of the body and mind as it is among humans. It is a thing of the soul, of the fëa first and foremost."

"I have heard of the term. Gandalf told me there wouldn't be as much physical type flirting as there is among humans and that our souls would call out to one another," Harry frowned. "I also know that elven fëa is tied to Arda. That unless you wish it, your spirits, even when your bodies die, are tied to the halls of Mandos, and that you can be resurrected in Aman."

"Yes, our spirits are immortal. And human spirits are not. Love between our races therefore is... hard on many levels. When elves court, our fëa merge with one another, often long before our bodies unite upon marriage. Elves grow together, work beside one another on tasks of hand, eye and imagination, seeing in one another the true individual beyond the physical shell. Rarely during courtship do elves part from one another once they are certain of their choice. Doing so can cause mental and soul-deep pain."

Elrond looked at Harry, giving Harry the impression he was looking through him at the moment. "I sense that you have changed beyond that."

"I have. My presence was added into the Song of Arda, and I have sworn myself to Arien, Maia of the Sun."

"Ah. That is good. Yet while you might turn out to be immortal due to your magic, Harry, you began life as a human. The transition in your fëa may be a long, drawn-out thing." He paused then, thinking about it. "Such a thing has never happened before, a human through magical means rather than that of the Valar's intervention. I cannot tell you how that will affect your mind or soul, Harry Potter, although I will advise you and Tauriel to seek out Lady Galadriel as soon as you may. That you and Tauriel are willing to be apart speaks to your individual strengths, but that separation will continue to be hard for you until you consummate your relationship through the vow of matrimony and more physical means."

The way Elrond said those last few words caused Harry to bite back a snort as he fought back a joke at the 'hard' comment that would have made the Twins proud. But since Elrond's tone sounded almost like a disapproving elderly matron discussing sex, he held back. If Harry had any remaining doubt that courting was decidedly different among elves, that would have cured him. Because while he did delight indeed in Tauriel's company and her soul, as Elrond put it, her body was not exactly 2<sup>nd</sup> to that.

*More like 1A and 1B, and I think judging by her reaction to our snogging sessions, she thinks the same thing, so maybe there is more physical attraction involved than elves would like to admit.*

"Understood. Still, I think it is worth the effort."

"Love always is. Even with my wife gone, I still cherish the memories of our time together, and as the centuries have gone by, I look more forward to the day I too will cross the ocean to the west to the shining lands beyond," Elrond smiled, reminiscing about his long-departed wife, having long since dealt with the tragedy of their parting.

Celebrían and a band of their fellows had been ambushed by orcs more than 300 years ago now, and although Elrond and his sons had eventually saved her, the corruption of her body had been far easier to heal than the damage done to her fëa. When it became clear that Celebrían would never truly be whole once more here in Middle Earth, she had made the decision to pass on to Aman over the Great Sea.

Elrond and Harry talked about courtship among elves in an upbeat, joking manner before shifting topics throughout the rest of the trip. Never did the conversation turn serious again. Rather, it was the discussion of two individuals getting to know one another better than they had previously. Despite having spent a night in Rivendell before, Harry had concentrated on Gandalf and then Lady Galadriel at the time, beyond pranking Elrond and Saruman anyway. Now he got to know the half-elven lord beyond his oftentimes stern exterior. Bilbo often joined in, interjecting his own jokes or telling tales about the shire, his longing for home obvious in his voice to everyone who heard it.

They crossed the river Anduin and soon found themselves in Rivendell proper, where Bilbo's pony and the horses of the elves were taken off to pasture, as Harry and Bilbo were led through Elrond's halls. Everything beyond the river looked brand-new to them despite having been there before. Soon they were ensconced in a small curving room built into the side of a tree at the center of a garden through which many different paths led off in different directions.

There, Elrond gestured them into chairs, and several servants came out, speaking quietly to Elrond for a few moments before food began to appear almost magically. "We will see to your supplies going forward, and not just Lembas either. Never fear, my good hobbit. You will not eat as well on the road as you would here, but it will be close."

With that, Elrond took a seat at the circular table. Normally they would all have been seated at a rectangular table, with Elrond at his head as was his right as Lord, but the use of a circular table made it clear to all that he saw the two travelers as equals and friends. "Now is it time for a serious discussion. Tell me about your travels. Tell me about it from when you left my halls until you returned. I have had reports from my sons about the battle of the mountain and the slaying of the Dragon, but those were bland reports brought to me by the talons of the good birds of the air and my own sending's. <-correct? I can sense the decrease in vileness and corruption within the Misty Mountains, but that is only the result rather than the tale itself."

Bilbo nodded, and Harry began to explain the story from the moment the goblins had ambushed them in the Misty Mountains. The destruction of Goblin Town was almost glossed over despite it being such a momentous event, as it was followed by meeting Thranduil's folk. Their imprisonment by the now-deceased Elven King brought a frown to Elrond's face, which lightened into a wry smile as Bilbo said, "And it is when we were imprisoned that Harry and Tauriel began their flirtations."

"We weren't flirting at the time! We were just getting to know one another," Harry answered with a huff. But he didn't argue the fact that was indeed the start of things. Nor did he interrupt Bilbo as he explained his own side of that adventure, thinking Bilbo had well earned the chance to brag.

The tale continued as day turned into night, and more elves came by to listen, including two who took notes, something that Bilbo noticed and requested copies of. And while the fight with Smaug won many gasps of shock and loud exclamations from the other elves, Elrond was more interested in

the aftermath. When the strength of the Taint showed, he simply nodded sagely, But then his eyes lit with delight at how Bilbo was able to combat it by literally burying Thorin up to his neck as he prayed to Yavanna and planted growing things around him.

When the story reached the Battle of the Lonely Mountain, Elrond became concerned. The grief and guilt in Harry's eyes was apparent to him, as well as the rising self-anger. The destructive emotions roiled within Harry as he explained how the company had lost Bombur, Bifur and Ori. *Losses among his friends have opened old wounds my stepmother attempted to heal, I fear. But I lack the words or touch to heal his mind. I can perhaps help, but...*

Elrond was one of the finest healers in Arda, but only of physical wounds. He and Rivendell's inherent magic could also help wounded spirits recover their strength. But that wasn't Harry's problem. No, his problem was purely a mental one, his own mind having turned against Harry. Elrond lacked the knowledge of what to do, as it was a problem he had rarely seen before. Elves dealt with self-doubt and even guilt, but rarely did they spend time regretting past actions or questioning if they had done enough. And all elves knew how to let go of the grief of lost friends, more often than not channeling such negative emotions into the arts, such as music. Harry did not seem able to do that, especially with new grief piled on past sorrow.

*And did not Gandalf say he was actually far younger than he looked? That he had entered the Void between worlds as a boy of fifteen or sixteen and come out a man? I should have consulted with my stepmother about him before she left.*

From there, Bilbo took up the tale about how Harry, the dwarves and humans had begun to rebuild and how the elves had helped by sending food for the rapidly growing population of Erebor and Dale and their ongoing conflict with the spiders of Mirkwood. There Harry interjected, the guilt and self-recriminations in his eyes disappearing for the moment. "That effort is being led by Tauriel. Legolas has apparently taken up the mantle of kingship very well in terms of clearing the greater corruption of Sauron from the various spells on the Western Road and elsewhere throughout the woods, but the physical war against the spiders is being led by Tauriel in the Unseen Host. It is a trial that she is well up to meeting, although I doubt she will do so as I would."

"Oh?" Elrond inquired, taking the bait with aplomb, happy to see Harry pushing through his roiling emotions. "And how would you deal with the spiders?"

"Fire, lots of fire and my new light-based spell. But then again, I am not an elf of the woods, so the surrounding territory wouldn't matter overmuch to me," Harry replied with a smirk, his tone both factual and jocular at the same time, causing Elrond to chuckle although he understood that Harry was indeed very serious about how he would deal with the threat.

It was almost enough to make Elrond feel sorry for the descendants of Ungoliant. But not really. No elf would ever feel sorry for such, all knowing of Ungoliant's despoiling of Laurelin and Telperion and the lights of the Wells. No elf would ever see the giant spiders as anything less than the evil creatures they were.

At that point, Elrond was roused from his musings as one of his folk spoke too loudly in denouncing the dwarves and their love of gold for Harry's taste. Elrond saw Harry twitch but decided not to intervene.

A finger pointed slightly from the table, and that worthy found himself wearing a bright pink outfit that was almost too bright to look at. His fellows reared back, turning their eyes away from the travesty as Harry drawled, "While I will be the first to say that the dwarves' love of contracts and gold is a little off-putting, they are my friends, and they have many good qualities that far offset the bad. I would urge you to interact with them more before coming to such a quick and all-encompassing conclusion."

"..." The elf in question stared down at himself, then around at his fellows, before looking to his Lord, who was looking rather amused. Seeing that, and with no other recourse, the elf in question decided to bite the arrowhead and get it over with. "I apologize for my intemperate remarks, Harry Potter. It is simply that gold is such a strangely useless metal for anything but decoration. The idea of humans, dwarves and even hobbits basing their economies on it and other so-called precious metals is bizarre to us."

"That is entirely understandable, and I am certain Harry will accept your apology," Bilbo interjected, giving Harry a stink eye. "If for no other reason than looking at you at the moment, Sir elf, is somewhat painful."

Harry rolled his eyes but canceled the color-changing spell he'd used, remarking internally that spell had quickly become the quickest and most useful spell when it came to pranks in this new world. He then yawned, suddenly quite tired from retelling the tale almost from beginning to end, wondering what time it was, not having learned how to tell time by the stars just yet.

Like a good host, Elrond quickly recognized his guest's exhaustion and gestured to two of his folk to guide Harry to where he would stay the night. "I am certain we will speak more on the morrow, Harry Potter. For now, rest as much as you wish."

Harry thanked him and followed his guides, yawning once more. Watching him go, Elrond shook his head slowly. He waited until a few of his folk began to play a melody nearby, drawing the others to them. Bilbo looked after the players, delighted by their music as he had been in his previous stay in the homely house. But before he could move over and lose himself in the music, he felt a gentle touch on his arm.

"Master Baggins, while it sits ill with me to talk to someone else rather than the individual in question, I have to ask you about Harry Potter's current mindset," Elrond requested. The more information I have, the more help I can give him. While I do not have the lady Galadriel's touch with mind and heart, I do have some knowledge of how one's thoughts can turn into knives, cutting you in ways no weapon in an enemy's hand would."

Bilbo sighed, his interest in the music fading for a moment. "I believe that Harry was faring well enough. His helping the dwarves let him set aside his grief for our fallen, but he is taking their deaths far too much on his shoulders. Thorin, Gandalf and I think even Dwalin at one point spoke to him about that, but without them around, any mention of the dead brings thoughts of what he could have done better. I know not how that mentality came to be, I have learned quite a bit about Harry's past in life, but it has been in snippets here and there, not a full retelling. I'm sorry I can't help more."

"I see. I believe that Gandalf knew more, and Lady Galadriel knew even more. But I believe you are correct, Bilbo, that the true depth of his self-guilt for the deaths of your companions comes from his past life. Yet it seems as if something new must have renewed that pain?"

"Er, well, Before we met with Beorn and his folk and Harry asked, no one had explicitly told Harry about how goblins and orcs..." Bilbo trailed off hesitantly, and Elrond nodded, waving him to silence. There need not be more spoken up on that score, although Elrond was surprised that neither of his sons had mentioned that to Harry. Certainly, their mother's defilement at the hands of the orcs was still a very sore point for all three of them.

"Still, tell me what you can of his life. Perhaps in doing so, I will learn enough to discern the words that can help Harry Potter restart the healing process."

The next day, Harry slept in a bit before going for a walk on the grounds, seeing if he could get himself lost, in all honesty. *Rivendell is an amazing place, he reflected, and not just the sheer feeling of goodness here either. There seems to be something for everyone here, if in a very Elvish kind of way. I doubt I will find the equivalent of magic broomsticks anywhere or one of the non-magical roller coasters I saw advertised on TV occasionally. But if you take that away, this place has a little something for everyone... except excitement or real work you don't bring in with you or take from someone else. And without something to do, without something to bend his magic and mind to, Harry's mind turned inward, and at the moment, that was the last thing he wanted.*

He spent the rest of the afternoon trying various ways to take his mind off the friends he had lost in the Battle of the Lonely Mountain by falling into an old staple: pranking every elf he saw. Several elves found themselves itching for no reason they could discern. Others found their clothing changed in subtle manners, and colors added where they shouldn't be.

And yet Harry found the reactions of the elves lacking. They simply blinked and looked around for the cause of the sudden changes. When they spotted Harry, they asked if they had done something to offend him and then politely requested that he remove the spells. Or they walked off in a huff. Neither reaction made it all that interesting to Harry, and he could tell by their placid faces not one of them even considered trying to prank him back.

*If I did something like that to Tauriel, I would wager she would either be after me with an arrow on her string or come up with ways of pranking me back. But unless they are thinking of using the next meal time to get back at me...*

Eventually, Harry's wandering took him far from the areas where guests normally stayed. This wasn't a problem for the elves, as all of Rivendell was open to guests. It was simply slightly unusual for them to go so far afield, and Harry hadn't seen an elf for a while. So it came as something of a surprise when Harry heard Elrond's voice behind him. "There you are, Harry. Are you enjoying your time pranking my folk and exploring my land?"

"I am enjoying the second far more than the first. Half the joy of pranking someone is the reactions, and your people's reactions are far too staid and composed," Harry answered dolefully.

Elrond chuckled at that, moving to walk beside Harry from where he had intercepted him through a small side path. He subtly turned them down one path, leading further away from where the

distant songs of his folk could be heard. "I am afraid you have caught us at somewhat of a low moment. Most of my most active folk are also counted among my soldiers, and there are but thirty of them remaining within the boundaries of Rivendell at present. I have sent out the rest on various tasks, scouting through the Misty Mountains, taking messages to Cierdan the Shipwright for me and other matters."

Harry looked at him questioningly, and Elrond explained. "We have yet to hear from Saruman, but it is doubtful indeed that he was able to deal a final blow to the lesser shadow, Sauron the Deceiver. And if there is one thing I have learned as ages pass, evil does not like to be thwarted. No doubt he has sent out messages of his own to the fell folk of the world to cause trouble. I wish my folk to do what they can to mitigate that."

Seeing Harry's eyes flashing with interest, Elrond hastened on. "But do not take my words as all that much of a warning. You should still have a somewhat peaceful journey towards the shire. Nor will there be any reason for you to halt your return to Mirkwood to lend your aid to the effort. You do not, in fact, need to do everything, Harry Potter."

Harry twitched at that, and Elrond knew then that he was on the mark. However, Elrond stayed silent for a moment instead of speaking, gesturing for Harry to look at some of the trees they were passing by, each marked by some artistic touch added by his folk over the centuries. This took Harry's attention away from the conversation until they were nearing a small sitting area. The chairs in question were not benches or indeed made in any manner. Instead, they were carved out of a portion of the mountain overlooking Rivendell, looking not down into Rivendell but across the lands beyond one of the rivers that marked the edges of Elrond's land.

Elrond slid into one of the seats, leaning back against the rock behind him and looking inquisitively at Harry. Caught out, Harry knew he could not demure and settled into the chair beside Elrond with a sigh.

As he did, Elrond began to speak. "When I was young and had yet to reach my majority, I wished to storm Angband on my own. Whenever there was a battle to be fought, I wished to involve myself. Whenever there was a deed that needed doing, I wanted to be the one seeing to it. Maglor, who raised me at the time, called it a heroic arrogance. The idea that you should always be doing more, that it is up to you to right all the world's wrongs. Looking back, I wonder how much self-loathing was in those words, but I digress."

He gazed at Harry, one eyebrow rising, and Harry shrugged his shoulders. "I understand what you're saying. And I completely understand that I also have a... I wouldn't call it a heroic arrogance. My friends once called it a people-saving thing. But in my past life I..."

From there, Harry explained a bit more about his life as Harry Potter, The Boy Who Lived. And like Gandalf before him, Elrond was quick to point out that the adults in Harry's life needed to have done more. That it should not have been Harry who always needed to be at the forefront against Voldemort. "I understand that this Voldemort might have been coming after you, Harry, and I understand that the adults in your failed you badly, forcing you to take on more of that burden. But that does not mean that you need to be the one to do everything. Not here in Middle Earth. There will

always be evil. To think otherwise is folly. To think you can do more than a man, be he a wizard elf or human, is folly. It is worse than folly; it is egotistical arrogance and stupidity.”

“Harsh,” Harry deadpanned, shaking his head.

“Does that mean my words are untrue? You could not control the entire battlefield, even if you could affect it. You could not save Ori. You had no idea where he was. You could not save Bifur nor Bombur. You were blind to their individual plights by the chaos of battle. You could not save them from the danger all warriors face whenever they fight unless you wished for them to not fight it all. Would you take that away from them? Their ability to fight for their homes, for themselves? Indeed, their very right to self-determination?”

Harry grimaced and slowly shook his head. Elrond laid a hand on his shoulder, squeezing gently. “I understand. As a leader, whenever a battle has ended, I always ask myself, could I have done better? And most of the time, the answer is yes. But that is in hindsight. That is once removed from the event. In such a way, you will always see more than you would during the event itself. But letting that thought cut your mind to the bone is foolish.”

He shook Harry’s lightly, repeating some of Thorin's words to him immediately after the battle. “Do not take the burden of their deaths on your shoulders. They were warriors fighting a battle for their friends and homes. No one is at fault for their deaths but the enemy. To think otherwise is to let the guilt crush you, and you have pain enough already from how you arrived in this world on many levels.”

Harry flinched, and Elrond turned away, letting Harry compose himself for a moment. And when he spoke again, he had changed the subject entirely. “Now, tell me of the work on the Lonely Mountain and Erebor. Bilbo did not touch on your work except for opening Erebor’s internal farms with your transfiguration spell. And tell me more of Tauriel. You did not explain much of why you felt drawn to an elven maiden? I confess I did not see that possibility within you. What did she do that grabbed your interest so much? And vice versa, for while it isn’t unusual for humans to feel attracted to elves, the opposite is far less likely. Believe me, I know.”

Chuckling, Harry leaned back, not looking at Elrond but down at the distant lands beyond Rivendell as he responded.

OOOOOOO

Near the Elven Lord and the human wizard, Bilbo smiled, backing away slowly down the path he had been following, waiting until he was well away before removing the ring. It might not have been necessary, but he had wanted to overhear how Elrond would try to get Harry to cease beating himself up over things he had no control over. Part of that was a bit of guilt, knowing he had been unable to come up with the words to get rid of Harry’s anger, only to calm him down. But Bilbo knew his friend was broken in some fashion inside his head and needed help.

*But perhaps with Elrond’s words, he can once more start to heal now rather than needing to wait until he can see the lady Galadriel. Or Tauriel, either/or. I am very much a fan of the idea of the healing presence of a loved one, given how Harry acted when she was around. I think together, the two ladies will be able to help him through his guilt and self-hatred. Either through healing or a slap upside the head. Honestly, a part of me wishes I was close enough to hear why Harry thinks that it is his job to solve*

*every problem and protect everyone, and yet another part of me thinks that whatever reason it is, it will be a most foolish one.*

Chortling at that, Bilbo made his way back through the forests of Rivendell, stopping here and there to simply gaze at a particularly beautiful scene. And because he was doing this, he noticed movement from the corner of his eye.

Turning in that direction, he saw a flash of black hair on a young body. Someone his own size in point of fact, which was so startling, that Bilbo paused in his journey back towards the music that had been calling him.

He moved with the normal stealthy nature of hobbits, his footsteps making no sound as they traversed the forest, following the bobbing black hair until it stopped. Coming close, Bilbo was somewhat surprised to realize that the black-haired individual was not another hobbit, nor a young elf, as he had seen scant examples of passing through Taur E Ndaedelos. Indeed, it was only now that Bilbo realized he had not seen any young at all here in Rivendell before this.

But this was not a young elf before him. Rather, it was a young human. He was spare of frame, yet well-built, and very young looking to Bilbo's eyes. *He is certainly younger than in his tweens, for certain.* And yet there was something about him, the intensity of his gaze, the way he moved that spoke of his time among the elves.

Yet his very presence here was a mystery Bilbo was utterly entranced by. He took a few steps forward and then gently coughed. As the youth whirled on him, Bilbo smiled. "I think, young one, you need to work on your situational awareness. While I know my feet are silent, my breathing certainly was not after running after you."

"And why did you..." The young boy began before staring at Bilbo in frank interest. "You are a stranger. And I have not seen your like before."

"I would be astonished if you had, although both of us are remiss in our manners at present. I am a Bilbo Baggins of Bag End in the Shire. At your service and your family's." Bilbo said, bowing grandiosely, so much that he gently brushed the ground with one hand.

Grinning and somehow understanding that this was not the hobbit's normal way of acting, the human hopped to his feet from where he had been examining a small stone surrounded by white flowers. Whether it was there naturally or not, Bilbo couldn't say, but it was certainly a striking image. The youth bowed in return, going so far as to touch his forelock as some hobbits and menfolk would. "My name is Estel of Rivendell at your service. Well met, Mister Baggins."

*A human youth whose name translates in Elvish to Hope? Fascinating!* "Please, call me Bilbo. We hobbits are not fond of formality between acquaintances, let alone friends."

"I have never heard of your folk Bilbo," Estel answered hesitantly. "In size, you appear to be no more than four or three years my senior, yet in build, you are more akin to a dwarf if thinner and less muscular. I meant no offense, of course, it is just..."

“The interest in the unknown compels you as it would any youngling worth the hair on his feet. How about a trade, then? Show me around this forest, and I will tell you about my folk and how I came here.”

Estel thought for a moment, turning his attention back to the stone, before quickly kneeling down, picking it up, and tossing it between his hands for a moment before pocketing it, whispering under his tone about some kind of errand or test, the difference between the words was very small in Elvish, and Bilbo couldn't quite make it out. He then turned back to Bilbo, holding out his hand, which Bilbo shook. “Bargained fair and well. Follow me and tell me of your kind. What are hobbits, where did you come from, where is Bag End?”

Laughing, Bilbo followed the youth, trying to speak through his questions to answer them for a time while wondering about the mystery of his presence here. *I think Harry should meet this youngster. Now, where is the path back to where we are staying?*

OOOOOOO

Harry stared at the young boy who had led Bilbo back to their rooms, feeling as if he was looking through a warped fun house mirror at his own past in a way. *Either I am feeling a touch of something, some magical sense, or it could be that thing I've heard mentioned. What was it called again? Common Sense? Yeah... a young human boy raised by elves and named Estel, or hope? Oh, dear. There's no way he doesn't have some major destiny. The question is, am I looking at another child of prophecy or something else? Still, at least I can assume that Elrond and the elves will have prepared him far better than the Dursleys prepared me.*

The boy scrutinized him just as much, showing a remarkable amount of maturity for an eleven-year-old. Harry could all too easily remember when he was that age, and he very much doubted he would be as calm. *Silent, sure, but not calm meeting another human after who knows how long. Is that his general character showing, or his elven upbringing?*

“You are only the fourth other human I've met here in Rivendell. And yet, there is something about you... your eyes are not a usual color for humans, and you... you do not act with the reverence towards the elves here that most humans do. At least, judging by what Mister Baggins told me about how you were pranking them.”

“Yeah, kiddo, I don't tend to let the fact that they are elves bother me overmuch. While their regal nature and the sense of agelessness they give off can impact others, they don't bother me. What does bother me right now, kiddo,” Harry repeated, having seen Estel twitch at the term, “is that a youngster like you should have a smile on his face.”

Estel blinked at that, and Harry pointed a finger at him. A Cheering Charm caught the youth even as he opened his mouth to ask what Harry meant by that, and an instant later, he was laughing aloud, falling to his knees and clutching his side as he lost control of himself.

Harry kept the spell on the youth for a moment as Bilbo chuckled nearby, shaking his head. “Just remember, Harry, people do need to breathe.”

“True.” Harry canceled the charm and grinned down at the kid. “Never take life too seriously, kiddo. That is one thing the elves around here tend to do a lot of. It's hard to blame them, given how

many tragedies, reversals and dark times they have seen. But don't forget that laughter can be just as important as music, poetry, quiet reflection and all the rest."

Growling, Estel came up off the ground in a lunge, slamming into Harry, trying to take the far larger man off his feet. But despite his well-trained, tough frame, Estel was still just a young child. He only succeeded in pushing one leg backward. But then he tried to swing for Harry's privates with one of his small fists.

Watching from the sidelines, Bilbo didn't think he was doing it on purpose, but the eleven-year-old's head came up to that point on the taller man's body. For his part, Harry didn't bother thinking about why. He just dodged, causing Estel's clenched fist to thump into his thigh rather than his boy bits. Reaching down quickly with a hand, Harry grabbed the kid's head, pushed him back, and held him at arm's length. "None of that!"

The kid ducked, pulling his head out of Harry's grasp as he crouched, grabbing up a handful of dirt. This he hurled upwards into Harry's face. Harry ducked away, but Estel kicked out, trying to upend Harry as he stepped backward. It didn't work, but it was a good effort, Harry thought. Then Estel was whirling away, grabbing a stick and shouting, "Have at you!"

Harry laughed and used an Accio to pull a stick to his hand, taking a stance that Thorin had taught him. "Come on then, let's see what you've learned, kiddo."

Growling again, Estel came at him, and Harry smiled, blocking his attempts, while Bilbo shouted encouragement for Estel from the sidelines. He also asked questions, as did Harry, as they 'dueled'.

The youth had been here for as long as he could remember. Elrond had told him he had come from the north and that Elrond had taken him in from his real family when his mother brought Estel to him. His father had died while he was a baby, leading a small warband of their folk against orcs. His mother had brought him here to live among the elves. "My mother usually stays apart from the elves. She is rather shy around strangers. Else I would introduce you."

Locking their blades, Harry looked at him, then ruffled his hair. "That's something we both have in common, Estel." His voice was serious and almost sad, causing Estel to pause in his attempt to break through Harry's guard. "We both lost our fathers when we were babies. My parents both died defending me, and I have no doubt that your father felt he was doing what he had to defend you and your folk."

Estel nodded back, and then Harry used the hand he had ruffled the kid's hair to push him away a bit. "I think I'm done with sword practice," he drawled. "Tell me more about yourself, and then you can continue to give Bilbo and me a tour. What are your favorite spots?"

For the rest of the day, Estel showed Bilbo and Harry around, while the two spoke about their adventures when asked and their pasts when prompted. The youngster was curious, intelligent, and seemed to be taking their words in with a certain amount of gravity, yet after the earlier moment with a cheering charm and the impromptu 'duel,' he was also wearing a wide smile and seemed to evince a certain amount of energy rather than the gravity that had marked his initial meeting with Bilbo. That was all to the good in Bilbo's mind. A youngster of Estel's age (so young, and he was human to boot!) should be more smiling and happy-go-lucky than serious and stern.

Eventually, Estel's stomach and Bilbo's began to argue with one another over who was hungrier. The three of them turned their wandering back to the hall, where they were intercepted by Elrond. "Ah, there you are Estel. Your tutors informed me that you had not shown up for either of your lessons today. You know you will have to make up the work, do you not? Although I will thank you for showing hospitality to our guests." Elrond said, smiling faintly at the youth, before looking at Bilbo and Harry. "I trust that you're not going to be too bad an influence on our young friend here, Harry?"

"I think everyone needs a little bit of a bad influence in their life, but I'll try not to overdo it," Harry drawled, cocking an eyebrow in silent inquiry at Elrond.

Seeing this, Elrond laid a gentle hand on Estel's shoulder. "Come. If you can concentrate on eating and listening to Livantiel about your numbers and writing, perhaps I will tell you a tale of the elder days tonight."

Eyes lighting up at what must be some kind of treat, Estel nodded rapidly, but he didn't forget his manners, which brought another faint smile to Elrond's face as the youth turned and bowed from the waist towards Harry and Bilbo. "It was nice meeting you, travelers. If you are staying, perhaps we could meet again tomorrow?"

"We will be staying for one more day and then leaving the next," Bilbo said. "As we told you, we've both been on a long journey, and I feel the call of home. But I think I speak for us both when he would greatly enjoy your company tomorrow."

Later that night, Bilbo and Harry met with Lord Elrond again at a small table in one of his many halls, listening to the music nearby as Elrond explained who Estel truly was. Harry listened attentively, placing the story among the rest of the history of Middle Earth that he had learned from first Thorin and then Gandalf, haphazardly gleaning further bits and pieces from other sources. He knew he still didn't have the whole story, but he understood that the Dunedain were among the descendants of the men of the sea, just like those of Gondor.

Long ago, the island of Elenna was raised from the sea for the Elain, the Three Noble Families of Man, to settle on by Ulmo. Set between Aman and Middle Earth, it was a gift for the three tribes of humans who had stood with the First Born throughout their history before that point. Elros, son of Eärendil and Elwing – and brother of Elrond – had chosen to become human and became the island's first king. The Númenóreans, as they came to be called, grew into a mighty kingdom and eventually went to war against Sauron alongside the elves of Gil-Galad and Lorien. Several times they were successful in this, and while Eregion was destroyed, the elves were saved, and Sauron's forces shattered in a war that culminated in the Battle of the Gwathló.

At that point, Sauron fell back on his oldest tool: guile. For hundreds of years and several kings, Sauron used intermediaries, whispers, and his hidden will to turn the Númenóreans against the Valar and the elves. In whispers, he told these mighty Men that it was their right to rule, that the elves and Valar feared the gifts of Men. This was so successful that many of the Númenóreans had turned so far away from them as to create a cult of Melkor.

This subtle warfare culminated in the usurpation of the kingship by a cousin of the line named Pharazôn, who led a coup against the last king to attempt to steer their folk back to the Valar and the elves. When he sailed out to defeat a resurgent Sauron, Sauron continued to plot, submitting to the

usurper and eventually becoming his chief advisor. It was Sauron who finally convinced the Númenóreans to try and wage war against the Valar, sailing for Aman, from which Men were barred by the word of Eru Illuvatar. Ulmo and the other Valar reacted in wrath, destroying the island and changing the world's geography. In so doing, they destroyed Sauron's physical form for the first time, turning him into a disembodied wandering soul for a time.

Elendil and his son Isildur, direct descendants of Elros, had long since led the faithful among the Númenóreans away, knowing they were vastly outnumbered by those who had begun to worship Melkor. After the destruction of the Empire, Elendil craved out the kingdoms of Gondor and Arnor, setting himself as High King while his sons ruled each realm. Harry had already learned the events from then on: the War of the Last Alliance as Sauron rose once more. The war smashed Sauron's power and disembodied him again, this time for good, as he lost the One Ring, which he had crafted in secret in the Second Age and imbued with much of his power. But in so doing, the elves and men of Numenor had spent themselves, and when Sauron used intermediaries – the Witch King of Angmar – they could not defeat them. Arnor was shattered, and the line of Elros and the Númenórean kings eventually descended into the Dunedain, a wandering clan in the north.

"I have watched over my brother's line since the days of the last alliance when I was the second-in-command of Gil-Galad, the last High King of the Noldor. It is a duty that has often been painful, as humans are such short-lived creatures, but it is one that I have taken up readily both in memory of the past and hope for the future."

As Harry and Bilbo smiled slightly at the wordplay, Elrond went on. "Every male of that line has been reared here for his youth, trained and educated under my direction since Arathorn decided not to try and rebuild the kingdom of Arthedain. And because of their leadership, the Dunedain still survive and continue their ancient duty of fighting against the darkness. I think it is a little too soon to know how well Estel will take to becoming a ranger, let alone the leader of his folk, yet he is a good lad at least, far calmer of disposition and far more discerning if eye than his father was. Arathorn was far too impetuous and hardheaded, although it is sad to speak ill of the dead."

Harry nodded and asked some more questions about the Dunedain and the men of the sea, their rise and fall, wondering how much of it had been Sauron's fault and how much had simply been human nature. He could not discern a proper answer from what Elrond told him, although he knew at least the final blow had come from Sauron's words.

Bilbo was also interested and showed how much he had read about history and his overall knowledge of Elven lore more than once to bring out more bits of the story. But for all of his reading and knowledge of the past, Elrond had lived it. Indeed, he knew more about the history of the area where the Shire resided than any hobbit could. He spoke of Arnor, the battle between them and the witch king of Angmar, and then the petty kingdom of Arthedain and its final destruction in turn. How after that, the Dunedain of the North had lost any dream to rebuild their glory in the north, instead clinging to the memory of the past and their lives with equal fervor. "Never have they forgotten that their line can claim the descendants of Kings, and always there is the hope that eventually, circumstance and the individual will come together and bring them back to the crown that is theirs by right, that they can ascend to the heights their ancestors achieved."

Before Harry knew it, it was deep into the night, and this time, it was Bilbo who was beginning to nod off in his seat. Seeing that, he stood up, gently helping Bilbo out of his chair, nodding to Elrond. "It has been fascinating to listen to such history, Elrond, but while high elves don't need sleep, hobbits and humans do. We will see you in the morning."

With his concerns about whether or not Estel was another child of 'prophecy' having been laid to rest -if he was, there was no sign of it just yet, and Elrond at least would have his back in a way that no authority figure had ever had Harry's -Harry slept well that night. Indeed, for the first time since leaving Tauriel behind in Mirkwood, he slept without any nightmares waking him up.

He woke up and spent most of that morning and afternoon having fun with Estel. While his life here in Rivendell was idyllic in many ways, it was a fact that the happiness of elves was not quite synonymous with the happiness of a young human child, no matter how smart, and he grasped onto Bilbo and Harry and their more down to earth nature with both hands.

"It is somewhat sad. I understand the secrecy and that Sauron has ways of finding out information I cannot comprehend. Yet I believe he should still have some playmates here, perhaps others from his tribe? I know there are not any Elven children here," Bilbo said somewhat sadly on the morning of his and Harry's departure as the two of them watched Estel race ahead of them up a small hill to a series of rocks that were set to look almost natural, and yet also give an amazingly good vantage point all around.

"True. Still, Elrond is doing as good a job as I think we could ask. We could suggest that, although if he hasn't already thought of it, there might be a reason. For now, let's just make sure that he has as much fun as we can while we're here," Harry said, shrugging philosophically, although internally, he thought that Aragorn's life here in Rivendell was certainly a lot better than his own had been. It was not a kind thought, and it wasn't one he would have her voice, but Harry had to admit to a certain amount of jealousy at how well Aragorn was being looked after.

Moments later, the three of them were standing on top of the pile of rocks, staring out in every direction across Rivendell and beyond the rivers that marked its borders on two sides. They were silent for a moment taking in the view, then Estel said hesitantly, "Are you sure you must leave? I understand you wish to get home, Mister Baggins, but.." The youngster floundered, trying to come up with a way to make them stay didn't seem too self-centered or childish.

"I'm afraid we must. Lord Elrond mentioned this morning a feeling that I had to get home by a certain time to stop something from happening, and though he gave no details, I am almost scared of what it could be. Besides that, I miss my little hobbit hole," Bilbo said with a shrug. "Rivendell is magnificent, but it is too magnificent for such as me to feel altogether at home here."

"Depending on the weather, it will take us at most five days to get there. And as we learned on our way here, some of that route can be quite dangerous and slow us down. So yes, we need to leave," Harry said with a shrug. For his part, he was more than eager to get on the road. The sooner Harry could see Bilbo home, the sooner Harry could start his feet back on the path to Tauriel and, from there, to see the lady Galadriel. While Elrond's words had helped a lot with Harry's guilt and self-hatred, he was still dealing with bouts of anger and stress and knew he needed mental-type healing. *I am almost afraid of what my nights will be like when I leave here.*

"..." For a moment, Estel was silent. Then he blurted out. "I envy you! Not for the hardships you have faced, or well, not totally. But, but I would love to see the world beyond the borders of Rivendell! It is not stifling or anything like that, but it is too staid, too controlled, maybe?" The youth faltered again, having trouble getting the words out to express how he wanted to explore, to see what was beyond the borders of the last homely house.

Harry suddenly grinned, staring down at the kid rubbing his hands as he thought of one last prank to play on Elrond and Rivendell in general. "Reaaaallllly? You think you're ready for your first adventure?"

"Yes!" Estel exclaimed while Bilbo was looking a little concerned.

"Harry, what are you planning?"

Shrugging, Harry ruffled Estel's hair again, having discovered that the youth didn't dislike it as much as he tried to act. "Well, I just remember that I had my first adventure when I was eleven. Several of them, in fact. I also remember the twins kidnapping me for my relatives the next year. So there is precedence."

Bilbo looked at Harry, seeing the mad Light in his eyes and sighed, shaking his head. "No matter what I say, you're going to do this regardless, aren't you?"

"I am indeed," Harry said, while Estel began to bounce in place, understanding what Harry was hinting at and more than willing to go along with it. "We can the three of us go to the Shire, and I can escort Estel back here on my way back to Tauriel."

Bilbo chuckled dryly, shaking his head for a moment before sighing theatrically. "I see you have it all thought out. In that case, I suppose I should help. The key will be to get Estel onto my pony without the pony having time or willingness to tattle on us..."

Later that day, Elrond bid Bilbo and Harry farewell, watching the two of them go across the river's ford Anduin with a faint smile. The rest here had done both of them good, Elrond could tell. Most importantly, Elrond hoped he had helped stave off Harry's insipid self-doubt and guilt. *Further, his meeting with Aragorn could not have gone better. Whatever else happens, having another wizard involved in Aragorn's rearing can only mean good things in the future.*

Elrond had not been totally honest with Harry and Bilbo when he explained how he had been looking after Aragorn and his parents for as long as the Dunedain had been a tribe. He had done so, of course, but something was telling him that Aragorn truly was the one that would eventually become High King as Isildur and his ancestors had been. Why that was, he could not say, perhaps a whisper from Aule beyond the ocean? Perhaps the recent troubles with the 'Necromancer' and Sauron's reappearance? Wherever that feeling came from, it was telling Elrond that Aragorn was destined for greater things. *Still, we will take it slowly. We will rear Estel just as we have his father and his father before him. We will not pressure him more than the world itself will do. Let Aragorn make himself great rather than have greatness foisted on him, as Harry was forced to deal with.*

Hours later, Elrond had cause to question whether or not Harry's influence in Aragorn's life would be entirely a good thing. He looked up from a bit of writing he was doing, a message to King Thorin, telling him about Harry and Bilbo's safe arrival and asking if there was ought Rivendell could do

to help Erebor as one of Estel's tutors coughed gently, grabbing his attention. "My Lord Elrond, I regret to inform you that Estel has not appeared again for his daily tutoring."

"I doubt he is somewhere sulking about Harry and Bilbo's departure. Let him have the day off, but ask Lady Gilraen to make certain that he is presentable and fit to dine with me tonight," Elrond ordered.

The other elf bowed in acknowledgment, and Elrond returned to his note, finishing it quickly and turning his head towards the open window, where a bird appeared. The hawk would carry his message to the Lonely Mountain far faster than anyone could on foot.

However, Elrond was to be disappointed. "You still cannot find him?" He asked that evening. "Has he found some new hideaway you do not know of, Lady Gilraen, Triasvol?"

The other elf was Estel's chief tutor in history and decorum and was among the best with working with the youth, having retained that position even when Rivendell had been taking care of Arathorn, who, as Elrond had mentioned, had been a very willful and impetuous sort. Yet like his fellows, he was looking somewhat at a loss, while Gilraen, a young human woman with long dark hair and a self-effacing personality, looked distraught, wringing her hands worriedly. "I'm sorry, Lord Elrond, but he is in none of his normal hideaways, and we have searched for him most diligently throughout all of Rivendell. Unless he has mastered the ability to hide in plain sight, we have no idea where young Estel is."

Frowning, Elrond leaned back, staring over the heads of the three tutors for a moment as he concentrated on his connection to his realm. Everything within Rivendell from the river in word owed allegiance to him, and he couldn't sense where within that boundary people were. There were few minds or powers that could hide in his presence and his realm.

And yet, after a few moments, he opened his eyes, his expression one of shock. "Estel is no longer within the bounds of Rivendell! I..." A memory came to him then, a memory of Harry showing his invisibility cloak, explaining how they had used it occasionally on their adventures. And the twinkle in Harry's eye as he shook Elrond's hand and bid them farewell, saying they would be seeing one another again soon.

Elrond gritted his teeth for a moment, almost becoming angry at the danger of letting Aragorn go so young into the wilds, but then, he began to laugh instead, shaking his head as a full belly chuckle went through him. The tutors and the worried mother looked at their Lord in bemused shock, and Elrond waved them off. "Never mind good folk. I know where the youth is. I think I will let him have his little adventure but when he does return Lady Gilraen, feel free to tear a chunk off his..., heh, kidnapper's hide. I rather think that will be a more than fair price."

**OOOOOOO**

Estel grinned from his position behind Bilbo on the pony, staring around him with interest. The forest might well be nothing unusual to him after his time in Rivendell, yet it was the first such forest he had seen beyond Rivendell's borders which made it fascinating.

Having used a lightness charm on the boy, Harry had been bundled him into the invisibility cloak. He had already been on the pony as Bilbo mounted, and thanks to how small both passengers were, no one had been the wiser, not even the pony itself.

“Well, I have to say for my final prank in Rivendell, this will take some beating,” Harry mused as he walked beside Bilbo’s pony once more.

“I hope Lord Elrond sees the humor in it rather than the danger,” Bilbo said obliquely, not hinting to Estel how special he and his line were.

“Why should you care? You’ll be safe at home in Bag End. I will have to face his anger when I return this way,” Harry joked.

Bilbo chuckled at that, admitting the point, and then turned to answer a question from Estel.

For the next few days, the three made excellent time, again thanks to Harry’s spells. It was also an extremely fun time for Bilbo, who took time out of every day to show Estel the hobbit method of moving quietly and gave him some pointers on how to shoot a bow. He was already being trained on one, but they hadn’t brought it along. Instead, Bilbo crafted him a sling and a pouch, and Harry helped collect sling stones.

Harry also had fun with the youngster. Estel’s curiosity and energy added quite a bit more fun to travel, and Harry also learned a lot from Bilbo about various plants and soil during this time. Things that Harry himself would never have thought to learn without Estel being there. Indeed, it almost made him think of herbology and potions back in Hogwarts, without Snape looming over him. Harry still wasn’t interested in potions overmuch, but learning about the various plants could undoubtedly help in the future in various ways. Even better, his nightmares had yet to return, which was great.

On their third day out from Rivendell, Harry and Bilbo began to recognize the area they were passing through, and Harry chuckled wryly. “I believe I know where we are, Bilbo.”

“I believe I know as well, Harry. There should be three very sad-looking trolls around here somewhere. Perhaps we can stop by and give them a good kicking?” Bilbo joked.

Estel looked at them in confusion, then up at the evening sun above them. Before looking back at them with a deadpan gaze. “If you’re trying to trick me with the tale of life trolls during the day, it won’t work. I know they can only come out at night.”

The two travelers grimaced, remembering the Battle of the Lonely Mountain. Gandalf had been very interested in the trolls that took part in it and how they had been out during the day. *I wonder what he found during his research of that oil or whatever it was they used?* Harry mused even as Bilbo began to lead the way down a small side trail.

That night, as Harry and Bilbo decided to delve into some wine that Elrond had sent along with them, the two took turns explaining the run-in with the trolls in greater detail than they had previously. Doing so in the shadows of those very trolls added a certain impact to the story as Estel listened avidly, occasionally sipping at a small cup of wine the two travelers had agreed to share with him. Given the youth’s scrunched-up expression whenever he took a sip, it was evident that he did not see the allure of

alcohol. Instead, he kept staring at the three frozen troll statues, the intact, the poisoned, and the crippled one.

As the story wound down, Harry stood up and began to make his way around the camp while Bilbo cleaned up the fire and laid out the bedrolls. Estel helped Bilbo, but mostly he was staring in fascination at Harry and his work, laying out runes at various places around the area. Estel had seen Harry do this every night after leaving Rivendell behind, and the wizard explained the runes to him. He had even learned a few, but watching Harry set the stones down and activate them was still amazing to watch, reminding Estel of how Mithrandir had shown him a few tricks with wind and smoke for his birthday the year prior. But Estel knew they were serious business and didn't bombard Harry with questions until all of the rune stones were set up. At which point, he refused to go to bed until Harry answered his questions.

But later that night, the runic arrays proved their worth as noises nearby roused all three of them from sleep. Harry was the first to move as the noises nearby registered, standing up quickly and grabbing at his sword, which was always in its sheath by his side, something he had learned on the trail. He quickly clamped a hand over Estel's mouth as the boy stirred, mumbling under his breath. The eleven-year-old's eyes widened, and he stared up at Harry, who held a finger to his lips. Understanding, Estel nodded back, and Harry slowly moved away, turning to wake Bilbo only to find him awake, staring out into the darkness.

Out beyond the edge of the wards, several goblins moved, chattering to one another as a few more followed them, tugging on the reins of, well, Harry thought of them as fox-wargs from the moment he saw them. They were smaller and thinner looking than the wargs the orcs and goblins had written he had previously seen, but they seemed almost skittish, moving this way and that with nervous energy.

"They can't hear us," Harry explained, gesturing towards the runes stones he had set around the camp. "The Notice Me Not will cover our noises as well. But it's best not to get used to that kind of thing unless you too can make runic arrays, understand, Estel?"

Estel nodded, staring out at the goblins in fascination. "I've never seen goblins in real for! The pictures don't really do them justice. He wrinkled his nose. "And nowhere did it mention how bad they smell!"

"I think that's one of those things you learn for yourself," Bilbo muttered, looking over at Harry. "What should we do?"

"I'm rather torn, actually. The goblins can't find us, but those animals with them probably mean they would be able to follow our trail tomorrow. And I don't know about you, but hiding us magically would be a bit more effort I'm not willing to spend. Furthermore, I want to know if they are hunting us specifically or any travelers that come along. Yet, we have young Estel to watch over. I'm not certain we should get into a fight despite my curiosity," Harry admitted. "Anything can happen in a fight, and I don't want to put him in danger."

Bilbo was about to speak up, but Estel took the decision out of their hands. He grabbed up his sling and, before either of the other two could stop him hurled a stone out through the edge of the wards to smash into the face of one of the goblins. "Death to the races of the Greater Shadow!"

Estel's target fell backward with a cry, and all the goblins turned their attention towards where the stone had come from, their intense interest enough to overcome the wards.

Not that any of them survived overlong to make use of that knowledge.

Bilbo instantly let fly with an arrow, killing one of the small wargs, as Harry lashed out with a wide-angle cutting spell, slicing several goblins in half. A fire spell flashed through the night next, lighting several of the foul folk on fire. So hot was the flame they died too quickly to do more than shriek for a second in pain. That fire panicked the fox-wargs, and several of them bolted, tossing their riders. Two more quickly died to Bilbo's arrows, while a third found himself without a head from another spell from Harry.

Only one of the Fox-wargs remained under the control of its rider at that point, and he charged forward.

Estel, showing far more bravery than sense in Bilbo's opinion, stood his ground and hurled a stone directly into the creature's eye as it closed, pulping the eye and sending it caterwauling to the side, its paws going to its ruined eye, where a slice from Harry's sword took in the side as another spell cut the goblin's head clean off. The venom on the blade instantly began to do its work, and the creature convulsed on its side, spasming, a long, drawn-out whine of agony escaping from it.

Then, as quickly as the fight began, it was over. If the party had been attacked unawares, perhaps the group of seven or eight – it was hard to tell in the dark at present – could have been a threat. But probably not. Still, it was a fight that need not have been, and Bilbo admonished Estel, shaking his head. "That was a remarkably foolish thing you did just now, Estel. It is brave to fight but knowing when to do so is just as important as having the courage to fight in the first place. I would urge you to remember that in the future."

"Agreed. I'll admit to some annoyance now that we have fought, and I forgot to keep a prisoner alive so we could get some information out of this fight. Still, a dead goblin is a dead goblin. Harry shrugged philosophically, sending Estel a wink. "Just try to reign in your Gryffindor tendencies in the future, would you?"

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"A tale for another time, I think. Unless either of you fancies trying to sleep with the smell of the dead around us like this. Let us get moving," Bilbo ordered.

Estel nodded and moved over to help gather their belongings, pausing to stare down at his hands as they began to shake. Then he suddenly found himself on his knees, his legs having lost any strength they might have had. "Oh."

Bilbo noticed this and instantly moved to his side, putting an arm over the young human's shoulders as Harry moved to clean up the camp. "There now, lad. The first fight can always take you aback like this. I remember how I acted after the run-in with the trolls. I had the shakes for hours. It's not a sign of any lack of courage, so don't let that thought enter your mind. It is just a body's reaction to being in danger and a life-and-death fight for the first time. And in this case to also taking a life, no matter how foul."

Under Bilbo's soothing words, Estel's reaction to his first fight passed slowly but without him throwing up or giving in to the shakes. By the time he was ready to stand once more, the pony was loaded, and all of their belongings put away in the various packs festooning the animal. Harry's mokeskin pouch was entirely dedicated to their treasure at this point, but regardless, the animal was just as eager to move on as the three of them.

That turned out to be the only true threat they faced on the trip, and a day later, the trio of travelers arrived in the Bree land. This territory bordered the Shire, the chief town of which was built on a crossing between the Greenway and the East Rod. The area was peopled by Men and Hobbits in almost equal measure, and as they walked (or in the hobbit's case, rode) up the road to the main town, which was also called Bree) Bilbo explained that some of the hobbit folk here claimed that this was the oldest settlement of hobbits, settled here before the Brandywine River had been crossed and the Shire colonized.

Estel listened earnestly, although Harry could tell he was only doing so because it was Bilbo who was speaking. The three of them garnered some looks as they entered the town of Bree, the capital of the area, but Bilbo's welcoming smile and waving to the hobbits he could see among the folk and the likeness between Harry and Estel - both of them were black-haired and trim of frame - caused that interest to fade slowly as they made their way to the Townsend massive inn. After all, anyone traveling with a child couldn't be up to anything suspicious, could they?

When they reached the inn, Bilbo spotted some hobbits sitting outside around a table and moved over to them, ordering a pint of ale, eager for some good old-fashioned hobbit gossip. Seeing this, Harry turned, patting Estel on the shoulder. "Come on, lad, I saw a market back there. It's time to introduce you to the fine art of haggling, something my dwarven friends taught me about. After all, we need to think of some gift for your mother, so she doesn't get too angry with me for kidnapping you."

Nodding rapidly, as that was a concern that had been growing in his mind the past two days, Estel followed Harry away from the inn. He looked around as he went, keeping his surprise and some disgust off his face with difficulty. This was the first time Estel had been among humans, and the simple layout of the town, the dirtiness, how close all the houses were, and even worse, how crowded and noisy it all seemed, took him aback.

Yet as Estel watched a gang of children race around, shouting to one another as they played some kind of game, he smiled. "I don't think this is the kind of place I would like to live. It doesn't seem the type of place to find good books or history," he whispered to Harry as they came upon the market. "Yet I can see the appeal."

Harry nodded, agreeing with Estel. "I have to say it's a bit too loud and crowded for my tastes as well, but to each their own." He watched as Estel looked away guiltily, knowing that had been what Estel wanted to say, he'd just been too polite to do so. And in the future, when you are old enough to travel on your own, I urge you to get to know folk like this and others. They may look simple, but places like this will also have trials and dangers they must face. There is more to humans than elves can teach you on their own and more to the world than humans can tell you. Learn from both, and I think you won't go far wrong."

“And dwarves too,” Estel joked, although it was clear by his slow nod that he also had listened to Harry closely.

“And dwarves too,” Harry agreed with a laugh. “Now, would your mother like a ribbon, you think, or a cooking knife? Or perhaps a shawl? You know her best.”

Back at the Inn, Bilbo suddenly became a minor celebrity when he introduced himself, for these folk had heard of him. Rumors from the Shire had spread across Bree about Mad Baggins and how he had rushed off one morning, disappearing with only a message left behind on Bag End’s door in the company of two humans and a band of dwarves. “No one knew where you’d gone or what madness had gotten into your brain. But if you are truly back, that is a tale of itself! And in the company of two humans who look almost related? What have you been up to, Mister Baggins?” Asked one old grandfatherly hobbit.

“There is a tale, there is a tale! Looking back on it, I cannot tell you how I made the decision, but I decided to travel with a group of dwarves, heading over the mountains...” Bilbo began, shaking his head. “The full tale of my journey would take many days, but suffice it to say that at the journey’s end, no matter how far I went, I wished to return home.”

That earned him some murmurings of approval, although the hobbits did try to weasel his story out of him. Bilbo didn’t tell them the entire tale, of course. He left out Smaug, and he left out Thranduil and his imprisonment at the Elven king’s hands, as well as the final battle. News of that would no doubt spread, especially to the dwarves in the Blue Mountains, but the full import would not interest the hobbits around Bilbo. All hobbits were insular, thinking more of their own troubles than the world at large.

As it was, the tale of trolls, orcs and goblins they met on the road to Mirkwood was more than enough to make the story almost too amazing to be believed. Indeed, if he had been in the Shire, Bilbo would have been dealing with many a scoffing face. But here in Bree, orcs and goblins were all too real a threat occasionally, whereas the Shire had only rarely faced such threats in its history. And travelers had already shared the news of the three troll statues, corroborating Bilbo’s tale. Up to that point, anyway.

As the afternoon wound on, Bilbo began to turn this story back on the locals, asking them about their histories. He began making notes on paper as he did something. This fascinated and flattered the hobbits, and more than a few of them were gleefully wondering aloud if perhaps their names would wind up in a history book of some kind.

However, at that point, another hobbit joined them, and when introduced to Bilbo, he stared around at his fellows, shaking his head sternly at them. “Why, Benji Banks, Root Longholes, Tris Mugwort, I am surprised at you! I understand the interest in Mister Baggins’ story, but if he is heading home, he needs to be on his way right sharp, judging by the latest news we’ve heard from the Shire.”

Bilbo looked at him in concern. “What do you mean?”

“You are the Baggins who owns Bag End, yes? A tidy little hole it is. And, according to the latest gossip from the Shire, it is being sold. On auction it is, with the Took having taken possession of it after no one has been living it for so long,” the other hobbit explained. “It’s going up for auction any day now.”

“Bu, but what? What in the, I made a contract with the Took. He was to watch over it until I returned or two years had passed!” Bilbo exclaimed in shock.

“Perhaps you did, we don’t know anything about that. But that is the rumor, Mister Baggins,” the other hobbit returned.

Bilbo hopped to his feet, slamming a mug of ale down so hard he splashed two other hobbits with its contents. Ignoring the now drenched hobbits shouts of annoyance, Bilbo bowed to the newest hobbit, then around at the fellows as he placed several gold coins on the table. “Thank you for your warning, sir. If this rumor is correct, you will have earned a debt from me I cannot take the time to pay right now. But if you are ever in the Shire, look me up. It has been lovely meeting you all, and I will make the trip out this way again to finish taking down my notes on your families’ histories, but I must go!”

His polite words and the gold on the table doused the surprise and annoyance Bilbo’s hasty actions evoked, and Bilbo raced away, the good wishes of his fellow hobbits on his ears. Finding Harry and Estel nearby with a few small purchases in hand for Lady Gilraen, he quickly explained to both humans the need for haste, and after paying for their dinner, the three of them were on their way once more with a somewhat recalcitrant pony, who had been looking forward to a night in the stables and apples for his dinner.

Pushing through the night, the three travelers made it to the borders of the Shire in the late morning the next day. Estel was dead to the world asleep against Bilbo’s back, and Bilbo wasn’t much better, although Harry didn’t seem bothered overmuch by going without rest.

In actuality, the night before, Harry had once more been roused by nightmares, so sleep was not something he looked forward to. And the faster he got back to Tauriel, and they moved on to Lady Galadriel, the better.

Harry roused Bilbo as he spotted the boulder guard post ahead of them. Outside the post, two hobbits were taking their ease, smoking around a small table on which cheese and bread were laid out, their weapons, long cudgels, on the ground nearby. But they hopped to their feet as they saw the travelers coming up the road towards them, trying to make themselves look presentable. Their shock at seeing a hobbit traveling with two humans was next to nothing when Bilbo told them his identity.

“But, but then...” one of them, a Took barely out of his tweens, stared at his distant cousin. “We, we heard, that is... the Tooks, we were told that you had died!”

“What!?” Bilbo exclaimed. “Whyever, or rather whoever told you that?”

“Lotho Sackville Baggins. He, he deals with a merchant, who brought evidence of your death,” the young man stuttered before gathering himself by remembering his family’s ties to this issue. “The Thain, the old Thain that is, Isimbras. He died a few weeks ago. His son, Cousin Forty, er, that is Fortinbras, became Thain at that point. Er, he decided to believe the man who was saying you had died after talking to Lotho. I don’t know why. But if you really are Bilbo, then that will be a big deal within the family.”

Bilbo sighed, shaking his head sadly. He had respected Isimbras, but Fortinbras was very much a fair-weather friend. He also was insular to an incredible degree, and felt going beyond the edge of the Shire was the same thing as a death sentence. Nearly every male Took spent time as a Bouncer,

guarding the Shire's borders, but Forty hadn't loathing the outside world to an extreme degree. "I have my copy of the contract I made with the Thain. Will that do?"

"Aye, that will do nicely. I'll send a message to the Thain, and he will send a representative to Bag End to meet you there. But your companions..." The young Took looked at the two humans askance, as did his companion. Big Folk were not welcome in the Shire, not even simply passing through. But Estel was obviously a child, and the other Bounder recognized Harry from when he and Thorin passed this way. And as before, his polite manners helped soothe the hobbit's worries. Soon Harry and Estel were allowed to enter, and with the young Took racing off like a sprinter, the three of them moved on, passing through into the Shire proper.

Soon enough, with Bilbo urging his pony, they came upon Bagshot Row leading up to Bag End. There, they met two men Bilbo identified as members of the Shire's peace-keeping force, the Sheriffs. They weren't normally very busy since hobbits were by nature peaceable, but occasionally drunks had to be handled somewhat roughly, or an argument over mushrooms or fields had to be calmed down.

With them Fortinbras Took stood, the keys of his office as Thain handing from his chest. He was a middle-aged hobbit, rather overweight, but with extremely sharp, shrewd eyes under a heavy set brow and a long beard. He took one look at Bilbo and grunted in surprise. "Well, cousin, you seem to have survived your 'adventure', as shocking as that is."

"Indeed, Thain Fortinbras. I am sorry to have heard of your father's passing. He was a good man, and it's a sign of his will that he retained his faculties for so long," Bilbo answered, keeping things formal despite Fortinbras calling their shared blood to attention. "Just as I am said to hear you decided I was dead despite not being gone even half the time our contract stated."

Wincing, Fortinbras nodded reluctantly. "I suppose I deserve that. To be fair, the Man Lotho brought to me described a scene of horror, and, well, you know my prejudices against the outside world. Even Bree is more other than I am happy with." The slightly older hobbit held up his hand, and Bilbo showed him the contract. "Good. IN that case, we'll just get Master Hamfast here, and then we can end this auction right sharpish."

"Good! I will be buried in dragon dung before I let anyone, **especially** the Sackville Bagginses, to take my home," Bilbo growled.

Fortinbras chuckled at that, and send one of the Sheriffs to find the master gardener. He was still looking at Harry suspiciously, but Harry got on his good side by asking about pipe-weed and if he could purchase any nearby. By the time the other Sheriff returned, Harry had purchased a small barrel of pipe-weed and had placed it on the donkey. There was no need to bother the hobbits with magic of any sort, after all.

When he arrived, Hamfast Gamgee's eyes lit up at seeing Bilbo. "Mister Baggins, sir! It's good to see you."

Bilbo smiled at seeing the old garden hand. "It's good to see you as well, Master Hamfast. You and your father have seemingly done a magnificent job around the place. Yavanna herself must have helped your efforts here as it looks even better than it did before I left."

While the use of Yavanna's name drew a start from Fortinbras and stares from Hamfast and the other two hobbits, Fortinbras quickly got them moving up the hill. Soon they came upon the auction, where the hobbit, another Took, running it had been stalling for a few seconds. Now seeing the arrival of the Took, he shouted, "Hear ye! This whole auction is invalid."

That caused a clamor from the crowd, especially from two of the hobbits in particular. These were Lotho and Lobelia Sackville Bagginses, relatives of Bilbo who he would rather never meet on a walk, let alone at the door, as the saying went. And Lotho was the one who, apparently, had come up with some kind of scheme using an outsider to convince Fortinbras of Bilbo's death.

Now, they turned, and joined in the shouting, but Bilbo, watching the two of them closely, saw Lotho pale. Lobelia just looked shocked, but Lotho was very surprised, and Bilbo smiled thinly. *Well now, this little scheme is going to cost you quite a bit, Lotho.*

"This is Bilbo Baggins," the Thain said, not bothering to introduce himself. The Thain was an important figure throughout the Shire, and while Fortinbras was not recognized instantly, the keys of this office were. And when he spoke, his voice carried with both authority and regret. "I was convinced, through the words of Lotho Baggins and an outsider, that he was dead. I am at fault for this mistake. If you have any complaints

Bilbo was impressed. He hadn't expected for Fortinbras to admit to his error in judgment so quickly. But then the Thain went on, his eyes hot as he glared at Lotho. "Lotho Sackville Baggins. Come with me. We will be speaking about this scheme of yours. I don't like being tricked, Lotho. And this was undoubtedly deliberate on your part. You can expect to pay a hefty fine in coin and food for this!"

"I, I," Lotho stammered, only coming back to himself when the Sheriffs, rather gently, pushed him along. He then began to shout his innocence, while his wife, Lobelia, simply shook her head, and moved off, eager to get as far away from her husband's disaster as she could. She did still glare at Bilbo though and kept as far away from him as the road would allow.

Even so, Bilbo could still hear the blink of silver, but decided not to bother with it. *I'll wager that Forty takes the worth of a whole silver set out of her and Lotho's hides anyway.*

Hobbits being how they were, this excitement dragged many of the gawkers after it. Others tried to clamor for Bilbo's tale. But eventually, the last of the gawkers had been escorted off the property, with Bilbo talking with Master Gamgee as Bilbo herded them all away. Hamfast soon left as well, quite pleased to not have Lobelia as a neighbor and for Bilbo's good manners and desire to help around the place in the future.

For several moments, Bilbo stood by the outer gate staring after them all before sighing and looking up at Harry. "Well, I did not expect that kind of reception when I returned home. At least it's over now. Please, come inside. I can at least give you and Estel some food and tea while we store everything we brought away before we say our farewells. As it is barely noon, I know you will want to be on your way quickly."

Bilbo was not about to use the words treasure or money just yet. He didn't need nosy folk coming around trying to search for hidden rubies or gold in Bag End, no thank you.

However, almost instantly, Bilbo realized his error. Even as he and Harry began to pull out chests of gold and the rest of Bilbo's share of the treasure from Harry's moke-skin pouch, Estel returned from a mission into the basement to report that the larder was completely empty. "Drat it. Thorin and the others, they ate my larder bare. And it will take me hours to shop for--"

"No need, my friend," Harry said, pulling out the last trunk of gold from his mokeskin pouch. Next came the chest with Bilbo's shield, Sting, and the jewelry he had chosen as part of his share of Sauron's horde. He was still wearing his mithril chain mail under his jacket right now. "I think at this point, it's better if we make a clean break, yes? If you offer me your hospitality, who knows how long it would take to tear myself away? I will instead take a rain check on spending a second night leaning on your hospitality."

Bilbo snorted at that, understanding that Harry was more interested in getting back to Tauriel as quickly as possible rather than any concerns about his wanting to stay. "Very well, Harry. I'll not keep you longer. Tell Thorin and the others that I arrived home, and give my regards when you see them. Perhaps in the future, when the roads are safer, I might make a trip back to them, so I can see the wonders they have made of Erebor."

Harry nodded, and the two of them worked to transfer Bilbo's dragon-gotten gains into his cellar, with Estel helping by carrying a small lantern. Soon it was done, and Bilbo took out the shield and Sting, carrying them back up and setting them by the fireplace. Eventually, they would go over the lintel there.

For a few moments, Harry and Bilbo stood there in the main sitting room of Bag End, somewhat awkwardly looking at one another and away. Leaving one another's company after they had been through so much felt wrong in some way, but it needed to be done. Bilbo was home, and Harry needed to find his own.

Eventually, Harry moved forward and wrapped Bilbo in a hug, which Bilbo returned tightly. "It has been the adventure of a lifetime traveling with you and the others, Harry. I hope if your feet ever do wish to wander again, that you and Tauriel wander here to my little hobbit hole." Bilbo snickered. "I would dearly like to see my neighbors' reactions to my hosting an elf here in Bag End."

"And if you are ever abroad again, get in touch with Lord Elrond. I'm certain he can find a way to get in touch with me in turn." Harry replied. The two held the hug for a few more seconds before Harry slowly stepped away, clapping Bilbo on both shoulders. "Be well, my friend."

"And you." Bilbo returned before looking over to Estel. "And you as well, young one. My offer of hospitality also extends to you if you are ever in the Shire again. I look forward to seeing what kind of man you grow into with interest. Maybe when we see each other next, you will have adventures of your own to share."

Estel grinned at that, giving the hobbit a thumbs up, a gesture he had learned from Harry over the past few days. He moved forward and gave Bilbo a hug then, before following Harry out the open door. Bilbo walked with them, holding the door open and then watching them move down the trail for a time. Then with a sigh, Bilbo straightened his shoulders and decided he needed a cup of tea before seeing to anything else.

“Are all partings like that, Harry?” Estel asked as he and Harry walked on, looking up at his taller companion. “You want to leave, but you also don’t, not quite certain how to put one step forward?”

“As rather a good way of putting it, Estel,” Harry agreed with a sigh. “And I suppose between friends who care for one another, partings can be very difficult. For one reason or another,” he added, the faces of his friends back in his old world flashing through his brain for a moment despite his best efforts to not summon them up again.

Shaking his head, Harry asked for a stone from the youngster and held it in his hand as he wondered aloud, “And now, without Bilbo and the pony to worry about, I am wondering if the two of us can do better going cross-country rather than following the road. The East Road makes a long winding curve before heading back to the direction we wish to go. So...” With that, Harry cast a Point Me spell on the stone, using Rivendell as the target. It pulled in a completely different direction from the road, and he looked down at Estel. “Well? Do you think we should take the East Road again or go our own way?”

Estel grinned. “Is that even a question?”

Harry laughed, clapping him on the shoulder and turning down the next road in the direction the stone was pulling.

### **End Chapter**

Initially, I had thought about having Elrond show up and escort Aragorn away before they entered the Shire. But I realized that didn’t make much sense since Harry would have to pass Rivendell to get back to Tauriel. And he would also trust Harry to look out for him, given his magical powers. So at least half of the next chapter will show Harry and Aragorn’s meeting with Tom Bombadil and the River Daughter, after which Harry’s journey will continue back to Tauriel, which will mark the start of what I will term the romance arc. LOL.

Harry’s mental state: A lot is going on here. His years of warring with Voldemort in the Void, remember folks he’s in his twenties now, when he was 15/16 when he body-checked Voldy into the Arch. That is PTSD inducing. His guilt over dead friends in his past life and on Middle Earth. The changes his mind is currently going through as it and his body becomes ‘of Arda’ rather than ‘alien’ and pseudo-Maia rather than human. That is a lot of strain on a mind that has already been through a lot. The story of how orcs and goblins keep their numbers up simply added another segment of horror, his mind going in natural paths there.

ON orcs and goblins: some of you might think this is too grim-dark. But beyond the original creation of their species, there is no mention of how either race, which was originally one in Tolkien’s writing, rebuilds their numbers. And I refuse to believe that they can just... rise from mud anywhere they have previously been. Too much like the orcs of Warhammer fame (and way before that broken universe), and I would think that Elrond, Galadriel and the rest could figure out how to stop it from happening anyway. So that method only works in Mordor. Elsewhere, they have to fall back on... other means.