

Not named Tolkien or Rowling.

Here, at last, is the next chapter of Fate Touched. This story will return in the small story poll for July and will stay there until we are finished with *The Hobbit* stuff, after which, depending on what other stories I have going, it might be put on hiatus. Doubtful, but we will see. I would like to finish *Semblance of Hope* and *Making Waves* at the very least this year.

Stallion of the Line, for those who follow it, is still with Tomon. As he has been a major help with that story going forward, I am not willing to post the chapter without his having looked at it.

No one has edited this chapter but Grammarly and I. Sorry, folks, but while I suppose I could have gotten the first half of this chapter out to an editor this month, I just forgot the need to do so. This month has been extremely hectic at intervals, and RL was both atrocious and unpredictable.

Despite that, I hope you all enjoy it!

Chapter 12: Smaug

"I tell you, I am more than capable of walking," Harry grumbled as he was helped up onto the donkey for the second day of their trek out from Lake-town.

"And I am telling you you aren't!" Oin said, shaking his head. "You don't see Balin or me arguing." The two of them used the second donkey, switching off every few hours. The two old dwarves themselves had been rather more battered during the trip downriver than they had been willing to admit.

"To put it bluntly, neither of you are arguing with being forced to use the donkeys because you are of an elderly persuasion. The last time I checked, I wasn't," Harry retorted dryly.

That won a round of laughter from the dwarves, but Bilbo held up his hand, offering, "If Harry does not want to be upon his donkey, I would cheerfully change positions with them."

"Ha!" Thorin chuckled. "Master Baggins, we could put both of you on that donkey, and it would probably still count it as a very good day. But no, Harry. You'll stay up there until Oin says you are healed. I want you at your best when we get to the mountain."

Harry scowled at his friend. "I would've thought that you would begrudge the time my healing from this leg wound is taking from our sword lessons." They'd continued those here and there on their journey, and Harry knew that Thorin was still extremely disdainful of Harry's skill with the blade.

"I do, and when you are better, trust me that I will work you hard to make up for it," Thorin said, causing Dwalin to bark a crack of laughter and for Fili and Kili to shake their heads in commiseration.

"You're in for it, Harry. Best you rest up while you can. My uncle's idea of training hard makes even most dwarves balk," Kili intoned dramatically, patting Harry on his uninjured thigh as he passed by, heading to the front of the column. With his archery skills, he routinely moved ahead of the rest of the dwarves, while Bilbo and Fili were at the back of the column, doing what they could to remove any trace of the dwarves' passage. Even though they had defeated the band of orcs and goblins following them, Thorin was unwilling to take the chance that another similar band was out there.

"I will cheerfully take up that challenge if I can stand on my own two feet rather than sit on the back of this admittedly robust animal," Harry replied dryly, patting the donkey on the neck. "If I spend any more time up here, you'll simply be exchanging the wound in my leg for another covering the entirety of my ass!"

Once more, laughter came from all of the dwarves nearby who appreciated humor like that, and on the march towards the Lonely Mountain and their former homes, needed it sorely. Harry had noticed since leaving Lake-town that one or two of the dwarves occasionally would stop their trek, staring ahead of them at the mountain as if mesmerized. But when Harry passed Gloin, he realized that mesmerized wasn't quite the right word. Haunted fit better.

Seeming to have noticed the same thing, Bilbo had taken it upon himself to talk to anyone who would listen about his teenage years, when he and his friends had engaged in pranks and various adventures to keep the dwarves' morale up. Harry had been particularly interested in tales that touched on the Brandybuck river and the lands next to the Old Forest, and now as they began their second day out from Lake-town, he asked for more tales about the forest itself. "Have you ever been inside?"

"Personally, no, although perhaps when I return, I might explore within. After this journey, tales of the Old Forest hold scant fear." Bilbo chuckled, shaking his head, before smirking slyly up at Harry. "Although why the interest in the Old Forest, are you thinking of exploring its depths with a certain someone?"

"Ha! That just proves there something wrong with your head Harry!" Bofur shouted from nearby, ducking between Balin and Harry's donkeys, grinning up at the human before moving to the other side of the column and reaching for a series of berries he had spotted. "The only green thing that should ever be part of any courtship are emeralds!"

"That shows what you dwarves know about it," Bilbo scoffed, grabbing the dwarf's hand before he could touch the berries. "And I will be very careful picking those. The leaves of that particular bush tend to cause itching for quite some time." He then reached forward, being extremely careful to pluck at the various berries himself and half of them to the dwarf. "Even if the berries are quite tasty."

"I keep telling you that Tauriel and I are not involved. There is no courtship going on." Harry knew he was blushing a bit and didn't like it or the tone of pout he heard in his voice just now. "We're simply friends, that's all, which is quite odd enough given everything that occurred since we all met the elves of Mirkwood."

"True enough, my lad, but through all of that, your and Tauriel's interactions proved that you are both attracted to one another to anyone with eyes to see," Balin said from behind Harry, causing him to turn in the saddle to give the older dwarf a look of betrayal. But Balin simply shook his head with a chuckle. "Such things should be grasped, my lad, not avoided. We dwarves know that all too well. I know you still have some... issues inside your head, and I know you think that Tauriel's loyalty to her king will get in the way. But from what I saw, that last at least is not insurmountable. And the issues in your head seem to be fading out as we have traveled too."

"I am a human. She's Elvish. Aren't there are a lot of old cautionary tales and taboos against that kind of union?"

“No taboo. To have become a taboo, it would have to have occurred often enough to be even seen as possible, which it hasn’t.” Balin shook his head. “Indeed, I can only think of one union of man and woman, and that’s the one that resulted in Elrond, eventually.”

You’re talking about Luthien Tinuviel and Beren,” Bilbo said, and all the dwarves turned to him in surprise. They had forgotten since leaving Elrond’s hall that Bilbo was quite incredibly well-read, especially in terms of the history of elvenkind. That was a tale that few dwarves knew. “And while their union might’ve been cursed, it was not cursed by the two themselves, Harry. It is known that they had many happy years together once given their second life.”

There was some grumbling at that from the older, more learned dwarves since during that second life was when dwarves had entered the tale of Beren.

One of the Silmarils, the same Beren and Luthien had stolen from Morgoth, had been placed in the necklace of Nauglamir, constructed by the dwarves. But the Silmaril madness had driven the dwarves to try and claim it, killing the king and plunging Doriath and the dwarven nation of Nogrod into a bloody war which ended in the destruction of Doriath. Beren had come upon the dwarves with a force of men while the dwarves had been returning home. Beren then challenged and killed their king in single combat before the rest of the host was annihilated by Ents.

Indeed, so complete had that destruction been that it was only through the tales of elves that the totality was known. Because of that, many dwarves, those who knew the tale at all, disputed the idea that they had been the villains in the sack of Doriath.

Thorin did not. As much as he loathed most elves, he knew that magic like the Silmarils was beyond his people’s ability to cope with. So he quickly changed the topic. “Enough of that. Now is not the time for such dark tales. Bilbo, tell us more of the Old Forest.” His lips twitched. “We will leave off teasing Harry about his love life for now.” His gaze then twitched over to his nephews. “After all, at least he **has** a love life, which is more than I could say for some dwarves here whose prospects should have enabled them to start attracting a dam if not for their attitudes. Or do you call my sister, your mother, a liar?”

Fili blushed rosily and quickly ducked under one of the donkeys, heading towards the back of the column. At the same time, his brother just as quickly continued his aborted journey to the front of the column.

Despite a rueful twist to his lips, Harry nodded his head towards Thorin in an abbreviated thanks, knowing that the dwarves would set in on him again. With the shadow of the mountain looming ever larger as they continue towards it, all of them were more than happy to find what pleasure they could at poking fun at him or Bilbo or one another. But that was all right with Harry. It wasn’t the first time he’d been made fun of. *And maybe they have a point about Tauriel anyway, much as I don’t want to think about it until Smaug’s dealt with.*

Bilbo’s tales about the Old Forest took them meandering through the various interactions the Hobbits had with it and, of course, its denizens, as well as the one time they’d been forced to fight off a wolf rider pack, intent on ravaging the Shire coming over the frozen Brandybuck. That garnered a lot of interest from the dwarves, although what Harry was most interested in were Bilbo’s tales which touched

on the old man of the forest, Tom Bombadil. Harry remembered that Gandalf had mentioned him in passing when they had spoken that night in the Shire, and now he asked Bilbo what he made of him.

Bilbo frowned thoughtfully, scratching at his hair for a moment, noting that he needed to get a haircut at some point. *Alas, I'm not about to trust any of the dwarves, except for perhaps Fili, with that task, and only then at great need.* Only Thorin and Fili seemed to take much interest in their looks normally, and Thorin preferred a shaggier, if somehow still authoritative, appearance than Bilbo was comfortable with. "I don't rightly know I've heard many a tale about him, and yet the truth is often elusive."

"As is Tom himself!" The hobbit laughed, shaking his head. "He might look human, but I rather doubt he is. Considering that none of the tales have ever mentioned any aging. My personal theory is that he is a Maiar of Yavanna who has taken up residence in the Old Forest to help control the fell trees there."

"Do they truly move?" Ori asked. "That sounds kind of terrifying!"

"Like the old tales about the tree folk," Dori agreed. While few knew about how they had destroyed Nogrod's army, Ents were still something of a social nightmare to dwarves.

"I've heard of them, Ents," Harry murmured.

"So have I, and not just in a tale or two here and there. But no, these are most definitely trees. They don't communicate with one another verbally as the tree folk was supposed to, and they certainly don't physically attack most of the time."

"Which Ents certainly would," Bombur muttered, shivering. The idea of moving trees was just **wrong!** *Lumber shouldn't have an opinion of if it's time to be chopped.*

"Exactly. No, these are trees, and they only move when they are not being looked at. They block trails, crowd the walls, grow over the top of it, try to undermine it. According to the Brandybucks, the Withywindle is the center of it all, but as I said, old Tom Bombadil seems to be able to control them, or scare them, anyway."

Harry nodded and was about to say something when he noticed Bifur had stopped, staring ahead of them, his eyes shadowed and lost. He sighed and reached out from the saddle, tapping the dwarf on the head. When Bifur turned to look at them, Harry gave him a concerned, commiserating glance, and Bifur nodded back, shaking his head once before moving along the column, resolutely keeping his eyes away from a boulder set to one side of the route that they were following towards the distant mountain as if trying to keep memory at bay.

As the day continued and as the next day dawned, the morose, withdrawn attitude of the dwarves began to become more and more prominent. Even Harry and Bilbo's continued efforts to take their minds off of the Lonely Mountain and what they would find within began to fail, the dwarves just not taking part in the conversation any longer outside of Fili, Kili and Ori, who could not remember anything of the mountain, not having been born there. But eventually, those three too fell silent, affected by the gloomy, withdrawn air of the others.

Eventually, their attitude even began to affect Bilbo, as he paused one day, staring around him, then moving away from the others, working his toes into the soil for a moment before kneeling down and doing the same with his hands. "There was a farm here," he murmured, staring around them.

Harry frowned, looking around himself, but couldn't see it. All Harry could see was a few blackened trees and a small, cleared area with nothing within it. Not even one stone on another.

"Aye, there was. And more than one. When most humans and even elves think of dwarven nations, they always think in terms of our tunnels, our underground cities. And while it's true that most dwarves would prefer to 'sleep with a real roof over our heads' as it's said, even dwarves need the outside world for food. Most of our food admittedly came from trade with Dale, but there were a few things that we grew on her own, and we always had enough farms of our own just in case," Balin answered a little bit happier than he had a second ago, eager to actually talk about their ancient nation without touching upon its fall.

"I remember of a morning, watching from my guard post as the farmers left Erebor to head to their steadings," Dwalin opined. "A few of them would start a singing chant. I remember a few of the words even now. 'For the sun has risen, and we must go to work the soil, for food on the plate is as good as a ring on the finger'."

For some reason, that caused Bilbo to glance away even as he rejoined them, but his voice was normal as he replied. "Some of this soil could still be usable right away. Something to think about. But tell us more about your people, Balin. Not their end, but your own lives here. What was it like growing up in Erebor?"

From then on, one or the other of the dwarves would speak, talking about the area around the mountain and a small childhood adventure they had. Many of those ended with "and when my father caught me, he thrashed me, but it was worth it in the end!" It appeared as if having teenage adventures was something hobbits and the dwarves had in common, even if the type of adventure varied wildly. Bilbo's adventures mostly dealt with sneaking up on people, playing small pranks, and stealing mushrooms. The dwarves spoke of campouts in the woods, stealing away real weapons to play fight with, and then wrestling matches whose violence always got out of hand to the point an adult was called for.

As they traveled on that third day, the hills became steeper, leading up into the Lonely Mountain's side. The dwarves now were past their grief stage. They were still grim but no longer seeming to have moments of complete disconnect. Yet oddly, Bilbo began to exhibit much the same attitude.

Harry looked at him and reached down from the saddle, grabbing at his shoulder once when Bilbo seemed almost to be about to run into the rear of the other donkey. "Ho there, Bilbo, you've been looking out of it all day. What's wrong?"

Bilbo looked up at him, one eyebrow rising in question. "Surely you can feel it too. You felt it when we reached Mirkwood."

His brows furrowing, Harry looked around them, then slowly shook his head. "I can't sense anything yet, Bilbo. But you are certain there is the same kind of corrupting touch on the land here?"

“Not quite. It is there within the ground, something weaker than Mirkwood. It doesn’t affect the trees or other growing things, nor the birds and the air as it did in Mirkwood. A lesser corruption but still something there, something foul I can feel through my toes.”

Thorin had been silent most of the day, staring ahead of him like a man possessed. Now hearing Bilbo speak like that, he seemed to come out of it, moving back to Bilbo and Harry from where he had been talking to Balin, who was riding ahead of Harry today rather than behind. He looked at Harry, then said slowly, “Elrond, he mentioned something. The dragon’s taint. Do you think, Master Baggins, that you can fight this whatever it is now that you have felt it for yourself?”

“If it is in the soil, yes,” Bilbo answered firmly. “With the blessings of Yavanna and my own knowledge of the soil, I can safely say that. Whether or not I can do it to something else, something the Dragon has touched, for example...”

“Like gold,” Harry interjected, unwilling to dance around the issue like Bilbo was.

“Um, yes, that. I don’t know yet. I think a tree perhaps, a new sapling placed nearby and blessed to Yavanna and your Aulë would work. Considering that Erebor is a dwarven nation, calling upon the smith for aid would no doubt help.”

“Here, here, Mr. Baggins!” Thorin said, reaching out to clasp Bilbo on the shoulder, nodding his head up to Harry as well. “Thank you for that. Knowing that there is indeed something of a taint from the dragons staying in our city will help all of us fight the influence of it, I think.”

“So would humor,” Harry drawled, waving his hand towards Thorin.

Unlike the elves Harry had previously used this particular trick on, Thorin had no magical sense of his own. The first he realized what Harry had done was when Nori, walking ahead of them, chanced to glance back and then promptly began to heal over in laughter, shouting out “polka dots! I never would’ve thought you polka dots fan Thorin!”

“What?” Thorin looks down at himself and then growled in anger as he saw that he was indeed dressed now entirely in white, with red and purple polka dots. Even his beard had changed, matching the colors of the rest of his clothing so well that it almost blended in, a travesty for any dwarf. “Remove this at once, Harry!”

“The moment you acknowledge that you would find it funny if it was on anyone else, I will remove it,” Harry promised.

With the snickers and outright guffaws of his fellows, Thorin had to concede the point, looking down at himself, letting out a snort. “Very well, I do acknowledge,” he said formally, his eyes twinkling dangerously. “Although, I will warn you, Harry. Oin did say you were but another day away from being let off that donkey. And you have been complaining all over about not getting enough exercise. I think I can give my fellow dwarves a laugh without being the specific laughingstock of it...”

Harry, however, simply grinned down at him. “When the time comes, I’ll take my lumps with good cheer. Until then, all hail Thorin Oakenshield, Lord of polka dots!”

“All hail!” Said more than one dwarf until Thorin charged Gloin, who was the nearest dwarf, grabbing him up by the waist and tossing him to the ground shouting out about how he still could

remember how to wrestle with the best of them. “If you want to laugh, you had best be prepared to pay for it!”

The next day, Harry was sore for an entirely new reason, as indeed, Oin had given the okay for him to start walking again. Thorin had instantly grasped with both hands and put Harry through the wringer, pushing him as hard as he could to basically restart his sword training, calling a few of the other dwarves to help.

Harry hadn’t taken this lying down. Instead, he had tossed Bilbo and a few of the others under the bus with him. “I’m not going to do this alone! There are others here who could benefit from actual weapons training, not just me. Bilbo, for one, Ori, Nori, Dori and Bombur could use some training as well.”

Most of those named protested, saying that they had gotten this far and didn’t need any training. Thorin and Dwalin disagreed, however, and soon had most of the dwarves began training every night, going through specific moves with swords, axes or warhammer, while Kili and Fili kept watch. None of this would be much use against Smaug, admittedly, but the training might come in use later.

Bilbo, too was roped into things, although in his case, he was turned over to Balin, who, despite his reluctance to fight, was the third-best swordsman among the dwarves and the only one who used anything that could be called a short sword. Of course, a short sword for the dwarf was still a longsword for a hobbit, but he could teach Bilbo some exercises at least.

Still, despite his soreness, Harry was happy to be on his feet.

That feeling stayed with him for half that day until the trail began to become even steeper than it had been, the side of the mountain looming above them. It didn’t happen smoothly at all, as had been the case when they had entered the mountain range. No, here, hills became mountain very suddenly, the entire environment around them changing as stone replaced scattered shrub and forest and the hill they were on led into a massive cliff face.

Harry stared upward, and upwards still more, shaking his head slowly as he took in the sheer immensity of the Lonely Mountain. “I thought I was prepared for this, from your tales about how the land around the Lonely Mountain changed. But that is entirely different from standing at the bottom of this thing! I feel dwarfed.”

“Poor choice of words there, Harry,” Bilbo muttered, as the dwarves all groaned, and Dwalin went so far as to smack Harry on the back so powerfully that he caused the human to stumble forward a few steps. “Yet I agree with the sentiment.”

Since the trail ahead of them ended here, Thorin led them to the east, knowing the roughly on which side of the mountain they would find their entrance. Finding the trail that led upwards took Thorin and Balin some time despite that start, but eventually, they found a small, barely passable ‘trail’ leading upward. Here, they had to go in single file, and very slowly and more often than not, their left sides were completely open to a daunting drop off the mountain.

Because of this, and because of the difficulty of the trail, and occasionally the need to set up ropes and take breaks during the day, their speed dropped dramatically. And no more could they put

out cook fires either. There just wasn't enough space for it on the trail and no wood. All food was now eaten cold and in smaller lots.

Yet as they did, and as Thorin started to search for the hidden door, Harry turned his mind to other matters. That evening he started to create small, scent-masking runic arrays. He and Bilbo had experimented with Bilbo's herbal concoction and decided it didn't work well enough to put their lives on the line with it. The herbs would still prove useful, but not enough.

Thus the runic arrays and Notice-me-Not arrays would hopefully keep them all from being spotted right away from the Dragon. Although Harry didn't know if they would continue to work once the dragon became aware of them since no one could give him a proper answer as to how magical a creature the dragon was. Considering it was a giant fire-breathing lizard that flew, Harry considered that the fact it was magical in the first place was pretty obvious. The question was, could it detect magic.

The dwarves quickly noticed what he was doing. "What is that you're working on now, Harry?" Fili asked, sitting beside Harry on the trail. "That doesn't look like the same configuration you've been doing the past few nights." Harry had begun to create Notice Me Not arrays when they left Lake-town.

"It isn't. The others are to make people not notice the user. This is to make your scent disappear, which isn't a sense that most people who use the first type of array tend to think of. The only problem is, I have no idea how to test it. None of us have the same level of knows that even a wolf might, let alone a dragon."

"That's simple enough," Dwalin snorted, looking over at Ori past his brother Dori. "You, you are famous for making stink bombs at one point, weren't you? Make a few, toss them down the trail and then have Harry set this rune stone in the middle of them."

"That isn't the aspect I want to test. I am perfectly capable of using a spell to create a smell so strong it would rot your nose off, Dwalin. No, it is hiding our scents from a more powerful nose than we have access to," Harry answered to many chuckles.

"I thought we were all still hoping that Smaug would be dead," Bofur's voice came from somewhere around a twist in the trail, his tone confused. "Why are you making those Harry before we can even figure out if he's alive or dead. Seems a lot of effort."

"It's always better to be prepared rather than scramble after the fact," Gloin intoned from the same direction. "Do you have any other ideas, Harry?"

Harry looked over at Thorin over Fili's head. The two of them had talked about Smaug several times over the trip, in particular when they were in the cells of Mirkwood. Thorin nodded at him, indicating he could say whatever he wanted, and Harry began. "Well, like I said, this current runic array I'm working on right now is to mask our scents. I have others that can mask movement and sound, if only for a given value of both. It wouldn't cover, say, someone walking across a room of gravel, but it would cover someone whispering to someone else. That's half of my battle plan: keeping us all hidden as much as possible, not allowing Smaug to find a target."

"I like that idea," Bilbo called out from somewhere behind a number of the dwarves.

“As do I, but that is defensive. What about all offensive? It pains me to say it, but even my weapons won’t do much against Smaug,” Dwalin grumbled, staring around a few of his fellows to where Harry’s sword lay beside him. “Are you certain we can’t try to use that blade of yours?”

Of course, he hadn’t been practicing with the sword of Gryffindor when he was being trained by Thorin. That would’ve been stupid. Instead, Thorin had created a wooden blade that was heavier than the sword, forcing Harry to work his muscles even more than he would if he was when his own sword, and thus helping him to train his endurance.

“Go ahead. If any of you can pick it up. I most certainly don’t need to be the one to deal the final blow or anything like that. I like to think I don’t have that large an ego,” Harry answered, his tone dry.

With that, Dwalin eagerly stood up from where he had been shimmying himself around Ori and reaching down to grab the sword. While he was not a swordsman, he was a hammer and axe lover through and through. There was something to be said about a blade that had such a deadly kick to it as Harry’s blade was supposed to.

But as he tried to lift it up, the sword didn’t move. It steadfastly refused his efforts, not even shifting in place as he grunted and heaved, veins standing out on his neck. “What, what the?! It’s so heavy I can’t lift it!”

Harry nodded, reaching down to the blade and lifting it up gently. “I have no idea why, but when I was given this blade in the first place, I was told that you had to have a few special qualities, that only a person who held the values its owner believed were important would be able to wield it. Honestly, of all the dwarves here, you, Kili and Thorin would probably be closest to that ideal, Dwalin, so I have no idea why it rejected you. Sorry.”

“That’s the problem with magical blades. They have magic in them,” Balin mocked, causing his brother to laugh, losing some of his anger as he returned to his place between Balin and Ori, the younger dwarf grumbling at having to scrunch himself up to let the older, bigger dwarf pass.

“Smoke,” Thorin grunted, leaning back from his meal, looking around at them, and dragging the conversation back to the dragon at hand. “In a cave or a mine, smoke can be deadly, and even a dragon needs to breathe, although we will need to close all of the air shafts leading outside. That was part of my plans to slay Smaug. The other part was attempting to pin it down by dropping the ceiling on him.”

“That would depend on where Smaug is, but it’s certainly an idea. As is the need to stop it from getting out,” Balin opined, while many of the other dwarves made noises of shock, astonished at Thorin’s willingness to talk about destroying segments of Erebor. But to Thorin, sacrificing part of the whole was something he was willing to do. Slaying Smaug and claiming the mountain after was the thing.
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“Is the main door the only way that Dragon can come in and out of the mountain?” Harry questioned.

“Indeed it is, and that too is where we would be most able to drop the roof down on him,” Thorin answered with Balin nodding in agreement. “There is a final defense set there, a series of dead

drops in the ceiling, which, if you pull the right leavers, will drop several thousand tons of rock down onto the entrance hall directly in front of the gate.”

“We’ve been talking about hiding ourselves from Smaug’s senses, but Thorin just talked about smoke, that’s a…” Bilbo paused, trying to think of a word. “An indirect attack?” When the nearby dwarves all nodded, indicating they understood, he went on. “And the herbs Ori and I have combined can surely make Smaug wish he didn’t have a nose. Is there some way of attacking Smaug’s ability to see? Above and beyond the smoke, I mean?”

“What about maybe using molten metal or something? I was a youngling when we left, but I worked in the smelters, and I remember how big some of those cauldrons were. Surely we could do something with them?” Bifur opined, his words attenuated by distance but still audible.

“Maybe, if we could get one of them right above his head,” Harry cautioned. “I don’t think anything less than that would work, considering that Smaug isn’t going to just stand there and take it.”

Balin snorted. “Indeed not. While he was able to simply overpower Erebor, it is known that all dragons are fiendishly intelligent. Smaug won’t allow us to attack it like that.”

“These are all good ideas, but I think we’re missing one important point. We need more information on the environment within the mountain,” Thorin said. “Let’s put our heads together tonight and on the march tomorrow boys, see if we can come up with a map of the mountain. That will help Bilbo and Harry when they go ahead to scouting out. Only when we have all the information necessary will we all move into the mountain and attack Smaug together.”

That night, Harry dreamed. That wasn’t so unusual, of course, but most nights, he dreamed about his past or the fight against Riddle in the Void. That night, however, Harry dreamed of something entirely different. He dreamed of a woman, a woman made of fire. So much of her features were made of flame that one could only barely discern skin from hair, but the shape was that of a woman as she stood at the helm of an odd, nearly circular ship.

But this was not a ship made of wood or even metal. Instead, it was a ship made of magic, the magic of the Valar made into a solid object by Aulë, for nothing else could withstand the heat of the woman and the object she had willingly bound her spirit to.

For at the center of the vessel was the Sun of Arda. Called Anar, the last light of Laurelin the Gold, one of the two trees of light that Morgoth and Ungoliant destroyed. And this was Arien, the lady of the Sun, a spirit of fire which, unlike so many others, Morgoth had never corrupted. When this ship rose, it drove Morgoth into despair, forcing him to hide away under his fortress until he could make enough clouds to hide from Anar’s light.

Ever since, Arien steered her ship across the same span of the sky, bringing light to those below. And now, she turned to stare at Harry. Her eyes were so bright they made the rest of the dream seem dull in comparison, so bright they hurt to look upon, something that Harry instinctively knew was part of some kind of test. So as she stared at him, Harry stared back, unwilling, almost unable, to look away.

Somehow Arien’s expression amidst the fire shifted into a smile, and she seemed to speak, her words drilling into Harry’s head like her eyes had his own. **“Prove yourself, Harry Potter. Prove you are worthy of my intervention between you and Arda.”**

"And how am I to do that, my lady?" Harry asked, thankful that Manwë and the other Valar had passed on his request to talk with the fiery maiden.

"Speak of yourself. Speak of your fight against the darkness," Arien replied. ***"For though my duty might seem merely to guide Anar, it and I do not do this to just to give light to humans and elves. We do so because it is a way to weaken those who look to death and darkness for their power. Manwë and Estë tell me you know something of that. Something of fighting evil."***

Over the next few nights, that was what Harry did, telling Arien about his life. The telling was slow because Arien continually asked questions, not just about Harry's life but his world, showing an intense curiosity.

It soon became apparent that Arien was trying to build an image of Harry Potter beyond what could be discerned as the surface level. Moreover, the impression grew on Harry that Arien was somewhat uncomfortable speaking to him like this and out-of-practice of communicating with others in general. She seemed to get over it slowly, and her aloofness disappeared as their talks continued.

Arien also seemed disturbed at certain points from what she was hearing: his willingness to kill, his somewhat loose moral code when it came to rules. But Arien was also visibly impressed by the tale of his friendships and the battle against Riddle's shade and questioned him closely on that topic.

Meanwhile, the dwarves settled down and began to plan out the mountain's interior as best they could. Apparently, interior maps of the place had been created at one point, but none of the survivors of Smaug's attack had thought to take any with them. But together, the group began to recreate one, debating on where bits of the city went in relation to one another and where the secret tunnel would come out.

And when he was awake, Harry joined Bilbo in working with the trio of youngsters on their swordsmanship as much as they could despite the narrow confines of the trail, and Harry finalized his anti-smell runic array. Others were easier: a Flame Freeze array and others to help the dwarves remain hidden. Enough movement would overwhelm those, but even so, they could be a help.

Eventually, they reached an area of the trail where they were forced to leave the donkeys behind, tying them together and around a rocky promontory. One of the dwarves would come back down the trail after that to feed them daily, but it was too steep now to take them alone. Indeed, the dwarves Bilbo and Harry actually climbed up walls of stone to continue on their way. But the fact that those walls of stone had hands and footholds carved into them was a sign that they were getting close to where the secret door might be.

On the fourth day after arriving at the foot of the mountain, they arrived at what looked at first to be a dead end. The trail opened, coming out onto an area that was almost as flat as a table and was about a hundred yards wide to a side, one side of which opened out into a cliff face, while at the other side, the end of the trail was marked by a rocky escarpment, the top of which none of them could see.

"It's here," Thorin announced, looking around him thoughtfully. "The hidden door must be here."

"Lovely. Now, exactly how are we supposed to find a hidden door with hidden runes on it?" Harry asked dryly.

“And the setting sun, with the last light of Durin’s Day, will shine upon the keyhole,” Bilbo quoted, looking around them. “We’re what, three days early?”

Thorin nodded to Bilbo’s question before looking over at Harry to pose his own. “Unless you think you can find it, Harry?”

“Even if he could find the door, unless we blasted it open using his magic, which I don’t think we want to do, be rather like announcing our presence to Smaug after all, the keyhole would still not be there,” Bombur grumbled, laying out on one side. Harry had used another spell to lighten his load a bit, but even so, the fattest dwarf was feeling the burn from that last bit of the trail.

Harry nodded, looking around thoughtfully. “I think I can sense something here, some kind of magic in the stone. I can’t tell what it is, though. Nor do I have any idea how I would go about finding a magically hidden keyhole that only responds to a certain type of light. I could play with my Lumos spell but, if it’s a specific type of light and needing to shine at a specific place from a specific angle?” Harry chuckled. “The phrase needle in a haystack comes to mind.”

“Agreed. Barring a miracle in that area, we will have to wait and be on our guard,” Thorin shrugged. “We got here in enough time. That is the important thing. We will continue to plan, continue to train, and eventually, we will be not only ready but able to take the fight to Smaug and reclaim our homes.”

The dwarves all answered with a cheer, even as they cast wary glances at the opening to one side. Bilbo also nodded, although he looked up at another sound was heard nearby. As he looked around, to one side, a thrush landed on a rock, looking at them with beady eyes, trilling a song.

Harry looked at it too, shrugged, and pulled out some jerky. He tore off a piece and tossed it to the bird, who caught it deftly, nodding his head in thanks almost, and began to tear at it with its beak. “We have the thrush, now too.”

Thorin nodded firmly, then ordered the others to start setting up camp while he told Harry to come over towards him, and they would begin their training once again.

Later, as the dwarves bustled around the camp preparing the evening meal and taking some oats back down the trail to the donkeys, Harry sat dangling his leg legs over the edge of the cliff. Several of the dwarves had looked ill at this, and even Bilbo shivered and turned away. To them, sitting like that was a sign of insanity, but to Harry, heights held no fears.

With the others busy behind him, Harry set aside his rune carving kit, staring out into the distance, specifically, the lake and beyond, where the forest lay. *I wonder, what is going on out there? Not just with Tauriel, but with Gandalf too. I thought he was supposed to meet us here, and I can’t escape the feeling that something happened to... delay him.*

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Those were two very separate questions, although it would not have surprised Harry to know that, indeed, something had happened to Gandalf. Although by the time Harry was worrying about him, the aforementioned wizard had nearly 6 days to both recover and it on the trail again afterward since being rescued.

At the same time, Harry was staring towards Mirkwood, Mithrandir, and the two sons of Elrond were entering the lands of that forest claimed by Thranduil and his folk.

"I must thank you for your aid Radagast. You sped us on our way most effectively," Gandalf thanked his fellow wizard as he clung to the back of Radagast's rabbit-drawn sley.

"It is no trouble at all, Gandalf. You, the Lady Galadriel and Elrond, did what I could not: you cleansed Dol Guldur. My home will be much safer now," the brown-garbed wizard of forests and animals answered with a chuckle.

"That may be, but I will not say that that place is cleansed," Elladan said, shaking his head. "The chief darkness within has been routed, but it is still a place of evil. I know that Thranduil's people resided there before the last war of Elves and Men, but I could not detect any hint of goodness there."

"Such is the touch of Sauron," Radagast replied. "But so long as the fell things, the orcs and such can be convinced to move on, the forest and living things will eventually reclaim it." He paused, looking shifty. "Er, I hope anyway."

"How much further do you think before we start seeing patrols, brother?" Elrohir suddenly questioned, his tone implying something that went over the two wizards' heads.

"I think we are already in sight of one, brother," Elladan laughed and turned to the surrounding forest shouting out, "Ho cousins, should you not be showing yourselves to welcome us? Are we unwelcome indeed, or has our odd conveyance stunned you so much that your manners have left you?"

"The second option, wanderer," said a voice, and four elves made themselves known all around the sley, which slewed to a stop, the rabbits all rearing up and looking around at it. Three of them were staring at it, although one of the elves was looking with scant favor on the wizards and the two sons of Elrond half Elven. "What brings you to our lands?" That one asked almost brusquely.

Elrohir was off the sled and stepping forward quickly, so quickly that the other elves backpedaled quickly. But Elrohir stopped abruptly at the edge of sword range, holding up his hand in an Elvish greeting. "I think that your manners have yet to return. Perhaps we should start on our side then. I am Elrohir. This is my brother Elladan. We bring Mithrandir to meet with King Thranduil, with tidings brought from lady Galadriel and our father, Lord Elrond."

The man stumbled back but eventually, with the two brothers watching him, raised his hand in equal greeting, intoning formally, "Be welcome in the land of Taur-e-Ndaedelos. Follow us, and we will take you to the king."

"Good," Gandalf barked sharply. "He and I need to have words, and then, we must be off soon after."

"As you say, Mithrandir," the elf replied, now somewhat obsequious in comparison to his previous attitude.

The squad of elves moved ahead of the two wizards and the two foreign brothers, allowing Mithrandir after saying his farewells to Radagast. With that done and Radagast to keep an eye on Dol Guldur, he looked over at Elrohir and asked quietly, "And what was all about?"

“Nothing that needs to concern you, Mithrandir. Let us just say that some here and in the White Harbor still hold a grudge against our lineage for various reasons. At times, it is because we can trace our lineage through Elrond to a human, and many elves still resent the fact that because of Beren, they lost Luthien for all time. Others resent the fact that Elrond, our father, has become so important despite being half-elven.”

“Foolish, more than foolish.” Gandalf scoffed. “To harbor such divisions even in peace is beyond stupidity. Especially given the fact that Elvish power in this world has continued to wane since the time of the Last War of Elves and Men.”

“It has never gotten to the point where it will threaten that peace, just harsh words and harsher glares in times of local trouble,” Elladan replied quickly. “But Thranduil is...” He paused, thinking of a polite way to say what he thought of the lord of Taur-e-Ndaedelos.

“Not the leader his father is reputed to have been,” Elrohir supplied, once more letting his tone imply more.

Mithrandir frowned at that, scratching at his beard, noting absently that he desperately needed a shower. Not so much because of the state of his beard, but because he could still feel the touch of Sauron on his mind and hoped that a nice shower would at least let him rid himself of that. But his frown had much more to do with what the two brothers were saying than the memory of his confrontation with Sauron. “Tell me, how exactly do you think that Thranduil would respond to Harry and the dwarves coming through his territory?”

“As long as they stayed on the Eastern Road, he would have to leave them alone. Although, come to think of it... Can you think of the last time we saw anyone coming from the East brother, elfen or human?” Elrohir questioned.

Elladan shook his head. “I can’t, and we skirted around the edge of the forest all the way down to Dol Guldur. Why?”

“The touch of Sauron is heavy in this forest and may well have spread far enough north to perhaps pervert the spells on the path unless Thranduil was being proactive about keeping them from being so tainted,” Gandalf supplied, his frown deepening.

To that, neither brother had an answer, and the group moved on in silence. Early the next day, they came upon the entrance to Celeb Aduial. The wizard and his guardians were left in quickly, through the city and to the halls of Thranduil. There, Mithrandir was greeted with a joyful cry of, “Mithrandir!”

Legolas, prince of the Silvan elves, moved towards the old man, clasping Gandalf in a hug. The two of them had met before several times when Gandalf came through the forests. The old man returned the hug, but then Legolas pulled back, smiling wanly and, surprisingly, somewhat warily, as if a thought had just occurred to him. “What brings you to my father’s halls?”

“A few matters. You will learn of them when I speak to your father, young Legolas,” Gandalf retorted, although he was smiling at the young elf, who looked somewhat affronted at his use of the word ‘young’ as he did. After all, he wasn’t young; he was over five hundred. Which, while younger than many of his folk, certainly did not make him a stripling.

“And yet, I can sense a heaviness to you, and indeed, a heaviness to the air here. What has been going on? And does it have anything to do with my friend young Harry and the dwarves I left in his charge?” Gandalf asked shrewdly.

“So you truly were a friend of Harry’s then.” Legolas seemed to pale at that, shaking his head. “Then your meeting with my father will be interesting indeed.”

“What has happened?” Gandalf growled, pinning the young elf in place with a glare as he stomped the butt end of his staff on the ground, causing a loud cracking noise, far louder than it should’ve made. “Speak.”

“If you wish to speak to anyone in my halls, Mithrandir, perhaps you should show the common courtesy to speak to me first,” Thranduil’s voice cut off whatever answer his son might have made from the top of the staircase leading up to the royal quarters. Mithrandir looked in that direction, locking gazes with the king, who stared down at him, his expression one of cold aloofness before he turned and moved away, heading into the same room where he had entertained Harry and Thorin months ago.

Gandalf stared after him, then looked over at Legolas, who did not meet his gaze. “I am building an image, an image of events here. And I do not like what I am imagining,” he mused aloud, before moving towards the stairs, heading upwards, not even glancing side to side of the two guards stationed there nor the guards stationed outside the room leading into where Thranduil waited for him.

“Will you not offer an old man a drink?” He asked the king as he entered.

Scoffing, Thranduil waved Mithrandir into a seat across from him at the table. “I will offer you a chair, and if what you have to say places me, I may offer you some of my wine. But I will hear your news first.”

“Very well. But before that, can you tell me when young Harry and the dwarves with him passed through your lands? They made excellent time over the Misty Mountains. I hope they did not lose it in passing through Mirkwood.”

Thranduil raised an eyebrow fractionally but otherwise did not react. “And why should I care for dwarves or one lone human?”

“Do not play games with me!” Gandalf growled. “Anyone with power can tell what Harry is. And I know him well enough to know he would mention Elrond and I if you the two of you ever met. I can tell something has happened. Legolas is looking guilty, and you are looking far too aloof and cold, even from the last time I saw you. So tell me what has gone wrong.”

“The last time you saw me... that was a long time ago,” Thranduil kept his own tone light, almost jokingly, but there was nothing humorous about his face as he stared at Mithrandir. “I was newly come into my position then, and you came requesting aid in driving the goblins out of the mountains. I gave it. That was a long time ago.” He repeated. “Much has happened. Much darkness has come into this world.”

“Indeed it has, and indeed that darkness has spread once more. News of which was brought to the Council of wise thanks to my brother Radagast. Yet I wonder, given your own proximity to Dol

Guldur, why we had to hear of it from him when Radagast lives far to the south of that ancient bastion. Why did you not send word of the vileness within when it began to spread once more?"

Thranduil did not respond, and Mithrandir shook his head. "It has often been said, 'beware the folly of Kings'. Perhaps it should instead read beware the pride of those selfsame idiots. No matter the race, I have found you to be a foolish lot once you put a crown on your head."

Thranduil surged to his feet, glaring angrily at the old man. "These are my halls, Mithrandir, and I will demand you keep a civil tongue in your head."

The wizard did not respond at all, merely staring back at the elf coldly, his hands tented on the table in front of him. "I may think about it when you stop prevaricating and answer me. Tell me, what happened when you met Harry and the dwarves?"

"When they trespassed on my lands, I had them seized as is my right. I became aware of Harry's power at that point, it is true. But he refused to help me learn how to use his spells and was quite rude. He and Oakenshield both. I left them to cool off in my cells for a time," Thranduil announced as if it was of no moment.

Hearing this, Mithrandir barely restrained his anger, his knuckles whitening as his fingers wound around one another. "That was remarkably foolish. And yet, you say it in such a way that implies that you eventually let them go. That is good. Tell me at least that when you did, you set them on the path to Lake-town and allowed them to keep their weapons? The weapon of Harry Potter is of special significance, and Thorin came to wield Orcrist honorably."

Here, Elrohir spoke up. "Our father, Lord Elrond, agreed that blade should stay with Thorin, that it had come into his hand at this time for a purpose."

And if anyone should have had ownership of that blade, it was Elrond who could trace his lineage back through Luthien to the last king of Gondolin. Neither of Elrond's sons said so aloud, but they made it clear through stance and Elrohir's tone that they would not approve of the sword having been taken from Thorin. Elves of all sorts were very good at using tone to imply things, and the sons of Elrond were his messengers and agents well beyond the borders of his lands.

"They have their weapons, yes, and they had made it to Lake-town at last report," Thranduil answered.

"And yet your tone implies far more than your words." Gandalf tugged at his beard, allowing a wide smile to appear on his face, almost a smirk as he looked at Thranduil. "They escaped, didn't they? You didn't release them. They released themselves."

Thranduil's face was blank, but Legolas wasn't nearly as good as his father at being his emotions in check, and he smiled slightly back at Mithrandir, nodding his head.

But instead of replying, the king went back to something Gandalf had said a second ago. "Yes, the weapon Harry Potter carried, which he went to great lengths to retrieve. Do you truly believe that his magic and that weapon will be enough to slay Smaug, a wyrm the likes of which has not been seen since the days of the Greater Darkness? I have to question this. I question it most heartily. Especially

since you no doubt will be somewhere else when the disaster comes calling upon my people, who have suffered enough.”

“They have suffered because of your pride!” Gandalf roared, standing up from his chair so hard that the chair flew backward while the table was pushed back into the king. Thranduil let loose a grunt of pain as it was propelled into his chest, sending him and his chair backward in turn.

Thinking that their king was being attacked, the two guards at the door to this level quickly entered, moving towards Mithrandir, confusion playing on their faces but certain of their duty. Yet they had only taken a single step into the room before the tips of Elladan and Elrohir blades were pressed into their necks, and the two brothers shook their heads, speaking as one. “We wouldn’t if we were you.”

“Let’s keep this talk between Mithrandir and your king,” Elladan added.

Slowly, the guards backed away, and the two brothers swiftly sheathed their weapons, also backing away from the confrontation to either side of the guards, leaving Legolas alone, who had also backed away to one side. The fact he wasn’t going to his father’s aide was rather telling, Elladan reflected.

Thranduil now stood up to, pushing the table away from him, but as he did, Gandalf moved forward, seeming almost to swell with power and fury as he looked at the Elven King. “Pride!” he exclaimed, bellowing the words into the king’s face. “Pride and arrogance. They alone kept you from reporting the events of Dol Guldur. Worry about how it would affect your position to seemingly ask for aid. Aid that would’ve been freely given, aid that, had it come in time, could well have seen the death of Sauron before he could have regained his strength!”

At the word Sauron, some of the fight seemed to flow out of Thranduil, and Legolas gasped. “It is true then, the enemy has returned?”

“The Great Enemy returned yes. But lady Galadriel, Elrond, Saruman, and I have since driven it out of Dol Guldur,” Gandalf answered, calming down slightly. “You could not have stood against it on your own. You should have asked for help. The moment this influence began to spread, the spiders, the sickness in the woods, you should have said something to us. Not even one such as I or Saruman can be everywhere at once, and even we thought that Sauron was dead after the last war of elves and men and the vileness in Dol Guldur had disappeared after my initial investigation there. We made mistakes, but had you told us, told **me**, we would have come.”

Thranduil looked away, unwilling to admit even now that it had been his own pride that had stopped him from asking for help, and the fear of what would happen to him personally that kept him from fighting back against Sauron’s taint as it spread through the forest. “If that is all that you have come to say, then consider it said. If you wish to chase after Harry and those dwarves, then I suggest you get on your way.”

“That is not all I have come here to say!” Gandalf boomed, once more looming over the king, his fury coming back. “I am willing to look past your arrogance and the wrongs that you have done to Thorin and company. But only if you answer the call of all good people now! While Sauron was driven out, he had already sent his armies into motion. An army is even now marching to meet with Smaug. Hopefully, Harry and the dwarves will be able to deal somehow with Smaug. But an army is beyond them. You can

redeem yourself. You can redeem your people's honor if you stand with the dwarves against the storm that will break over the Lonely Mountain all too quickly."

Looking back at Mithrandir, Thranduil shook his head, somehow pushing through the impact of the wizard's presence. "You come here to make that demand? What then do I get in return for risking my folk? Especially when I personally do not agree with you that they will be able to deal with Smaug. Marching out to fight a battle against the orcs and goblins is one thing, but it will simply remove us from this, a safe haven, and present on a platter to Smaug!"

"Even now, you speak from fear and arrogance in equal measure! You have had your last chance. Now be silent, Thranduil!" With a crash of his staff, Mithrandir froze Thranduil as if he had become a statue, turning instead to his son, who stared between his now frozen father and the wizard. "But now that it has come to it, I do want to know the exact depth of your perfidy. Legolas, tell me what happened here, from the moment you all became aware of Harry and the dwarves."

Unlike his father, Legolas was almost eager to get it off his chest and confessed everything, from how they had captured the dwarves after the dwarves had exhausted themselves in a hard-fought battle against the same spiders that their king had forbidden Legolas and his people to battle unless they encroached on Taur-e Ndaedelos. How he and Harry had gotten off to a rocky start but had become, if not friends, then at least acquaintances over time. He smiled wanly then. "I wish I could say that I was an ambassador of normal Elven hospitality, but if anyone could even try to claim that, it would be Tauriel."

"Tauriel? Who is that? I do not believe I have met a Sylvan elf of that name." Gandalf mused.

"Tauriel is a captain of the Unseen Host and co-led the band that first met the dwarves. She and Harry started to exchange barbs almost at once. But eventually, I think true friendship and perhaps even something more developed between them."

Blinking, Gandalf was quite surprised that and secretly pleased. He knew that Galadriel had done all she could in a single night's session for Harry's wounded heart and mind, but there was only so much that even she could do in such a short amount of time. A new love interest could perhaps move Harry's mental healing along. *But then again, his confinement no doubt created new issues and new hatreds. What is it about elves, humans and dwarves that they are compelled to continually search for reasons to hate one another?* "Continue."

Legolas did so, explaining how the party had escaped the cells due to clever use of magic and perhaps some aid from one of their band on the outside. How they had then taken the river down to the lake and then into Lake-town. Legolas described the battle there as he had seen it, finishing with, "And then, Tauriel and I returned here to report to my father."

"And were either of you punished for not bringing Bilbo, the dwarves or Harry back?" Elladan asked from where he and his brother had listened to this tale with growing revulsion at the treatment the dwarves and Harry had suffered and then amusement at the battle and their escape.

Despite his being frozen, the king tried to glare Legolas into silence. But Legolas's last loyalties to his father had badly frayed over the past few days, and he resolutely did not look at him, instead shaking

his head. "I was confined to my quarters until this morning, but Tauriel was imprisoned in the same cells which held Thorin and the others and remains there now."

"Release her, now." Not even waiting for Legolas to move, which he did quite promptly racing towards the door, Mithrandir turned back to Thranduil. "Will your arrogance know no limit? Harry was brought here by the actions of the Valar, or perhaps an even greater power than they. He has my friendship, he had Elrond's word, and you still imprisoned him! You still try to capture him and Thorin again when he had escaped you. Your actions are not that of a king. They are that of a bandit lord hiding away in his patch of forest, eager to clamp on to any power that passes him by, but too afraid to fight his more powerful neighbor."

With a wave of his staff, he released Thranduil, even as his body began to grow, glimmers of power willing out of him. "As a servant of the Secret Fire and representative of the White Council, I **command** you, Thranduil, to lead your armies out. March to the Lonely Mountain's aid, make right the wrongs you have accrued on Harry and the dwarves. Or I will remove you, exile you, and demand your son do it in your stead. What will it be, Fool King?"

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Two days of training and planning passed, and every time he slept, Harry was visited by the lady of fire in his dreams. Arien and Harry talked about his life, about his powers and abilities. Eventually, she finally decided that the two of them could indeed form a permanent connection rather than the temporary one Arien had forged at Manwë's orders so they could talk mind to mind. "***Mind you, Harry Potter, I am still not certain of this. I was a Maiar until I bound myself to this ship and Anar.***"

Arien routinely spoke of Anar, the Sun, as if it were a living thing, but Harry couldn't tell if she thought of it as another Maiar, a child, or an animal at times. It was clear, though, that the two were connected on some level. It had also been clear from the start that Arien was uncertain how to go about interacting with Harry or anything about their conversation and was, in fact, making it up as she went along.

The reasons for that became apparent now.

While I am now something else, I do not consider myself a Valar worthy of being followed even if Manwë has decreed that it is possible for you. But I am also uncertain if you and I can make that connection. There is too much of you, which seems like it should call more to Tulkas or Aulë than I. While I fight the dark, I do not do so in as physical a manner as you do."

She then smiled grimly. "**But I am willing to see. My mind keeps coming back to your very arrival here on Arda, Harry Potter. If Eru Ilúvatar wishes for you to be here, then perhaps, there is something beyond your own intuition guiding you to form a connection with me.**"

"...So...what now?" Harry asked in some confusion.

"Now? Now you fight Smaug, Harry Potter, and meanwhile, our connection will grow. You will no longer feel as heavy a drain on yourself as much as you have before, but connecting you to this world will take time. Shine a light into the darkness that was Erebor, Harry Potter, retrieve what is

within, the source of light and madness, and you will prove worthy of our connection,” Arien replied cryptically. Then she began to smile. *“After all, is it not normal for a human male to do something to impress your new lady of the manner?”*

Harry’s mental eyes narrowed. *“You’ve been practicing looking cryptic, I see. And I also think that you are either mixing stories or giving me mixed messages, hopefully not on purpose. I already have one lethally dangerous woman who might be interested in me, thank you.”*

Arien’s laughter was still ringing in his ears as he woke up on Durin’s Day, the day when the hidden door would be revealed.

As the sunlight faded, the dwarves became anxious, looking around, wondering when the light they were waiting for would appear would happen. But Bilbo, Balin and surprisingly, Fili reminded everyone about the other aspect of what they would be waiting for. “Stop complaining! It will happen at the last light of the setting sun, which means it is not at the start of sunset, but the end. Beyond that, we already have the thrush. We just have to wait.”

“I have to wonder, what is the connection between the thrush and the rest of the events needed to find the keyhole. Is that just a euphemism for finding the place where thrushes nest or is there an actual magical connection?” Harry mused.

“The birds of this mountain are more intelligent than you might think. Indeed, my people were friends with many of the bird clans in past decades. Of course, they’re not as intelligent or as independent as the giant eagles which saved us from the orcs, but they are certainly intelligent enough to converse with to a certain degree.”

“Ahh, yes, the giant eagles. I can’t remember, have I mentioned how unspeakably jealous was about all of you flying like that?” Harry murmured, watching Kili, who had been the one to speak. His words about their being friends was given an added weight that he was feeding one of the thrushes at that moment.

“I am personally wondering if we could send one or two of them out to find my cousin and his army on the march. The knowledge that they are doing so would make me feel more certain about our ability to keep Erebor if we can take it in the first place.”

So saying, Thorin looked at one of the thrushes, the largest one insight which also happened to be the first one that they had seen upon their arrival. Among birds, size and courage were even more important in terms of a leader than in other races. The thrush in question bopped his head once, then jerked its beak towards the mountain face to one side.

“As you said, Kili, smart bird. He knows that it is coming up on time for the door as well,” Bilbo smiled cheerfully in an attempt to hide how worried he was about his about what that meant.

They all fell silent then. Over the next few hours, they ate a hearty meal, the dwarves saw to their weapons, and Bilbo and Harry went over their plans one last time, looking at the maps the dwarves had put together for Erebor. They were the scouts, and on them would lie the highest burden.

Watching them, Thorin was sad to think that was the case, but it was true. Without Thorin, Harry and Bilbo, any attempt to scout out the mountain's interior would have been many times more

dangerous. To say nothing of fighting Smaug. Indeed, over the past few days, Thorin had forced himself to realize that without Harry's magic, any attempt to fight the dragon was at best a forlorn hope, if not impossible. *Beyond the portion of the treasure that they will have earned many times over, we, myself and our nation will owe them immensely.*

Hours later, the sun fell beyond the Misty Mountains, and the last light of the sun seemed to shine across the distant mountains towards them in a thin beam of oddly white light, the color reminding Harry almost of a Patronus. As this happened, the thrush began to knock a nut against the wall just as the beam of light struck the mountain face.

When this happened, Harry felt it through his feet, the enchantment activating on the door, and he watched avidly as the stone seemed to shift and mold itself into a new shape, showing the keyhole. "That is an impressive bit of enchantment."

Thorin didn't reply, being too busy sticking the key Gandalf had given to him, the one which the wizard had saved from the body of his grandfather, Thrain, into the keyhole. Looking back at the others, he locked gazes with each of the dwarves in turn. The looks they exchanged spoke of longing, loss, determination, and the dreams of a brighter future. Then he slowly turned the key in the keyhole.

Once more, Harry felt magic reverberate through the stone of the mountain, not far, just this small area. As it did, a circular crack appeared in the stone, and then slowly the area beside the key slowly started to shift, the surface of the stone, about two feet of it maybe, recessing into the rest of the mountain and then shifting to the side into a slice cut out of the side of the tunnel with a smoothness that this astonished everyone there.

The entranceway that was thus revealed was about wide enough for two or perhaps three dwarves (so long as one of them wasn't Bombur) to walk abreast. The sides of it looked perfectly smooth, a circular hole in the side of the mountain, with impenetrable darkness beyond. But the air that wafted out was vile, thick with the stench of decay and the passing of years, causing everyone to step back, grabbing at their mouths and noses.

Thorin had the presence of mind to push one of his packs into the doorway just in case the doorway automatically closed if no one was holding the key, and the rest of them moved away. But soon, it became time for the mission they were all there for to continue, and it was with some ceremony that the dwarves looked at Bilbo and Harry.

"I, I feel as if we should say something here, something profound, something deep and emotional. But words fail me, my friends. You two have given so much for this, for our mission, for our obsession. And now here we must ask still more of you. It seems churlish, yet reality is what it is," Thorin said, reaching for to clasped forearms first with Bilbo than with Harry, staring into his human friend's eyes. "Be safe. And by Aulë come back to us in one piece."

The two of them looked at one another, and Harry raised a hand, going through the series of spells that he had devised for this portion of the operation, placing them on himself and Bilbo at once, which would allow them to see one another then Harry pulled his Invisibility cloak around him. The dwarves would keep the number of Notice Me Not, anti-smell runestones and several other goodies Harry had provided with them.

That would hopefully allow them to ambush Smaug eventually. But for that, Bilbo and Harry needed to map out the lay of the land inside the mountain.

The two of them moved into the tunnel, with Harry leading the way. Both of them had spells on them to see in the dark, which would be necessary in the mountain. *Or it will, until Smaug starts to provide us with far too much in the way of firelight for comfort*, Harry thought morosely.

The secret passage wound down in a spiral until they were near where Harry estimated the middle of the mountain was. There it became straight, heading into the heart of the mountain, where Erebor would be. Soon after that, the passageway ended at what seemed to be a dead end. But when Harry touched it, he found the wall was not stone, but a cunningly wrought kind of weave, made to blend into the stone so exactly that only by touching it could you tell it was there at all.

One the other side of this cover, Harry and Bilbo came out onto a balustrade above, well, Harry had to blink and stare for a moment as Bilbo nearly stumbled beside him. Neither of them was the sort to be blinded by the gleam of gold, and indeed both of them had thought they were ready for the sight of a lot of gold since Thorin had been certain the secret tunnel would bring them out into the vault, which would naturally have become the center of Smaug's lair within the ruins of Erebor.

But hearing about the wealth the dwarven nation had accumulated was something entirely different from seeing a room as large as a football stadium covered from one end to another in mountains of gold. Gold coins, for the most part, with other gold items scattered throughout, along with silver suits of armor that were almost shining with a silver light on their own and a few other larger items made of precious metals. Throughout the mass of gold, the gleam of jewels was scattered like stars, but they barely registered to Harry.

Yet strangely amidst all that gold, the dragon was nowhere to be seen.

The two of them looked at one another and then used hand movements to communicate. While Harry had covered them both with a spell that should help to deaden the noise - gold coins could shift, clinking against one another, the sound moving beyond the reach of that spell, so it was of limited utility - both had decided over the past two days that there was no need to tempt fate.

Harry mimed reaching forward to take a coin, then shook his head, pointing along the edge of the balustrade around the edge in a random direction. Bilbo nodded and moved into the lead. A few minutes of silent, slow movement brought them into the sight of a small doorway on the same level as the balustrade. Yet between them and it was a portion of a mound of gold that had washed over the balustrade. But Harry didn't trust himself to move across the gold mound between here and it silently.

He was about to signal Bilbo to stop, but then Bilbo did so without any such prompting, one hand rising and shakily pointing forward and down. As he did so, Bilbo turned a bit, allowing Harry to see how his eyes had widened, the sudden fear on his face.

Looking in the direction that Bilbo had pointed, Harry saw what had caused his reaction: the tip of a snout sticking out from under the gold. One of the nostrils thus revealed was about as large as half as wide as Bilbo's body while the rest of the snout was wider than Bilbo was laying down. And from here, they could both see that the nose was moving, the dragon breathing in and out.

Trying hard not to estimate how big Smaug must be with a nose that large, Harry gestured to Bilbo, gesturing back the way they'd come. From what Thorin and Balin had told them, there were two ways out of this area, which had once been the vault of Erebor. One was the royal entrance, which Harry had ribbed Thorin about unmercifully as they tried to construct a map of Erebor from memory. The other was the main entrance to it which was supposed to be at one of the far ends of the vault, while the royal doorway was set into its side.

Nodding understanding, Bilbo indicated he would continue on. Harry's eyes widened, and he shook his head, but Bilbo was adamant, reaching down and patting one of his big, fur-covered feet with a wry, if shaky, grin. Rolling his eyes at that, Harry eventually agreed, and with a light touch to Bilbo's shoulder, turned away, pulling the hood of his invisibility cloak forward further over his face.

For the wizard, getting down from the balustrade took up some of the rope that the party had brought in just in case and was somewhat harrowing. But soon, he was down and moving towards the large open entrance to the halls beyond.

However, as he went, Harry began to feel a certain kind of pressure. It wasn't a physical one. It was purely a magical thing, hitting his senses like a weight settling onto his shoulders, pressing his magic down. He had felt this from the masses of orcs or goblins before and when he became exhausted, but it was stronger now. **Much** stronger, so much so that Harry's connection to Arien, which even now should have lessened the impact of that kind of thing, didn't do much. Harry could literally feel the spells on him start to fade.

Harry pulled back, staring hard all around him, his eyes narrowing until he spotted segments of what had to be the dragon's tail sticking out of the gold here and there. *Shit, so Smaug's main body is around here, and the dragon's definitely creating the same kind of anti-magic impact to my powers that I've run into before. But, but does that mean he can sense me and my magic, or is it just a natural thing with dragons thanks to their origins as creations of Morgoth?* For a moment, Harry stood there, crouching down in his invisibility cloak, undecided.

For his part, Bilbo was able to move across the balustrade to the mound of gold blocking his way, where his hobbit feet allowed him to move across the gold without making any noise whatsoever. Trusting in that and Harry's spells, he didn't even have to use the ring, although Bilbo could feel a certain desire to do so just in case, wishing to add a second layer of invisibility.

Yet Bilbo kept it in reserve for now and was soon across the hill of gold and moving into the doorway there. On the other side of it, Bilbo paused as he was just about to step up and off the mound of gold onto the balcony, his eyes caught by perhaps the largest, purest looking jewel he had ever seen.

It was large, about as large as his clenched fist, as white as the driven snow, gleaming with an inner fire that seemed to shift in color as Bilbo stared at it. *What manner of jewel is that?* He was almost tempted to go and take it, but Bilbo held himself back. The stone looked like it would be heavy, and he and Harry had too many things to do for Bilbo to want to overburden himself.

Shaking that flight of fancy away, Bilbo walked over the gold mound onto the balcony, making his way inside to find himself standing in an office, the personal office of the king. Looking around, Bilbo fought back of manic chuckle, thinking about Harry's jokes on this score and agreeing with them heartily.

It says something about the dwarven mind that the king wanted to have an office where he could very easily overlook the gold vault.

But moving through that area, passed another room that housed ancient-looking books, which didn't seem, thankfully, to be molding given how dead the air was in here, he came out through another series of what was obviously living quarters for the royal family. They were nice, a little too gaudy for Bilbo's tastes, but he could still get a feeling of a family and home here, despite the overdone glitter of it all.

From there, Bilbo moved from that area out into what was obviously a throne room. The throne itself was a stone affair that looked incredibly uncomfortable to Bilbo's frame of mind, but he could not argue with the artistry that had gone into its construction. It looked as if it had been carved up out of the stone of the floor, with its sides and back showing dozens of dwarves, hammers or axes raised in salute to the man on the throne. Above, there seemed to be a series of gemstones set into it, with a place for a particularly large one right above where the king must have sat, set into what looks like a series of sunrays carved into the stone of the back of the chair.

This kind of thing was seen elsewhere in the hall. Columns as massive as the trees of Mirkwood stood in a row on either side of the main pathway to the throne, six of them to a side. These lines of pillars lead out into darkness beyond Bilbo's sight, and as he passed each of them, he saw that these columns had been carved to show different frescoes of various parts of the mountainside or Erebor's history.

Spoiling the hall's look was a wide streak of what looked like seared stone leading from the far end towards the throne. The hall's sides also showed that they'd been subjected to a massive amount of fire, and any tapestries which might've hung on the walls or various columns had long since been burned away. *The dragon must have used fire in here because it's too large to enter physically.*

At the far end of the throne room, the double doors to the throne were open, leading directly into the central portion of Erebor. There, Bilbo paused, staring up and around in awe. *If I had any doubt that dwarves are capable of being artistic to put any Hobbit to shame after seeing the throne room, this would have cured me of that.*

Meanwhile, Harry knew he had a choice. He could try to push on, trusting that his cloak and the various spells he had on him would hide him from the dragon's senses despite the pressure he could feel even now pressing against his spellwork. Or he could turn around and try to follow Bilbo around in the other direction. But with the area there covered with so many gold coins, Harry knew that would be a nonstarter. Nor did he even think of simply retreating and letting Bilbo do all the scouting for them. *I have to get past it.*

With that thought, Harry pushed himself flush against the wall, putting as much distance as possible between him and the tail. Moving around the vault in this manner, Harry eventually stumbled back into the open doorway, watching as the tail twitched once more before turning and quickly moving away from it.

Behind Harry in the mound of gold covering the snout they had previously seen, an eye slowly opened, its iris barely able to peer past the gold coins covering Smaug's head.

With the danger past him, Harry made his way forward now, noting that he passed what looked like a few small hallways leading up and off the main entranceway to Erebor's vault. Some of those were shallow, ending in what looked like small offices. Others moved deeper into the stone around the vault.

Past them was the central area of Erebor, and there, Harry stopped, pulling the hood of his cloak off his head as he stared around in shocked wonder at Erebor. First of all, it seemed as if the city had been built into what was once a natural cavern of immense size. Several football stadiums could have been made in that same amount of space. The sides of the cavern were lined with small entrances leading into homes or side streets. And as he moved along, Harry could see that each of those side streets or entranceways was marked by small glyphs, as well as tiny crystals embedded into the stone.

The floor underneath him had been leveled so much that the stone underneath his feet was flat and smooth to the touch. Stones of various colors had been set into patterns, while words carved out in runes were here and there. There was nothing magical about them. They were simply the dwarven language, the names of their ancestors maybe or something similar.

Regardless, the overall effect was quite stunning, and what stood out most was the colors. The bits of bronze and copper hanging here and there or discarded as the dwarves ran. The stalls, some of them having been left almost untouched other than being flattened, the purple and bright green silk standing out against the overall gloom of the cavern crushed there or part of various doorways into smaller side streets.

The walls had all been smoothed, too, almost to a mirror shine. *Which makes sense*, Harry thought. *Light in an underground city will always be an issue. Although they seem to have solved that too.* High above Harry, what caused that last thought was the stalactites in the ceiling. Because they too had been carved, each of them carved to look like upside-down castles, with either lights or crystals embedded in their sides.

Alas, marring this vista were the bodies. This had obviously been the central area, not just in terms of the city but its people's everyday lives. There weren't many in sight from where Harry was standing, but Harry knew that was because the dwarves had held off Smaug outside for a time, letting them prepare their interior defenses. He was grimly certain there would be more elsewhere.

On a wide staircase that led up to what Harry could see was another large hall, Harry spotted Bilbo. He had simply sat down, taking in the sights around him in awe, but when Harry reached him, Bilbo stood up willingly, glad to see his friend had gotten out of the vault. And as amazing as this place looked, they couldn't simply stand here all day.

He then gestured to the ceiling and out into the distance further along the thoroughfare. Against the far wall, Harry could barely make out what looked like another set of massive doors. But these were closed and even more massive than those smashed down leading into the vault.

This impression was born out when the two of them came close to those doors. The gates of Erebor had been carved to have the likeness of a dwarf warrior on either door. Facing one another, the carvings raised their swords in a salute, their shields placed on the ground in front of them. But as artistic as that was, it didn't hide the fact that those doors had been battered inward at some point in the past, then closed with equally dreadful force.

Harry was vaguely surprised they seemed to have closed so well and that indeed, there didn't seem to be any seam even now. But he couldn't really concentrate on that, and Bilbo hadn't even bothered looking at them yet, distracted by what was all around them. For it had been here that the dwarves had apparently made their stand, and all around the two scouts as they made their way towards the side of the gates were bodies.

Several of them still had bits of helmet on them or metal armor, their weapons held in clenched, skeletal hands. But not one of those suits of armor was intact. Many had been simply rent asunder along with their owners, the metal-stained red. Others had been simply crushed entirely along with the dwarves they had protected. It made for a gruesome sight even after more than a hundred years, the sheer number of bodies in one place making it worse than the rest of the main hall.

To one side of the doorway, there was a stairwell set into the side of the mountain face so cunningly that you couldn't see it until you were right in front of it, which they had been warned about by Thorin and the others. There, the two of them made their way upwards, passing several offshoots to various defensive works facing out from the mountain's side until they came to the ceiling of the massive cavern there, where they entered a tunnel. In that tunnel, they found the controls to the dead drop that Balin and Thorin had mentioned.

Harry could still feel some of the magic within it, although what that magic did, he didn't know. But since the dead drops were supposed to allow tons of prepared stone blocks to drop into the area right in front of the gates of Erebor as a final defense, it wasn't the kind of thing you could actually test before use.

So, Harry and Bilbo simply marked that it still existed on their maps and that it hadn't been disturbed in any way before moving on their way.

At the other side of the main thoroughfare, staircases led down. Indeed, ten staircases wound in different directions. Many went down and under the area, they had been exploring to other parts of the city. Others went up to a series of tunnels leading possibly to other caverns where larger clans would have lived rather than the single families or farmers that lived on the main floor.

Two of the staircases led down to another portion of the city, which overlooked what had to be the largest smelting operation that Harry had ever even envisaged. It was **huge**, with large smelting tubs, lathes and other things Harry didn't have the words for, filling an area about as large as the vault. And while every hint of precious metals had been removed, Harry saw that a lot of the coal and other minerals and things had been left in place amidst the ruin of Smaug's attack.

This area would be part of their plan: the smelters and everything else would be used to create smoke to both partially blind and slowly weaken Smaug. *I have to wonder why the dwarves are so certain all of this will still work after so long. But all of them, even Balin, who's always the voice of caution, said they would still work. Why that is, I have no idea.*

One aspect of the underground city that both Harry and Bilbo were pleased to see was that most of the side entrances were too small for the massive dragon to enter. He could make his way down into the area with the many staircases, but not with any speed or dexterity.

Not all of them, of course. Many side passages were at least large enough for the dragon to perhaps get his head into. And any of the tunnels which didn't twist and turn enough would no doubt be susceptible to Smaug's fire. Indeed, as they went, the two scouts continually saw signs of this, marks on the ground or walls of the dragon's flames.

And bodies. Many more bodies. These were the bodies of women in dresses, children, their skeletons smaller than the others. In one place, Harry found a family, the male standing in front of his wife and child, all burned, their skeletons the only thing surviving other than the scorch marks creating an outline of them. In another home, Bilbo found a nearly intact skeleton of a child who had hidden under the bed, only for perhaps his head to be caught in the dragon's fire. This was to say nothing of the larger clan community centers. These, for rich or otherwise prominent families, were scenes of macabre horror.

But both scouts could not let themselves break down from seeing this tragedy. They had to push themselves to do their parts to avenge it. The important thing was there were enough side passages and tunnels to allow the dwarves to hit and run. Now they had to find enough weapons to, if not annoy Smaug, keep his attention.

Orienting himself, Harry used the information that Dwalin and Thorin had given them on where the various armories had been to examine them one after another. Unfortunately, most of these armories had been so close to the main hall that the dragon's attempts to burn the dwarves out had melted or simply destroyed most of the weapons within. Yet, in a few of the armories well below the main thoroughfare, they found some of the heavier weapons that would've been used to defend the Lonely Mountain as a whole rather than the interior of Erebor.

A few ballistae remained scattered throughout the armories. These were heavy, two-person weapons which looked as if they hadn't seen any care in a long while, but Harry hoped they could still be useful. With the help of spells to make them lighter, the two of them moved many of these weapons out to the smelting area.

Then, they moved through the whole mountain, mapping out where the tunnels leading up to the surface which let in the air were. Of course, all of these air vents were set to open up near the top of the mountain where no one could get to them, and this took them both several minutes. But blocking those off would be another part of their mad scheme to possibly choke Smaug on his own smoke if the poison of Harry's blade didn't work.

How long this took Harry and Bilbo had no way of knowing, but in the furthest tunnels away from the Dragon, Harry saw that the spells on them were starting to fade away. Reflecting that Bilbo didn't seem to need the silencing spell given how silent he could already move, Harry renewed the spells on both of them, then chanced to speak aloud. "Are we done?"

"I think we are. Now comes the hard part," Bilbo whispered in reply before leading back the way they had come, shivering in fear of the battle to come.

It was only as they began to move to the rope Harry had left behind that both scouts realized some of the gold piles seems to have moved. By then, it was too late, as the dragon shifted, raising its head out of the gold pile which had previously covered it.

That head was as large as Harry had feared it would be from the size of this out sticking out earlier. Its eyes were almost as large as Bilbo would be lying down and opened on luminescent, catlike orbs, which looked this way and that, as the green-scaled dragon opened its mouth, showing serrated rows of teeth, lots of them. And even worse, the dragon was between them and the safety of the hidden tunnel.

“And what is this which has entered my home, creeping about in the shadows?” The dragon spoke in a voice so deep it sounded like the very earth had spoken its words slightly sibilant, but not overmuch, as it turned in their direction. “I cannot yet see you, but I can feel the movement of the air you breathe, sense your presence here. What manner of human has been able to these halls, and why do you smell of magi? Are you a wizard then, one of those busybodies from across the Eastern Sea come to steal my treasures? I would’ve thought that of a group of people called themselves the Wise would know not to disturb a dragon in his lair.”

For a moment, Harry panicked, thinking that the cloak and the spells Harry had cast on Bilbo had failed.

Bilbo stared at Harry, nearly invisible in his cloak, despite having turned his face back to Bilbo in shock. Then acting faster than Harry would have thought possible, Bilbo doubled back the way they had come a tiny bit, moving behind a pile of gold on the floor, closer to the dragon. Somehow the hobbit moving silently even now as the gold shifted and moved with Smaug’s movement until he was hidden from dragon and human.

There, Bilbo began to speak, calling attention to his position even as he slipped on the ring, causing him to become invisible to a level that Harry’s spells couldn’t match. “I am no human oh, great and powerful Smaug! Nor am I a thief.”

“I note that you have no issue with the creeping about in the shadows part of my statement,” the dragon replied drolly. “But if you are not human, which I can well believe, what kind of creature are you?”. You smell different than any dwarf human or elf I’ve ever eaten before. And what are you? And my other question, oh shadow lurker? What is this magic I feel in the air? And if you are not a thief, and do note the sarcasm in my tone, why have you come here, little creature?”

“Those are two extremely long answers you wish of me, oh greatest and most ancient of calamities!” Bilbo answered, causing Harry to gape at his bravery even as he slowly backed away from the dragon, trying to move silently and unseen even without his spells. “Which do you wish me to answer first?”

Smaug chuckled, small puffs of smoke rising from his nostrils as he slowly shifted his head, staring around him but still unable to actually see his visitor. “You have some manners at least, my unseen guest. Answer me my questions in order, I believe.”

“Then I will answer them in riddles, Lord Smaug, for it is said that like all intelligent beings, dragons enjoy them,” Bilbo began, still speaking both obsequiously and dramatically.

When Smaug gave his ascent, Bilbo began, making things up as he went along, blessing the riddle game he’d had with Gollum for awakening this part of his mind. “I come from under the hill, and under the hills and over the mountains my paths led. And through the air. I... I am he that walks unseen.”

“This I can well believe. Yet no mention of magic as yet?” Smaug interrupted, but it was clear from the smile on his face and the twitch of his tail that he continued to find Bilbo’s words amusing.

“No magic, no. But I am the clue-finder, the web-cutter, the stinging fly who slew the spiders.”

Smaug huffed in delight. “Aha! Mirkwood then! I have eaten several spiders in the past who attempted to leave the forest’s environs and move to my mountain. But you are no elf, Riddle Maker. You do not speak as one, and you certainly came from much farther away than the woods.”

“Indeed not, my home as I said was under a hill, not a mountain such as your magnificent lair. There I came from the end of a bag, but no bag went over me, and I was chosen to cancel an unlucky number. On my trek, I have been the friend of bears and the guest of eagles and become a Barrel Rider.”

“Fascinating. If I were to take your words as truth, you have certainly come a far way. That makes me even more curious, although no longer about your origins. Instead, I will repeat one of my earlier questions. Why have you come?”

“I wished to simply come and see, to see if the legend of you has grown over the centuries to eclipse the reality, oh great drake,” Bilbo answered.

While Bilbo and Smaug had been conversing, Harry had been making his way rapidly away from the hobbit, shaking his head under his invisibility cloak at the young hobbit’s bravery. *It’s always the quiet ones!*

Now, as he was almost at the point where the rope hung down to him, Smaug laughed at Bilbo’s attempt to appeal to his arrogance. And yet, it did seem to work. Smaug reared up out of the piles of gold, shaking himself almost like a dog would get rain out of its coat as millions of gold coins rattled to the ground all around him or off the walls of the vault. Several of them hit Harry, and one of them caught him in the side of his cloaked head with enough force to send him stumbling to his knees. A swishing noise in the air caused him to fling himself forward flat while Smaug’s tail flew through where he had just been standing.

“Then look upon me, oh Barrel Rider and despair! For no passage of centuries has made me any less fearsome! I... am... **Smaug!** My claws are spears, my teeth swords, my scales like tenfold shields! My wings are hurricanes, the shock of my tail a thunderbolt, and my breath... **death!**”

Now fully out of his golden bed, Smaug stood revealed. He was easily twice as long in the body from the tip of his tail to his snout as the basilisk that Harry had killed in his second year, and the tail was just as thick around as the basilisk’s body, while his body put to shame any ship Harry had ever seen pictures of in size. Its forearms and back limbs were both the size of trees, his claws gleaming like metal at the ends of long, dexterous-seeming fingers. His wings filled the air of the cavern from one end to another, and his head brushed the ceiling high above them. Along Smaug’s back, a series of thick plates rode up his back until around halfway to his head.

In front of Smaug, Bilbo gaped, then narrowed his eyes and stared at one particular spot on the dragon’s breast. There, almost invisible against the dragon’s vast bulk, was an area where a series of scales were missing or perhaps had never grown in. *A weakness?*

But before Bilbo could feed Smaug's ego further, Smaug twisted around, lashing out with his claw right above the balustrade where Harry was lying. His claws dug into the solid stone of the vault tossing bits of stone down onto Harry, one of which nearly smashed into his head, but he roiled to the side at the last second, then got his feet under him and dove behind another pile of the gold which had been spread out to the sides of the cavern from Smaug's movement.

"It isn't very polite, oh hidden one, to allow your companion to talk for you," Smaug growled out, bellowing in some amusement a tongue of flame flashing up to the ceiling before Smaug stared down into the area around him once more. "Well, what do you have to say for yourself?"

Using a spell to launch his voice in random directions, a prank spell that he had learned from the twins, Harry replied, now thinking that the only way to get out of here was to keep the dragon talking until one of them could get to the tunnel's entrance. "My companion is rather more talkative than I am in the normal scheme of things," Harry replied. "I meant no offense."

It seemed to fool Smaug for now as he turned partly away from where Harry was crouched down, depending on his cloak of invisibility. "Offense was given hidden one. And yet again, I cannot actually see you, fascinating! But I can still smell your clothing under those spells which hide you from my gaze. And I am wondering how long you can keep this spell up in my presence."

Smaug seemed to chuckle again, but much of the humor had disappeared from him when he spoke once more. "I am also wondering what to do with two thieves who have stolen into my lair. But, as fascinating as the mystery is, and as interesting as it has been to have a conversation after so many decades, all good things must come to an end. And I think perhaps, for all your strange magic hidden one, that you have yet to prove you are fireproof."

With that, he turned towards Harry who was standing once more, and launched a blast of fire towards them.

Hastily Harry transfigured the mound of gold in front of him into a solid wall, hitting it and himself with a flame-freezing charm as the fire lapped out all around and above the wall. Then he used the Avis spell to conjure hundreds of birds into being, which flew up and towards Smaug over the fire.

The dragon seems to blink at this, then bellowed a laugh and used his flame once more to turn the whole covey of birds into so much burned charcoal. But by that point, Harry was moving already, lashing out with a blasting spell towards Smaug's face as he left his hiding spell. This did nothing, but Harry, remembering the conversations about indirect attacks, lashed out with a Lumos spell, then a cutting spell.

This blinded Smaug for a few seconds, and he cried out, growling and smashing his head into the ceiling as he stumbled backward. "That is just not on wizard!" he roared, and more flame erupted from his mouth down towards Harry's former position, who had already moved on.

"Come on, you giant flaming cockerel!" Harry bellowed. "You won't be the first overgrown reptile I've slain, and your eyes aren't nearly as dangerous as the last ones!"

Now thoroughly annoyed, the dragon seemed to have forgotten Bilbo. With a final glance in Harry's direction, Bilbo turned and sprinted for the rope leading up to the balustrade, trusting in the ring

and his own hobbit-given ability to move silently. Gaining it, he raced towards the tunnel, knowing that he needed to get the dwarves involved, or else Harry would die.

OOOOOOO

Outside, the dwarves waited anxiously as the night moved on, and dawn began to break without either of their companions returning. Given the size of Erebor and their mission to map out what the underground city was like after so many decades of Smaug squatting within the ruins, the time made sense. Yet that made none of them any less anxious.

Thorin, in particular, was pacing about, his hands clasped behind him. On the surface, he looked calm and determined, but inside, the man who wished to be King Under the Mountain was feeling every bit as anxious as his fellows, on top of an immense feeling of guilt. Guilt about leading his nephews and their other companions to this place. Guilt at how far Harry had come for simple friendship. Guilt at how they had basically belabored Bilbo into joining them. Admittedly a part of that last had been thanks to Gandalf, but at the moment, Thorin was in no state of mind to admit that.

Harry had nothing in this world, no part in our quarrel, our struggle to reclaim our home and our pride as a people. And I have dragged him across half the world in pursuit of it. And Bilbo, poor Bilbo, torn from his peaceful life in the Shire and brought along on this adventure. Not only brought along but instrumental in its success up to this point, just like Harry has proven! And then, to add to our ignominy, we had to ask them to do this one last task.

Around and around these points, Thorin's mind went as dawn light began to bathe the Lonely Mountain in its glory until Kili, on duty inside the tunnel, hissed out, "Someone's coming! And they're running. I can't tell much beyond that, but it sounds like only one set of footsteps."

The rest of the band quickly grabbed up their weapons and waited as Bilbo came into sight inside the tunnel, having removed the ring a few turns of the upward spiral ago. He stumbled into Kili's arms, and the younger of Thorin's cousins helped Bilbo forward, whispering concerned questions in his ear. But before they had gone a few paces, Bilbo wrenched himself free, shouting out, "Harry! Smaug, it smelled us out. They're fighting now, but Harry's spells, I don't think they're doing anything to Smaug!"

"Ah, so Smaug's still alive then," Nori muttered before being smacked upside the head by Dori.

Ignoring that, Thorin clapped a hand on Bilbo's shoulder before looking at his other companions, throwing off his guilt and anxiousness in the face of battle. "We didn't think that Harry alone would be able to win this for us in the first place, Mr. Baggins. This is it. This is the moment we have been dreading and hoping for in equal measure. Now, let us win back our kingdom!"

With that, the dwarves forward, even Balin and Oin growling out an affirmative before racing inside with Thorin in the lead with Bilbo beside him.

OOOOOOO

Blinking his eyes rapidly, Smaug's tone turned into a sneer, as he turned his full attention on Harry. "I feel you, wizard. And now that I can see your spells in action, I know you are not of this world! You're not strong enough to withstand my might."

“Maybe not in might, but I think I am more than fast enough to dodge you, you fat tub of draconic lard!” Harry retorted as he raced forward, slashing at a toe with his blade before dodging away, rolling underneath Smaug’s tail and then hurling himself over another small, quickly shifting pile of coins. The blow from his sword hadn’t done anything. Instead, it had been like hacking at a stone. *So much for that idea!*

Harry thrust the sword of Gryffindor into his mokeskin pouch, then rolling away from a foot stomp.

“Hahaha! Yes! Fight, struggle, lets me amuse myself more!” Smaug shouted before a Reducto crashed into his neck. It did nothing, not even making him choke, the Reducto spell simply unable to find purchase on his scales.

But the next second, another indirect spell was flashing up towards Smaug’s face, filling the cavern with a smell like someone had dropped a thousand dung bombs right on top of Smaug’s nose. *Thank you, Fred and George, for your horribly inventive bag of tricks!*

“Now that was just annoying, wizard! Do not think I will make your death anything less than excruciating for this!” Smaug howled, trying to get away from the smell, only for it to cling to his snout. “Grah!!!”

Harry’s response was another Lumos spell, which conjured a minor sun right above Smaug. It was so bright that Harry had to quickly cancel the Owl-sight spell, which had allowed him to see in the dark up to this point lest he be blinded. Even the dwarves who had just reached the vault and who had recently been outside in the sunlight had to stumble to a halt, rubbing at their eyes. It was only a last-minute injunction from Bilbo to keep silent that kept them from crying out.

Blinded and without his ability to smell anything at the moment, Smaug raged at Harry’s previous position, lashing out with fangs and claws. This allowed the dwarves to get down to the king’s personal entrance to the vault.

Then, Smaug seemed to somehow sense where Harry’s next assault came from. In reply, fire flared once more. And even though Harry rolled away from them, the heat followed him, boiling Harry despite his Flame Freeze spell, and he began to cry out in pain.

Behind them, the dwarves, who had raced to the closest entrance, the king’s personal entrance, heard Harry screaming somewhere near the flame. They couldn’t figure out where Harry was thanks to his cloak and the voice-throwing spell, but Smaug evidently had been able to, or at least a general location, as he had just doused the far area of the vault with fire from one end to another.

Thorin stared towards where Harry’s screams were coming from, then over at Smaug. *Not this time, creature!* Urging his people on, he bellowed at the top of his lungs, “Dragon!”

In response, Smaug’s flames cut out. He turned his long neck around to look behind him and saw Thorin standing there, and as the last of his fellows raced past him out into the personal library beyond his grandfather’s office, Thorin spoke once more. “Dragon, these halls are not yours, these treasures are not yours, and we, the sons of Durin, have come to reclaim them!”

in response to this, the dragon smiled, a terrible, condescending, arrogant twist of the lips. "Truly? The wizard at least had his magic, which he could have been deluded enough to believe he had even a chance of hurting me with. But you? A dwarf? What madness has addled your brain? Still, I will indulge you. I don't have to eat you afterward after all. I wouldn't wish to catch anything."

With that, Smaug lashed out with his tail towards where Thorin was, only for Thorin to fling himself back into the office. Rolling as he hit, Thorin popped to his feet, running as quickly as he possibly could into the hallway beyond, putting several stone walls between him and the blast of fire that chased after him.

Growling in amusement, Smaug straightened up further, shook himself, sending a few errant gold coins bouncing, then moved towards the main entrance into the vault, staring out into the main cavern. There, he looked around and began to laugh, staring. For in every direction, he saw dwarves racing away in seeming panic. "So it isn't just the one madman who has returned, but a small band of little rats scurrying back into their holes."

Stalking forward, he looked over to where Thorin was hiding near the entrance to the king's throne room, and, deciding to play with his toy's minds before he started the chase, Smaug taunted them. "Tell me, little rats, have you ever wondered what your people felt when you left them to their doom?"

"Oh yes, hahaha," Smaug laughed, easily the vilest laugh any of them had ever heard. "I can smell you, Prince of Erebor. I well remember the scent of your father and your grandfather before, given how it permeated that little alcove overlooking my den. How nice of one of you at least to return. There is a sense of completeness in killing a royal when you take his city, which alas I was not able to feel because you and your family ran so quickly."

Stalking forward, Smaug continued to taunt, not realizing that in so doing, he was playing into the dwarves' plans. Because while it seemed as if the band had simply panicked, that was not the case. No, Bilbo had hastily filled them all in on what he and Bilbo had found on the race through the tunnel, and they had all put into motion the plan they had come up with over the past few days.

Ori and Bofur, the fastest runners, had already disappeared up side-streets leading to the first airshafts. Balin and Oin had raced to the maintenance tunnel that would lead them up to where the dead drops near the doorway could be released. And Bifur, who had worked in the smelters, had led Nori down to them and was now frantically running hither and yon on that lower level, hoping that their boasts about the smelters still being able to work would be accurate.

It turned out that they were, and the two swiftly started them going.

This left Gloin, Dori, Dwalin, Bombur, Kili and Fili to aid Thorin in distracting the dragon. The best fighters and Bombur, who, alas, was just too slow on his feet to help much elsewhere.

"Tell me, in your freedom out in the world, have you ever dreamed about how they died, how many you left behind to die? The ones that tried to hide rather than flee, the dams that couldn't escape fast enough?" Smaug well knew what would hurt the dwarves the most. "They died in agony, slow or long. They died trying to get past me, a swift death, or starving to death in fear, hidden in these tunnels

until they at last succumbed to madness or sank into darkness. The stink of their fear was **delicious!** They died cursing you and your family, King's kin, for leaving them behind."

"Yet their vengeance is nigh, dragon!" Thorin shouted, trying hard to not let the dragon's words get to him. "Every last one of my people, every last dwarf you slew in Erebor, they will all be avenged!"

Smaug laughed, and then Bilbo, Dori and Gloin rolled a ballista out from one of the old armories which hadn't been completely destroyed. The bolt had barely enough time to fly before Smaug turned in their direction, flames reaching towards them. All of them yelped and dodged or ducked out of the way, but before Smaug could move over and breath fire into the hole they had entered, another ballista bolt from further along the main level caught him in the shoulder, bouncing off his scales.

Then, the chase was on as Smaug whirled, launching himself forward, his wings flapping open involuntarily as he lashed out towards Dwalin and Fili.

Back in the vault, Harry had barely gotten out of the way of the tongue of flame Smaug had launched his, and the heat of the fire had nearly cooked him alive despite the Flame Freeze charm. Now, as he rolled away from the bubbling, molten gold behind him, it was all he could do to have finally clamped his jaw on his scream. He could feel his mind fading in and out, but Harry couldn't let it win.

In this, he was aided by another image of Arien, the Maiden of fire, which appeared in his eyes as he began to lose the battle with unconsciousness. ***"Take heart, Harry Potter,"*** she whispered into his mind. ***"If you do not fight, your death will not be the only one mourned this day, and I would hate for the first being to ever look for me rather than Anar for guidance to die. Take of my power and bring the battle to the twisted creation of Morgoth. Let not your light be diminished!"***

"Ugh, n, now I know what Oliver was talking about when he talked about high maintenance girls," Harry grumbled, but the image had somehow helped to deaden his awareness of the pain he was in. The pain was still there but no longer threatening to drag him into darkness, definitely a gift from Arien. Harry slowly pushed himself to his feet as he pulled his burned, possibly ruined invisibility cloak off, tossing it behind him. There would be time to retrieve it later if he survived.

Outside, Smaug was laughing now, a great booming sound that set the scattered remains of the dead dwarves to rattle as he enjoyed the chase, knowing that the dwarves, wherever they came from, could not return to the hidden tunnel that had somehow brought them into his lair. Before exiting the vault, Smaug had destroyed the balustrade where a mysterious tunnel had seemingly appeared. They were trapped here, and Smaug was confident that nothing they could do could actually hurt him.

That was, until a massive blasting curse caught Smaug on the side, hurling him off his feet. "What!"

At the main entrance to the vault, Harry stood on weary feet, his hand outstretched towards the giant dragon. Both his legs were marked by burn marks; his pants having been set on fire when he touched some of the molten gold left after Smaug's attack. One side of his body was a mass of thermal burns, his hand on that side useless, clenched into a claw, the old scars on that hand having been exacerbated tremendously, to the point where they had opened and were slowly leaking blood.

But his emerald eyes gleamed in the spreading firelight, and he was stumbling forward, lashed out with another blasting spell that hit Smaug in the side once more before Smaug was able to turn his neck around. When he did, he launched a massive fireball towards Harry.

Kili was there suddenly, diving and catching Harry across the waist, taking them both off their feet to land in one of the offices set into the side of the wall separating the vault from the rest of Erebor. This saved them as the blast of fire roared past where Harry had previously been.

On the other side of the main cavern, another ballista bolt, this time fired by Thorin and Bombur, crashing into the side of Smaug's snout, causing him to growl in pain. Although they couldn't really do much damage there, his nostrils were sensitive enough to touch and thus sensitive to pain.

That diverted Smaug's attention in that direction, and he whirled around, continuing his fiery assault across the central plaza and into the hole that the two dwarves had disappeared down into. The blast caught the ballistae and burned the wood of it to ash, but Thorin had turned, grabbing Thorin and rolling them away down the corridor. The blast of fire flashed into the tunnel, but there was a slight bend in the tunnel, enough for both dwarves to lie there, staring as the flames passed them by.

Racing into the area where Kili and Harry were now hiding and reflexively pulling off his ring as he skidded into place beside them, Bilbo eyed Harry up and down, gasping in horror at the number of burns covering him. "Harry! How are..." He paused, realizing the stupidity of that statement.

"I am all right. Pain is an old friend to me, Bilbo. I will collapse after all of this is done, but for now, how goes the battle?" Harry asked, his voice calm, almost disconnected from reality, such was the pain his body was in.

"We are completely unable to hurt the dragon, and frankly, I don't even know if the dead drops will do enough damage! But Harry, I have to tell you, when he, when Smaug showed off, I saw something, a weakness." He quickly explained about the small area of missing scales, and Harry reached into his buckskin pouch, thankfully unburned, pulling out his sword to both use as a crutch and as a focus for now.

"That is a damn small target Mr. Baggins, but it is a better idea than aiming for his mouth, where the fire originates." Harry even laughed at his own little joke, although it was more of a grimace made into sound than an actual sign of humor. "Still, let's see what we can do."

Sticking to the edge of the main thoroughfare and cutting in and out of sight through the tunnels had allowed the dwarves to keep themselves alive up to this point. Meanwhile, above, Balin led Oin in their own part of the battle, making certain as best they could that the dead drops would work, waiting for the opportunity.

Seeing Smaug scabbling at the whole where Thorin and Bombur had hidden with one of his forepaws, Dwalin and Gloin feared the worst. Without even thinking about it, they charged forward from the different houses where they had been hiding, hacking at Smaug's tail with their weapons. But Smaug scales would have been proof even against the elven blade Orcrist, let alone dwarven made weapons.

The tail flicked once, smashing Gloin off of his feet, then hammering back to send Dwalin flying, bouncing off of the far wall like a metal ball bearing. Gloin staggered to his feet, but Dwalin lay where he

had been hammered with several cracked ribs. Smaug turned and would've gone for Dwalin then, but for Harry again blinding him with another Lumos spell. "That is getting tedious, wizard!"

"My name's Harry Potter, you overgrown gecko!" Harry retorted, firing off a transfigured spear that crashed into the side of Smaug's mouth, shattering on impact.

That somehow seemed to get past Smaug's arrogant imperturbability more than any of the previous attacks had, touching him to the quick. He twisted around himself, roaring towards where Harry's voice had come from. "Gecko, I will show a gecko! I will burn your body and crunch your bones beneath my feet!"

Harry was nowhere near where his voice was sounding from. Indeed, he moved towards Dwalin with Thorin coming from the other side, using one of the Dis-illusion runestones that Harry had prepared. This let him move around Smaug, and when he was by Dwalin, Thorin shouted out, "BAAAALLIINNN!!!"

At this signal, Balin and Oin hit the levers to remove the ceiling holding the dead drops in place. The ceiling, which had been so cunningly wrought as to look like a single piece above Erebor's main gate, came apart above Smaug. Giant, multi-ton stone slabs crashing down towards the dragon, including several that had been stalactites.

For all his insane reaction time, Smaug was not fast enough to get out from underneath this sudden deluge, and the stones slammed into him. One of them went through the membrane of one of his wings which had opened as he leaped towards Harry's voice, causing Smaug to cry out in a terrible fury and pain. Another few caught him on the back, and then still more came down, then more. The equivalent of several skyscrapers in weight of stone, intended to completely bar the front gate to **any** foe, crashed down onto Smaug.

The dwarves watched with bated breath as the dust settled, then as the dust dissipated, Smaug roared, rearing up, pushing the stones off of him, trying to drag himself out from underneath them. But the damage was severe. Both of his wings had been ripped in places, possibly ruined, and Smaug might have well suffered even more broken bones given how he was moving as if his body was no longer quite as responsive, but his scales were so tough that even this had not finished him off.

However, the worst injury was to one of Smaug's eyes, which had been caught directly by one of the larger stone blocks. Hitting the eye corner-first, the stone had pulped Smaug's eye as the weight of the blow and several others smashed Smaug's head to the ground.

But Smaug was nowhere near dead and was rapidly pulling and shoving the stones off him with his head and his one free back leg. Roaring and shooting fire in every direction, all of Smaug's normal urbane air, his taunting contemptuous arrogance, was gone now, leaving wrath made into a voice that shook Erebor from one end to the other. "**I will kill you!** I will kill you all! And then, when my wings heal, when I can fly once more, I will go to your Iron Hills, dwarves. I will ravage them to the bedrock. I will eradicate your people!"

"Ballistae!" Thorin roared as he dragged the wounded Dwalin into cover behind a smashed statue that had once shown the likeness of Durin. "Everyone, find one of the ballistae! Aim from on high, aim for his eye!"

Fili and Dori instantly returned from the side passage where they had been hiding, having even saved their weapon from the earlier attack. Now with Bombur holding the weapon for him, Fili twisted the back of it this way and that until he lined up a shot. Not being the marksman of his younger brother, Fili's shot missed, but it caused Smaug to reflexively twitch his head away, roaring in a fury, the fires reaching for the two of them even as they ducked back once more, protected by a hasty Protego from Harry.

Other dwarves among the attacking team also began to fire ancient ballistae at Smaug. Many of the ancient weapons didn't fire, portions of their bodies having rusted, or the wood in them breaking under the strain after one or two shots. But enough bolts struck Smaug to, along with Harry's spells – now Bombarda and various conjured creations mainly - keep Smaug raging, twitching his head this way and that unable to free himself as quickly as he would have. The ruined eye was now a danger, a visible wound that they could aim for.

Even worse for Smaug, it had occluded half of Smaug's world, blinding him from being able to see to his left at all without twisting his other eye to look that way. For the first time since he had hatched, Smaug felt vulnerable, and he had to fight a growing amount of panic down.

Meanwhile, Ori and Bofur were nearly finished sealing the mountain. All of the hidden air vents had been closed. And in the smelting area, Bifur and Nori had the fires going. Instead of turning out metal in large amounts, they had set up a heap ton of coal into the massive braziers, creating smoke. So much smoke that the dwarves had to retreat.

Above this and Smaug's continued use of his fire had an impact, and smoke quickly began to spread, making eyes water. Realizing the danger of this, Thorin shouted out, "Pull back by teams! Harry, you first, far side! The rest, meet up with Harry in groups of two."

Grimacing, Harry raced away from where he had been hiding, Kili staying behind to race to another tunnel which would eventually lead to another armory. As Harry went, he grabbed up a piece of old, frayed leather from the ground where it had up to this point survived the battle. Transfiguring it into a pair of goggles, Harry felt anew the drain of changing something of Arda into something else on top of his growing exhaustion, Arien's touch having begun to fade. But it would hopefully stay in this shape for long enough, and luckily, Harry's pain was still being kept at bay for now.

Able to see through the smoke now, Harry began linked up with Dori, Fili, Bifur and Nori, casting bubblehead charms on them, before once more join his own attacks to that of the dwarves, giving the next group to retreat from the battle around the doorway cover fire. In this, he was joined by Kili and Bilbo, who had yet to retreat, trying to stop Smaug from freeing himself from the trap while also keeping his attention on them, not thinking about the sheer amount of smoke or the fact it didn't seem to be dissipating.

The teams rotated out, with Ori and Bofur joining them, and soon nearly every dwarf bar four had been given Bubblehead charms. Dwalin was still hidden, too close to the dragon for any to get to. Balin and Oin were stuck in the ceiling, unable to get down without the dragon seeing them, and Fili was simply missing, causing Thorin and his brother a good deal of anxiety. But thankfully, Bifur and Nori had also supplied goggles for everyone, taken from the corpses of dwarves working the smelters when the

dragon had broken into Erebor, so everyone would be able to continue to see through the smoke somewhat.

By this point, the smoke from the smelters had nearly filled the main cavern, with Smaug adding to that smoke every time he breathed out his fire, using up the air available in the now-closed city. And as the dragon pushed itself out of the trap, at last, Smaug seemed to at last notice this and laughed. "You think you can hide in this smoke from my gaze!? Or, could you be so stupid as to believe that I would be suffocated by it?! Is that your great plan, to smoke me out! I guarantee that you will die of it long before I do, dwarves."

Yet despite Smaug's words, Thorin, near the front once more, could see that the smoke was indeed having an effect. First, like Harry's Lumos spell, it and the loss of an eye greatly impaired Smaug's sight. And despite his bravado, the dragon was also moving slower. After all, smoke was only one portion of the problem. The other was that said smoke, and the various fires were using up the air within Erebor. And unlike the dwarves, the dragon didn't have a Bubblehead charm or something to wrap around their noses and mouths to keep the smoke at bay.

But will it be enough, or will Harry's spells give out first? Thorin thought worriedly, trying hard not to think of his missing nephew or his pair of respected advisors.

The dragon wasn't breathing out as many flames any longer, either. Instead, he was stalking forward on all fours towards where the bolts were coming from.

When he closed with one such, he ducked his head down, blasting a long jet of fire into the side tunnels, pinpoint attacks rather than long-range. That was incredibly dangerous to the scattered teams of dwarves, and one such attack nearly killed Ori and Bofur, too slow to retreat from their first assault on the dragon.

Indeed it might have burned both dwarves alive if the dragon's attack hadn't cut out when Harry began to attack from long-range. At the same time, under cover of the smoke, Dori raced forward from another nearby tunnel, bringing down a hammer that looked as if it would weigh as much as Bilbo to crash down on one of Smaug's toes.

Where cutting and slashing attacks had not worked on the scales of Smaug, blunt impacts seemed to be able to get through them, however little. The scales themselves didn't seem all that damaged, but the flesh underneath certainly felt it, and Smaug screamed in rage, twisted around, and would have caught Dori with one of his claws, if not for a Bombarda spell from Harry blasting into his snout right by his ruined eye. As it was, his tale still caught Dori in the chest as the dragon turned.

Another ballista bolt smacked into his neck then, doing no harm but dragging his attention towards where Gloin and Kili had just fired at him. As Smaug scrambled forward towards them, Harry saw it. He saw the weak spot on Smaug's chest, and after a brief second's thought, Harry raced forward, the sword of Gryffindor in his hand.

But Smaug caught his movement and twisted around. Then, setting aside his need to conserve air, lashing out with a blast of fire.

Harry may well have been caught full force by this blast of fire if not for Thorin. Oakenshield had seen his charge and raced out to impose himself between the fire and his friend. A metal tower

shield taller than he was that Thorin had grabbed from an armory hung on one arm. And in his offhand, Thorin clutched his Flame Freeze runestone.

The runestone shattered within seconds of the fire hitting him, its magic overcome by the sheer heat of the fire hitting them. A second later, the shield began to melt, the interior of it searing Thorin's arm. But he kept it there as Harry hit him with another flame freeze charm, the pain in Thorin's arm dissipating slightly. A second later, Harry hurled the sword of Gryffindor over Thorin's head like a spear.

It was not a very aerodynamic spear, and sword throwing was an art that Harry had never perfected. But as the blade was in the air, Harry grabbed it with a modified version of the Leviosa spell, adding the impetus of a reverse Accio so automatically that Professor Flitwick would have given him an O on the spot.

As his magic took command of the flying sword, Harry, moved by an impulse he didn't quite understand, screamed out, "By the name of Manwë King of Winds and Arien the Sun Mariner, you will not cast your shadow any longer on Arda, Smaug!" Harry screamed as he poured all of his remaining magical power into the spells carrying the sword of Gryffindor forward.

It was as if combined with his own magic, the names of the King of the Valar and Harry's new patron merged to create an even more powerful spell. The flying blade became covered in a lance of blazing red and orange light as it flashed through the smoke.

Having already proven that he was completely immune to their weapons, Smaug didn't even try to dodge until he could see the white light of the spell surrounding the sword. And by then, it was too late. Guided by Harry's will, the sword's course shifted, following Smaug's last-minute twitch, to stab unerringly into the weak spot on the dragon's chest.

But it didn't hit dead on. It came in at an angle, so, although it pierced his chest down to the hilt, it missed his heart.

Smaug roared in agony beyond that of his eye as he slumped onto one side, fire exploding again and again from his mouth as he spasmed. But despite the blade stuck in his chest, Smaug righted himself, charging towards Thorin and Harry.

Turning, Thorin dropped his shield and grabbed for Harry, hurling them both to the side, dodging the next, far thinner and weaker tongue of fire. Then Kili and Gloin were there, holding up shields of their own as Thorin pulled Harry to his feet, dragging his friend back and away from the dragon. A moment later, Harry nearly stumbled as his feet missed the first step to a staircase, but Thoring simply hefted the human up into the air and carried him bodily down and away.

Soon, all of the dwarves were in hiding, underneath or simply away from the areas of Erebor Smaug could reach. This wasn't pleasant for any of them, as these were where a majority of the skeletons of those who had died could be found. But for now, they were safe.

Behind them, another fireball followed, but it was a short one, cutting off quickly. When it did, all of the dwarves there could hear Smaug's voice raised in rage and wrath. But weakness too was apparent there, especially as it started to trail off within a minute. "You think a single blade, a single blade is long enough to pierce my heart!? No, this is not I a... what, what is this!? what is..."

Smaug's voice faltered, and from where he was now being carried by Thorin, Harry grinned. "I think the poisons having an effect!"

"So is the smoke! But for now, let us pull back and let it and the smoke do its work. We need to rally with the others."

Harry nodded and recast the spell on the three dwarves with him. This, though, seemed to drain Harry past the point where he could still ignore his pain, and with a cry, he slumped further against Thorin, his whole body becoming near boneless.

Looking at his friend, Thorin made a decision. "Stop the smelters. Kili, run to the nearest air shaft and open it. We need the air now just as much as Smaug did. I'll send Ori after you when I can.

As they waited there, the other dwarves slowly began to trickle in through the smoke and fog. By the time the smelters stopped putting out smoke, Bilbo, Fili, Dwalin and Balin's team were the only ones still missing.

That wasn't to say all of them were uninjured, of course.

Gloin, Kili, Nori and Bombur had all been scorched badly, with Bombur and Gloin losing most of their beards, a terrible thing for a dwarf. But thanks to the flame freeze arrays, none who had shown up just yet had died. Worry about those still missing ratcheted higher, while above them in the main thoroughfare, Smaug's death rattles began, accompanied by hissing, pain-filled screaming.

Hearing this a sound like thunder in the distance above them and seeing his youngest nephew racing towards them along with the equally young Ori, Thorin pushed Harry towards Bombur as he stood up. Then, waving the other dwarves down, he grabbed up his sword. "Wait here, I will see if Smaug is truly dead. If not, we will restart the smelters and then escape through the open-air shaft that Kili just opened and let the poison and the smoke continue to do their work. With the dead drop already used and Harry's blade stuck in him already, we have nothing else that can truly hurt Smaug directly."

Above, Thorin found the smoke slowly clearing, although not very quickly. And there was no sound of any movement, certainly no sound of Smaug moving any longer. Such a large creature could never be stealthy after all.

He turned towards one sound, though, seeing Balin and Oin hurrying towards him, carrying a blonde-haired body between them. The sight of what could only be his sister's firstborn being carried towards him unconscious caused Thorin's heart to waiver, and he raced in their direction, ignoring his search for Smaug for just a moment. "FILI!!"

He nearly tripped over Bilbo, coming out from hiding behind one of the now shattered columns of stone that had served as signposts in the past. "Thorin! Are you all right?"

"I should ask you the question, Mr. Baggins," Thorin said, ducking around him. "You have a positive gift for moving around unseen."

"I rather think that was a necessity here." With that, Bilbo, his face covered by rags to keep the smoke from getting to him, raced along beside Thorin until they reached the trio of dwarves.

“How is Fili?” Thorin asked anxiously, lifting Fili from between the two older dwarves, looking into his face but noting with relief the rise and fall of his chest.

“Same as the rest of us, a little burnt around the edges, but Fili also took some stray piece of rock right underneath his armpit. We staunched the bleeding, but it’s a serious wound, Thorin,” Balin reported grimly, staring around him through the haze of smoke behind his own mask of rags. “Where is Dwalin?”

“Alive,” Bilbo answered from behind Thorin. “He’s probably got more broken ribs than whole ones, but when Harry tricked Smaug into heading towards Erebor’s gate Thorin was able to drag him into cover, and I moved him afterward into one of the side-houses. But with my limited medical knowledge, I couldn’t see how badly he was hurt. How is Harry?”

“Barely conscious and in a lot of pain. But alive. Indeed, I believe that only Dori is still missing. Balin, you and Bilbo will take Fili to the others. Tell Ori to join Kili and have them open up more of the airshafts. Then come back for your brother. After he is seen to start the search for Dori.” Thorin turned in the direction where he had last seen Smaug through the smoke and fire and fog. “I need to make certain that we are finished here.”

Seeing through the smoke and haze was still somewhat difficult, yet Thorin found Smaug’s side quickly enough and slowly moved up towards his head. There, he climbed up onto Smaug’s snout, staring into the dragon’s one remaining eye, before, with a roar, he brought Orcrist down in a two-handed stab. Pus and blood sprayed yellow and black, but Smaug didn’t move.

Smaug, the last dragon in the world and the greatest since Ancalagon, was dead. Harry’s poison on top of his already rapidly beating heart had finally finished the dread beast off.

“Baruk Khazad, Khazad Ai Thrain Nur! Khazad Ai Thror Nur! Khazad Ai Loral Nur!” Pulling his sword back out, Thorin stabbed, again and again, shouting out the names of his father, the name of his grandfather and then began reciting the names of friends he had lost to Smaug.

How long he did so before Bilbo pulled him away, Thorin didn’t know. But he was literally covered in Smaug’s blackish brackish blood and was still trying to stab his sword deeper into the creature’s eye as Bilbo’s arms wrapped up under his armpits, locking into place behind Thorin’s head in a wrestling hold as Bilbo shouted in his ear, “Enough Thorin! Enough it is dead! It is dead, and we need to see to the living!”

Eventually, Bilbo’s words got through, and Thorin dropped Orcrist from suddenly weary hands. The elven sword rang on the stones of a freed Erebor, and Thorin, King Under the Mountain, turned aside from Smaug, nodding to Bilbo. “My thanks, Bilbo. I’m calm now.”

Once the hobbit freed him, Thorin clapped Bilbo on the shoulder, pushing him away from Smaug to where the others were.

As they went, Bilbo kept a wary eye on Thorin, grimacing at the amount of blood on him. *If even being near a dragon is enough to taint the gold they sleep on, then I shudder to think what their blood can do. I will have to insist he bathes somehow and stays out of the mountain for a time. Indeed, we might all wish to head down to the nearest bit of honest soil we can. But hopefully, with the blessing of*

Yavanna, whatever taint the blood carries can be removed before it takes hold. The gold... that's going to be a tougher question.

Good news waited for them with the others in the form of Dori, who had been knocked unconscious but was otherwise unharmed. Now he was propped between two of his brothers while the doctor fussed around him, having already seen to Fili and done what he could for Harry. Dwalin had also been seen to, but unlike the other two worst injured, Dwalin was awake and moving around under his own power, a growl on his lips but no weapon to hand at present.

Amidst the dwarves Harry stood, leaning heavily on Balin as they came up from the smelting area, but unwilling to let his exhaustion or wounds carry him into sleep just yet. He stared at Thorin, then over his head into the gloom above them on the main level. "We won, right?"

"We won, Harry," Thorin replied.

With a smile, Harry nodded, the touch of Arien in his mind receding, letting unconsciousness claimed him, slipping to the side, his weight becoming a dead weight on Balin's shoulder, to the point where he had to call for one of the other dwarves, Gloin, to help him.

As he did, Harry heard the Fiery Maiden's words once more in his head, stronger and clearer than ever before. ***"I accept you fully now as my pseudo-Maiar, Harry Potter. Let the light ever go with you as you venture into the dark."***

End Chapter

Hmm... I am uncertain if this fight scene is up to par. But I had to deal with the whole giant monster underground thing, which really pushed my ability to visualize the battlefield. I hope you all enjoyed it though. The Small story poll will be up on fanfic on the 6th, so if you enjoyed this, make certain to vote.