

I ain't a Tolkien nor the Rowling.

Hey all! Woot, this was a trip and a half. As those who also read *Bhaalson Remodel* already knows, July has been annoying in RL for various reasons, the main one being I went through an operation on my head (still won't say what it was) and recovering has meant a whole lot of itching, which as an ADHD poster boy, is a thing of horror when considering how it impacts my ability to stay on task. Because of my desperate attempt to get FILFy done by the end of the month to send off to my editors, I only had three days to get this chapter out. Still, I think it's pretty damn for all of that.

And um, a funny note. I looked this up. Aragorn, or, as he was born, Arathorn the second, is only ten when Smaug dies in 2941. Aragorn was born in 2931... Uncertain if I have mentioned him in the past, but um... yeah... any idea of having him and Harry meet will wait a few decades.

This has been edited by no one but myself with Grammarly. Despite that meaning there will be little mistakes within, I hope you all the bit of world-building and romance.

### **Chapter 1# Last-Minute Warnings Are So Last Year**

"Of course, as with all things supposedly simple, why should getting out of Erebor not be harder than expected?" Balin asked rhetorically as he stared at where the walkway around the edge of the treasure room lay in ruins. In particular, right in front of the entrance to the previously hidden passage.

Yet even as he stared up at that, Balin was aware that this was the same place where Smaug had slept and where the gold was piled. Balin was trying very, very hard not to think about the gold. It helped to think about the number of bodies they had found, how close the battle against Smaug had been and the task at hand, but that just made the old dwarf feel depressed. "We need to rig up something to get us up there."

Nodding, Thorin glanced at Bilbo, smiling lightly as he patted the hobbit on the shoulder. "One more task for you, Mr. Baggins. You and Nori are our best climbers. Do you think you can get across from the King's old entrance?"

The two so named went into a huddle, staring up at the wall, then nodding. "The rope, a lot of it. And will need to rig up something for Harry and the other wounded."

That the wounded included Dwalin and Dori, two of the strongest dwarves, and Fili, one of the fittest, compounded matters. Dwalin could still move under his own power, stubbornness keeping him on his feet. But both of the others had to be moved with makeshift gurneys. Both Bifur and Bofur were also wounded, spraining their wrists, and many of the dwarves had horribly bruised shoulders and arms from firing their ballistae.

“Then let us be about it.” Thorin stared down at where his human friend lay, the man who, like Bilbo, had been instrumental in reclaiming their lost home, keeping in mind the wounds that the man had sustained to ignore the call of the gold nearby. He could already feel that call, and looking around, he knew that several of the other dwarves were also feeling it.

Bombur and Bifur in particular were looking avariciously at the gold, and Bombur was even now moving towards it, one hand outstretched towards the nearest pile, his face gleaming with the reflected light of their torches on the gold. “Bombur, stop! There will be time enough to claim our portions of the treasure afterward! Remember the words of Gandalf and Harry both!”

Bofur reached for his brother’s hand, grabbing it at the elbow and halting the fatter dwarf’s reach. The two brothers stared at one another, and eventually, Bombur nodded, shaking his head in and turning away.

This was not the last time that one of the dwarves would become nearly overcome by the gleam of gold, but despite that, the dwarves created a pulley system to get the wounded up to the entranceway after Bilbo and Nori had reached it, hammering in makeshift tines there to tie the ropes to. Indeed, by the time they were done, all of the dwarves still on their feet, bar Kili and Ori were looking at the gold longingly, even the wise Balin.

So the task fell to Bilbo to keep the dwarves moving, warning of madness and the draconic Taint, gesturing to Thorin. “And Thorin was overcome by his anger at the dragon and is now covered in blood! Who knows what kind of mind-altering poison is within it?”

Hearing that, Kili nodded firmly, looking around at his kinsmen and fellow adventurers, recognizing the danger. *Crud, and with Thorin so, well, bloody, and Fili unconscious, it falls to me to do something about it. Damn it.* Shuddering, Fili spoke up, gesturing at the next two youngest dwarves still on their feet. “Nori, Ori with me at the back of the group. Let’s get the wounded up there,” he shouted, gesturing to the group of wounded and to Thorin.

Twice Ori and Nori had to resort to thumping one of the other dwarves as they tried to turn away from their work to reach for the gold. And by the time the last of the wounded was up and moving through the secret tunnel, Thorin was looking somewhat out of it, staring around him in thought, his eyes dilating, his breath coming in gasps.

Kili came up next to his uncle, touching his shoulder gently. “Uncle, we need to moving.”

“Yes, yes, I suppose. But first, I need to find just one item. The most important item. The Arkenstone. It must be here. We must take it with us,” Thorin replied, moving towards the gold, shrugging off his nephew’s hand.

“Uncle, we can do that later. Out of here! I want to see the sun again,” Kili answered, moving in front of Thorin, holding out his hands placatingly. “It will still be here for us when we return. When we can bring sunlight and life back into these dark halls.”

For a moment, the lyrical turn of phrase from his nephew produced a sardonic raise of an eyebrow and the mutter of, “Now if only you could speak to the dams as well as you can waxed poetic just now.” But the moment passed quickly, as Thorin made to push Kili aside, before staring at his own hand as he had moved forward to push Kili aside. A hand that was covered in Dragon blood up with the elbow.

With a shutter, Thorin backed away, moving rapidly towards the ropes, grabbing them and closing his eyes, climbing up blindly until he felt hands reaching down for him from above, pulling him into the entrance to the tunnel. “Let’s get out of here. Kili has the right of it. Erebor is ours, but it is yet not fit for living dwarves.” His lips twitched as he opened his eyes, nodding to Bilbo, who had waited there for the three royals. “Nor for a hobbit or human, I would wager, Mr. Baggins. Lead on.”

With the younger trio behind him, Thorin moved up the tunnel, walking briskly away. As the tunnel wound on, that briskness faded, and he started to glance behind him occasionally, although everyone missed this in the darkness of the tunnel.

When they came out of the tunnel, many of the dwarves, a race who mostly preferred to be underground for one reason or another, cried out in delight at the sight of the sunlight streaming into the open tunnel.

The first dwarf out, Gloin, had to fend off an inquisitive thrush who landed on his shoulder and began to twitter happily into his ear. “Enough, little one,” he grumbled, waving his hand at it. “I have not the tongue to speak to you. And there are more besides me coming out.”

As Harry passed into the sunlight, his body seemed to explode in white-hot flames. But Ori and Nori, who had begun to drop the makeshift gurney that the human was laying on, froze in astonishment. “It, it’s not burning!” As hot as that flame looked, it felt to both of them as if they were lying out on the grass on a hot summer day.

For a moment, all of them stared, but then the flame faded, and Ori gasped. “Lo, look! His wounds! They’re gone!”

Hurriedly setting the human down on the large shelf outside the entrance to the secret tunnel, the other dwarves all crowded around, some even going down onto their hands and knees to poke at where Harry’s wounds had been. Wherever he had been burned, those wounds were now gone. And the hand which had been so badly burned on top of his old scars was now completely healed, including those scars.

“A miracle! A miracle of the Valar,” Balin and Bilbo murmured as one before looking at one another and chuckling wryly.

“But if he’s healed, why isn’t he waking up?” Ori asked, looking around at his older and wiser companions. Which was, even he knew it, the entire company.

Oin shook his head. “Remember he’ll have to deal with a great deal of magical exhaustion too, youngster.”

However, at the word exhaustion, Oin’s words were nearly drowned out by the grumble of stomachs all around them, with Bilbo’s being by far the loudest. “Sorry all,” he said as the other dwarves turned to him in both shock and amused respect, all of them remembering how much Bilbo ate daily, yet still looked so much fitter than he had when they met him in the Shire. “But it has been a long time since elevenses.”

The dwarves all laughed bar Thorin, who had stood up from his friend, looking down at him with a faint smile, before turning his attention back to the entrance. His face hardened in resolution and growing obsession. Now that the wounded were out, he could return, and...

At that point, Bilbo got in his way again, his normally friendly face firm. “Thorin, we still need your help here,” he soothed, trying to use the dwarf’s duty to the others to convince him. “Taking the wounded down to our packs is not going to be easy, and I think we should all move down that way, away from the tunnel. And temptation.”

That last word was perhaps a bit too pointed, and Thorin’s face shifted into one of anger as he stared over Bilbo’s head towards the tunnel. The scent of the blood on him and the curse of the dragon was now swiftly winding its way into his mind, the magical impact of that blood aiding in the slow breakdown of his mind to the dragon’s curse.

And yet, Bilbo had taken the right tact, and Thorin moved over to Harry, hefting him up into his arms, disdaining the gurney now that moving him would not cause further harm. “Come, I will hand him down once we get to the harder areas.”

The way down to where they had left the donkeys was difficult, but everyone agreed with Bilbo that getting away from the entrance would be a good idea. All of them now were stealing glances Thorin’s way, seeing him starting to twitch even as he clasped Harry’s body to him.

When they reached the top of the nearly vertical stretch leading down to where they had left the donkeys, Bilbo breathed a sigh of relief, clambering down it with some of the other dwarves following quickly. The donkeys were all still there, although most of them were now looking a little annoyed at the hobbit and the others, their feedbags having emptied that very morning. It was a look of a domesticated animal reminding its domesticator that they had a deal.

Bilbo moved over to pat them on the noses, then pulled out several bits of hardtack meat, passing them around to the dwarves as they joined him, while the wounded were slowly lowered down into waiting hands.

Unfortunately, this took Bilbo and Balin away from Thorin. He waited until handing Harry down into the waiting arms of the dwarves below, then turned, scrambling back the way he had come, almost going on all fours in his haste to get back to the tunnel and back into Erebor. Nothing existed in his mind at that moment other than finding the Arkenstone.

Kili saw this and scrambled after him, climbing up the wall of rock after him as swiftly as he could. "Uncle, wait!" Several of the others also followed, but most got in one another's way.

"The Arkenstone! I must have it, I must. It is mine by right, like Erebor itself! No one else can touch it, no one else can own it, I must have it in my hands, now!"

"Thorin, that is the madness talking," Kili returned, having caught up with the slower moving Thorin and grabbing his uncle's arm. "We must..."

"No! You want it for yourself! But it is mine!" With that, Thorin turned wildly, swinging his arm back. The blow caught Kili in the jaw, sending him stumbling to the side before Thorin could even understand who had even grabbed him, not having recognized his nephew's voice through the rush of madness taking over his brain.

So surprised was he by the sudden attack that Kili hadn't even set his feet against it. And the area of the path they were on was very thin. The blow caused him to stumble out into space, where Kili had a brief moment to feel horror at the feel of air all around and beneath him.

That sight, the sight of his nephew's wide, terrified eyes, broke through Thorin's madness once more. He grabbed at Kili's arm, pulling him back until Kili's feet scrambled for purchase under him, and the newly arrived Bofur grabbed his other arm. When he saw this, Thorin dropped his grip on Kili, stumbling away from him and going on to both knees as sheer horror at what he had nearly done burned brighter than the Taint. "Someone, knock me out!" he shrieked.

This was an order that Bifur was more than willing to obey, and he moved around the others with some difficulty but at speed. A blow to the back of the head from the side of his axe sent Thorin crashing to the stone of the path.

Kili needed a moment to just sit and get over his near-death experience. When he finally returned, his older brother, who had been woken from his unconsciousness by the cries of alarm from the others, had him in a hug that would've broken a human's ribs despite his wounds the instant he touched down from the wall of stone, a. No words were exchanged between the brothers as Kili returned the hug far more gently while the others looked at Thorin in shock.

“Dragon madness, a horrifying thing indeed,” Balin murmured. “What can we do for him?”

Bilbo looked over Thorin, frowning. “I think we need to get down to the feet of the mountain. I also think we need to find some running water.”

“Why running water?” Bombur asked, looking a little ill. He knew he had been one of the ones who had been fighting the lure of the gold the most inside Erebor. And unlike Thorin, he didn’t have the excuse of being covered with Smaug’s blood.

“Running water is the sign of one of the Valar. Given what happened to Harry, I think we can’t deny that our quest to end Smaug’s life was something they were watching most closely, and want running water might be able to help us.”

The rest of that day passed uneventfully, although Fili did quickly fall back into unconsciousness. He had lost quite a bit of blood, and although Oin had done what he could to set the wound, there was nothing he could do for the loss of blood save force-feed Fili and make sure Fili lost no more as he recovered.

Eventually, they managed to make it down to the start of the hidden trail. There, Thorin was piled up onto one of the donkeys. Then he, Gloin and Bilbo, went in search of running water. At the same time, the others made camp, setting the wounded down and making them comfortable under Oin’s draconian commands.

They did find a small stream, but it wasn’t big enough for them to wash Thorin in all at once, making the entire effort that little bit harder. They washed each of the dwarven leader’s limbs first, watching as the dragon blood colored the water moving downstream. Then Bilbo used several canteens that they had brought from their supplies to wash the blood away from Thorin’s chest and beard, muttering, “I wonder how long it has been since he was able to actually wash this thing!”

“I would take offense at that for all dwarf-kind, Bilbo, but at the moment, I cannot find the truth of your words,” Gloin chuckled from behind Thorin, having propped him up to let Bilbo have more access to the beard. Soon, all of the blood was cleaned away, but Thorin still didn’t wake up from his Dori-induced unconsciousness. “But what now?”

“Now we return to the others. And we bury Thorin.” Bilbo answered simply, his tone so matter of fact that for a moment, Gloin didn’t realize what the hobbit had said. But back at the camp, despite the dwarves looking on incredulously, this was precisely what Bilbo did. He dug a shallow grave and had them place Thorin in it before filling it back up to the neck, at which point he began to plant little seeds around Thorin in the now-tilled earth.

As Bilbo worked, he hummed a tune he had heard his mother’s knee while also sending a thought to Yavanna, the lady of the gardens. *Please, Thorin is a good man, and in perfect one*

*true, but he does not deserve to be cursed by one such as Smaug. This madness, this Taint, it might be a weakness in his family, but to not let it claimed him!*

Catching his companions' incredulous stares, Bilbo shrugged his shoulders defensively. "Don't look at me like that! This will be the first time I've ever had to, to purify anything! I am grasping at straws here, good dwarves, and just doing what a hobbit would do to the earth and hoping for the best. If my people's connection to Yavanna really can do what we think, then it has to do with our care of the earth and growing things. This is about the only way I can think of to make that transfer over into renting a person of a Taint!"

Nearby, Fili had woken up once more from where he had been laid out after the hug earlier, showing the hardihood of the dwarves. Even though he still couldn't move much, unlike Dwalin and even Dori, who was now moving around, if a bit cross-eyed. Seeing his uncle's predicament, Fili did let out a weak chuckled, and some of the incredulity of the dwarves faded that sound as they turned to look at him. "Well, we do here precisely how a person could be freed of the gold madness, and I have to admit to some humor at the idea of my uncle's surrounded by so many living flowers. What he will say about it, I can only imagine, and do so with delight."

That won a round of laughter from the other dwarves, but Balin turned his mind to other matters, although he did wait until Bilbo was done with his ministrations. "Do you think... that is..." He ponders thinking, then asked slowly, "Would it be even safe for us to enter Erebor? If Smaug's blood was able to do that to Thorin, then surely his body remaining within Erebor will cause the Taint to grow, even if it is removed by a distance from the gold."

Bilbo frowned thoughtfully as he turned away from his work, looking down at his now soiled fingers with some small delight. It had been a long, long time since he had worked in his small garden at home with good Master Gamgee helping him with advice and strong shoulders both. A sudden longing for his home hit him then, and it took him a moment to shake it off before he turned back to the dwarves. *First, help them reclaim their home, then I can return to mine, with an entire lifetime's worth of stories to share if I ever wish to do so.*

"In answer to your question, Balin, the answer is I don't know. Like I said, I am simply guessing about most of this. However, I would suggest that we start small. Bring out small clumps of gold, and let me bury it as I did Thorin." The Bilbo waited for a moment as the round of laughter at that phrasing went around the dwarves. "But I also do believe that Smaug's body will need to be removed first."

"You bring a good point, Mr. Baggins, and I fully agree with the idea of removing Smaug's corpse, which begs the question," Balin replied, looking at him quizzically, then leaning back in the lead between two tree roots, which he had used as a chair, looking around at the others then back to Bilbo, letting his face assume a quizzically mocking expression. "How?"

Scene break

Traversing Mirkwood was a chore for all but the elves if you didn't use the road through it. A road that would've taken them out of the way to Lake-town by quite a few days, time that Gandalf could not afford. But finally, Gandalf and his two guards, who had gone ahead of the rest of the Elvin Army - since even an elephant host could not move all that quickly - Gandalf, at last, saw Long Lake, close enough to go around the edge of it quickly. "Thank all the stars above for Radegast," he breathed out in some relief. "If not for his speed, we would still have been winding our way through Mirkwood to try to meet with Thranduil."

He looked at his two companions, patting Elrohir on the shoulder with his free hand as he continued to stumble on his way with the aid of his large staff. He had replaced it soon after having been freed, although he still bemoaned the original's destruction when he had been captured. "And thank you two as well. Your aid has been a major benefit to my old bones."

"Old bones? Say rather ageless, Mithrandir," Elladan quipped from Gandalf's other side. "You may seem like an old human to our eyes, but I would wager that you could still traverse the world several times over before getting truly tired."

"The spirit might be willing, but the flesh is not, my young friend," Gandalf teased, knowing in point of fact, that both of these young elves were older than his own stay in middle earth by nine-hundred years, something they knew as well, judging by the chuckles this comment earned. Then he became serious. "But come, we still must press on hard. Thanks to the two of you and Radegast's aid, we might be well ahead of the Orcish host, but the more time we give the dwarves and everyone else to prepare, the better."

A day and a half later, Gandalf reached Lake-town. He had been here before, although he had never announced himself as Gandalf the Grey at the time. He rarely did so if he could get away with it. Better to watch and observe, with no one the wiser as to your true identity. That way, you could tell how people would really act or think.

He had found Esgaroth a most unpleasant place, slowly going to ruin due to mismanagement but now, even before he entered the town, Gandalf could sense and see something different around it. For one thing, there were far more people on the Lakeside rather than within the town, and he could spot several of them working what looked like small farms here and there. For another, a certain smell had seemingly been removed from the town. It looked cleaner almost.

There were guards at the Lakeside portion of the two long docks that connected Lake-town to the shoreline. They were ready to greet the three travelers, having been warned by some of the guards on the town's wall of their arrival. "Halt and state your business in Lake-town," one of them barked, trying not to sound all that at the site of two elves. His companion was much better, having been among those who had been forced to threaten Tauriel and Legolas when they attempted to infiltrate the town before the battle against the orcs.



"I am Gandalf, the wanderer. With me are two elves of Lord Elrond's court, not that of Thranduil," Gandalf said, making an instant decision to mention his companion's loyalties for no reason that he could quickly discern beyond the near glare of the silent guard standing next to the one who had demanded their identities. A glare that subsided at Gandalf's words "I bring grave news from the east."

That caused everyone within earshot, of which there were several heading out to the fields, to frown, but the guardsmen who had spoken simply nodded then turned and headed into the town. "Wait here. I will bring word of your arrival to Lord Bard."

"Lord Bard? A minstrel has taken over here then?" Elladan quipped. "I would've thought to hear more singing and song as humans reckon such things if so."

Gandalf chuckled, shaking his head. "When last I passed through here, I believe the fellow named Bard was but a simple archer or was it a fisherman? Regardless, why do I think that his sudden elevation to leadership has much to do with the dwarves and Harry?"

"You are friends to the King Under the Mountain then?" The heretofore silent guard inquired. "Yes, Bard met with King Oakenshield, and they worked together to bring to light much of the vile mismanagement that the master of Lake-town was guilty of. Bard is our Lord now, although I caution you not to use the title to his face. Much of the newcomers, people who have come in from small hamlets, who we barely even knew of, call him that and Bard's getting sick of it."

Elrohir nodded, holding up a hand gently to us for stall another quipped from his brother, whose love of ponds was detrimental in his opinion to good humor. "It is often that those called to leadership feel uncomfortable with the trappings of it, and indeed, I have long preferred to see that rather than the alternative."

It took the guard a moment to understand what the elf was saying, but when he did, he simply nodded. "I can see that Lord elf."

"Elrohir, and this is my brother Elladan," Elrohir introduced himself, shaking hands with the human in a human manner. He and his brother had been their father's representatives to many a human kingdom and got along pretty well with human cultures, to say nothing of their deep and abiding friendship with the Rangers of the North.

"Tell us how this transformation came about if you please," Gandalf inquired. "I doubt that we will have time to discuss it after I tell your new leader the news we bring."

The guard nodded, and after introducing himself as Artur, explained how Bard and the dwarves had snuck into the town, getting past the guards at the wharf, then confronted the master of Lake-town. He then went into greater detail on the battle against the orcs, pride for what he and his fellows had done shining through.

He was nearly done by the time Bard arrived. The new Lord of Lake-town paused, staring at Gandalf thoughtfully, recognizing somehow that this old man was not just any old man, above and beyond having two elves as his companions. This guess was proven correct when the old man introduced himself, and Bard bowed his head in respect. "Gandalf the Grey? I have heard the name but thought it mere legend until now. But what news do you bring us?"

"Fell news, I'm afraid," Gandalf answered, nodding his head back to the younger man before using his staff to point toward where Dol Guldur lay in the forest of Mirkwood. "I am afraid that the ancient fortress of Dol Guldur was conquered in ages past by orcs, who have now put forth their strength in an army whose mission is to meet with the Dragon Smaug and lay claim to ancient Erebor. But, unfortunately, their passage will bring them straight through your lands, and even if you retreated to the center of the lake, they would find a way to attack you. Such is the hatred orcs and goblins have for all free folk."

Bard stared at him in dread, while a few of the people who had come out with him, other leaders of the town questioned Gandalf closely, trying to figure out if he was telling the truth for one, and trying to figure out how he knew about this for another. But Gandalf answered their questions easily, mentioning his own mission to Dol Guldur but not mentioning the great enemy. Doing so would make his tale seem less real to the humans in front of him, who had never faced Sauron and to the name would mean a little beyond the tales of ancient times if that.

But soon, the questioning subsided, leaving Bard to stare off into the distance, slowly shaking his head. "Where can we go?" He said, his voice almost broken but with anger as much as despair. "There is no place around here, none where we could defend ourselves. If you say we could not even retreat to the center of the lake, then we would have to rely on speed to get away, and there are too many children, too many old people, not enough horses or even wagons!"

Gandalf nodded slowly, understanding his point. *And if it was any other living orc general than Azog, perhaps retreating to the center of the lake would be a good defense.* Orcs were not known for their boatbuilding, after all. But Azog was determined and vastly more intelligent than most orcs. Worse, he had access to goblins, who were actually quite dexterous wood builders. The only way to make certain that the orcs would not attack such would be to provide another target for their army rather than simply linking up with Smaug.

However, at that moment, a thrush arrived from out of nowhere, zooming down out of the sky to land on Gandalf's shoulder, singing joy at meeting him. All good birds knew of Gandalf and revered him for a follower of their Lord, Manwe, and this thrush had been sent to Lake-town in any event.

"That is one of the thrushes from the Lonely Mountain. They occasionally come by here. The children give them bits to eat, and they keep away bugs and mosquitoes in turn" Bard

frowned, staring at the bird. "It's often been said, and by my father and grandfather before him, that they are far more intelligent than people might think."

"That is truer than you know. The thrushes of the Lonely Mountain have long had dealings with the dwarves of Erebor and are often used as their messengers. I believe that is what has brought this little one here," Gandalf mused as he up reached up and unrolled the parchment that Bard had been staring at, handing it over to Bard as he whispered into the thrush's ear. "Speak to me in your own words, my friend. What has happened?"

In this manner, news of the battle in Erebor reached Lake-town, as well as the cost to the dwarves. The victory was something Bard was ecstatic to hear about, although hearing the dwarves needed help in the form of food and further medical supplies was less pleasing. However, he could deal with that, and it gave Bard both hope and a plan.

Quickly, he began to organize, shouting out orders to the guards nearby to running fetch messages to other people, while Gandalf looked on in some amusement, watching these events while hearing of the details that Balin have not mentioned in his letter, particularly who had been hurt, and the near-disaster with Thorin. Yet even as he listened, Gandalf was nodding in approval. Bard would be a good leader and possibly, a good King for a reborn Dale.

By the time an hour had passed, four packs had been readied with food and medical supplies. They were given to five of Bard's men, the fifth being Artur. They were about to set off when Gandalf interjected, "myself and my companions will join you. I feel that the dwarves might need a more erudite healer than Oin can provide."

Bard simply nodded at that and then continued to turn away, beginning to organize the evacuation of Lake-town. Many of the town's leaders protested, saying how they should simply just move out into the middle of the lake as they always had before when faced with raiding parties too large for them to see off. However, the mother of goblins stopped that protest. Orcs they feared in battle. Goblins, they feared due to their ingenuity. And even the few who feared that the dwarves would be unwilling to take in the entire town were mollified by the fact that they did indeed have an agreement to help one another with the dwarves and that their need would be borne to them by Gandalf.

While this was going on, Gandalf had waited for a time, sending the thrush out with a message his own. When he was asked by Elladan what he was up to, Gandalf merely shrugged. "We might need more allies for this battle, and I know of at least one group that could get here in enough time to be of some aid."

Scene break

As he lay once more having pushed his magical core beyond its limits, Harry dreamed of a song. The song was beautiful, an entire choir of voices singing without words. Each person in the orchestra raised their voice in harmony, creating noises that could be likened to instruments but with no instruments in sight. The sound was powerful, uplifting, yet

threatening to drag his mind away to that place across the oceans to the halls of Mandos, yet didn't quite.

Instead, as he slept, Harry saw the great task that the choir had been created to fulfill, the image of the world in front of him. The Song became louder as that image grew, and then changed, becoming deeper, almost discordant as Morgoth changed the tune, adding darkness to the world, adding evil into the creation. But even that didn't stop the song, for the being who had created that song, Eru Illuvatar, was able to mold his errant follower's works into his greater work, muting his ambitions, minimizing him while also, Harry could now see, crystallizing Morgoth's desire to supplant him in the great scheme of things.

He heard it all, and then, he saw something new. Two Valar stepped forward from the rest of the host, their forms becoming more certain in his eyes as they did. Aulë, the smith, creator of the dwarves and master of earth, and Arien the lady of the sun, stood there, side-by-side, singing a new note into the song. A new note, the beat of drums which sounded somehow challenging yet humble, almost, and, though Harry's mind struggled to put a term on it, young compared to the rest of the notes of the song. But now, part of that greater whole, and it was with a start that Harry realized that note was supposed to signify him.

***"Welcome to Arda, Harry Potter,"*** Arien announced simply, a fiery grin on her face as she nodded to Harry. ***"And now, awake, for my love has passed, and I am high in the sky."***

***"And do remember to retrieve that which creates light in the darkness of Erebor,"*** Aulë intoned, his voice a deep bass to Arien's almost fiery alto. ***"My people will need it. If one be worthy."***

Two days of making camp and worrying at the problem of Smaug's corpse had not helped the dwarves much. None of them had a good idea on how to move the dragon because that issue was made of many different smaller problems. How to open the main doors was the only one they had solved at this point. This left how to lift the dragon and get it over the massive amount of stone and rubble in the way thanks to the dead drop, and then how to move it outside and finally bury it somewhere.

That last, like the first, at least they could do. "After all, that's just a matter of digging a big enough grave, as Bilbo did for Thorin, but without leaving the head above ground," Ori chortled as he took a plate of thin soup from Bombur.

He looked over in shock as Harry muttered, "That sounds like a tail," opening his eyes and looked around him, tiredness disappearing as he looked around at the physical world once more. He tried to push himself upright, only to stare down at where he knew he had been burned in surprised wonder. "What the..."

The dwarves hurried over to him, Oin quickly beginning to poke and prod and his body here and there. "I suppose I have Arien to thank for this, quite a welcoming gift."

Harry's now healed hand, in particular, took his attention. The stark contrast between the number of wide, deep scars on his other hand, which would forever be red and hurting whatever anyone could do, and the now healed skin of the other, was just incredibly startling.

"Aye, you do that. Your new lady, Arien, healed you magnificently. I've never seen the like," Oin muttered, looking over Harry's body once more. "We live in interesting times truly, when such wonders are apparent to us here in Middle Earth."

"We often forget that this entire world is based upon magic," Balin interjected. "Everything in this world owes its existence to Eru Illuvatar and the Valar one way or another, none more so than we, created as we were by Mahal. Seeing something like this must serve as a reminder of that fact."

"Or, maybe there's a simpler reason behind it? Maybe this Valar, Arien, is sweet on you?" Nori joked. "Poor Tauriel, having to compete with an actual Valar."

Don't even joke! Heck, how would that even work? I mean, my new patron is literally made of fire. Mortal I might not be any longer, but flesh and bone I certainly am," Harry retorted, shaking his head. This quick report had many of the dwarves laughing as he went on. "Besides, she's a boyfriend, the moon spirit."

Dwalin frowned at that, sharing some confused glances with the other dwarves. "Your question right back at you, Harry, how would that even work? I mean, how would they even meet?"

"Don't look at me. I don't have all of the answers. That little tidbit just came up in conversation." *Right now, but that doesn't really matter*, Harry thought ruefully. *Still, Dwalin's right. Conjugal visits must be really hard to schedule.*

That brought up more questions, but Harry disdained to answer them, staring out over the heads of the dwarves to where he could see Thorin's head stuck in the ground like an odd plant. "Nevermind, why is Thorin taking a dirt nap?"

"Harry!" Thorin suddenly shouted, causing many of the dwarves to flinch. "Thank the spirits that you are awake again. Get me out of here, these turncoats, these traitors! They are keeping me from my birthright! I must have it. I must have the Arkenstone! All of you, all of you are traitors! You will all..."

A quick muffling spell shot over the heads of the other dwarves to impact Thorin, and Harry turned away, looking at the others, frowning heavily. Balin supplied the answer to his question, and Harry side, hearing how the Smaug's blood had horribly weakened Thorin, letting the Taint take over. Since then, they had kept him buried within the dirt for most of the day, letting him out only occasionally to eat and stretch under supervision, mostly with his hands tied in front of him and Dori nearby with a cob of wood ready to knock him out.

"What is this 'Arkenstone'?" Harry asked.

“It is a giant jewel, around the size of a fist, which was set in the throne of the King. It gleams with all the power of the sun from the interior of it, a golden gleam through a diamond,” Balin began, slowing into hesitation than shrugging. “You have to see it to believe it, frankly.”

“It sounds magical, Harry said with a frown. It can’t be one of those... What are they called, the ones created by mad Feanor in the First Age?”

“Silmarils!?” Bilbo bellowed laughter while all the dwarves looked a little shifty, once again reminded of one of the darker points in their race’s history. Of course, none of the dwarves here were related to the dwarves of Nogrod, but even so, the fact that they had gone to war for such a stone, won the war and then lost both stone and army was still something of a low point.

Indeed, a few of the dwarves, Bifur, Bofur, Bombur, and Nori, liked the idea of the Arkenstone being a Silmaril, and it was Bombur who gave voice to this question. “Why do you laugh, Bilbo? Surely it isn’t without the realm of possibility. We know that at least one of them was lost beneath the earth, wasn’t it? Some strange movement could have covered the thing in diamond, and then...”

“Perhaps, but I doubt it,” Bilbo interrupted, still laughing. “You forget the other power of those jewels. They are made of the light of the Two Trees, Laurelin and Telperion. They will suffer nothing evil to touch them and yet will entice evil to do so. There is no chance that Smaug would not have found it, coveted above all others, touched it, and been seared by it.”

That stopped that kind of talk, although Harry was still interested in the Arkenstone. *Could that be the jewel of that Arien, and Aulë demanded I bring out into the sunlight? It makes sense, but I don’t think now’s the time.*

But there would be time enough for that later. “Is there anything I can do to help?” He inquired as he removed the spell from Thorin, wondering as he did what his new patronage would allow him to do from now on. After all, Arien hadn’t actually told him. *Did it remove how quickly I became exhausted when using my spells, or do I have an affinity for light and fire now?*

“Unless you have suddenly discovered a means with which to purge the Taint from his mind, I doubt you can help. We’re feeding him well enough, or as well as any of us are eating currently, and he just needs to get over it,” Fili answered from where he was still laying out nearby. Two days had been enough time for the wound under his armpit to slowly start to heal, but the blood loss still made him horribly weak and pale. “What we need you for, Harry is to start work on getting the dragon’s carcass out of Erebor and starting the... the reclamation project, I suppose we can call it.”

Harry frowned at that, then nodded. “Agreed. Let’s head to the main doors then and see what we can do.”

“Are you sure you’re up for it? You did just wake up after being unconscious for two days, after all,” Oin grumbled, shaking his head as Harry stood up, stretching and moving his body this way and that to get the kinks out.

“I’m fine. In fact, I think I’m more than fine. My stomach might be a little empty, but the rest of me feels almost bursting with energy. So let’s put it to good use,” Harry said, clapping his hands together.

Kili and many of the other dwarves nodded in approval, even Thorin, who was looking on silently, having spent much of his energy in his earlier shouts. Then Harry looked around quizzically. “I don’t suppose anyone retrieved my sword?”

All the dwarves looked at one another in some chagrin, and Harry sighed. “Right, although come to think of it, I’m uncertain who among you would have been able to move it. But I still want it back before anything else.”

Leaving Oin, Bombur, Dwalin, Balin, Bofur and Bifur behind, the others went with Harry around the Lonely Mountain to Erebor’s main entrance. Or rather, the only entrance that nearly everyone had ever known about.

There, Harry found that the dwarves had already begun work. Kili had led Bilbo and a few of the other youngsters back into Erebor and had, through great effort, and quite a lot of stored grease, pulled back the deadbolts keeping those doors in place. With that done, even a single dwarf could move those gates, so well were they made. Beyond that lay a veritable field of giants stones, remnants of the dead drop, and beyond that, the dragon laid deeper into the main hall.

“We’ve measured it, and we think there’s enough room for the Dragon to be carried over those stones, so we don’t have to move each of them in turn,” Kili explained as he led the way over those stones, crawling up and then climbing up several of the larger ones to get through them.

This kind of boulder climbing was quite fun, Harry reflected as he scrambled along behind and then to the side of the dwarves as they moved deeper into Erebor’s main hall, idly creating a Lumos spell and sending it above them as they left the state of sunlight behind them.

He also reflected that there being room to get the dragon over the stones was a very good thing since those stones combined would probably weigh at least half as much as Smaug did, with far more stones in the way than there was dragon. But then they came within sight of Smaug’s corpse, they all paused, moving around it slowly, staring at it from every angle.

The dragon’s blood had seeped into the stone somehow, something that the dwarves hadn’t noticed before, not having come this far into the main hall. Seeing it, Kili pointed out, “That stonework will have to be pulled out and entirely replaced, I fear. Even if the Dragon

Taint in the blood eventually dies out, those stones will never match the rest of the pattern in color.”

“Really?” Nori thumped the other young dwarf on the back. “Is now really the time to worry about aesthetics?”

“Maybe yes, if that Taint is still active within the blood,” Kili retorted.

Although he didn’t say it aloud, Kili was extremely grateful that Harry seemed to be concentrating on the dragon’s corpse to the exclusion of everything else. Because even he had noticed the treasure room out of the corner of his eye as they passed it, the gleam of distant gold beckoning from the darkness. It had called to Kili for just a second before Smaug’s corpse had grabbed his attention. *If even that little glimpse is enough to make me pause, we can’t let any of the oldsters in yet.*

Harry was oblivious to this, moving around the dragon, staring at it from every angle. He ignored the ruin of its dead eyes, the damage it had taken in the fight. He tried not to remember how close this thing had come to killing not only him but all of them. Instead, Harry looked at it like a thing, an ungainly weight that needed to be moved.

“The tail and head are going to be an issue,” he muttered, frowning. The dragon had died with his head fully extended from his body, while the tail had been curled to one side, his body twisted to lay on its wounded wing as Smaug breathed its last. “if I begin to move the damn thing, both head and tail are going to flop and maybe catch between some of the stones.”

The dwarves around him laughed at that, the imagery hilarious to them, but all of them understood the point he was trying to make. There were indeed places between the stones where the head or tail could get caught. “We’re going to need to be aware of that,” Kili mused. “Maybe even use long pikes or boathooks to steer them? Or, do you think that the dragon’s anti-magical properties vanished with its death?”

At that, Harry raised a hand and sent out a cutting spell into the side of the corpse’s neck. Unfortunately, the spell didn’t do a damn thing beyond making the dwarves look away from the sudden bright flash of red energy. “That would be a no,” he drawled, scowling as he looked at where only the hilt of his sword could be seen, pulling it out of the dragon’s chest with an Accio.

Dori, the oldest of the dwarves with him, stared at the dragon and some interest. “That’s actually a fascinating idea.” The others turned to them, and he shrugged. “If we can wait out the taint somehow, bury it and wait for the teams to leave its body, then could we well hardest it scales and everything else?”

“Perhaps, although how long exactly would it take for the taint to leave the body?” Harry asked.



To that, none of the dwarves had an answer, but Bilbo did. "Plant some grass on top of the grave. Once the grass stops dying or showing signs of the Taint: going brown, or black or what have you, you'll have a hint. Remove some of the scales at that point, bury them, see if anything happens. And then come back for the rest. It won't be a fast process even as you dwarves measure things, but it is possible."

"Good thinking, but that's for the future. Let's move this bad boy!" Harry grunted, looking over the dwarves. "You said something about pikes?"

All of the dwarves grinned, taking some vicious humor in this as they remembered how Smaug had toyed with them, slaughtered their families, taken their homes. And now, they were talking about moving his body as if it was just a giant ungainly package. There was a lot of catharsis in that thought, and it drove out any hint of gold desire and the dwarves as they scattered to the various armories. Most of the weapons within, not just the siege weapons they had used against the dragon, were ruined through disuse. But they eventually found enough halberd tops and left Erebor, eager to find wood to turn into shafts for their new tools.

It was nearly mid-day when they returned, and Harry was anxious to get this done. With the dwarves situated in places within the field of stone blocks, Harry looked at the dragon, then thrust out his hand, concentrating as he used one of the oldest spells he'd ever learned, indeed, a spell that was near and dear to his heart because it had eventually led to his becoming friends with Hermione. "Wingardium Leviosa!"

While the spoken words had no meaning and didn't help Harry any longer in directing his spell, nostalgia had taken over for a moment.

But as the dragons slowly lifted off the ground, Harry grimaced. The anti-magic properties of the dragon were fighting him hard on this, and he grunted, shaking his hand, then his whole body as the dragon rose up only a foot off the ground. the anti-magical properties of the dragon had

But they had thought of this, and the dwarves quickly raced forward along either side of the dragon dragging a massive carpet behind them. It had once served as a carpet used in the King's hall for special occasions and had been stored away carefully. Now it would serve a simpler, if possibly nobler, purpose. Within minutes the dwarves were done, and Kili shouted, "We're done, Harry!"

Harry released the spell with a gasp, collapsing to his knees, wringing out his hand and arm as if they had gone dead, while his head was slowly throbbing. "Fuck me, but that was hard."

"You're not my type," came the answer from many of the dwarves.

Harry turned and gestured with both hands with his middle finger. "Tell me, is this still a universal gesture?"

The dwarves laughed heartily at that, and Harry grinned, taking a canteen of water from Bilbo and drinking down quickly. All of them were just getting kicked out of this, despite the hardness of the past. And after chewing his way through a long piece of jerky, one of the last few they had, none of the hunters among them having had much luck in finding came near the Lonely Mountain, Harry straightened his shoulders and stood up, wringing out his hands once more. "Right then, fellows, run to your secondary position, and let's get this show moving."

It was tough. Even lifting just Smaug's weight was hard, and for a moment, Harry feared that the carpet would tear due to the weight. But with the dragon's weight distributed all across it and Harry's spell acting on the entirety of the carpet, there was no one point for that weight to really settle on and start tearing. It would've been different if the dragon had been on his back when he died because all of the back scales were sharp and edged, but the scales of the underbelly weren't.

Harry was thus able to use the carpet to carry Smaug into the air and over the stones, where, yes, the tail and head proved to be problematic. But the first time they had smacked into the rocks beneath, all of the dwarves fell about themselves with laughter, and even Harry, holding the dragon in the air, had to fight off an urge to join them. "Hah, uh, hehe, I, if the dragon falls fellows, those stones are going to rip the carpet, and we will have a devil of a time moving it again! I want this job done, dammit! We can laugh afterward."

This didn't stop the dwarves and even Bilbo from occasionally laughing when the head got stuck in stone here and there, or the tail was caught and pulled taut before the dwarves could push it clear. But they went about their work with a will, grinning all the while. Somehow, that sense of humor, that sense of fun, kept the fears of the Taint at bay and not once did any of the dwarves turned aside from their work to stare at the entrance to the treasure room.

Outside, Harry ended the spell, gasping and nearly falling backward only to be grabbed by Dori. "Well done, Harry! We did it."

"We did, although, what you all are going to be doing with those stones, is something you lot are going to have to figure out. I think I could move five or six of the larger ones a day if I was doing nothing else, but even so, that is one hell of a task." He looked at the dragon's carcass, then shook his head slowly. "And what we're going to do with the damn thing from now on is another question entirely."

"Perhaps a giant cart of some kind? Crude, but just a set of logs, two axles, and wheels?"

"Many wheels," Dori decided. Had once worked as a farrier and wagonmaker and had noticed several wheels of cards to move goods inside Erebor were still there. "Many axles, many wheels, and heavy logs."

Kili asked him what kind of tools he would need for that task, then Kili and Ori reentered Erebor, with Bilbo moving to join them automatically. As they did, Harry noticed that his earlier Lumos light spell was still going strong. *Well, that answers my question on if I now have an*

*affinity to light magic. I only put in enough magic in that spell to last an hour at most, and we've been at this for far longer.*

While the other trio searched within Erebor for tools, Harry and the others were left to search for trees. They had to range further away from the Lonely Mountain but eventually found a small copse of trees.

This allowed them to be the first to meet the aid from Lake-town. Harry had just used the spell to knock over several trees, which the dwarves went to work on when he heard a loud halloo in the distance. Turning in that direction, Harry saw Gandalf coming over a small hill, waving his staff in the air.

By the time Harry and the others with him arrived, Harry had pulled the doors off their task, and all of them were waiting for the humans to reach them. "Well met, Harry Potter! It is good to see you hale and hearty. The news we had from the thrush you sent to Lake-town told us of your survival, but seeing is still believing," Gandalf greeted Harry, holding out a hand to the younger man with a merry twinkle in his eyes.

Once twinkling eyes might have annoyed Harry, but now he simply chuckled, holding up his other hand, the one that was still scarred. "I'm almost intended to like myself on fire just to see if Arien would be willing to heal at me again."

"If you are actually serious about that it would worry me as it would almost certainly not work. The Valar are kind, but they do not reward stupidity," Gandalf laughed even louder, then pulled the younger man into a hug, "Well done, Harry Potter! Well done indeed."

Once introductions were made all around, Harry and the dwarves decided to call it a day, leading Gandalf and their new allies to where their camp had been made. As they walked, Harry was unsurprised to feel Gandalf's eyes on him. "Say what you want to say, old one, or should that be, Senior?" Harry quipped, turning to wink at the older man.

"Senior indeed!" Gandalf understood the joke and shook his head, feeling lighter and more pleased than he had in many a decade. Indeed, he almost felt young again, in a way he had not felt since the burden of his mission to Middle Earth had been placed upon him. "You are truly one with the land, one with all of Eru Illuvatar's creation now," he went on in a softer tone.

"I dreamed of a song Gandalf," Harry said, his own voice light, yet his tone serious for all its sudden tenderness. No one, least of all someone with a heart like Harry Potter's, could come away unchanged from the dreams he'd had. "I dreamed of **the** song. The song of creation. And I watched as my lady and the Lord Aulë sang a new note into it, connecting me to this world. Before I'd never thought of myself as much of a drum person, I was more of a strings bloke, you understand, but I think drums have grown on me now," Harry tried to make light of it, but Gandalf new, staring at young Harry, he knew what he had been given.

“I understand completely. And I welcome you into our brotherhood, young Harry.” Gandalf said, reaching over to touch the younger man’s shoulder lightly. “Never before has something happened, and yet, I am happy that it happened with you, and I hope that in the long years to come, you find peace and happiness in this new world of yours.”

Harry said nothing to that, simply nodding his head, and the trip passed in companionable silence between them while the humans and dwarves exchanged information around them.

Reaching the camp, Gandalf stared at where Thorin was still buried up to his neck in the ground, small flowers having grown in the past few days all around him where Bilbo had planted them. “Most crude, Mr. Baggins, but perhaps effective,” he mused aloud, calling the attention of all the dwarves to him and the new arrivals who had come upon the camp unawares. Neither Bilbo nor Balin had kept watch, believing themselves safe at the foot of the Lonely Mountain, and all of the dwarves that hadn’t been working with Harry on the trees were there, Bilbo and the others who had entered within Erebor having come back out and headed back to camp to work on the tools they had found.

“Gandalf!” Bilbo shouted in delight, smiling at the old man as he scrambled to his feet, followed by many of the others. “By the farms of my forefathers, but it is good to see you!” He paused suddenly, looking at the two elves with Gandalf, and going on politely in Elvish. “Your pardon, good elves, but while you look familiar, I cannot believe we have actually met.”

Gandalf smiled at that before introducing his companions while striding past the dwarves, shaking hands with those who offered but making for the fire, where he set a kettle on the holder and ordered two of the humans to bring over flasks of water they had gathered the day before. Once the water had been poured in, Gandalf added a series of herbs he had taken out of a pouch at his side as he looked over at Thorin and Fili. “Fili first, I think. The herbs to stimulate the creation of blood will need longer to work with.”

“So easy, Thrakul?” Fili quipped, using Gandalf’s dwarven name for once. “And why is it that you arrive now when all the hard work is already done?”

“In that, young Fili, you are quite wrong. Your work against Smaug is finished is true, but as much as I would like you all to have time to rest, there is more work to be done. But tell me, what is wrong with Thorin?”

“He was doused in Smaug’s blood after exhausting his anger on Smaug’s corpse,” Bilbo replied. “This made him incredibly susceptible to the dragon’s curse.” He then smiled wryly. “Thankfully, he didn’t actually inject any. His beard protected him from the splashback.”

Gandalf laughed at that but quietly as Thorin stared over at him, his eyes wild.

“He is getting quieter at least and is still eating the food we feed him well enough,” Balin explained, staring over at his King for a moment, then back to Gandalf. “But you said something about having more work to do?”

While the other humans and the elves dumped their burdens down around the campsite, Gandalf explained the news he had come with. He was frequently interrupted, though, as Harry and the dwarves all asked questions about the nature of the army, how Gandalf’s explorations into Dol Guldur had gone, forcing him to share much of his own ventures, as well as the battle that had finally ousted Sauron from his fortress. The news that the lady Galadriel had collapsed due to exhaustion made Harry grit his teeth in anger, a part of him wishing that he had gone with Gandalf, but the majority of Harry knew that the dwarves had needed him more. Who knew what would’ve happened without him here to help against Smaug?

Even with these interruptions the tale eventually finished, and Harry frowned, touching his old lightning bolt scar thoughtfully. “Why are they coming here with an entire army? Surely they don’t need that large a force if all they were thinking of doing was meeting with Smaug? Or even if they thought he was dead and we could claim the Lonely Mountain without a fight, there aren’t enough of us to demand such a response. And no offense to you four, but Lake-town just isn’t important either. Not important enough to send an entire army against.”

“They are after two things.” For all that Thorin had screamed himself hoarse several times due to the Taint, Thorin’s voice was still deep and powerful, drawing all eyes to where his head stuck out of the ground. The serious expression on his face as Thorin looked back at them was almost comical, surrounded as he was by flowers and... well... the whole head sticking out of the ground thing.

But Thorin ignored that and the snickers from the younger dwarves as he continued on into the side of the mountain in comparison to how he had been over the past few days. “One, they wish to fortify this place. Even without the Dragon, Erebor and the Lonely Mountain represent an incredible defensive fortification. Close the main doors, and even a dozen men could hold off armies. That is why they are sending one.”

He then locked eyes with Harry before glancing over at Gandalf. “The second reason is you, Harry. Isn’t it, Gandalf?”

“I’m afraid you’re right, Thorin.” Gandalf looked at him thoughtfully and decided to make two batches of the potion that would convince Fili’s body to generate more blood rather than one for him and one for Thorin. It seemed as if the gold curse was working its way out of Thorin’s system regardless.

He turned to look at Harry, who was already looking at him in confusion. “I have mentioned the fact that you and your magic make splashes in the past Harry. With your connection to Arien, those splashes are mostly muted, but Sauron knew where you were. And

he knows that you assess powers and abilities that he wants. So that army is not only to create a defensive fortification to rival Dol Guldur but also to capture you personally.”

“But Gandalf has given us a precious gift coming here so quickly. Time.” Thorin once more drew attention to himself, and as everyone looked at him, Thorin slowly shook his head, the dirt around his neck shifting with the movement. “I still shouldn’t be allowed out save for mealtimes. I am not entirely lucid just yet. The thought of the Arkenstone still haunts me, as does the idea of anyone else laying claim to our gold. But at the moment, I am lucid enough for this.”

He looked at the humans, who looked very confused about the whole gold curse thing, his voice turning even more formal than it had been. “As King Under the Mountain, I agree with your plan to evacuate to the Lonely Mountain. If it can be cleared of the dragon’s Taint, Erebor will welcome you all within its halls. We will pay you the portion of the treasure we have agreed to previously, and we, the people of Lake-town and my party, as well as the dwarves of my cousin Dain, will stand to gather against the orcs.”

His lips quirked, looking over his nephew. “I would shake your hand to signify my acceptance of this, but instead, I will have Fili do it for me.”

“Thank you, Your Majesty,” Artur, the man who had been sent to lead the men of Lake-town, slammed a fist into his chest, bowing from the waist even as his lips twitched at seeing Thorin, who had left quite an impression in Lake-town, being subjected to something like what he was seeing now regardless of why.

“Until I am well, Fili, you are in charge. Disregard everything else but clearing Erebor of the Taint if possible and preparing our people for war,” Thorin ordered, unaware of what had already been done to remove the dragon and everything else.

Even as weak as he was, Fili nodded, straightening his shoulders and standing up, nodding formally to his uncle. “I’ll see it done if it can be done at all, uncle.”

Thorin nodded and leaned back, closing his eyes, gritting his teeth. When they opened again, they once more were wide, almost manic with anger and rage.

He was about to open his mouth when Harry hit him with a muffling spell. “Well, that was good while it lasted. What are your orders, Fili?”

“Do you have orders to return once you dropped off your supplies?” Fili asked Artur. When the human shook his head, Fili smiled. “Good. We will need more hands for this, I think.” He looked up at the sky, realizing they had only a few hours left of sunlight. Still, they were only within an hour’s walk to the entrance, and Fili decided he needed to see for himself how bad the boulder fields and the Dragon issue were before making any decisions.

He then whooped as Harry pointed at him, and Fili rose into the air. “This is becoming my favorite spell,” Harry said dryly, pulling Fili behind him like a balloon.

Kili led the others in laughing at his brother, but Gandalf interrupted things barking out that “Young Fili is not going anywhere until he has the concoction that I am brewing at present. And I mean for you to drink it all, young Fili.”

Eventually, Fili gulped down the horrid-smelling potion, and leaving Balin and Bombur behind to watch over Thorin, the group left.

However, the moment they came within sight of it, the humans all stopped and stared at the carcass of Smaug laying there, a mound of scale and muscle and ancient hatred. When he saw the corpse, Gandalf shook his head, frowning. “Smaug was truly the greatest fire drake since Ancalagon. The fact that you all killed it without taking any losses is a tremendous miracle.”

“It was far too close for many of us. But I certainly hope that it is a tale that will ring down the ages. After all, if we can’t beat this orc horde, there will be no one left to sing of it,” Fili answered tartly. “And that corpse can in no way be part of our defensive works. So first and foremost, we need to move it further away from the entrance to Erebor.”

Harry nodded and explained the plan had been making. The fact of the matter was, the tracking was just too damn happy for Harry to move with just his own magic, so the idea of a giant cart to move it was simply the only way they were going to move it anywhere at all. And if the Taint of the dragon was able to be felt through the ground, they didn’t want it anywhere near the entrance.

Gandalf nodded, but he was looking thoughtfully at the dragon. He waved his staff in the air, and above the dragon, a visible world of air occurred. He then smiled. “I believe, Harry, that if you can but that it into the air, I will be able to do the rest. You see, it isn’t so much moving the corpse, but moving the air around it.”

“You’re going to have to teach me that one old man,” Harry muttered, then reached forward with both of his hands to direct his own spell, almost absentmindedly setting Fili on the ground beside his brother. Sweat broke out on his brow as he once again lifted the dragon, using the frayed and tattered remains of the carpet underneath it. The thing had not done so well as they crossed over the stones, slowly coming apart due to the weight despite the amount of pride the dwarves had in something so ancient still being in one piece.

Harry had lifted the beast barely a foot above the ground when Gandalf began his own magic. Whispering words of power under his breath, Gandalf gestured with his wand in a circular motion, and underneath the Dragon carcass, the air began to move, solidifying almost. Watching it, Harry had the thought that it almost looked like something from a show that he and Hermione had once watched at her parent’s house, a hovercraft. Regardless, much of the strain Harry felt in his spell work disappeared as Smaug’s weight was taken by the air beneath it.

Working together, the two magic users moved the carcass from where it had been lying in front of the gates to Erebor, slowly moving with it for several miles. By the time they were done, both of them were now drenched in sweat, the effort of moving the dragon taxing even Gandalf. But they eventually set it down, breathing sighs of relief. “That, I think, has been working enough for this old man for one day. Let us go find the others in return to camp for the night.”

Considering that it was now well into the evening, Harry nodded, and the two of them returned to the others. With the two wizards gone, Fili and the others had begun to make plans. These plans came under two headings, one for the war and one to combat the Taint. And as they all moved back to camp, Fili outlined them. Bilbo and Harry discussed some of those plans, and Harry nodded since most of it was doable for his part, while Bilbo was a little concerned. Still, there were trees near enough, and so long as their root systems were so sprawling, they could be transplanted with enough time and work. The other plans involved preparing a series of camps outside the entrance. With the Taint still within, the citizens of Lake-town would only be moved inside when battle actually beckoned.

Watching the still weak Fili talk to the humans and the dwarves around them as they walked, Harry reflected that while Thorin would probably have been a better commander, he didn't have the younger dwarf's sense of humor or easy-going nature with the humans. So *this might actually help us in the long run.*

Over the next three days, as the people of Lake-town made their slow way to the Lonely Mountain and armies moved elsewhere, Fili's ideas were put into place throughout Erebor and around the Lonely Mountain. First, several of the dwarves, with Dori leading them, hacked out the portions of the main hall's floor where the dragon's blood had seeped into the stone, removing the stone and not touching it at all, their hands covered with leather gloves resized to fit them from gloves and other things they had found scattered through the museum that was the ancient city.

This was a somewhat distressing task, because not only was the work hard, but they had once again had to go scavenging throughout Erebor for the gloves and tools. This had forced them to again face the sheer number of skeletons scattered around their ancient home. Balin, Oin and Gloin wanted to start removing them for burial, but there were just so many that doing so would have taken far too long. The majority of the skeletons would have to wait until they could be taken care of appropriately.

Meanwhile, Dwalin, easily the most experienced combatant among them who was still mobile – despite his broken ribs - marked out areas around the mountain, areas that were easy avenues of assault or could be made into defensive positions, and so forth. They would, after all, have to protect a large portion of the exterior of the Lonely Mountain if they couldn't retreat inside Erebor for fear of the Taint.



At the same time this was going on, Harry and Bilbo used magic to create a wooden palisade within the entrance to the treasure room. Bilbo marked an area on the floor in front of the gold and then had Harry explode the floor in chunks before filling the trench with soil. With that done, he, Elladan and Elrohir re-planted trees brought to him by Gandalf and Harry.

But it was Bilbo who led that effort, moving the soil around the roots, tending to the trees, watering them, making sure that the transplanting had worked. Under Bilbo's touch and the light of another Lumos spell from Harry, the trees were successfully transplanted. And over the next few days, as Bilbo and the two elves worked on them, they started to show signs that they would eventually flourish. That would take time, but the sheer amount of trees would block people from getting to the gold easily.

The other entrance, Harry blocked off by the simple expedient of stuffing it with one of the stones from the drop zone.

During this, Harry found himself before ending the two young elves. They were affable, good-natured, and not at all condescending. They were also, Harry reflected, dangerous. There was a kind of hidden anger within them, which he called them out on one evening as Elrohir sat next to him at the fire.

In this manner, Harry learned about what happened to their mother and fully understood, even replying with the tale of how his parents had died to Tom Riddle. He disdained to call the man a dark Lord. In comparison to even a single one of Sauron's Nazgul, the man had been a dabbler at best.

Seeing the desire to change the topic, Elladan smiled at Harry, one eyebrow rising. "By the way, what is this I hear of you and a young Sindar elf named Tauriel?"

Harry's blush was all he could have asked for, aided and abetted by the other dwarves piling in, and even Thorin, in another moment of lucidity, shouting out his own thoughts on that subject from where he, once more, was buried. Despite the toil of the day and the dangers to come, around the campfire that night, laughter resounded.

#### Scene break

Unbeknownst to Gandalf, a small boat moved across the Long Lake, lined with goblins who were inexpertly using paddles to move them across the water. They slowly get moved across the lake towards the distant mountain, and when they got there stopped. One among them, taller and stronger looking than the others, pulled out a long metal and glass object.

It was an amazing piece of work, and he had been well drilled in its use, a gift from Saruman, although only Sauron knew that. With the device, the goblin stared at the Lonely Mountain, his breath hissing out in shock at the sight of the dead dragon. Unfortunately, the device was not powerful enough to see anything else, not where the dwarves were, not where

their camp was. Only the dragon's corpse dumped several miles away from the bottom of the Lonely Mountain could be seen from here.

He turned back, quickly stowing the object away, hitting the others with the end of it, no longer caring about how amazing it was. "Back, back into the boat! Back back! The dragon is dead! Lord Azog must be told!"

#### Scene break

Families from Lake-town began to arrive on the third day after Artur and the others had arrived. These were families without children, children near to fully grown, and no elderly to slow them down. All of them eagerly set to work on whatever needed doing, which all the dwarves were grateful for.

During this time, the group had moved their camp directly in front of the entrance to Erebor. This was closer to their various projects and served as a test to whether or not the dwarves could be that close to the gold without the Taint reaching out for them. That experiment worked, as none of the dwarves evinced any interest in rushing inside to search for the gold or take their portion of it or what have you, unless they were near to where Smaug had fallen, and the wooden palisade that Bilbo and the elves had made over the past few days.

During this time Thorin woke up, once more fully aware, cognizant, and without a hint of the Taint, taking command from a very happy Fili. However, before that, he gathered his companions, politely excluding the others from the discussion. Once alone, he looked at them all in the eye one after another and then slowly sank to his knees in front of them, his face twisting into an expression none had ever seen there before: guilt. "Balin, Bombur, Dwalin. I apologize for the words I said to you. No dwarf should take such words lying down, and the fact that you are not railing or demanding a trial by combat with me, or simply just leaving me here to rock in the dirt, is more than I am worth."

"You're our king, and you were sick," Dwalin replied for all three. "There is nothing to forgive. I,..."

He fell silent, but his brother spoke up in his place, Bombur nodding silent agreement. "Most of us have felt the pull whenever we entered Erebor over the past few days, Thorin. It is still powerful and something we will have to be aware of going forward."

Thorin nodded, in acknowledgment not agreement with their words, still castigating himself severely for his weakness. Not so much the weakness against the blood. That Thorin would allow himself. But the fact that he had lost control of himself.

Now he turned to Fili and Kili. "Fili, Kili. I said things I should never say to any dwarf, let alone one of my blood. I will confess all of my words to your sister when I meet her and take whatever punishment Dis gives to me. Not only for that, but for, for nearly killing you, Kili. While I might have saved you, that does not in any way absolve me of... I, I nearly..."

He fell silent, unable to even say the words, and Fili and Kili both grabbed his forearms in both of theirs, squeezing. They said nothing, simply giving their wordless support.

He smiled at them before going on, giving every one of his companions personal apologies until he came to Bilbo. With Bilbo, he pulled him into a hug, something that most would not have thought Thorin would ever do to someone who is not family and even then rarely. "Bilbo Baggins, you have been a friend and an ally, one whose worth I can never truly repay with anything so crass as gold and jewels. If ever you are yours need aid, you have but to say it."

Embarrassed, Bilbo mumbled something and pulled away quickly as Thorin released him, and Thorin turned to Harry. He hadn't said anything about Harry over the past few days, considering that whenever he was about to open his mouth when he had been under the control of the madness, Harry had simply muffled him, and the wizard said so now. "Don't apologize for words said in anger when they were never heard. Just promise me you are over your madness. Especially for this Arkenstone thing. "

Chuckling at that, Thorin shook his head and held out his hand for Harry to shake. "I am over my madness, but why do you mention the Arkenstone? I will still require it as part of my raiment of kingship if nothing else, as worried about that fact as I might be."

"I think the Arkenstone is something that Lady Arien mentioned to me. She basically demanded that I bring it out of Erebor and into the light of day." *And then Aulë demanded the same thing, so it must be important.*

"Well, in that case, I suppose someone else will have to go and fetch it. However, I am not going to enter the mountain until we retreat into it in the face of the orc host," Thorin declared, staring at Harry as if this was some kind of final challenge, which he would meet and overcome.

Chuckling at that, Harry held up his hand towards the entrance into Erebor. "Accio Arkenstone!"

Nearby, Gandalf's felt the pulse of magic from Harry, but everyone else was simply staring at him quizzically while inside Erebor, clunking could be heard as if something small was bouncing off the wood. And then, as the dwarves turned to stare, something whizzed out of the darkness, glowing almost with an inner light.

The Arkenstone seemed to be made of diamond covering over something that looked like a golden or perhaps an orange opal. But whatever it was, that in her light earned. It didn't just shine. Instead, there was a light **burning** within, which shocked Harry, having thought that the others had simply been speaking about some strange stone. But no, staring at this thing, it was very obviously magical in some fashion. And as Harry held it, the glow within the became brighter and brighter.

Then, moved by an urge he didn't quite understand, Harry held out the stone to Thorin. "Take it."

Thorin frowned, putting his hands behind him very firmly. "I dare not. I have only recently overcome the Taint, I... I saw what processing that for overlong did to my grandfather."

"Take it," Harry said, and the voice with which you spoke was not just his own. "You are worthy of the Heart of the Mountain Thorin Oakenshield. You have overcome your blood's weakness, the base to her self as fuel Royals would. You have shown humility in this, drive and skill of hand and mind. You are worthy!"

In another lifetime, this would never have happened. In another lifetime, Aulë, like all the other Valar, would've turned their attention away from Middle Earth, deciding that the time of magic and their interference had passed. But, all of that had changed with the arrival of Harry, and it had changed again when he had proven himself to Arien, becoming part of the song.

They would still not stretch forth their hands to smite Sauron. Middle Earth would not have survived such, and humanity had to learn to fight for themselves. The elves would also still decline, too focused inward to truly protect the world around them as they had in ages past.

But the dwarves? Their future was very much up in the air thanks to how they had been created solely by Aulë, putting them beyond the scope of Eru Illuvatar's songs. And in his vast halls underneath Aman, Aulë exulted as Thorin proved that his folk could overcome the greed inherent in their being and grasped a creation that Aulë himself had made.

For the Arkenstone was literally The Heart of the Mountain indeed. As long as one worthy held it, the Arkenstone would give him power, strength and durability, as well as skill of hand and eye far above those of a normal dwarf. But if you were unworthy, madness and decay would result, spreading from the owner to those around him, as it had in the hands of Thrór and his father, the first king to own it, much to Aulë's chagrin. Although only a few dwarves now alive still remembered how weakness had started to creep into Erebor, ended as Thrór's reign had been by Smaug's assault.

Thorin and all of the dwarves there stared at Harry in shock, knowing without being told the voice with which Harry had just spoken was not his, but that of their Lord and Creator Mahal. Then, slowly, hesitantly, Thorin reached out and took the Arkenstone into his hand. As he did, he felt the energy within it pulse into him, and the dwarves heard Mahal's voice once more. "All hail Thorin Oakenshield of the blood of Durin, King Under the Mountain!"

Scene break

From one of the topmost bunkers in Erebor's original defensive positions, Kili groaned as the thrush on his shoulder finished its report. Using the thrushes as their eyes and ears around the area had been a masterful idea, and it was coming in handy now, even though the number

of people who could understand them was limited: Elladan Elrohir, Gandalf, Kili and, surprisingly, Balin was able to fully understand the thrush's twittering, which forced at least one of them to be on post up here at all times. "Because, of course, Dain and the elves have to arrive at the same time."

He turned to one of the humans, a youngster around fifteen. That was still shocking to Kili, and many of the other dwarves: that humans would allow someone so young to be placed in such danger as entering Erebor with the Taint still active within, and Kili had to continually remind himself that humans matured much faster than dwarves. Luckily, they had the example of Harry to look to in that area. "Run and find Bard and my uncle. Tell them we're about to have company."

Nodding, the human youth raced off down the stone staircase that led from this large lookout post and down through several internal doorways to the main defenses of Erebor and from there down to the base camp outside. Like the main balcony-like structures carved out of the stone above the main entrance, this place was designed to protect that main entrance and nothing else. They had interior doorways that closed automatically, small circular bits of stone that acted as a second, nigh-inviolable defense against assault unless locked open. Against the dragon, none of that had mattered since the defenders stationed here had died by fire, the doors closing behind them. If they hadn't, the idea of using smoke to weaken Smaug would never have worked.

Kili turned to the thrush, gently patting its head as he pulled out a tiny bite of jerky, feeding the thrush with his other hand. "Thank you for the information, little friend, but now I have another task for you. You must go and find Dain. Warn him about the elven army and that they are friendly. Then, tell him to march around the mountain's southern side. The last thing we want is for Dain and the elves to spot one another before they see us."

Thanks to Kili's quick thinking, this possible disaster was averted. As Harry, Thorin, Bard and their companions watched from a hilltop leading into their camp, the two armies came into sight of the defensive lines around the entrance to Erebor from different directions, the elves to the north, the dwarves to the south.

Around them, the hundred and seventy plus human men of fighting age from Lake-town and a few surrounding villages arrayed themselves in the defensive positions Dwalin, Bard and Harry had mapped out. Almost all of them were armed with bows, but around a fifth were armed with dwarven weapons, and those men also wore dwarven armor found in Erebor and repaired or, in a few cases, even recast by Thorin over the past few days.

The same could be said for the dwarves of Thorin's band who were the best fighters: Dwalin, Fili, Kili, and Thorin himself. Even Harry and Bilbo had been given some armor, and like that of the dwarves, it was quite special.

**Flashback:**

The day after being given the Arkenstone, Thorin had insisted on going through the gold, a fact that at first had made Harry and the others somewhat leery. But Thorin's eyes and face were clear, and he explained why quickly. "While many of the armories within Erebor were wrecked or are useless to us due to disuse, my people made weapons and armor of passing beauty and ability as well." He tapped his sword, smiling faintly. "Nothing like Orcrist, but still, very good weapons, and more particularly, armor. There were several suits of Mithril armor within our halls, only one of which was lost with my father when he ventured into Moria."

There were some rumblings of interest at that, although the term Mithril flew over Harry's head first. When the metal's special properties were explained to him, his idle musing caused Thorin and Dwalin to go cross-eyed at the implications. "I wonder how that kind of thing would take to my type of runic enchantment?"

### **End Flashback**

Standing next to his friend, Harry was once more impressed by the friends come over him since cleaning the Arkenstone and throwing off the Taint of Smaug's curse. He was once more somber, but he stood straighter, he moved faster, and Harry had seen that Thorin was actually a good deal stronger than he had been. He even wrestled Dori, the strongest of the dwarves, into submission the day before, both of them laughing and joking as Bard and the rest of the dwarves had stood around them, placing wagers on the outcome.

But one thing hadn't changed in the past few days, and that was Thorin's admittedly understandable anger towards Thranduil. Watching him, Harry could see Thorin's face closing down as he stared at the elven host coming towards the mountain. The elven host had marched around Long Lake to the north and now were coming towards them from that direction. "Calmly, Thorin. As much as we have legitimate grievances against that asshole, now is not the time to voice them."

From his other side, Fili and Balin both murmured agreement. The younger dwarf had stepped up even after Thorin had taken command once more as his uncle's second main advisor, and now in the face of their united front, and perhaps helped by Gandalf's firm glower of agreement, Thorin breathed in a few times, then resolutely turned away to stare at where his cousin army was coming into view. "I was told as a young dwarf that if one cannot say something nice, one should not say anything at all. So, I will follow this advice now."

Chuckling, Harry turned in that direction too, watching as the dwarves and army came up over one of the hills leading to the Lonely Mountain before halting at the top and reforming a ring itself for battle. It was an impressive sight, to be sure. From here, Harry couldn't make out many details of that army, but he could see the gleam of steel on all of the dwarves up there. It looked as if the dwarves were either larger in general than those from Thorin's company, which Harry discounted, or were wearing extremely heavy armor while wielding large hammers or axes, along with equally heavy shields. "My word, they even have helmets! I didn't even know that was aloud here in Middle Earth."

Rolling his eyes at Harry's wry amusement, although inwardly acknowledging his point, Balin nodded. "Aye lad, no people in the world can carry as heavy armor as a dwarf. Our endurance and strength are what makes us dwarves in the first place."

"I have no doubt that there is a baggage train out of sight somewhere behind them, but Balin has the right of it. Every dwarf over there would have marched the entire way here carrying most of their kept themselves, with only their armor on the packs of the mules, if that," Thorin said, equally proudly to his advisor.

Harry turned to look back at the elven host. Unlike the dwarves, who seemed entirely made up of what Harry would term a single type of unit, that being heavy infantry, the elves had two portions to the army. One was a force of what Harry estimated as perhaps two thousand or so infantry. Whether or not they were heavy or light infantry, Harry couldn't tell. They were wearing armor, sure, and it was gleaming gold, and they had high helmets gleaming gold, and they looked very impressive moving into a combat line, using large double-bladed glaives and kite shields. But the way they moved seemed too loose, too quick for their armor to be that heavy.

Beyond that was another five-hundred or so - again, Harry was guessing, but since it looked as if it was only about a quarter of the rest of the host, he felt it was probably accurate - of the Unseen Host that Harry had seen examples of before. They were dressed in green raiment that seemed to blend into the environment around them even here, let alone the forest that they were charged to patrol. Each of them seemed to carry a bow and several quivers of arrows.

As Harry watched, a group of four elves came forward from the army. There seemed to be some kind of argument going on with one of them, and Harry smiled as he saw the flash of red hair from the elf at the center of this argument. But his attention was pulled to the side as Thorin grunted. "Here comes Dain. I have no doubt that he's going to be quite prickly about the idea of so many humans camped outside Erebor, and explaining why we can't all be inside the mountain is going to take some doing. Especially with elves nearby. Gandalf, can I ask for your assistance there to explain the Taint? Using small words and continually hammering the point about madness, if you please."

As Gandalf chuckled assent at that, Harry turned in that direction and blinked as he saw a single dwarf riding down the hill towards them on a... "What the heck is he riding?"

"A battle boar. A giant forest boar trained to fight, our equivalent of warg riders, although it's a new addition to the Iron Hills military. That's why my cousin is the only one you see up there," Thorin snorted in amusement. "There were only fifteen or so trained for war throughout the Iron Hills the last time I met with Dain in person."

As the creature came closer, Harry realized that Thorin was telling the truth rather than pulling his leg. It was indeed a giant bristly, tusked, mad-eyed boar. Which also had its own

barding, complete with helm set on its face and head. “Interesting concept, weird-looking, but interesting,” Harry drawled. “But since he is coming forward, and I think the elves are about to do the same, do you think we should go forward and meet them as well? Unless you want to meet with them in our camp?”

“It’s customary to meet on neutral ground, even between supposed allies.” Thorin snorted, then pointed to a small hill a ways ahead of their lines and to the south, nearer to a neutral point between the three ‘armies’ and down toward the Long Lake. On the other side of which, not at all incidentally, Smaug’s corpse lay, having been recently buried by Bilbo, Elladan and Elrohir after they had finished work on the palisade guarding the treasure room. Although again, Harry had been forced to help, blowing up large chunks of the ground, which the three then shoveled onto the corpse. “We’ll set up a pavilion there.”

Harry nodded, while beside him, barred gestured to two of his people, who raced in different directions. Soon enough, a makeshift pavilion was set up by the people of Lake-town, along with some water and simple refreshments. Very simple, since the camp didn’t exactly have a lot of food to go around.

To get to the pavilion, the elves had to pass by where the dragon’s head could still be seen sticking out of the ground, much like Thorin’s had while he was being cleansed of the Taint. Watching the elves recoil from it was amusing and quite gratifying, Harry reflected as he looked down at them from the top of the hill. From the other side, Dain couldn’t see it, and Harry could hear Thorin greeting the other dwarf heartily, then bringing him over to meet Harry “and to see the proof of our victory.”

When he heard the two sets of booted feet stop, Harry turned his eyes away from the elves to nod respectfully to the older dwarf. He was slightly larger in the shoulders than Thorin, with ginger hair that reminded Harry of the Weasleys. His beard was even more bristling than any of the other dwarves Harry had already met, and at his side, Dain had a large warhammer, one whose shaft was almost as large as the dwarf was tall. His eyes were slightly deeper set into his head than Thorin as well, and he looked up at the human speculatively.

“So, you’d be the magic-user then? The one my cousin here calls friend? His agreement with Bard is one thing. Making local allies is just smart business, even taking in his people like this, although I’m confused about why you’re all camped outside the mountain rather than in it. Yet what surprises me most is my cousin, Thorin the hardheaded, Thorin the aloof, Thorin the...”

Yes, thank you, Dain, we get it,” Thorin mock-growled, thumping the other dwarf on the shoulder.

Dain laughed, more guffawed, really, and it was then that Harry decided he would probably get to like this dwarf. “Well, you understand what I’m saying. You, of all of us, saying that this human is a friend! That is most peculiar.”



“Well, while Thorin is indeed prickly and hardheaded, I rather like him, but there’s no accounting for taste, I suppose.” Harry drawled.

Even Gandalf chuckled at that, and so it was that Thranduil and the other elves with him arrived to discover all of the people they were there to meet with laughing or as snorting and humor. Legolas and Tauriel both smiled at that, although Tauriel’s smile was more because of Harry than because of whatever was putting a bit of humor into the proceedings. Likewise, Harry’s eyes went to her, and he bowed slightly from the waist towards her. His eyes flashing with delight.

But as the elves arrived, the dwarves’ good humor vanished, and all of them glared at the elves, who stared right back impassively. To one side, Bard and Artur, who he had chosen as his second for this meeting, looked uncomfortable, while Harry just rolled his eyes.

It fell to Gandalf to move between the two groups, thumping his staff down on the ground, creating a sound far, far larger than a simple wooden staff hitting dirt should’ve evoked. “Gentlemen, and lady,” Gandalf interrupted himself to bow grandly towards Tauriel, who he had last seen when Thranduil released her from her captivity, looking much the worse for wear and far angrier than she seemed now. “We are not here to simply glare at one another, or worse, to cast aspersions on one another’s honor, ancestry, or bring up past dealings in which elf or dwarf wronged one another. We are here to discuss the enemy host. An enemy host, moreover, that is barely 2 days behind you.”

Gandalf and Kili had organized the thrushes into a kind of scout force. It was harrowing work because the orc host had crows following it, or perhaps even as part of the army, and there were a lot more crows than there were thrushes, and they were all larger and more combative in the main as well. And yet, the thrushes had still been able to keep track of the army in general by watching the cloud of crows. So they knew the general area and speed of the orc army but had no idea about its composition. Although with the enemy so close, Elladan and Elrohir would be leaving after this meeting to make up for that lack.

There was some consternation at the news the enemy was that close, and Thranduil raised a sardonic eyebrow. “Are you so certain? We have not seen any evidence that this army even exists as yet.”

“No doubt you came via the East Road,” Thorin said, his tone mild but his eyes flashing. “It is the preferred way to travel from east to west, after all. But it would’ve brought you up and around the northern tip of Long Lake. The orcs are coming from the southwest, from Dol Guldur straits to here.”

“Aye, well, I’m not so vain as to gainsay what Thrakul tells us,” Dain said, thumping over to a chair and flopping down into it with all the grace of extremely well armored and arms dwarf, who was fighting back the urge to wring someone’s neck. “So, what are we going to do about it?”

“As you can see, we’ve already begun to prepare the mountain for war. But, unfortunately, there is a problem with retreating into the mountain,” Gandalf intoned, gesturing with his staff down to the head of the dragon at the foot of the hill below them. “The Taint of the Dragon is still there and will be for some weeks yet. Far longer than it will take the orc army to approach. Some people can go inside and interact with the pre-existing defenses, but we can’t let the humans for the most part inside, or the dwarves.”

Gandalf explained about the Taint then, as well as how they had started to combat it. The idea of a wall of living trees in Erebor’s treasure room caused Dain to splutter in indignation, but the elves, even Thranduil, were looking speculatively at Bilbo, interest plain as they heard how he had helped Thorin

“And I will be damned if I allow a large group of elves into Erebor without an equal number of dwarves to watch them.” Thorin intoned firmly, getting nods of agreement from the other dwarves, although Harry didn’t answer, leaving that decision up to Thorin.

“You speak as if you think we will make off with your gold? Or hold the mountain against you? Why would any of my people want to live beneath your mountain?” Thranduil scoffed.

“It isn’t your people whose honor I’m questioning,” Thorin answered darkly before another clap from Gandalf’s staff interrupted things.

“Children, behave, or else you’ll both be sent to the naughty corner!” The wizard said with a sigh of long-suffering patience. “Thranduil, you must concede that how you treated Thorin and his company, to say nothing of your past dealings with his folk, was not in keeping with the honor of the elves. And Thorin, you must understand that regardless of past dealings, Thranduil has agreed to lead his army to aid us here and thus deserves respect.”

Thranduil made as if to speak but seemingly thought better of it, nodding his head to just once. “If we cannot enter the mountain, what is our defensive position to be like?” he asked instead of whatever else he was going to say.

Breathing in deeply, Thorin seemed to gather himself, and when he opened his eyes, they were once more clear, his anger gone. “With the work we have been doing in preparation around the camp and various projects within the mountain, as well as gathering weapons, we have yet to truly begin to prepare our defensive lines. We have begun to create some of our old siege engines. But your two armies represent a far larger fighting force than we have currently. Beyond my 12 dwarves, we have the men of Lake-town. Bard?”

Bard stepped forward, nodding his head once to Dain and Thranduil, showing no deference to either one. While he was still somewhat uncomfortable with the role, Bard understood he was here to represent his people, and he would not show subservience to either dwarf or else, regardless of Lake-town’s past dealings with the Mirkwood elves. “My folk can field around a hundred and seventy or so men of fighting age. I further have seventy women

who are capable of fletching arrows, and both they and a further eighty men are strong enough to help us create defensive lines, transport wounded during the battle, carry arrows and so forth, but not fit or hale enough to fight in the battle.”

Dain scowled, knowing those numbers weren't all that impressive in comparison to what he'd already seen of the elvish host. “I've got five hundred veteran dwarven warriors with me. Heavy infantry the lot of them, and if there is work to be done, well do it with a will. Although not being able to enter Erebor is a major blow, I'll tell you that now.” then he smirked over at his cousin. “And we have a further two hundred battle-boars. They're a day behind us, foraging in this land for the beasties has been rough, and it slowed us down. But I think if we use them

Laughing, Thorin congratulated him for finally having raised enough boars to make an actual combat unit. “But beyond that, we killed the dragon within Erebor, and it lay on our gold for decades. The Taint is real, cousin. As Gandalf explained, I succumbed to it for a few days and was only able to recover with the help of my friends and a rather extreme method of cleansing. So unless you're volunteering your dwarves to be buried up to your head for days on end, entering Erebor in large numbers is not in the cards.”

Thranduil nodded slowly, his gaze flicking down to the Dragonhead, then back to Thorin, something like respect showing on his face for a brief moment. “It sounds to me as if my people, particularly the Unseen Host, although all of my infantry are also trained archers, will be our long-range punch. Is this the case?”

“Not entirely. As I said, we've been hard at work preparing the ballistae. They'll have a much longer range than anything you have. And then we've got Harry,” Thorin drawled, pointing to the wizard.

Harry smiled grimly. “I've been hard at work every evening since Gandalf arrived on various little tricks. But we do still need to create more defensive lines, and in that, I think we all have something we need to contribute to this, be it manpower or knowledge.”

“Aye, but what about after? What happens after the battle is won? Are we to simply forget all the grievances we have with Elvin kind? Are we to forget that the Lonely Mountain is ours, as is the gold within. Even if we taking these humans, they do not...”

Thorin interrupted his cousin, his hands smacking down on the table. “Without the aid of Bard and his folk, we would not have won our mountain back. He and I already have an agreement in place. Money will flow into Lake-town, Dale will be rebuilt. They do not have a claim on the actual mountain, only on our alliance with them. And that is more than enough! As for the elves...”

“Let us keep this discussion on current events,” Gandalf nearly ordered. “After the battle, there will be enough time to discuss what will occur, not before.”

Everyone there had to agree with that point, and all of them got down to business. Orders went out, and Dain's dwarves began their march down into the existing camp of dwarves and men to much cheering from the humans and the rest of Thorin's company, most of whom greeted old friends within that battle line, as they started to direct them where to go, where to drop off their camping equipment and so forth. The elves would make their own camp nearby to keep hostilities between the two groups at a minimum.

Soon, the group had stood up, and with Gandalf leading them, they began to move around the area, deciding on where to put defensive lines, scout positions, how far the archers could fire and so forth. As they walked, Harry moved over to walk beside Tauriel. She looked at him with a smile, and when he asked, "My lady, would you like to take a walk with me?" agreed quickly.

Neither of them could really add much to the current discussion. Harry was already doing what he could, and if someone wanted to say a wall pulled out of the ground or whatever, they could come and find him later. But, right now, he had something more personal on his mind.

The two of them walked away, Harry resolutely ignoring the smirk on Thorin's face or the questioning look on Dain's. Thorin must have told Dain something because a bellow of laughter fell reached his ears before they were out of earshot, causing Harry to grunt in annoyance.

"Is my company so trying?" Tauriel teased, a faint smile on her face.

"How could anyone be annoyed to be in the company of someone so beautiful?" Harry retorted, although his eyes told Tauriel that he was actually serious about that, as he put his arm around her waist, looking at her questioningly.

She could have easily pulled away from that grip, but Tauriel welcomed it with a smile, leaning against his shoulder for a brief sideways hug. Then Tauriel pulled away, although she did walk even closer to him than before. "How have you been? I have no doubt that you have a tale to tell about this," she said, taking the hand which no longer had scars in her own. "I thought that these curse cars would be a mark you would forever have to bear. But it seems as if that was not the case?"

Harry laughed drolly, leaving his arm around her waist as he let her off, away from the others were now, and away from both and everyone else, heading north where hopefully, they would find some privacy. "Now, that is indeed a tale, my dear. I believe I mentioned at one point how my magic wasn't exactly welcome by Arda? How the very world seemed to fight against it? Well, things changed."

Tauriel's elbow connected with his side as she muttered, "stop trying to downplay it, and just tell me what has occurred since I left you in Lake-town."

“And will you do the same? I thought I sensed some tension when you joined the group coming up to meet with Thorin and the rest of us,” Harry observed.

Tauriel winced. “My King had thought to perhaps leave me behind when he realized that you would be part of the delegation. An extremely pointed snub to both you and myself. He and I are very much at odds at present. My duty keeps me where I am, for that is to my people rather than to Thranduil. But, I cannot say that I am happy to the serving him at this point.”

“There’s a tale there too, and I will have that out of you, Tauriel,” Harry announced firmly, pulling her to a stop and moving in front of her as soon as they had started down a hill which would hopefully hide them from the others. “Whether or not you are my friend, or something more, I care about you, and if he hurt you...”

“I am a grown woman Harry Potter, and I do not need you to defend me,” Tauriel answered tartly before softening the words by reaching out and touching his face, becoming almost lost in his emerald eyes. Of all his physical features, those eyes were the part that she liked best. “But yes, I will tell you my tale, although I rather doubt it will be anywhere near as interesting as your own.”

As they continued on, Harry reflected that it was somewhat annoying, that there really wasn’t any place that could be called even remotely romantic in the scrubland and brush that surrounded the Lonely Mountain. Although there might have been at one point, before the dragon had burned most of the woods around the mountain to ash at the moment, there was not.

Then again, as it became Tauriel’s turn to talk, any thought about romance left Harry’s head. At that point, the term towering wrath could easily have been used to describe this feeling. He’d felt something like this before, right before he took his jaunt through the nothing between worlds and was fully prepared to do something equally biblical to the man whose actions caused this. “I’m going to kill him,” Harry said, his tone mild, but his eyes flashing with his real emotion, the heretofore mentioned towering fury. “I’m going to light him on fire and use his screaming corpse to make s’mores.”

It was a sign of how annoyed Tauriel still was with her King that Tauriel didn’t seem at all put off by Harry’s bloodthirsty statement simply asking, “what are s’mores?”

“Have you ever had chocolate?” Harry decided to start with something simple, the question, and he knew this was why Tauriel asked it, having knocked him somewhat out of his murderous thoughts.

When Tauriel shook her head, Harry thought about it for a moment, then conjured a bit of chocolate into being. “It won’t actually be food, and it won’t have any vitamins or imbue you with energy, but it will taste like the real thing.”

One eyebrow raised in question, Tauriel took the milk chocolate piece from Harry's outstretched hand, staring at it in thought. It was about the size of two fingers and a darkish brown color, but it smelled interesting when she lifted it to her nose. A tiny bite followed, and Tauriel's eyes widened in shock at the taste hit her. "That is excellent! What is this?"

"Chocolate. I honestly don't know how it's made, unfortunately, but I think I know the taste well enough to duplicate it like tha, ahh..." Harry trailed off as Tauriel ate the rest of the chocolate in a few short bites, making a humming noise that sent a shiver down his spine.

"You will be making more of that later," Tauriel nearly ordered, licking at her fingers in the most indelicate manner to get a few bits of the chocolate which had melted in her hands due to the heat of the day. Then she saw the look in Harry's eyes and blushed scarlet, looking away quickly. Although she was happy with how her little distraction had served there. Certainly, it looked as if any idea about killing Thranduil had left Harry's mind.

"Yes, well, I'll certainly be willing to make it for you again. I can transfigure any kind of food into something like that if I wish, although it won't last, and as I said, it won't give you the energy rush that real chocolate does." Harry's lips quirked as she looked back at him, and he shook his head. "And don't think you'll be getting away with manipulating me like this again, my lady. I am going to remember what Thranduil did to you. And when all of this whole orcish army business is done, I will have some satisfaction one way or the other."

"Is it not enough that Gandalf threatened to remove him from kingship?" Tauriel asked. "While I admit that my own feelings towards my King are mostly negative, your attacking him for whatever reason would not be a good thing in terms of peace between the dwarves and my nation."

"I could make it look like an accident," Harry replied, although his voice was fainter now, and Tauriel smiled at him shaking her head, and he sighed. "Fine, I won't hurt the idiot." *Pranking the hells out of him, though, that is still in the cards.*

"Good. Mithrandir's remonstrations seem to have been enough to get him moving at least, and I would hate to see Thranduil backslide into his normal arrogance as part of that defensive mechanism against further attacks on his person or character." Tauriel paused thoughtfully at that point. "Although, I must say, that I am confused that Gandalf was willing to do so and that Thranduil went along with being threatened as if he knew Gandalf could follow through with his threat. I did not know that the Council of the wise could do such a thing."

Two both of their surprise, Gandalf's voice spoke from behind them. He had come upon them while Tauriel was having her chocolate moment, and neither elf nor wizard had noticed. "You would be correct, Tauriel of the Sindar, that kind of thing would be well outside our normal power if not for the fact that every Elven nation agreed to a certain degree of oversight by us when we Istar arrived in Middle Earth. Further, the Elven nations are represented on the Council by Galadriel, Cierdon, and Elrond. Therefore, the Council has some control over them.

We can compel leadership changes if we believe the King is acting in a treasonous manner, as treason and duplicity have always been Sauron's chief weapons. In this case, Thranduil not warning us of his concerns about the growing power of Dol Guldur falls under such a heading."

"You couldn't do the same thing to the human nation?" Harry asked quizzically.

"No, I cannot, although we can influence those nations who can trace themselves back to the lines of the Numenorians. I could perhaps browbeat them if I saw the need, although such a thing would not sit well with me. Indeed, I did not enjoy taking Thranduil to task and would not have if he had not compounded his acting in fear with acting in arrogance towards you and your companions at the time."

Gandalf coughed, looking at Harry, deliberately not looking towards the Elvin maiden at his side. "I also was acting in a way to punish him for his treatment of you specifically, Harry and spoke as a servant of the Flame Imperishable. No elf would be able to disobey an order from me in such a case."

Harry nodded thoughtfully at that, understanding that Gandalf might have had some inkling as to Harry's own recent... Conversion? Harry wasn't certain how to put it. Elevation, maybe? Regardless, it was clear that Gandalf had wanted to make it very plain to Thranduil that he was in the doghouse and had best be on his best behavior. *The fact he then turned around and attempted to not bring Tauriel along to the peace talks when he spotted me shows that Thranduil is taking that lesson just as well as one would think given his previous actions,* Harry thought dryly.

"However, he did bring his army here, so I suppose allowances can be made," the young wizard said aloud before shaking his head and turning back to look at Gandalf, reluctantly moving another step away from Tauriel. "But you didn't come here to just tell us that."

"We are done discussing defensive positions and other such matters. We wish for you to rejoin us and start discussing your own additions to the battlefield," Gandalf said, smirking slightly. He'd been avidly learning from Harry over the past few days some of his rounds, but it was an extremely fiddly process, and while Gandalf had memorized a few of the runes, he was in no way willing to experiment.

Harry nodded and then looked over at Tauriel. "Would you care to join me? If nothing else, we can at least keep talking. And tonight, I'll make you some chocolate," he wheedled.

Tauriel laughed and linked arms with Harry, following after Gandalf as he turned away.

Unfortunately for Harry, the two of them did not have much time over the rest of that day and the next to be alone again. Preparation for the battle ramped up, and Legolas, Elladan and Elrohir, who had left the camp within an hour of the meeting, broke up to find the Orcish host. The existing defensive structures needed to be expanded, Harry needed to use transfiguration magic on the earth to create bulwarks, the elves needed to make their camp,

the dwarves needed to do the same and set to with a will to create various defensive structures all around.

Thankfully, the two of them finally had an evening off the night before the battle was thought to begin to steal away once more. At that point, preparations were all done, and everyone had been given the night off to talk, party, and drink, in the case of the dwarves.

Harry had objected to this, saying, "Are you seriously thinking that letting your troops get hungover the day of a battle is a good idea?"

But Dain and Thorin had both waved his worries on that score away. "It is a poor dwarf who will drink to excess Harry, and drink tonight, will make them fight all the harder tomorrow for they will have that memory of what they are fighting for."

Gloin nodded, then looked at Harry consideringly, knowing that he and Tauriel would probably spend some time together that night. Reluctantly, Gloin reached into a pouch at his side, where he pulled out something he had been working on for a while, ever since the dwarves and their companions had moved camp directly in front of the entrance to Erebor. "Here, Harry, try it yourself, aye?"

Dubiously Harry took the large flask from Gloin and took a sip before his eyes widened in shock. Not just because of the burn going down his throat or the hit from the alcohol. But no, just the taste of it was amazing. It was like the mead that he tried before with the dwarves, but it was her, stronger, and somehow, there was a hint of spice to it as well. "That, Gloin, is incredible!"

"Try it with your last night," Gloin waved him off. And, if we win the battle, there will be more in your future."

"Now see, that is a reason to fight!" Dain shouted with a laugh, slapping the other dwarf on the shoulder. "Tell me you didn't just give the pansy elf lover all of your good mead?"

Harry rolled his eyes at the redhead attitude. He'd gotten used to Dain's bluff manners over the past few days and had also seen that he was a hard worker and extremely intelligent underneath that gruff exterior. Between him, Dwalin, Thorin and Thranduil, they had created an extremely good defense-in-depth. This would allow them to bleed the incoming orc and goblin army in intervals, hopefully keeping their own people alive at the same time. "I doubt I'll drink it all even if he did, Dain, and if we all make it through the battle, I'll cheerfully share what remains until Gloin makes another batch."

"I'll hold you to that, wizard," Dain snorted.

"I as well, Harry," Thorin said, clapping his friend on the shoulder, then smirking. "Now, go find your lady, and enjoy some time off."



Harry smiled and, to the amusement of Thorin, no longer objected to Tauriel being called his lady. Harry got the impression that their courtship would be a rather long one, but if he had learned nothing since joining Thorin on this trip, it was that the journey should be just as rewarding as the destination.

Entering the Elvin camp, which was still separate from the dwarf and human camp and not nearly as raucous tonight, he found Tauriel, Legolas, and several other officers having a last-minute meeting with Thranduil. He waited by the sidelines, but his attempt to be unobtrusive without using the invisibility cloak failed.

Harry had gone out of his way to avoid the King, knowing that his own temper might get the better of him if he didn't. And seeing the King's eyes on him now, Harry realized that had been a very good decision. But after a moment, the King turned away, finishing his discussion with his officers. He then waved Tauriel off, gesturing to Harry with one hand, as if he was a smell to be wafted away before turning away deliberately and entering his tent.

*Well, I can take arrogant dismissal over any other kind of interaction, I suppose. Thranduil's anger, though, that I could do without. I just hope he keeps his eyes on the real enemy here and doesn't try to do anything tricky for whatever reason.*

Harry White those thoughts from his mind as Tauriel moved towards him, smiling, as Harry bowed to her, and asked grandly, "my lady, would you like to take a walk under the starlight with me?"

Tauriel smiled at that and link arms with Harry. "I would indeed."

The two of them walked out of the Elvin camp and away from everyone else, pending around the mountain for a time, simply talking about the day's events, what they thought the battle would be like, the fights each of them had already seen against the orcs and so forth for a time. But then, the conversation turned more personal.

As they left the last of the Elvish guards behind. The first time, Harry learned that Tauriel had a family: parents, a younger brother and an older sister, who had just conceived her first child. "Mind you, Mahariel and I are not all that close. She is nearly a thousand years older than I and was never around the house as I grew up." He further learned that she got along very well with her father, but not her mother, who had disliked her entering the Unseen Host and had thought at first that she and Legolas would bond.

"So she is a social climber?" Tauriel looked at Harry quizzically for that one, and he explained the phrase, to which she frowned but then slowly nodded. It annoyed her to no end, but the concept was all too accurate in this case.

Harry told her in turn about his own life, not touching on anything family-related, but more about his schooling as a wizard and the adventures he'd had that he hadn't discussed with her before. The story of the basilisk had been the one he had told Tauriel about previously,

in a way to explain why he was so willing to face the dragon. Now, Harry talked about the first adventure he had in the Wizarding World, the battle against the possessed Professor Quirrell.

Eventually, their discussion turned to the future.

“Are you still planning to travel to Lothlorien once your friends are fully ensconced in Erebor?” Tauriel asked.

Harry nodded. “I am. I think, on the whole, I’m mentally all there now. But I would like an expert’s opinion,” he finished drolly before shaking his head as Tauriel laughed, holding up his still-scarred hand. “I would also like to see if lady Galadriel could do anything about my hand.”

Taking his scarred hand in both of hers, Tauriel traced the scars with a finger very, very lightly, causing a shiver to go down Harry’s spine for the second time since they had met up again. “I understand why. But do not think that your scars are enough to mar my opinion of you in any way. Indeed, I rather think that they add character. Not just these scars, but this one as well.” One of her hands moved up to gently trace the lightning bolt scar on Harry’s forehead. “It shows that despite your age in human years, you have proven yourself a man of substance time and time again.”

“A man of substance? For some reason, I quite like that turn of phrase rather than simply a ‘tested warrior’ or something similar,” Harry mused, then looked at her, reaching up with his other hand to take the hand that was still tracing his lightning bolt scar up and down. Bringing it to his mouth Harry kissed the tip of each finger, causing Tauriel to blush at this forward action. “And, could I perhaps count on having some company on my trip?”

The way he asked it sounded light, almost teasing. Yet his eyes were serious as he looked at her, both of their features visible to one another in the light of the moon above. Something that Harry reminded himself to thank Arien’s boyfriend for, if only secondhand.

“If possible, I would like that,” Tauriel replied honestly. I fear, however, that it might not be possible. Regardless of anything else, with the greater threat driven off from Dol Guldur, the King will probably rescind his ruling on not antagonizing the spiders. I would like to be a part of rooting them out very, very much.”

“Even if you have to keep serving Thranduil?”

“Even then. Thranduil is but a small annoyance compared to the threats the spiders pose to my people. Besides...” Tauriel paused, then shook her head, deciding not to discuss some of the inner politics of Taur-e-Ndaelos with Harry. he wouldn’t care, and the fact that the King was now on very thin ice even with his own people was dirty laundry that she really didn’t want to share with any outsider despite their relationship.

“Well, if you can join me, I would appreciate the company. If not... Well, I suppose both of us will have time to spare.”

Tauriel nodded, having been told once before that Harry's magical power had basically made them nearly as immortal as an elf before, and now, with his being bound into the song of middle earth by Arien and Aule, he was probably just as immortal as one of the Istar. *Although he is far more handsome than any of them*, Tauriel thought, then scolded herself for it.

Perhaps her thoughts that direction had taken over Tauriel's tongue because the next thing she said was, "Well, while that may be, do not think that all of our courtship has going to be like this, emphasizing the slow, elven manner. In fact, I was wondering, what you humans do for courtship, and was thinking that perhaps you would something of that sort tonight."

Harry snorted, then, feeling very daring, said, "Well, there is a way that most lovers would see one another off to battle. Would you like to try it?" Before Tauriel could answer, Harry was leaning forward and kissing Tauriel full on the lips.

It was the first kiss of this sort they'd shared, but Tauriel found herself almost unsurprised by it and indeed eagerly returning the kiss, so much so that when her back hit a tree behind her, she didn't protest. Instead, as Harry's tongue tapped against her lips, Tauriel didn't fight her instincts, slowly opening her mouth, meeting his tongue with her own. Harry's tongue seemed to be almost alive with a mind of its own moving around Tauriel's and into her mouth, exploring, licking, flicking, causing Tauriel to feel sensations that she had never felt before. There was so much that it took her breath away.

It was with a jolt that Tauriel realized that was not, in fact, a turn of phrase that her mind had come up with. She actually was out of breath and had to pull back after a few moments. Harry let her, leaning his forehead against hers. "Well, my lady, what do you think of human courtship now?"

Gasping in air, Tauriel knew she was blushing but found she didn't care overmuch, instead biting her lip in delight at what happened. "I think, Harry, that I quite enjoyed it. Do you think you could show me another example?"

By the time both of them returned to camp that night, Tauriel's lips were slightly bruised, and she had a hickey on her neck, fully visible in her uniform, something that had astonished her at the time. Why would someone mark their mate in such a manner? But the pleasure of having been bitten in such a way had been its own answer, and Tauriel ignored with aplomb the looks she was getting from her fellow elves, men and woman alike, as she took to her tent.

On the other hand, Harry had to deal with Balin, Thorin and the others all laughing at him as they too saw that Tauriel had left a hickey of her own, and Harry's lips were also similarly bruised when he came to their campsite that night. Regardless, both of them went to bedrolls that night feeling very good about their relationship, where it was going, and life in general.

That feeling did not last past noontide the next day because the outriders, including the three princes, all had rushed into camp at that point, shouting out their news. The Orcish host was barely an hour behind them, and it was coming on hard. "As to the enemy host's numbers, I could not be certain, but I believe they are at least four times our own!" Elladan reported as he gratefully grabbed another quiver of arrows from one of the humans stationed as a runner for the upcoming battle.

It would be up to men and women like them to rush arrows forward to the elven troops. Some would even serve in Erebor's own defensive line, doing much the same work for the ten ballistae that the dwarves had repaired in time for the battle.

"Is that all?" Harry quipped as he raised the sword of Gryffindor. "I'm almost insulted that this Sauron fellow felt that was enough."

The dwarves all around him laughed, and even the two sons of Elrond chuckled. Up and down the line the news went, but also the upbeat attitude of the leaders, as Bard moved forward, nodding at Harry, the two of them clasping forearms before moving forward to join the Unseen Host in the first line of defense with the elven twins.

Behind them, Thorin and Dain jointly commanded the main battle line, a series of makeshift ditches and bulwarks, backed up by the dwarves and the humans. The other dwarves from Thorin's company had spread out throughout the dwarven battle line, commanding portions of it and the humans backing it up with arrows and pike. The dwarven cavalry was elsewhere, hidden for now, with the thrushes ready to take orders to them when they could get it stuck in and do the most damage.

The Elven host, by far the largest of the combined armies, had also been split into different commands. The two main portions of the Elven Army anchored the battle lines, centered around two hills, and protected by walls that Harry had raised from the very earth. But in front of the main battle line and spread out in a curve around the other defensive positions were several other ditches and dikes, where the Unseen Host stood scattered in groups of five. To them would come the charge of starting the battle, raining down long-range fire on the orcs and goblins as they closed, picking off enemy archers when they could, but generally pricking the enemy army before retreating behind the main lines, where further raised positions had been readied for the elven and human archers.

Bard and Harry moved forward to this line, grimly determined. "We've got this. Trust in the plans and the battle line." Harry said, just as they reached the forward position. "Just remember to stay away from the red-painted stones," he said in a louder voice. "Let's not get ourselves trapped in any of the little surprises I've put out, right?"

The humans and elves in hearing range either smiled or laughed at that, the humans laughing, the elves mostly smiling thinly. The proof of Harry's otherworldly abilities had brought

some interest from the elves, and all of them realized now why their King had to keep him captive, although few agreed with Thranduil's methods.

Nearby, Harry could see Tauriel also moving forward, to one side, with Legolas on the other. Depending on which portion of the Unseen Host's forward positions was attacked first, Harry and Bart would move to that position to reinforce it for a time before calling the retreat.

Harry held up his hand towards Tauriel, who returned the gesture, and then, Harry resolutely turned away from the redheaded elf woman, looking around at the humans around them, seeing the fear of their faces, the determination as Bard began to whisper to each man in turn.

As the thumping of many thousands of feet began to reach them, and the sound of the enemy's drums began to thunder in the distance, Harry lifted the sword of Gryffindor into the air and shouted out, "Who is ready to kill some orcs? Who's ready to fight for their families, their homes?"

His words caused the men around them to hesitate, some faces firming, others looking indecisive as the noise from the enemy army grew louder, but then Bard replied in a booming voice. "We are! The men of Dale will fight! For our lives and for the future!"

That did it. Spines stiffened all around, and men began to shout, roaring out their own battle cries as the elves looked on in some perplexity. They didn't understand how humans needed to bolster their spirits before battle and further not understanding that this was even more true for an irregular force like this one.

The cheers continued as orcs and goblins began to appear, spreading out as they came, chanting their own war cries, slamming large swords against shields or pounding the dirt with heavy boots. But they did not advance. Instead, they kept on spreading around the defensive position, thickening their lines, bellowing their own cries, shouting down the defenders, until the cacophony was so loud that even the humans at the front line could not hear themselves bellow.

In the far distance, in the center of a group of trolls, stood Azog, the white orc. He stared forward from his raised position on a platform held between four trolls, snarling as he saw all of the enemies of his people gathered in one place, assembled in a meager alliance against his mighty host. Then, with a bellow, he raised his sword and pointed forward. At that signal, the orcs and goblins all started forward.

The Battle Of The Lonely Mountain had begun.

**End Chapter**

Now, I know that a common thought in fandom is that the Arkenstone is a Silmaril or something. However, that isn't possible, given the reasons Bilbo gave in the chapter above. So I had to come up with something different and decided that perhaps Aulë would have his own plans for the dwarves, since Eru Ilúvatar said that they were outside his designs. Hence the Heart of the Mountain. And making it's power only able to be wielded by someone worthy just makes sense, especially given how much trouble the Silmarils caused. Aulë ain't no fool, LOL. There will be more about it and the impact it has on Thorin in the future. Beyond that, I hope you liked the travails caused by the Taint, and the romance.

Now, a FILFy Sitrep: It isn't going to be posted either here or on patty r on, since no one over there asked me to post it without my beta readers having seen it. So it will be updated in August, but I will not promise an exact date. I have no idea how long it will take me to go through and Grammarly the \*\*\*\* out of it, and I have no idea how long it will take my beta readers to get the chapter back to me. So August will see FILFy, one patty r on story, one story that hasn't been updated in a long while, and one large story. The large story poll will be up here on fanfic when I post it over on patty r on.