

I ain't named Tolkien nor Rowling. I think I do romance better though.

Hey all! while *Stallion of the Line* won the small story poll here and a Ranma fic won over on Patty on, the Patty on only poll was so close, I wanted to give my Potter fans something extra this month. And there wasn't enough time left in the month to do all the editing I needed on *ATP* and *Stallion* to do a chapter of *Bhaalson Remodel*. So I decided to whip up a chapter for hits work. That this means the small story poll will be between the two SW crossovers did not enter my mind at all...

This has only been edited by me with Grammarly. Honest Lyre'ed also gave it a look through, but that's it. Sorry, folks.

Fate Touched Chapter 16 Rebuilding and Returning

Despite putting in a full day's work the day previous and getting a good night's sleep the morning after Tauriel had left, Harry was feeling quite grumpy. While he wouldn't describe the emotions they felt for one another in hot, passionate terms, Tauriel had become important to Harry, and simply being away from her was irritating. Worse, now that she wasn't around, Harry had fallen asleep thinking about how his plans for the near future and her duties might not coincide very well.

It was that kind of sinking feeling that kept Harry in bed in his bedroll that morning, the feeling that things between them were probably not going to go as smoothly as either wished. *Even in terms of just spending time together. After all, I can easily see Legolas asking her to take over the Unseen Host entirely, and Tauriel is just as duty-bound as I am bound to help my friends. If that happens, how will she get any free time to travel with me? Maybe if I settle down on the lake somewhere, that could be easier, but...*

A part of Harry knew that his mind was worrying about problems that really didn't exist. That it was going in circles. But for some reason, Harry couldn't quite force his mind out of this rut.

Normally, Harry would be one of the first up, helping to cook or otherwise get the day started on a positive note. This morning, with no sign of the young wizard, it fell upon Thorin to shimmy his young friend along. "Wake up, Harry, the day is passing, and we have many a task to do and few hours to do them!" Thorin barked, toeing Harry's side.

This only garnered him a groan and a weary, "Bugger off Thorin, I think I deserve a bloody lie-in, thank you."

Narrowing his eyes, Thorin decided to deal with this in the time-honored dwarfish manner. He left and returned with a large pot of water, which he hurled onto Harry. "Now Harry, when I say wake up, a mean wake up!!"

Squawking in shock, Harry rolled out of his now-soaked bedroll, shouting, "You will pay for that, Thorin!"

Thorin's eyes widened as a spell lashed out towards him, and deciding not to see what it was, he ducked behind the nearby Boulder, watching as it continued to hit a nearby tent, changing it into a pale fuchsia. "That is not my color, Harry! You will forgive me for not standing still... drat."

The boulder levitated the air, and Thorin charged before Harry could cast another spell. He knew his friend, so he didn't think he would use anything truly lethal.

Harry let the boulder drop back down and narrowly missing the King, Harry tried to off another few spells, but Thorin juked to either side, avoiding most of the spells. And the spells that did hit didn't do anything, much to Harry's shock. Then the stocky dwarf crashed into Harry.

A few furious seconds later, Harry was face down on the ground, and Thorin was sitting on his back, patting the back of his head. "You're not at your best when you are woken up by someone else, are you?"

"I'm not at my best this morning, full stop, and you sitting on me like a little mountain is helping," Harry grumbled. "Although I must say I am thankful you're not wearing armor, as that would make this even more painful."

"The doldrums never helped anyone, Harry Potter," Thorin said more quietly. "Your lady might not be here, but this is not the first time you have been separated since starting your courtship. You will see her soon enough. Never fear."

Harry grumbled but nodded. "I don't know what came over me, but I suppose everyone needs a firm kick in the rear."

"Aye, and when you do, you have me, Harry Potter. I recall several times when you forced me to realize I was being stubborn or foolish, or sometimes both. So it is nice to turn the tables and force you out of your doldrums." Hopping to his feet, Thorin helped Harry up, chuckling dryly. "Although I am surprised I was able to close with you."

"You're surprised. I'm the one eating dirt," Harry muttered, shaking his head. "But I think I did hit you with several spells."

"I thought the same thing but believed it was my imagination."

"It wasn't. If any of those spells hit, they should've immobilized you or pushed you back at least. None of my truly offensive spells worked on you. And not because I cast them. The spells fizzled when they hit you."

Thorin's eyes widened, and he glanced down at where the Arkenstone resided across his chest in a makeshift holder. This was just a few leather straps worked together in such a way as to create a small pouch, which Thorin wore like a bandolier, but it was the best they could do at the moment. Thorin had refused Harry's offer of a transfigured item, and there being no leather workers among the dwarves at present, they had made do. Thorin could have done the work himself, but he was a weaponsmith rather than an artisan. And he had so many other tasks to his that needed his hands that spending days on such a project would have been foolish.

"The Arkenstone protected me from magic. That is... interesting information," Thorin mused.

"Indubitably," Harry drawled, shaking his head. Then he smirked and walked away, calling over his shoulder, "But it only seems to protect you from actually harmful spells."

Finally realizing that many of the nearby dwarves were snickering into their beards, Thorin looked down at himself and found his own beard had been turned into a hideous rainbow monstrosity. "HARRY!!" he growled as he chased after his friend.

The day before had mostly been devoted to organizing. All of the humans and dwarves had split up into several jobs, their available resources had been tallied, and defenses around the main camp were set in place just in case. As for the jobs, these could range from assigning most of the women to watching the kids or sewing for the humans to hunting or chopping down trees for wood. And, of course, there was Oin and his band of helpers watching over the wounded.

Previously, that task would have been given to Gandalf. But he had left the same day as the elves after a final conversation with Bilbo. He had headed south and west, wishing to "Head to Isengard and speak to Saruman upon his return. With my concerns about Bilbo seen to by your promise, Harry, I can do so more quickly than I had feared."

A group of young dwarves under Kili's command were heading into the mountains once more to search for anything useful that they could make use of now. They had already brought out large amounts of utensils, knives, and plates, which had been used during the wake. Now they were searching for any usable cloth or fabrics... and, alas, removing the skeletons throughout the darkened halls of Erebor.

They would be laid out with small cairns for now, with notes denoting where they had died so that living family members could perhaps identify them. If identification was impossible, they would eventually be interred in a common grave.

Dori led another similar group in waking the furnaces, so they could craft any tool or item they would require. This included forging new lights, the massive lanterns that would be required to light Erebor as it came alive once more.

Another group of fifty warriors who didn't have any other applicable skills had taken to the road heading back to the Iron Hills with ten boar riders with them the day before. They would help guard the migration that news of the victory here over the orcs would have begun. Thorin was certain that his sister, Dis, would already have begun organizing that the moment his first message about Smaug's defeat reached her.

Harry had asked him yesterday about that, wondering if Dain would miss having so many people relocate from the Iron Hills to Erebor.

"It isn't as simple as that, Harry. Yes, my cousin's people are Longbeards like ourselves, sons of Durn. But since Erebor fell, we have been but living off his good graces in many ways. That kind of debt is not something that a dwarf would be willing to countenance. Although it is hard to think of our dams making the trek, so long as we can put Erebor right as much as possible before they arrive, the trip will be worth it. It will take many years of toil, but eventually, Erebor will rise to its former glory."

Balin nodded at that, although oddly, he mumbled about "How we should never have removed our people to the Grey Mountains. In doing that, we courted disaster." Harry would have questioned him on this but decided it was probably a tale for another day since even Thorin didn't seem to respond to it.

When it came to Kili's mission, Harry was unable to do much. While repair spells could work on, say, something that had been splintered and destroyed, if something had been turned into dust entirely, and that dust had then been joined by far more dust elsewhere, the spell wouldn't take.

"So," Harry asked as he sat next to Thorin on a tree log, eating a meager breakfast. Meager was going to be the norm given their supplies for a while until the first elven shipments of food arrived. "What is our objective today?"

"The humans will need your help the most today. Bard means to get a start on rebuilding Dale. That will take a lot of heavy lifting and stonework. I've already talked to a few of the dwarves who came with my cousin, and they're willing to pitch in, but they'll need some heavy lifting."

"Which I'm quite good at, yes," Harry said with a nod. "And where are you off to Bilbo?" he asked, looking over at the Hobbit, looking quite unhappy at present.

Bilbo was eating the same small meal as the others, which probably had something to do with his unhappiness. Hobbits had metabolisms that burned through food quite a bit quicker than humans or dwarves, which meant they needed more food in the first place. It was why they could eat so much and still retain the ability to not all look like small roly-poly balls of fat. Bilbo had explained that on the journey.

In fact, wasn't it Bombur who... Harry cut that thought off, shelving it with all the other thoughts of lost friends and acquaintances. Now was not the time to dwell on them. Not now, not for a long time.

"I've been asked to help teach dwarf and men alike some farming techniques. The soil around the Lonely Mountain itself isn't the best, although you can tell where there were forests and a few farms even so. If they work it dutifully enough, they could perhaps make something of this territory, although I think the best farming will be down by the lake.

"Agreed. One of my first projects once Erebor is settled once more will be to create some aqueducts to carry the water from the lake to Dale and Erebor. But do not, please, forget your primary task, Bilbo. My people will need access to the treasury at some point," Thorin joked, shaking his head.

"I will check on the trees this afternoon. Fili is on watch with Nori this morning. And you, Thorin? What will you be doing?"

Thorin shrugged, saying that his morning would be taken up with paperwork, much to the confusion of both Bilbo and Harry. But he waved that off, saying, "We dwarves like our paperwork, our deeds, our loan, our contracts, as you know. Both of you have your copies of the contract of the Company, after all. More than half of Dain's people need to be paid, and Bard's share correctly apportioned. I will be doling out riches the moment I can, Bilbo," he added, looking over at the hobbit.

Bilbo shrugged his shoulders, reminding them that this wasn't exactly something he'd ever done before. "The trees are helping. My constant touches to them, my blessings to Yavanna, I can feel my effort cleansing the Taint, but do not ask me to tell you more." He then snorted, pointing to where the corpse of Smaug had been buried. "Certainly, it is disappearing faster than the Taint from Smaug's body."

Nothing near Smaug's burial mound was green any longer. It was all brown or black, but regardless of color, it was very dead. Harry had even set up a ward around the area with his runes to keep people away.

Harry nodded thoughtfully, looking at Bilbo closely. *It's also doing something to you, Bilbo*, he thought but did not say aloud. Bilbo's back was straighter than he had ever seen, his face firmer. Bilbo even looked a bit taller and stronger despite the subpar food they had been eating the past two days. There was something stronger within Bilbo that Harry could somehow sense.

Is this sense of mine something I've gotten from Arien? he thought suddenly, his eyes narrowing thoughtfully. *Still, it doesn't seem to be harmful.*

Soon after their small breakfast, the trio broke off, with Harry nodding his head towards Balin and Dwalin. Balin would be working with Thorin, while Dwalin was in charge of a group of

Dain's warriors gathering the weapons from the dead from the battle. Much of that refuse had been left where it lay before this, the elves, dwarves and humans too busy trying to burn the bodies of their dead foes and thus avoid flies, crows and so forth to care overmuch about their weapons. Regardless, the battlefield would be a good source of iron, if nothing else.

The archers saw him coming and held up a hand, causing his people to turn and nod or simply stare at the young wizard.

As he walked through them towards Bard, Harry tried to ignore the looks he was getting from men and women alike. The rumors about his magic were well known, but before the party, Harry had spent his time with the elven brothers or the dwarves general. Now, however, with the battle over and the elves away, many of the men folk were interested in getting to know Harry better, while the womenfolk were of a similar thought but a most decidedly different goal. Many young single women were looking at him the way Harry had once seen boys look at Fleur Delacour during the Tri-Wizard tournament.

Gah, now I really know what Fleur felt, not just being a public object of interest but also an object of desire. I wonder if they would still be interested in me if they knew how long I might live. And can't make it so they could live forever either. The fact they are also looking at me and... yes, many are even flashing me their legs and cleavage, knowing I'm in a relationship with Tauriel is also a mark against them.

"Bard, I thought we were all on a mission to Dale, yet I don't see any large rocks or logs among your folk. You expect me to do all the work? Considering that this work for you would be but the wave of a hand and a moment's concentration and would be literally backbreaking for us, I don't exactly see that like any great hardship," Bard drawled, clasping Harry's hand.

Chuckling, Harry agreed and then asked to be shown the rocks and other material in question. Moments later, as the humans stared, several of the large rocks previously blocking the way into Erebor were floating after them.

To Harry's surprise, the trip to the ruined city of Dale took only a single day, from the time he joined them to late evening. Situated as a point in a triangle, it was east and south of the mountain, and Harry estimated it was nearly equidistant to the nearest point of Long Lake.

"I didn't expect Dale to be that close to the Lonely Mountain," he murmured to Bard as they continued forward, looking ahead of them to the first sight of the ruined capital.

"sharing a border with a dwarven kingdom is not the same as between two human realms. Dwarves don't need as much land, and so long as the humans are ruled wisely and do not become jealous of the riches of the dwarves, peace is easily kept. The relationship between Dale and Erebor was mostly one of equal trade and co-dependency. The dwarves provided metalwork, jewelry, stonework. Dale provided cloth, raw materials occasionally, woodcraft of all sorts, and food."

“And toys, lad!” A nearby oldster exclaimed, cackling. Probably pushing seventy and showing a life’s worth of hard work, he still looked spry and eager to see Dale. “I remember my great grandfather talking about a toy he’d had as a youngster, a magnificent doll that you could move and dance from its strings.”

Bard laughed. “Those too. The toys and instruments of Dale were known far and wide.”

Harry chuckled at that, looking ahead of them towards Dale. The sight was worth it.

The area around Dale was a mixture of flat and rolling hills. The city was situated between four very slight hills, with the outer wall between them and long smashed forts marking each hill. Beyond that smashed, broken outer wall was the city of Dale. From here, Harry could see the walls of numerous buildings within, although few could be seen over the top of the outer wall.

Yet even that surprised him, as Harry had expected the place to be far more ruined than it seemed. Then he realized. “Ah, of course. Stone doesn’t burn so easily.”

“Exactly. However, you will note that most of the towers around the outer wall are destroyed. Their tops would’ve been burned, along with the people within. But afterward, Smaug used his tail to smash each one. I came here to explore once in my youth, and I know he did the same for many of the larger houses. But the fires were the main killer here.”

This became very clear as they actually entered the city. Everywhere the stone was marked with black ash. Occasionally some of that ash was in the shape of a human outline, standing starkly out from the white of a wall, but mostly it was just... black. The ground had been scalded hot in some bygone era to resemble pottery. Even some of the flagstones had been seemingly cracked by the sheer heat, and everywhere, bits and pieces of skeletons could be seen, a disturbing mirror of Erebor’s downfall.

And yet the most poignant sight for Harry was on a macro level. Kneeling down by the entrance to one of the buildings, Harry pulled out a tiny doll, which had somehow survived. The features on the doll were long gone, but the general shape, the stuffing inside, was still enough to show what it had once been. “Smaug died in agony, Bard. He died poisoned, horribly wounded, gasping his life out as his body failed him. Yet, if I could, I think I’d bring his soul back just to torture it a bit.”

Bard nodded, touching Harry’s shoulder gently, saying nothing but grimly looking around them. This wasn’t the first time he had been here, yet still, the vision before them was a haunting one.

Eventually, Harry was able to push through his horror at what had been done to the people here to rejoin the efforts to rebuild the town. The first thing Bard wanted was to rebuild the outer wall and check on the soil around the area. Plus, of course, setting some roofs

on several buildings to house his people. While Lake-town could still hold them, their farms and the few buildings on the lake shore had been destroyed by Azog's army.

That, and already people had begun to gather from hamlets to the south. News of Smaug's death had spread quickly, and while the news of the orcs' defeat hadn't yet reached many ears, Smaug's death alone was enough to draw interest from men just as it would dwarves.

And as they worked, Harry started to notice the architecture beneath the shattered remnants of ancient glory.

The buildings around them weren't very large, and most of them were situated side by side, the organization of the city very apparent, each road laid out like a grid rather than haphazard. Unlike Lake-town or any city Harry had been in, it was very obvious that this place had been organized at the outset. That probably showed the dwarves had something to do with the city's planning. However, the architecture of the buildings didn't match that idea. The doorways were taller than a dwarf would care for and thinner, with wide windows on every floor. Most of the buildings themselves were also wider across.

One oldster opined, "Housing, seamstress work, woodcarver, any trade at all, really. All that would be on the first level, with living quarters above that."

"Bah! the buildings are not the half of it," one of the girls nearby said, eager to see if she could grab Harry's attention. "Those windows would sometimes be closed off with painted wooden guards or even glass. Glass! Can you believe that? And the colors. The tales always talk about the colors. Buntings that would go from street to street, red, white, dark green, yellow, all the colors of the rainbow flapping in the breeze."

"And the sounds, I remember a song about the sounds of Dale," another woman said, trying to paint their new home in the best light they could. "Day or night, there was a sound, not the sound of shouting but of bells and chimes. The dwarves would make them for us, but we would finish them, polish and hang them around the city. There would also be singing and violins."

Bard nodded. "If we can re-create the wood industry, even more than the clothing industry, Dale will become prosperous quite quickly. As far as Lake-town's wine went, there is no hint that anyone taken up that work."

"Right. And if we are to make this place great again, it needs some elbow grease right now. Back to work," Harry said, finished shaping some of the stones they'd brought to fill in a hole in the outer wall. He also completely ignored the women attempting to get his attention.

"Elbow grease," Bard mused, "I understand what you're saying but that phrase..."

Harry rolled his eyes. "Don't worry about it. Let's just move on."

Even as they turned back to their work, several of the oldsters would pause on occasion, seeing the wreckage of not just the ancient glories but the lives that had been so easily snuffed out by dragon fire. But always, Bard or one of the others would end the tale on a more positive note, the same kind of theme that the victory party had several nights previous. "We will rebuild, it will go on, and we will become greater than our ancestors. That is the only true way to honor our ancient dead."

Back at the mountain, Bilbo was running into issues once again. The dwarves from the Iron Hills were becoming more and more annoyed at how they could not access the treasury. Money was extremely important to dwarves just as much as contracts, and while Dain was willing to wait, many of his folk wished to be paid for their efforts in restoring Erebor now. And while Dain could have promised payment, Thorin had refused that offer, knowing it would put him more in debt to his cousin, something he did not want. Erebor would pay for its restoration directly.

These were folk who didn't want to relocate, who had businesses to go back to and would be doing so when more of Erebor's own folk arrived. They wanted at least surety now that their efforts on behalf of Thorin and Fili could only write out so quickly. The sight of the gold would settle much of the dwarves and nerves.

But Bilbo was adamant and did not let any through the wall of trees. "I'm willing to let some of the younger among you look, good dwarves, but not to touch!" Bilbo growled out that evening as Harry arrived in Dale before injecting a bit of humor into his tone. "Unless you all would like to become a planted flower for a time? Thorin was a most hilarious-looking shrub for a bit there."

That caused some of the other two words to laugh, but one still looked like he wanted to take his axe to Bilbo and his trees. Thankfully, another gripped the angry dwarf's shoulder. "He is right. A look is all we need, my friend. To know the gold is there and not eaten or some such."

"BAH!" the angry dwarf whirled, tossing his friend's hand off him, leaning in to growl in the peace-makers face. Bilbo couldn't hear much of what he said, something about beggars and "Dain assuming much," but Bilbo didn't care to listen in further. Instead, he backed away, reaching for a nearby club Dwalin had found for him for just such occasions.

"You might need it, my lad," Dwalin said. The usually dour, dismissive dwarf had come to see Bilbo as a friend through their journey, and now he gave him advice. "Don't go for the head. Jab them in the stomach, then aim at the legs, upend your enemy. We dwarves are not used to protecting our legs from even goblins, let alone anyone else. And regardless of their king's opinion, there is an undercurrent of anger among the Iron Hill folk for not being able to take their just due."

Bilbo knew some of that at least was the Dragon's Taint still reaching out past his defense, corrupting susceptible minds. But Dwalin and Bofur had explained it to him further. While much of Erebor's folk had been welcomed in the Iron Hills, there was always some resentment toward newcomers, especially given their number. And later, the Iron Hills army had come to fight in the War of the Dwarves and Orcs, which had begun due to Thrain, Thorin's father, leading them into war for his own hubris. Erebor was a hoped-for ally in the future, but for many dwarves of the Iron Hills, that was not enough to make up for the resentment of their losses in that war.

Whatever the angry dwarf was saying seemed to be winning a few of the others over, and Bilbo gulped, hoping that none of them were still wearing armor. Instinctively his free hand reached the pouch he kept his ring in, wondering if he could somehow disappear from this confrontation. *Surely the noise of them trying to push through the trees would bring in other dwarves to stop them?*

But thankfully, Balin's voice rose from behind the small throng before anything could happen. "And what is all this then? Are you lot here to search for something solid, something real to show you will be paid as soon as Erebor's gold is safe to handle? Then never fear, for King Oakenshield, and I have written out precisely that. Can I see Choril, Agni and Sharn, please?"

The three named dwarves turned, and to Bilbo's relief, one of them was the angry dwarf. The crowd parted, and now Bilbo could see that Balin was standing there with official-looking scrolls stuffed into a large pouch at his side.

The sight of those scrolls and Balin's smile, plus Dwalin standing beside him with a much larger version of the club that he had given Bilbo, seemed to work a magic of its own. The three dwarves moved towards them and quickly read over the contracts while Balin went through them one after another.

Watching hands be shaken and the dwarves taking out small stamps and placing their marks on the contracts, Bilbo breathed a sigh of relief, his grasping hand slowly lifting from the pouch where his ring lay. Later, as the crowd dispersed, he quipped, "I didn't know you were a wizard too, to use simple parchment to disarm angry feelings."

The former-and-once-again King's advisor chuckled, running hands through his beard, absently noting it needed a good washing. "Among my folk, contracts are important, a lynchpin of our society. And do not be too hard on some of these. Many were among those who swore the oath of KazDru'kal."

Bilbo had heard that word before, and though he didn't understand the full import, he nodded. "I understand that, but just imagine what kind of damage that number of dwarves could do if they were taken by the gold madness. If they fell and we tried to remove them from

the treasury, they would no doubt attack, and it would spread. Which doesn't even consider they might see the humans as outsiders or even Thorin and you all as enemies."

The two brothers frowned, but Bilbo went on, hesitating only a moment. "The Taint is still there. I can, I can feel it, like a shadow in the gold and the rest of the stone of the treasury. It is weakening. I can feel that too, but..."

Dwalin shook his head, clapped Bilbo on the back and left, not needing any more description of that process. He felt magic was best left in the hands of those that understood it, and the taint, for all its evil nature, was inherently a magical thing. Balin also didn't have much to say, but he left another pouch of contracts with Bilbo before leaving. These were generic, fill-in name types, an idea Fili had come up with, but it would be enough to disarm the dwarves or send them off to argue with Balin and Fili.

Not Thorin. Thorin's work that day was on higher things, and he spent most of it with Dain. As worried and perhaps angry as some Iron Hill dwarves were, they were not brave enough to bother the man who had slain Azog or their king.

With Harry working in Dale with Bard, it was another two days before he returned. Harry had done most of the work he could with repair and levitation spells and had left a few ward stones, sun-stones he called them, to help the work continue. "At this point, Bilbo, Bard was making noises about you joining them."

"I would like that, I think. The number of dwarves who come by to try and push past my little barrier has lessened, but they are still coming around. Still, if Fili or someone else could take over, I would appreciate a break."

Bilbo sighed tiredly, his fingers twitching on the small bowl of stew in front of him. Food was becoming a bit of an issue, unfortunately. More humans had shown up, and few had brought supplies beyond that for the trek. That kind of thoughtless positivity annoyed the dwarves, and even Bilbo resented it a bit. But the extra hands were too helpful to become angry at.

"But even so, with every day that goes by that I work those trees while praying to Yavanna, I can feel the taint weakening. It is just a feeling, but something is changing for the better in the area around the trees. They are blooming stronger, looking better. Unfortunately, that is the only thing I can use as a real means of measurement."

"And then, it will be time for me to head home," Bilbo continued before anyone could answer, a little pleased hum accompanying his words. "This has been a magnificent adventure Thorin if a costly one. But as I told Harry the night of the party, an adventure is not complete until you are home. And I miss my simple hobbit hole more with each passing day."

Thorin nodded slowly, shaking his head looking over at Harry. "Will you be coming back here or heading straight to speak with Lady Galadriel?" While Thorin still had a few issues with

elves, even he would never think of speaking of the Lady of Lothlorien in anything beyond a respectful manner.

“I don’t know, although I will have to consult with Tauriel. We’re supposed to meet her on the way.”

Thorin nodded slowly, then looked back at Bilbo. “I will be sad to see you go, Bilbo Baggins. And not just because of your scouting ability. You have been a truer friend and a truer advisor than I had any right to expect. And truly, you were the only solution for a problem neither I nor any of the Company would have seen coming. And if you expect to leave without me making you the richest hobbit to ever farm, you will be sorely disappointed.”

Bilbo was shocked, still getting used to this humbler, less spiky Thorin. Yet he held out his hand and shook the dwarves firmly, and then as Kili and Fili slapped his back, he searched for a way to change the subject, finding it on Thorin’s chest. “Are you going to carry the Arkenstone as part of your royal regalia, or will you set it into your throne, Thorin?”

Thorin scoffed, shaking his head. “No. When my sister gets here, she and her husband will be in charge of setting it into the ceiling of the King’s study. There it will remain. While I then watch as Dis hounds Fili and Kili here about courting.”

Both younger dwarves blanched while Harry frowned, looking at the royal family. “And how will you feel about moving into that area?”

“Most of the furniture has already been removed, leaving a few ancient scrolls. Few things remain that will force me to remember what there was before or what occurred there in Smaug’s assault. Yet even if there were, I would still live there. It is where the king must be, and thus it will be done.”

“And what also must be done,” Thorin snorted, pointing at Harry. “Is your sword lessons restarting, Harry Potter. If you wish to go harrying off all on your own or with only Tauriel to guard your back, I will beat some further self-defense into you before you go.”

“Your use of ‘beat’ does not fill me with happiness,” Harry replied dryly. “Why do I think I will be paying for the rainbow beard incident? It was days ago, Thorin. Let it go.”

“Ahaha, no.” Thorin laughed darkly, and Harry groaned theatrically.

The next morning, Harry was proven quite correct. After several hours, he was indeed more bruise than man, although it had only been Thorin training him. Dain, Dwalin, and several others, including Fili and Kili, joined the training. Warriors needed to train every day to keep fighting fit. The last few days had been a break for most of the warriors who remained, but now they were back into it.

At a bellowed command from Thorin, Harry found himself doing some exercises to keep his muscles beside Dain, who was surprisingly doing many of the same exercises, although not

as many shoulder and neck ones. Harry put that down to the dwarves having slightly different musculature than humans. "Dain, what is the geography like between here and the Iron Hills? When can you all expect the first of Thorin's folk to arrive? We've seen humans begin to arrive already."

Dain grunted, looking up at the human. They hadn't spent much time around one another. When Harry was interacting with anyone, it was one of the Company or a few of the youngsters who had sought out his presence simply because of the stories of the young wizard's power. Even the two metalsmiths who were so eager to work with Harry and their own rune scribes didn't interact with him often.

Yet the human had won his respect several times over, so Dain answered readily enough. "It's sparse territory, not deadly, just the kind of territory you pass through to get somewhere else. There's no good soil for the humans or anything to mine for my folk. We could see those who had set off on news of Smaug's death within another day or so."

"And beyond to the east?"

"Beyond the Iron Hills lies some of our other brethren in scattered mountain holds. And the Easterlings, of course." Dain spat to one side at that, as did many of the older dwarves nearby, Thorin and Dwalin among them.

"I've heard of them, followers of the Great Enemy, I think? Or at least enemies of Gondor and the dwarven nation, right?" Harry asked.

"aye, they are that. The Easterlings breed like rabbits, more even than most human nations. They're organized too, and deadly. We have fought alongside our brethren against them occasionally over the past hundred years," Dain said, gesturing to the others around them.

"I went there and served a season in the army of the Blacklock nation," Thorin added. "Our Blacklock and Stonefoot brethren hold them off by using their pike formations and slingers, but they have much the same problem as any dwarven nation would against humans. Humans can rebuild armies and numbers far faster than we."

Thorin paused, glancing towards Dain and the nearby Balin, who had come toward them to speak to his brother. Balin wasn't the most warlike among them, although he was still decent with a pickaxe. "It is why I also offered them to come here as well. I don't know if they will take it up, the eastern clans are prideful, especially the Stonefoot, but I wished to make the offer."

"Hah!" Dain interrupted, shaking his head. They'll come. I don't know whether they'll come in an organized fashion or just disparate families wishing to live in peace, I don't know. But they will come."

“Good,” Thorin mused. “I can but hope for that and for the remnants of the Ironfists and Stiffbeards to come south as well.”

Balin and Fili both gaped at Thorin, astonished. “You have already sent... I thought, lad, I thought I would have to beat you over the head to send word to the other Houses!”

While the dwarves had clans, houses were the larger term for their various sub-groups. Each house could trace its lineage back to the seven fathers of the dwarves. Although when he heard that, it always made Harry wonder where the mothers of the dwarves came from. Dain and Thorin, and most of their followers, were from the Longbeard House, the eldest house of Durin, the most revered of the seven fathers. As for the others, only two, the Firebeards and Broadbeams, resided in safety in the Blue Mountains west of the Shire.

Thorin chuckled, shaking his head ruefully and gently running a finger over the leather holster directly over the Arkenstone. “Perhaps if not for my humbling and the strength of mind the Arkenstone gives me, you would have to. But I need to think of the dynasty, you know, and my thrush-born messages to the clans mention that.”

All the dwarves there started in surprise, staring at Thorin, who allowed a wide smile to appear on his face as he looked at Fili. “Unless, of course, you wish to be my named my official heir? Dis would be most pleased, although my sister would then be on you even harder to make yourself presentable to the other dams.”

Fili rapidly shook his head, but Harry interjected before more teasing could occur. “I understand about thinking about the dynasty, but you all are acting as if this is a far greater deal than that would be among humans. Am I missing some kind of interaction between that concept and the fact that the womenfolk always control the courtship among you?”

“You are indeed,” Dain breathed, shaking his head. “The King asking for a marriage of state is the one exception to the women folk controlling everything. It will still be up to the women once they meet Thorin to decide if he is their One, but it is a big deal to request a marriage of alliance between the houses.”

“And what about you, Dain?”

“I have an heir already, thank you very much,” Dain said, coming out of his stupor with a laugh. “My youngest brother is my heir. He wields a hammer about as well as you expect. Yet still, Thorin, that will be a mighty journey, and the demands the Kings make of you for even sending their dams will be massive.”

“I well know it, but it is necessary. My duties keep me here, or else I would make the journey to each of the clans personally.” Thorin looked over at Kili and Dwalin, and the younger dwarf grinned at him. “And speaking of journeys, are you two ready to move out? I know Elladan and Elrohir are anxious to be on their way.”

“What’s this” Harry inquired.

The dwarves looked at one another, and then Kili shrugged his shoulders. "Uncle Thorin has assigned Dwalin and me along with a chosen band of eight to go to Gundabad in the North."

Harry frowned, looking at Thorin. "I've heard that name, but only in relation to an orcish fortress."

"Gundabad is where Durin woke. It is a sacred place for all dwarves, and yes, it has been foully used as a home by the orcs in the present. But.."

He was interrupted by an elven voice as the two brothers came out of the darkness around the fire. They routinely were out and about, attempting to hunt for game to add to the growing communities larder. "We need to make certain it is empty. If it is, we can install a watch upon it and make certain it cannot be used again by the Great Enemy."

"That is but a small thing. If we can go there, if Fili can paint it, can bring proof of our being there, that folk of Durin have been there, that will be a monstrous thing among us dwarves. Not just the dwarves who reach it, but also for the nations they come from."

"Aye, it's why I'm lending a few of my own lads to the effort. With that and Erebor's defensive position, Erebor might become the most important dwarven realm in Middle Earth," Dain expounded.

"First among equals," Thorin said firmly. "I will not dictate matters. I will not attempt to control even the Iron Hills, let alone the other holdfasts of our folk. But I wish to have Erebor become the first among equal, able to gather or defend all at need."

"Tell me more about the history of this place," Harry requested, leaning back, eyeing the dwarves with interest.

Thorin, Dain and Balin eagerly told the tale of how Aulë had made the dwarves against the wishes of Eru Ilúvatar. Of how when he was found out, Eru Ilúvatar had pointed out they had no souls. Repentant, Aulë had been willing to smash his creations. Instead, Eru Ilúvatar had given the dwarves life and sung them into the Song of Arda, only demanding they wake up later than the elves, who would be first born. The Fathers and Mothers of the dwarves had woken up scattered, with Durin being the first and waking alone on Gundabad, which the dwarves believed held the ancient cave where they were created.

As they finished, Bilbo's voice interrupted matters. "Gandalf! Why has it not occurred to me? I have not seen the wizard all day."

"He has been gone since the day Harry went to Dale," Thorin answered with a shrug. "He left with Beorn and his folk."

"Without a farewell!?" Bilbo gasped in shock.

“Since when does one of the wise need to require leave to leave Mr. Baggins?” Elladan chuckled.

“Indeed, Bilbo. Gandalf has been looking after himself ever since he came to the shores of Middle Earth. He is even better at it than we are,” Elrohir supplied with a chuckle, smiling at the hobbit.

“So none of us will comment on the whole got in trouble the last time he was left alone thing?” Harry asked dryly, having also missed the old wizard’s absence.

Elladan and Elrohir stiffened at that, looked at one another, and then slapped their foreheads as one in a move that reminded Harry painfully of George and Fred. “We should’ve thought about that! At least to tease him a bit! What a moment missed!” they shouted, causing Harry to laugh.

OOOOOO

At that moment, Gandalf was pushing down towards the edge of work Mirkwood. He had traveled with Beorn and those with him for a time, only to request a steed to carry him south when they reached Mirkwood. The bear that Beorn had carry Gandalf did so without complaint for several days before indicating with word and growl that he had traveled far enough. From there, Gandalf had gone on foot.

Pausing at a rustling nearby, Gandalf gripped his staff, his other hand flashing with the speed of a far younger-seeming man to the hilt of his Glamdring at his waist. Sliding it out of its sheath, he stared around him, growling, “If you are here to cause trouble for me, best believe that I will be causing trouble upon you as well, whatever you are.”

“That isn’t very nice, Gandalf,” a voice intoned, followed by a loud bumping noise as a sled pulled by giant rabbits came out of the woods to one side of the path Gandalf had been walking.

Gandalf breathed a sigh of relief, sheathing his sword quickly, and moved forward with his arms open. “Radagast, it is good to see you, my friend.”

It is good to see you as always, Gandalf,” Radagast answered, nodding his head slightly to the other wizard. “I was most pleased to hear about the destruction of the goblins and forks. You wrought quite well there, although that has left the spiders behind to do mischief, which they have.”

“Bah! Had that been up to my design alone, it would’ve gone quite a bit better for our own side. No, my friend. More than one player was trying to call the tune in that battle.”

“Regardless, I have had word from Elrond.” Radagast was not part of the White Council and rarely dealt directly with lords like Elrond. “He bid me say that he has put forth his strength

to make certain the Misty Mountains are cleared of fell folk from his side. The goblins and orcs will soon have no safety beyond the mines of Moria.”

Even as he smiled at that news, Gandalf shivered at the mention of Moria. He knew precisely what the Waking Doom was, the power that was there that had ended the old Dwarven kingdom from within when its defenses had turned even Sauron away in 1697. *To fight such as that underground would be more than any on Middle Earth could hope to accomplish bar a scattered few.*

“I have also learned that Saruman has returned to his fortress. Looking much the worse for wear according to the animals that saw him.”

Gandalf winced at that. “You did not see him yourself? I know well that your little animals will not be able to give much detail.”

Radagast shook his head. “I had not spoken directly with Saruman since he insulted my mushrooms.”

“Your mushrooms are worthy of insults,” Gandalf snorted, shaking his head but feeling slightly better for the little joke. “Might I ask for your aid at this moment?”

“Where would you like me to take you?” Radagast asked simply.

“The edge of Fangorn, I think. I will move on there on my own. I would take council with Saruman quickly, and your help will speed my journey tremendously, my friend.”

Radagast bowed and gestured for Gandalf to join him in his sled. With Radagast’s help, a trip to the edge of Fangorn forest would take a week, whereas on his own, it would’ve taken Gandalf a month or more.

Yet even as he went, Gandalf had to frown. *I feared that Sauron would escape Saruman, but it is hoped that Sauron was wounded in spirit still further in that chase. With the One Ring gone into the sea, Sauron cannot be killed, although he was weakened horribly in its loss. Yet his power is **still** horrifying in scope. If not for the intervention of the rest of the council, I would have died, and perhaps the battle of the mountain lost.*

The wind tugged at his hair, and Gandalf was near bounced out of his seat as the sled raced between the trees, but he barely noticed, so heavy were his thoughts. *We have won a campaign, time to prepare. At the very least, a watch must be set on Mordor, and council given to root out what dens of the orcs and goblins we can. But is there hope for final victory if we cannot kill Sauron?*

OOOOOOO

“You have yet to put your personal touch in here, Legolas. Do not tell me that you are feeling humbled by the need to do so,” Tauriel teased as she stepped off the stairs into the king’s study.

Legolas looked up at her, grateful for the reprieve from his study of the book in front of him. It was about the enchantments on the East Road where it wound through Mirkwood, and it was very dry and convoluted. “No, I wish to do so eventually, but I have lacked the time. I have been looking into how to repair the spells along the East Road and elsewhere in our realm, along with other matters. It has not been pleasant.”

Not that Legolas would make many changes to the king’s quarters, such would not be right, although perhaps he could create a new tradition. After all, elves rarely lost their Kings. Or rather, only rarely had Kings been slain without dying with their kingdoms.

Legolas had spent the days since they had returned in seclusion as befitted the new King, sending his fëa out to commune with the Valar, in particular Mandos, who ruled over the halls of the dead. He knew Thranduil’s fëa was there now and that he would not be returning. Even if his father had been willing to, Mandos and Manwë had decreed that he had made too many ill decisions of late to be allowed the honor of a swift resurrection.

Tomorrow would be Legolas’s formal assumption of power. The time of mourning the dead was over, and Legolas would be crowned king.

But whereas a human prince would have been using this time to bolster support for his coronation, or even removing rivals, for Legolas, there was no such need. If you were born to rule among elves, that was what you did. They could trace the lineage of their kingdoms all the way back to when they woke up on Middle Earth, and no one in Mirkwood would question Legolas’s right to lead them.

No, this time was mostly about Legolas himself. He needed the time to adjust his thinking from merely the commander of the Unseen Host and somewhat wayward princeling to that of a king.

As such, he’d had to make several decisions, and one of them was about the woman in front of him, while another would directly impact her time going forward. Now he looked at her thoughtfully, seeing again the sheer beauty she possessed. A lithe body and shapely form could be assumed among their folk, yet in Tauriel, it was as if Oromë had crafted a huntress to match his skill in the form of an elven woman, for she was stronger, faster, more deadly of hand and eye than nearly all in Taur-E Ndaedelos save Legolas, and then only barely.

Few elven women took up the bow and sword at all. For one to excel as Tauriel had placed her in rare company. This changed her beauty to seem that of a wild thing, a falcon swift and sure on the wing. *Is it any wonder I once thought I had come to love her? Yet she is not for me. So be it. I will move on. Jealousy has never served anyone, and not even the Valar can compel love.*

“As part of becoming king, I have needed to step down as commander of the Unseen Host. I will be raising you to the position.” Legolas held up a hand before Tauriel could protest. “That is a temporary measure. I wish to take the battle to the spiders as quickly as possible. To that end, I wish for you to be in charge. Sift through the army for more men to add to the Unseen Host. Another two hundred or more. Then take the fight to the spiders as soon as possible.”

Tauriel frowned, thinking, but could not find anything to argue about. Legolas was right. It made sense to push the spiders now before they could make good the losses they had taken against Thorin’s Company more than they undoubtedly already had. *And before they can become acclimated to the Great Enemy no longer being nearby.*

“The unseen host did not take many casualties in the battle. I can... I think I can split off two dozen men, have them form a cadre to train the newly chosen in stealth, and lead the rest out in campaigns to map or assault any areas where the spiders have set their webs recently.” Tauriel then sighed. I had hoped to travel with Harry and Bilbo to see Bilbo home. Still, I can understand your reasoning. Duty first.”

“Duty first,” Legolas repeated, nodding his head. “For now,” he added, knowing that while this campaign would unfortunately stop her from joining Harry on his trip to the Shire, she would be free to leave as soon as it was finished.

Once more, Legolas shook his head as he thought of this strange relationship. “Are you serious about Harry? I do not ask for my own sake any longer. I know well now that your heart has never led you towards me as I thought mine did towards you. And yet, we are still friends...”

The closest of friends,” Tauriel nodded, smiling at him faintly. “So I know what question you will ask now. If the Valar demand my fëa becomes human and I age, would I accept it? My answer is perhaps yes. After all, it is quite early in our courtship to think that far away. But on the other hand, I don’t think I’ll need to. Harry is possibly immortal as well after all.”

Legolas blinked, not having made that leap of logic, and Tauriel chuckled, telling Legolas about how Harry had sworn himself to Arien’s service and thus become part of the song of Arda.

Listening, Legolas was surprised and amused. And then decided to tease his old friend. “So, a Maiar of the sun will meet a Maiar of the hunt?”

Tauriel blushed slightly at that tease, which she had first heard several hundred years when she had decided to pick up a bow and arrow rather than an instrument. She shook her fist at Legolas, who laughed, delighted. Whatever else happened, no matter how their paths diverged, that reaction told him they would remain friends.

OOOOOO

The fifth day after the elves left, the food situation had gotten worse. So much so, Thorin had called for a council meeting the day before, pulling Bard away from Dale.

By this point, everything smaller than a squirrel that had previously been courageous enough to live near the mountain had vacated the premises or been hunted by Elladan and Elrohir. But there were more mouths to feed as well. A few more tiny, hard-scrabble human hamlets to the east had basically depopulated themselves of people eager to join in reforging the nations of Erebor and Dale over the past few days, bringing barely enough food for themselves, let alone enough to add to the total supply.

As for the elven twins, they, Dwalin and Kili were gone. They had left the day after with the band of six other warriors, heading north and west to Gundabad. They'd been given provisions for the journey, mostly elven in nature, much to the dwarves' chagrin.

In response to the lack of game, the Lake-town fishermen were reinforced, pulling many of the original able-bodied men from Dale. This was a good thing in the main, as it gave the newcomers work and the ability to work alongside Bard. This allowed him to weed out the wastrels and anyone who thought it might be a good idea to steal or attack the dwarves for their treasure.

Not that there were many of that variety. Beyond the few wounded still being cared for by Oin, the rest of the dwarves routinely went around outside Erebor armed and armored, whereas the humans barely had any weapons that hadn't been given to them by the dwarves before the Battle of the Lonely Mountain.

The fishermen were able to bring in enough fish daily for everyone to get some, enough to continue to work anyway. Yet even with protein seen to, vegetables were practically nonexistent by this point bar some potatoes that the newcomers brought in. Fruit had been practically nonexistent from the start. Spices also were almost entirely gone, except for salt.

There was a small salt mine south and east of the original position of Lake-town. Originally worked as part of the Master of Lake-town's series of punishments for minor lawbreaking or disobedience, one of Dain's officers had taken it over the day after the elves had left. With scarcely any other help, he and two humans interested in mining were rebuilding it and bringing out more salt to boot.

"We didn't realize how large a problem this would be when we sent for our folk," Thorin worried, pacing in a small circle in front of Harry and the rest of his advisors.

Some of those advisors had been replaced in the days since work to restore Erebor had truly begun. Kili was gone, along with Dain. The King of the Iron Hills had taken half the boar riders back to the Iron Hills. They would help guard the caravans coming from the Iron Hills for a time, but Dain would not be returning to the mountain as he had his own duties to see to. He had never intended to permanently settle in his cousin's realm, only help him win it.

“How long did Legolas say it would take them to send us supplies?” Fili mused.

“Legolas said that they would start putting together a supply train the moment they returned, and the grieving families had been told of their losses. But putting together a large supply of food that isn’t entirely made up of Lembas will take them some time,” Balin answered. “I spoke with Legolas on this point before he left, and they also don’t really have much transportation, not a lot of carts or anything like that. Taur-e-Ndaedelos is but a single sprawling city, and elves rarely believe in the need of roads or carts after all.”

“And elves can’t carry nearly as much as our folk can,” said one of the new faces, snorting. “Noodle-armed insular cowards, the lot of them.”

His name was Sari, and he was apparently the second in command of the original supply corps, such as it was, of Dain’s small army. He was as old as Oin, perhaps older, and had apparently worked in Erebor as a banker, doing business between the humans and dwarves. He was well-liked among the majority of the humans, and Balin and Thorin both spoke highly of Sari’s grasp of numbers and organization. But it was clear he had a major ax to grind against the elves, just like Thorin had before being mellowed throughout the Company’s journey.

“While you are correct, I think we can trust Legolas to be looking for solutions. One that springs to my mind is simply using the river, heading down into the Long Lake and then across. Surely the elves have people that know boating, right?” Harry suggested.

“That is both an excellent idea and an assumption that I’m afraid we cannot make. That the elves have boats, I mean. Recall Harry that the elves were terrified of drawing Smaug’s ire before we were able to slay him. I would not put it past Thranduil to have ordered any boats they possibly could have had destroyed.”

Thorin’s observation was tart, and there was a sharp undercurrent of anger, but Harry understood that the observation itself was an accurate one, and he turned to Bard. “Bard, you know our resident fishermen and boats. Could you have some of your people sail a few barges like the one you used when we met towards the river where it comes into the lake?”

“Good thinking. I can certainly send orders to that effect,” Bard said approvingly, and Thorin nodded ruefully.

He should’ve thought of that, but he had wanted to place a little more blame on the dead king’s shoulders despite it being ignoble to speak so of a dead. *Best to remember that Thorin. Let the last of your anger with his actions die with him, and do not paint the rest of his race in the same light.* Then he thought about something entirely different. “Actually, we might have more aid to hand than we thought. I wish to set my beard on fire for this, but we have all forgotten the underground farms.”

Nearby Bilbo perked up, looking over at Thorin, his voice somewhat strained, his face haggard. “And where within Erebor would those have been located? I didn’t see any sign of

them when Harry and I were mapping Erebor out before the battle with Smaug.” The lack of food had hit the hobbit hard these last few days, and he had begun to develop a nervous tic, where he would paw at one of his belt pouches for some reason.

Bilbo was hungry. He was hungry all the time. Any hobbit needed quite a lot more food than a dwarf or human, and while Bilbo did not want to complain about anything, considering his own workload was small in comparison to that of most of the mixed community, it just wasn't enough. He had lost weight tremendously in barely two days and was now a gaunt if extremely well-built and proud example of hobbit-hood.

But the thought of what could be grown underground was enough to bring new life to his eyes. “And are we talking about mushrooms?!”

“I don't think either you or Harry would know what to look for, Bilbo. You were following our instructions and working through the service tunnels to the air vent, not the regular tunnels which would've been directly beneath them. Do you remember anything blocking you or seeing anything that could be a different surface rather than the normal stone in front of you or along the floor?”

Bilbo and Harry looked at one another, then shrugged their shoulders in unison. They hadn't been looking for anything like that, and Bilbo admitted so, with Harry adding that their fight against Smaug would no doubt have messed with their perception of that kind of thing anyway.

“Bofur!” Thorin bellowed, “get over here.”

Bofur came over, leaving several human construction workers behind, a sketch of a complicated rope and pulley system left with them. When asked about the question, Bofur frowned but admitted that he had also taken the service tunnels up to the air vents when he and Ori closed them. “As for mirrors and the like Thorin, there could've been something like that on the ground of the tunnels. Ori would've been the one to notice, though. He was always better at that kind of thing than me.”

For a moment, Harry, Bilbo and the dwarves fell silent as they remembered the youngest of their company, while Harry fought back another wash of grief and guilt, tamping it back into his mind. It still wasn't time for him to allow himself to grieve for his companions' deaths. Not Ori, the cheerful prankster. Not Bombur, gourmand and affable giver of money advice. Or Bifur, Harry's fellow watcher of the stars and cook.

“In better times, the farms would receive sunlight through a series of mirrors, set up below the air vents so that the mirrors did not block the needed air coming in. I know there was also one garden directly off the main thoroughfare, which was fed light from the entrance to Erebor. But it was turned to ash by the Dragon,” Thorin said, his voice low and passionate as it always was when talking about what his kingdom had been and the monster who had destroyed it.

Then he smiled at Bilbo and hopped to his feet, reaching out a hand to the hobbit and pulling him upright. "However, Bilbo, Harry, this is a possibility that I think we should look into, and your skills will be a major help."

Harry looked over at Bard, but Bard waved him off. "We've enough men and material around Dale to complete the basic work, Harry. I'll work with the fishermen today, make certain the barges we send across the lake are good for the journey and have them ready by this afternoon. Unfortunately, I know some of them were scavenged for their wood for Dale. But my people need vegetables and fruit just as much as the dwarves."

Nodding, Harry looked over at Bilbo, whose eyes were almost feverish now, and he hand on Bilbo's shoulder, trying to calm them down, although even as Bilbo seemed to calm down slightly, he was still muttering, "Mushroom, my fortune for a mushroom," under his breath.

"Is there something you want to tell us, Bilbo? Only, where I come from, certain mushrooms are known to be a bit... herbal and medicinal in nature," Harry said, trying to make a joke but failing to find a word or phrase that would convey the meaning of the term psychedelic properly.

"Mushrooms are a favorite for all hobbits, Harry. And I haven't had one since leaving Beorn's house on the other edge of Mirkwood. And even then, I had to share them!" Bilbo said before his stomach started to rumble, and he added sheepishly, "And then there's the whole hunger matter."

Watching the wan, if still energetic Hobbit, Harry made a note to have the cooks give his share of the next meal to Bilbo. He knew the hobbit didn't want special privileges, but there was a difference between that and having enough food for him to be in good enough condition to keep working. Whereas Harry had not felt hunger pangs in a while.

The three of them headed into Erebor, where Harry looked around, smiling slightly at the amount of change that the dwarves and their few human helpers had already done in this area. A lot of that just meant cleaning, getting rid of the dust and grime from the centuries of Smaug's habitation, yet there were other signs.

Literal signs in places, street signs set up to mark the way to the blacksmiths, the furnaces, the various living quarters, and so forth had already been cleared out and made ready for new habitation. And to one side, the trees that Bilbo had planted between the thoroughfare and the treasury stood almost like sentinels. But now, their branches were gilded by small, extremely polished pieces of bronze or copper, scintillating in the light of the open doors. Those pieces of color, such as they were, existed elsewhere throughout the area. The dwarves were trying to bring some color and life back into Erebor.

With Thorin leading the way, Harry, Bilbo and Bofur headed into an area of Erebor none of them had seen before, passing through far more of the dwelling segment of the mountain

than any of them had done before this, bar Bofur when he had been helping to remove the skeletons of their folk. Here and there, Thorin and Bofur paused, talking quietly or bowing their heads for a moment before moving on.

Ever upward they moved, passing through several layers of housing districts and then through what looked like an entire floor devoted to jewelry and extremely detailed metalwork. Here, Thorin explained, would also reside the Rune scribes who did not work directly and solely for the royal family. "I think going forward, Harry, that I will probably not have them housed here. Rather I will keep them close until Erebor is fully restored. At that point, I will allow them to take on more commercial properties, but until then, their skills will be a national resource, so to speak."

Harry agreed with that sentiment, considering how much work there was left to get both Erebor and Dale up and running, let alone on the way back to becoming true nations. They talked about that prospect, what runes Harry knew that could help around the place now, and what Harry would require of the dwarves to produce such runes. This conversation lasted them until they were several floors down, and Thorin paused, staring up words.

Above them, a shaft several stories in length rose through the floors above them. And for some reason, at the top, there was a glimmer of light, just a faint sliver, but still visible.

Thorin nodded thoughtfully as he saw that and then gestured them upward. "There is our target, gentlemen."

Soon, they were standing to one side of what looked just like another segment of a tunnel above, except for the fact that there was a faint glimmer of light through it through the open-air shaft above. That shaft, so thin as to let not even a goblin pass, still let in more natural light than the three had seen since leaving the main thoroughfare behind. "Quartz crystal, buffed and shined normally to allow greater light reflected all around."

Harry used a cleaning charm on the quartz, which instantly began to emit quite a great deal of light, so much so that the four of them, used to the light of their torch, had to blink and look away, even though most of that light wasn't actually directed in their direction. Rather, it was directed down below them.

Soon after that, the four stood at the entranceway filled with what looked like dead tree limbs. "So Bilbo, what exactly are we..."

"That is the dead remains of an overgrown apple tree Harry, and besides those, what looks like a Clementine tree, shockingly." Bilbo knelt down, staring through the roots, and his eyes widened in delight. "I see mushrooms! Several dozen varieties! The remnants of white look like a garden. I see numerous dead plants, very desiccated, but the mushrooms were able to survive without sunlight! There's enough here for a feast, I tell you!"

“And that is only what you can see, Mister Baggins. Let us get to work.” Thorin nodded over to Bofur, and as Harry cut into the dead mass of wood and leaves using his magic, the two dwarves hauled bits out, tossing them down the hallway while Bilbo held their torch, pointing out areas of the tree for Harry to target with his cutting spells. None of the others commented on the now continual gurgle from his stomach or the nervous way he bounced on his feet.

Soon, the entrance was cleared, and the four of them moved into the actual farm.

The farm was set in a wide circular area, almost a cavern like some of the clan living quarters below. Several terraces were built around the outer edge of a central area where the trees had once been. The entrance was on the second level of this structure, and to either side, the terrace contained several trees which needed more care. Directly below had been where the legumes and other things that hadn't needed light were originally placed.

Everything was vastly overgrown. It was evident that some of the plants had flourished for a time out of control, but then, as the dirt and grime had obscured the light, the trees had died. Eventually, they decomposed and then were used as soil for the mushrooms. Now, those mushrooms would be a source of nutrition for everyone in the dwarven and human community.

And in the center of that lay the remains of a series of mirrors, which had been designed to be controlled, moved around to each segment of the farm and bring the light from the air vent down into it. None of that construction remained intact, and Harry's repair spell could barely put together a single mirror. Most of the structure's wood had simply eroded to nothing and then been used as further soil for the mushrooms. This meant that the light from the distant quartz floor was not being directed here just yet.

Without any of the others trying to stop him, Bilbo began sampling the mushrooms raw while sifting through the grime and soil, picking out seeds from the various trees and other plants he felt were still good. The happy hobbit was actually muttering a song under his breath about mushrooms and the end of the workday, and Harry had to smile at his cheerful tone. It had been several days since Bilbo had enough energy to be cheerful.

But he became serious as he heard Bofur and Thorin wondering how to best use this area in the future. It seemed like building the mirror arrays would constitute a lot of work. Yet Harry felt he might have a better solution, so he interrupted their morose discussion, asking, “Bofur, Thorin, how close to the call it the outer shell of the mountain are we here?”

“Outer shell, he says,” Thorin chuckled. “There is a reason why even Smaug had to come through our front door, Harry! There is no power remaining on Middle Earth that can get through several hundred yards of stone.”

Harry nodded thoughtfully, staring upwards. The farm wasn't anywhere near one of the vents, which itself would've been sending the light down into that quartz floor that they had

found earlier, underneath which the remains of the first mirror array they had found had been situated, turned to shed light through another series of mirrors down to the farm.

An ingenious system, to be sure, but one that did not take magic into account. *And it is rather too complicated, but that's dwarves for you. Still, I have magic, and I am a simple man at heart.*

"This is either going to fizzle out and make me look like a fool, or it will work and if it does, I have no idea how much power it will take. If you could catch me if I collapse, Thorin, I would be grateful," Harry intoned dryly before holding up his hands and staring at the ceiling intently, gathering his magic.

This was no great attack spell. Nor was it a newly created and barely understood spell devoted to incorporating the enhancements submitting himself to Arien had given him. No, this was simply a color change charm, a charm that changed the color on something without changing its inherent property. It had become something of a favorite for Harry in terms of pranks, easy and quick.

And translucent was, technically, a color. Many of the windows in Hogwarts were simply transparent bits of stone, never made to be opened. It was a lazy method of magical construction, but it could serve a purpose, like in the green houses. Which was where he got the idea for what he was about to do.

Harry controlled the image of what he wanted here closely. He didn't want to change the entire mountain, primarily because it would probably kill him even to attempt. But he wanted a tunnel through the rock above to change color, to become translucent.

With every yard of stone he visualized the change occurring to, it became harder and harder to keep the image in his mind. This was a sign of how much power this was to take. Yet eventually, as Thorin watched on worriedly, wondering what Harry was up to, Harry's mental image, or perhaps his mental senses, it was awfully hard to tell, finally reached the mountain's surface beyond. And he whispered, "let there be light, color change charm.}

From Harry's hands flashed a large surge of magic, racing upward to crash into the ceiling. There was no physical impact, but an instant later, the ceiling began to change. It began to look different to Thorin and Bilbo's eyes, almost clear.

And then, that change reached the surface, and light poured forth, blinding all of them. It was only by remembering where Harry had been standing a moment before that Thorin was able to catch his human friend as he collapsed.

Later, after Thorin had carried an extremely weary, somewhat out-of-it Harry from the mountain, Thorin talked about what Harry had done to Balin and the others. A small expedition instantly set up the mountain, with some of the best climbers, including Bilbo, going with them, his bags stuffed with mushrooms. They had to know if Harry's change had weakened the outer

protection of the mountain. Thorin didn't think so, but it was best to be certain about such things. And if it hadn't, and if the change was permanent, well...

"Before this, I was in debt to Harry Potter for his help along the journey and against Smaug. But if this holds, it will take a lot of work, admittedly. But if this holds, Harry will have given us a price beyond anything thus far. An internal source of food larger and more easily cared for than any we have had before in any dwarven settlement. The ramifications of that..." Thorin shook his head, and all of his advisers nodded, tugging on their beards furiously, smiles and frowns alike on faces all around him.

Sari shook his head. "That's not even thinking about whether or not he'll be able to do it again. You all said that this isn't the first time he's magically exhausted himself, and he is conscious enough to eat at least."

"That's correct, although I will ask them to exhaust himself like this again. We already need to find some means of paying Harry back more than simply giving him his share of the treasure," Thorin said, shaking his head.

Balin smiled suddenly, gesturing with a thumb towards where the lake was, well out of sight from the entrance to Erebor, where the camp was set up. "I understand that Tauriel wished for the two of them to have a house on the lake."

"Hmm, and Harry would like that too. He likes moving water, the sound of streams, and trees." Thorin instantly understood what his advisor was saying and now leaped ahead. "The trees we can't really do much about, although I think Bilbo found several seeds that he says could be useful. But beyond that..."

Throughout the rest of the day, most of the dwarves, save those who had proven to be susceptible to the Dragon's Taint, trooped in and out of the mountain in small groups. Fili, Nori and Gloin stood guard alongside Bilbo's trees as small teams of twenty dwarves or a few humans and dwarves moved in and out of the mountain, setting up further torches, removing refuse, and carting down wagonloads of mushrooms.

These mushrooms were then sorted, cleaned up, and added to the supplies, causing joy among the dwarves, although most of the humans had never even seen mushrooms like this before, and certainly not in this quantity. Many of the children complained, and several old folk muttered about the food not being fit for humans, but Bard and his officers sat on that sentiment hard. The mushrooms were an excellent addition to their supplies. And Bard would have no one say anything different.

"Since most of the mouths these are feeding are human mouths and mouths of folk who did not think ahead to see the need for food upon your arrival here, it is gross ingratitude to then complain when food is offered!" Bard bellowed more than once that day.

Even better, a trip across the lake barely took half the day, and only two more days passed before the first supplies from the elves arrived. Harry was still a bit out of it, or else he would've been somewhat annoyed that Tauriel wasn't with them. Indeed only a few elves actually made the trip across the lake. It fell to the humans to make the trip back and forth.

It wasn't so much that Harry was magically exhausted, shocking as that thought was. No, his head and mind had been battered by the effort, like someone had blown a balloon just to the point where it would pop before letting it collapse.

But when he woke up three days after his magical experiment, Harry's mind was clear once more, and with a yawn, he sat up in his bedroll, sniffing the air appreciatively, the smell of a full meal, a chicken cooking over a nearby open fire with mushrooms, gravy, and loaves of bread. The time of the empty stomachs was fully over now and would not return for a long even as more humans and dwarves arrived from scattered holdings, eager to add their strength to the efforts to bring back Dale and Erebor.

"He's awake!" Came the shout, and Harry laughed, pointing at the meal. "I will have me some of that."

Harry ate slowly as he listened to what had been going on since he had fallen into his semi-insensate state, shook hands with several people as they thanked him for what he had done, and breathed a sigh of relief as Bilbo reported that his spell had done no actual change to the mountain. "It's still stone, still so thick that you can hardly see the bottom of the shaft, but that shaft is translucent enough for sunlight to get through! It's a wonder, Harry, truly a wonder."

"Good. I did that without really thinking about it, but I'm glad it worked."

"Worked? That refuse and the soil within that farm is some of the most excellent soil I've ever seen this side of Master Gamgee's best! With that light, some water, and some care, that farm will be able to produce enough food to feed every dwarf here with some leftover. It'll be tough, and it will take the normal amount of time, of course, but it will be done. Indeed, Thorin is consulting with some of the others about enlarging it still further. We certainly will have enough soil to put down with all the mulch and so forth from the other farms."

The other farms had also produced mushrooms. "Combined, those five farms will be more than large enough to supply all of Erebor as we rebuild. Eventually, our population might outgrow what they can give us, but that is centuries in the future," Thorin reported, clasping forearms heartily with Harry. "And if I was not in debt to you before Harry Potter, I am now."

Harry chuckled at that, but he didn't say anything about that indebtedness. The money he would be given eventually for his journeys would be a major help, but he was still hesitant about speaking of debt between friends. It wasn't something he had ever really thought of back in his old world. Friendship had always been the most important thing to him. "Just don't ask

me to do that again for a bit. I think I can. My magical reserves were up to the task, but my mind wasn't yet."

Indeed, Harry had already recognized the difference in his magical core from now to before he had sworn himself to Arien's service. His reserves were no larger, but the impact of his spells was far smaller, and his magical reserves refilled swiftly. Harry probably would never have been able to do that color change charm before, but now, Harry felt the impact on his mind would be far less the second time around.

"Hah! Take your time on that, my lad. But once you're finished eating, Harry, we have something to show you."

Blinking, Harry looked at him quizzically, but Thorin made no answer beyond what he had already stated. So Harry shrugged and turned his attention to the food.

That evening he stared at what the dwarves had begun to build.

It was a house built into the side of a granite protrusion of stone that jutted out of the ground near the edge of Long Lake, curving out over the water almost like a claw. Just looking at it, Harry knew that rock would make for an excellent hearthstone, an anchor for defensive spells of all sorts. Around it, a small segment of ground had been cleared for what looked like a garden, while a house's foundations were being laid directly against the granite rock to use it as a wall. A large tree, an oak tree if Harry was any judge, had also been transplanted and was now growing to one side.

There was a lot of room to improve, but there was an outline of what could be a truly beautiful house.

"... I don't know what to say, Thorin. This looks amazing!" Harry said enthusiastically.

"We tried to remember the sights and sounds that you enjoyed the most on our journey and incorporated them here. We also thought that Tauriel would like the tree, and we have also left enough space for other trees to be planted," Balin explained. He had been put in charge of this project by Thorin and given forty humans and six dwarves to do the work. It had been hard to move that one tree alone, but Balin knew that this was the place to build once they found the stone.

"We had to do most of this without Bilbo since he was out with our climbers up the mountain, but I think we did a good job. It will be an ongoing effort, but that's all to the good as it will let you and Tauriel give us some more insight into what you want here."

"Thank you, my friends. This looks fantastic." *And with that granite stone, I will be able to put down so many wards that this house and its environs will be as protected as Rivendell!* A part of Harry thought it was a little too close to what would undoubtedly become a major settlement here on the lake so close to the mountain. But again, that could be seen to with enough wards if he and Tauriel wished for some privacy.

The thought of Tauriel made Harry smile, even though a part of him was somewhat bemused as that thought percolated. *Good grief, do I already think Tauriel and I will make a life of it together? Do I care for her that much?* Harry thought about it for a moment, felt out his feelings toward Tauriel, and was surprised, yet happy, to realize that the answer was a resounding, *Yes, yes I am.*

With that, Harry eagerly threw himself into the work around the area that Balin had chosen or his house putting down some wards already, setting the large granite stone as the centerpiece of that work, and then adding a few bits here and there.

Some were whimsical, like placing a chair out on the edge of the claw overseeing the lake and a primitive fishing line. Others were more useful, digging out a portion of the house's foundation. However, he warned the dwarves not to put the house down beyond the foundation for now. "Human and Elven architecture isn't that much alike, and I'd rather us not have to do everything over if Tauriel doesn't like it."

Hearing that Tauriel had not come across the lake with the supplies annoyed Harry a bit, as it was a clear sign that Legolas had found something important for Tauriel to do rather than come and see him, which was, unfortunately, something Harry knew would happen. But he was hopeful that she would like the effort they were putting in.

With his magic and a little help from Bilbo on how to transplant things, several other trees were taken from the four edges of Mirkwood and brought across the lake. But even then, when Harry was standing on the western edge of the lake, Tauriel still made no appearance.

Legolas did and apologized to Harry, not having anticipated him coming over like this. "She led portions of the Unseen Host in an initial foray against the spiders last night and has yet to return. That work has grown in importance, unfortunately."

After the Elven Army had left, the spiders had spread their web into even more areas of the forest. And while the elves had mostly already retreated beyond the magical and school defenses of Taur-e-Ndaedelos, some hadn't. Many of those lone families had gone missing in the past few weeks. So Tauriel was leading bands of the Unseen Host to find and put these new holdings to the torch.

"The retreat into Taur-e-Ndaedelos was my father's injunction, but I will reverse it. Mirkwood will belong to the elves and the side of the light from one end to another if I can make it work."

"More power to you, Legolas, and I agree that sounds far more important than having her be available to meet me on a little surprise visit like this. Doesn't make me feel any better, though," Harry quipped.

Legolas smiled at that, seeing in Harry the same annoyance and well-controlled sadness at being parted that he saw in Tauriel occasionally. That was an early sign of the connection an

Elven couple created, that they simply did not wish to be apart from one another. Later on, after a century or more of being married allowed some of the passion time to cool, that would fade. But right now, this early in their courtship, it was an accepted sign of their closeness, Although Legolas had not thought to see it and Harry. *Then again, perhaps I should have, given what I know of his semi-Maiar state... and his past.*

“I promise you Tauriel will be free to see you if you and Bilbo start your trek to the Shire within the next few weeks, Harry. I’ll even pull her from the front lines to meet with you if I have to,” Legolas vowed.

Harry thanked him and then was on his way across the lake once more with the next round of supplies. That trip took a half-day, and planting the trees took the rest of that day and well into the night, but by the end of it, Harry had a small copse of large trees situated all around the granite outcropping and the foundation for the house. By that point, several elves Legolas had asked to join them were also at work. Indeed they preferred to work at night rather than during the day. Like all elves, the Sindar of Mirkwood revered the night and the stars.

The architects professed to be interested in the combination of stone and elven construction, as Harry had very firmly said that he needed access to the granite outcropping within the house and wanted a walkway to the top of it where he had situated his little fishing seat. But beyond that, so long as they showed him their designs, Harry was fine with letting them just have fun.

But not two days after that, Bilbo announced that the Dragon’s Taint was gone from the treasury room within Erebor.

“It’s gone. I no longer feel any darkness in the air, no sickness within the trees, nor the atmosphere. I recommend you leave the trees in place, but I know that’s a faint hope,” Bilbo said, shaking his head and munching on another mushroom.

He had sautéed large numbers of them and kept them in a pouch free to chew on throughout the day. Even so, Harry could still see the vestiges of the days of short rations on Bilbo’s face. And the nervous tic he had developed of absently stroking his belt pouch also remained.

“It’s done. I’ve also walked the humans and dwarves who want to take up farming through as much training as possible. And I feel the call of my hobbit hole, my friends. If it is possible, I would like to leave tomorrow,” Bilbo finished firmly.

Harry looked around at the others and saw that many were sad to see Bilbo go, but none said anything about more work for which they had to have his special skills. Indeed, keeping Bilbo longer would be more a sign of gross ingratitude than anything else.

“We knew that you would wish to home as possible, Bilbo. We’ve set aside supplies, Elven bread, bags of mushrooms, some salted meats and fish for both you and Harry. “But do

not think that you will be getting out of here with just that to your name!” Thorin said, slapping Bilbo on the shoulder.

Throughout the rest of the day, Thorin, with Fili’s help, worked his way through the treasury, deciding on what chests to give Harry and set aside in his house, what to give him now, and what to give Bilbo to take back to the Shire as his just due.

Through this effort, Harry was given a very good plate of scale mail, thicker and somewhat better than he had used during the battle. It was not magical, but it was dwarf make, came complete with a padded undershirt layer, which came complete with a cup for his boy bits, both things the other had lacked.

Harry was also given a helmet in the dwarven style, complete with a facemask that went over his nose and mouth. He was also given a shield and a spare sword, the same sword he had been using while training with Thorin over the past few weeks. In terms of money, Harry received several pouches of jewelry and gold to put into his bottomless pouch, a small amount from the majority that he had earned as part of the Company, and a large flask of Gloin’s best mead.

Bilbo had been given a small buckler, the kind that a dwarven child would use but which could cover his full arm and much of his chest on the hobbit. The mithril scale mail, a set given to a young dwarven prince in days gone by, was also gifted formally to Bilbo, although Thorin did not count it against the total amount owed their scout.

At that point, Bilbo tried to demure, but Thorin was having none of it. “I told you that I would make you the richest hobbit to ever exist, Bilbo. And I will not be called a liar!”

Bilbo was allowed to pick out another piece of jewelry whose amount would be taken out of the amount of gold that he would be given, and he chose a bracelet made of gold and intertwined pieces of diamond, each piece of diamond a different shape. “It would be a magnificent conversation piece over my fireplace, or perhaps, if the idea of taking a wife ever comes to me, an excellent bride’s gift.”

He was also gifted a pony, one of the ponies from the Iron Hills, and several large trunks of gold. No more jewelry, though. Gold was gold, whereas the price of jewels varied.

Beyond that, Harry was given a large silver bowl, the work of some silversmith that had remained unfinished before Smaug came. Its top was marked with gold filigree, but it was otherwise unadorned and had thick sides. Bilbo was somewhat flummoxed by that choice, although Thorin and one of his advisors, one of the metalsmiths who routinely worked with the iron Hill rune scribes, understood that Harry had plans of the magical type for that item.

Seeing Bilbo’s confusion, Harry explained that he could use runes and magic to help someone else see his memories. “I don’t know if it would work with someone who doesn’t have a magical core, but it would certainly work with elves, I think, and myself.”

“I will need to see this in person, Harry. But if it does work, on non-magicals, or if we dwarves have enough inherent magic ourselves because, that maybe my first commission to you once Erebor has become self-sufficient,” Thorin mused.

“I imagine it would be interesting. The memories of our times on the journey, especially against the trolls, would be fascinating to share,” Harry opined, and Thorin nodded while the rest of the gathered company, minus the missing Kili and Dwalin, gathered around them. None of the other dwarves or humans helped them as they gathered the material for Harry and Bilbo.

And that night, they all sat apart from the rest of the community, which had shrunk tremendously over the past few days. Humans had mostly situated themselves either back in Lake-town or in Dale. With the Taint officially gone, many dwarves had moved into the mountain. Harry was surprised to see this included the first large groups from the Iron Hills. Single dwarves or groups of men had come first, eager to join the effort to rebuild the ancient kingdom, but this was the first large clump, mostly menfolk, but carrying **large** amounts of supplies.

Regardless, for one last night, the majority of the Company came together to bid farewell to Bilbo and a momentary farewell to Harry. After all, none of the dwarves were under any illusion that Harry’s return to Erebor was set in stone. He may go to Mirkwood or go straight from the Shire to Lothlorien after consulting with Tauriel, although that would be a massive trek in distance and danger. Regardless, it may be some time before they see their human friend again.

But dwarves were not folk who saw leave-takings like this as a time to worry. And so they passed with jokes, tales, games of chance, and, at Fili’s assistance, an attempt by Harry to dance. “After all, Tauriel isn’t here, so you don’t have your lady love to concern yourself about being a fool in front of.”

Thorin frowned, then leaned over to Gloin. “How many drinks has my nephew had? That sentence was just wrong.”

“I will be cutting him off now, My Lord,” Gloin answered with a chuckle. A chuckle that became a guffaw as Fili, Harry, and Nori began an impromptu Jig with Bilbo counting the time alongside them.

Soon, the dwarves began to drop off into sleep, having put away quite a good deal of the so-called reserve that Gloin had been husbanding from his stock up to this point. Bilbo had retired before any of them, wrapping himself up in a cloak by the fire. Soon, only Thorin and Harry remained awake, staring at the entranceway into Erebor on the horizon.

For a time, they simply talked about the future, what Thorin wanted to build here, and what he wanted to do differently from his father or grandfather. How he wanted to not only have Erebor become the center of a reborn Longbeard nation but the center of dwarfdom in

Middle Earth. Harry answered with his own half-formed dreams for the future before turning the conversation to their journey up to this point.

Thorin replied to that, saying at the last that nothing that he would be building from now on could've been possible without Harry and Bilbo. "You joined only for friendship's sake, and yet despite all of the gold I have weighted you down with Harry Potter, remember that I am still deep in your debt. Remember that home we are building by the lake is yours. And it will remain so, no matter how long it takes you to come back here."

"Thank you for that, Thorin Oakenshield, and for your welcome when I appeared in front of you as I did," Harry answered, equally as formally. Although it was not his normal way of speaking for this moment required it almost. "I might only have truly become a part of this world when Arien and Aulë sang me into the song of Eru Ilúvatar. But you were the first to make it feel as if I could. And I won't forget that."

Thorin nodded, smacked his shoulder, and leaned over, whispering, "But Harry, um, could I ask if you could remember to pick up some of that Shire pipeweed for me when you are there?"

The serious moment passed, and Harry and Thorin exchanged another laugh before leaning their heads back and staring up at the stars until they slowly fell asleep.

The next morning, the remaining members of the Company walked with Harry and Bilbo throughout the morning and afternoon down to Long Lake, where they found a boat waiting for them. Each gave personal farewells to the hobbit and human, ending with a back slap from Thorin to Bilbo as he helped Bilbo and his pony out onto the boat.

The dwarves remained as the boat polled out, watching until it was almost out of sight before Thorin slapped his hands together and ordered them all back to Erebor. There was a lot more work to be done.

OOOOOOO

A week later, Bilbo and Harry stood on the Eastern Road, staring into Mirkwood. "Well, Bilbo, can you sense anything within?"

"I cannot. You?" Bilbo asked, cocking his head to one side from the saddle of his pony.

"No. I can't feel anything, fair nor fowl," Harry quipped before chuckling. "And I suppose that is the best we will get."

"I would not say that," Tauriel announced, coming out from between the trees to one side of the arch of trees over the Eastern Road as it entered Mirkwood. "Although I would not count myself overly fair, I would certainly say I'm not fowl..." She began and then found herself in Harry's arms, lifted off her feet.

She laughed and hugged him across the shoulders and head, leaning down to kiss his forehead. "I have missed you as well, my Harry," she breathed.

Harry set her down and, mindful of Bilbo nearby, simply gave her a kiss on the cheek, but his eyes smoldered, and Tauriel found her pulse racing at that, a slight flush coming to her cheeks. "Perhaps later, my lady, I can show you how a human lover, separated for so many days, greets his lady."

Tauriel again laughed, but it was a breathless one, and she quickly turned away from that look, unwilling to follow up on it with Bilbo so nearby. She held out her hand as she greeted the young hobbits, trying not to notice his smirk. She then held up a hand to his pony, which greeted her as if she was a lifelong friend, nuzzling into her hand chuffing softly. Such was the way of elves with all good beasts.

"Come, I will guide you through the forest. Legolas has removed the spells on the path, and the way is clear for now."

"He removed them? I take it Legolas could not find a way to cleanse them?" Harry asked, taking Tauriel's arm with his own, which she leaned into gladly.

"Given how much trouble we had with Smaug's Taint, I can't imagine that the Great Enemy's corruption is any easier to get rid of, especially not in an actual magical working rather than the land itself," Bilbo said sadly.

"True enough. Legolas was able to dissipate the magic, but he is having a hard time discerning how to emplace new spells. I regret to say my own attention has been on the campaign against the spiders." Tauriel explained how the elves had basically been forced to reclaim the majority of Mirkwood, moving out from Taur-e-Ndaedelos in every direction, something Legolas had hinted at with Harry but had not gone into much detail on.

"How the spiders knew that our Unseen Host was gone, we know not. But in the times since Thranduil led our forces out from the forest, they have spread dramatically. Their numbers have not increased over much so far as we have seen. But the number of dens, traps and web-infested forest areas has spread tremendously. Burning them out has been difficult, made worse by the spiders being as intelligent as they are."

"Have you lost anyone?" Harry asked solicitously.

"Not under my command, no. The day after we returned, a band of six hunters was lost. The next, a pair of foolish young elven children who somehow got away from their parents and out into the forest were also taken and..." She shook her head slightly. "We found their desiccated remains within a night of our return. We have not lost anyone since, although there have been some close calls. Anger for that act runs very deep within the expanded Unseen Host."

Harry winced at that. Now he did not want to ask if Tauriel would be able to join him and Bilbo on the trip to the Shire. If this campaign was ongoing, then Tauriel was taking time away from her duties now, as Legolas had said he would allow, to meet with Harry like this.

“But enough about me and about our campaign against the spiders. Surely you have better news from Erebor and Dale.” Tauriel forcefully changed the subject, looking at her two companions expectantly.

“There were a few days there were touch and go thanks to our lack of supplies, but we got through it, thanks partly to the supplies Lord Legolas sent us.”

“And the mushrooms of the mountain!” Bilbo exclaimed, laughing while Tauriel looked at him in confusion. The hobbit explained in detail, by the end of which Tauriel was giving Harry a most speaking glance.

“A spell that makes stone transparent? And how much of your magic did that drain from you?”

“In a set area, and with a set amount of power needed, yes. It hadn’t reverted by the time we were getting ready to leave. So hopefully, it is a permanent change. I know Thorin wanted to ask me to do something similar over the other farms, but we hadn’t gotten around to it by the time Bilbo here told us that the Taint was gone, and he wished to return home.”

“I can understand that sentiment well enough, although that makes the question of where home might be for me at the present moment,” Tauriel murmured, shooting a sideways glance at Harry.

He smiled tenderly at that, his arm moving from holding her own to around Tauriel’s waist as they walked alongside Bilbo on his pony. “I rather think that eventually, home will be wherever the other one is for the two of us. But the dwarves wished to repay me for the work with the farm and have actually begun to put together a house for us on the lake like you said you wanted.”

Tauriel’s eyes widened at that, and she exclaimed, “Legolas! So sneaky, my friend. I’d wondered why he had requested two of our architects volunteer to work among humans and dwarves for a time. I was there when he called for volunteers, and I never put it together.”

Harry chuckled at that, and Bilbo described the house, which sounded interesting enough already to Tauriel, even before most of the elven touches were added. From there, she began to ply them with questions about what else had been going on, and by the time they camped for the night, she was shaking her head in shock. Say what you would about the younger races, but dwarves and humans alike had a energy and urge to **do** that few elves could match.

Harry and Tauriel spent some time alone that night, which, despite Harry's early suggestion, they spent mostly talking. Cuddling, however, well, cuddling was amazing, and the few kisses and nuzzles they shared just added to it.

It was as if a weight neither had noticed had disappeared, and they simply reveled in one another's sheer presence without the need for more. It was odd and hadn't been what Harry had thought would happen, but he deeply enjoyed it all the same.

Tauriel could have easily run the entire route but across Mirkwood on the Eastern Road within a day and a half. Bilbo's pony was not made for great speed, even with Harry having used spells to lighten his load every day of their journey. And while Harry had endurance to spare, even he couldn't have kept up with Tauriel on the run.

Still, Harry and Bilbo's presence made the trip extremely pleasant.

By the end of the second day, they came upon the remnants of where the party had ventured off the path and were subsequently ambushed by the spiders. Evidence of the fight was still there in the form of a few burned trees and a lot of kicked-up ground, although a new set of leaves had fallen over most of it. The spiders' corpses were also mostly gone. Scavengers of all sorts had seen to that.

"Strange to think that without the spiders attacking, we might never have met," Harry murmured, smirking slightly as he leaned the side of his head against Tauriel's, their fingers entwined.

"I rather think that we would have eventually met, one way or another. If not on the trail, then when my king reacted to news of the dragon's death," Tauriel answered dryly, shaking her head. "Looking back, I wasn't as polite to you as I should've been, and I apologize for that."

"Being polite while still trying to incarcerate me would've been a very thin line to walk anyway. And I like to think that everything between the two of us worked out in the end."

Tauriel chuckled at that and leaned deeper into Harry's side, his arms going around her waist, one hand falling to her thigh right where her skirt ended, causing a faint shiver through her body. Normally, such touches would not occur until several months or even a year into the courtship between two elves. But Tauriel was more than willing to allow it despite that. *After all, allowances must be made for different races' cultural differences*, she thought virtuously.

Bilbo said nothing, turning to look deeper into the forest. "I remember trailing after you all was terrifying at first. But I cannot say that my trial was near what my companions faced once we arrived in Taur-e Ndaedelos."

"Yes! I have told many of my fellow rangers that tale, and few could believe it that even a single individual could infiltrate our city like that and remain undetected for so long. It is a

lesson in humility that I think many an elven hunter, especially within Mirkwood, can benefit from," Tauriel drawled.

"Including yourself," Harry teased, only to get a firm nod in reply, which served as a reminder that his lady friend was not human. Any human woman who had heard that kind of quip would probably have elbowed him in the side at the very least, but Tauriel simply took it for granted that yes, she too had needed such a lesson, a type of self-reflection that few humans would have admitted to. And that he wasn't trying to have fun at her expense, or if it did, the truth was more important.

Bilbo simply chuckled, saying nothing about how he did it, although he wondered once more if he should tell Harry about his ring. But he decided not to. Gandalf had asked him about it once, and Bilbo had unloaded the tale on him. How Bilbo had found the ring deep underground, how Gollum had come after him, found him, and would have slain Bilbo for the supposed 'theft' of his precious. How Bilbo had nearly cried at the necessity of killing the poor creature and then later been forced to use it to follow the elves into the city. After that, he switched to Harry's invisibility cloak simply because he could cover other items with the cloak.

Gandalf had been intrigued, but when Bilbo, once more grieving at the memory of slaying Gollum with a stone, had offered to give him the ring, Gandalf had evinced no interest in it, saying that it had come into Bilbo's hands and that he had made good use of it so far. It seemingly had no other powers other than invisibility, so Gandalf was perfectly willing to let Bilbo keep it.

Yet now, Bilbo found himself unwilling to speak about it with Harry. *No, Gandalf knowing about it is enough. He did say it was mine, after all.*

By the end of the third day, they came upon the river which had nearly caused them so much trouble the first time through. And here, the feelings of depression, being closed in, being cut off from the sun, and everything good that the Company had felt passing here the first time was still here.

Bilbo shivered, taking a few steps backward as that feeling hit him, before resolutely staring at the river, not taking another step, although his nervous tic was back again. "Why does the river still feel as sick as the rest of the trail was before?"

"We don't know," Tauriel sighed, looking over to where Harry was staring grim-faced at the river, her hands on the pony's side, holding it still through that touch. "For some reason, the river still retains the darkness from the Great Enemy. It isn't as pointed or as powerful as it had been in the past, but it is still here. Legolas has attempted to use his new connection to the land in this area to get rid of it, but it doesn't work."

"The river's source itself must be poisoned in some fashion," Harry mused, looking at Tauriel thoughtfully. She nodded, indicating that the elves had realized that but were uncertain about what to do about it.

Turning back to the river, Harry shrugged his shoulders and, with a wave of his hand, pulled the boat from the other side towards them through the river. With the boat in the air, Harry paused, staring at the large hole near the front of the vessel. "I take it that replacing the riverboat here never occurred to anyone?"

Tauriel too looked at the boat, then sighed. "No. We knew of the corruption within the river, but the individuals we sent down here to check on it neglected to mention the boat."

"All those in favor of not touching the corrupted water, say aye?" Harry quipped, shaking his head and letting his magic fade on the boat. When the others all shook their heads, he nodded and levitated the pony and Bilbo one after another across the river. The pony's furiously cantering legs caused Harry to laugh, but he held the spells until they were both on the other side of the river, after which he sat down in the boat and gestured for Tauriel to join him. "Would you like to take a little boat trip with me, Tauriel?"

Realizing what Harry had in mind, Tauriel smiled faintly, got into the boat but did not sit across from him. Instead, she sat in front of him and leaned herself back against his chest, wiggling this way and that until she was comfortable. She then nodded up at him, and Harry, with one arm around her waist, placed his other hand on the side of the small boat and magically lifted it into the air.

Directing the boat across was tougher, and he had to eventually lean over the side to direct them, which caused Tauriel to clutch at the sides of the boat since it nearly toppled them over. But eventually, they stopped down on the other side of the river.

There Bilbo clapped dramatically for them, his eyes narrowed and locked on Harry. "And if you ever attempt to do that to me again, Harry Potter, I will throw up on you, I swear I will!"

Harry laughed, and leaving the boat there, the trio set off once more, with Bilbo again on the back of his pony. And two days later, they came out of the other side of Mirkwood.

"If you head west and north of here into the hills, you will run into the edge of Beorn's territory. He should know the best route through the mountains, as he and the band of dwarves who arrived with him have been exploring them of late. They've reported to us occasionally about small bands of goblins they ambushed, but the goblins' strength in the Misty Mountains has been smashed in the Battle of the Lonely Mountain," Tauriel said slowly, staring from the world beyond Mirkwood and then back to Harry.

The two of them had very carefully not talked about if Tauriel would be able to come with Harry on this journey, and looking at Tauriel now, Harry knew she wouldn't. Still, it had to be asked. "You're not free to come with us, are you?"

Tauriel shook her head. "No, I am not. I do not feel right leaving the Unseen Host under the command of another against the spiders. I'm sorry, Harry, but I can't just walk away from that responsibility, not when I pushed for years for us to attack them."

Harry nodded, sighing faintly. "I saw that coming, unfortunately. Still, the time it takes me to get Bilbo home from here will at least allow me to finish work on the Pensieve before we see one another again. I still wish to show you some music from my old home, Tauriel."

Tauriel replied that that would be nice, and Harry turned to Bilbo. "Would you mind going ahead for a bit Bilbo? I'll catch up."

Nodding, Bilbo held out a hand towards Tauriel, who found herself surprised and pulled into a sideways hug by the hobbit where he sat on his pony. "Be well and take care of yourself, Tauriel! Sometime in the future, I would like both of you to stop by my home in the Shire. If you do, I will put on such a welcome that even an elf such as yourself will be in awe!"

"That sounds lovely, friend Bilbo, and I will hold you to it," Tauriel smiled, gently hugged the hobbit in turn, and then stepped back.

The pony and its rider cantered away for a few moments, and Harry and Tauriel stepped back into Mirkwood, putting off few trees between themselves and Bilbo for the moment. When they did, Tauriel's eyes widened as she felt her back gently pressed against the tree. Harry kept her there for a moment, his forehead pressing against hers, asking for permission with his eyes.

Tauriel bit her lip, but she also nodded, and he turned his head just enough. Then they were kissing tenderly but also very passionately, as Harry's arms wound between the bark of the tree and Tauriel's body, pulling her tighter against him. Tauriel responded, feeling emotions and desires within her that she had never felt before, as she reflected on the difference between flirting between elves and the flirting of humans.

Flirting between elves was characterized by talking, singing, admiring one another, writing couplets. Perhaps a dinner or two that the couple worked on together and a walk in the starlight holding arms. But Tauriel reflected that Harry and she had done at the holding arms in the starlight bit, and they had done quite a lot of talking ever since they'd met. *And I very much doubt that Harry will ever write a couplet or a song about me.*

In contrast, flirting was a far more primal thing with humans, and she decided once more that she liked it. Although she also liked that Harry made no effort to deepen the kiss or open his mouth until she did. It was a wordless pledge that Harry would let her set the pace and not push.

Not until I decide I want him to anyway, she thought. With that, Tauriel opened her mouth, and her tongue gently licked out, flicking against Harry's for just a second before Harry's mouth opened in turn.

The kiss deepened as their tongues began to duel in her mouth, and Tauriel actually let loose a little moan. Then as air became necessary, they slowly pulled away from one another.

How long they stood there, their foreheads pressed against one another, staring into one another's eyes, Harry and Tauriel would never recall. But eventually, Harry pulled away,

stepping back although his hands were still on Tauriel's shoulders. "Multiply Bilbo's worry for you by about ten, Tauriel. When I come back this way for you, and I **will** before heading down to Lothlorien, I want you in one piece."

"That is my concern for you as well, Harry. The power of the Great Enemy might be broken in the Misty Mountains, but who knows what has occurred beyond the edge of Rivendell and the Shire? You also may be in danger. And I want to see you just as hale and hearty as you are now when you return to me."

The two exchanged another tender kiss. Then, Tauriel gently rotated them before slowly pulling away from Harry, gesturing over his shoulder towards the open lands beyond Mirkwood. "Go, or Bilbo will be too far away for you to catch up. I will be here when you come back."

With a final kiss, Harry nodded and released Tauriel, taking a few steps back, before with a spring in his step, racing after Bilbo. Tauriel watched him go until he was out of sight, then turned away, heading deeper into Mirkwood. For now, at least, duty had to come before pleasure.

Bilbo had not gone very far when Harry caught up with them, and he looked at the human sympathetically, reaching out a hand in claspng forearms with Harry. "You know, I could perhaps get at least to Rivendell on my own. Or at the least with Beorn's help."

"No, Bilbo, I gave Gandalf my word of honor that I would see you home. And I will. Tauriel and I have all the time in the world, remember? Being apart again for a time is annoying, but nothing that we can't deal with. Now come on, we're losing daylight. I'd like to be at Beorn's before night falls."

End Chapter

Okay, so this wasn't the chapter I initially thought it would be. You all have *Beleriond* and a point he made to me to blame for that. This being that a certain long-shanked individual is 11 at this time! And how fun would it be to introduce Harry to another 11-year-old child who might one day have the world's weight on his shoulders? That plot point and the need for food – and showing how Erebor and Dale claw their way back to life – made me decide to end the chapter here rather than push it to the Shire. Still, despite it not being quite what was advertised, I hope you all enjoyed it!