

Howdy all. Seeing as Tomon has yet to get back to me with *Stallion*, let alone seen *DA*, I decided to post this here for you all first so you have something to read. It hasn't been edited, and I won't have time if I want to try and get a similarly sized chapter for Heroes out, let alone go over *Stallion* if *Tomon* does get it back to me. Especially since I will be doing a favor for a family member that will take around five hours on Friday. UGH. If anyone thinks they have enough WoW knowledge to try and take over work on *DA* for a month, contact me via pm here. Otherwise, send your thoughts to Tomon to empower his ability to read faster and deal with RL issues, LOL.

### **Chapter 21: Sometimes, Those Travelling Hit Potholes**

On the morning of the third day out from Lothlorien, Harry decided he could get used to waking up with Tauriel hugging him to her chest like a teddy bear.

It turned out that Tauriel became a cuddler at night, something he had not really anticipated from an elf. Cuddling while awake, yes. That seemed a natural part of their courtship, something they both deeply enjoyed now that they were away from other people and could be open with their affections. Not that they couldn't hug or hold hands, but being around other elves was somewhat stifling when it came to more than that.

But Tauriel sought out his warmth and body at night was a surprise. But despite her death grip around his upper body and how deeply she seemed to sleep, Harry quickly learned that any noise nearby that her brain didn't register as natural or coming from the forest would wake Tauriel instantly. Indeed, when he had to extricate himself from Tauriel, to go to the bathroom mainly, he found her awake and waiting for Harry to return.

However, they'd had a particularly intense make out session last night. It had ended with both of their shirts coming off and Harry exploring Tauriel's upper body for the first time without any cloth impediment between them. It turned out that in this world, bras had yet to be invented, and Harry had found himself extremely glad of that. Now, as dawn light began to filter into the tent and through Tauriel's red hair, which covered his back and the side of his face, Harry once more took in the view. *From far closer this time too.*

Looking down, he could take in the shapes of her large apple-sized breasts, rising and falling as Tauriel breathed in, her breaths seeming to have far longer intervals than a normal human's would be able to sustain. Each fleshy hill was firm, standing high and proud on Tauriel's so much so that even though they were sleeping on their side at present, they barely seemed to feel gravity pulling them sideways. Beyond that, Harry had been amazed to find that elvish nipples could come in colors unknown to man. At least, he had never heard of someone back on Earth having a light green tinge to their nipples, which only came out when they hardened from arousal.

*Or the cold maybe, Harry acknowledged, but I doubt elves actually feel that. I certainly didn't see any sign of them needing to dress up for winter during our time in Lothlorien. And just look at how they go around without boots all the time!*

*Despite that minor surprise, Tauriel's baps looked utterly magnificent to Harry's eyes. I know I saw them before during that disaster when the Company was trying to escape, but having Tauriel let me see them, and even play with her breasts like last night is another thing altogether.*

Seeing that Tauriel didn't seem to be in a hurry to wake up that morning, Harry decided to be a little daring. Leaning forward just a bit, Harry kissed along the inside of her breast. Hearing the change in her breathing as she began to wake up, he waited a moment before moving to Tauriel's nipple. Lightly licking that hardened light green nub caused Tauriel to gasp.

Now awake, Tauriel gently tugged at his hair pulling Harry away from her nipple before running her fingers through it in apology. "That is a little too far as a means of waking me up, my love."

"Then perhaps you should've put your shirt back on last night," Harry answered cheekily, causing her to gurgle in laughter. Then, to his surprise, Tauriel pulled his head back into her chest.

Obligingly, Harry began to kiss and nibble at her breasts again, causing Tauriel to let loose a low moan. He kept at this for a few seconds as Tauriel got used to the sensations, before at another tug at his hair, Harry moved up to her mouth.

Both broke off from the kiss as the noise of thunder and lightning reached them from outside the tent. Harry rolled to one side and Tauriel stood up with all of the grace of her folk, going from laying down on her side to standing up in one smooth motion. Moving to the tent flap she shook her head at being able to stand upright in what the outside world would see as a single simple sleeping tent for one person. *We still need to crawl in and out, but that is a small price to pay.* "I still cannot get over this tent, Harry. I know you worked on it while we were with the Lady Galadriel and her folk, but even so, your space expansion runes are amazing to see in action."

"Thank you. I like to think I do good work when I put my mind to something," Harry answered modestly, laying back down on the large pillows that served them in lieu of a bed. That had been Tauriel's preference, something that she shared with many elves. They tended to prefer large comfortable pillows rather than formal beds.

Above where he lay, the portion of the tent's interior directly above the pillows were marked by a painting of the nighttime sky visible when it was dark out. That had been a contribution by several of the elves in Lothlorien who had delighted in the work and sharing the glory of the stars from the Years of the Trees with Tauriel and Harry. That was the name of the First Age of the world, before the creation of the Anar and Ithil, the Sun and Moon. They had only been created after the death of the Trees, Telperion and Laurelin, had been destroyed by Ungoliant

and Morgoth, and even then, fifty years went by before Arien first sailed Anar into the heavens above Middle Earth.

Harry was often confused about the First Age. Elves seemed to switch between what they called 'Long Years' and regular years, and it was quite confusing as he couldn't get anyone to explain what a long year was in terms of a regular year. Even Lady Galadriel hadn't, saying that the true nature of the long years changed one year to another.

Still, Harry was grateful for the work the elven painters had put into his tent. Even though he knew it had been more thanks to the request of Lady Galadriel than for Harry or even Tauriel.

Around the sides of the tent elsewhere, which, much like the rest of the interior was much larger than it appeared on the outside obviously, were little packets and pouches that could be clipped down so that what they contained wouldn't move. Fletching tools for Tauriel, along with spare bowstring and a pouch containing several hundred arrowheads to further extend their supplies from the full quivers in Harry's mokeskin pouch. A chisel for when Harry was working on runes and several dozen flat stone discs for the runes themselves. A spare dagger, bits of wood, the two daggers they had been given by Galadriel and other small things.

There were also two elven cloaks and a fur-lined undershirt for Harry, made from animals who had been harmed in some battle and were on their last legs, according to the hunters who had brought the fur in. Unlike what most humans and even dwarves thought, the elves did sometimes eat meat, but only from animals were already dying for the most part. Fish though? Tauriel was not alone in her tendency to eat fish like a hobbit ate mushrooms. All Silvan elves did, and even many Noldor.

The cooking equipment and the bag containing it rounded out the tent's interior, although there was no place inside the tent for a campfire, nor the fish or meet. Those were contained in their own separate pack. As for the lack of fire, Harry couldn't figure out a way to ventilate the tent without damaging the structural properties of the space expansion charm. And his one experiment with cooking inside with the tent flap open had been rather foolish.

Yet the amazing tent barely took Harry's notice away from Tauriel as she bent down to look outside the tent, poking her head out of the tent flap and presenting her rear to him. Although still clad, that rear was most enticing, as were the long extremely well-formed legs that led up to it. Especially as she only wore a pair of what would've been called boy pants back on earth. Here, they served forest elves like her as nightwear while out in the forest.

Looking back over her shoulder, Tauriel smiled faintly, thrilled beyond anything she had ever thought she could experience at the awareness of Harry's eyes on her. Being wanted like that, the passion she could feel in Harry was not something that would normally occur in Elvish courtship until well after marriage. But Tauriel delighted in it, as she had practically everything they had done. *Oh yes, we needed some alone time*, Tauriel thought with amusement, remembering her last conversation with Arwen.

“Well, it looks as if it just started raining. My prediction will was off alas. I thought it would’ve hit last night at some point, but...” Tauriel shrugged, which did enticing things to her rear. “I am a master of woodcraft, but the wind and weather are the domain of Manwe, and he sends us what he will, not what we wish.”

Tauriel turned away from the flap. Instead of sitting down next to Harry, she straddled him, her legs going to either side of his waist as her rear settled into his lap, leaning her forehead against his. The two of them simply stayed there for a moment, staring into one another’s eyes, lost as their Fëa wound around one another. Then a lightning strike nearby broke them out of the momentary paralysis and Tauriel tilted her head, leaning in to kiss Harry hungrily. “However should we spend the morning?” She whispered.

Later that day, Harry continued his training in how to move through a forest as Tauriel did. This was difficult in a forest recently drenched by rain. Sound was relatively easy, but leaving no traces behind when the ground was wet like this, was much harder. But Tauriel firmly believed that leaving tracks behind you was stupid, regardless of what you were doing. And considering the goblins the pair had dealt with on their trip to Lothlorien, Harry was more than willing to go along with the lessons, despite knowing that Dol Guldur had been dealt with. Especially when the company was so good.

The two lovers had crossed the River Anduin the first day out from Caras Galadon and within a day had entered the southernmost portion of Mirkwood, which had previously been controlled by Dol Guldur and the fell power residing within. But with the fortress utterly destroyed, the death grip that the forces of darkness had on this portion of the forest had also faded. Not a day had gone by without Tauriel commenting on how the forest felt cleaner to her, the air moving more naturally, smelling not of musk and decay, or the leavings of spiders - and goblins and orcs around here - but of pine, wet leaves and the trees themselves. “Even animals have begun to move back into this area of the forest. That is an excellent sign for its future recovery.”

Harry had nodded, although he hadn’t noticed any animals just yet. And indeed, they had planned for the trip thinking there wouldn’t be any animals to supplement their diet going forward. Thus they had spent a day on the river itself, as Tauriel fished and Harry preserved the fish for later use.

The rain continued to come down intermittently for the next few days, and one time, Tauriel, who was the most experienced, was calling the shots on how fast a pace to set, called a full halt. “The rain will not be letting up, and may worsen. I can feel it, the drizzle is going to become a flood soon. We had best find someplace to set up camp for the night.”

“I will bow to your greater expertise,” Harry answered easily. “It isn’t as if we’re in any rush.”

Within a short amount of time, Tauriel’s prediction proved accurate. The rain, which had just been drizzling, suddenly began to pour down from the sky. It was as if Manwe and Ulmo were conspiring to flood this portion of the world ever so slightly. Thankfully, the lovers had set up

the tent on a small hill by that point. There, Harry used drying spells on pieces of wood, quickly making a fire and cooking a stew before transporting the stew into the tent right before the rain began to fall in earnest.

The two of them sat together, pulling the pillows out of their normal place in the tent to lean back against as they watched the rain through the tent flap. "I remember a rain like this happening in my second week of being a member of the Unseen Host. North of Taur-e Ndaedelos, the trees are so large that you can take shelter in the lee of a tree, cover yourself in a blanket and not be hit by any of the rain," Tauriel said. "Indeed, instead of being a bother, the rain felt almost like music playing on the leaves. One of my fellows began to sing, a song of the olden times when the forest spanned much of the land, and one could walk from Taur-e Ndaedelos to the Blue Mountains and never leave the shade of the trees."

Harry nodded, taking a bite of stew as he listened to Tauriel try to hum a portion of the song, before failing, her memory not up to doing it justice in her words. "I don't know if I can ever see the world as your elders did in those days. My own world has few places which haven't felt humanities touch. Although, I will say that enjoy exploring the world as it is now with you by my side."

That line might have sounded almost saccharin to another human, too sweet to be believed. Or said more to get a laugh than a romantic response. But Tauriel smiled happily, hearing the truth in Harry's words, leaning her head against his shoulder as he went on wryly. "And I can't say that I have any good memories of being caught in the rain, which makes me thankful that we're here warm and dry in our little tent. I'll never get over how we used to practice Quidditch in the rain and the cold, although I'll admit that rain and heat is much better."

"Quidditch? The flying game yes? You've spoken several times of it, although I don't believe you mentioned rain before in conjunction with those stories, save for that one game interrupted by the horrible Dementor creatures." Tauriel shuddered a bit, thinking those creatures sounded like something that the Great Enemy might have created in the first Age of the world. And to know that there had been hundreds of the creatures back in Harry's old world was horrifying to her.

"I did mention that story, didn't I?" Harry mused, remembering that conversation between him, Tauriel, the lady Galadriel and Celeborn. It had happened after Harry had taught Galadriel the Patronus. "No, that wasn't the only time I was forced to play in horrible weather. In fact, we didn't just play in horrible weather, we trained in it. Oliver Wood, the captain of our team was a maniac when it came to Quidditch..." From there, Harry explained more about his time on the Quidditch team which he had only touched on before this.

Tauriel replied in kind, telling about how the members of the Unseen Host were trained to move in all types of weather without leaving a trace, including snow. Even elves needed to be trained in such things, something Harry took some comfort in. "And not just hardpacked snow either,

but newly fallen snow. Leaving no trace in that kind of material is extremely difficult to learn. But once you do, it can become second nature.”

“I really don’t think you should expect these plodding human feet to be able to do what yours can,” Harry quipped, staring down at his own well-made leather boots, and Tauriel’s feet, which did not have anything upon them. She smirked, wiggling her toes at him, and Harry chuckled, reaching down and taking one of her feet and tickling it, causing her to shriek and try to pull away.

The flirting continued the next day even though the rain did as well. It wasn’t as heavy, and they could see for quite a ways through it. It was also warm. Summer hit this portion of the world hard that day, so much so that Harry didn’t want to be in his cloak to protect himself from the rain. Tauriel had much the same thought and they put the cloaks away into Harry’s bag with the cooking equipment. Tauriel carried the tent in its own backpack along with a dagger at her hip and bow over her shoulder.

The two of them walked together, still scanning the surrounding areas for trouble, but mostly lost in one another. Not a league went by without them stopping and kissing or simply holding one another. And at one point, Harry was even allowed to get his hand underneath her skirt, as Tauriel leaned her head against his shoulder, shuddering at the sensations he wrought with his fingers, her words coming out in a loud moan. “Oh, my love, my heart!”

Later, as the rain began to pass and they broke out from the forest into the flatlands beyond, Harry learned more about field craft from Tauriel. How to hide his footprints was but the start. How to always be aware of his surroundings and set up a camp that would be unseen by any near or far, regardless of terrain were just as important. They couldn’t practice on all terrain, but by the third day of sitting up a camp under Tauriel’s stern injunctions, Harry felt he had it down at least in scrubland and grassland, which was not easy.

Luckily, the term rolling hills could be easily used to describe the terrain they were going through right now. Grassland marked out with a few shrubs, large rocks and bushes as far as the eye could see, but the eye could not see very far because the terrain here was not flat. Rather it was a series of small hillocks, with tiny streams hidden making the ground wet in surprising places.

At one point, Harry looked up from where he was cooking to see Tauriel staring east her face showing an expression of curiosity. “You see something you want to explore?”

“No, nothing like that. I... I am simply remembering the tales of the early days of the elves in the Far East. Since the Breaking of the World, my folk have never wandered eastward. Especially since the last war against Sauron any thought in that direction has faded horribly. We know that to the far east, the land was cracked there as well, and that one continent became two, as we have spoken of before. But out there somewhere is the ancestral birthplace of my people:

Cuiviénen, the place we dwelled in before we began to migrate west under the guidance of Oromë.”

Harry nodded, remembering that Oromë was the Hunter, one of the Valar devoted most to hunting down the creatures of Morgoth. And that during his time having his mind healed had reached out to Tauriel, training her further as a huntress. Looking at her now, Harry could well understand why. *Tauriel looks almost like she is poised like a bowstring ready to charge forward on the hunt*, he though wonderingly, losing himself once more in simply looking at her, before shaking his head and addressing her words. “I remember our previous conversation on that. Far east of the inland sea called the Sea of Rhun, right? But if the land was really broken in two, it might be impossible to find Cuiviénen.”

“I know, and I also learned that the dwarven houses of the Stiffbeards, Ironfoot and Blacklocks reside there, locked in a state of constant skirmishing with the Haradrim, the men of the Harad and Khand. But even if we just go as far as their holdings it be fascinating to explore there.”

Tauriel grinned, turning to look over her shoulder for just a moment before turning back the way she had been looking, gazing afar once more, seeing Harry knew for leagues beyond where Harry could see. “To wander once more in forests untouched by Silvan or Noldor hands, to perhaps find some lost dwelling of the Avari? That would be amazing.”

When they awoke upon Middle Earth, the elves were originally divided into three clans. Back then they were called the Minyar, Tatyar, and the Nelyar. All of the Minyar, half of the Tatyar, and a little less than two-thirds of the Nelyar were convinced by Oromë to journey to the west, becoming known as the Vanyar, Noldor, and Teleri, respectively. But those who stayed, most of whom came from the Teleri, were called the Avari and were not counted among the Eldar, never empowered by living among the Valar and Maiar in the Blessed Realm.

Little was known specifically of their history among the surviving elves. But it was speculated that many, perhaps most, had eventually fallen into darkness under the reign of Morgoth, and perhaps become twisted into the first of the orcs. But some of them met the first Men to awake, helping them to journey West, teaching them what they could of woodcraft and culture. For that alone perhaps everyone alive today should be thankful, for if not for Men, specifically Eärendil, the age of Morgoth would never have been broken upon Middle Earth until too late for the elves who lived there, given the fear that the Valar had in further damaging the world they had wrought in Eru Ilúvatar’s name, and the sadness and betrayal they felt at the Noldor leaving Aman.

Yet that had been thousands of years ago, well before the Breaking of the World. The world was changed now, and as Tauriel said, the lands to the East were dominated by the Haradrim. Men who had apparently given themselves over to Sauron. It would probably be impossible for them to go there... or Harry would say that if they didn’t have access to elven cloaks and his magic. *As it is, well if we wanted to turn our hands at spying, I doubt that anyone but Sauron... or maybe the Nazgûl if they revive too, could spot us.*

Harry set that thought aside for now and slowly rose to his feet. He moved around the fire pit and behind Tauriel, putting his arms around her and leaning his chin on her shoulder, staring in the same direction she was. *I do not know where it comes from, perhaps it is the equivalent of what Celeborn once called the 'sea longing' of the Teleri, but my lady does enjoy the idea of traveling quite a bit. And who am I to gainsay her?* "If you want to my lady, journeying in that area would be amazing. Probably dangerous too, but I think we could handle that."

"My word, but the list of places we wish to explore is getting longer all the time, is it not?" Tauriel answered teasingly, leaning her head sideways against his.

"Why should that matter, we have all the time in the world?" He asked squeezing her tighter. "a few years with the dwarves, a year or so exploring the north before deciding yes, its cold and miserable and we've hunted the monsters Oromë wanted you to, a few years traveling into the human realms. And then why not travel to toward the east?"

There were a lot of reasons probably why they wouldn't be able to, and both lovers knew that. First and foremost, as Harry had just been thinking about, Sauron was out there to the south in Mordor rebuilding his power base. While at the moment there was little Harry could do beyond spreading the knowledge of his magic and runes as he had to Galadriel, one of the reasons they would be travelling would be to slay other monsters and dark beasts Sauron could call to his service. That was the mission Oromë had given Tauriel. And even if she hadn't been given that mission, neither Harry nor Tauriel were the sort to simply keep on traveling once Sauron rose to power again. It was only a question of when.

But it was nice to dream.

Tauriel chuckled, before her nose wrinkled, and she pulled away from Harry to look over their shoulders at the fire. "That is a pleasant thought for the future, my dear. But for now, I believe our meal is about to burn."

She laughed as Harry twisted around, releasing her quickly and racing back to their fire pit with a curse.

That night the lovers stayed awake, sleeping outside the tent for once. They stared up at the stars above, their arms around one another, the stars clearer here than they had been back in the forest even on the best nights. And as Tauriel sang a song of thanks to the stars, Harry bowed his head in thanks as well to Elbereth Gilthoniel, Lady of the Night.

Later the next day, the two of them crested a small hillock and paused, looking ahead of them in surprise. They saw what looked like a small copse of trees on the horizon. "Huh. That sticks out like a pimple on a nose. I wonder what those trees are doing here?"

Tauriel's own nose wrinkled along with the rest of her face as she stared at Harry. "That is a most strange phrase. What is a pimple, and what does it have to do with your nose?"

Harry stared at her, then sighed. "Right, elves. You probably don't have those, do you?"



Setting that strange conversation aside, Tauriel raced forward, flitting across the ground as only an elf could, causing Harry to sprint to keep up. He could, but he noted absently that while Tauriel still left no sign of her passage among the grass, looking over his shoulder, he could see that he definitely did.

By the time he caught up with Tauriel, she had already flipped herself into the branches of one tree, laughing in delight. "They are so old! Look at them! They are as old as the oldest of trees in Mirkwood. And I can feel the touch of elves still within them. They remember our language, our touch."

Harry lost her entirely among the foliage above, but he was more than willing to assume she was right at home. With that, he began to look around, noting tracks of animals, including one which might be to a bear. A big one, although not to the size Beorn had taken on during the battle of the lonely mountain. He was about to tell Tauriel but yelped in surprise as she swung down from a tree behind Harry, landing lightly, smiling and leaning in to kiss him. Then she was pulling away, taking his hand and touching it to the trunk over a gnarled piece of trunk that could serve as a handhold. "Come. I have taught you how to climb, and this is a view you need to see."

Moments later, Harry had to acknowledge that Tauriel was right, the view up here was magnificent. Then, as Tauriel moved off to further explore the woods, Harry stayed where he was, leaning against the tree staring out over the world as he reached out with his senses into that world as he had been taught by Lady Galadriel.

Soon, Harry felt the tree respond, it's mind, such as it was, opening up to him. He could almost feel it, feel how the tree viewed the world. The tree's thoughts were slow, ponderous, and slow to change most of all. But it was strong too, with deep roots and strong boughs, and after a moment, Harry could feel himself pulled deeper into the connection.

Shuddering, Harry quickly pulled his mind away from the tree, shaking his head. "No thank you. I might have a lifetime to live that a tree might envy, but I'd prefer my thoughts remain human, thanks."

With that in mind, knowing that Tauriel would be busy exploring the little copse of trees for a while, Harry pulled out his rune crafting materials and began practicing. He was still there as night fell, but to his surprise, Tauriel asked if they could push on instead of make camp. "The stars are so bright tonight, Harry. A night like this calls me to be up and doing."

Harry shrugged. He wasn't tired, something he had gotten used to on the journey down to Lothlorien and had luxuriated in since his mind had been repaired and fully integrated into his changing body. "Of course, my lady," Harry said, taking one of her hands in his. "Just remember, my eyesight isn't as good as yours, particularly at night."

Tauriel laughed again, that light chiming sound causing Harry to smile and turn. She pulled into a light kiss and again pulled away, gently tugging his arm. "Come then, oh blind one. I will lead you through this night."

"You know, that could be taken entirely different direction..." Harry drawled, causing her to blush.

Near dawn, however, they paused for a time, then went forward more slowly, wary of the area in front of them. Here, where Harry estimated they should start to see signs of a river rather than the small streams and ponds they had seen previously, they had come upon an area of hills. Real hills rather than the tiny bumps in the land they had been dealing with.

Moreover, these hills were somehow nasty looking. They were filled with jagged rocks, and as they closed, they saw dozens of small and even a few large areas that looked like they could be caves. Still Harry pressed on, heading north and slightly west as determined by Harry's Point Me spell towards the Lonely Mountain.

But even as they made their way through the rocky hills, no trouble came to them. Still, the area gave both of them a negative vibe. Soon, as Harry predicted, they began to hear the sounds of a river. A mighty one too, on the same scale as the River Anduin.

Climbing up a sharp series of boulders, they saw the River Celduin far below, winding through a canyon between the rocky hills. Called the River Running in Trade Speech, the river lived up to its name, rushing strongly from its source in the Sea of Rhun in the east and thence north and west to Long Lake, one of the two rivers that fit into that body of water.

Tauriel stared, never having seen a body of water moving so fast. "It dwarfs the King's River in Mirkwood, and even the river Anduin didn't have a current that was visible from so far away."

"Indeed. Unless we wish to fly across via my magic, we may need to journey along the bank to find a place where it slows down," Harry agreed. He then smirked at his lover teasingly. "But at least that will allow us to rebuild our supplies of fish. Although I have no idea what kind of fish would swim in a river like that."

At that, Tauriel grabbed his arm and began to pull him along. They had run out of fish and some herbs they had been given in Lothlorien the day before. They still had a lot of Lembas, and the bread of the elves would sustain them regardless, but Tauriel would admit to being somewhat spoiled by this point when it came to meals. Harry's cooking was just that good. "Come, I think I saw a easier path down towards the river this way."

Laughing, Harry once more allowed Tauriel to pull him along, and they found an area between the rocky hills where the ground evened out, allowing them easier access to the river. There, the answer to Harry's question about what fish would swim the River Running was quickly answered: Big ones. They looked somewhat like pike the size of Napolean fish, only with larger heads and more fins sticking out in odd places to Harry's eyes.

They were mean too. Tauriel quickly tried the trick she had in the River Anduin, murmuring to the fish and simply pulling them up by the gills. These fish did not respond well to that, nearly biting her hand before she could pull it out of the water. "They are not evil, Harry, but vicious and too hungry to listen to me."

"Well, there's always magic," Harry answered philosophically. An Accio spell shaped like a net followed his words, pulling three fish out of the river to flop nearby, their large jaws snapping at the air as Harry and his lover watched.

"I've never seen fish like these, unfortunately. They might even be poisoned, which would be a problem. For you, anyway." Poison was not an issue for Harry after his adventure in his second year in Hogwarts. "I need to experiment a bit, see what is edible and what isn't. Can you look around for a place for us to cross?"

Harry gestured across from them now, to the sheer rock face that dominated the other side of the river across from them. "That looks tougher than I want to deal with, and frankly..." He looked up at the top of the rock face, shaking his head. "Something about going up that way bothers me."

"I too. Indeed, now that you have said it, the area around here feels foul. Not as if it is currently inhabited by foul things, but as if they had recently moved on. I dislike it. I will travel further downstream, searching for both tracks of any kind, and a way across," Tauriel said, now serious. The feeling had been faint before, but looking up at the far side of the river, it was much stronger, although still nothing like it had been when they had traveled through territory near Dol Guldur. "Perhaps a troll, or some community of goblins or orcs made their homes here before being called to Sauron's service?"

"Maybe," Harry answered with a nod. "And I'm grateful I'm not the only one sensed something off about this area."

"Indeed not. I had thought to say something before, but it was so faint, I thought it but a shadow of some evil long passed before we came down to this point," Tauriel said, scowling at making such a mistake, as she looked around, pulling her bow off her back as she did, tying the string into place. "Should I return here at eventide?"

"No," Harry said, suddenly decisive. "I'll head back up the way we came and skirt further west and north around this area. I'll work with these fish before I live the rocky area behind and meet you along the riverbank." He hefted the fish, shaking his head with a wry smile. "After all, I don't have to do my experiments here. And if I leave the refuse from my tests with these fish elsewhere, it might throw off anyone in the area."

Tauriel heard the change in Harry's tone and smiled. *He leads in battle as I lead in travel. I like that.* "I will follow your lead in this, my love."

No longer simply taking their time and traveling lazily, the two split off, with Tauriel moving quickly and silently through the rocky terrain following the river. Behind her, Harry retraced their steps just as quickly, although not nearly as silently.

When they met up again, Tauriel reported that she had not seen any trace of tracks on this side of the river. "I could smell troll, and trolls would not cross such a river as this. According to what I have been told of how they act when not directed by orcs, trolls get extremely confused and scared once they cannot see their feet touching the ground. And the River Running isn't clear enough for them to do that. They might have been living directly upon it at some point, hence why that specific area felt so foul to us, but they seem to have migrated away."

Harry frowned thoughtfully. "True. Trolls do tend to travel to where they think they'll find food. And from what I remember of the three trolls Thoren and the rest of us ran into, they can get a little angry with one another if their diet becomes too predictable."

"That matches with what I was told of them. That, and precisely how omnivorous they were..." Tauriel said, trailing off with a shudder of revulsion. It was well known that all the foul races created by Morgoth in the second age of the world ate anything they caught, be it animal or person. Indeed, they seemed to delight in the doing.

"Did you find anything else?" Harry asked. "An easier place to cross the river?" He gestured to the river, where it was still flowing far too swiftly for him to want to even attempt to get across in the same manner they had the River Anduin. "Or are we falling back on the magical solution?"

"Magical solution. It is like this as far as I traveled today, and at a run that was quite a ways. Even if I did have to return to join you once more, my slow companion," Tauriel teased eager to move past the topic of trolls. "Besides, from what I know, the River Running keeps its speed for its entire length."

"Companion? Is that what I am?" Harry answered, his head hanging low theatrically. "Just a person you bring along to cook for you and keep the camp?"

There was only one response to that Tauriel could make, and she made it, leaning over and giving Harry a kiss on the lips. Harry returned the kiss, but Tauriel's eyes widened when his hands moved up to grip the back of her head. Keeping Tauriel's head still, he threaded his tongue into her mouth. It wasn't the first time they had done this, it was just the timing that threw her off, and then she was being pulled into Harry's arms, and twisted around to lay Tauriel on the ground as Harry leaned over her. There she began to whimper in delight as he began to kiss her even more ardently, all thoughts of trolls and other troubles leaving their minds as they once more lost themselves.

With the suspicion and worry of what will lay out there forgotten, the two of them had a quite pleasant time by the river, although they still built the fire so that the smoke would not rise very

far. And that night Harry laid out his protective runic arrays for the first time since they had left Mirkwood behind on their lazy journey.

Tauriel returned the next morning from taking care of her morning ablutions to find Harry staring at the river, his portion of the camp already cleared away. She wordlessly moved over to finish her portion, tamping down the ashes from the fire, removing the pit's rocks, and cleaning up to make it seem like no one had ever stayed there.

"Thinking of what specific method you will use to get us cross, my love?" she asked once she finished, feeling a thrill at the words my love.

The grin Harry showed as he turned around to face her told Tauriel he felt the same, and Tauriel idly wondered if this was what it was like for purely Elven couples. She doubted it. *The feelings and emotions might be the same, but I doubt they have the flashes of raw passion*, Tauriel thought with some amusement and a certain amount of smugness, although she would never admit to it. She had come to take quite a bit of delight in that aspect of their courtship.

"Actually, yes," Harry said to her question, breaking into Tauriel's thoughts on the relationship. "I'm wondering if we should try to freeze the water and then cross, rather than fly. I remember how you reacted when I floated you across the River Anduin."

Tauriel shuttered looking a little green at the memory. Being in midair like that had not been like being mid leap at all, because she instantly lost any feeling of being under her own power. That, combined with how long she was in the air had been somewhat scary to Tauriel although again that was something she would never admit to anyone else. *If for very different reasons.*

"If you believe you can freeze a portion of the river for a time, we could sprint across it fast enough to get to the other side before the current tore your ice apart," she said, deliberately upbeat about the idea. "Either that, or we can do it slowly, use a series of ropes to create a rope bridge across."

"Maybe, but I don't think I'd trust that. We had enough trouble crossing that way when we had to cross the River Anduin. This river is much faster, and there are those fish to consider."

"True." Tauriel winced. "Given their hunger, I do not think they would leave us alone. Even me, despite not being creatures of Sauron or the Greater Darkness."

Nodding his head, Harry turned back to the river. Holding his hands over the water, he began crafting the spell he wanted in his mind. "Glacius..."

But as he pushed his magic into the water, the water responded. Magic surged through it, the ice shattering even as it began to form along with Harry's spell, causing Harry to quickly pull his hands away from the top of the water. "That would be no!" Harry shivered. "Ulmo, or perhaps one of his surrogate Maiar definitely do not like someone messing with their water magically. And since I wish to remain on good terms with all of the Valar, I do not wish to push things."

That confused Tauriel for a moment. After all, she had seen dozens of times that Manwe did not care if Harry used spells that impacted the air. But then she remembered a portion of her history lessons, which had originally been taught to the Eldar by the Valar in the lands to the west in Aman. From a time long before the Firstborn awakened. "I think it perhaps smacks too much of the great enemy my love."

"Wait, what?" Harry looked at her in confusion then shook his head. "This is another one of those long-ago things, isn't it?"

"Oh indeed. In fact, this tale is older than even my people remember. In the dawning of the world, the clash of powers, specifically the clash of destruction embodied in Morgoth and the power of water embodied in Ulmo, created snow and ice. We were always told that Ulmo began to take delight in such uses of his power, and in the beauty that could be created with it. But I do not think that equates to letting someone else 'mess with his waters' as you put it."

"Then that only leaves flying across my lady..." Harry said teasingly.

"Then I suggest you get to work on that flying contraption you've been trying to make," Tauriel answered back primly, but to her dismay, Harry simply grinned, and pulled out the broomstick she had seen him working on for the past few nights from his expanding pouch.

Lined with runes near the straw tufts, and elsewhere along its length, the broomstick wasn't finished as the wizards and witches in his old world would term it. But it was mostly finished. "I'm not good enough to hide them, and I can't get them small enough to put all the runes hidden underneath the straw. But I think..." Harry let the broomstick go, and watched as it hovered in midair. "It will get us across the river. And maybe after that too. I'd dearly love to take you flying with me."

Tauriel just shook her head, but moved over behind Harry as he got onto the broom, hugging him from behind around the waist as he pushed them off of the ground and slowly they began to ascend, before Harry twisted them around, almost as if he was on a horse, in Tauriel's mind, and pointed them across the river.

Or, as there will through the air continued, there came a noise like a sizzle, and Tauriel twisted her head around and down to look past her rear at where the runes were. Her eyes widened, as she saw the runes sizzling where they were carved into the wood. "Harry, there's something wrong with the runes. We're on fire!"

"There's something wrong with our speed to. Damn it! I knew a few of the runic arrays built into broomsticks were proprietary, but I didn't think... I believe we're going to be making a more precipitous landing than I had hoped my lady," Harry said, frantically pushing the broomstick forward. Get ready to jump."

Tauriel quickly unwound her near death grip around. A second later, grass was visible underneath them and she leaped, leapt to one side. Harry tumbled the other way, his legs

releasing from the broomstick, grunting as he hit the ground. But they hadn't been all that high up, so both were fine.

The broomstick continued flying forward for another yard before disintegrating and exploding simultaneously. The straw at the back of the broomstick exploded in every direction, a loud crackling booming noise that cause Tauriel's eyes to widen and remember that there might be trolls about, while the front of the broomstick simply disintegrated, turning into so much ash.

"Okay, I can understand why it exploded, that is somewhat normal if you mess up a runic array or overpower it in this world. But why did one end explode and the other simply come apart like that?" Harry mused from where he lay on the ground, propping himself up and staring at where the destruction of the broom had occurred.

"I know not, but I think we need to perfect some means of crossing rivers like this if we travel in the future. For I will not do that again!" Tauriel growled, shaking her head. "If the river was even one more elven length longer, we would've been in serious trouble."

Harry nodded morosely before throwing off the momentary annoyance. Getting to his feet, he looked over to where Tauriel was already standing. "Back to the drawing board with that one, yes. For now though, we are across." He cast the Point Me spell again, and a stick in his hand pointed in the direction towards Erebor. "Shall we go?"

Tauriel nodded, shaking her head at Harry's attitude but smiling unwillingly at his upbeat attitude.

For three days and three nights the trip proceeded just as it had before this, with both of them pushing on through night and day, taking little breaks whenever they wished to rather than setting up formal camp, both of them a little too energized to want to take full lights off any longer, and with the weather as clear and as warm as it was, there was no need to. Further, as they traveled Tauriel would often stop and stare to their east, frowning pensively and saying aloud that she could still somehow sense that something evil had passed this way.

What then would be however, they did not learn until the fifth night out from the river crossing.

In the dead of night, Tauriel paused, holding up her hand. She was several steps ahead of Harry at that point, but Harry stopped and looked at her, before she pointed forward. "There are fires out there, and the sounds of combat."

**OOOOOOO**

Not even two leagues ahead of where Harry and Tauriel had stopped for the night, another band of travelers had also stopped. But this was not a pair of lovers, or even a family on the move through this strange terrain. Instead, it was a group of dwarves, several hundred strong. With them were more than three dozen ponies as beasts of burden all burdened by heavy packs, along with many of the dwarves themselves. There were even a few carts among them, each with wooden sides and roofs.

The dwarves were well-organized. The carts were in the center of their camp, completely surrounded by a series of other tents. Among the tents here were four large fires, each equidistant from one another, and torches had been set up around in a circle. Beyond that, patrols roved around the camp comprised of soldiers as the civilians began to set out cooking equipment and seeing into the animals. But like with most dwarves, the difference between guard and ready-made militia was **very** small. Every dwarf in the caravan moving around the camp were armed.

Alas, all of that simply made it a larger target for the trolls. The majority of trolls were not mindless beasts, as the three that Harry and Thorin's Company had fought near the Shire showed. They were able to speak, to plan and work together, if with some difficulty. They weren't bright by any means, but trolls knew their strengths, and knew how to go about filling their stomach, which was both a primary goal in life and a never-ending process. Further, while they had a certain amount of fear for fire, they didn't fear anything that dwarves could do to them.

Thus, nine mountain trolls who had migrated north from their previous hunting grounds after getting bored of fish had gleefully attacked the moment they saw the fires in the distance. They came in from the southeast, coming out of the darkness and simply running forward, ignoring the sounds of the dwarven scouts signaling their coming. As the camp responded, the trolls reached the edge of the camp before any of the close-in patrols could reach them.

One troll was slower than the others to rush into the tent area and a dwarven patrol charged at it before it could join the others in the camp. Six dwarves against one troll was a losing proposition, and the troll flattened three before the others retreated, but instead of pulling away, they fired crossbows at close range, then as the scouts attacked, charged in again with hammer and axe.

Where humans would have panicked and maybe broken at the sight of trolls charging into their camp, the dwarves had closed ranks. And as Harry and Tauriel came within sight of the fight, it became clear to them that the dwarves were giving about as good as they could.

One troll was on the ground, a long spear in its guts, and its hamstrings hacked to ribbons. Several dwarves were dead on the ground around it, but others were already moving to finish it off. Ahead of the troll, a cart had opened, letting Tauriel to see one of the dwarven ballista there.

Further away from where Harry and Tauriel were approaching the camp, the troll which had turned to fight the patrol that came at the trolls from behind was also being swarmed, the sound of crossbows and shouts coming from that segment of the camp. Another was down to one knee amidst the tents along the edge of the camp for some reason they could not discern. Several dwarves were actually climbing up its back, hacking and smashing with hammer and axe.

Deeper into the camp though, things were not going so well. The majority of the dwarves had formed up into a solid wall between the charging trolls and the two carts, neither of which seemed armed with the ballista that had already fired its bolt. But the seven remaining trolls had hit their line by the time Tauriel and Harry reached the camp, and the dwarves were being trod underfoot. The trolls were now sporting a few cuts and lots of bruises, along with dozens of crossbow bolts, and one more seemed to falter as the twosome reached the edge of the camp, but the rest were running roughshod over the dwarves, massive clubs smashing dwarves away in punches and feet stomped other dwarves into the ground. One had even broken through their ranks entirely, closing on a cart despite all the dwarven warriors could do.



That was about all that Harry could take in at a glance, but it was enough. "Circle to the right. Stay in the darkness, aim for their eyes or the backs of their knees, those are the only places trolls are vulnerable. Bring them down to size if you can and let the dwarves finish them off."

Although this was in no way her first battle, Tauriel followed his orders, knowing that in close she was no match for a troll unless she got exceedingly lucky. Pulling back slightly she disappeared into the darkness beyond the scattered fires. But the darkness, and indeed the difference between the darkness and the fire lit battlefield was no impairment to an elf like Tauriel. A second later, her first arrow flashed out from the darkness beyond the fires. Several of the dwarves torches had been knocked to the ground, spreading quickly.

As she did so, Harry took his own advice, moving left and launching a spell towards one of the trolls. His new magical abilities which he had gotten from connecting through Arien to the world at large couldn't be used at night. *That just means I need to fall back on my old powers instead.*

One troll died surprisingly quickly. An overpowered Bombarda spell hit the back of his neck, breaking it, causing the troll to flop to the ground. Its limbs still moved for a time until they realized that they were no longer taking orders from its brain.

See that, Harry stared. *When I fought those three trolls near the Shire, they barely felt my magic! That should've gotten his attention, if that. Did the spell just hit it at the right angle or something?*

In getting the trolls' attention though, the attack worked well enough. The two closest to Harry's fist target turned, casually swatting aside dwarves to stare at where the attack had come from. "'Ere, wha' were that?"

"Toss somethin' out 'ere," another troll answered, putting the thought into action instantly as it grabbed at a dwarf who was a bit too slow. The dwarf was then hurled through the air out into the darkness, cursing and screaming as he went.

But Harry had already moved on. Racing towards where one of the other trolls had broken through the dwarven line and was now reaching for one of the carts that had remained in the center of the camp. From the cart screams came, feminine screams to Harry's ears, but he set that aside as he came within range. A cutting spell lashed into the troll, cutting into his shoulder.

"GRaahhh!" the troll snarled as brackish blood flew but the troll wasn't hurt that much, the spell only making a light cut on its shoulder, although Harry undoubtedly knew that it would be incredibly painful for the troll. *Like a paper cut going across your entire shoulder!*

He followed that with several more cutting spells, still moving forward, using what cover he could as he closed further with the trolls, knowing the sword of Gryffindor was a sure-kill weapon. He also cast an illusion spell forward, the same he had used back with Thorin and company. Suddenly there were hundreds more dwarves around, and the trolls were smashing at nothing occasionally when they brought their clubs or fists down.

"W'as goin' on!?" One troll cried out, suddenly looking a little worried whereas before none of the still fighting trolls had seemingly been thrown off by anything going on, including their own losses. To trolls, less trolls around meant more food for them. But now, seeing the lack of anything happening when they brought their clubs down threw them off immensely.

This didn't matter to the troll nearest the carts though, who had turned back to the cart. "Protego!" Harry hissed, the spell flashing forward. The troll's hand bounced off the shield, and it snarled in confused fury. Several dwarves tried to take advantage, charging forward from every side, but the troll killed two before bringing its club down on an illusion.

The next second, Harry attacked again, ducking out from behind a tent. Another series of cutting spells flashed out drawing it further away from the cart as the troll howled in pain turning around once more to face its tormentor. Harry's spells were doing enough damage on their own, but ten long bleeding cuts across the troll's back and shoulder were enough to make anyone ignore what was going on around them.

The Troll caught sight of Harry and instantly raised its club, charging towards Harry and ignoring his previous opponents or even victims. "RAGGHGH!"

It smashed aside and even trod down several dwarves and dwarven illusions, but one dwarf had enough sense of mind and speed to dodge to the side. A pickaxe's pick point flashed out and was able to penetrate the troll's hide at the back of the knee.

One of the dwarves it had knocked down took this opportunity to rise to his feet, and stabbed, catching the troll in the side of his knee. A look of almost comical shock crossed the troll's face as his leg stopped working between one step in the next, causing him to fall flat on his stomach.

The troll tried to push itself upright, but several dwarves were already on it, hacking and battering.

As they did, Harry idly noted that these dwarves seemed to favor hammers more than Thoren and his folk. Few swords were in evidence as well.

By this point, three other trolls had faces and legs only a porcupine could be comfortable with from the number of arrows Tauriel joining the multitude of crossbow bolts. But her arrows were just not doing anything, much like the majority of the crossbows of the dwarves. It was a very lucky shot that could actually draw blood. The beasts were moving and attacking so randomly that she had failed to put a single arrow into their eyes.

Just as the frustrated thought came to her that perhaps she should close as Harry was, Tauriel watched as one of them lifted a dwarf to its face and bit the dwarf's head off, ignoring the helmet entirely. But in so doing, it turned fully around towards Tauriel's current position. An arrow flew before in a instant and this time it struck true, sinking deep into the creature's eye.

And finally, her arrows had an impact. The arrow burst the eye, sending blood and puss everywhere.

"GRAAhhhhhh,.... Me eye, me eye!" The troll screamed, as it dropped its former victim and raised its gore-splattered hand to its face, lashing out with the club in his other hand in every direction, clearing dwarves away from it like they were bowling pins.

But it did not see one of them running up to its now blindside. His pickax turned to bring the pick into the back of its knee, much as the other dwarf had done to the troll which had tried to attack the carts. It screamed again, falling to his knees and turning around, trying to grab at its attacker, but he had already moved away. Another dwarf stood there however just out of range of the troll's arms, and yet another crossbow bolt flew.

At close range, the crossbow had more penetrating power than Tauriel's bow did from afar, and this time, the quarrel sunk into the troll's neck. Blood gushed, and the young dwarf quickly retreated, as two more took his place. Once more, crossbows twanged with an almost metallic sound, and the troll finally fell, blood gushing from two more perforations in its neck.

The dwarves had finished off all of the wounded trolls by this point, and Harry moved in toward the five remaining trolls. They suddenly found themselves completely surrounded by the unknown attackers from out of the dark and their previous victims as more trolls charged in from where they had finished off the wounded. Crossbow bolts flew from every direction and the dwarves once more began to organize as shouted orders came from various throats.

Harry could almost see the fact that they might be losing this fight percolate into the troll's brains, and one of them grunted out, "Oof it!" to his fellows. He grabbed up a dead dwarf and turned racing away from where Harry had slain the one troll that it made it into the center of the camp.

Harry saw this, and noted the troll's route would bring to close to him. *Leave it for now then, concentrate on helping the dwarves against the others. Illusions and concussion spells.*

The others stood for a moment, still fighting the dwarves off, then Harry's spells began to hit them. Not aiming at any one troll, Harry used Bombarda and illusion spells. The first caused troll clubs to shatter along with a few bones, their bones proving easier to break than their skin when it came to his magic. But even that happened only when he could hit the troll at just the right angle. Once more, the troll's magical resistance was incredibly annoying to deal with.

The illusions around their feet did just as much to distract the trolls from the real dwarves though, and that helped the dwarves overcome two more. At close range, their bolts actually penetrated enough to cause debilitating wounds, slowing one of them down a bit for the few dwarves who closed through the illusions of their fellows. The trolls were still fighting, but they were trapped now.

Seeing that, Harry gestured down at the ground, and a wall rose up in front of the fleeing troll, which it crashed into and through. Still, that was enough to cause it to stumble, letting a few nearby dwarves swarm over it like a bunch of hyenas taking down an elephant. An instant later that same troll took an arrow in the eye, as Tauriel appeared out of the darkness directly in its path. It continued forward, flailing around long with a massive club about as tall as a tree, but she rolled under the blow, coming up and launching another arrow into its other eye.

"I's can't see, I can't see!" Thoroughly blinded, the troll flailed around blindly.

One enterprising dwarf got under its reach. His hammer swung, and the side of the troll's knee caved in. It fell, and both Harry and Tauriel turned their attention back to the trapped foursome.

They were still fighting hard. One was now using a dwarf to smash others around, the blood of its makeshift weapon and victims alike splattering everywhere as the dwarves around it groaned in dismay and revulsion. The other trolls were content to use their fists and feet, but were still doing a lot of damage.

As Harry and Tauriel raced to engage them, there was a loud, \*WWWUNG\* noise. The same ballista that had fired before they arrived had finally been reloaded, the cart turned around to face towards the

trolls. One of the trolls gurgled as the giant arrow took it in its side, penetrating almost to the point of the tip poking out its opposite side.

The next second, Harry dashed through the dissipating remnants of his last illusion spell.

Harry was there a second later, coming up behind it. A single cut from the sword of Gryffindor caught one of the last three in the thigh. "Fall back! Concentrate on the others!" Harry shouted in Common.

The dwarves ignored him, after all, how could a tiny cut like that be enough to finish off the troll. But then their eyes widened in confusion as the troll screamed, grabbing at its thigh with both hands before toppling to the side, dead.

"The poison that can help bring down a Dragon will certainly be able to help bring down the troll," Harry shouted again. "Make way!"

Now understanding what he was up to the dwarves obeyed, letting Harry close with a second troll before it or its sole surviving fellow could react. At the same time, Harry cast a spell into the air. "Solaris!" *I should have thought of using this spell earlier, blast it!*

An overpowered Lumos blinded the two trolls. Both raised their hands to their faces, screaming in agony. And a moment later, the battle was over. The ballista fired again, taking one of the last two trolls high in its chest while Harry closed on the other troll unimpeded.

As the last troll gasped out its final breath, Harry sighed, shaking his head as he gave vent to his earlier thought. "Damn it. I forgot how susceptible the creatures of Morgoth are to sunlight. I should have done that earlier. Hell, it should have been the first thing I did! From now on it will be the first thing I do in any fight with these creatures."

"Do not go down that road, my heart. Learning from mistakes is one thing, but it can be taken too far. Simply remember in the future," Tauriel advised, shaking her head. "As for myself, I think I will need more arrows when we get to Erebor, Harry. I went through more than thirty in this one battle. And they were far less effective than I would've liked to see as well. I realized back in the battle of the Lonely Mountain that trolls were tough, but having so little effect on this battlefield until I was able to get a few arrows into the trolls' eyes annoys me."

She smiled winsomely at Harry, going so far as to actually wink at him as she took his hand in hers, knowing that Harry was prone to brood about his own mistakes too much. "I don't suppose you could do something about that, my heart?"

"Maybe? I could simply overpower a few runes so they would explode as normal in this world," Harry mused, his brooding thoroughly derailed. "That's not exactly safe to be around, though, and you couldn't really say that the arrow would explode on impact either, that would take some very precise timing. For anything real, I could only get a few runes small enough to be put on an arrowhead, and the shaft is far too thin... unless I roll it? Huh. I don't know what bending runes around like that would do to the magic is supposed to contain. Let me think about it for a bit."

Tauriel nodded, while Harry reflected that most would probably be very happy to have gotten not one, but three trolls in the eye in the midst of such a chaotic fight. But his lady was not most people.

Shaking that off, he turned and raised a hand towards one of the dwarves, who was now making their way through the wrecked camp towards him. From the light of the nearby fires, the dwarf was looking at them both warily, with some amount of disdain mixed in as well. "Greetings elf, human. What brings you here?" The dwarf asked in gruff, almost rusty sounding Common. Several other dwarves had also come forward, forming a ring around the two as if to fight Harry and Tauriel if need be now that their mutual enemy was dealt with. Nearby, the rest of their folk were already organizing themselves, seeing to any wounded, pulling aside bodies, and putting out fires.

"My name is Harry Potter, and this is Tauriel. I don't suppose you have any dwarves of Erebor among you, do you? We are well-known among the folk of the Lonely Mountain," Harry said, underplaying it significantly for the moment. This close and without the battle to concentrate on, Harry could see these dwarves did not look like any dwarf he'd seen before.

Being armed mostly with hammers instead of the habitual axes, swords and pickaxes of Thorin's folk, their armor was also not quite the same. Instead of chain mail or heavy plate, these dwarves wore leather armor or scale mail of a kind that Harry had seen only a few times before. *Although the make of the armor Bilbo was given was very obviously of much higher quality even if you set aside the fact that it was made of Mithril.*

Their weapons were also double-handed, and Harry saw a far greater proliferation of crossbows than he would've expected to see among a band of dwarves this size. Those crossbows were also far more mechanical looking than anything Harry had seen previously. He had never studied crossbows, but he could see several large gears in various places along their length which possibly helped give the crossbows striking power.

Then, there were the dwarves themselves.

First, the dwarves skin was black, the black of a people who spent a lot of time under the sun, which was not something Harry was used to seeing in dwarves, to say the least. Even the most outdoorsy of them, Kili and Bofur, barely had a tan compared to most humans Harry had seen, let alone the entirely black of skin of these dwarves.

Harry could also see now that they all kept their beards in the same manner. Shorter than most dwarves Harry had seen keep their beards, these dwarves also braided their beards into five or six braids draped down their chests. Each braid was marked with a few golden circlets along its length. Even here, the dwarves showed a certain amount of conformity, with only one or two Harry could see having their golden circle in different places than the others. The heads of those dwarves who had lost their helmets were shaved almost bald too.

This was all very strange to Harry's eyes. Harry had rarely seen any dwarves before this who had their beards done in the same manner as one another. Indeed, Harry knew that dwarves took a lot of pride in their beards, not just in caring for them but in their uniqueness. Family members could get away with imitating their elders, but having an entire warband wear their beards in the same manner was highly unusual.

The discs in those beards were also the only gold in evidence bar a small ring of gold set into the helmet of the dwarf who had addressed Harry and Tauriel. Among a band of this size, there should have been a lot more gold in evidence in the way of rings or forearm bands. If nothing else, the goldsmiths among

them would wear such things to show off their craft. Instead, Harry saw jewels worn in bronze or copper bracelets.

Their clothing also seemed lighter underneath the armor they wore. That too was highly unusual, and maybe pointed to their homeland being to the south and southeast, where would be habitually warmer all year long. Several of the dwarves were also wearing what looked like watches, the first watches that Harry had seen in this world. *I saw a clock in Bilbo's place, and a few hobbits walking around with pocket watches, but not wrist watches like this. And come to think of it, those carts look very well made too, and are those gears there?*

From where he was standing Harry could see something that looked almost like springs on the carts. Further, much of the construction of the bottom half of the carts was metal. And now he came too look at it, the back of the cart with the ballista, the closest to his current position, had even more mechanical devices built into it. *Is that how they wheeled it around to face the trolls? I wonder what the rest of them do.*

Regardless, while he knew the dwarves he could see was a small sample size of the larger group, it was still unusual to Harry's eyes.

He all this in as the dwarf who had spoken turned to his fellows, speaking in their own language, which sounded a little more lilting than most examples of Khuzdul Harry had heard before this. *These dwarves are definitely not of Durin's folk.*

The leader, if such he was thanks to the gold around his helmet, turned back to Harry, staring at Tauriel. "You claim to be known to the mountain and the reborn kingdom? Rumors here tell of a human traveling with the young king, but it made no mention of an... elf."

"That would be because I was not present for most of their adventure good dwarf. Yet how I met them and why I am now in Thoren's good graces as well as traveling with Harry is a long tale. Perhaps you would prefer to set it aside for now and allow us to help you with your wounded?" Tauriel asked, trying to sidestep the thorny issue of how exactly she first met Harry and the rest of the company for now.

"No!" The dwarf barked, glaring at her now, and then gesturing Harry away. "We... Thank..." He said, the word coming out as if it was almost foreign, practically poison on his tongue. "You for your help, but we do not want outsiders within our camp." The phrase non-dwarves was so loud in his tone that it was nearly physical force.

Harry frowned, knowing that dwarves were standoffish at the best of times, but not to this extent. Not after they had fought together anyway. "Might I know the reason, good dwarf? I count Thoren my close friend, and if you are indeed traveling to Erebor, then..."

Again the dwarf barked out a negative reply before mellowing slightly. "If you believe you can help our wounded, we will allow it, but you will not go near our carts. Move over to the outer edge of our camp and we will bring the wounded to you there."

Harry's eyes widened in realization then, putting the dwarves' attitude together with the sounds of feminine screaming from before. *Dams. They have womenfolk with them.* That was shocking to Harry, who well understood how much the dwarves of value to their womenfolk, and how rarely they travelled. But he remembered one of the things Thorin and his sister, Dis had been talking about when he and

Tauriel stayed in the mountain for a few days before leaving to travel to Lothlorien. *One of their princesses, maybe? For the dynastic marriage Dis was going to oversee?*

Dwarven women normally retained the right to marry whoever they wished. It was the women who drove courtship among the dwarves, giving their favor to their One, their choice among the menfolk who outnumbered them four to one or worse. But kings occasionally had to marry to create alliances, and Harry had known that would be the case with Thorin. Although even there, it was Dis who would make the final say in who he married, regardless of what specific alliance the marriage might bring to Erebor. Making certain there would be peace within the royal household and that the woman and Thorin were compatible, meant more in terms of securing the future of their house than any material goods could.

That all meant that these dwarves would be even more protective of the dams they had brought along their princess and a few other women to advise her than normal.

He nodded quickly, saying that bringing the wounded over them was fine. "Simply point us where you want us to start working away from the camp. Although, could you at least tell me why you are going towards Erebor in such strength? Are you a... diplomatic party of some kind?"

"..." Dwarf stared at Harry, then over to Tauriel, once more looking very reluctant to interact with them at all, but he nodded. "We are. We are of the Stiffbeard house, the Kingdom of Khazad Fuldur. And we are traveling to open trade negotiations with the reborn kingdom in the north."

Harry nodded, as Tauriel's eyes widened, understanding what this might be, and precisely who at least one of the women within the central most cart might be. *A prospective bride for Thoren as I suspected. Well, my knack for finding trouble helped out immensely here.*

"I would like to talk to you further about your lands, not..." Harry hastened to add as the dwarves eyes flashed and his grip tightened on his hammer, "any secrets or information like that, simply about the weather there, and your wars with the Haradrim. It is known that you and the other Eastern clans of dwarves fight those folk incessantly. And I certainly know which side of that war I would come down on."

The dwarf stared up at Harry, his craggy face narrowed in suspicion for a moment. Whatever he saw there apparently was to his liking as his brows smoothed and he nodded. "That we can do." Abruptly the dwarf turned away, barking out orders before looking at Harry and Tauriel again. "We will bring out the wounded to you. Do you wish to see serious wounds or not serious? What aid can you actually give? Our own healer is among the dead as are his two apprentices."

"While I am no Tharkûn, I have spells which can close small wounds, other spells which can make certain wounds do not become infected, and can kill pain," Harry announced looking for a place where they could set up a healing station of some kind.

"We also have medical supplies with us, not a lot, but some. I am also a dab hand at sewing," Tauriel offered.

The dwarf jolted at the drop of Gandalf's dwarfish name, but didn't address it or look anymore trusting. He simply nodded brusquely, and then turned away once more, marching into the center of the camp. Several of the other dwarves stayed where they were, watching the two strangers warily.

Seeing that, Harry sighed, shaking his head and looking over at Tauriel. "Well, I suppose some dwarves are just like that."

"I rather think that you can find all manner of dwarves, just as you could find all manner of humans and elves my love," she replied with a chuckle. "Still, it us do what they say for now. Regardless of their standoffishness, there are still wounded to see to."

Harry couldn't argue with that, and the pair of them moved towards the outer edge of the camp where they would set up their aid station.

OOOOOO

At the same time that Harry and Tauriel were trying to work with the dwarves to the betterment of the dwarven wounded, Gandalf was actually living up to his name, traveling the world. Most of the time he didn't have a specific goal, but right now, he was traveling with the long term goal of speaking to the ruler of Gondor, who was called the steward of Gondor ever since the last of the kings of Gondor had died. In this case, this was Lord Turgon, who was named after the King of the original Gondolin, the last and greatest bastion of the Noldor on Middle Earth. It was a sign that in Gondor, the history of the world was still taught to the nobility. That the blood of Numenor still ran in their veins.

Gandalf had started this particular journey after speaking for weeks with Elrond, and then Cerdan Ecthelion, the shipwright, getting the impression of their people towards the fear that Sauron might rise again in the future. While his personal power was sharply curtailed, and it was hoped that it would take years for the Nazgul to reform, there were still physical threats out there, the orcs of Mordor, and, as Saruman had discovered, the Haradrim who had ambushed him could also be working with Mordor.

His conversations on that score had not pleased Gandalf, although he had known going into them that the power of elves to fight Sauron had waned badly since the Last War of Elves and Men. Only the elves of Mirkwood could even field a small army, and that army, inexperienced as it had been mauled in the Battle of the Lonely Mountain. Cerdan would never order his folk away from the Havens. And Elrond lacked more than a hundred elves trained and experienced in war. To hear that Celeborn had sent trainers to help the survivors rebuild was something, but not enough.

Lothlorien though had surprised him. Although they too lacked the numbers to field a full army, to hear that those within had found strength in a renewed connection to the Valar and begun to look beyond their borders was gratifying. Gandalf had determined then to speak with Galadriel on his way back from Gondor, but for now, he had other things to do.

Specifically, Gandalf wanted to scout into the land called Ithilien by those who had once lived there. Lying closest to Mordor, this realm was on the other side of the Eryn Muil following the River Anduin south from Lothlorien. Those nasty marshes had long been contested land between the few Rohirrim who came into this realm, scattered marsh goers and goblins who made the area their home. It was nasty, but no bugs bothered Gandalf, and he was able to go through without being discovered by any.

But the land of Ithilien, the land between the Ephel Dúath of Mordor and the River Anduin, was in a way, worse. This territory was started out thin in the north before spreading to the south, almost like a boot that had been flattened above the ankle. It had long been ceded to the orcs and goblins. The fall of Minas Ithil, the easternmost fortress city of Gondor, had made the rest of the territory indefensible. It



had been captured the creature Gandalf now knew to have been at the witch king of Angmar. Between him and the line of the kings of Gondor had laid a bitter enmity, and they had warred together incessantly, but it was the dark forces which had the mastery of the field, leading to the death of the last King of Gondor, Eärnur.

At the time, Gandalf and Saruman had advised the king against his war with Minas Morgul. They told him the elves could not help, having given too much of their strength in the north. They had helped to wiped out Angmar after it had defeated the Númenórean kingdoms of Arthedain, Cardolan and Rhudaur, the remnants of once-proud Arnor, kingdom of Elendil the Tall.

But Eärnur was a hotheaded young man who loved combat and warfare like most men would love their wives, and he had tried to challenge the Witch-king during the Northern War only for Ecthelion to stop him, saying the Witch-King was beyond his ability to kill.

This time, Eärnur had not heeded their council. The war had ended poorly for Gondor, which lost control of this land even though the orcs and goblins had lost much of their number.

The first steward of Gondor, Ecthelion took command of Gondor then in the name of the king. He did so because no claimant could be found who had a true, clear claim to the throne, and the nobility of the realm feared another civil war. They had already survived one such in the Kin-Strife, and refused to see such again.

Ecthelion decided to retreat over the river Anduin. They pulled back, concentrating on guarding the bridges over Osgiliath, which were the only ones on the river. So wide was the Anduin after it moved past the city of Osgiliath, the capital (at the time) of Gondor, it could not be bridged by anyone. Further upstream, the river widened again for a time, the wide area controlled by Caer Andros, a fortress set onto a island in the center of the river. After that, the land became marshy, impassable for any large force, before a traveler would come to where Entwash joined the Anduin on it's seaward journey.

During this military retreat, the peasants which remained there after five decade of warfare had mostly fled by then, leaving the land of Ithilium to the orcs. Not that such creatures had done anything with it. Ithilium was mostly farmland and forestland, and orcs had no need for either. By this point, the forests had regained much of the terrain lost to farms, and woods of all sorts could be found here. Ithilium was still a contested land to this day, with bands of doughty men out of Gondor hunting and being hunted in turn by orcs and goblins and, as Saruman had discovered, Haradrim. Gandalf also knew that this land was watched by the Dunedain, the last descendants of Númenor left in the north.

*We should have been here with Eärnur, the both of us. But Durin's folk awoke the Nameless Doom that same year and I hastened there to give what aid I could to their people as they fled while Galadriel renewed the defenses around Lothlorien. Then the orcs of the North were pouring forth once more, causing trouble for not only Rivendell, but nearly everywhere occupying Saruman and Elrond both. None of use were here to aid Gondor or Eärnur in their time of need.*

Shaking those thoughts off, Gandalf turned away from where he was looking at the dread fortress, hidden underneath one of Harry's runic arrays once more. They have proven to be magnificent gifts, and Gandalf idly wondered what Saruman would make of the one array that Gandalf had left with him to see if he could construct his own. Gandalf had not begrudged him that research, had the best chance of re-

creating Harry's abilities in that area, and furthermore that Harry would not begrudge them the knowledge.

*No. There is no chance of the might of men reclaiming that fortress now. I knew it was guarded in strength, but so much fell power built up after so short a time? Truly, Sauron always planned to retreat from Dol Guldur. We were duped entirely to believe anything different, although perhaps the timing of his retreat was somewhat forced thanks to my investigations, and rescue thereafter.*

*Could the captain of the Nazgûl be quartered there? It would explain much. No, for now, we cannot win through into Mordor through strength of arms.*

Deactivating the runic array around him, Gandalf waited a few moments, his senses both physical and not probing the world around him. When certain he was still not being observed, he turned away from the fortress and began to trudge off, heading back to where he had left his horse, which had been given to him by Saruman after he had left his fellow wizard several months back. He had learned all he had to from this journey.

The enemy lacked offensive military power yes. And from Saruman's report, Sauron himself would be unable to stretch his influence very far for decades more. But his fell captain still possessed a physical body and the will to use his powers, and that was enough. *No, we have no ability to strike at him, as I feared. We must build up our own strength, and in that area, Harry's runes will help immensely. I really must get in touch with that young man after this journey, and convince him to teach either myself or Saruman for a time., Which must be set upon the borders. The peaceful watch as Gondor calls it has come to an end. It is time for the watch to become an armed one.*

Several weeks later, Gandalf rode his horse into Minas Tirith. Above him, pennants flew in the wind, and the light of the sun sparkled off the black walls of the city, made of the same material used in the constructions of Orthanc. All around him, rich farmland spread, with men and women working the fields. And in front of him, leading into the city, houses large and small lined well-made, clean streets.

Men and women alike could be seen going about their business, while children raced hither and yon. There were more people in that one glance than in Lake Town entirely, and it was but a small portion of the city Gandalf rode through. The city was built on a hill called the Hill of Guard, a portion of Mount Mindolluin which thrust out from the rest, dominated itself by a massive outcropping of rock that split the city in half. The winding path through the city had to go through tunnels cut through this solid thing of rock five times.

Seven concentric tiers had been cut out of the hill leading up to Citadel at the base of that rocky outcropping, hundreds of feet above the plain below. Each level was divided further by its own wall and a gate with each gate facing a different direction. A formidable defense adding to a naturally defensible position, which served now as the capital of Gondor.

Thankfully, Gandalf had been here many times over the centuries, with only Saruman having more to do with Gondor than he. Many of the soldiers here knew him and waved him by cheerfully. Even some citizens saw the Grey Rider and waved at the mysterious but always affable traveler.

Seeing all this and the magnificence of the city did Gandalf good after so long to the east of the Anduin and he exchanged greetings and smiles with the folk as he considered the history of this city and Gondor in general. After all, much in the coming centuries would rely chiefly on this nation's strength.

Originally named Minas Arnor, the city had once been one of the main cities of Gondor, a fortress city much like Minas Ithil, constructed to create a defense against the Wild Men to the west. Osgiliath, set between the two fortress cities, had been the capital, built to either side of the river Anduin. That city now marked the border between where the people of Gondor still lived, and Ithilien, the land that Gandalf had been traveling in before.

Founded by the ruling house of Numenor, those who had not given themselves over to evil and fled Ar-Pharazôn's rule, Gondor had been founded by Isildur and Anárion, the sons of Elendil the Tall who led the Faithful way from doomed Númenor. Finding other smaller colonies of Númenóreans who had fled before the final fall from grace, the two sons of Elendil found them more than willing to join together as a single nation. The two sons ruled together, bound by love and duty to one another and their father as High King in the North, where Elendil ruled Arnor. Isildur first built Minis Ithil to threaten Mordor, planting there a sprig from the White Tree of Númenor. Anárion built Minas Arnor, and then together the brothers saw to the creation of Osgiliath, the capital.

Alas, Minas Ithil did not last long after Sauron returned to a physical form after the Breaking of the World. He burned the White Tree, and it was only Isildur's courageous act that allowed even a seedling to survive. Anárion held the realm against Sauron, winning some battles and even pushing the fell forces of Mordor back, but would have ultimately been destroyed if Elendil and Gil-galad had not led the army of Elves and Men to relieve him.

Although Gondor itself had come through the wars relatively intact on the western side of the Anduin, High King Elendil died. Isildur latter joined him in death in the Battle of the Gladden Fields. And while the succession in Gondor was clear as Isildur had made Anárion's oldest son his heir, Arnor, the northern kingdom, grew estranged from the men of the south. Both nations grew in strength through the centuries, with Gondor spreading east, pacifying and bringing the Wild Men into their reign, crating entirely new provinces, and warring with the Easterlings and Haradrim of the south occasionally. But while Arnor eventually broke apart, Gondor did not. It's eastern realms grew in strength, with new cities being created, protected by the Kings of Gondor and their strongest vassals in Dol Amroth and the former colonies of Linhir and Pelargir.

Alas, that was long ago. The golden age of Gondor began to wane during the rule of Atanatar in the 1,200s TA (Third Age). Gandalf admitted to himself now, as he rode through the streets of Minas Tirith, that he should have done more back then. He should have been able to convince Atanatar to do more with the power he had inherited. But he did not.

*Then like three great blows came the Kin-Strife, such foolishness to overthrow the king simply because he had Northern blood, as if that blood was not as pure as that of Gondor! And after the Great Plague... Saruman, Radagast, and I we did our best, but the plague was so devastating... And then the last blow to end Gondor's age, the Wainrider invasion. Though the nation was eventually victorious thanks to Saruman's aid in hiding Eärnil's host as it marched north, it lost control of the northeastern territories. And then... and then came the death of the last king.*

Since the death of the last King, Eärnur, the stewards of Gondor had ruled, their oath being to rule until a king could come again. It still remained such to this day. The stewards saw their rulership of Gondor as a duty, rather than a privilege, and one they took in honor of both the people and the king. In Gondor there was even a belief that in some distant day, a king would return to claim the throne and rebuild Gondor to its prior glory.

The stewards of Gondor had been a mixed lot in Gandalf's opinion, much as the kings before them. But most of them were of good heart and mind, and many had proven to be an incredibly good captains of men, leading their people against the power of the orcs, the Easterlings, corsairs out of Umbar and the Haradrim, who were their most dangerous foes.

There was still strength in Gondor, easily the strongest nation in Middle Earth in terms of size and military power. At the stewards direction, armies thousands strong marched, and Gondor, with its firm ally the nation of Rohan, represented the majority of the military power that Gandalf would set against what he feared was the growing power of Sauron in the decades to come.

Turgon himself was an aged man in his eighties, and that was old indeed for most men. Yet the blood of Númenor, though mixed with that of lesser men still ran strong in the men of Gondor. Although his body was slowly fading away now, there was nothing wrong with Turgon's mind, and he listened intently to Gandalf's news, shaking his head as he finished. "You did not need to tell me to not try to attack Minas Morgil, Incantus."

Incantus was Gandalf's name among the Gondorians. It meant 'Man of the West' in their language.

Raising a palsied hand to his face, Turgon slowly kneaded his nose, chuckling darkly. "Peaceful Watch you called it, but never was a name so foolishly given. While we have been at peace with the Haradrim for the most part, the orcs have ever been an issue to the north and east. And over the past year, corsairs have begun to step up their raiding on our coastlines. Their black ships are fast, too fast for us to catch most of the time, and swarm any ship or settlement they can. Our navy is doing its best, but they have faced some setbacks over the past few months. I had hoped to set our might against them solely. The knowledge that the orcs of Mordor might soon make trouble for us closer to home here in Minas Tirith as well is not a welcome one."

"Yet surely Turgon, there is still strength in Gondor. And you have the riders of Rohan to call upon. I will be stopping in there to speak with King Fengel after I leave here. They in turn can look to Saruman for help. He can stand as a strong bulwark against the Dunlendings, letting Rohan take a larger portion of watching Mordor."

"Rohan...Fengel and I have not communicated for nearly two decades now. We have both gone our own ways, been troubled by our own issues. Yet perhaps you speak correctly, renewing our friendship might allow us to stave off the troubles you see ahead. Still... the timing of this troubles me."

Gandalf frowned, and Turgon shrugged. "Why are the corsairs making so much trouble now? How have their numbers grown so large after the ? The timing is suspicious."

"Ah, I had not made that connection." Gandalf's frown deepened as he considered the corsairs.

The Corsairs of Umbar had once been men of Gondor, the navy who followed their Lord Admiral Castamir in his attempt to overthrow the ruling King Eärnur for his mixed blood. The corsairs had fought

several wars with Gondor over the years, with Umbar changing hands several times, the last one being during the Wainrider's Invasion, where Umbar had been reclaimed by the corsairs. Always making common cause with the Haradrim, who had at one point been conquered by Gondor, the corsairs were a constant thorn in the side of the former Númenórean nation. Now, any attempt to wipe them out had the Haradrim marching into Harondor, the southernmost province of Gondor. Gandalf knew that the Haradrim longed to revenge themselves upon Gondor, but that was a thing of pride and statecraft. The corsairs simply loathed Gondor for all the 'wrongs' done to them.

*Never understanding that Casatmir was in the wrong. Not just for the fact he overthrew the rightful king for such a specious reason, but also for his cruelties and the inequities he created during his brief reign.* "You fear they might be another group of men who have bowed to Mordor then, like the Easterlings?"

Gandalf did not ask about the Haradrim. There he had no knowledge with which to base any guess on their actions or reasons. And while it was known they were cruel in warfare, it was said the Haradrim were also firm but fair to their own folk. Gandalf had even heard that they had rebelled in the Second Age against Sauron's attempt to recruit them into war against the Númenóreans, long before he and his fellows arrived in Middle Earth. Later though, as Númenor fell further under the twin influence of arrogance and Sauron, they fought against them in turn, before being conquered by Black Númenóreans, those fell men who worshipped Morgoth but who had survived the destruction of the great island. Umbar, which later became the home of the corsairs, was conquered by them, and they ruled Harad until overthrown.

"Yes. And if so, and if they can somehow coordinate, no watch on Mordor will be enough. They will pull us in different directions, and eventually tear us apart," Turgon answered grimly. "Indeed, before you came, the corsairs were becoming such a problem that I..."

He was interrupted by his seneschal coming in, bowing deeply to the two older men. "My Lord, your son is here and wishes to speak to you and your guest. You know he is due to depart in the morning on the Great Circuit."

"Send him in," Turgon ordered, smiling faintly, before explaining to Gandalf, who looked confused. "You have been gone from Gondor overlong, Incantus. The Great Circuit is what I call our survey of our lands, where we go to every city and fortress within to observe how they are all doing. It is the work of years, and this time, my son will lead the Great Circuit."

The man who strode in was tall, taller than the steward by a good foot and a bit more. His hair was brown, falling straight down to his shoulders, which were broad, reminding Gandalf almost of Beorn though a bit shorter and less stout. His eyes were clear, focused, and he stared back at Gandalf thoughtfully as he bowed to both men. "Father. You keep interesting company this evening."

"Has it been so long? I am sorry, my son, talking business always takes longer than you might wish. Still, let me make introductions. Gandalf meet, Ecthelion, my son. Given my own age, I can no longer take to the field, and my son has become of my strong right hand," Turgon said proudly.

"Rumors and hearsay tell me of you, Incantus. I am interested to know the truth, not of those words, but of the individual they attempt to portray." The middle-aged man said thoughtfully, stroking his small goatee for a moment. "On the one hand, rumor would say that you come with fell news and death. Yet on the other hand, dread words can simply mean warnings in time of danger. The warning is not the

danger itself, even if foolish men wish to see such a connection.” Ecthelion, rightly called Ecthelion the second, looked at Gandalf silently for a few seconds, judging him.

Then he smiled faintly. “The even more foolish will see the messenger as a danger himself. Without seeing the warning for the good deed it is.”

Gandalf smiled faintly, standing and bowing from the waist to the far younger man. “It is good to meet you, Ecthelion. I have heard tell of your marshal abilities, and sagacity both. I do come with word of further trouble, alas, but also with offer of help and friendship.”

Ecthelion looked between the two older men, and then abruptly turned away, grabbing a nearby chair and dragging it over to the small table they were sitting at. Sitting down, he leaned back, crossing his hands in his lap calmly. “It seems then, that I have come to speak to my father at a most opportune time.”

Once more, Gandalf told the story of what had occurred to the north, how Sauron’s guise of the Necromancer had been torn asunder and how he had been driven out of Dol Guldur by the White Council. Then he spoke of how the power of the orcs and goblins in the North had been shattered in the Battle of the Mountain. But he warned Ecthelion as he had his father that Sauron had seemingly planned to retreat at some point, and how Mordor might well rise in further strength in the years to come.

“Say decades rather. While he made no attempt to remain there, we men of Gondor have crossed the river into Ithilien. I do not doubt that there are more orcs and goblins within Mordor than we would like, but they will not have the numbers or organization needed to wage war upon us for many decades yet, nor the will if you are right of how Sauron’s spirit was weakened. Would we could make war upon them, but you are correct in that Gandalf, such a move would be foolish in the extreme. The mountains there would funnel us into the passes as they always have, and the orcs would cause us five for every one slain on their home ground.”

The middle-aged man mused, then looked at his father sharply, gesturing to Gandalf. “As you no doubt trust this man’s words father, did you tell him of our concerns about the Haradrim and the corsairs making full alliance? In the past the corsairs often raided them just as much as us if they could get away with it. But we have heard no reports of such for the last twenty years.”

“That and more my son. With the rising of Mordor, we might well see Sauron’s hand in the corsairs rather than just the Easterlings. Our concerns on that score were bad enough, but to think that they might be in league with the dread enemy is far worse.”

“All the more reason then to gather further worthy men into our service in the days to come,” Ecthelion said, as if continuing an old argument.

But instead of arguing back as Ecthelion obviously thought he might, Turgon simply nodded. “You’re right, my son. I will help to organize that. There are men living in the north, men living in the northwest, well beyond our shield that know not of the danger. Yet they might have some strength of arms and will. But you must turn your sight to the Great Circuit. It is the perfect opportunity to see to our defenses without rousing concern among our folk.”

The man stood up, as if suddenly finding himself with too much energy, and began to pace, his hands clasped behind him. “And there we come back to the problem of whether or not the corsairs are working

with the Haradrim. We cannot be strong everywhere father. And I do not think that a defensive war entirely favors us either.”

“You might not be strong everywhere, but you are already apparently looking for allies. Keep doing so. And if it is information we lack, I will get it for us,” Gandalf said firmly. “I will go among the corsairs. Do not ask me how, for I do not know yet. But I will do so, and will find out if they truly are in league with the dread enemy, or are simply opportunistic. The Haradrim too, although that will be more difficult. Upon my return, I will go north. While Erebor is too distant to aid you, as it grows in power it might be able to send help to the dwarves kingdoms in the East, who also make war against the Easterlings. Who we **know** are allied with Sauron.”

For a moment, pain crossed the old man’s face, but he did not share the reason behind that pain to the two men of Gondor. How could he explain the bond between those Maiar chosen to enter Middle Earth and help the people of middle earth against Sauron? How could he explain that two beings who he would call brothers were gone? Somehow defeated in the East, without his or the others understanding or knowing what happened to them? *All that is left is to hope their spirits returned across the ocean to Aman, but even that is doubtful...*

“For now, I would advise that you strengthen your borders, and continue your recruitment policies. They sound good to me,” Gandalf said. “The land of Gondor is still powerful, still free of internal strife, of banditry and other issues which might plague other lands far beyond the borders of Gondor and Rohan, who we were talking about before you arrived, Ecthelion. Renewing the friendship with Rohan would be an excellent idea.”

Ecthelion nodded at that, and then said something that shocked both listeners. “Perhaps my own son should be sent there to learn the ways of the Riders of Rohan. We could exchange sons for a time. I understand that King Ecthelion has a son older than mine, but still learning. Let him come here, and let my son go there for a few years.”

“This makes sense to me. It will take us some time to set up, but that is all right. It will take you some time to finish your survey of our landward defenses. See to them first. We already have captains we can trust to watch the South and the coastlines, if not to better our situation there. But not our Eastern approaches,” Turgon advised. “The watch of Osgiliath must be strengthened first and...”

Later that night, before the three men were to retire, Gandalf asked the other two to halt as they all made for the doorway. “I have something to show you. A portrait of a man who might become a staunch ally in the days to come.”

“Color me intrigued...” Ecthelion said musingly, not sitting back down, instead stretching and cracking his shoulders and neck, holding out his arm to aid his father. “And who this paragon be?”

Gandalf wordlessly handed over a portrait he’d had made in Rivendell of Harry, done by memory from one of the elves of Elrond’s house. “This is Harry. He is a wizard like me. Only not. His powers and abilities are very different from my own, and...” Gandalf smiled a little wondrously. “He prefers direct action far more than I do. Regardless, he may well eventually make his way to Gondor, by himself or with companions. And if he does, I would urge you if you meet him, to listen earnestly to whatever he says. He was instrumental in the battle of the lonely mountain, and before that in the death of the dreaded Dragon Smaug. He might be just as much help to you and yours as he was to the dwarves. You see...”

## Seeing break

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The dwarves were still being standoffish the next morning despite Harry and Tauriel having stayed up all night to help with their wounded. But in the light of day, Harry was able to tell quite a bit more about the dwarves. Much of the observations he had made of the dwarves the night before proved accurate: the likeness of their clothing, their beards, the fact that they used double handed war hammers for their main weapons, and the lack of jewelry.

He could make out more of their features, though. The Stiffbeards seemed to not have as large noses as the Longbeards, and more than one of them seemed to have given themselves a ritual scar on their cheeks. Those wounds were too uniform and strange in shape – a spiral cut, the pinkness of which stood out starkly on their black skin – to be from actual battle. Their boots were also uniformly made of some kind of snakeskin, although there wasn't quite as much uniformity in boots as there were with their beards. *I have to wonder which came first, the way they keep their beards currently and the conformity to it, or the name of their House?*

"I get the impression though that that last isn't because they are poor, and not just because this is a trade delegation. I think that these dwarves dedicate themselves to other skill sets rather than blacksmithing, mining and so forth that we've seen among Thorin's folk," Harry said aloud. "Have you taken a look at those carts of theirs? Cogs and springs and what remind of the shock absorbers I saw on bikes back in my old world."

"You've described bikes and other mechanical things before, but I'm afraid I wouldn't be able to recognize what you call cogs and springs, let alone the other term. We elves do not make use of such. Although I will say, I am **fascinated** by how many watches these dwarves have. I had never even come across the concept of such before we met. Telling the passage of time via mechanical means like that is something that would never occur to me or any elf in Mirkwood," Tauriel said thoughtfully, before concentrating on something more notable. "More importantly, their crossbows are also mechanical. They fire those at our rate and with a respectable striking power too. Do you have any idea how they work?"

"Sorry, no. I'm a wizard, not a machinist," Harry shook his head then as several of the dwarves looked towards them, their eyes narrowed over their beards and under their helmets. Helmets which were strapped underneath their chins, and looked to be quite heavy on the top of the head and to the sides, with what looked like full face coverings. *I... I wonder, scale mail below the head, but protection of the head being that much heavier? Something like that would be useful fighting people much taller than them, who strike down at their heads. Something like a horseman armed with a saber, maybe? Like those pictures I've seen of cavalry from the Napoleonic Wars.*

Shaking off that thought, Harry spoke again, this time in Common. "Best not talk about it anymore love unless we wish to overstay our welcome before we are ready to leave. The dwarves seem to be quite annoyed with us for speaking in Quenya."



“Rather two-faced of them as they are all speaking Khuzdul, but I suppose we can provide a better example.” Tauriel answered with a tart tone, before turning back to finish the meal Harry had prepared for them, reflecting internally, that yes, she was now well and truly spoiled by Harry’s cooking. While she still didn’t eat as much per meal as Harry did, she tended to savor each and every bite despite Harry’s cooking being so unusual compared to that which she was used to.

Most elves perfected each individual segment of the meal, and rarely needed to bring different flavors together to make a meal memorable. But that was precisely what Harry did, and it made his food just shy of overwhelming to her taste buds. “What is our plan going forward? Should we stay with these dwarves, or push on?”

“They sent out scouts ahead of them before the battle last night, and while the remainder couldn’t give them enough warning of the trolls to let them set up a proper defense, I still want to hear their report before we decide anything. Although I’m leaning towards pushing on. While I’m interested in the art of these dwarves, I’m not so interested enough that I want to put up with their attitude towards us any longer,” Harry admitted.

“Kind of you to say that it is ‘we’, rather than only my presence which is causing the negative reaction, even if that is closer to the truth,” Tauriel said, smiling wanly at Harry. “I knew that Erebor had a somewhat caustic relationship with my folk even before the dragon attacked. But I had hoped that those Houses which had not been directly involved in that or any of the previous altercations between dwarf and elf would be able to look past their distrust of us. The Stiffbeards were not involved in any of the previous wars between our folk as far as I know.”

“Actually, I said that because I don’t think it is just you,” Harry said to Tauriel’s surprise. “Though they might have heard of me from rumor, I’ve heard a curse word in Khuzdul and the word for human in Khuzdul connected far too often for it be just you. I think the fact that I don’t look like an Easterling helps almost as much as the fact rumor of my friendship with Thorin has reached them. Without those things they probably would’ve attacked us without a second thought even after we helped them in the battle against the trolls.”

“You mean saved them from the trolls. Do not sell yourself short Harry, you often try to downplay your own abilities like that. Without you, the dwarves might well have faced ruin,” Tauriel remonstrated Harry mildly, reminding Harry that while the dwarves were still fighting, they hadn’t been able to stop the trolls from bull rushing straight through their camp. “Regardless, I doubt you will be able to get much information out of them. Perhaps they will mellow once they meet Thorin or one of the others who can vouch for us, but until then I doubt it. I would be all for moving on, and that quickly.”

Harry nodded, and left Tauriel to clean up the meal, reflecting that they had worked out a great way of splitting up the work around camp. Tauriel found the camp and dug the main fire pit while Harry either put up his runic arrays or the tent, then cooked. Then Tauriel would be in charge of cleaning up the fire pit and utensils, setting them aside for Harry to put away while Harry took down the tent.

They hadn’t bothered putting up the tent last night though, sleeping out on the ground with only their cloaks to cover them.

*And wasn’t that funny, when we had to shout at the dwarves to tell them where we were. We’ve used the cloaks so often I’d forgotten that they are incredibly good at hiding us from other people. Almost as*

*good as my invisibility cloak*, Harry chuckled to himself as he waited for one of the watching dwarves to come over towards him. "Good dwarf, if you could get your leader, the person we talked to last night? I'm afraid he didn't give us his name. My companion and I wish to know about your travel plans, and if he is willing to answer some of the questions I had asked him last night."

The dwarf muttered something under his breath in the Stiffbeard's lyrical version of Khuzdul, nodded and marched off. The tone of his muttering though made Harry very clear that whatever he had been saying had not been complementary, but the dwarf was soon back with the leader, whose habitual scowl did not lessen at the site of the elf and human.

"Your work was... well up to standards last night," the dwarf began without preamble, giving out what to a human would seem faint praise, but which seemed to be heartfelt from the dwarf. Who still didn't introduce himself. "But while rumor tells of you being a true friend to the risen King under the Lonely Mountain, you're not **our** friend Harry of Family Potter. And we have learned to be wary of both humans. Humans reaching out to us in friendship especially."

Harry frowned at that, rubbing at the lightning bolt scar on his head, causing the dwarf to stare at his hand. Harry's scarred hand no longer bothered him at all, but they still looked pretty bad. "The Great Enemy has almost always afflicted the most hurt to his foes through causing betrayal or the corruption of previously good folk. Are you talking of something of that nature?"

If it were possible, the black skinned dwarf would have paled at even that oblique mode of address and he took a step back, clenching at a necklace around his throat barely visible through the beard as he mustered, "Mahal's works protect me..."

That was the first sentence any of these dwarves had spoken that Harry was made able to make out in full, and it sounded almost like a benediction to his ears. *That doesn't seem a good sign for how these dwarves have fared against Sauron and his plots in the past.*

"Yes, and there again no..." The dwarf answered after a moment. "Once we believe was caused by the...the Great Enemy. Other times were caused by simple human greed or loathing of our folk. And so we loathe Men in turn."

"Very well. If I cannot convince you of my good intentions, and if you are not willing to take my word for my friendship with Thorin, then you will take his once we meet at the Lonely Mountain. My lady friend and I are heading there and will probably spend a few seasons there."

The dwarf looked keenly at him, tapping his fingers rhythmically against the golden circlets in his beard. To Harry's surprise, each of them made a distinct sound. There wasn't much variation, but there was enough for Harry to notice. *I know dwarves can hear the difference between one piece of metal and another, I wonder if those sound almost musical to them.*

Harry didn't notice another dwarf responding in like kind, tapping two of his golden circlets with a metal clad thumb. To Harry's ears it sounded like just the clink of metal. But to the dwarves it might have meant something different.

Whatever the case, the dwarf paused for just a moment before addressing Harry's words. "Rumors about you tell that you are also something of a runesmith. Perhaps if the son of Thrór vouches for you in front of us, we may..." He paused then, almost unwilling until the same dwarf clanked his metal-clad

thumb against the same beard ring several times, still unnoticed by Harry or Tauriel. And when he spoke, the dwarf's words came out as if he was pulling out his own teeth and trying to sell them to Harry. "We may be willing to provide some information in exchange for access to new runes."

"I have had several lessons from Thorin and my lady friend about valuing the work of my own hand and mind more than I had previously. So if it comes to that, a trade of information rather than simply you giving me a broad overview in thanks for my help against the trolls, we will have to write up a formal contract."

As Harry had hoped, those words seemed to soothe the dwarf. As different as he and Thorin's folk might be, contracts still seemed to be a magical term to them. The dwarf nodded agreeably. "That would be more than acceptable. Once the new King or his advisor, the one called Balin, vouches for you."

Harry nodded, then glanced over to one specific part of the dwarf in camp. There, the dead from the previous night lay, covered by the blankets they had previously owned. Harry had seen the dwarves going to great pains to match the blankets to their owners the night before, taking it as a sign of respect. A dwarf's goods, either made by their own hands or bought by their own sweat, were incredibly important to them.

A few older dwarves were moving among them, ritually removing the gold bands from their beards. All but two were set aside with the rest of the dwarf's gear in a black bag, then tied shut and marked by a white cord. On top of the white cord one of the dwarf's gold bands was placed, somehow identifying it to the other dwarves.

As Harry watched, one of the older dwarves going through the dead took the last beard ring in hand and snapped it open, causing Harry to realize this beard ring at least closed with a clasp, rather than simply being a loop of metal fit over the beard braid. *A maker's mark, perhaps with some other bit of identifier added on? I know that Thorin and the others were able to identify who owned various tools in Erebor.* The band was then placed in a small, well-made box of some strange white wood carried by one of the dwarves in an almost ritual manner: outstretched, the top open to show the inside was lined with fur.

There were one hundred and three dwarves in the caravan at present able to go about their regular duties or work for the caravan. The night before, there had been one hundred and seventy-nine. The dwarves had been able to save the lives of twelve of their fellows, while Harry and Tauriel had saved another seventeen more.

The rest had died fighting the trolls. *That box might not be big enough to hold all the clasps...* Harry thought sadly, although intellectually he knew the dwarves had been very lucky that he and Tauriel had heard the battle going on and decided to join in. A thought occurred to Harry then, and he addressed the dwarf in front of him. "Will you bury your dead here, or will you in some way try to carry them with you to the Lonely Mountain to be buried there? And if you want them buried here, would you accept some help in digging their graves?"

"Why, so you know where to go to loot the bodies!? Sorry human, but we will leave nothing for you and yours!" Growled one dwarf nearby.

After a moment of silence, he was shouted down by their leader and several other dwarves. For once, the looks directed at Harry were not suspicious, but rather conciliatory, and the dwarven leader actually apologized for their younger fellow.

The reason for this was perhaps the fact that most of the dwarves here, despite themselves, acknowledged that they had needed Harry's help the night before. Or perhaps it was the face that Harry was now wearing because for the first time in a long while, Harry was truly infuriated by what someone else had said about him. His suddenly wrathful expression, the power that suddenly began to leach out of him as if he were Gandalf when he cowed the dwarves back in Bag End, showed this.

Seeing this, Tauriel came up from behind him and laid a gentle hand on his shoulder. At that touch, Harry's anger dissipated with the wind, and he breathed in deeply, before saying simply, "We will speak no more of that. But if you wish to throw around such blandishments, then you do not need my aid. Tauriel and I will see you in Erebor."

With that, he turned abruptly around, took Tauriel's hand in his, raising it to his lips and kissing her on the fingers, before, still holding her hand and ignoring the shocked, appalled looks of the dwarves moved back to where their equipment remained. It was clearly evident to Tauriel that the dwarves were not just reacting to people being affectionate with one another in public. Rather, they were sickened at this show of romantic attachment between elf and human. *Let them. I think both of us are done with these particular dwarves for now. They will have to work hard to get into our good graces after that insult.*

The two of them wordlessly got to work, ignoring the dwarves, most of whom were now looking at one another awkwardly, or glaring at the one who had spoken up, knowing that they had angered the wizard. Thankfully not to the point where he would take it out on them, yet most dwarves there knew angering such a being was not a good thing. Those who were able to see ahead hoped that this incident did not ruin any future agreements that could be made with Harry, if he truly was Thorin's friend like in the tales of the reconquest of Erebor.

Not twenty minutes later by the watches of the dwarves, the unusual pair were off, leaving them well behind.

**OOOOOO**

The two of them traveled through the rest of the day, not speaking, but enjoying being away from the distrustful glares and standoffish dwarves. Harry's anger at the insinuation that he was a grave robber disappeared by the time they had covered a little over a league away from where the dwarves had stopped, and by the time three leagues were passed, the two of them were once more lost in one another, their Fëa wrapping around one another again, pulling them further down the road of their courtship. They stopped several times, simply slowing their walk to a crawl, and turning to look at one another, or laying her head on his shoulder.

Or, as became more common as the sun began to wane, stopping to have a little make out session. While their souls might be merging and changing one another as would be common among elves, the human side of Harry demanded a certain amount of physical affection, and Tauriel was more than happy to respond to such.

But despite that, the two lovers agreed to speed up their journey from then on. The journey straight east from Lothlorien had been idyllic, which was why they had gone the circuitous way they had after months of being kept Elvish standards of propriety. But now, they were running out of even the last of Harry's spices, and both of them had reached a point where they wished to interact and be around other people again, so long as they were not the Stiffbeard dwarves. And Harry was eager to see what Thorin and the rest of the company had made of Erebor in the year or so since he was last there.

With Harry's Point Me spell leading the way, the two of them turned their feet directly towards the distant Lonely Mountain, and the kingdom therein. The scrubland they were now moving through allowed them to push on easily, with no real impediments to their progress other than the weather, which occasionally dumped torrential rains down on them. While the pair were more than willing to put up with it considering it was still quite warm out to Harry's mind, they had to deal with a few small mudslides and areas that became just too muddy to move through.

But five days later, the world decided to remind them that trolls were not the only troubles out there, and this land, the land south of the Lonely Mountain and east of Mirkwood, was mostly uninhabited for a reason. The reason being, that it was far too easy for war bands of goblins to make their home out here, an area unclaimed by any real kingdom between the realms of the dwarves and the rest of their brethren.

Harry paused next to Tauriel on the top of a small ridge, staring out into the distance at what Harry could not say. Even now, with his body having been changed to something more like Gandalf's and an elf's combined, he didn't have the eyesight to match Tauriel. "What do you see out there?"

"Dwarves fighting goblins," Tauriel said, pointing unerringly towards one area that looked set between two distant hillocks just on the lip of the horizon. "The dwarves were moving without torches, and I cannot tell from here who ambushed who or who has the upper hand. But..." She turned her pointer finger to the right, and then up again to point at the top of another hill, one larger than the one they were standing on that rose slowly at the back of one of the hillock. It probably gave whoever was up there a decent view of the battle she had just described. "I believe there are more goblins up there. At least I see movement up there, and... yes, they are goblins. I see no dwarven reinforcement. Bar you and I, at least."

Harry nodded at that, and then made a circling motion from where she had first pointed up to the top of the hill. "Do you think you can lead us in a way that they will not see us coming? Seems to me that the best thing we can do is to ambush the reinforcements before they hit the dwarves."

"It is nighttime and we both have our cloaks. Even without your invisibility cloak to call upon Harry Potter, that is well within my abilities," Tauriel stated tartly. But she did allow Harry to kiss her in contrition for questioning her skills before turning and racing off. Harry quickly dashed after her, grateful for the time spent keeping up with Tauriel before this.

The two of them soon neared the battle enough for Harry's merely human ears to make out the sounds of combat. The dwarves seemed to be in fine fettle, one of them shouting orders to the others, and Harry could now make out at least six or seven distinct voices. A few of them were even raised in battle song as they fought the goblins. It had none of the strange magical power Harry remembered feeling in the forge in Erebor, but it seemed to keep their spirits up.

Tauriel led them on a circuitous route around the current battlefield in towards the hill where she had seen other goblins beginning to amass, and now, Harry could actually see the battle occurring below them as they raced up the taller hill. There were at least fifteen or sixteen goblins fighting the dwarves, their numbers hard to make out even this close thanks to the tumult.

But these were goblins, not orcs. Goblins were around the size of a dwarf, and strong for their scrawny appearance. But none of these goblins seemed to be wearing any armor, whereas the dwarves were all wearing the light chain mail that Harry had seen used so often from the dwarves of the iron hills and Erebor. The dwarves lacked shields, but they could see as good in the dark as their opponents, and were more than holding their own.

But if not for Tauriel and Harry's arrival, that might not have remained the case for long. Because barreling down towards the skirmish was more than eighty goblins. Again, it was hard to make out their exact numbers given how close they were to one another. Yet Tauriel had led herself and Harry right to a position flanking this new force. Now at Harry's nod she began to lobby arrows into them.

For his part, Harry took a moment to use a Sonorous spell on himself before shouting in Khuzdul, "Harry, this close eye, dwarves!"

It wasn't very good Khuzdul, and he had gotten the sentence structure all wrong. And yet the dwarves all still heard him. While none recognized his voice, the name Harry spoken in common was something they did recognize. The tales of the conquest of Erebor was still being retold every other night in most homes within the mountain. Almost all of them closed their eyes, and the two that didn't, simply raised their hands to cover their eyes for a second, ducking behind boulders or falling to the ground.

"LUMOS!" Harry bellowed. Even as the goblins began to response to the arrows striking them from their left flank, a new sun appeared in the sky above the battle already going on.

Harry's Lumos spell had changed since giving his allegiance to Melian and the Valar. Before it would have been a pure, almost artificial looking white light and would give off little heat. Now, even at night it blazed with the power of the sun, the cleansing Light of Anar. Created by the last fruit of Laurelin, the Golden Tree of Aman, the sun was anathema to all Dark creatures, and Harry's spell had taken some of that power within itself, burning bright orange and red.

Bright and almost painful to look at for even humans, the goblins to an individual screamed. Some of them fell to the ground, covering their heads and burying their faces into the ground, certain that death had come upon them with the light of day. Others ran screaming out into the darkness, only to be picked off one after another by Tauriel's arrows. *We cannot let even one survive to bring tales to others.*

Harry quickly began to attack in earnest, lashing out with cutting and piercing spells as he moved forward to engage with his sword.

Below near the bottom of the hill, the goblins the dwarves had been fighting were dealt with quickly. Now, they charged up into the still screaming mass of goblins that had been about to descend on them in turn. While further away from the sudden blaze of light, most were in just as much pain, and worse was the fear of the sun, causing them to cower in place.

But further away even then that second group of goblins, a few had remained behind on the top of the hill. Now they had the smart idea of rolling boulders down towards the ongoing battle, uncaring of

whether or not they crushed friend or foe. Harry saw them coming and was able to deflect one of them away with a hasty shield spell which shattered at the impact of the boulder, but did send it rolling to the side of the dwarves. Two more of them barreled down into the battlefield, causing the dwarves to stop their halt.

They quickly split, shifting to either side to avoid the boulders, almost as if they had faced something like this before. *Underground and hill fighters, right, should have expected that.*

More of the goblins were crushed by the boulders and now more began to flee, overcoming the near-paralyzing fear of the sun to act to save themselves. One of the dwarves barked out an order, and two of his fellows fell back, pulling from their back bows and arrows, joining Tauriel in shooting at any of the goblins they tried to escape.

Still more of the goblins from the top of the hill began to descend now. They knew that it was either fight or die at this point, and a cornered animal would always fight.

But Harry did not give them any quarter. The next boulder they attempted to roll down the hill exploded, as Harry had been watching for it, the pieces of shrapnel shredding many of the goblins around it. He then charged up the hill, leaving Tauriel and the dwarves to finish off the goblins who were still dealing with the miniature sun that had exploded over the battlefield.

Three of the dwarves quickly joined him, and together, they hit the remaining goblins trying to come down the hill, slaying several and pushing them back into what Harry was astonished to see was a small extremely well-made cave entrance at the very top of the hill. "Bring it down, or go in after them?" He said, blocking a goblin's sword with his own for a second, before parrying quickly, slaying the goblin, then ducking and dodging around several more, cutting them into pieces. *Thank you, Celeborn,* he thought, almost dancing among the goblins as his blade flicked out.

Celeborn had taken to training Harry whenever Harry was not busy with Galadriel learning from and teaching the Lady of Lothlorien. And while he would never put himself forward as one of the best swordsmen of his people, he didn't really have to. The fact that he had survived for so long spoke for itself, and he had quickly realized that not only was Harry almost as fast as an elf, his reflexes were actually a little bit better than most elves. And he had a sword that could kill with a single's touch.

These factors contributed to creating what Celeborn rather euphemistically called snake sword style that emphasized dodging. Instead of going for a blow that would kill or at least maim, Harry's style emphasized aiming for small, usually unprotected portions of the body. After all, even unarmed people rarely remembered to protect their hands or forearms from strikes that looked as if they would mostly miss. This used both Harry's speed and the poison of his blade to the best effect.

The goblins were the first to truly face it. Judging by the screams dying from the poisoned blade, the goblins did not like the lesson.

"By the axe of my father, no! You never rush after goblins into a goblin cave!" Said one of the dwarves, shaking his head, and looking sideways at Harry. His voice was calm even as he deflected a goblin's sword from his throat, lashing out with an ax and carving the goblin in twain, before using the haft of the ax to block another sword strike. The metal reinforced banded wood of the shaft blocked the blade easily, and a punch caught the goblin in the center of his chest, breaking bones and sending him gasping to the

ground, where another dwarf finished him off with a negligent blow of the back of his ax. "My father told us tales of your prowess in bottle Harry Potter, but I was not among those who fought in the war of the Lonely Mountain. It is good to see that rumors at least to this extent of court held some truth."

Harry looked over at him for a brief second as his current opponent convulsed, foam coming from his mouth and tripping two other goblins. When he took a good look at the dwarf by the light of the nearby Lumos ball, he began to laugh, before turning back to the work at hand. "It is good to finally meet you, Gimli Gloinson. Although I dare say that at least in the beard area, the image I saw of you when your father boasted about you did not do it justice."

Gimli, son of Gloin, groaned loudly, slapping a grabbing at his beard with one hand and tugging furiously in annoyance. And nearly missed a rusty dagger trying to embed itself in his side. The dagger broke though against his chain mail, and a backhand shattered that goblins jaw, hurling him aside. "Is my father still showing that picture around?! I swear that my mother told him to stop, it's so embarrassing!"

"A parent who is so easily able to tease his son giving such a thing up?" One of the other dwarves said, laughing as he smashed a pickax into the head of one of the goblins as if he was a particularly recalcitrant bit of stone that did not want to yield.

Soon, the other dwarves joined them, and what little fight remained went out of the goblins facing them by the cave entrance. The last of them fled inside, shrieking in fear still from the Lumos ball.

Gazing into the darkness of the cave, Harry shook his head, then looked over at the other dwarves. "Well, if going in after them is foolish, does anyone object to me just bringing the whole thing down?"

A chorus of nose was his response, although Gimli, who seems to be the leader of this group, ordered his dwarves to circle around the top of the hill, and to signal if they heard anything from underground. As Harry watched, Gimli also knelt, placing the side of his head against the hill, before nodding at Harry. Harry went to work bringing the top of the cave down onto the rest, while the dwarves listened intently to see how deep the war and of caves went.

Luckily, these goblins had seemingly lacked the tools necessary to enlarge what might've been a natural cave. The dwarves reconvened with negative reports of any further noise, and with the light of the Lumos ball above, Harry held out his hand to Gimli. "Seriously though, it is good to meet you. Your father spoke of you quite a lot. I don't suppose you could tell Tauriel and I what Gloin and the others have been up to since we left Erebor?"

**End Chapter**



