

I am not Tolkien, nor am I British in any form.

Happy quite-belated Hannukah!

Sorry guys, this was the winner of December's HP only poll (thanks to my voting for it, ATP was the other choice and given everything else I'm working on this month, I didn't want to work on a chapter I knew I might not be able to keep short) but I lost two days of internet access, so couldn't get it posted after *Nad Destroyer*, who looked it over for me, got it back. Beyond his work on it, this has been checked by me with Grammarly. No doubt this means there will be small mistakes throughout, but hopefully, there won't be enough to detract from your enjoyment.

Chapter 11: Sneaking Is Not A Dwarf Thing

The plan to get the dwarves into Lake-town ran into a hurdle almost immediately, even before they got down to the details because the dwarves flatly refused to get back into the barrels. "Once was enough, damn my beard if it wasn't!" Oin shouted, the normally silent healer backing up the more recalcitrant Dwalin, Bombur, and the others.

Harry couldn't blame them, and by the look on his face, Bilbo couldn't either, although he stayed silent, looking on as Thorin and the other dwarves argued. However, Thorin was unwilling to push his people just yet, knowing there was a breaking point which, even with the Lonely Mountain looming above them like a Titan out of myth, they were fast approaching.

It was the helplessness of it that bore down on his people, Thorin reflected. Being treated like a parcel can wear on even the best of us. "Very well, I won't force you back into them. But that means we will have to come out into the open quickly," Thorin cautioned, looking over at Bard.

Bard winced, shaking his head. "If we can get some momentum among the townsfolk going, we could perhaps go that route. But I am concerned about how the Master of Lake-town will react. And if he just closes the wharf's gates on us, we are lost."

"Describe the town to me," Thorin nearly ordered, before, with a cough from Harry and a somewhat chagrined look, he added, "Please. And I apologize for my tone. We have all had a rather trying time of late."

Bard nodded at that and explained the layout of Lake-town. To do so, he set the tiller of the barge to move them around in a slow, lazy circle. They had a lot to talk about before he wanted to take these dwarves back to his home.

"The wharf area of the town juts out from two sides of it, one heading towards the side of the lake where it is tied down, and one out to the lake itself. Both sides have a series of postern gates, where the wharfs entered into the town proper, and grates at all the entrances to the waterways of the town, which are only opened to take in the barrels."

“What, why?” Bifur asked. He was the only dwarf who knew anything about boats and river travel, and to him, that made no sense. “Surely, if you live on a lake, you would want your town to be open to the lake directly.”

“So it had been at first, good dwarf, but no longer. About a year before I was born, the town was attacked by goblins. They spread throughout the town quickly using tiny reed caravels, and it was a hard and costly slog to clear them out. The Master of Lake-town decided at that point there should only be two entrances to the town,” Bard explained. “The gates are crude, but work and the docks are all thin, barely enough room for a series of workers and boats to tie up to.”

“Drop the portcullis, and you could defend the town quite easily, as the defender attackers would be bunching up onto the wharf, with no place to go,” Thorin murmured, looking around at the dwarves with him, one eyebrow rising.

All save a few looked away, knowing that they would indeed have to get into the damnable barrels once more. But not wishing to cause further acrimony, Thorin turned back to Bard, inquiring politely, “You looked as if you had something further to say about our coming out into the open.”

Bard nodded, gesturing to the barrels. “I know for a fact that the Master of Lake-town is in communication with the elves. I think they use carrier pigeons of some kind. With the trouble you told me you ran into with them, the elves might have sent word ahead. We might find more allies than enemies if you try to declare yourself openly. As I said, momentum would be the key to that, and there are problems with that.”

“Bah! We’re dwarves, human, didn’t your father’s father’s tell of your ancestors working with ours, the greatness of our paired countries? Surely your fellow townsfolk would sooner side with us than the elves?” Dwalin grumbled.

“They did. We even have a legend that says that eventually, a king will come again in Erebor to bring prosperity once more. However, none of you look like kings,” Bard answered bluntly. “And the Master of Lake-town knows well what side of that boat his lines are tied.”

There were some growls and mutterings about that, but Harry decided to get involved quickly, stating simply, “He’s right, we don’t. We all look like mangy, scraggly vagabonds, and if you’re expecting me to magic your clothing to look better, think again.” He tapped his leg and the wound there, shaking his head wearily. “I’m flipping exhausted. I need rest and time for my body to heal and build up my reserves again.”

The biggest issue was how much blood Harry had lost, he knew. It wasn’t enough to make him light-headed, but if Harry started to cast more spells, that would add to his already exhausted state far too quickly.

“So we either must bluff our way in somehow, or hide,” Bilbo spoke up then, and all the dwarves turned to him. Some of them wore frowns as they did, but there was stark respect in their eyes as they looked at the Hobbit, where before there would not have been. “The wharves are the real issue, I presume? After that, we can hide if we decide to?”

“Correct,” Bard said with a nod. “The Master’s bully boys control the wharves, for the most part, they are always on the lookout are troublemakers.” He scowled, spitting to one side. “Of course,

troublemaker means anyone who will speak out against Master of the town. But they are the most likely to be told to be on the lookout for all of you.”

“A Tinpot Tyrant is he?” Harry asked.

“I have no idea what a tinpot has to do with anything, but I cannot argue against the tyrant portion of what you just said,” Bard replied dryly.

“Tinpot means he’s basically weak but thinks he’s strong because he controls a very small area,” Harry explained as the dwarves all chuckled, having understood the reference.

“Tell us more of this Master of Lake-town,” Balin said, stroking his long beard thoughtfully as Bard nodded, acknowledging the truth of Harry’s appellation for Master of Lake-town. “Where exactly does he get his power from? Was he elected? Is ‘Master of Lake-town’ simply a long way of saying, Mayor? What is his pedigree?”

Bard chuckled dryly. For someone who lived on the water, Harry reflected, he seems to favor dry tones. Then he frowned, staring down at his wounded leg. *That phrase wasn’t nearly as funny even in my head as I had hoped. I was really battered, wasn’t I?* Indeed, as he lay there on the barge’s deck, Harry could feel a headache coming on, and he didn’t think it was entirely due to blood loss.

“He was related to the mayor of the capital city of Esgaroth, the capital city of dale, but not directly. He and his father before him are only really called Master of Lake-town since his family has come to own much of the vineyards along the edge of the lake. Those vineyards drive everything within the town; our economy is mostly based on them. We don’t even grow enough vegetables and fruits beyond grapes to feed ourselves without trading wine with the elves and a few distant towns to the south.”

“That’s not right,” Bilbo interjected, looking aghast. Bombur too grumbled that an economy based only on one thing, especially a luxury good, wasn’t a good idea. The two of them were backed up by Balin, Oin, Gloin, and many others, including Thorin.

Throughout their journey, Harry had come to realize that the dwarves had an extremely good grasp of economics, trade barter and so forth. Well beyond what most would assume, given the medieval ages they all lived in. But Bilbo taking part in this discussion was a surprise.

“How did that happen? You can’t live off wine and fish alone. And if the soil around Lake-town is at all like the soil of Mirkwood, you should be able to create bountiful crops for yourselves, barley and wheat for certain. And yet the way you speak, it is as if you live off the trade you get from other regions through your wine.”

“Are you a farmer then, Mr. Baggins?” Bard asked, stumbling a little as he wondered how to address the short creature who had introduced himself as a hobbit.

Bilbo huffed. “I am a Hobbit! The soil and growing things are what we do. I have kept up my own garden with the help of Master Gamgee for years.”

“Then you will have to argue with our experts, who said that the only thing that we would be able to grow are grape shrubs and vines.”

"I will do so!" Bilbo huffed, almost looking affronted at the very idea. "That is not how you treat the soil. Work with the land, with the blessing of Yavanna, your lives will be enriched in turn."

Bard blinked at the mention of Yavanna, not having heard the name before, but Bombur spoke up before he could ask about the origin of the name. "So this Master of Lake-town controls the wine, and the economy, and let me guess, levies taxes for the upkeep of the town, and to see to its defense against further incursions."

Bard nodded grimly. "Exactly. The town's economy is based on wine, as I said, which allows him to hire foreign thugs to protect the wine caravans and the town. He meets the elves' demands and the southern towns, growing rich on the trade while everyone gets a share of the wine before it is shipped off. Of course, that means a large majority of the townsfolk are drunkards. It is awfully hard to find anything to be positive about in the shadow of the Mountain, and the world always looks rosier reflected off the surface of a stein of wine."

All the dwarves shook their heads, causing Harry to snort, muttering about the pot calling the kettle black for a moment, but Gloin quickly replied. "We all like a good drink Harry, but we don't drink to excess. Tis a poor dwarf who doesn't know to keep his drink from impacting his craft, whatever that might be."

"And we certainly wouldn't drink that piss that the elves were guzzling down so happily the night before," Nori added, drawing chuckles from the rest.

"I feel like I should be offended by that, but I loathe the wine business, so I will merely agree with you," Bard scowled. "It has been a curse on our people ever since it was introduced. My people see no hope in the future and thus no need to control their excess or go along with the wine trade thinking it the best option, while the Master of Lake-town grinds all opposition down. He and his cronies grow rich while the town goes to rack and ruin around him."

"If the town is badly off, supplies will perforce be hard to come by. Again, we find ourselves in need of weapons," Thorin added, looking around at the dwarves. They were better off than they had been when they met with Beorn, but that wasn't saying much. In their eagerness to be armed before having to get back into the barrels in the river, many of them had lost their weapons once more. The only ones who hadn't lost their weapons were those who had fought with Thorin on the causeway overlooking the river, and Kili with his bow, although he had used most of his arrows by this point.

"We have food enough in the pouch from the elves, which could last us a while. But we don't get as much out of Lembas as the elves would, so we cannot live on it alone. Weapons and food," Fili agreed, coming to sit by his uncle on the deck once more, having moved off to talk quietly to his brother a moment before.

"Some armor would be good too," Dwalin added.

Bilbo spoke up now, thinking aloud. "Some various plants that I know grow wild, they are called herbs, but only a few of them actually have anything to offer in terms of taste. But we could use them to create a poultice that will deaden our smell to the dragon. I know that you have spells that can do that, Harry. Still, your spellwork is taking more out of you these days. I would rather you save your strength for actually fighting against the Dragon rather than merely fooling his senses."

“How good warriors are you exactly?” Bard asked, leaning forward suddenly. “Supplies, as you are talking about, will take hard coinage, and the only one who has much such is the Master of Lake-town. If you would gain those supplies, you would first have to liberate the town from his clutches.”

Dwalin’s eyes narrowed, and he was about to bark that they weren’t here to do the human’s dirty work when his brother touched his arm. Dwalin looked at Balin, and Balin shook his head while Thorin simply smiled grimly while a ragged chuckle ran around the rest of the dwarves. “We are good enough warriors, I think. Get us into the town, and I believe we can at least hold our own against his bullies long enough for the word to get out. After that,” Thorin’s smile turned somewhat amused, “After that, I think we can give your fellow humans the one thing you said they lack: hope for the future.”

For a moment, Bard was silent, staring into Thorin’s eyes, trying to gage the dwarf’s seriousness, and then he nodded sharply. “Yes. If we can rally the people behind us, knock the Master of Lake-town off-balance, he will never regain it. I’ve been waiting for something like this for a long time, practically since I was old enough to realize how bad things were getting. I’ve even kept records of some of his most egregious misdeeds. If we air them along with your own message of wanting to bring back the days of Dale and Erebor, we can gain enough public support to take over the town. After that, you will have your supplies, and I will have begun to pull my folk out of the mire.”

“Your people?” Thorin asked, his smile turning wry, even as his face showed he understood the sentiment.

“Just because my father and I have never worn a crown doesn’t mean that we have forgotten our vows as the royal family of Dale,” Bard answered firmly. “You all convinced me you have a chance against the dragon. By all that is good, I will take this chance to bring my folk back to their glory!”

The dwarves all grunted approval at that, even Dwalin, who went so far as to clap a hand on Bard’s shoulder, becoming impressed the man didn’t stumble from it. Harry, deciding to add a bit of levity to this discussion, asked, “I refuse to use this Master of Lake-town title for this arse. Does he have an actual name?”

Bard actually had to think about it. The Master of Lake-town was just called that or Sir most of the time by the townspeople. “Percival, I believe. Percival, son of Bunder.”

“How do you have such records? Is this Percival that arrogant?” Balin asked interestedly.

“No, or perhaps, but not as you would think. There is simply always someone watching everything you do in the town, crowded as it is. And, although it might sound arrogant on my part to say it, I have always been well-known and respected by people throughout the town. I simply make it a point to listen, and information comes to me.”

“Of course, that crowding is another crime we can lay at the feet of Percival,” Bard went on with a sigh. “Part of being Master of the town should mean that he is in charge of seeing to its upkeep and expansion, but he never has. And whenever someone tries to call him out on it, he always comes up with excuses, both to not listen and why such work hasn’t been done. And soon the person trying to push for such backs down finds himself in debt to Percival, or, in one case, disappears.”

“He does sound like the worst kind of scoundrel,” Bilbo agreed, looking a little shaken by the last portion of what Bard had said. “My own folk have dealt with a few such, though not many. People who would work a land into the dirt, then blame the dirt for not producing, as we say.”

“How did it come to be so bad?” Thorin inquired. “Indeed, how did it come to be that any of you humans remained in this land? I’ll admit that I had not considered any would still be here when I began to plan this journey. I know that most of you fled as my own people did.”

“Many of our people couldn’t flee. Where would we have gone, Thorin?” Bard snarled, the first sign of temper not directed at Percival they had seen from the even-tempered man. “Most of us had no family elsewhere, no great stores of wealth or even supplies. All our forefathers had was burned by the Dragon!” he shook his head, reining in his temper as he looked away from the Lonely Mountain for a moment. “You should thank your lucky stars given how you may well be bringing that Dragon’s wrath down upon us again, that I am helping you at all.

Ori spoke up then, his intemperate words showing his youth to all there. ““If the dragon attacked you, your dwarf and weapons should’ve seen him off!”

“Bah, don’t be ridiculous, Ori!” Balin answered before Bard could. “If all the steel and all the warriors of Erebor could not do anything against Smaug, what could a series of ballistae, even armed with arrows made by dwarven hands, do to harm him? This was Smaug, boy! The greatest dragon seen since Ancalagon the Black!”

“Wings, mouth, eyes,” Harry counted off on his fingers. “Those are the only places to really hurt a dragon, and they know their wings and eyes are vulnerable.”

“Even this one’s wings aren’t all that vulnerable, Harry,” Thorin muttered, shaking his head. “I remember seeing ballista bolts hitting Smaug in his wings and side. Never did he look to be any worse for wear afterward, not that we could see.”

He sighed, looking up at Bard. “I do not regret my question,” he said roughly, “but I should’ve realized the answer before I even said it. Your... your pardon Bard.”

Bard nodded, practically slumping in his own skin for a moment. “And I crave your pardon to Master Oakenshield. I am deathly afraid of what you will find in the mountain regardless of the plan you laid out for me.”

For a moment, Harry was concerned that Bard would decide to reject aiding them further, but then Bard threw off the sadness and fear after a moment like an ill-fitting cloak before looking around at the dwarves. “Yet for a chance to better my people’s lives, I will gladly join you. But I may want our agreements in writing,” he warned, a lurking smile on his face. “To formalize everything.”

“What sort of agreement?” Balin interjected himself into the conversation quickly while the dwarves all nodded sagely. Many even looked eager. Dwarves as a race respected written contracts.

“A defense treaty perhaps between the town and the mountain once you have control of it. That’s maybe putting the cart before the horse, but I think it is necessary. For the town, some monetary compensation will be required.”

“Oh? And do you expect us to just let you name your own price? I think not!” Bombur exclaimed.

“Indeed, let us get down to brass nails, my good human,” Balin agreed. “First of all, what is the standard unit of measurement among you humans? How solid is your coinage?”

The discussion on that point actually was quite upbeat, and Harry reflected the dwarves were very odd folk, to take such joy in talking about coinage, transfer of money, and so forth. *Still, they are enjoying it, so I suppose that’s a good thing after the troubles we’ve had. Such odd priorities dwarves have.*

OOOOOOO

Tauriel and Legolas came out of the woods, staring out into the lake, then all around them. For a moment, their faces showed a certain amount of trepidation. They were warriors of the Unseen host of Taur-e-Ndaedelos. There was not a single portion of the forest where either of them would feel out of place, save perhaps the area where the necromancer held sway. Here though, there were no trees. No canopy. The midday sun beat down at them through nothing but the air, and it was highly unusual.

Tauriel smiled slightly and, after a few seconds of hesitation feeling the touch of the sun on her bare skin, smiled slightly.

“And what are you smiling at, my Tauriel?” Legolas asked.

Tauriel was in such a good mood, she decided to let the ‘my’ part slide. She knew that Legolas understood now that his courtship of her was at an end. But it would take time for his speech patterns to leave off such terms of endearment when they were alone. “I am thinking that I have wanted to travel the world, and now I am doing at least a tiny bit of that.”

“While chasing after dwarves and a wizard. Yes, I can truly see that that is a great adventure,” Legolas quipped.

Tauriel chuckled at that, indicating a touch by touching one of her shoulders as a member of the unseen host would. Legolas acknowledged with a bow of his head, and the two of them turned to stare across the Lake. Both of them had the typical elvish eyesight, which could make most hawks green with envy, and they could see the pile of wood that people called Lake-town. Presently it was directly opposite the position where the two of them had come out of the forest, which, in turn, was well away from the point the river met the lake. They couldn’t see any movement that would have been beyond even elves, but they could see the town itself.

“Which way around, do you think?” Legolas inquired, looking this way and that. “Unlike straight across, they could not see the ends of Long Lake, so they had no way of knowing which way would be faster.

Tauriel shrugged ignorance, and the two of them stared around for a time before Legolas pointed in one direction. “That way is as good as any other.”

Tauriel nodded, and the two of them raced off, leaving no sign of their passage, their legs lifting in the run of elves on a mission, faster than any human sprinter, more tireless than any dwarf. Doing so,

they moved directly in the opposite direction around the lake that the orcs under Bolg had taken earlier that day.

OOOOOOO

Eventually, Lake-town came into view, and Bard called a halt to the discussion. "Any more talks on this point will need to occur once we have parchment and ink, and it can be witnessed by other worthies of Lake-town beyond myself. For now, we still must get into the town without causing an all-out battle on the docks. Hide yourselves away in the barrels for now."

This caused much grumbling, but in a far better mood than they had been, most of the dwarves agreed to go through with this bit of ignominy once more. Bombur didn't, nor did Dwalin. "I am not getting back into that thing! It's like a second skin on me, and I have had enough of being a parcel!"

"Fat Bombur speaks for me as well," Dwalin growled angrily. "I am done with hiding and sneaking around."

Looking at their faces, Thorin realized that he would probably have to overpower the two to get them into the barrels, and he looked over at Harry, who nodded, a wry smirk on his face. "Well then, I'm afraid you two are going to have to get very friendly."

"What?" Dwalin was noticeably disturbed, while Bombur merely sighed, figuring out where this was going.

Harry pulled out his invisibility cloak from his pouch, holding it out to the others.

"What about you," Dwalin asked, holding out the magnificent magical creation, then measuring himself and Bombur against it, grimacing as he realized that Harry was quite accurate. They would have to become very friendly indeed for a while if they wanted to hide their presence under this thing.

"I figure I won't be as unusual a sight as dwarves would be. A single wounded man is no threat and of barely any interest, especially when not accompanied by dwarves," Harry said with a wry chuckle looking over at Bard. "Is this not so?"

"I can pass you off as a wounded survivor of a trade caravan that ran afoul of beasts or some such," Bard nodded with a wave of his hand. "You even look like a northerner, with that black hair. Although can you do anything with your eyes? Emerald is not a color we normally see, and if the elves have passed on your appearance, that and that scar on your forehead could be a dead giveaway."

Harry shook his head, saying he didn't know any spells to affect the eyes, at least not in terms of changing the color. "As for my scar, again, probably not. We'll just have to wing it."

Soon enough, the barge was bumping up against a pier at Lake-town, and Harry, along with the hiding Bombur and Dwalin, saw that Bard had told the truth. The docks were separated from the rest of the town with small gates, the grating just waiting to be dropped down to block anyone from walking into the city. Along the waterline, Harry could see several streams of water heading deeper into the town, but along the outer edge, they all passed through iron bars, leaving no way to enter unless you knew how to swim, which only Bifur did among the dwarves. Harry had also heard Bilbo admitting he didn't know how to swim either. And frankly, the sight of the water underneath the town made Harry unwilling to even offer up his bubblehead charms for the effort.

“You’re late, Bard,” shouted one of the dock workers, sneering angrily at Bard, while others waved him a cheery greeting, some of them visibly breathing sighs of relief at his arrival. *Or should that be survival?* Harry thought, wondering what kind of danger a bargeman could run into out on the lake.

“The barrels were still coming down the river as I arrived, Carle,” Bard replied, shrugging his shoulders. “I decided to wait until they were all down, rather than taking some and leaving others. Considering that I would have been charged for the expense of replacing them, I felt that was a good idea.”

Carle sneered even further at Bard for that but gestured to several of the men around him. They were all tough-looking, but Harry noticed their clothing wasn’t as good as Bard’s or Carle’s, nor did they seem to have kept themselves in as good shape as the archer. They had beer-bellies to a man, and two of them looked as if they had just finished a heavy drinking session, with it being not even midmorning.

“And who is this?” Carle asked, pointing at Harry.

“I was a bodyguard for a caravan,” Harry said, speaking up for himself. “We were attacked by goblins, and most of the traders were slain along with my fellows. I only survived by diving into the lake and swimming far enough out that they couldn’t follow.”

“Goblins!” Carle backed away hastily. “They are active around the lake again?”

“They have been active in the area for months,” Bard growled as he finished tying the barge off with the aid of the other dock workers. “We’ve known that for a while. They’re just getting bolder as time goes on.”

“You’re not much of a guard if you can keep off the goblins,” muttered one of the other dock workers to much laughter.

Harry shrugged his shoulders. “I killed two before one of them got my leg with an arrow. If any of you can dodge arrows, please tell me. Once I have some coin, I might pay to learn such.”

“Another mouth to feed then,” Carle growled, setting aside the issue of goblins and Bard’s attitude for now to glare at Harry, his earlier shock at hearing about goblins fading as he did. And as he looked more closely at Harry, his face went blank, and he turned away quickly. “We’ve enough of those already. Still, anyone who can fight can find work with the Master of Lake-town. Now come on, lads, start unloading.”

Before the men could start moving, Bombur and Dwalin moved to the side of the barge, hopping off it onto the wharf. There was a noticeable shift in the balance as the two dwarves left the barge, and Harry shook his head. *Ballast, thy name is Bombur.*

Soon, all the barrels containing the dwarves were pushed off the barge onto the pier, one after another. Thanks to a few weightless charms, no one noticed the added heft thanks to the dwarves. But as they were moved to the docks, they were not carried away as the dwarves and Harry had thought. Instead, they were rolled away along the dock heading toward the gate leading into Lake-town.

“Ooh boy, are they not going to be happy,” Harry murmured as Bard helped him to his feet.

Bard smiled grimly, and Harry wondered if he had just pranked the dwarves on purpose before the other human helped him across onto the pier, and the two of them made their own way down the wooden planks to the wooden entryway into the town.

Harry counted out the barrels which contained the dwarves, marked slightly by a cut made into the top of them pushed ahead of the two humans. He couldn't see the invisible Bombur or Dwalin but considering that they had gotten off the barge before anyone else, Harry figured they must already be in the town.

Neither Bard nor Harry had noticed, but Carle had sent some kind of signal toward the guards at the portcullis.

On the other side from where they had found a small, smelly alleyway to wait in, Dwalin and Bombur watched as several more cards arrived, clenching their halberd's tightly in one hand as they waited just out of sight from the pier.

"That's not good," Dwalin muttered.

Pressing directly into his side, Bombur grumbled but bore with the feel of Dwalin's hammer pressing into his side. *It could be worse. It could be his ax.*

But Bombur wasn't watching the action around the portcullis gate, like Dwalin was, instead, he was watching the barrels carrying their friends. Inside the town, the barrels were taken by several people on small boats, moving them deeper into the town via the waterways that dominated the streets here in this odd, rather shabby, floating town. Bombur had seen other human habitations before, several villages and towns scattered near the Blue Mountains, where he and the others had fled to with their folk so long ago. And even the poorest of those had been better kept than this one. From where he was near the edge of the town, Bombur could see signs of disrepair, several drunks lying out in doorways or on the few walking paths. No refuse or anything else, though, which Bombur reflected they had the lake under them to thank for.

Dwalin didn't see any of that. He saw more men moving to possibly attack Harry, Bombur held him back. "There are too many of them. Let us get the others out, and then come back."

Grumbling Dwalin did so, and the two of them followed the barrels with much cursing and growling between them. The need to move in lockstep and not pull away from one another, lest the Invisibility cloak be pulled too far away and reveal them, was not something either had any experience with. But soon enough, they were inside the warehouse, watching as workers started to inspect the barrels before pushing them to join one of two groups. As they were, the barrels were opened and inspected for any damages.

Seeing this, Dwalin moved to attack the workers, one hand grabbed at his ax's shaft. But before he could remove the cloak, Bombur spoke up once more, whispering the words into Dwalin's ears as he made tossed the cloak aside. "Don't. Why fight when we can scare?"

Dwalin looked at him from barely an inch away, grimacing once again at the enforced closeness, as well as the fact that Bombur had bad breath at present. *Verily I have come to know Bombur far more closely than I ever wished to know any male dwarf. Ugh. I might be forced to bathe after this just to get the feeling out of my skin.* "What do you mean?"

Bombur rolled his eyes at that and then moved forward and began to bang on one of the walls. As he was doing so, he was very careful that the movement didn't dislodge the cloak from around him.

All the warehouse workers looked up at the loud noise, then around themselves, frowning and muttering about where the noise had come from. Then more noise came, and the men started to look around for it quickly, spreading out, wondering where the noise was coming from.

Then more noise came from somewhere else with no reason, and someone muttered, "Is there some kind of foul Elvish curse on these barrels now?"

It made no sense, of course. But most humans in this age were very credulous people, having no understanding of the magic of the world or of science to explain away things. Moreover, you didn't get put on barrel duty in Lake-town for being a go-getter or intelligent. You were put in charge of checking the barrels when there was no other job anyone would trust you to do. The drunken sots around the barrels thus considered this idea as good as any other and began to look around, one of them even whimpering, "W, we're not bad folk, sir elf, we've not to do with you. Tis but our job to look these barrels over!"

In the barrels, many of the dwarves had been using all their will power to concentrate on keeping their food down after being rolled and banged around like rats in a barrel. But Ori and Bilbo both cottoned on to the scheme occurring outside and began to add to it, making 'Oooo' noises.

The men began to back away, and then Dwalin, who'd had enough of this, pulled Bombur up in front of one of them. Then he pulled off the invisibility cloak and thrust his head forward with Bombur looking over his shoulder for all the world like a two-headed monster. "BOOOO!!"

That was the last straw, and the warehouse workers screamed and bolted towards the nearest doorway.

Dwalin blinked, then shook his head as Bombur instantly moved away from him, moving towards a bung hammer. "I didn't think that would honestly work."

"It helps that they were all half-drunk and sods besides," Bombur grunted. "Now come on, let's get the others out of the barrels and head back to help Harry."

OOOOOO

Having been about to pass under the portcullis, Harry's eyes narrowed, and he warily took a half-step back as the group of pikes being thrust towards him. Bard kept a firm hold on Harry's arm, helping him keep his balance as he, too, stared at the guards. "What are you all doing? Can't you see this man is hurt? He's no threat to the town."

"Bard, step away," said a man Bard knew all too well. He was a slight man, sallow-faced, with lank black hair. "The Master of Lake-Town's been warned about this one. He's apparently a fell magic user, who did something in their lands., and the elves want him back."

"I Defended myself against spiders, and then refused to be jailed like a good little boy," Harry drawled, his hands coming up as he gently pushed Bard away, grimacing as his injured leg took his weight. Grimace or no, this was the equivalent of a wizard cocking a shotgun, but it simply looked as if he was raising his hands in surrender to the guards. Not making certain that his palms were facing them.

This allowed his scars to be seen, which caused a few of the smarter guards to stare, but otherwise, they all stood firm.

Bard held up a hand. "Now wait a moment, do you have even a description of this young man Alfrid? I tell you I..."

Bard's voice slid to a halt as one of the pikemen pointed his weapon at Bard.

"You're already on in thin ice with the Master of the town, don't make it any worse by trying to aid this dissident and rebel," Alfrid sneered.

"I thought I was a mad wizard caught on their lands, now I'm in dissident and rebel," Harry quipped

He was answered by a dwarven voice on the other side of the pike wall. "Don't think to look for sense from such morons, Harry. It will only hurt your brain."

Before the pikes could turn, there was a gurgling sound, and Thorin continued, as several of the men craned their necks to look behind them. "Now," the King Under the Mountain said coldly, one arm around one called Alfrid's throat as he bent the man backward almost to the point where his spine looked like it should break, having previously kicked the man in the back of the knees to bring him down to choke-level. "We are going to have a little chat with the so-called Master of Lake-town. And we will do so openly. And before you think about trying to turn those pikes on us, looked around you."

The dwarves were in an angry, combative mood, and those who had lost their weapons in the river had availed themselves of bung mallets, billhooks, and other items of similar apparel. All told, they were the most warlike looking group these guards, used to roughing up people like Bard who spoke out against Percival's policies, and ever seen. Indeed, this lot hadn't even seen any action guarding the wine convoys.

The fight went out of them immediately, and more than one actually went so far as to lay down his weapon. Bofur hopped forward, grabbing up a pike, efficiently smashing it over one knee so that he broke the shaft halfway down its length. Now it was a long, oddly shaped spear for him, and he grinned as he put it on over his shoulder. "Well, boys, that was right smart of you. Now, let's see if we can keep the trend going, hey? Drop them."

"You! You're all under aghggrest" Alfrid whimpered.

Thorin blinked as the man he was holding, tried to make noise. Then he very deliberately pulled the man further back, causing him to whine in pain as his back truly began to strain. "Are you really that stupid?"

"He is," Bard said with a sigh. "That's one's name is Alfrid, and he believes that the sun sets and rises at the Master of the town's orders."

Shaking his head, Harry nodded to Bombur and Dwalin. "Good job."

Dragging his prisoner, Thorin nodded to Bard. "Show us the way to the Master of Lake-town's hall."

Meanwhile, Balin, who had taken control of Harry's cloak, looked at Bilbo, Fili and Kili, their best climbers. "Get up high and watch over our advance, lads. Don't do anything without need, but make sure we're not walking into a trap."

Bilbo nodded and quickly led the way to the right, while Fili took Harry's cloak and followed his brother and the hobbit. Then Balin moved with his brother to either side of Harry, lending him their shoulders. "And as for you, Harry, lean on us for now. It's hoped you won't need to use any of your magic just yet."

The group had drawn a crowd around them, as Thorin knew they would. While he had spent a goodly portion of his life as a blacksmith, making his way in the Blue Mountains and then in the human lands for coin, Thorin had been trained as a prince when he was younger, and it wasn't just his determination and drive which he retained from those years. Now Thorin boomed out, "Justice has come to Lake-town, the king under the mountain has returned! Follow us to Percival's hall, and you will learn more."

Threadbare their clothing was, dirty and tired and battered though they were, there was no doubting the power of Thorin's voice or his stern conviction, and many of the watchers either raced off to inform their loved ones what was going on or followed after the dwarves. And though they were battered, sore and dirty, the dwarves quickly proved the better fighters when a band of guardsmen tried to slow their passage through the town.

They lowered their pikeheads and bellowed for the dwarves to surrender, then were astonished as Gloin and Dori led the charge directly into them, using their own purloined pikes to batter up and aside the pikes of the guard as the others raced in behind them. Once under the pole armed guards' reach, the dwarves quickly began systematically beating up several of the human men.

At that point, most of the dwarves disdained their weapons, instead just attacking with fists and feet. Most dwarves were stronger than most humans and not just of similar size, dwarves being far denser with muscle and bone than humans. The local bullies were learning this to their cost, and one wag watching it called out, "It's the little man's revenge, lads! Hahaha, look at 'em go!"

Twice more when they were faced with a group of guards. Each time the dwarves battered aside pikes, pulled them from hands, then pummeled the local bullies into submission. And each time, there was cheering from the growing crowd all around them.

There was no love lost between the guards of the town and the townsfolk. Many, indeed all the so-called officers, of the guards were barely locals, having been brought in by the Master of Lake-town's money. Others were known thugs and worse.

Those who were neither of those things were also intelligent enough to see where the wind was blowing threw down their arms or shouted out for Bard to explain what was going on. Bard, as he had told the dwarves, was well known among the townsfolk, and it wasn't just the guards who asked him what was going on. Many of the fisherfolk came forward, shouting out questions for him, and were relieved by the answer. And all the while the crowd grew, men, maids and elderly, boys and girls, all came out to watch this display.

By the time they reached the small area in front of the large townhouse that was Percival's dwelling, a majority of the townsfolk had gathered, spreading out through the streets, even crowding boats on the little river roads. Some had even joined Fili, Bilbo and Kili, although Kili was still under Harry's cloak, on the rooftops. All of them watched as events unfolded, the legend of the King Under the Mountain being whispered or even shouted out openly, where barely an hour before it would have been crazy to even speak of it. The days of Dale were long gone. But now, once more, dwarves moved among them.

Because of these interruptions and the town's odd architecture slowing the group down, Percival had time to prepare. In a small cleared area that served Lake-town as a central square, Percival faced them with ten guards on either side of him gripping short-hafted halberds, wearing plate armor, and helmets. This was unlike the majority of the guards they'd seen already, who only had pikes and leather jerkins.

Percival himself was... well, Harry had to bite back a laugh when he saw him. *God, could he be any more of an evil merchant stereotype?*

The so-called Master of Lake-town was slightly overweight, although not overly so. Yet his face and jowls showed the fact that he was not one who believed in good exercise. Percival had lank orange hair, scowl lines on his face, sweat on his brow, his hair a little thin up top, and a little too long around the edges. He wore a heavy gold chain, on which a small seal of office could be seen. His robes were dark burgundy and brown, and his eyes deep-set and beady. His mustache, though, Harry had to admit, was somewhat magnificent.

"You have taken officials of this town hostage!" The man shouted, and Harry was somewhat surprised to realize that his voice was a deep, almost pleasant baritone rumble, completely unlike his appearance. "You are escaped prisoners of the elves who are this town's patrons, the only reason we can survive in this cursed land always under the danger of the mountain."

He gestured up to the Lonely Mountain, which loomed above the town as it did the lake, an ever-present reminder of danger and death. "But I can be merciful. Surrender yourselves, your arms, and cease this foolishness, and I will intervene between you and the elves on your behalf. You will be allowed to go free to the south, transported there at my own expense with the next wine convoy going in that direction."

"And what gives you the right to make dictates to me? Why have you bent over backward for the elves? Did they even tell you what we were imprisoned for?" Thorin shouted. He looked around at the crowd as he stepped forward from his people, gesturing to them and then himself. "Have any of you ever wondered why you have never seen traders from beyond Mirkwood? The elves have neglected the roads, to the point where you cannot carry enough food to get through the forest without leaving the path to forage. We were imprisoned because we trespassed on their lands rather than starve!"

There were a lot of grumbles at that, but Thorin decided to change tactics. It was evident that while the people had no love for the elves, they were still in some awe of them, and further attacks on the elves would not garner them aid here. Instead, he decided to challenge them. "And why should you care for the dictates of the Elves! This land was the land of Dale, an ally of the dwarves! A kingdom of men, of high towers, wide streets, wise people, skilled craftsmen! The toys of Dale fetched a high price

among even my folk, your woodwork and food of surpassing quality! And yet here you squat, willing to live off scraps? Willing to drink yourselves into ruin on the trade this man champions? When this lake could become a bastion of stability and strength? Where is your industry, where is your pride?!"

There were many more grumbles from the crowd at that, but most didn't seem to know what to think, and Percival sneered. "My trade in wine gives us stability. I put clothing on their backs, food in their family's bellies when this land could not sustain us. If not for the wine, where would we be, what would we do!"

"Fish, farm, build! When was the last time Lake-town grew! And yet wherever I look, I see people living two or three families to a single house!" Bard shouted, stepping forward in turn. "Where are our taxes spent, master of Lake-town? Where was the agreement with the elves to allow us access to some of their trees so that we could expand, which you have promised for years?"

"The elves and the wine are not the true enemies here. They are simply a symptom. A symptom of the fact that alas, you were left behind." Thorin sighed, releasing his prisoner and taking another step into the center of the square, turning to look out into the crowd, not just at Percival.

The prisoner made to scamper, but Dori grabbed his wrist, and while Thorin had gripped him in a vice of steel, Dori was just as implacable. The man tried to tug free of that gentle grip on his wrist, but Alfrid found it about as impossible as getting away from an iron hawser. This caused some laughter from the crowd and not a few jeers. Alfrid was not well-liked by the other people of the town but had been protected up to this point by his loyalty to the Master of Lake-town.

But it was Thorin who is the center of this stage, and he rose to the occasion. "Good people of Lake-town, I tell you this. We dwarves remember Dale! We dwarves remember how we, your people and mine, created something magnificent. Surely there are those among you who remember the tales of that time."

"There are, but we also remember the coming of Smaug in those tales!" Percival shouted back. "Smaug whose fire burned Dale from one side of our nation to another, Smaug who slaughtered our people, who that was attracted to these lands by your wealth! And where is that wealth now! It is Smaug's, never to be seen again!"

"Perhaps, but perhaps not. And perhaps, hope for the future is worth a bit of sweat and effort now! Percival says that he offers stability, and I will not gainsay that." Thorin used the man's name deliberately, making him flinch and more than a few people titter in laughter. "Yet stability can be just as crushing as the bootheel of any tyrant."

"I remember Dale," Thorin repeated, "and I would see you and your people raised to that status again. I am Thorin Oakenshield, son of Thrór, son of Thráin. I am rightful King under the Mountain, and I have come to reclaim what is mine!"

For a moment, Thorin's ringing oration drew silence, then there were cheers and screams of joy, pounding of feet and delight from the crowd. To Thorin's concealed surprise, the people didn't even think to question whether or not he could, in point of fact, claim the mountain or even whether or not Smaug was still alive. He could see those questions forming in Percival's face, but not in any of the watching crowd.

The cheering went on for some time, but Percival was not done yet, and he was no more willing to draw the ire of Smaug down on Lake-town than he was willing to draw the ire of the elves. "And what of Smaug! What of his wrath?! I see eleven dwarves here and one man, who might be an evil magic-user according to the message I got from my good friend, the king of the elves. But that is surely not enough to face the might of Smaug."

"In open combat, it would not be," Thorin replied instantly before that fear could move through the crowd. "But we do not intend to be open in our approach. I have a way into the mountain, unseen, unheard. A secret path that will allow us to surprise Smaug. Furthermore, we do, indeed, have magic. Fili! Kili. And we are not eleven dwarves and one human. We are thirteen dwarves, one hobbit, and one human."

On top of one of the roofs, Fili pulled off the invisibility cloak he and his brother had begun to share when they took up position watching the tableau below. Nearby Bilbo too appeared, moving around a chimney as if he had appeared from nowhere while beside him Kili matched his arrow, grinning viciously down the shaft towards Percival.

"We have guile, we have magic and cunning," Harry went on, moving to stand beside Thorin. "We have a sword whose poison is specially prepared to kill Smaug. All we require from you is food, animals to carry it, and certain spices and plants which our young friend Bilbo up there says we can use to deaden our smell to any animal, even that of a dragon."

"It is not bravado and a simple faith in destiny that led us here," Thorin continued, nodding to his friend. "It is not just the goal driving us ever onward, but a plan to gain that goal! What say you people? Will you throw off the shackles of your mediocre present, to grasp a brighter future?"

While the word mediocre might have gone over their heads, the majority of townsfolk certainly understood it by context, and several of the guards standing with Percival put down their weapons. Others gripped them even harder, backing away into the doorway of Percival's hall.

Percival was a decent politician and, above all, a survivor. Now looking around him, he knew that his small moment of forward momentum had been halted and reversed. The people were most decidedly on the dwarves' side. So he did what any good politician would. He abandoned one platform and hopped onto the next. "In that case, I have no objections. What would you wish of this town?"

That brought more cheering, but Bard stepped in, knowing when to strike while the metal was hot. "Hold! Hold! I agree with all the dwarves that said, I agree with their plan, the magics they have shown me. However, I think that we need to start our bright future now! By getting rid of Percival and his cronyism!"

Percival hissed, "You would betray me, Bard? I knew that you would eventually! You've always been a rabble-rouser!"

"To betray someone, you have to actually be on their side in the first place," Bard growled back. "My family have always served the people of this land. Not you." From there, Bard described many of the moments of incredibly poor leadership that could be laid at the feet of Percival, to the times when Percival had committed the next best thing to murder to keep his popularity among the people. He called forth names from the crowd, and those named came forward, attesting they had witnessed a

guard drowning a man for speaking out against Percival, or how there had never been any work done on the upkeep of the town, or how other people had suddenly found themselves in debt due to contracts none could remember signing.

By the time Bard finished, the crowd seemed ready to lynch the man on the spot, and all of his guards looked at that most dangerous moment of bravado. Their backs were metaphorically against the wall as they knew that the townsfolk understood they had been a party to much of Percival's misdeeds, yet they still had weapons in their hands. Against a mob of civilians who were unarmed for the most part.

Realizing this could go bad if the dwarves were forced to attack, Harry decided to do his part, and with a grimace, reached out with his scarred hands towards the guards. A transfiguration spell struck the weapons the guards carried one after another, shifting them into rope, the rope flopping in their hands to be flung to the ground in shock.

"At them!" Bard shouted, not letting his own surprise slow him down. He racing forward, to be joined by the majority of the men in the crowd.

Behind them, Thorin shouted, "I will have no lynch mobs! We will have the rule of law here! Just like in your ancestor's time. Capture them, do not kill them out of hand."

"Percival's the judge magistrate too!" shouted a voice from the crowd.

"Then we will have one of our own's go through his books. Anything and everything he has done we will discover. He will answer to it, by the law of Dale!" Thorin returned.

That won another cheer from the crowd, and finally, Bilbo, Fili and Kili came down from the rooftops.

Of course, that was only the start of their work in Lake-town. Thorin had examined the local weapons and deemed them unsuitable for even a short amount of time. Their armor was worse. So in return for teaching some of the blacksmiths in town, Thorin gained access to their Smithies. He put several of the other dwarves, Nori, Bifur, and Ori, to work with him. Kili was put in charge of patrolling the town and a group of young men who Bard had recommended to find a few individuals who apparently were toadies to Percival. They would be clapped in irons by the end of the day and forced to work for the town for a time.

Bilbo was true to his word. He asked Bard to introduce him to the local farmers, and they, along with Bofur and Dwalin as guards, had headed ashore. Nearby there were a series of farms, the vast majority of their land devoted to grapevines or bushes. Here Bilbo went to work eagerly, calling on Yavanna to bless his work as he spoke to the farmers and began to teach them how to really work with the land instead of trying to conquer it.

As he did, Bilbo felt lighter than he had for days. There was just something about working with the soil, he decided, getting to the roots of it all, he thought, before tying the pouch that contained the ring he had found during his meeting with Gollum tight at his waist. With that done, he got down to work.

Meanwhile, Bard worked with Balin and Fili to create a written contract between himself and the dwarves and the town and the dwarves. Beyond Bilbo and Thorin's work with the desperate crafters, everything else that the dwarves needed would be annotated on one parchment, to be paid for later. Bard's agreement to help them gain the aid of the town was on a second. And finally, a third was filled up by the agreement between Lake-Town and Erebor restored, a mutual defense treaty, and material aid in times of trouble, which the current times were.

Harry had been given a crutch by Oin and had watched Thorin for a time before heading back to Percival's hall. There he had watched the argument between Fili, Balin and Bard, reflecting that Fili had some hidden depths. He was not only a good people person but very good with contract work and verbiage.

Still, that didn't matter to Harry all that much, and with a sigh, he decided to get some rest. He passed another room, Percival's study as he went, only to stop and stare at the sight of Bombur chortling madly, a sound that was not for the faint of heart as he sat at Percival's desk, several rolls of parchment and books in front of him. "What are you laughing at, my big-boned friend?"

"Oh, just amused by the blindness of those who attempt to hide their perfidy in numbers, Harry," Bombur chuckled, tapping a finger down on some of the papers in front of him. "Honestly, it's as if you all think you invented it. The former Master of Lake-town was a very, very bad boy when it comes to taxes and funds. Still, I'll have it sorted by the end of the day."

"Make sure they send me some food!" he shouted at Harry's back as Harry, rolling his eyes, turned away. The nearest flat surface that wasn't likely to be trodden on was calling to him.

Around Harry, the whole town was filled with new energy and excitement. Tales were sung, stories of ancient times retold, and the people of Lake-town, for the first time since the destruction of Smaug's arrival, could feel honest hope again.

While Harry was resting, Bilbo ranged far afield of Lake-town, leaving behind his guards not seeing the point of them. After all, all Bilbo was doing was moving around and taking samples of the soil and plants already existing in the area. And besides, Bilbo had insisted, "If I run into trouble, I can either sneak or outrun it far better than you two!" when Dwalin had tried to argue with him.

This would turn out to be as important as Bard's original agreement to aid the dwarves in return for their aid in ousting Percival.

Bilbo had decided to take a break from gathering soil samples by climbing up an apple tree to see if any were edible. This tree was part of a small copse of such having been planted in some bygone era. It wasn't the right ground for them any longer, Bilbo reflected, hence why there were so few apples per tree and those that were there were small and somewhat sour. *And yet, there are possibilities elsewhere, perhaps nearer to a stream and more running water? The apple trees were at least three miles, perhaps more, away from the edge of the lake. Perhaps at one point, the lake was bigger? Regardless, I should take some of the seeds. With enough tillage, the area around the lake further to the south could...*

The hobbit's thoughts froze as did his body as he heard something nearby, where there should not have been anyone. He had left the dwarves behind, aiding a group of farmers who were moving some stones around in the hardened soil near Lake-town, as well as pulling several acres worth of vine bushes out to allow for another seasonal plant whose seeds Bilbo had found when he asked around the town. So there should not have been anyone nearby.

But as Bilbo looked, he saw a goblin, moving into the small area of trees, looking around sniffing the air. He was armed with a short bow and a dagger and looked around with beady, narrow eyes. *Where did he come from?!*

Slowly Bilbo reached down to the pouch with the ring in it, grasping the pouch, and very quietly flipping it open, reaching inside but not yet putting the ring on. He waited, watching as more goblins appeared, three of them, then seven orcs on their wargs, followed by more. Many of them were riding double saddle on their wargs. To Bilbo, they sounded angry as they grumbled and snarled at one another. Soon though, thanks perhaps to this double-saddle technique, there were at least fifty orcs and a further twenty-eight goblins.

One of the orcs was taller and stronger than the others, and he snarled orders in some dark tongue that Bilbo couldn't understand. They started to make camp falling asleep here and there while the goblins were pushed out to the edge of the copse of trees. Others started to move to the trees themselves, perhaps to take up guard posts. Bilbo decided he'd seen enough and slipped the ring on his finger, moving around the tree from where he had been hiding. Being very quiet and surefooted, making no more noise than an elf would, he was able to climb down, moving away from the goblins quietly and unseen.

As soon as he was out of the tree-line, Bilbo picked up speed, keeping the ring on his finger for now as he raced forward. *I have to get back and tell Thorin and Harry we're still being followed, curse it!*

When word reached Thorin and Bard, there was a lot of consternation, while Thorin thought murderous thoughts centered Azog and his unending enmity. *Will I never be free of that creature dogging our trail?*

As Bilbo relayed the numbers of the war band he had seen, more than a few of the humans looks terrified, but Bard was made of sterner stuff and took command of the meeting between the dwarves and the leading townsfolk, declaring, "This is not the first time we have dealt with raiders, it will not be the last! We will fight them as we have always fought. And if there are too many for us to fight, we can but cut the hawsers, and let the lake's currents pull us away."

Lake-town wasn't merely a coastal town. It was literally a floating town, tied to the lake's edge by large hawsers, and more by the two long wooden bridges that connected it to land, allowing access to the vineyards and small, scattered farms. Those bridges were

embedded in the earth beyond the edge of the water and were about a hundred yards in length and could be cut loose from the town side easily, just as easily as the ropes could.

Thorin held up a hand, looking at Bilbo. "Bilbo, were you seen?"

Bilbo looked affronted, shaking his head. "No, I'm certain of it. I was out of sight when they arrived, and then was able to get away when they started arguing with each other." Again, he made no mention of the ring. Something about it made Bilbo keep it secret even from his friends. Bilbo didn't even question it at this point. The ring was so useful but seemed too minor a thing really to bring up. That and Bilbo feared that the dwarves would mistrust it, coming from under Goblin-town as it had.

Thorin nodded slowly. "And you pulled in the farmers as you came in?"

Dwalin snorted. "When Bilbo ran up to us talking about orcs and goblins, most of the farmers fled to the town instantly. It was all we could do to stop them from causing a panic."

A few of the farmers looked a little shamefaced at that, but the others just shrugged their shoulders. They weren't fighters, after all. Indeed, they were just grape pickers for the most part, not even real farm owners or land-owners.

Thorin nodded slowly, then looked over at Bard. "Would you mind accompanying me? I would like to survey the land side of Lake-town."

"What are you thinking about, Thorin?" Harry asked, having been roused from his rest for this meeting.

"I am thinking that we should wipe this group out entirely," Thorin snarled, a bloodthirsty smirk appearing on his face. "And I think that with the Lake-town folk and surprise on our side, we should be able to do so."

There were some mutters and exclamations at that, but Bard slowly nodded. "You mean to trick them into attacking the town, then pin them in the area around the portcullis entrances."

Harry nodded slowly, understanding what Thorin was thinking. "How many archers are there in the town?"

There turned out to be quite a few. Over seventy men came forward saying that they knew how to shoot bows, with Bard nodding, indicating that he felt they were up to the task, though he also cautioned that their actual bows were not the best quality. About a hundred more men came forward indicating that they could hurl spears, and a dozen former guardsmen stepped forward, saying that they would be willing to fight in the front lines. The dwarves all accepted this, with Bofur and Kili going to work with the townsfolk on creating more arrows

and throwing spears while Harry, Thorin and Bard made plans. And Bilbo added his own piece to the trap...

OOOOOOO

In the townhouse that Percival had owned and in the area around it, the women, children and infirm among the townsfolk partied as if their lives depended on it. Seeing as this was part of the trap Thorin and Bard had cooked up, That might well be the case.

Harry and Balin watched the festivities, with Harry leaning against a nearby wall, his crutch unseen in his shadow. "So, do you think this plan will work?"

"Aye," Balin grunted. "Orcs are aggressive by nature, and this group's been trailing us for who knows how long. They'll want to finish it. Heh, and that Bard, he's a good head on his shoulders. Indeed, I think this plan is better than the one we've come up with for Smaug. Far less unknown variables at any rate."

"The poison within my sword will work," Harry answered after a moment, his tone thoughtful. "It is applying it to that is going to be the issue. I agree there's a lot of unknowns, but I think that Thorin's plans of steam, heat, and trying to deprive the beast of air to breathe will work as well as any. Although, there is one aspect that I am concerned about, and it concerns you, Thorin and the others."

Balin looked at Harry, indicating he should continue with a raised eyebrow. "When Thorin and I met with Elrond, he mentioned something about dragons tainting their horde. We'll have to be on the watch out for that. I know Thorin swore he would not let it affect him, but if the taint is so powerful that Elrond feared its impact, we need to be aware of it."

"That is, what was the phrase Bard used this morning, rather like putting the horse before the donkey, isn't it?" Balin chuckled. "Although I do truly enjoy your optimism. Still... I will be on the lookout for any behaving strangely once we enter Erebor."

Harry's nodded, then looked down at his leg wincing a little. The wound hadn't festered, but it certainly wasn't healing just yet, barely a day after he had gained it. Still, with a crutch, Harry could move along well enough and would do so. There was no way he was going to sit out tonight's activities.

He stared up at the sky, seeing the stars, smiling slightly in delight at the sight. "The first night we've had free of Mirkwood." He sighed. "I liked Elrond and Rivendell, and of course the Lady as well. I even liked most of Elrond's elves we met. They were good people. And so, too, were at least a few in Mirkwood. But there... well, I, I suppose that when the king goes sour, the kingdom is sure to follow."

Balin opened his mouth to reply, only to close it, and Harry realized he wasn't looking at Harry but over his shoulder. Harry had sixteen years to get used to how his luck worked, and he raised one hand to pinch at his nose, shaking his head. "One of the elves is behind me, aren't they?"

"Two of them in point of fact," Balin answered, now looking somewhat amused. "Remind me to speak most harshly to Bard and Kili. However did they get this far into the town without being challenged?"

"And one of them is Tauriel," Harry grunted, still pinching his nose.

“One of them is indeed,” Tauriel announced herself, hopping down behind Harry, and Harry turned to look at her before she swung her palm around, cracking it into the back of Harry’s head just once, shaking her head as she did so. “That was for what we both know you accidentally walked into, and you’re muzzling me. Considering the first as an accident, I believe that it and the muzzling are now paid for.”

“I did indeed deserve that,” Harry acknowledged with a dry chuckle, bowing to her slightly from the waist. “And I would ask you to forgive my impertinence, my lady, except you seem to have followed me with the intention of taking me back? So instead, I will simply ask you to look up.”

From a nearby rooftop, Kili, who had heard the crack of skin on skin, waved cheerily at the two elves who, among all the others, had been the least annoying while they were all kept captive by their king. However, an arrow was notched to his bow, and it was pointed directly at Legolas, even as Kili smiled at the tableau. Other archers also appeared around him, looking confused, shocked and annoyed at the two elves in the middle of their town.

“Might I ask why those humans and your dwarven companion is up there?” Tauriel inquired, showing no fear, only wariness. “Surely you did not think we were following you? Yet we saw many of your fellows and the humans moving around, seemingly ready for battle.”

“We seem to have an infestation of orcs about to descend on us. Although the fact you two were able to sneak in does not make me happy.” With that, Harry moved to a nearby chair, sitting down heavily, grimacing as he touched his leg. “And the timing of the orcs is still up in the air.”

Instantly, both Tauriel and Legolas were kneeling beside him, looking down at his leg in concern. Both elves could see as good at night as in the day and could easily see Harry’s wound. “You are hurt! By one of the orcs? An arrow from one of their fell bows?” Legolas asked quickly.

“It’s not so much a fell bow as a foul arrow,” Harry quipped, patting the wound. “Oin tells me they poison their shafts.”

“Then how are you still...”

“The same poison that is on my blade works through my system,” Harry interrupted Tauriel. “I’m pretty much immune to any lesser poisons.” He then smiled thinly. “But I take it you two weren’t all that interested in dragging us back?”

“No, and if we were before, we are not now,” Legolas sighed. “I would not wish to fight an entire town to simply drag you back when you truly have not done much wrong in my own eyes. My loyalty to my father does not equate to being suicidal. But what is this orcish infestation you were speaking of?”

“Well, elf, I think you’re going to find out,” Balin murmured, as he saw Kili start to wave his hands frantically, relaying a signal from the outer wall facing the shoreline. “The play is one lad and lass, best we move to our places.”

OOOOOOO

That night, the goblins snuck through the surrounding territory on their wargs, their noses to the wind, while behind them, the orcs came, their own wargs also sniffing the air. In the center, Bolg sat on his wolf in the center of the pack, snarling out orders as they spread out.

There weren't even any guards visible on the outer wall of the Lake-town, and Bolg shook his head with an irritated snarl as he stared at the town from the nearby shoreline. Only a few of the goblins could swim, and the lake became deep very, very quickly. So even to get to the side of Lake-town, you would have to swim for it.

But those sides were almost completely open, a few houses abutted the edge of Lake-town providing walls that would have to be avoided, but that was all. If the orcs had been able to attack from the sides, they could've easily gotten into the town. But facing the shoreline was a wall, backing up the two long wooden bridges leading into the town via two gates. They weren't being protected, which was a good thing supposed, but they made Bolg wary.

He gestured the goblins forward on them, watching as the short, weak creatures nervously urged their wargs onto the bridges, which rocked under their feet slightly. They sniffed the air, then moved forward slowly, coming to the side of the wall and peering inside.

Here the wargs ran into trouble. They started to whine and whimper, pawing at their noses and twisting this way and that. The goblins too could smell it, an overwhelming stench of fish, so strong it was painful for the wargs. It meant the warg's enhanced sense of smell was useless here.

Yet the goblins kept control of their creatures and peered around, finding that they couldn't see very well given the number of houses that were crammed all around them. There were only four pathways forward, though, two along the walls, and two leading deeper inland. Yet even along those routes, they couldn't see very far, given they all seemed to turn just out of sight.

Still, the goblins couldn't see people moving about. And even better, they could hear the sounds of merrymaking deeper in. It sounded as if the whole town had gathered deeper in to have a party.

Snearing at one another, the goblins nodded, turning back quickly, racing back to Bolg to report what they had discovered. "...but the town is large mighty Bolg. Many hundreds of manlings, perhaps."

"Then the spoils will be all the more," Bolg growled. "Forward. The orcs will lead the way. You goblins will bring up the back and spread out once we are within the town. Remember, the wizard must be found and taken for the Master. The others must be killed. I want Oakenshield's head to give to Azog!"

Bolg led the way, his massive sword out in one hand, a dagger in the other as he urged his wolf forward with just his legs. The beast balked hard at the entrance to the portcullis, whimpering and pulling back from this man-made thing that looked so much like a jaw and from the smell of fish. But with his prize is so close once more, Bolg threw all caution to the wind. The dwarves were battered, the wizard no doubt poisoned and on his deathbed. They had to complete this mission and return with the wizard alive. Or the master would flay them all. He urged his warg forward with a smack of his sword hilt on its head and gestured his orcs and goblins into the town.

The mixed band of orcs and goblins moved into the town quickly, spreading out and moving forward, slowly losing sight of one another in the warren of Lake-town. When this happened, groups of goblins began to climb up the nearest rooftops, only to find themselves facing the guards' pikes thrusting down into their faces.

Behind Bolg, Bilbo sat hiding within the gatehouse between the two portcullis entrances, hidden by the ring. As the shout of "Erebor! Erebor and Dale!" rang out, he hopped to his feet and threw his full weight against the pulley system that controlled the portcullis gates.

The two portcullis grates slammed down while a dozen men raced up from boats that had been hiding in the darkness between houses. They raced forward and began climbing up ropes onto the wall. A simple two-story wooden palisade, there was normally only one way onto the wall, the now barred and heavily barricaded gatehouse Bilbo was hiding in.

From the walls, these men began to shoot down first at the goblins that had yet to enter the town. The plan was to wipe out these attackers, and the goblins provided most of the warband's long-range power. Bard himself took three of them, hurling off the invisibility cloak that Harry had given him, as he stood between the two gates, killing the farthest goblins away from the gates, before turning his attention into the town.

The town's interior had been greatly changed since that afternoon, although the goblins, not having seen it before, could perhaps be excused from not noticing. Before, tiny boats, small bridges and a few barges had connected the walkways to another in a haphazard fashion allow for easy access and travel through the town. Now, there was only water and the walkways for more than half the town from the shore-side. The few normal walking streets had also been blocked by large barricades or random junk and wooden flotsam just out of sight from the gates.

Most of those tiny boats had been pulled backward, tied into position well beyond the entranceway, creating platforms for the spearmen to attack the groups of goblins and orcs from long-range as they pressed into the town. The rest of the archers were on the roofs, helping the pikemen keep the goblins from ascending to them, led by Kili, and now Legolas and Tauriel.

Knowing now that this was a trap, Bolg snarled, turning and racing back towards the portcullis. As it snapped shut, he leaped off of his wolf, slapping it in the side and snarling, "Charge!"

The orcs obeyed instantly, racing in a single direction down the nearest walkway, straight at the barricade there with the few warg riders in the lead, leaping upwards onto the top of the barricades. Other wargs began to panic, the smell and the unfamiliar area causing their animal minds to go wild, forcing the orcs and goblins to fight their own mounts just as much as the enemy.

Yet the orcs knew that if they could hack the barricades aside, they could get to grips with the humans. And these were but townsfolk. None of them would stand against the might of an orc in close-combat. Not even with the dwarves with them.

As they did, spears and arrows began to land in amongst them, killing wolves, goblins and even a few of the orcs as they charged. But the barricades didn't move, and the wargs who got onto the top of the barricades found their legs being cut out from under them. Thorin led the defense personally here, hacking one warg out of his way, stabbing the orc riding it and hurling both back down into the mass below. "Baruk Khazad! Khazad Ai Durin Nur!" He shouted, Orcrist flashing down, hacking into an orc's head.

Beside him, Ori, Gloin and Bofur fought too, while behind them, a few townsfolk thrust forward with long spears. The added height and defense of the barricade, which Harry had transfigured into a single piece for a time, allowed the dwarves to completely dominate the orcs at the point of attack. Elsewhere on the other walkways, Fili, Dwalin and Balin led the others in similar defenses.

This, and the fact that the warband had been broken up and strung out as they entered the town, meant the orcs and goblins were in a death trap. They couldn't even escape by breaking down doors or walls, the doors of the buildings around them backed by further, if smaller blockades.

Sensing the battle quickly turning against his forces, Bolg turned aside, determined now to escape himself if he couldn't win through. Moving along the outer walkway towards the battle occurring there. But instead of joining the assault on that position, Bolg leaped upward, a prodigious that allowed him to reach up with one hand to grab the side of the parapet and pull himself upwards, a show of strength few could have matched.

Rolling onto the balustrade, Bolg grunted as an arrow took him in the arm, but he still lashed out with his sword as he came up from his roll in a crouch. The human who had been standing nearby cried out as his feet were cut from underneath them, collapsing off of the parapet to the road below, where he cracked his head before rolling into the water to one side, his arrow going over Bolg's head.

Then another arrow hit Bolg in the back, coming from the rooftops, and he stumbled.

Another human was on the wall nearby and turned as his fellow screamed. Now he fumbled with an arrow of his own, his eyes wide and pale in the moonlight as he saw the orc

looming in the darkness. He placed it on the string and pulled it back before Bolg charged, but then he dropped his weapon, turning to run away, but he didn't get far. The orc cut him down from behind and then made to leap over the wall, trusting that figuring out how to swim would be easier than facing an entire town of manlings.

As he did, two more arrows hit him, causing Bolg to stumble as they punched through his plate armor. A third arrow struck him in the side of the neck, puncturing straight through from one side to the other. Bolg gasped, his fingers going up to his throat, as he collapsed, freedom still seeming just a single jump away even as his strength failed him.

Bolg turned, staring as yet another human moved across the parapet towards him, his face set in a rictus of hate, and yet another arrow on his string. Bolg tried to lift his weapon, tried to push himself to his feet, yet could barely snarl in defiance, as Bard the Bowman put another arrow into them, right through his forehead.

The orcs who had raced forward to crash into the barricades on the streets, anxious to get through and into the humans rather than stay in the killing zone around the gates, were also being overwhelmed now. The barricades hadn't broken on their charge. Instead, they had rebounded, and the dwarves on top of the barricades were now hacking down at them with short and pike heads, swords and spears. The wargs were all dead. The goblins hacked off the walls before they could gain the roofs. Dwalin and Fili had already led a charge down onto the orcs, slaughtering the remainder facing them and taking the group attacking Balin's position in the rear.

And now, from one of the rooftops overlooking the center of the killing zone, their final doom approached.

Harry moved from where he had been hiding with Legolas and Tauriel, staring down into this busy street below. He then raised a hand, a hand gestured. A Bombarda lashed out, exploding among the orcs, hurling them this way and that. And then, Balin and Fili's forces crashed into the survivors from behind, hacking and slashing at the remaining goblins and orcs.

Soon enough, the entire battle was over. Surprise, lack of room to maneuver, and with numbers on the side of the defenders, for once, had allowed Thorin and Bard to organize a one-sided massacre.

As the last orc fell and was then kicked into the water to sink, never to be seen again, there was a moment of silence. Then from his position on the wall, Bard shouted, "For Dale! For Dale, Erebor and the Alliance!"

This shout was taken up, along with the shout of "King under the mountain!" And even the two elves cheered, although shouting like that was not something their people normally did even in moments like this.

The final tally was twelve injured and two dead among the townsfolk. The battles to keep the goblins off of the rooftops had been fierce but quick, and a few of the pikemen had been injured at that point by the arrows of the orcs and weapons of the goblins. At the same time, arrows had also caused injuries among the spear-hurlers before the goblins had been dealt with. But the only dead had been the two that Bolg had slain, the ambush having been planned to thoroughly remove the strengths of the attackers. His ability to leap that high had come as a surprise. Indeed, if the other orcs had been similarly capable, they might well have been able to get away, or at least ascend to the walls and wipe out the archers there. Maybe even get behind Balin and Fili's barricades.

But all in all, Thorin's plan had worked a treat, and, as the last of the orcs were kicked into the waters of the lake, the air about the time was jubilant. Soon enough, the mock party that had been going on in the main townhouse became a real one, spreading out quickly. Meanwhile, Legolas, Tauriel and Oin quickly began to care for the wounded along with a few of the locals who thought themselves skilled in healing, making certain that the rules didn't fester.

Several hours later, they were done. Between them, the elves had made certain that none of the wounded would succumb to their injuries or the poison and vileness in the arrows and weapons of the orcs and goblins always carried.

"All done then?" a voice asked from nearby, and she turned to look at Harry, leaning on his crutch as he looked at her.

Narrowing her eyes, Tauriel peremptorily gestured Harry down to a nearby cot. "You shouldn't be standing," she said sternly.

Smirking slightly, Harry didn't obey her peremptory command, instead motioning Tauriel out of the house that had been turned into a hostel for the wounded. "I will sit when we find someplace to sit together."

Leaning on his crutch, Harry walked slowly through the town with Tauriel, the two of them silent for a time. Tauriel was looking up at the stars and the moon, smiling faintly at the sight of them. All elves, regardless of their origin, took special delight in the stars and the moon.

Meanwhile, Harry was looking around the town in pleasure. The hope and energy he had seen grow within the townsfolk throughout the day seemed to have solidified into something deeper with the victory over the enemy warband. A few people were mourning the dead, but even they were ecstatic at what their fellows had accomplished. A war band of that size could have done a lot of damage if they had taken the town unawares, and many remembered a time that, when faced with a similar attack, the town had simply been cut loose from the shore, retreating out into the lake. Yet this time, the townsfolk's strength, combined with the dwarven strength and ingenuity, had seen them win the day. And for simple townsfolk, that was something to be **very** proud of.

Eventually, the two came to the main square, where the party was in full swing. Both took one look at it, then looked at one another and shook their heads. "Too noisy." Harry was all for noisy parties normally. He had a lot of them when the Gryffindor Quidditch team won back home, but right now, with his leg the way it was, he wasn't in the mood.

"Indeed," Tauriel agreed.

The two of them retreated a bit, finding a series of chairs set out on the porch, currently unused. Harry sat down, and after a moment's hesitation, Tauriel did the same. "We will have to be leaving soon," Tauriel began without preamble. "Legolas will be missed by the king if he is gone for overlong."

"And you?"

Tauriel paused at the simple question, staring up at the stars once more. "...I would rather like to travel. But now is not the time. There are troubles at home. The spiders, the Necromancer behind them, the sickness that has grown in the forest due to his touch. Our borders are not secure, and until they are, as a Captain of the Unseen Host, I cannot look for adventure elsewhere. No matter how much I would prefer to do so."

"Duty," Harry slowly nodded. "I know that tune, even if I've never been all that loyal to governments in general. People though, yes." Shaking his head, Harry said, "But have you really never been out of the woods before? That's rather sad."

"Your opinion of the woods is biased," Tauriel retorted tartly, a faint smile taking some of the sting out of her words. "Moreover, you came across Mirkwood, rather than lengthwise. Even one of my folk would need to travel for weeks before reaching the edges of the forest in either direction. You humans, with your limited endurance, and your inability to let live off the land as efficiently as my folk would take even longer."

"Careful Madam, your arrogance is showing." Tauriel snorted at that, and Harry moved on. "That's true enough. And well, while I enjoyed some of the sites I saw in the forest..." he didn't put any particular emphasis on those words, but for some reason, both he and Tauriel started to flush a little before he moved on hurriedly, "I rather think that for the most part, I saw the worst of the forest had to offer, with none of the best to offset it."

Tauriel nodded. "Would you like that? To explore the forest?"

"That would depend on the timing, whether or not I was free to do so, and perhaps the company on hand," Harry answered after a few moments of silence, turning to look at her.

Tauriel smiled at that and nodded. "Hopefully, after all of this is over, and you have proven that you and your dwarven companions are not insane, my king will relent."

Harry's face stiffened, and Tauriel winced. "I really don't fucking care what your king thinks," Harry bit out harshly. Then he breathed in deeply, grabbing his self-control with both hands and dispelling his anger. "I am sorry. I shouldn't curse in front of a lady, but your king... I don't want to talk about Thranduil right now."

"Very well, nor do I," Tauriel answered hurriedly. No good could come of talking about Thranduil with Harry.

"But if I am to come to your land, he would have to at least give me leave, or you would have to hide me away somehow. I do not want to be a wedge between you and your king or your people's," Harry went on, shaking his head.

"I understand. But we will have to see. Perhaps if the darkness to the south is dealt with by the White Council, I will feel free enough to set aside my captaincy, but not before."

"And, when my friends and I reclaim the mountain, and Thranduil decides that he doesn't like the idea of a strong dwarven kingdom reemerging on his borders?"

"I thought we were not talking about my king," Tauriel asked lightly, yet the tightness of her eyes and her lack of answer spoke for itself.

Harry chuckled at that, nodding his head, and the two fell silent for a bit before Harry spoke up once more. "What would you like to do? If you can set aside your duty? If nothing else happens between your people and my friends? The lady Galadriel told me to see out Lothlorien once I was finished helping Thorin, and I agreed to do so." He smirked, a faraway smile on his face. "Twice over, in point of fact. So that will be my next destination, once Thorin is installed as King Under the Mountain, Smaug dead, and their defenses capable of standing up for themselves."

"That is a journey I would like to take as well. The Lady Galadriel's lands have long been sung of among my people. To see them for myself would be a treat." Tauriel nodded before blinking in shock as she realized that she did indeed think that day would come. Harry and the dwarves would see their mission through.

"Then I believe we have a plan," Harry said with a chuckle reaching out to take her hand and squeezing it gently. "If that is, I, um, I am not reading too much into the idea that you would like to travel with me?"

Tauriel looked at him, then slowly nodded. "I believe that, too, is something I would enjoy."

At that point, Harry nodded and, still holding her hand, turned to look up at the stars. "My own people had a class called Astronomy, you know. I always enjoyed some of the stories behind the various constellations. Do you have any such here?"

“Of course, although the way you use stories seems to imply the reasons for the names behind this or that constellation is made up. Here it is not. Tell me of the stars where you come from, and I will tell you what we Sindar elves know of the stars. It is perhaps the most important thing we share with the Noldor and the Vanyar.”

This conversation continued for some time. Tauriel laughed aloud at the idea of a dipper being so memorialized in the stars, while Harry learned about the work of Varda, wife of Manwë, in setting the stars in their places, the unsullied light of creation, which Morgoth had never touched. He only interrupted once, exclaiming aloud, “You laughed at the idea of a Dipper, but what is the difference between a dipper and a Valacirca (Sickle) being so immortalized?” to which Tauriel laughed gaily.

But alas, Tauriel had been correct, and Legolas soon came up them at that point, having been spending time speaking to Bard, making a new, less one-sided trade agreement than his father had been able to create for the wine his people so enjoyed. He paused for a moment, watching the human and elven woman speaking before shaking his head and finally setting aside the last of his desire to court Tauriel. It was obvious his childhood friend was quite taken by the human. What would come of it he did not know, but he would cease his own pursuit of her.

That wasn't to say that Legolas would let Tauriel join the dwarves in their mad venture, however. Not with Smaug's anger being such a potent threat. *Or my father's fury.* “Tauriel, we should be leaving soon, unless we want to be caught away from the forest another day. My father is already searching for us.”

Sighing, Tauriel nodded and stood up, looking back at Harry, who looked up at her in turn. “Farewell, for now, Harry Potter.”

“Farewell, for now, Tauriel,” Harry replied just as formally.

He watched them go, unable to stop his eyes from going down her body to her swaying hips for a second before shaking his head. *Damn.*

He was then startled as Kili's voice sounded out from nearby, followed by Balin. “Come on, man! There was no kissing, no heartfelt farewells! You didn't even ask to exchange promise gifts as we dwarves would. I thought humans were all about forward momentum and passions.”

“We are so disappointed in you, Harry,” Balin jibed, moving to sit next to his human friend, clapping him on the shoulder as he did. “You should at least have exchanged Promise Gifts. Although admittedly among our folk, it is the woman who offers such first.”

Kili groaned mockingly, leaning against the nearby wall. “Seriously, you spent most of the time talking about the stars. It's romantic, I'll grant you, but only for the first five minutes or so, not for half the night.”

“Yeah, that was kind of funny,” Harry laughed, not taking their ribbing seriously. “Who knew that that astronomy course I took would come in handy. And as for your point, Kili, I don't think elves go into passionate leave-takings. Nor do I think material possessions matter overmuch to their courtship.” Harry's eyes widened then, as he realized he had just tacitly admitted that he was interested in Tauriel and hastily added. “B, besides, I still think you all are seeing too much into this.”

“Say that to the grin you're wearing, Harry, me lad,” Balin rejoined, chuckling, while Kili just laughed, causing Harry to blush, visible even in the light of the stars.

OOOOOOO

Gandalf woke up. That in and of itself was not unusual. Indeed Gandalf rather liked waking up normally. It meant he was still alive. *But in this case, being alive might well be the signal of the start of further trouble.* Opening his eyes, Gandalf found himself in a cage to one side of a patio area overlooking a vast opening in the ground within the old fortress of Dol Guldur. Below, what looked like the last portion of an army marched out.

And this was not a slathering horde. This was an army, with ranks upon ranks of orcs, groups of riders interspersed by infantry, all of them heavily armed and armored, just like the ones he had seen in the hidden caverns underneath the fortress. The sight made him clench his teeth angrily, a fact which may have saved him from biting off his own tongue a second later as a voice like nails on the chalkboard battered into his mind from one side of where he was hanging.

"YOU WITNESS THE START OF MY RISE TO POWER ONCE MORE, OLORIN. THIS ARMY IS THE MATCH OF ANY IN THIS WORLD IN THESE DAYS OF WEAKNESS OF MAN AND ELVES. I HAD THOUGHT TO SEND IT AGAINST THRANDUIL, TO WIPE CLEAR ALL OTHER RACES AND SLOWLY EXPAND FROM HERE, FORCING YOU ALL TO PAY IN BLOOD TO OUST ME. BUT INSTEAD GANDALF, YOU HANDED ME SUCH AN INTERESTING PUZZLE. THOSE STONES YOU WERE CARRYING, WITH CARVINGS INTO THEM GLEAMING WITH ODD MAGIC. YOU RECEIVED THEM FROM THE YOUNG SHARA'BURZUM'KAR (Man Born of Darkness) WIZARD DID YOU NOT?"

Gandalf did not turn to look at the owner of that voice. He knew if he did, he would be overcome. The sight and the voice would be too much. Instead, Gandalf clenched his eyes tightly, hissing out the words, “You will have nothing from me, Sauron!” He made the name and epithet. “That name serves you well, doesn't it?! It has served you for so long, do you even remember your own name, The Abhorred!? You are forever cast out from the light, your old name forgotten, forever seen as something to despise!”

For a moment, there was a heat flash from one side of Gandalf, as Sauron dealt with his anger at Gandalf's words. Indeed, one of the things that Sauron regreted most was that in

servicing Morgoth, his original name as a Maiar of Aulë had been purposefully removed from him by his former lord. Since then, he had been Sauron, the Abhorred in the language of the Valar.

But then, Sauron seems to regain control of himself. **"KUU'GLOB (old fool), DO YOU THINK I CARE OF YOUR OPINIONS OF ME? DO YOU THINK I CARE OF THE OPINIONS OF THOSE WHO YOU SERVE SO DOCILELY THE VALAR WHO HAVE TURNED THEIR BACK ON MIDDLE EARTH? LIKE A DOG YOU RUN HITHER AND YON, EAGER TO BEND TO THEIR WILL. YET HERE IN MIDDLE EARTH, IT IS I WHO AM THE POWER, I WHO WILL BRING ORDER! THE POWERS BEYOND THE SEA WILL NEVER COME AGAIN. AND ONLY THEY COULD DELIVER THIS WORLD FROM MY RESURRECTION. IT IS INEVITABLE..."**

Abruptly the voice changed, becoming a drill trying to force its way into Gandalf's mind, crashing against his mental defenses like a wave on the shore. **"THE YOUNG SHARA'BURZUM'KAR! HIS STRANGE MAGIC, HIS POWERS, THE RUNES OF POWER THAT YOU WERE CARRYING. WHERE DID HE COME FROM? WHO DOES HE SERVE?"**

These questions reverberated through Gandalf's mind, going round and round as Sauron's power poured into Gandalf's. But Gandalf bore through, clenching his eyes tight, as blood began to drip from his nose, eyes, and mouth. "I will not, I will not!"

"I ALREADY KNOW WHERE HE IS OLORIN. MY ARMY WILL BRING HIM TO ME. MY ARMY WILL MEET WITH SMAUG, AND WITH HIS FIRES I WILL CREATE A NEW POWER, ONE THAT NO POWER ON MIDDLE EARTH CAN OVERCOME. I SHALL HAVE HIS MAGIC GANDALF, HIS POWERS, HIS KNOWLEDGE. SAVE YOURSELF SOME PAIN, GIVE ME WHAT I WANT TO KNOW!"

"Never! By the power of Manwë and Varda the fair, you will have nothing from me!" Gandalf shrieked in response, his skin flaring white like a fire was just barely covered by his skin as his power as a Maia rose to defend his sanity.

Sauron retreated for a second, and this time feeling a slight bit of pain. Although he had decried them, the names of the Valar still held power here in Middle Earth, especially when spoken by one of the Wise themselves. But this simply made him angrier, and he bore down once more, attempting to break Gandalf's will. **"YOU WILL BREAK OLORIN. I WILL HAVE WHAT YOU KNOW."**

Eventually, even Gandalf the Gray would have broken. If it was a contest of will, perhaps Gandalf could have thrown Sauron off, but there was a limit to how much of his power Gandalf could use in his current raiment, and Sauron was far more powerful than Gandalf in terms of raw magical strength. However, this process was interrupted, as there was a crack of thunder, and the side of the square overlook where Gandalf was being held shattered.

Through the haze of dust walked Saruman and Elrond. They looked at Gandalf where he was hanging, and their faces went blank and grim before they turned to look at the blazing eye

that hovered by one side, the Iris of which looked like an armored man standing in the flame. "That would only have been true if Gandalf stood alone. He does not, and never will." Saruman intoned calmly.

"And as for the rest of you," Elrond growled, a sword in his hand almost like it had been teleported there, gleaming with magical light. "You all should have stayed dead!" shouted as the Ringwraiths attacked.

All but one were here, and they all attacked, trying to drive Elrond and Saruman back, only to be pushed onto the back foot as their weapons and stats crackled with energy. One of them died instantly, dissipating to a blow from Saruman's staff as he shouted out a word of command in the language of the Valar. A second later, he held up a hand, making a slight motion in the air to one side of him.

Behind Saruman came Gandalf's staff, flinging itself through the air, to where Gandalf grabbed it out of the air, smashing it down onto the bottom of the cage. The cage floor broke, and Gandalf reached forward, grabbing at the remnants of the metal circle around the edge of the floor, flinging himself forward to roll along the ground of the overlook. He stumbled to his knees but still raised his staff in front of him, creating a shield of air as one of the Ringwraiths went for him before wearily pushing himself to his feet, glaring defiance at the ancient ghost of a dead human king.

"ENOUGH OF THIS!" Sauron shouted, and suddenly his willpower bore down at all three. Saruman flinched, and Elrond turned, his ring hand gleaming for a moment before he stumbled another step backward as Sauron's power crashed over them like a wave, sending them back as Gandalf collapsed to his knees again. A second later, the five Ringwraiths charged in once more, their dread blades raised.

But then there was a blast of answering power, and the pressure against the trio faded. Instantly Elrond leaped forward, engaging four of the Ringwraiths as Saruman went to aid Gandalf.

Behind them, Galadriel walked through the opening. Ignoring the combat all around her, she moved directly towards the eye, even when one of the Ringwraiths went for her, her hand flashing up. "Begone!" she ordered, and from her hand, a star was born.

The flash of power was such that it flung Elrond and the others to their knees and blasted the remaining Ringwraiths to nothing, but that was merely the backlash of the assault that crashed into Sauron. He shrieked in pain and agony as Galadriel attacked him with her magic and will, showing the power of one a princess of the Noldor, daughter of the High King beyond the Sea, the power of one who had walked with the Valar and Maiar both. And one who wielded the power of one of the three rings of Elvenkind, Narya, the Ring of Adamant.

That sight, the white star glowing from Galadriel's outstretched hand, caused Sauron just as much mental pain as her assault. He had always coveted the Rings of Elvenkind, which were forged in secret from him. But he could not overcome her assault. Such was her power that only with his own ring on his finger could he have matched Galadriel of Lothlorien, one of the greatest of the Noldor, wielding Nenyá.

Sauron shrieked in agony and then retreated, his presence shrinking, becoming a fiery bolt of fell magic that disappeared into the distance.

As he faded, Galadriel turned to the others and smiled at them gently before almost collapsing from exhaustion, only to be caught by Elrond. Behind Galadriel came two more elves. These were Elrond's sons Elrohir and Elladan, called here by their father. Now they went to their knees beside Galadriel. When they realized that their grandmother was well, they moved swiftly to Gandalf, nodding to Saruman in respect as they did.

"We have driven Sauron off, but he must be pursued!" Galadriel gasped.

"Leave that to me," Saruman growled, gripping his staff tightly. "You weakened him dearly, my lady. I will finish Sauron off if anyone can."

"But we must take heed of what he said to me," Gandalf said, gripping Elladan's wrist with surprising strength, causing the young elf to grimace slightly even as he put an arm around the older man's shoulders, heaving him to his feet. "He is going after the dwarves and Harry, after Smaug. We cannot let Smaug contact..."

"Even as the elves travel, we would not arrive there in time to do anything in the battle against Smaug. I sensed Harry once more using his powers, in a town, near the mountain," Galadriel gasped. She looked at her two grandsons, however, pointing at them then looking over at Elrond.

He nodded and hopped to his feet as well. "I will see to the lady Galadriel. You two will go with Gandalf. Find Harry and the dwarves. Do what you can to help them stave off that host we all saw leaving a moment ago." The group had arrived about ten minutes before Sauron had started to torture Gandalf, but it had taken them a while to get to the lookout where Gandalf had been kept. And while Galadriel, Saruman and Elrond could have done something to the last group of the army to leave, they would have been discovered and been too exhausted to face Sauron. It had been a calculated risk which had paid off for now.

"Should we contact Thranduil for aid?" Elrohir asked.

"They should already be aware, but yes," Gandalf said, standing on shaking legs but unwilling to rest.

Saruman nodded and then moved quickly, bowing to them all. "I will start my own hunt now. Good luck to all of you and to me as well."

The other Council members nodded at him, and Elrond gently helped his mother-in-law to her feet, putting one arm around her waist as his sons moved off with Gandalf, ready to aid him in turn.

OOOOOOO

Early in the morning, Thorin and company prepared to set out for the Lonely Mountain. They would be leaving behind a newly reinvigorated and renamed town of Esgaroth, with Bard in charge. At first, Bard had indicated that he should probably come with them, but he had decided to place his trust and the dwarves to repay the aid they had been given and was also leery about leaving when Percival was still alive.

"The man is tricky and still has friends among the populace of the town. Trying him in an open court will allow him to have his say, and his voice has always been a dangerous tool," Bard said to Thorin, as the other companions finished looking over the two donkeys they had been given, making certain all the packages were tied down. Most were the herbs that Bilbo had insisted they bring, arrows for Kili, and weapons. Most of the foodstuffs had been placed in Harry's mokeskin pouch, along with several new rune-carving tools and pieces of stone for said work.

Thorin slowly nodded, looking around at his friends and family. "Agreed, they are your people Bard, lead them. When I have reclaimed Erebor, we will send a message to you at that point. You or one of your representatives can come to claim the initial payment. But you are certain that your messenger to my folk in the iron Hills will be able to get through to Dain?"

Bard nodded firmly. "Joseph is a good man, and he and his two sons will make it there for certain. They are the best we have when it comes to horsemanship and trailblazing. I'm sad to see them go if I'm honest, I could use their help here."

"That is always the way of a leader. There are never enough truly competent people around," Thorin commiserated.

Nearby, Harry grumbled as he was hoisted up onto a donkey, wincing as the impact to his thigh stung his wound. He had told them all he could walk, but the dwarves were not impressed by his attempt to tough it out. They weren't willing to leave Harry behind, but they also weren't willing to let Harry hurt himself further.

Bilbo finally joined them, at that point, waving farewell to a few of the farmers, who had insisted he join them for breakfast. The hobbit had made quite a name of himself in a single day among them, and Bard chuckled, gesturing with a finger towards the curly-haired hobbit. "Are

you certain that I cannot interest you in leaving Mr. Baggins behind?" he asked jokingly. "He knows more about soil and planting than anyone our farmers have ever met."

"And I thank you for your kindness. Indeed, I would like to stay for a bit, make certain your farmers follow my instructions. But I am part of this company, and I will see it through," Bilbo announced firmly.

He was clapped on the back by several of the dwarves for that, as the others started to move towards the gates.

The whole town had once again turned out for the dwarves and their two companions. Dozens were lining the wall facing the edge of the lake. Hundreds more lined the way both within the town and on the lakeshore, shouting their farewells.

The dwarves took it stoically, save for Ori and Kili, who waved back and hammed it up quite a bit, whereas Harry just nodded his head to a few of the locals he'd met personally, trying hard not to be embarrassed by the fact that he was the only one currently riding a donkey.

Thankfully for Harry, they soon left the crowd behind and moved deeper into the no-man's-land around the Lonely Mountain. And as they went, Harry stared up at it, taking in the daunting size of the thing. The dwarves two had stopped, staring up at it as the cheers of the townsfolk dwindled behind them.

"So close," Balin murmured. "So close, yet still we have so much work to do."

Thorin grunted at that, then gestured them on. "Onward." A thin, grim smile crossed his face for a moment. "We have but two weeks left before the end of summer, and I want us in position in front of that door long before the last light shines upon it."

The other dwarves all nodded but didn't turn away from their mountain home, staring up at it even as their feet began to carry them forward once more to whatever awaited them.

End Chapter

And now on to Smaug!! That might be a medium-sized chapter. We will see. Regardless I hope you enjoyed my take on this oft-overlooked segment of the dwarves' journey.