

A bit of a note: I realized when working on this chapter, I had mixed up the names of the dwarven Houses occasionally in the last chapter. I have since corrected this. No more Ironfoots except for Dain, LOL, and no weird black rocks either.

Beyond that, due to how late in the month I finished work on this - seriously, last minute guys, RL fucked me up the ass for the last two weeks of this month - this has been checked over by Grammarly, and a new beta reader going by the awesome name of Lina Inverse! Enjoy!

Chapter 23: Prospective In-laws and New Meetings

As his Lady began to talk to her parents, Harry reflected on what Tauriel had told him of them and her family before, and seeing that the Cooley assessing looks in their eyes as they looked at him, Harry remembered that they were very insular like most elves. They didn't have any personal history with humans that influenced their opinion of humans, but they were also students of Elvish history and opinionated about many of the mistakes that could be laid at the feet of humans, even as far back as the betrayal of the Easterling tribe of Ulfang the Black during the battle of Nirnaeth Arnoediad, or in the common tongue as the Battle of Unnumbered Tears, which apparently their own parents on both sides had fought in.

Although they had survived that disaster, all four of her grandfathers had not survived the first War of the Elves against Sauron in the Second Age. According to Tauriel, they had fought in the main host of Gil-Galad in many battles, the lands of the Silvan community they had been a part of having been put to the torch by Sauron in his march on Eregion.

Eregion was lost, the first of the elven nations to fall, although Harry had learned from Celeborn about that campaign and knew it had not died easy. Celeborn himself had led a host to victory against Sauron's first army, only retreating when several more hosts threatened to envelop them. His forces in danger of being overwhelmed, Celeborn had broken off south and somehow infiltrated through Sauron's armies with a large portion of his army. Once behind the front line, Celeborn organized a hit and run campaign that helped to weaken the enemy, but not enough to save Eregion.

It had been fascinating to Harry to hear Celeborn speak of those dark days as if they had just happened to the ancient elven royal. How hard it had been to decide to split his force, sending the majority on a forced retreat to Eregion's capital of Ost-in-Edhil as he led his own troops to do what they could behind enemy lines. How reluctant Celeborn had been to aid Eregion at all, given their friendship with the dwarves for centuries, finally admitting that the

elves of the Longbeard House, the House of Durin, had never wronged elvenkind, and how he had even worked alongside them in that war. "I doubt I will ever forgive the dwarves for the death of Thingol and the subsequent fall of Doriath or be comfortable around them, but the dwarves of Khazad-Dûm, they fought well."

When the Númenóreans arrived later in the war and shattered Sauron's might in the battle of Gwathlo (although Harry felt it should have been called the campaign, and judging from what he knew, the shattering part was underplaying things too), Tauriel had stated that the scattered Silvan folk had almost entirely turned away from war and even interacting with others. They had lost too much. To a tribe, the forest elves had simply retreated deeper into the Greenwood, each group going their separate ways.

It was only when Oropher, a Sindar lord at the time, moved into the Greenwood that they began to come together once more into a nation under his banner. Sindar and Silvan elves merged there as they had already further south in the Galadhrim, with the Silvan elves taking on much of the Sindar society while also teaching the Sindar how to live and not create any sign of their habitats within the great forest. Now, the two groups had mingled so much that it would be hard to tell one from another except in names and perhaps the disposition of a few elves more devoted to woodcraft or to music and the arts.

Oropher was Legolas' grandfather. He had died during the War of the Last Alliance, leaving the throne to Thranduil, his son. Which led to a whole host of other issues.

Most of which Tauriel's parents had been around to see, and to blame on outsiders, much like a lot of the other Silvan folk among the Greenwood.

When it came to the elvish society within Mirkwood, though, it was Tauriel's older sister who, in Tauriel's own words, "Has always wished to be more important than her skills or abilities could garner her," which made Harry pleased she wasn't here along with Tauriel's mother and father. This was awkward enough already.

Harry had once asked if Naniel, her sister, was a gold digger and now had to smile at the memory of incredulous laughter Tauriel had let loose at the explanation of the term. "I cannot fathom how an elf would ever be so enamored with physical things as to try to force a relationship to gain more such!" The redhead had said at the time, throwing her head back in laughter and squeezing Harry's hand as the two of them had walked along, the leagues falling behind them, no threats in sight and the sun high overhead. "Even elves who are simply crooked of soul and mind like Caranthir, Curufin or Maeglin the Accursed would never stoop so low. Enamored of the flesh, of the handsomeness of someone, yes, that is how the darkness of their souls was shown. In the tale of Luthien and Beren, the brothers Caranthir and Curufin caused much harm, and Maeglin desired Princess Idril so much that he willingly gave up the

secrets of Gondolin. But physical things? Perhaps an elf could be enamored of a painting or a song, other creations of hand and eye, but simple wealth?"

Tauriel laughed again before reminding Harry that elves did not have anything like a set economy. Barter and simply gift-giving dominated when they dealt with one another, though they understood the concept at least to be able to interact somewhat with humans or dwarves if they wished to. In this day and age, of course, most elves didn't.

Unfortunately for Harry, his small smile at that memory was interpreted wrongly as contempt or something similar by Tauriel's father for him and his wife. Tauriel's father, whose name was Sanwë, turned from where he had been looking at his daughter as Tauriel spoke, his eyes flashing with anger as he cut her off, staring at the human man who stood next to his daughter as if they were equals. *I do not care if he truly can wield magic; he is still human to my senses, and that means his life is finite. His emotions pale in comparison to our own. His lifespan is but a blink, and I will not have my daughter go the way of Luthien, lost forever, or Idril lost over the ocean to those of us who have no wish to see the light of the Maiar!*

"What have you so amused by our presence, human? Or do you find the concept that a parent would object to his daughter making a bad personal choice amusing in some fashion? Would your own parents have allowed you to simply chase off after the first human female you saw, or can you at least understand our concerns on this score, especially when our daughter has not sought our opinion on your... courtship..." Sanwë practically spat the word, "or even introduced you to us. Instead, leaving like a thief in the night to meet with you, never telling us of her interest in you or, indeed, that she had left the Greenwood at all."

Harry's smile vanished at that, and he answered coldly. "As the only memories I have of my parents are of my mother getting murdered by a magical spell that destroyed her Fëa, I cannot tell you what they would have allowed or not. And as to the tone you give the word 'courtship', in our human language, we would probably use the term shacking up to imply the same meaning. But I have never used the term, nor would with Tauriel and my relationship, as the connotations would insult your daughter. Something I refuse to do, unlike how you seem willing to."

Tanwe twitched at that, his lips pressed together in a ruler-straight line, but said nothing for the moment. At the same time, Harry watched Tauriel's eyes narrow dangerously while Legolas took a step to the side away from the two older elves. *Although what about them tells me they are older than Legolas, I can't say. A stoop in the shoulder, a fragility?* Shaking that observation off, Harry caught Tauriel's eye and cocked an eyebrow in question, asking silently if his presence was needed or would just make this confrontation worse. She shook her head lightly, then flicked a finger subtly back towards the door, and Harry smiled over at Legolas.

“Legolas, it’s good to see you as always. Seeing as these two wish to talk to their daughter, and I, the subject of this discussion, don’t actually need to be here for that, might I invite you to walk with me outside for a time?”

He held out his arm to the other elf while both parents pushed through their shock and outrage at the verbal spanking Harry had given Tauriel, swelling themselves up at what they saw was an insult to their king as well as an insult to themselves. But Legolas simply smiled back at Harry, knowing that for Harry, friendship would always be a precious thing, and being called a friend was not something he would toss about lightly. He gripped the other man’s arm firmly before letting it go and making for the door. “Yes, I get the impression of that as well. I’m also here to speak with Thorin.”

The way Legolas said the word ‘speak’ made Harry’s eyebrow rise, but he nodded and, after a final, almost defiant hand squeeze with Tauriel (it would have been a kiss on the cheek if not for Legolas’s presence), led the way out of the house that Harry and Tauriel had been living in. Glancing along the small walkway to the other houses, Harry wondered aloud if this would be called Ambassadors Row or something similar in the future. “A permanent domicile for representatives of other nations.”

“An interesting thought, assigning someone to interact with the government of another power permanently?” Legolas mused, reaching up to his hand and running one finger down through his hair, which fell now in a long braid along one shoulder rather than loose down to his shoulders. “A fascinating thought. One I might actually take up in the future if my own folk’s interactions with the dwarves and the humans continue. Which is in question at present. Yet perhaps in times of future trouble, it might become necessary. I am not so foolish as to believe that evil has been completely crushed from this world, after all.”

Legolas had been there when Gandalf had told Thranduil that his greatest fears were, in fact, reality and that the Necromancer he had been losing ground to for so long was Sauron. As such, he was determined that his folk would be able to protect their borders better, at the very least. He said so now, adding, “I have to thank you for whatever you said to Lord Celeborn and Lady Galadriel. They sent three Noldor trainers to us, and they have been a magnificent help in rebuilding the shattered morale of my people’s main army, such as it is. The term ‘army’ seems far too grandiose, frankly.”

By which, Legolas meant the regular Army that had been brought in during the battle of the Lonely Mountain. The losses the elves had taken in that battle had forced Legolas to enact several policies that most of his people did not like, and in fact were annoyed by: enlarging the Unseen Host, and eventually turning his attention to reforming the normal army after the spiders had been eradicated. That last was far more annoying to most, as Legolas had forced

nearly every elf who had even a vague knowledge of combat to join up for training. That annoyance would not turn into reluctance let alone rebellion as it might among humans, but it was there, and it was making Legolas's life a bit harder.

Harry winced, understanding that, and saying aloud, "So, Celeborn was right when he guessed that most of your troops were green?"

"I can understand what you mean by how you say it, although the term is unusual," Legolas said as the two of them began walking away from the house, heading first around the area, simply up and into the woods for a time as they talked. Legolas did want to speak to Thorin, but a few minutes spent speaking and talking with Harry was not exactly time spent ill, in his opinion. "And yes, most of our people trained for hand-to-hand combat were not as well-trained or as well-experienced as those of the Unseen Host. If it comes to direct conflict again, I mean to make certain that we prove that the tales of elven prowess in that area have not been mistaken once more. That this has also allowed me to open dialogue with Lothlorien is also a bonus. And that, in turn, allowed me to shore up my own internal power structure at a time when I needed it."

Harry blinked at that, and Legolas sighed. "I could say that you have no need to know of the eternal politics of my position as King or make a joke that such is very, **very** little such in terms of a human would understand. But considering my very presence here is because Thorin perhaps did not comprehend that power structure, maybe you do. You see, despite what you and Thorin might have thought, or indeed Tauriel, who has never been exactly quiet about her opinion on my father's policies, he was not a poor king. Rather, Thranduil was revered by my people as the leader who led us away from a darkness few could comprehend, let alone combat. Far too many of my folk believe the rest of elvenkind, and of course, the humans abandoned us, concentrating instead on their own matters save those of our own folk in Lothlorien under the Lady."

The elven King sighed faintly, looking up at the sun descending into evening above, shaking his head. "Worse, my folk can almost be as irrational as humans. Many resent you for being the reason why Mithrandir overawed my father in his own hall when he forced us to get involved in the Battle of the Lonely Mountain. All life is precious to us elves, even those of orcs, and killing such makes a mark. Worse, we lost the flower of our strength in that war, as you well know. I tried to funnel that resentment into increasing the numbers of the Unseen Host, and in further training for our regular troops. But the bitterness is still there and fuels a..." Legolas paused, thinking. "I suppose you could say an isolationist point of view. But I understand that most elves are isolationists in comparison to what humans are like, or even dwarves. Simply more so, I suppose, or more strident in their thoughts on that score, so much so they resent me

and my own, especially the need to send so much food to Erebor since the battle. A demand that has only recently ended.”

“That I had somewhat gotten a grip on,” Legolas went on. “I had begun to slowly change people’s opinions, mostly thanks to the overtures from Celeborn at Lady Galadriel, as well as the fact that with the increased numbers of the Unseen Host, we had basically won the war against the spiders left behind after the White Council drove Sauron from his base at Dol Guldur. But there is still quite a bit of dislike for dwarves, and there are many who do not believe that the interests of Mirkwood would be served by allowing Erebor to continue to grow stronger.”

“And into that muck and mire came an official missive not to me but to be passed on to the parents of Tauriel, saying that the time had come to formalize the relationship between Tauriel and you, Harry. A man who still, to the senses of many, seems mortal rather than the Istari I know you to be.”

There was a lot to unpack there, and most of it, Harry decided he would wait to unpack until they were in front of Thorin, who probably did need to know that there was growing resentment within Legolas’s realm towards Erebor and even Dale. So, he decided to tackle that last part first. “Perhaps you could explain that last bit? To your senses, I seem human? I know that my magic shouldn’t ring out any longer as it once did, but...”

“Oh, you do not seem mortal to **my** senses!” Legolas laughed gaily, a sound as wild and fae as Tauriel’s, and for just a second, Harry understood how inhuman and powerfully **other** elves could sometimes seem to humans. “To me, you gleam with the power of the world within you. Mithrandir might seem an ancient human, stooped by age yet hail of mind and body. But to those of us with senses to see it, he glows with all the power of the wind and earth beneath our feet. His power shines through the outer raiment like an ill-fitting cloth. In your case, that energy is even easier for us to discern. But it only becomes so if we look for it or know what to look for in the first place.”

Legolas tapped his chest and then gestured up to the small diadem of gold and silver lying within the greater gold of his hair. “Thanks to my position as King, I have become far more in tune with nature, with the powers of magic and how those two interact, and can see it in you when I could not before. That came as something of a shock when you came through the door just now.” Legolas chuckled, and Harry chuckled with him before Legolas continued. “I have no doubt that Tauriel can tell, given how long she has spent in your company. But to others? To other elves, you will seem simply human unless they see you perform magic. And as important to the history of Middle Earth as Human and Elven relationships have been in the past, they are also seen as tragic to a one by the Sindar and Silvan folk of my realm. Among the Sindar many resent Beren the eternal loss of Luthien, and that has spread amongst our Silvan folk. And some

doubt that even Tuor of Gondolin was welcome among the First Born and Maiar beyond the ocean when he and Idril traveled there eventually after the Fall of Gondolin and his son wed Elwing of Doriath.”

Elwing was the daughter of Dior, son of Luthien and Beren, who wed in turn Nimloth, an elven maiden. Dior was technically human, but his soul had been elven, and when Nauglamir, given to him by his mother after she passed on a second time, sat on his brow, he had seemed the most handsome and magnificent of men. Both had been slain by the sons of Fëanor, with Elwing, their daughter, being the only surviving member of their house, fleeing to the hidden havens. Nimloth was the only elven maiden whose love of a human had not ended with her soul being barred from ever returning from the halls of Maedhros, and thus, unlike all others, her tale was not seen as a true tragedy by elvenkind, as there was a hope that her soul could eventually return.

“Celeborn called Tauriel and other Silvan folk Tawarwaith,” Harry murmured in lieu of an answer as he thought of that, wondering if that hearkened back to how Gandalf had said that every time he used magic. He had caused a splash in the world. *Am I still doing that even now that I am tied into the world?* Harry didn’t think so, or at least not to the scale he had been, but he knew that Gandalf had also been discovered through the use of magic when he had infiltrated Dol Guldur. *That is deathly something to consider in the future, but perhaps only when I know I’m near someone else who can use magic.*

Legolas laughed again, nodding his head as he explained that that was an old name for the Silvan elves, for when there had been dozens of scattered territories claimed by the Nandor, Elven people who had begun as part of the greater tribe of Teleri, only to stop and linger in the vales of Anduin rather than continue the journey. The Silvan elves had broken off even before the leader of the Teleri, named Elwë at the time, had met the Maiar Melian, which had caused a large portion of the remaining Teleri to stop their journey and search for him through the woods of Nan Emloth in search of him.

Shaking his head and realizing that that was something he would need to think about in the future and to try to experiment with in some fashion perhaps, Harry turned his attention back to what else Legolas had just told him. “You also mentioned that this missive came over officially from King Thorin? I don’t suppose you kept a copy of it, did you? Because I would wager anything that it wasn’t written by him.”

“It was not. I could tell that right away. But as I said, who it came from did not matter. Simply the fact that it mentioned that the relationship between you and Tauriel was moving forward and should be formalized was enough to give those who resent my changes to our

society more reason to do so. I can deal with them, but I prefer it when they are less..." Legolas paused, trying to think of a word.

"Strident? Screechy? Voluminous with affected affront?" Harry quipped, causing Legolas to laugh again, some of the ill humor that had returned to him as he answered Harry's question disappearing as he slapped the young man on the shoulder.

"Exactly! And as I said, it came as if it was a formal missive from King Thorin, not to me, but to almost be passed on straight past me to a pair of citizens within my realm. Such a thing is simply not done on many levels. But I will take my displeasure with that out on him and whoever was truly behind it."

"That would be Dis, his sister. I think she's the only one that would be able or willing to do something like that. I know Fili handles quite a bit of the diplomatic side of things for Thorin; he is his heir at this point. But there's no way I can picture Fili being a part of that kind of thing. He might not understand or know about your position within Mirkwood, but he also wouldn't care about Tauriel's relationship with her parents." Harry went on to explain some of what he knew about how dwarves and women were generally speaking in charge of courtship, as well as Dis's even more special position when it came to the royal family of Erebor and her current duties. "From her perspective, I would wager she's simply acting as a dwarves and matron should. Not saying she's right, just saying that's probably where she came from on this point."

"That does not excuse her, and if Thorin thinks it does, he and I are going to have an argument," Legolas said simply before changing the subject abruptly, deciding that the rest of this walk before they reached the massive doors heading into Erebor should be taken up with more pleasant things. "Tell me about Lothlorien and your experiences there. Tell me about meeting the Lady Galadriel. What is she like? What is Celeborn like?"

Hearing the near awe and Veneration, Harry chuckled at that but made no jokes. If anyone in this world was worthy of that awe, it was Lady Galadriel and, through her, the Maiar beyond the oceans. He began to describe Lothlorien as well as what he had been doing there. He went into detail on meeting Celeborn there for the first time, as well as Arwen, and how Lady Galadriel was while at home in Lothlorien, not dwelling too long on Arwen to Legolas's shock. Even in Taur-e Ndaedelos they had heard of the beauty of the daughter of Elrond.

Harry also described his healing at the Lady's hand in vague terms but went into detail on the training that he had been given after waking up from his induced coma by Celeborn. He also explained the decimation of Dol Guldur, mentioning his own brief part in that destruction while lavishing more attention on how Lady Galadriel had done the majority of the work there.

That conversation took them until they were near the guards stationed outside the doors into Erebor. At night, this guard detail was not the formal thing it was during the day, but

here he was known well enough to be passed through without issue, and one of the guards had even recognized Legolas, although Harry did have to formally introduce him to the rest of them.

Fili met them at the entrance to the throne room, waving them on, sliding past several other clumps of dwarves around the area and heading towards Thorin's personal office.

"Well, that was remarkably easy!" Legolas said as he followed Fili, shaking his head. "I remember my father had often mentioned that his own personal visits to Thrór were full of pomp and ceremony."

Fili opened the door to Thorin's personal study just as Legolas said that, and Thorin looked up from where he was working at his desk, snorting as he got up, moving around the desk to shake hands with Legolas. Nearby, Balin sat at a similar desk, but the older dwarf did not rise, seemingly writing something down as he stared at a truly massive book set to one side of his parchment, a ferocious scowl on his face."

"Some of our folk are indeed taken by that, and the older we get, the worse it can become. But our pomp and ceremony, as you put it, is very different than that of humans, let alone elves. My grandfather had incorporated much of human ceremony in order to intimidate and overawe people. A move that can backfire if used too often."

Thorin paused for a moment, his gaze going far away for a second as he thought about those days before coming back to the here and now. "We dwarves do admittedly prefer formality with strangers, as you both should know. But our ceremonies and formality among ourselves lean in a different direction than humans. Not displays of might and raw wealth or grandeur so much as displays of craft, martial strength and mastery. You might see such ceremonies if you wish to stay here for a few days. I intend to put one such on to rub the Stiffbeard House's representative's noses in the mistake they made in not treating Harry like the Dwarf Friend he is."

He looked at Legolas, his eyes narrowing. "But what has brought you personally to my realm, King Legolas? And I thought you would be staying with Tauriel for the rest of the evening, Harry. Your presence here with Legolas rather than simply Legolas himself tells me that something is going on. Should I be worried? Some trouble in the Misty Mountains you think we should get involved in, or perhaps even within Mirkwood?"

"My presence here does indicate a bit of a problem, but it has nothing to do with the security of your realm or mine; never fear. It has more to do with the fact that your sister, at least that is Harry's guess, might have overstepped herself and caused me trouble within my court," Legolas said.

His eyes widening in shock, Thorin rocked back on his heels while Fili frowned, winced, looked away, frowned deeper and finally assayed, "Well, that doesn't sound good. I had wondered why I saw a report of a letter being passed on by our messenger to your people by Long Lake. Familial loyalty demands me to try and defend her, but if that truly was her, then whatever her reason, my mother overstepped any bounds of... wait..." Fili looked over at Harry, showing the bright mind that sometimes reared its head in the blonde dwarf. "Don't tell me..."

"I'm afraid so. And to say that Tauriel's parents are unhappy with her decision to enter a relationship with me is something of an understatement. And they made trouble for Legolas, official type trouble in his actual court in turn," Harry said drolly. "It's not so interesting a story as to hear three times, though."

"I'm going to go get the good wine, I think," Fili stated.

"Please, sit," Thorin recovered and remembered his manners, gesturing to indicate a pair of small sofas set so that they could be turned to face either desk, now facing one another. Fili brought out from one of the corners a small but ornately wrought table, setting it between the sofas before returning a second time with a bottle of wine and a glass, which he set on the table in front of Legolas.

Seeing that, Legolas smiled faintly, seeing the dwarves did indeed have wine for him rather than the regular dwarven mead or heavier drinks. While the humans had yet to take up winemaking on the scale that they had been forced to previously, a goodly number of people coming in from other villages had brought wine bottles with them, and more than one vintage had somehow wound up in Thorin's possession over the past few years. He didn't use them often, but he knew that elves preferred wine to ale or mead.

Sipping from the wine, Legolas declared it good before going on to explain what had happened, as well as how it had caused him issues.

Hearing all this, Thorin winced, rubbing a hand down his face but resolutely not downing his own mead in a single quaff as he so desperately wished. "My sister is a magnificent organizer and has performed her duties as the matriarch of our family very well in trying times as well as in the good ones we are facing now. Normally, I would not hear a single word against her. But Dis does not understand humans, let alone elves, and has no knowledge of how your societies do such things." Thorin barked a laugh. "Really, I could say the same about myself! Regardless, she did wrong here. I will first make my displeasure plain with her later, and then I think that we will allow Tauriel to remonstrate with Dis directly. Is there anything I can do to offset the trouble she has caused you?"

Thorin was very serious on this point. Causing such issues within the court of another nearby power like this could have led to a major diplomatic disaster. That was especially true in

this case, as Erebor was still deeply indebted to the Elven nation for the amount of food that it had produced and sent to Erebor and Dale until they had begun to be self-sufficient.

“... I think that I need to see some physical token of apology,” Legolas’ tone was apologetic but firm. “Not so much that you personally were involved in this wrong, but that you acknowledge that it was done in your name, that it should not have been, and you apologized. Something personal to me, I think.”

Harry cocked an eyebrow, leaning back and glancing over Thorin, humming thoughtfully for a second. “Something to immediately take back to your folk to show that Thorin was demonstrably contrite? I seem to recall something about your father wanting a specific set of jewels from the dwarven treasure trove here?”

For just a second, Thorin’s eyes flashed, anger at the memory of the treatment that they had all been given at the hands of Thranduil coming through. More, he could remember that Thranduil had used Thrain’s decision to withhold that set of jewelry as a reason to state that the elves had no obligation to help the dwarves after Smaug sacked Erebor or even after Smaug had moved into the mountain, leaving the dwarves to flee without attacking them further.

But Fili spoke up before Thorin could perhaps say something impolitic. “That could be a good idea, uncle. Either that or something master crafted from your hand for Legolas. But since I know that you are already working on something else altogether, perhaps the jewels are a better plan.”

He added that with a teasing note in his voice, and Thorin laughed, a flush appearing on his cheeks as his anger instantly dissipated. “True enough!”

Thorin turned back to Legolas, nodding his head firmly. “If such baubles are needed to cool the ire among your people for Dis’ discourtesy, take them. My father and grandfather might have put much store in such, and they are amazingly master-crafted, I will admit. But your folk fed my people and that of the humans. That is beyond price.”

And I have to thank my grandfather for having paid for the work from start to finish, else I would have been forced to return them to the maker’s family. Old Crolin was slain by Smaug and his sons later, but I know his grandson has only recently returned from the Iron Hills.

Legolas bowed formally from the waist, both in acknowledgment of the gift and at the wisdom of Thorin’s words, wondering mentally if either Thrór or Thrain would ever have been able to say such and mean it. Thorin was very, very different from the memory of the one time that Legolas had met Thrór while accompanying his own father on a diplomatic mission, let alone what Thranduil had said of Thrain, his grandfather.

On a personal level, Legolas was also somewhat astonished at the changes he saw physically in Thorin since the last time they had met personally. That had been shortly after Legolas had left with most of his folk back to Mirkwood after the Battle of the Lonely Mountain. Thorin stood taller. He seemed broader at the shoulders, more energetic and somehow more centered in a way that Legolas had trouble putting into words, even in his own head. It wasn't magic or anything of that nature, but there was a certain **presence** to the young dwarven King, like yet utterly unlike the one Harry or one of the other Istari had.

I wonder, is that the effect of bonding to the Arkenstone? I had heard something of that process, but I did not expect it to have such an impact. Just like Harry, I think Thorin is going to have a greater impact on the world than any might expect.

"I think you, great King Under the Mountain," he said formally. "Such a gift after such a mistake from your family will appease my own people greatly and will soothe those troubled waters to the point that I think we can both take great pride in our continued goodwill towards one another."

"And I thank you for your forbearance on this issue, King of Taur-e Ndaedelos," Thorin answered just as formally, looking over to Balin. The older dwarf nodded and exited the study, heading towards the treasury via the royal house's personal entrance. There was still a faint corrupting element to the gold held within the massive vault, but it had faded almost to nothing over the years. Harry knew that a few of the oldest dwarves in Erebor had shown some impact from it, yet all of the dwarves of the Company had proven largely immune after their own close call with the Dragon Madness. Balin was no exception.

Legolas looked after Balin for a second, and when he turned back to Thorin. He raised an eyebrow, looking between Fili and his uncle, a smirk working on his lips for a moment. "Forgive me if I am wrong, but there seemed to be a little more to how you were talking about whatever it is you are working on yourself a moment ago."

This caused a faint flush to appear on Thorin's face again, but he answered gamely enough. "As part of making certain that the foundations of my new kingdom remain strong, one aspect I have been looking into has been marriage alliances and producing more heirs for myself. I have made my interest in one of the prospective women who might become interested in me in turn plain. As such, I am in the process of creating something for Ani Red of the Blacklocks as a final showing of my affection."

"You are at the gift-giving stage?" Legolas nodded thoughtfully. "Among my folk, it would be wooden instruments, paintings, comparing poetry and song between man and woman. And I rather doubt it will go on for as long. Among elves, courtship can last for decades."

Harry snorted at that, very deliberately taking a chug of mead for a moment to stop himself from saying something that would get him smacked.

“In our culture, it is routinely only the men who present the women with such gifts, and a far wider assortment of said, at this point in the relationship anyway. If the woman is a crafter, she can then present the man with one amazing gift to show her own interest in the one suitor she has decided is her One. Occasionally, it is the womenfolk who take the lead when they meet their One outside of formal courtship, but that is rare. For my part...” Thorin paused, looking away for a second as he tried to work up the courage to continue. Emotions and romance did not come easily to him, to say the least.

This allowed Fili to step in with a grin. “He’s going to make her something, the first something from his forge that will bear his new master’s mark!”

Harry’s eyes widened, and he then nodded thoughtfully, putting that in with what else he knew of dwarfing culture easily, while Legolas looked confused, having none of the insight that Harry had gained over his friendship with Thorin and since returning to the Lonely Mountain. “I take it that is important?” The elf King asked quizzically, wondering what a master’s mark was and what the difference between one of those and a maker’s mark was.

Those I am familiar with, at least. One thing elves and dwarves had in common was a respect for craftsmen of all sorts.

“It is very much so! A maker’s mark is part of a Master, part of who and what he is, and who my uncle wants to become in the future,” Fili explained, hopping to his feet just barely ahead of a grab from his uncle. “To have Ani see it, to show it to her as his first project, is like showing Redring the future of his clan and essentially asking if she wishes to be part of it.”

Grumbling as his nephew stayed out of grabbing range, Thorin took up the explanation with as much dignity as he could at present. Which wasn’t much, admittedly. “If Ani thinks she is worthy of it, then the courtship will enter a formal stage.”

“In other words, they will be promised to one another, and there will soon be a wedding, which is not the simple prospect it is among human folk,” Fili interjected again, only to eat a pillow from the sofa to the face.

As Harry laughed and Legolas smiled at the byplay, Thorin shifted the subject slightly to more important matters. “*AHEM*. Yes, well, my sister will continue to handle talks between her family and mine in my name. At the same time, Dis will cease such talks with the others, coming up with ways to appease them that match the effort the other Houses put forth. Sending a single princess of the House this far away was a huge showing, even from the Stonefoots. That will be a delicate thing, and her council of women will help her. Meanwhile,

with Balin and Fili aiding me, I will handle the larger, House-related portions of building a blood alliance, which will be discussions of trade and military aid. Everything more personal will come from my sister and the matriarch of her family or Ani herself.”

Thorin smiled faintly. “Knowing how forthright my perspective bride-to-be can be, I have no doubt that she will take over the formal discussions at that point, and perhaps even the House-related portions if she was given that authority by her own King. Although she might work through an intermediary. And I wager she will still make me work even more for her hand. So be it. Nothing worth having should be easy, and I think Ani will enjoy the chase far too much to make it so for me.”

“What exactly are you making?” Harry asked.

“That, you will have to wait for. Even telling anyone else what I am making would diminish the impact of the gift.” Thorin chuckled, shaking his head.

Harry nodded at that, and Thorin turned back to Legolas, asking him questions about how life fared in Mirkwood. He had received formal letters from Legolas occasionally, mostly talking about the food supplies and the battles against the spiders within Mirkwood and once about the human forces making a new dwelling place at the feet of the Misty Mountains. Built around Beorn and those who wished to live with him, they had begun to wage a small war to keep the number of goblins within the Misty Mountains in that area down. But those had been very simple, short missives, and Thorin had a particular interest to hear about how the spiders had been wiped out given his own run-in with those creatures.

At that point, though, a messenger from Dis came in, announcing that it was dinner time and that the delegation from the Stonefoot House wished to talk to Thorin before retiring for the night. As a female dwarf, Dis would not show herself in front of a stranger and non-dwarf like Legolas, so this was not actually as rude as it might have seemed to such, something Fili explained to Legolas now, who looked amused at the oddity of it.

Thorin looked at his sister’s messenger, then over to Legolas and sighed, stood up, and gestured towards the doorway. “Well, I suppose now is as good a time as any. If you could get my sister for me, and gentlemen, give me the room? This will hopefully be short and not overly loud. But it must be between us.”

Legolas nodded, stood up, smiled at Thorin, and left without a word while Harry patted him on the shoulder commiseratingly, and Fili winced before hastening out the door as if expecting someone to light his rear on fire. As they went, Fili explained, “Remonstrating with our womenfolk about a mistake like this rarely happens, and it’s normally done by the clan matriarch when a younger woman overstepped the bounds of propriety. Here, having a woman, a princess, no less, nearly cause a diplomatic incident... I can’t think of a single example of that

ever happening before. My mother truly overstepped herself here, and truly, only ignorance can excuse it.”

“While your King is dealing with that issue, perhaps you can show me around? The glimpses of Erebor we saw before entering the throne room were amazing. They make the halls of my father seem almost prosaic in comparison,” Legolas inquired.

“I go with you. I gather that returning to my own house might be a little more fraught...” Harry quipped, causing Legolas and Fili to chuckle.

OOOOOO

“Your prospective human swain seems willing to leave you at the drop of a hat. Perhaps it is something you should get used to. The certainty of marriage among human folk is--” Tauriel’s mother began as soon as the door closed behind Harry and Legolas.

But Tauriel had about enough of this and interrupted her mother, Lauriel, her voice coming out terse but trying to keep just this side of polite. “Harry is not like that at all. Harry simply trusts me to be able to handle my own battles without his aid, an opinion that I quite like. Harry treats me as an equal in things like this.”

Lauriel sighed. “Setting your bad manners aside, daughter, this has going on long enough. Humans are mortal, ephemeral. Would you truly tie yourself formally to such? I will not say he is without his physical qualities, I suppose. Humans can seem barbarically impressive to the eye so long as they are clean enough, which cannot be said most of the time. But marriage? Sharing your body with such? That is far too far! You would forever close off your Fëa to the touch of another, all for a few decades or, at best, a century of dalliance with a mortal?”

At that point, Tanwe also piled in. “I eventually did not see any issue with your obsession with becoming a member of the Unseen Host, as it brought you into meeting Legolas, who anyone could see was taken by you. Now we learn not only that instead of simply enjoying the chase, you have fully refused his suit and turned to a mortal for affection! That is beyond the pale! Why it is any wonder that Legolas’s policies are more warlike and aggressive since.”

“That is both an insult to Harry and to our King! Legolas was the first to actually acknowledge what was going on between Harry and me, to step aside, and to wish me well. While he was attracted to me, never once did I return that affection or show him any interest in turn.” Tauriel shot back. “Legolas’s policies since becoming king were designed to reinforce the strength of the Unseen Host and our people as a whole. I was consulted on much of it and agreed, yes, but none of those changes were caused by my relationship with Harry or suggested by me.”

Tanwe frowned but acceded to the point easily enough. It had ever been Naniel who had pushed Tauriel to acknowledge Legolas's courtship of her, not her parents, who understood that their daughter would not be happy in such a relationship. She had also not been attracted to Legolas in any way, as elves counted such matters both on the physical and Fëa-based level. But Sanwë's grandmother had lived in Gondolin, and the memory of Maeglin was hard to forget, even if the tragic story of Tuor and Idril was often overshadowed in tales of the First Age by the tale of Beren and Luthien. *It did not end as tragically for the participants, but for those around them, it was certainly on the same scale. I suppose I should be thankful that Legolas did not feel as strongly towards Tauriel as the Accursed.*

"And as for your second objection, how little time I will have with him? HAH! I do not know why you think Harry is like any other human. He is an Istari, practically proving it from the first moment he and I met in the forest. You must have heard stories about it from the guards on his cell, at least. Naniel must have carried stories of the numerous times Thranduil stalked down to the cells in wrath. While she and I do not get along, I know Naniel was there in the hall on more than one such occasion. That was caused by my Harry using his magic within Thranduil's halls."

Seeing that her parents still looked disbelieving, Tauriel calmed down a bit, going on in a more controlled tone. "Even among his own folk back in his previous realm, wizards, such as they were called, could live for several centuries. That was before he came to this world and became as he is now. I will not tell you more on that score, that is Harry's tale, not mine, despite how much I love him!" That, and it would sound far too much like bragging frankly to Tauriel's mind. "But suffice to say that the two of us will have our entire lives together and that his life will be just as long as mine."

"Bah, while we heard of his powers, that matters not. He still feels human. He has no Fëa, as an elf should. That means that his thought processes will be human. Are you ready to have a child? Are you ready to be tied down as human womenfolk are?" Lauriel shot back. "Given how badly you pushed to become part of the Unseen Host, that seems most unusual. Who is to say your infatuation with him is but a passing fancy, something that will fade in a mere handful of decades."

"And again, you speak from ignorance!" Tauriel exclaimed, losing her calmness, her arms flung out to either side in a stark expression of exasperation.

This caused her mother to cut in quickly, overriding whatever Tauriel might have said. "And he seems to be a bad influence on you. Your emotions seem to have become more out of control, almost human."

Tauriel tried to control herself a bit more after that, but the discussion didn't get any better for the next while. Her parents had heard about Harry's magic, but Harry's presence was still human to their senses, and they refused to think otherwise. Even setting aside that thought, though, once they learned that the two of them had bonded over traveling, of all things, the conversation got worse. Tauriel had to admit to some fault in not telling them about her relationship with Harry from the first. She had hoped to put this off until the changes she had noticed Legolas had begun in their society had settled down.

Well, that was a lie, and she knew it. Tauriel had simply not wanted to have this very conversation. Even if her parents could tell Harry was an Istari like she or Legolas could, he still wasn't an elf and still wanted to explore the world. Both her mother and father had long hoped that becoming involved with someone – in their eyes, it didn't have to be Legolas, but there were dozens of unwed elven men in Taur-e Ndaedelos – that would keep her grounded in the city or, barring that, at least Mirkwood.

And for her part, well... Tauriel had wanted to have her parents at their eventual wedding, but the three of them had not been all that close ever since she joined the Unseen Host. That had caused a rift between them and one that had yet to truly heal, even if all of them were willing to ignore it. Tauriel simply saw the world in a different light than her parents, one they could not understand. It was as simple as that.

By the time that Harry and Legolas were meeting with Thorin, and explaining what happened, Tauriel had only begun to force her parents to listen to her at all. And it took even longer than that to get them to admit that while they did not like it and still felt it would end in tragedy, her word was final in this as it had been for her decision to join the Unseen Host.

"I have always wanted to walk my own path. I have never sought conformity with what Sylvan or Sindar society would wish of me. I wish to be my own person, to find my own path. Will you try to deny me that again?"

That demand brought both Tanwe and Lauriel up short, reminding them of the several decades in which Tauriel had refused to speak or even be in the same room with them after they had tried to forbid her from becoming a member of the Unseen Host. At the time, Legolas had yet to show any interest in Tauriel, and Tauriel had been fascinated by the greater world of Mirkwood out past the borders of the Elven kingdom and had wanted to go out to explore, to see new sites and to hunt down monsters. The latter part being why she wanted to join the Unseen Host rather than simply explore on her own.

Like among Man, among Elvish folk, women rarely fought and for much the same reason: men were on the main, tougher, stronger, and more physically inclined. Among Man there were exceptions, like Haleth in the First Age. That worthy had been so good at combat

and leadership that her people, the Haladin, the second tribe of Men to meet and befriend elvenkind, became known as the Halethrim. So good at combat was she that she led a siege of her people's sole city until aid from the elves could arrive and was so proud that she refused to subsume her tribe under the rule of Caranthir of the house of Fëanor, instead leading them to the Forest of Brethil, in the lands of Thingol, which they defended from orcs and other foul things as free men.

But among Elves? When it came to actual combat, even to the type of combat Unseen Host used, there were no such examples. Elven women wielded other powers, and occasionally on a scale their men could not match, like Luthien the Fair, with her voice, Galadriel magic and healing, or others for skill in craft. An elven woman only wanting to be a warrior was unheard of and still rankled both Tauriel's parents, who were entirely pacifistic and isolationist, believing that they could be safe simply by closing the borders of Taur-e Ndaedelos entirely.

"No. But neither will we give you our blessing for this union. We can... tell you are in love..." Tanwe sounded as if that admission was costing him teeth but still made it after exchanging several speaking glances with his wife. "And in that, as in so many things, we cannot stop you from making a mistake."

"We will not stand in your way but do not expect us to be welcoming of it," her mother finally stated, shaking her head. "We will retire for now and speak more of this tomorrow. I presume that we can stay here with you at the very least?"

Tauriel hit a grimace but nodded her head in answer to that question, knowing that in that, at least, she had little choice if she ever wished to have even a remote chance of mending the bridges between her parents and herself. "I will set out my bedroll, and the two of you can share the bed." She continued on, ignoring the renewed flinch from her parents at the blatant acknowledgment that she and Harry shared that one bed between them. "I will need to step out for a time, though to ask for some food to be delivered here so we can have a meal together and to make certain Harry knows that he will be staying with Thorin for now."

And to verbally tear Dis' eyes out! She added mentally, even as her parents began to speak again, pointing out how it sounded to them as if Harry was pressuring her into moving their relationship along far too quickly for elven propriety. *That is the least Dis owes me for springing this on me without warning!*

OOOOOO

Walking Legolas through a tour of Erebor's main cavern took Harry and Fili around an hour and a half, at which point they decided to return and see if Thorin was done with his sister yet. They found the King Under the Mountain brooding in his work-study with Balin once more,

dictating something to the old dwarf as he sipped slowly at a mug of mead with several papers in front of him as he sat at the sofa.

He looked up as Fili once more led Harry and Legolas inside and waved a hand towards the other doorway leading deeper into the royal apartments. "Tauriel just arrived about five minutes ago, and despite the positively thunderous expression she was wearing, I allowed her through to tear a strip off my sister. So long as it isn't physical, I care not."

Thorin sighed. "Dis was somewhat unrepentant at first when I laid out the reality of her mistake, but she began to understand the severity of her actions when I informed her of how much trouble her actions had made for you, Legolas. That was not my sister's intent, and that is the only thing that soothes my mind on this. That..." And here Thorin leaned forward, gesturing Legolas to sit across from him, tapping a parchment on the table between them. "And that your being here might let us conspire a bit on the future."

The smaller ornate table had been replaced by a much larger one, forcing the sofas apart further, almost like the family sitting room nearby but even more so. Harry was amused to note that the dwarves enjoyed shifting furniture around to match the need of the moment like that. It was something that no human would have been willing to do at the drop of a hat, but given how strong dwarves were, Harry supposed it made sense. *Although why Thorin didn't just invite us into the sitting room, I don't know. Too comfortable for serious discussions, maybe? Or perhaps it's the fact that Legolas is a king from another country, and that's sort of the center of Thorin's family area, and he wants to keep a clear difference between kingly duties and family time?*

Regardless, Harry sat down next to Legolas, peering down at the map, which was a very crude one of the lands around the Lonely Mountain. Small marks of squares picked out here and there, with dwarven lettering inside them, which Harry recognized as being similar to something he had seen on Woli's map. It indicated that that segment was mapped out in greater detail elsewhere.

"We've begun to map out the area around the Lonely Mountain again. Not much has changed in terms of geographic features, obviously. Even a dragon like Smaug cannot shift entire hills or empty rivers. But there was a forest at the foot of our mountain, one that stretched to the north and around the northern edge of the Lonely Mountain and then back down. That is gone now."

Legolas nodded slowly, commiserating both with the loss of so much forestry and with the deeper loss that it simply represented to the dwarves, audible in Thorin's tone despite the almost prosaic words he had used a moment ago. He looked at the map then over at some

sketches laid down beside it, blinking. "You mean to create permanent docks on both sides of the Long Lake?"

Currently, there was nothing on the Mirkwood side of Long Lake. You had to go up the river quite a way before finding the Watergate, where Harry and the dwarves had been ambushed by the orcs.

"I do not mean to. I mean to ask for your permission to do so. A boat rowing across Long Lake and then handing off a message to one of your folk can carry a message or supplies to you in Taur-e Ndaedelos far faster than even an Elven runner can reach us from the edge of Mirkwood, let alone vice versa," Thorin explained.

"True, the mouth of the river is far closer to Taur-e Ndaedelos than the edge of Mirkwood is. But given how isolationist my people wish to become despite my best efforts, I am uncertain how they would react to such a move from you," Legolas stated apologetically.

"Not even if the construction of such a port is part of our repayment to you for the foodstuffs you sent to us over the past years?" Thorin asked shrewdly. "You said that not getting any payment for that was one of the issues that was fueling your isolationists. Not even if it is clear that you all will control the docs after we are finished building it?"

"Perhaps, but you miss the point. Even the people who are not leery of you dwarves among my folk wish to isolate ourselves further. Even couched as payment for our food, as you say, it would tie us to you and to the wider world beyond. While I can see the reasoning behind it and the fact it is necessary, that does not mean my people will like it. We have just healed one wound that has weakened my position. I have no desire to replace it with another." Legolas's tone was hard as he replied.

"How about we throw in free wine for as long as the project is going on? Or offer our aid in renovating Thranduil's halls? Or the entirety of Taur-e Ndaedelos?" Fili asked.

Legolas smiled a bit at that, humming thoughtfully. "Perhaps. Not needing to deal directly with either elves or humans would be a good idea, as would bringing back the wine trade. I hadn't realized before taking over from my father that our folk have not been able to actually produce as much wine as we drink. Since the disruption of the loss of Lake Town and its vineyards, there has been something of a drought among my folk when it comes to wine."

He then shook his head, gesturing down to the plans. "But this is still far too grandiose a project. Something smaller, something more nondescript that can blend into nature, would be acceptable, at least in terms of design. A fast project, over and done swiftly, would appeal to my folk."

Legolas then looked over at Thorin questioningly. "Yet with Erebor and Dale self-sufficient now and stronger in terms of people and material to boot, I didn't see why you would wish to continue to trade with my folk to that degree. Why exactly do you want us to have such a dock? I understood your point about speed, but..." He paused, his face lightening up. "Ah, I see... I am not used to thinking of Mirkwood as simply being one step among many."

Thorin nodded firmly. "Exactly. This is but the first step. The other step will be in the hands of Beorn. If he and his folk can keep the road through the Misty Mountains clear of goblins and other predators, then we will be able to have somewhat steady lines of communication between us here in Erebor, you, and through you and Beorn, Elrond in Rivendell."

"And past them, the dwarves of the blue Mountains," Harry added, thinking about it now in the larger terms that Thorin seemed to be doing, not having seen it before.

"I won't mention that part to my folk when I attempt to convince them that my agreeing with this is not part of an expansionist or warlike policy on my part. Which is an entirely different conversation I'm not going to be having with anyone else at the moment," Legolas answered dryly, humming thoughtfully once more. "The resumption of the wine trade is one thing, but this trade needs to be sweetened a bit more I feel, so I can convince my people to go along with it."

Thorin grinned, and the two kings got down to haggling. Despite the fact that the elves didn't really have a set economy, they liked to haggle quite a bit, and Legolas knew what he wanted to get out of this trade. While the dwarves preferred to deal in gold, they, too, understood barter, and the two of them had a fascinating back-and-forth for a time.

Harry watched them go back and forth for a bit before Balin called Fili and Harry over to look at something else. This turned out to be the formal document denoting the contract between Harry and the dwarven Rune Scribes. The trio were still looking over it when Tauriel appeared, looking slightly more satisfied than angry as she had been when she first arrived but still annoyed.

She looked at Harry and then gestured with her head towards one of the corners, where Harry met her after a few moments, asking lightly, "Did you leave Dis alive, love? Going by the face Thorin said you were wearing when you first arrived, I feel as if I have to ask. Of course, if you do need to hide the body..."

Letting loose a small snicker at Harry's gallows humor, Tauriel leaned her head against his pec for a moment as Harry's arms wrapped around her waist. For a few moments, she simply laid her head there, delighting in the feel of Harry's arms around her before speaking. "Oh, Dis and I argued for quite a bit. Dis seemed to fully understand that she had overstepped

her bounds in how she had contacted my parents before I began. She wanted to argue the point that she should still have done so, considering where our relationship is and the fact you have no matriarch to do so for you. And I... can't argue with the fact that I probably would have put off introducing you to them for a few more decades. That still gave Dis no right to contact them in my stead of course, and she is now well aware that our growing friendship is on hold. She seemed genuinely repentant at the end, but whether or not that was because Dis understood my arguments or simply the volume of them, I do not know."

Harry said nothing, simply continuing to hold her there while the dwarves in the room studiously ignored looking their way. Legolas looked over at them, smiled for a brief moment and then went back to his discussion with Thorin. Soon, Tauriel spoke up again. "But these are going to stay here for the night at the very least. And I'm afraid it would be very antagonistic for the two of us to share a bed tonight, my love."

Harry snorted, nodding his head. "I had figured that out already. One of the first things I asked Fili when he started to show me and Legolas around as Thorin went to soften his sister up prior to your arrival was if I could be put up for the night here. He agreed. There're more than enough bedrooms to go around. They even have enough human-sized beds to give me one for the night."

"Thank you for being so understanding," Tauriel said, leaning up lightly to give him a kiss on the cheek, which was about as much physical affection as she would allow herself in company.

"And how did it go with your parents? I understand that one night is probably not enough to get them used to the idea that you are involved with a human, even one as unusual as myself," Harry said drolly, shaking his head. "But did you make some progress, at least?"

"They are unwilling to cut off all ties to me, so to say they are resigned to our relationship rather than happy about it would be quite accurate. I hope to turn this entire thing into a positive over the next few days, have the two of them interact more with you, show you their good qualities and vice versa. Unfortunately, we're going to be facing an uphill battle there."

Harry almost made a quip about it being an upstream battle, considering the discussion going on presently about the Forest River and how it would be interesting to see if a messenger sent upstream against the current would make up that time by heading down the River Anduin and arrive near Beorn and his folk faster than traveling overland from Erebor. It sounded as if the discussion had shifted, broadening further between the two kings, with Thorin now leaning back and tugging at his beard as Legolas tapped the map emphatically with a finger.

With a shake of his head, Harry banished any curiosity in that direction, instead concentrating on something far more important to him: Tauriel. "If you want me to put my best foot forward, just tell me how. Do you want me to perform small magics in front of them to show I am not a normal human whatever their senses are telling them? I can do that. Do you want me to keep you at arm's length as long as they are here so they don't understand, shall we say, how much we both delight in the human method of courtship occasionally?"

This time, Tauriel's laughter caused everyone in the room to look at them, but she waved them off, pulling away out of Harry's arms and looking up at him, her eyes twinkling. "That would be very much the worst thing you could do, I think. Yes, small magics, prove that you are indeed a wizard in front of them, and... perhaps, if you wish to, mention your friendship with the Lady."

That caused Harry to frown a bit, his face wrinkling in disdain. It felt wrong to use his relationship with Lady Galadriel in such a way. "I think I would sooner explain to your parents more about my magic and how I am sort of like a Maiar to Arien, frankly. Mentioning Lady Galadriel feels too much like bragging about a social connection to me, whereas Arien and my connection to her is just another aspect of my being an Istari."

"That is your choice, beloved, although I will admit that I have not made any mention of Lothlorien at all, let alone meeting Celeborn or the Lady myself for much the same reason," Tauriel answered, leaning back in briefly to give him a tight hug, before pulling back and away. "I just wish for the two of us to do all we may to help convince my parents that your presence in my life is not something they should object to, let alone change. They will never be happy about whatever we do. But for now, I think I will return to them. I will see you tomorrow morning."

Harry nodded, fighting back the urge to offer to walk her out of Erebor at the very least, knowing that if he did, parting with Tauriel would be even harder than it was now. The fact it was hard in the first place was both intensely gratifying and annoying. Since he had met her in Mirkwood after dropping Bilbo off in the Shire, the two of them had not spent a single night apart. Even when Harry was in a medically induced coma so that Galadriel could work on his brain, Tauriel had been beside him, although he had no way of knowing it at the time. Spending a night apart shouldn't have been difficult, but it was.

"I will be outside Erebor when the sun rises, Tauriel," Harry said finally. *I suppose I can take this as a negative to how elves court one another, how our Fëa is merging with one another. I was warned about it, but I didn't think I would still feel such a reaction years into our relationship.*

By the look on her face, Tauriel was feeling it too. She squeezed his hand, then visibly steeled herself, pulled her hand away from his, and turned towards the door. "And I will see you then as well, Harry."

Legolas seemed to take this as his own cue to leave, standing up and shaking hands with Thorin, saying that their talk would continue in the morning and that he was fine with meeting with Bard and Thorin in the afternoon tomorrow as well. Bard was due to arrive then for what had become a thrice monthly meeting with Thorin, as the two of them continued re-creating their reborn kingdoms and, perhaps even more importantly, making it clear where one kingdom began and the other ended. Rights and prerogatives, trade, and laws governing how humans and dwarves should comport themselves around one another were incredibly important and helped smooth over ruffled feathers, something that had been important hundreds of times over the past few years.

The elven king clapped a hand on Harry's shoulder, then followed Tauriel out, speaking to her in Elvish. Whatever he said earned Legolas a hard glare from the woman, which in turn caused him to laugh quietly before they were out of sight, opening the door that led into the throne room and Erebor proper beyond.

Harry watched them go, or rather, he watched his lady go, staring after her even as the door closed between them until Thorin came up to them, grasping his bicep in a powerful grip. "Come, Harry," he said with a chuckle, "it's only one night apart."

"I will remind you of that when you and Ani Redring are wed, Thorin Oakenshield. Don't think I won't," Harry answered back, but willingly let Thorin lead him back towards the table, where the two of them, Fili and Balin sat drinking for some time, talking about the future and future plans for Erebor.

Early the next day, as he had promised, Harry met Tauriel outside the massive entryway into the underground kingdom. The two of them held one another for a few seconds to one side of a stream of dwarven passersby garnering many looks before Harry, having had enough of the gawkers, walked with Tauriel back to the house the two of them had been living in before this, meeting her parents outside of it.

For the rest of that day, Harry tried to get along with her parents, telling them more about himself, his magic, and so forth. In turn, Harry learned that her mother was a weaver of some repute among the people of Taur-e Ndaedelos, while Tanwe was a sculptor, one who worked with both wood, clay, and rock.

They were chilly to him, but that seemed to fade very slightly when Harry reached down and plucked a blade of grass from the ground, transfiguring it into a rose, which he handed to his lady for a moment, quipping that, "Among humans, the giving of roses of various colors has

a certain language to them all their own. Unfortunately, I only know what the red one is supposed to mean: love and affection.”

Tauriel smiled at that, holding the rose up to her nose and sniffing appreciatively before saying, “Perhaps a different color would go better with my hair, Harry. This one can only be placed elsewhere, lest the red disappears in the greater red of my hair.” With that, she placed the rose on her belt, looping the stem in an intricate pattern around her belt to one side of the latch.

That wasn’t precisely what Harry had been going for, but he had to admit, a red rose on red hair didn’t look all that good, frankly. Still, he tried. When Harry began to produce roses of various other colors ranging from purple to blue to green to violet and beyond, Harry won his first snort of laughter from her parents, which he counted as a win.

This is how it went over the next five days. While Legolas was deep in talks with Thorin and Bard, creating what amounted to entirely new contracts and trade agreements with both (something that would first annoy then soothe his people’s views of the world), Harry attempted to ingratiate himself to his future in-laws. Unfortunately, that first initial burst of laughter proved to be the high watermark for that endeavor.

Despite all the magic he was doing, to the senses of the two elves, who themselves could not use more magic than any other Silvan elf could, Harry still felt like a mortal Man to their senses. And when he or Tauriel casually mentioned how many centuries they had to look forward to together, both of them simply looked disbelieving as if they simply could not understand that Harry was, while mortal of mind, immortal of body and soul.

Eventually, he came to the same conclusion that Tauriel had. Tanwe and Lauriel would accept him as part of Tauriel’s life, but neither would ever be truly happy about it until Harry proved beyond a shadow of a doubt that he did indeed have an elvish lifespan.

Thankfully, they couldn’t exactly prove the other aspect of why the most poignant of elven-human relationships had ended in ultimate tragedy. After all, how was anyone here in Middle Earth to know or learn that Harry’s soul would be allowed to enter the halls of Maehdros and eventually reincarnate rather than join Ilúvatar wherever he was beyond Arda? This was a point Harry did not deign to bring up, obviously.

“So does this mean they will not give us their blessing for what, another hundred years or so?” Harry joked with Tauriel on the morning of the third day after her parents and Legolas had arrived. “That is a very harsh prerequisite, but I suppose I can get behind the idea, considering how much time you and I will spend together going forward.”

Even to a wizard, thinking in terms of centuries like that was not something that came easily, but while traveling with Tauriel, Harry had on occasion used his newfound powers and training from Lady Galadriel to connect to trees or rocks, to feel their connection to the greater weaving of Middle Earth. While he would never be at home in thinking entirely in those terms, he could at least envision it and understand that he, like the ancient oaks in the deepest of forests, would have a lifetime more easily counted in centuries than years or even decades.

"I'm afraid so. I wish it could be otherwise, but even with your magic, neither of my parents can discern that you are anything more than a human," Tauriel said apologetically. "They lack the greater skills in magic and insight that Legolas has gained as king or the amount of time spent in your company that I have. And it has to be said, Harry, that even in comparison to other Istari, you come off as somewhat unusual. You wear your power lightly for the most part, whereas they always seem a bit more than they are even on the surface."

Sensing how regretful Tauriel was that their marriage would need to be put off for so long, Harry simply shrugged. Frankly, whether or not they married at all was a technicality to him. He very much doubted that their relationship, physical or otherwise, would be put on hold until they were, after all. *Considering the glances Tauriel has sent my way over the past few days, I'm not the only one missing cuddling at night, let alone other things.* "If I have to wait so long to wed you formally, I will. I would wait forever if that was what you wished."

Harry smiled then, turning to face Tauriel fully, leaving his forehead against hers as he went on, feeling suddenly romantic, overselling it a good bit, but putting so much passion in his gaze that the words, cheesy though they were in his opinion, still rang true. "And to prove worthy of you, I would pluck the jewels from the earth, craft gems with my art and mind to rival the stars in veneration of your beauty. I would travel with you on whatever adventure you wish, discover whatever you desire to see, and make certain that you can always find your way home so long as I can keep walking beside you."

Instantly, Tauriel's expression lost the regret and annoyance that had been there, and she positively melted a little inside, pushing her own forehead lightly against Harry's as she looked into his emerald gaze, her own positively crackling with emotion and feeling none of the slight embarrassment Harry had as he spoke. "I would never ask that you prove your worth in such a manner when you have already proven it so often. I prefer to hold you, to gaze into these eyes of yours, so bright that any gem would seem pale in comparison. And to know that you are willing to accompany me, that you are the reason why I was able to leave Taur-e Ndaedelos behind to become free to explore the world beyond Mirkwood? That is a gift beyond any piece of art, song or poem."

Instincts had both of them turning their heads slightly in different directions as Harry leaned down, kissing Tauriel hard on the lips. Both leaned into the kiss, their mouths opening, their tongues dueling against one another.

How long the kiss lasted, neither could tell because they only broke apart when a passing thrush landed nearby and trilled at them, a gleeful, almost naughty tone to the sound. Which, given the high intelligence of the thrushes that made their home on the Lonely Mountain, was not as big a stretch as most might have assumed. They routinely interacted with the dwarves, carrying messages everywhere around the Lonely Mountain.

Slowly, Harry pulled away from Tauriel, raising a finger to point at the bird, the tip of his finger gleaming with gathering magic.

The bird chittered once more, then flew off before Harry could do anything, and Tauriel giggled, leaning breathlessly against his chest for a moment. *“I love thee, Harry Potter!” And if my parents might believe that waiting a century will cool our ardor or make us follow the more staid, controlled, Elvish manner of courtship until Harry starts to show signs of age or what-have-you, well, what they don’t know won’t hurt them!*

“And I love thee, Tauriel of Mirkwood. For now, and for all time,” Harry replied, his own chest heaving a little.

This little moment did not go unnoticed despite how few people were living in the row of external houses that Dis had convinced Thorin to commission for humans and elves. While Tanwe and Lauriel were gone, both Legolas and Bard were there and had been coming out of the house they had been speaking in, the one that had been set aside for Bard by the dwarves, only to turn around and reenter, neither willing to interrupt the moment between the two lovers.

At first, Thorin had offered Bard a place within Erebor, but like many humans, the master archer-turned-king preferred not to be under several hundred million tons of rock, finding that disturbing even when surrounded by the finest finery and most well-crafted furniture. Then too, Bard had heard about Harry’s idea of ambassadors and had decided that setting up a formal house for one here for his own ambassador and another for dwarves and ambassador in Dale was a magnificent idea. In fact, he was in the process of vetting some of his own people in his head so that in the future, he and Thorin would not need to travel to meet one another, instead conversing entirely between their ambassadors, who would have to make the trek themselves instead.

Given the distance between Dale and Erebor, a day’s hard travel by horse or two on foot, that really wasn’t a major issue right now. But it might become so in the future for several reasons. The least of which being that, once their nations were fully established, making sure

that both dwarves and humans understood they were separate nations would be important. Currently, that particular demarcation line was quite blurred. But it would not always be so, and setting the foundation for it now was a good idea.

Bard and Legolas had been discussing the idea of restarting the trade of wine for elvish herbs, a completely separate agreement from the one that Legolas and Thorin had been speaking of. They had just finished and been in the process of leaving to resume discussions with Thorin when they had spotted the romantic moment going on, and not being heartless bastards (and knowing how much trouble the pair of lovers were currently having with Tauriel's parents), had decided not to interrupt.

That didn't mean that Legolas hadn't heard what was being said initially, and now Legolas frowned thoughtfully, tapping his chin as he began to plot a bit. *While it is indeed traditional that Elvish courtship takes a few centuries, it isn't exactly written in stone either. And I believe that I would rather like to see a wedding between those two in the near future, say within a decade at most, regardless of what those among my folk who have not met Harry might think of it. And I think I know just the way to... Somewhat force the issue without seeming to, and perhaps earn Sanwë and Lauriel's blessings too.*

Next to him, Bard stared at the thoughtful expression on Legolas's face, then out towards the two lovers, before chuckling, shaking his head, and mentally making a note to get on with his own search for a wife. *Heirs don't grow on trees, after all.*

Later that day, a message came to both Bard and Harry, as well as Tauriel, that the time for personal matters had subsided for a moment. The Stiffbeards had been sighted by a scouting party of humans, and Thorin wanted everything to be ready for when they arrived so we could put on a show.

OOOOOOO

"Hear ye, hear ye!! Harkin' one and all to this, a missive from the Steward of Gondor, Lord Turgon!" A town crier shouted in the middle of the square of the village in central Gondor. The village was much like any other, and the town crier assigned to it was much like any other, too. Both in volume and the words he was speaking as word went out from Minas Tirith that the Steward of Gondor was beginning several plans based on the discussion he'd had with his son and the wandering wise man, Incantus.

The need to deal with a foray from the corsairs, which had actually tried to take Cobas Haven, had halted Ecthelion's Great Circuit before it could begin. This had forced him and much of the forces of Minas Tirith to ride to the aid of the prince of Dol Amroth, lest the corsairs use that foothold to raid up the River Morthond into the most well-populated areas of Gondor. That

campaign had lasted the better part of a year, but had decimated a large portion of the Corsair's military force. Although, far too many of their actual ships had escaped for comfort.

Nonetheless, with that victory and the prince of Dol Amroth, Aglahad enthusiastically supporting him, Ecthelion's Great Circuit had begun. And with it, so too would the projects needed to secure Gondor from the storm to come. When that storm would come, no one could guess, but the sooner it started, the better done.

"Rumors have reached Minas Tirith of orcs and goblins amassing once again in the fell lands of Mordor. The corsairs of Umbar have recently been taught a lesson, but their perfidy knows no bounds, and they might yet try to come against the might of Gondor. Even the men of Harad are rattling their spears, eyeing South Gondor and more with covetous gaze."

Showing a mastery of public speaking that came with the job, the town crier paused, letting the common folk around him to grumble, growl and start to work themselves up a bit at the mention of those ancient enemies before going on. "Knowing this, Lord Turgon has decided we will not simply wait idly. Instead, Gondor will prepare! Lord Turgon and his son, goodman Ecthelion, call upon any good men or women who wish to serve in any capacity they deem fit!"

"The Steward calls for multiple National Projects, a great well-spring of effort from all corners of Gondor to see to the defense of our mighty nation from every direction. Caer Andros is to be rebuilt! Osgiliath is to be fortified as never before to defend against the dread lands of Mordor. A watch on the south, with towers to be spread along the river Harnen! They will serve as warnings should the dread Haradrim come from the south! A navy! New ships are to be designed and put down to take the fight to the Corsairs on the open ocean."

There was some shock as the three projects proposed sank into the listening peasant's minds. Even one such would have been ambitious. But all three? Such effort to strengthen the realm's defenses in total had not been made in hundreds of years. Indeed, a whelming like this had rarely been seen since the rule of the Stewards had begun upon the death of the last king, King Eärnur.

The island of Caer Andros was unknown to any here, but those who did know of it elsewhere in Gondor, those who lived further northeast, were astonished at the idea. Not because it didn't make sense in terms of geography but because of the difficulty of refortifying the island. Yes, there were the ruins of a fortress there, but the ruins were just that. Not a single wall remained standing, let alone a tower. There would need to be a lot of new cut stone to aid in rebuilding it. Worse, there was no place on the island or nearby for stone, which meant transporting the stone would be even more difficult than repairing the fortress in question.

And those with a strategic bent, many a lord or soldier, wondered why would you build a fortress there when Osgiliath, the ruined city of Minas Ithil, was already in a better position? It

seemed strange to many. Only those most knowledgeable of geography outside of Gondor knew that a powerful enough fortress on the island of Caer Andros could defend the great North-South Road, the fastest and easiest way for armies to travel between Rohan and Gondor. Most of that border was blocked by the Ered Nimrais, an almost impassable mountain range. Only by coming close to Mordor could you find any way for an army to travel.

Watch towers against the Haradrim also made sense. It was well known even to peasants that South Gondor was an ongoing area of conflict with the Haradrim and the Corsairs of Umbar. Between the rivers Poros and Harmen, there was just no natural defensive area, with wide plains, grassy gnolls and no forests to speak of. Placing a series of signal towers on the Harmen that could hold up an attacking army and send messengers north into Gondor proper just made to those who knew the geography of that area wonder where they would go.

The real shocker was the fleet. None here in this village knew that the Corsairs had been raiding for nearly five years now or the recent near-disaster that Ecthelion had turned into a great victory. But even those who did know of that wondered, for there was a reason why Gondor did not have a national navy. After all, the Corsairs of Umbar were the product of the last national fleet, a fact that was something of a national shame to even peasants.

“Room and board will be paid by the Steward, and all material for the building projects will be paid for by Minas Tirith. Training, if you feel called to war, will be provided by the local lords. But men who know of stone, men or women who want a new life but do not wish to join the Army of Gondor, may travel to Minas Tirith and present themselves and their skills to the Steward’s household! And even better, all debts will be forgiven if the service you give the nation is proven worthy!”

While this town crier wasn’t the most eloquent, he got the gist across at least, and more than a dozen men came up to him to ask questions, accompanied by four women. It would’ve been five if not for another woman pulling her away and hissing in her ear, shaking the younger girl angrily and pushing her back towards one of the houses nearby.

Similar events were happening all across Gondor. From the lands of Anfalas to the mouth of the Anduin, men and women alike learned of this as the news spread, both men of good heart and those agents of the dread enemy. But they could not stop word spreading, not when it was given voice by the Steward or his son, who was well beloved by the people of Gondor even before his most recent victory.

Soon, people would begin to gather, and the projects would start. Now was the time, before the enemy could become strong, to gather, to prepare. Although all of these works would take decades, and there would surely be both enemies within who would wish to stop the project for their own reasons and enemies without who would try to take advantage of the

shift in Gondor's attention. Indeed, it was doubtful Turgon would live to see even the fleet rebuilt. But, Ecthelion was just as determined to see the work done.

When Mordor rose once more, and the Dread Enemy tried to reach his hand out towards Gondor, Ecthelion wanted to make certain that he would pull back a stump.

OOOOOOO

Gurni Blackblade was a late-middle-aged dwarf who had been assigned to the Bloodhammers given the duty of protecting a group of the Stiffbeard House's princesses and the rest of a large trade convoy to meet and possibly start formal engagement talks with the young king of Erebor. He was a veteran of several small wars with the Haradrim and a master of organizing long marches, although this one had been far, far longer than any he had done previously.

Yet now, even as they were allowed into Erebor and even assigned a set of caverns befitting their numbers and status as diplomatic envoys, Gurni was uneasy. Not as unsettled as he had been even when traveling through the wild lands between Stiffbeard land and Erebor, let alone when they were spotted by a human patrol days back, but still uneasy.

Frowning, he began to tap at the golden rings in his carefully braided beard for a moment. The noise of it was a secret language known only to the Stiffbeards, directing a warning to his fellows as well as to the womenfolk unloading from the carriage nearby. "Old instincts warn of danger here. I am uneasy about this formal meeting with the king we have been invited to."

He was instantly overruled by the leader of the caravan, ancient Bular, who tapped a sharp negative on his own ringlets. Advisor to King Shar Flintgaze, currently the strongest ruler among the Stiffbeards, Bular, older than Gurni by nearly eight decades, had been chosen for this mission very carefully and understood what was at stake, as well as what they represented. The sight of Erebor, less than three years after its being freed of the Dragon Smaug, was astonishing, but even so, even with the power of the Iron Hills behind the reformation here, Erebor and its young king would undoubtedly need more help.

And the Stiffbeards could not only give that help but benefit tremendously from trade with Erebor. The Stiffbeards' last iron ore mine had been run dry twelve years ago now, and they had nearly no reserves left anywhere in their lands. Two of their holds had fallen in that time, and the Haradrim were close to driving a wedge between the Stiffbeards and their only nearby allies, the various holds of the Ironfist House, the only remaining source of iron they had. Without iron, there would be no weapons of any kind, let alone the various mechanical gadgets they had begun to use to offset the Haradrim's numbers advantage. Worse, the Stiffbeards last fully trained Rune Scribes had died nearly two hundred years ago without being

able to pass on more than rudimentary knowledge of runes. While the Bloodhammers' weapons were all made in an older time and would last for centuries more, the regular military units of the Stiffbeards were not nearly as well armed.

Yet even so, no dwarf, no matter how old, could be said to be without a certain amount of ego. Bular was no exception. "Oakenshield wishes to bluster, to show off more of what has been reclaimed in such a small time while also welcoming us, giving us a chance to show off in turn. Good. Let us do so and remind him that he is but a young king, the foundations of his kingdom built on the ruined remains of another. I mean to make as much of our time here as possible."

"What of the princesses?" There were currently five princesses with them, one matriarch, an old widower there to handle the business of the courtship for the other four, who varied wildly in ages. "It is not proper for them to be shown to so many strangers, even dwarves. And we saw humans among these Longbeards!" Gurni hissed the last few words as if they were a curse.

Which, coming from a Stiffbeard, they were. Humans were not to be trusted. They had proven that many, many times over the ages. *While a part of me still regrets young Torn's words to that wizard given his and the elf woman's actions against the trolls, he only said the truth. No human can truly be trusted, and kindness to such is simply a way of committing slow suicide.*

"True. I will speak with matriarch Princess Ulin. She will decide."

Quickly, Bular was back. Ulin had agreed that the princesses should not show their faces, but they had long since decided on ways to get about that idea. Heavy cloth veils had been prepared for them all, able to hide their features from beard up to just below their eyes for anyone. Gurni still worried about what they were walking into, but with that, and with their clothing showing not a hint of femininity, his objections faded quickly.

Within two hours, the group was ready. The dams were all dressed in severe, loose-fitting black garb, marked by bronze and copper bangles over their forearms, golden necklaces, and crowns on each of the young princesses. Matriarch Princess Ulin's crown was the only one that had jewels in it, rubies the size of a finger inset in a simple row around the brow. All their jewelry gleamed, and the bracelets were each marked out in fine filigree, with more than one bracelet among the dams being marked further out by a watch, the clock faces within ticking over behind small glass containers.

The Bloodhammers were also well-turned out. Their scale armor gleamed in the light instead of being darkened as normal, and each ring in their beards had also been shined. Every third Bloodhammer carried an uncocked crossbow, the bolt missing and no quiver on them.

Instead of being simple weapons, those crossbows were another sign of the mechanisms that the Stiffbeards had developed, each of them having several cogs visible along their length.

Moving from the set of caverns that they had been given through the main cavern of Erebor in formation around the princesses and the rest of the merchants, the Stiffbeards drew a lot of looks from the other dwarves and the few humans around them. Yet the crowds parted way for the Bloodhammers easily enough as they made their way towards the entrance into the royal castle. There, they found themselves entering into the throne room, their entrance announced by dwarven bugles.

But as much of an entrance as they made at the head of the column, Gurni and Bular both flinched as they glanced surreptitiously around. Here in the throne room, they did not see just the local royalty or numerous other delegates from other Houses or the affected wealth of a kingdom that had more gold than true worth. Instead, they saw the panoply of a dwarven kingdom in full might.

Thorin had been telling the truth that dwarves had their own pomp and ceremony, and it was on full display now. And it began on the ground. Something that had severely surprised even Harry, who was present now for this ceremony.

In the center of the throne room lay a carpet of immense beauty, yet like many a tapestry, this carpet, too, told a tale. For on it, the body of Smaug was shown so that whenever a dwarf strode on it, they stepped over the body of the dragon. Beside the tail and towards the entryway was the burning city of Dale, with a representation of the mountain behind it also burning, a long line of flame marked out on the rug between the two, before the mountain slowly transformed into the body of the dragon, which took up the majority of the carpet going forward from that position.

Near where Smaug's head ended with a single tongue of fire spat out from the dragon's mouth, there were hundreds of dwarven 'Higlaz'. The term was used to describe the marker of a family, clan, or Master. And they were all here. Every single mark from a dead family or wiped-out clan, every Master's Mark of a dwarf who would never craft again that the Remembrancers had records of who had died to Smaug either in his first initial sacking of the mountain realm or after trying to hide away, trying to survive and escape only to be slaughtered or die of starvation. So was the crown of the King of Dale, as well as the known weapons and heraldry of many of his officers who had also died trying to defend their country from Smaug's predations.

To all who saw this carpet, it was a stark contrast between remembering the past and shouting the Company's victory against Smaug.

The rug had been commissioned by Balin barely a few weeks after Harry had left with Bilbo and had taken every master and apprentice rug maker among the humans and dwarves

more than a year to create, even after they had agreed with the overall design. It was so amazing and so magnificent that it was rarely brought out, simply making all of the other banners and tapestries within the King's Hall look poor and unimportant in comparison. This was why there were only a few such, showing the family and clan marks of the dwarves of the Company.

But it wasn't just the rug that had grabbed the attention of the Stiffbeards. Most of the Stiffbeards, save for one of the princesses and several of the merchants, were able to move past their shock at the rug, striding forward over it easily towards the dais holding the king and the royal family.

Today, that included Kili and Dwalin in addition to Balin, Dis and Fili. Gloin could also have been there, but he had just left the day before with a group of humans to Dale for some reason that Harry hadn't been told about. And Gimli, the young dwarf Harry and Tauriel had met leading a scout patrol, had yet to arrive back in Erebor, though his group had been spotted that morning.

Fili stood to one side of Thorin, the place denoting his position of heir-presumptive, while Dis sat on the throne reserved for the Queen as was her right as matriarch for the moment. Although she would have to give up that position when Thorin wed. Kili stood to her left, marking him as her son, with Balin to her right, Dwalin standing beside him. All of them wore their finest, with Dwalin once more showing off the dark blue coat and finally wrought chain mail of the royal guard, with the others equally well dressed, including a flowing dress in green, brown and copper for Dis, matching the small circlet she wore on her head. On Thorin's chest was the Arkenstone, glowing almost as bright as the sun outside, lighting the room with more natural-seeming light than the dwarven lights situated on either wall around the throne room.

And with them in turn, in a show of friendship that had rarely been given out to other dwarves, let alone a human, Harry stood. He wore a green cloak over a black shirt and pants. At his shoulder, he wore a leaf of Lothlorien, but that was the only sign of ostentation he allowed himself.

In the crowd, Tauriel was similarly garbed. A white blouse marked with copper thread at the neckline and hem met a light blue skirt below. Her hair fell down her back in a wild wave. Although it covered everything just as a dress would among elven and dwarvenkind, it still showed off her form to the point that Harry had been rendered speechless when he saw her wearing it earlier.

Any human's presence on the royal dais would've been shocking enough to the Stiffbeard. But to see Harry there, the human that they had insulted so badly weeks past was more than astonishing to Gurni and Bular.

But while Gurni was lost in shock, Bular understood something else. He wasn't just concentrating on the king or even the presence of that glowing stone, which could only be the fabled Arkenstone, an item of power that even the Stiffbeards had heard of before. No, he was surveying the crowd as surreptitiously as possible. And as he did, he realized that while undoubtedly still young in terms of a nation, Erebor had already begun to gather a tremendous amount of power and wealth to itself. Real wealth, too, not simply the gathered gold and wealth that others might have meant when they said that word.

Here on display were weapons, the weapons of the famed forges of Erebor, the first such weapons made since the fall of Erebor, held in the hands of dwarves throughout the small crowd, and not just in the hands of Longbeards either. A few were already present in the Stonefoot and Blacklock House delegations who were also there.

Bular could tell from a mere glance that these weapons were of better quality and make than any the Stiffbeards could create in this age, marked with the sheen of the proper mix of ores and even, dare he think it, more than merely physical strength. Armor there was also on display. Master-crafted, the sign of the Smith that had made them was worked into the links of the chain mail over the leftmost shoulder or on the side of the helmet, barely visible but still there for eyes that knew what to look for. The armor was worn either by warriors or by the smiths themselves. Bular could not tell which.

And then there was the rest of the crowd. Cloth makers, resplendent in the finest of their own clothing, the colors of which looked garish to his eyes but were undoubtedly rich. Jewelers proudly displaying their wares. Humble farmers wearing their best, staring around avidly but without fear. Smiths of all sorts, hunters, warriors. The breadth of Erebor's citizenry were here, alongside Glassmakers from the Stiffbeards, furs and leather from Stonefoots, spread throughout the crowd just as much as the weapons of the Longbeards had spread to the delegates in turn. And all of it showed not only wealth but craftsmanship, which, to dwarves, was even more important.

To a human, the display, beyond the magnificent rug and the Arkenstone anyway, might well have seemed of poor quality, or rather quantity. There were barely sixty dwarves throughout the hall before the Stiffbeards entered. But quality was what the dwarves strove for here.

A human king's court would have had a gathering of a few hundred humans, all of them showing the nation's wealth in their jewelry and clothing. All of them were there to curry favor

or use the wealth they had gained from family. Showing off their wealth and connection to the king would have been the main point.

But among the dwarves, this far smaller gathering was much more telling because each person there had brought their finest. And among dwarves, their finest meant far more than it would among humans, for most here had made what they wore or earned it in some fashion as Dwalin had. They were showing off their skill of hand and eye rather than simple wealth.

That wasn't even mentioning the fact that there were two other non-dwarves in attendance, something Bular only became aware of as the Blood Hammers started to peel away to either side, letting him and the other civilians forward as the Bloodhammers, still in perfect lockstep, knelt for a brief second before standing at attention.

One tall human man stood among the crowd of dwarves looking out of place to Bular but also as if he belonged there. On his brow was a crown, a simple thing to dwarven eyes but still telling. At his side was a longbow of surpassing beauty. His eyes were keen as he examined the stiff beards in turn, catching Bular's gaze in his own, assessing calmly as he stood near the dais to the throne.

On the opposite side of the hall from the tall human stood an equally well-built elf, garbed in green from shoulder to toe, wearing a silver circlet on his own brow, the mark of a king among his own folk as it was among all others. To see two such here, a human and elf allied with a dwarven king, and welcome within his hall to boot, was a message all on its own. It did not sit well with Bular or any of the Stiffbeards who became aware of it, although they could not do anything about it.

Seeing all this, Bular understood that the young king was making a point. *Look upon us. Erebor is reborn, and we have already made allies. I understand that message all too well. We are last, and we are not going to be very welcome thanks to how we interacted with the human and his Elven lover before. We may even be forced to give out an apology, and we must also acknowledge that in allying with Erebor, we may have to ally with the elves and humans nearby.*

For a second, Bular fought with himself, but in the end, Bular's loyalty to his king and greater House won out over pride. *Very well. We can deal with that, I suppose, if, in so doing, we link ourselves to this growing power here in Erebor. We need their metal, we need their armor, and we might need their armies in the future. If I have to bend my neck and apologize or even, even prostrate myself in some fashion, I will do so. It won't be pleasant, but I am a diplomat and an advisor to a king. I am used to unpleasantness.*

With that, as Thorin gave them a formal welcome, Bular moved forward with matriarch Princess Ulin moving to stand beside him as they moved forward from the rest of the party, bowing from the waist towards the young king.

OOOOOOO

“Well, my friend, are you satisfied?” Thorin said, kicking back in the family sitting room with Dis next to him. Kili and Dwalin lounged out in chairs nearby with the older dwarf snorting at something Kili had said. Balin and Fili were not there, having gone out to work the crowd so to speak. They wanted to know what the general feeling towards the Stiffbeards was now that they had arrived, as well as to get a feel of whether or not any of the other house representatives were going to make deals with them in turn now that the opportunity presented itself. It was doubtful, but it was possible.

The rest of the formal welcoming ceremony and the meal afterward had gone off without a hitch in Thorin’s opinion. Many a small deal had been made, and none of the other delegates had been slighted in the least by the show, realizing almost to a dwarf that show had an edge to it. If anything, the Blacklocks had approved of it mightily, and... if Thorin had seen Ani smiling at him, well, that was no one’s business but his.

“I am. The Stiffbeard commander looked as if he was eating a still-living crow when he was forced to apologize so publicly, although Bular, the one in charge of the whole caravan, seemed to take it with a bit more self-control. I couldn’t get any kind of read on how the Princess matriarch was dealing with it but I was satisfied enough on that score. So long as it is agreed that nothing touched by my rune work will be traded with them for a good while. Say seven or eight years?” Harry shook his head. “And what was that word you used when you introduced me? You switched to Khuzdul then.”

“Round it up to a decade that makes it a nice neat number. As for the Stiffbeard Princess matriarch, Ulin was not happy. I could tell that much from her body language and our words during the meal. Her eyes also told the story, but it is not one of outright hatred so much as wariness towards you and to Bard. Tauriel, I think, interested her and is perhaps the first female of any other race she has ever seen,” Dis said, glancing towards Tauriel. The elf woman sat leaning into Harry’s side.

Dis still remembered their argument nearly a week ago all too well, but she shook it off. There were more important matters to think of now instead of strained friendships, and she quickly turned her eyes away from the ruby-haired elf. “But she was intensely put off by the fact that a human was named a Duzak-Kal, and that a human king was in attendance. That might have been a little too far in Ulin’s mind and will make any future interactions with her more difficult. Still, I will handle that score.”

“There it is again. What does that mean?” Harry asked.

“It is a deeper term for friend,” Thorin said slowly. “It means something like ‘shield brother you have trained with for decades and would trust to protect your family in your stead’.

It is not a term any dwarf would use lightly, but it makes my opinion of you even plainer than having you on the dais with us.”

Harry stood just a little straighter in the chair then, staring back at Thorin, but when he spoke, he tried to make a joke of it. “Ah, so an obvious thing, then. As if you would even have to ask me to do something like that.”

Thorin snorted, and the two of them clinked glasses.

“Humor as a shield to not talk about emotions. That is still a bad habit of yours, my Harry,” Tuariel said, poking him lightly in the side before looking around at the dwarves. “Just as pride is in the Stiffbeards. They have pride, yes, but what if they face troubles they cannot deal with? Pride is brittle and can often crack unexpectedly. I think you need to be aware of that going forward, Thorin.”

Thorin paused at that, thinking, then slowly nodded. “I will tell Balin that we will gouge them on trade deals or any other lesser contracts. The Stiffbeards might be far too stiff and will likely never accept Erebor’s close relations with Dale. But trying our best to keep them strong is a good idea long term.”

With that, Thorin decided to change the subject. “And speaking of something strong, how long do you think it will take for the poison within Smaug’s body to fade away? That mound over his corpse is still barren, but surely it can’t take much longer. I have leather workers and weapon smiths both salivating at the idea of getting at the scales and bones of Smaug, and I personally quite like the idea of wearing dragon hide gloves myself...”

OOOOOOO

Fur and blood flew as several wargs and dogs fought in a large pit, howling, biting, clawing at one another as if their lives depended on it. It did, of course. They all had been starved and goaded into a frenzy before this, the last battle of the surviving studs of two years' worth of winnowing through the various warg and dog breeds that could be raised in Mordor or stolen and transported to Barad-dûr.

The onlooking orcs and the unseen watched as first one of the wolves, then another began to pull back and away from the fight, trying to escape, trying to pair up. But the dogs, raised from when they were puppies among humans and bought or stolen away to be trained here in Mordor, did not. They lacked the self-preservation instincts of wolves, the instinctual knowledge that as predators, their lives hung on a knife thread all the time. They had to be at peak condition in order to hunt, in order to survive in the wild. The dogs did not know such, and fought all the harder for it. Moreover, the wargs, even the best trained and bred among them, did not have the size or strength that some of the dog breeds from among the Easterlings did.

Sauron's presence was there as well, his physical form a bare shadow in the darkness of the pens, enveloping all. That presence spurred the dogs and wargs on and pressed down on all the orcs like a weight on their minds. Many of them had begun to bleed from their eyes, yet they remained upright, knowing that succumbing to the pain growing in their minds would cause their fellows to turn on them in hopes of winning favor from the Master.

Sauron's attention was on the dogs, not the orcs. He had plans for them, and this result was somewhat surprising. ***TO THINK THAT MAN'S DOG BREEDING HAS COME SO FAR AS TO CREATE A DOZEN DIFFERENT TYPES. THE MAIN AROUND THAT ONE DOG'S NECK, THE FACT THAT IT PROTECTS IT SO WELL AGAINST THE NATURAL TENDENCY OF ALL DOGS TO GO TO FOR THE THROAT IS INTERESTING, AS IS ITS RAW STRENGTH. ITS VICIOUSNESS ISN'T AS MUCH AS THE OTHERS, BUT TO THINK THAT EVEN ORC-RAISED WARGS WOULD LOSE IN THAT AREA TO A DOG.***

Soon, the battle began to die down, the last of the wargs dead. Now, the final four dogs turned on one another, lost in a battle blood-mad frenzy. When but three remained, the handlers barked out orders to one another. Swiftly, nets were thrown, the dogs were pulled away from one another, and the spirit of Sauron coalesced. Instantly, the dogs whimpered, lying flat, ignoring their wounds and showing their bellies, completely paralyzed and terrified.

Similarly, the orcs trembled, their bodies tense with both fear and a dark pleasure in the pain their master's presence brought them. When Sauron spoke, his voice was like a hammer into the minds of all the orcs, bringing more fear and yet also pleasure. This was a sign of the twisted creations of Morgoth, who parroted life but had no souls of their own. The pain they caused others filled up that empty place within them.

“GOOD. BREED SOME OF YOUR WARGS WITH THE MUSCULAR ONE WITH THE MOST VICIOUS INSTINCTS. THAT WILL DO AS A TEMPLATE FOR YOUR NEW MOUNTS. SET ASIDE THE OTHER ONE, THE ONE WITH THE MANE OF HAIR AROUND ITS NECK. BREED IT WITH ONE OF THE FEMALES OF THE THIRD TYPE. BRING ME ALL OF THE CHILDREN OF THAT LITTER THE MOMENT THEY ARE WHELPED.”

Sauron would work his magic on them, taking from his time as a lieutenant of his dread god, Morgoth. In the wars against the elves and the men of Númenor in the Second Age, Sauron had moved away from his previous use of transmuted beasts and animals. But he felt it was time to once more dig into that bag of tricks. The goblins and trolls are magnificent blunt objects. With them, Sauron would once more create an army fit to roll across the west, crushing the remnants of Númenor that resided in Gondor, the men of Hador who had not moved to that island whose get yet lived in Rohan, and beyond. But to help that, to make certain that his enemies not only feared the coming of his armies but feared the darkness and the howls of the

wolves, he needed more weapons. He needed assassins, creatures of the night, intelligent, biddable, and able to sneak in where even goblins would never be able to go.

And for the best of that breed, Sauron had one very specific target in mind. ***IT WILL TAKE ME A DECADE OR MORE, BUT SO BE IT. IF I CANNOT BRING THE SHARA'BURZUM'KAR (MAN BORN OF DARKNESS) TO SERVE ME OR TO BREAK HIM TO MY WILL, THEN I WILL SET A WATCH. AND WHEN HE DOES APPEAR AGAIN, MY HUNTERS WILL BE SET ON THE TRAIL. LET US SEE THEN WHAT HE CAN DO AGAINST MY WEREWOLVES.***

That was but one plan, one piece on the board that Sauron was creating for the moment. He had others, and a second later, all of the orcs in the fighting pens beneath Barad-dûr briefed sighs of mixed relief and sadness as the presence of their master faded, taking the pressure on their minds with it.

Soon, Sauron's spirit was back where his spirit habitually resided. After the battle with the White Council and his confrontation with Lady Galadriel, and then the harrowing of his spirit to the very borders of Mordor by his erstwhile ally Curumo, it had taken Sauron a bit longer than two years to gather energy to take a single shape once more. Now, when his presence was concentrated in one place, that form took on the image of a great shadow, larger and stronger than any troll but as ephemeral as a will of the wisp would be to the touch. Were any being brave enough to try to touch him in this form, they would have been able to pass through.

Sauron knew not to nor cared what would have happened to anyone stupid enough to try to do that, but knew that he would not feel it. He had not felt anything physical, the touch of the stone underneath his feet, the wind in his hair, the taste of food, for centuries. Not since he had lost his physical form in the destruction of Númenor. A victory that might have been for him, but Eru Ilúvatar's overwhelming response had been well beyond his calculations, and he had paid for it tremendously.

Never again would Sauron ever be able to take a physical body. Even in the war that the elves and humans called the war of the last alliance, his spirit as a Maiar had been contained within his armor, given more strength on the material plane thanks to the One Ring.

But the lack of a physical body did nothing to restrain the power of a Maiar, which Sauron still was, regardless of what his former fellows might think.

In front of Sauron, his chief lieutenants, the Nazghul, all bowed as one, forming a triangle in front of him, with the witch king of Angmar at their head. Bearers of the nine Rings of Power made for mortal men, each of these human kings, Easterlings, Men of Númenor and others, could only serve him, their wills long since subsumed by his darkness. It had taken those who had been with him in Dol Guldur time to reform after the battle there, but now all of them were once more able to take nearly physical forms.

“WITCH KING, HAS THERE BEEN ANY NEWS OF THE SHARA'BURZUM'KAR FROM OUR SPIES?” Although able to spread his spirit throughout Mordor for a given value, Sauron still lacked the strength to reach beyond it and would for decades yet.

“No, Master. There was the battle in the Misty Mountains two years ago, but that is aught that we have heard. I fear he has disappeared into the elven lands,” the Witch King, whose name had long since been lost to history, answered, fear of having failed in his ghostly voice, but he was more afraid of not having told his Master the truth.

“... YES, THAT IS LOGICAL. VERY WELL. HE WILL APPEAR EVENTUALLY, AND HUNTING HIS SCENT WILL BE GIVEN TO LESSER SERVANTS FOR NOW. YOUR TALENTS ARE NEEDED ELSEWHERE. I HAVE USED UP VALUABLE WILLPOWER TO REFORM YOU AND THE REST OF MY NAZGHÛL INTO YOUR NEARLY PHYSICAL BODIES FOR A REASON. THE EASTERLINGS ARE OUR CREATURES AND HAVE LONG BEEN SO. BUT THE MEN OF HARAD HAVE HAD MANY CENTURIES WITHOUT THE TOUCH OF MY GUIDING HAND, AND ONLY A FEW OF THEIR HOUSES REMAIN TRUE TO THEIR REAL MASTER. YOU WILL REINTRODUCE MY HAND TO THEM. YOU AND ONE OF YOUR FELLOW NAZGHÛL MAY TAKE YOUR TIME IN THIS TASK. IT WILL STILL TAKE MANY DECADES FOR THE ARMIES OF MORDOR TO BE REBUILT ENOUGH TO TAKE THE OFFENSIVE.”

The witch king of Angmar bowed his crowned head almost to the floor both in response and a show of submission to their Master. “It will be done.”

Sauron turned to one of the other corporeal Nazghul, his second lieutenant among them. **“KHAMÛL, YOU WILL RETURN TO YOUR PEOPLE. LONG HAVE THEY WARRED ON THE POWERS LOOKING TO THE LIGHT IN THE WEST. YOU WILL HARNESS THAT HATRED. YOUR MAIN TASK WILL BE TO BREAK THE HOUSES OF THE DWARVES. LIKE THE WITCH KING, YOU WILL HAVE TIME TO DO THIS, BUT I WANT THE DWARVES BROKEN BEFORE THE GREAT WAR I MEAN TO LAUNCH AGAINST GONDOR IS READY. THE ELVES HAVE NO STRENGTH LEFT TO CHALLENGE US.”** *THE REPORTS THE WITCH KING PASSED ON ABOUT THE BATTLE OF THE LONELY MOUNTAIN AT LEAST TAUGHT ME THAT.* **“ROHAN AND GONDOR ALONE AMONG THE HUMAN REALMS WILL STAND AGAINST US, AND I MEAN FOR MAN TO STAND ALONE IN THIS WAR.”**

Like the witch king before him, Khamûl, who could barely remember his name when it did not come from his lord’s lips, bowed his head in supplication. “They will learn once more to obey you, Master. I swear it.”

That left only one more command to give, perhaps the most important one. **“ADÛNAKHÛR, YOU WILL TRAVEL TO MORANNON WITH THE REST OF THE NAZGHÛL. THERE, YOU WILL TAKE OVER AND ENLARGE OUR SPY NETWORK THROUGHOUT THE REALMS OF MAN AND DWARF THAT THE WITCH KING HAS BUILT. YOU WILL SEND OUT GOBLINS AND**

SCOUR AS MUCH OF THE RIVER ANDUIN AS POSSIBLE WITHOUT DRAWING ATTENTION TO YOURSELF FROM THE WHITE COUNCIL, NOT EVEN CURUMO. SEARCH FOR THE ONE RING. I STILL EXIST, THEREFORE IT STILL EXISTS, AND CURSED ULMO WOULD UNDOUBTEDLY HAVE FOUND A WAY TO DESTROY IT IN HIS DEPTHS BY THIS POINT IF IT HAD BEEN TRANSPORTED OUT TO THE SEAS. I WILL BE BENDING MY OWN THOUGHTS IN THAT DIRECTION OCCASIONALLY, ATTEMPTING TO DISCERN ITS LOCATION. BUT THIS, THIS MOST IMPORTANT OF TASKS, WILL BE LAID ON YOUR AND THE REST OF MY NAZGHUL'S FEET. BEND THE WILLS OF MEN, SIFT THROUGH RUMORS AND TALES FROM THEM, ORCS, GOBLINS, EVEN DWARVES IF POSSIBLE."

Dwarves had proven almost completely immune to any kind of corruption from even the seven Rings of Power given to them. Yet they were greedy things, and some among them could be turned by the glint of gold. **"IF MY RING HAS BEEN FOUND, SOMEONE WILL KNOW OF IT!"**

The Sauron's presence shifted away, beginning to spread, covering the whole of Mordor with his presence, and the remaining wraiths dissipated, returning to their own orders. And above Mordor, the smoke and plume of forges began to grow.

OOOOOOO

Legolas was still there a week after his initial arrival, hip-deep in talks with Bard, Harry and Thorin. They had put aside the treaties and contracts between them now, with all of them, if not happy, then at least satisfied with what they had done. Now, Legolas was spending a lot of time talking to Master Cartographer Kiflo and Harry. He, Thorin, and Bard were all discussing a massive mapping project.

Not for Mirkwood, Legolas well knew that his folk would not see any such move as a good idea, although he would still push to create their own maps incorporating the ideas Harry had introduced. Rather he wanted the areas outside the edge of the Greenwood mapped out. In particular, Legolas was interested in completely mapping out the River Anduin and the area immediately around it between it and the edge of Mirkwood and beyond up towards the feet of the Misty Mountains. He well understood that should trouble come his realm's way, that was the first direction it would come from, with the other being up out of the Brown Lands to the south.

Past them lay the Emyrn Muil, the marshes that few could move through better than goblins and orcs. And beyond that, Mordor proper in the form of Morannon, the Black Gate.

But from that area at least Legolas would have far more warning. For one thing, it would take any army months, or even any band of goblins or wolf riders weeks, to make that journey. Moreover, Legolas knew from the Noldor trainers Celeborn sent to Mirkwood that Lothlorien would be watching the Brown Lands. And now, Dol Guldur could no longer serve as a forward

base. Thus, the Misty Mountains would become the primary avenue of attack on Legolas's kingdom.

In turn, Bard was absolutely **enamored** by the ideas that Harry had introduced into the mapmaking when talking to the dwarf Wuli while traveling with Gimli's patrol. He and Thorin had bargained heavily on the mapmaker's services. Knowledge of the terrain was a major force advantage in times of war, something Harry well understood, although he had not seen all of the civilian applications, particularly when it came to two budding and still growing realms like Dale and Erebor.

Meanwhile, with the prospective in-laws gone, Harry and Tauriel resumed living in the same house they had been assigned before. Their nighttime activities resumed, making both far happier than they had been in the preceding days, even though they had yet to do more than make out intensely while shirtless. Both knew it was only a matter of time, but at present, just sleeping beside one another was more than enough for both.

Beyond that, the pair turned their time waiting for their house, work on which had kind of paused for the moment with all the work on Balin and Nori's shoulders, to other things. Tauriel spent her day exploring further and further away from Erebor, working with and making an impression on dwarf and human alike.

Meanwhile, every morning he found himself corralled by the mapmakers and forced to share what he knew with Kiflo, during the afternoon, Harry would train with the sword for a prerequisite amount of time with Thorin, Kili or Dwalin. After that, he would sit down with the rune masters, working on the contract until they were all satisfied with it and had made plans going forward.

Throughout this the Stiffbeards were very pointedly ignored. Two of the Stiffbeards were actually apprentice rune scribes desperately looking to be taken on by a master, but there was no talk of bringing them into the contract that Harry was making with the Longbeard houses Rune Scribes.

The Stiffbeards simply took this. After the show that Thorin had put on for them that first night, they understood how badly they'd messed up with Harry and that they had also missed the boat when it came to wedding one of their princesses to Thorin. But he and Dis were very quick to point out that Fili and Kili were both still available for dynastic marriages, so long as the Stiffbeards kept on putting their best foot forward. Within two days, some trade agreements had already been reached with two small shipments, around seven ponies worth of weapons and armor, heading the other way, defended by half of the Bloodhammer company.

And such armor! Better than any the Stiffbeards could make on their own, more durable, stronger, tougher and longer lasting, simply because of the nature of the various ores nearby.

With armor like that, the weapons of the southern Haradrim would break, and it was hoped their armies would as well. At least, that was the hope.

In return, several Stiffbeards had already begun to work with the local artisans to create gears, springs and mechanical devices. Their first project was to make the gates leading into Erebor able to be opened more efficiently and easily. Others went to work on helping to redesign the huge floating chandeliers to make them easier to pull in at night and maintain. Working together with the Blacklocks, with their mastery of glass, the artisans of all three dwarven Houses would undoubtedly make something amazing in time. There was even talk of creating and selling to other Houses great masses of the revered dwarven lights.

This would rather neatly line up with some of the things that Harry would be learning from the dwarves and rune masters. Because Harry would be doing a lot of learning as well as teaching, which was the major sticking point when it came to the contract between them. The Rune Scribes were insanely reluctant to teach anyone not under a very formal apprentice contract with them, let alone a human.

Thankfully, Thorin and Balin had ground down any opposition to sharing what was normally about his secret to the dwarves as their own language or dwarves and names. Harry would learn things that only one being, the great Celebrimbor of Eregion, had ever learned before: the secret of how to imbue runic magic into metal.

“This is at the heart of our ability with runes,” the ancient master Gurak Surehand, said slowly during a meeting with himself, Balin, and Harry, just the three of them that day. The other Rune Scribe had been called away to help an apprentice. “Our runes are more subtle than many of yours, but the impact they can have when worked into the metal? It will **endure**. It will become a part of the metal, remaining within until the metal itself rusts to nothing. Have you ever wondered how amazing a thing could be to have an ever-sharp weapon, one that needs no care but will always cut like it was newly come from the forge? Or which was heavier than a Man blade of similar length? We dwarves are powerful, stronger by far than Men, and we make light of burdens. Think you what a weapon like that could do against a similar weapon of Man’s manufacture.”

Occasionally, the ancient dwarf’s Common seemed to become stilted, almost strange to the ear, but he certainly got his point across, and Harry nodded slowly. “Where I come from, we could only ever embed runes into stone or jewels. Rubies were best, or diamonds. Steel could not take magic because the iron within it fights the basic magical imprinting. If you used metal instead of a rune stone, you might be able to get a single use out of it, if that, and it would be far less powerful than it should be. Gold... We hadn’t actually delved into its uses before I had my little misadventure and arrived here about that or other precious metals.”

The last was said in a wry tone of voice, which made both Balin and Gurak chuckle, with Gurak waving a hand airily. The man had mellowed considerably towards Harry as the negotiations went on. It was as if writing down what exactly both sides of the contract would be held to had made him both respect Harry more and look forward more eagerly to working with him. That was a purely dwarven attitude, but Harry was happy to see it regardless.

“Bah, of course! Even we dwarves do not jump directly to carving out our runes into steel, let alone the more Enchoak Lacha.” There, he seemed to lapse into Khuzdul, but Harry still got the gist, deciding it meant something like precious metals, as Harry had said earlier. “We will have to experiment then, to see whether or not which metals your own type of magic and work with. And we will see if you can even use ours, imbuing them with the magic. That will be your first lesson, I think.”

“And vice versa,” Harry said with a nod. “It will be fascinating to see how you gather magic and push it into the rune. With Istari like myself,” using the local term for wizard had almost become second nature by this point, “we simply imbue our own magic into the runic array, and I know for a fact that elves who have been trained to use the magic within them as well can do the same.”

Gurak harrumphed at that but nodded. They’d already gone over that: that Harry would learn how the basic premise of runework among the dwarves was done. While he was still not exactly sanguine about a non-dwarf learning that secret, it wasn’t as if Harry hadn’t already had clues in the direction, seeing the dwarves and blacksmiths at work as he had more than a year ago.

“But yes, learning how to imbue any kind of magic into metal? That will be amazing.” Harry shook his head with a wry little laugh. “That is a secret that back home was only known to the goblins of my world.”

Gurak and Balin both growled angrily at that. Balin had learned a good deal about Harry’s old world during their time as friends, yet some things were just too bizarre to them and their own sensibilities to let go of. The idea that humans would trust goblins with their gold? With the only bank in the wizardly world? That was bizarre enough. To learn that many of the secrets that the dwarves held so dearly on Middle Earth were the providence of such creatures in Harry’s? That was even worse, and Gurak and Balin both spat to one side, muttering to one another in Khuzdul, while Harry sat back, sitting at his watered-down mead - this was a professional meeting, after all - until they finished.

When they finished, it was Gurak who spoke up first. “Yet there is more that our runes can do. Runes of protection from heat while at the Forge, runes that allow the goodness within the earth to rise and renew itself via emplacing a wellness stone.” He tugged at his beard

thoughtfully, then said slowly, “Beyond the first tests going either way, teaching you our runic language and vice versa also seems somewhat straightforward now that we have it on paper. The classrooms you describe are somewhat similar to how we do that. There’s not going to be a lot of issues with that. But the way you described it, you performed far more experiments with runes without supervision than I would allow for. I think we need to figure out an area outside of Erebor for tests and such things, as well as time for you and for us to simply observe one another’s training in action. Hands-on learning is well and good, but seeing something like that will help hugely...”

And so, the discussions continued. Within another week, Harry began his first lesson in dwarven runecraft and began to teach his own. Meanwhile, Tauriel continued her work with the dwarf and human scouts, and life around Erebor started to fall into a routine. A routine that would continue with only some interruptions, such as weddings and other important matters, for several years, as elsewhere, life also continued on, while the power in Mordor continued to gather strength as well...

End Chapter

Hmmm... reading back through it, the first part where I have Harry remember talking about the past seems a bit too info-dump-like, even for this story. But I kept it in. THERE IS JUST SO MUCH stuff from the Second Age and I love sprinkling it in.

I still cannot believe the, the sheer lack of vision shown in Rings of Power. You had a literal AGE to play with. Thousands of years! You could have had drama, exploration, the creation of nations and alliances, espionage, corruption, societal changes and numerous wars, and you instead decide to create not-hobbits, a newly arrived Gandalf, a Sauron who is exceedingly obvious, and a Galadriel who is abso-shitly-nothing like what the real lady is like outside of her being blonde. You could have had Celeborn take much of that role – combat commander, hunter of dark things, has a chip on his shoulder when it comes to dwarves which could have been interesting to explore – but you had to use a woman. And not a woman from Númenor or even an OC. Then had to introduce her to Númenor by trying to send her over the ocean to the land of Aman in a way Galadriel at that time would never have agreed with, let alone the other BS. Just... **why?**

You all will note I am not commenting on combat, tactics, armor, strategy, plot or inclusion. I think I’m good enough at combat scenes myself to say that’s all shit too, but when it comes to the sheer disrespect shown to Tolkien’s works, that aspect doesn’t matter. Tolkien wasn’t the best when it came to designing fortifications, either, but that’s no excuse to pull back from a highly defensible position just to set a trap that didn’t even work all that well.

As for 'inclusion'? Lean into the Haradrim!! The Red Hawk! The Blue Wizards. The other House of the dwarves! PLEASE, god, just... have some imagination, people... whine...

And RIP, sorry ROP has a second season. I want to cry. I really do. Simon Tolkien, you are the fantasy genre's Quisling, selling out the nation your father created for gold and your own ego.

Rant over. Sorry.

For those wondering, Adûnakhôr is the name of the Númenórean king, Tar-Adûnakhôr, who outlawed the elven languages from Númenor. I figured that it was a name that would be given to other Númenóreans after that, and worked as a name for one of the other two Nazgûl who are descended from Númenor. The Witch King is the Third. Khamûl is the only Black Rider named in the original canon.

I am not quite happy with the last segment. I might rewrite that tomorrow if I have the time. But that would simply be to bring the chapter to a better, cleaner ending, so there won't be any changes in terms of plot or anything important.

Anyway, I hope you enjoyed this chapter, folks, even if it didn't really advance the work as much as I had hoped. I had hoped to show within the chapter the five year gap coming up. But this way that can happen off screen, so to speak and I can then show all the changes that have happened in Erebor and to Harry and Tauriel since. That will be the first of many large-scale time skips folks, so your reaction to those changes will help inform me if I am doing those right.