

I am not Disney or Rowling. I know world-building, apparently better than the first, and romance better than either.

Hey all. This is the first chapter dealing with time normally skipped over, thanks to the huge time-skip in canon. I won't promise to not use huge time-skips on my own, but this is prime world-building territory. That is why this chapter is both as long as it is. But it still doesn't cover the events in Caras Galadon as I had hoped. I underestimated the amount of time it would take the two to arrive and the territory H&T would have to cover.

After two and a half tortuous days this has been edited by me via Grammarly. I hope this cuts down on the number of mistakes you all see.

### **Chapter 19: A Romantic Walk Through Middle Earth**

Eventually, Harry and Tauriel pulled back from one another, and Tauriel frowned slightly, noticing a rip in Harry's clothing that he hadn't bothered to repair from his run-in with the goblins. "And what happened here? Did you find some trouble again? I remember you mentioning how often that seemed to happen in your past life."

"Oh, I just ran into a few bumps on the road back to Mirkwood," Harry replied blithely. "It turns out that while the orc and goblin threat from the north and northernmost Misty Mountains might have been shattered, there are still a few scattered groups moving around out there."

"That statement demands more of an explanation," Tauriel drawled back, shaking her head, before gesturing to a nearby tree. "I suggest we both get comfortable for a bit."

Biting back his lip to comment on how that line could be taken, Harry nodded, linking arms with her as they moved over to the tree she had indicated. When they stood at the base of the trunk, Harry was surprised to note that there weren't any hidden handholds or anything like that, and the branches began well above his head. "How exactly..."

He paused as Tauriel easily ascended the tree, her fingers and toes finding small crannies to propel her further until she reached the first branch. With a single hand, Tauriel flipped herself upward like one of the best gymnasts in the world, soon disappearing into the tree's boughs.

"That is going to be a very hard act to follow, you know," he muttered, staring up at where Tauriel had disappeared, watching her push her head down into view to look at him expectantly.

"It gets easier with practice," Tauriel encouraged, amused that Harry was taunted by the idea of climbing a tree.

It turned out that Harry wasn't so good at tree-climbing, partly due to it being night and partly due to not having much experience. He had climbed rocks before and had experience making his way through the mountains with the dwarves, but tree climbing was a bit different, requiring greater use of hand holds and the ability to discern where to put them. Still, eventually, he was up on the tree branches, where he could make much better progress.

Soon, the two were both sitting on the uppermost tree branches, very well hidden from below and almost hidden from other people on this level of the forest, a rather neat trick. *Especially given how many leaves have fallen already. Strange that I haven't noticed any change in the temperature, even if the signs of autumn are all around me.*

Setting that aside, Harry put his first observation into a question asking, "Is this habit, or are there still spiders around? I would've thought..."

Tauriel interrupted Harry with a headshake. Watching her red hair flashing in the moonlight and seeing the faint smile on her face caused Harry to pause, simply drinking in the sight of her. Tauriel's lightly tanned skin gleamed in the moonlight, her red hair set off by the light almost to the point where it looked like it had caught fire, framing her angular face, the faint smile on her lips, painted red at the moment. That amused Harry somewhat, that while there didn't seem to be a lot of cosmetics in this world, there was still lipstick.

"No, the spiders are gone, dead or fled to the Misty Mountains. We burnt out their webs in carefully controlled fires and wiped out the numbers they had amassed. It was not easy, but Mirkwood is free of that filth. And Legolas is continuing his work on moving the more subtle taint from the forest entirely to the Old Road in particular." Tauriel's smile widened slightly as she finished speaking, aware of where Harry's mind had gone for a moment and thinking that Harry also looked quite handsome in the moonlight.

"That's good to hear. Although I think it was kind of cheating of you to climb up here as you did. I can't go around without shoes like you can, you know," Harry said mock-angrily. "My shoes don't let me grip as well as your toes seem able to."

In response, Tauriel merely waggled her toes at him lightly, snickering. "Well, you're not walking around any longer, are you?"

Harry's eyes drifted down to her feet and Tauriel's lower legs for a moment, tracing them back up to her thighs, before quickly looking away with a faint blush, whereupon he reached down and began to undo the lacing on his own shoes. He looked at them ruefully as he pulled them and his socks off, shaking his head. "I think I might need to look into better footwear in the future. While these have served me well, they are most decidedly coming to the end of their lives."

"Perhaps, but that is for later. Humans might need shoes for walking and war, but there is a time to allow the grass between your toes to feel the world beneath." Feeling somewhat daring, Tauriel reached out with one foot, gently tapping Harry's foot lightly, then running her foot up the inside of his pant-covered leg. "Now, does that not feel better?"

"I feel as if that is further cheating, my dear. But yes, it does feel good to get these off my feet," Harry replied. His feet freed, he answered in kind, rubbing his large toe up the inside of Tauriel's leg to her knee, causing Tauriel to shudder, wondering at the sensation of someone stroking her leg like that, even if it was only with his own foot.

For a few moments, they simply sat there, talking quietly about how they spent time apart, their legs gently intertwined between them. Tauriel's part of the tale was simple enough, although when prompted, she did go into greater detail on the tactics that the Unseen Host and Taur-e-Ndaedelos'

regular army had used against the spiders. Harry was impressed and noted how effective hit-and-run tactics could be when run by elves in the future.

More importantly, he was somewhat shocked that Lady Galadriel had sought out Tauriel's dreams in her spirit form. Not that she could, Harry understood that such things were within her power given his interaction with Galadriel's sending when Harry's Fëa had been pulled to Ilmarin, the hall of Manwë on the peak of Taniquetil. It had been Lady Galadriel who had helped Harry's spirit find its way back to his body. No, what surprised Harry was that she had both learned about his budding relationship with Tauriel and had decided to seek her out.

"There are many ways I can take that. The Lady could be simply, in her own way, looking out for me by checking in on you, or, as the Lady said to you, she could be concerned you did not understand in full what you were getting into with me and my impact on Arda. Something I don't fully understand myself," Harry mused.

Then he smiled, reaching forward to take Tauriel's hand in his. "And I think her acceptance of your response could be seen as a blessing upon this relationship. Although I hope our relationship does not become a challenge as you seem to be looking forward to facing in the future."

"Hmm, that is how I took it as well, Harry," Tauriel smiled back at him, then smirked. "But tell me more of your journey, please."

For her part, Tauriel was somewhat annoyed that Harry had run into not one but two bands of goblins who might have been sent out specifically in search of him. After the Battle of the Mountain, there shouldn't have been any goblins left in the mountains to provide the manpower for such. So the fact goblins could organize themselves to do longer rangings from further south in the Misty Mountains... or even the lands beyond was annoying. *How far south would we have to push them to stop that kind of thing? Or is the concept of the Beornings keeping the passes free and not spreading further ourselves a better idea?*

The news that the lands on the other side of the mountains were sparsely populated, and thus the only place they would get help for such a thing was Rivendell was also somewhat annoying. Not just in the news itself, but that Tauriel hadn't known that before. Her knowledge of the world beyond Mirkwood left much to be desired, something she was looking forward to correcting with Harry by her side.

But of more interest to her than the goblins was learning of young Estel and the fact that some men of the North still survived. "I wasn't a member of the host in the last battle of elves and men, but I have heard the songs of that time. The men of Numenor, of the fallen North, feature highly in some of those legends both to show how high and proud men could become and how far they could fall."

"The fall of Numenor, yes. I heard about that from Elrond. It's somewhat horrifying to think about. What Sauron could not do militarily, he could do with his own voice and charisma," Harry answered sadly, shaking his head, before relaying what Elrond had told him about that time.

The fall of Numenor was a direct result of Sauron's actions, his use of his greatest tool in the past, his voice and his charisma. Ar-Pharazôn had long since usurped the kingship from the rightful line – the line that led back to Elrond's brother, Elros, by forcefully marrying Miriel, the last king's daughter.

Who had also been his cousin. That disgusted Harry on many levels.

But even after that, Ar-Pharazôn had been a rational human being, arrogant and vile, sure, but rational. He had even come to the aid of the elves of Middle Earth, and for a second time, the armies of Numenor had shattered Sauron's military might.

When his martial strength had been proven to not be up to facing the Númenóreans, Sauron used his skills at deception, convincing him to take Sauron as a prisoner. And from then on, Sauron became Ar-Pharazôn's advisor, then chief advisor until finally, Sauron had convinced the arrogant fool to turn to the West, to Valinor, to conquer the realm of the Valar. This broke the edict of the Valar, which stated that no mortal man could come to their lands. At that point, Manwë had asked Ilúvatar what they should do, not willing to act directly against Men, as that too would have been against Ilúvatar's will.

But then Ilúvatar had... acted on his own. He broke the world, sinking the island of Numenor and swamping Middle Earth, completely changing it's geography forever. Valinor was almost entirely cut off from the rest of Arda, and there was even another continent beyond Middle Earth that had once been part of Rhun, the far East of Middle Earth.

Having learned of all this in some detail, or as much detail as any elf had, Harry was somewhat of two minds on this event.

On the one hand, the Númenóreans had been moving away from worshipping the Valar for quite some time. Elrond had been very clear on this, having spoken in person to many true believers who had fled to the island before the usurping king's expedition under Elendil, whose name was revered even now by the men of Middle Earth. They had been practicing human sacrifice, and the Cult of Melkor had been instated as the island's official religion. Hedonism had spread along with it, and the colonies they had started on the mainland had become more enslaved subsidiary states than true colonies. So, their fall from grace had been building for a while, and their destruction could be seen as necessary.

On the other hand, Harry didn't particularly understand why the edict that stopped humans from going to the West had been put in place. He had theories, basically built around the idea that humans couldn't really live in so magical an area without being changed physically and mentally, which would be against the will of Ilúvatar or the general fact that human spirits were more easily swayed to evil.

But even so, Harry felt that perhaps Eru had overreacted a bit by sinking the island and a large portion of the lands beyond.

"But Elrond was also perfectly clear about how the wars against Sauron would've gone without their aid before that moment. Even Ar-Pharazôn first smashed Sauron's military power before taking him captive. As for Estel himself, he was fun, amusing to be around at times, and extremely willful. And by that, I don't mean arrogant. I mean, Estel had a lot of willpower. That's about the only way I can put it. I rather think he'll go far, even if he isn't the one destined to reclaim the kingship or whatever."

Tauriel nodded thoughtfully, saying she would like to meet the youth eventually. "Perhaps in a decade or so when he has made something of himself as humans measure such things."

"You realize that he'll be in his twenties then, which is a young man's age rather than a young boy's, right? By that point, he will most certainly have made something of himself," Harry said dryly, causing Tauriel to exclaim almost mockingly about how that was far too short for such a change to occur.

She watched then as Harry's laughter broke off into a yawn. "I am sorry, Harry, I know that humans here to sleep at night. Would you like to bed down here with me?"

Harry looked at her blankly for a second, then decided he couldn't let this one slide. "You do know how that could be taken, correct?" When Tauriel looked at him in confusion, he elaborated, "When a man or woman asks someone else if they would like to bed down with them, it usually means more than just sleeping."

"Ah." Tauriel blushed a bit at that, then shook her head with a laugh. "It is far too soon for such things, but I thank you for the lesson in human courtship. I've enjoyed some of your lessons before this..." she teased gently, "but I would prefer we mainly keep to the slower Elvish manner of courtship if that is all right with you."

"Perfectly fine. Flirting is fun, but I don't want to pressure you in any way for more," Harry answered before becoming slightly more serious. "Besides, I need to change my way of thinking in terms of time. After all, my lifetime isn't a human's any longer." Then he smirked, leaning forward to run a finger up Tauriel's lower calf. "Not that the human manner can't be fun. Still, would you like to be the big or the little spoon?"

Thrown off by his touch, it took Tauriel a moment to register the question, at which point she frowned in incomprehension. "What do you mean?"

"It's a way of describing how two people can sleep together, one is in front of the other or behind, the big spoon is behind, little spoon front, one wrapped around the other," Harry explained, standing up from where he had been sitting on the branches and moving slightly around Tauriel using the other branches for a moment.

Understanding his intent, Tauriel scooted forwards on the branch a few feet, saying dryly, "While I would prefer to be held by you rather than vice versa, I'm not sure I can trust you to keep us in this tree if you fall asleep. Even I could not catch myself fast enough to avoid injury if I am awoken by our falling off the branch."

"I will use a sticking charm, then," Harry said philosophically.

With Tauriel laughing at that, Harry sat down on the branch behind her, finding it more than wide enough for him to sit comfortably, his back against the tree trunk, his legs on either side of hers as his arms wound around Tauriel's waist.

Even as she leaned back against him, Tauriel's head was already turning, and the two kissed, not intensely, simply longingly. Their separation had, as Elrond had told Harry, hurt them both more than a bit, and this kiss, like the one they had shared back on the ground, made that perfectly plain.

Eventually, Harry pulled back, instead going to work on Tauriel's neck, gently moving her hair to one side as he kissed her lightly along where her blouse began. Tauriel recaptured his lips for a few moments, and then, by some unspoken signal, they pulled away, with Tauriel laying her head against Harry's chest, humming happily to herself. *While in Elvish courtship Harry and I would still be composing poems and songs by one another or walking hand-in-hand through the woods, I think that going back to that much slower courtship after feeling the pleasure he can give me with those lips of his would be most annoying.*

Meanwhile, Harry was simply reveling in the feel of Tauriel in his arms, feeling something deep inside him becoming satisfied. It went well beyond the feel of her muscles shifting under her clothing, her smell, or the sound of Tauriel's voice. No, it was as if a soul-deep part of him was now being satiated. *Again just like Elrond said. So whatever I am becoming, in terms of relationships, I'm following the elvish model.*

But then Tauriel's humming reminded Harry of the work he had been putting into the Pensieve array, and he spoke up again, eager to see what she thought of it. "I have something to show you. Hold on a moment."

Harry removed one arm from around Tauriel, reaching into his makeskin pouch, thinking back to all the mistakes he had made in terms of using or not using that pouch. Still, he had learned, the pouch had survived, and so had he and his cloak. At this point, that was all Harry could say about that. Reaching in, Harry pulled out the Pensieve he had been making, handing it to Tauriel, who cupped it in her hands in her lap, looking down at it and then over her shoulder at Harry quizzically.

Whatever question she was going to ask went unsaid as her eyes widened, watching as Harry reached up to his head with a finger and slowly drew **something** out. The grimace of pain on Harry's face concerned Tauriel more than what it was, however, and she was about to stop him from doing whatever he was doing when the process seemed to come to an end. "What did you do? Are you all right, Harry?"

"I, I think maybe I did that spell wrong. I researched it a lot, but maybe there's a trick to the visualization I missed," Harry muttered, only the pain his head was already in stopping him from shaking it as he tried to blink away the pain. "Still, it, it worked, I think. Hold the bowl steady for a moment."

Tauriel did so, and Harry placed the memory into the bowl before gently tapping one rune on the side of the bowl for a second, letting his magic flow into it. "Now, if this worked correctly, there should..."

Harry stopped as white light began to glow all around the bowl's edge, then down into the silver liquid-like substance of his memory before suddenly exploding upwards as if a projector set into the bottom of the bowl had turned on. In the sky above the bowl, directly in front of their faces, there appeared an image, moving slowly. It was somewhat grainy, but the sound came through excellently, and Harry reflected that might be because the music had dominated his mind and memory of that moment far more than the actual play had.

Tauriel's eyes widened, and she flinched back, almost rolling off Harry, and the branch before the music accompanying the image halted her. Harry's arms went around her again as he whispered into her ear, "I did mention that I wanted to show you some of the music and plays of my world, remember?"

"You did, I..." She stared at the image. "I cannot understand what they're saying. But oh, the feeling of it comes through... Oh my..."

The young Sindar elf fell silent then as Harry mentally cursed himself, having forgotten that while he was so used to speaking in the common tongue, his memories would all be in English. "Would you like me to Tran—" He was interrupted as Tauriel shook her head quickly, staring at the image as Cosette of *Le Misérables* sang *Castle On A Cloud*.

By the time the song ended, Tauriel was nearly in tears, staring at the child in the image. She lacked a lot of the societal knowledge needed to really understand what was going on here, and yet, the emotion of

the young child came through easily. She gently pushed Harry's hand away from the Pensieve, causing the projection to flicker out, although Harry's memory resided within the bowl. She wondered idly how that was possible, how quite a lot of the things she had just seen were possible, before deciding to put it down to 'magic' and whisper instead, "Now that the music is finished, Harry, what was she actually singing, and why?"

That explanation needed several dozen smaller explanations tied into it, with Harry reminding Tauriel of his attempt to explain a revolution to her before, as well as serfdom and poverty. Eventually, Tauriel understood enough to realize that the young girl had been singing and dreaming of a better life, a life where she had a family and didn't live in poverty, something that was an entire explanation in itself.

Yet despite all the background knowledge needed, the song itself had been extremely impressive. "It is short, as is the way of all human song, but you say it is part of a greater play, which would offset that. And the emotions it can evoke for being so short are amazing. If you can perfect this Pensieve of yours, I believe that any elf would be astonished at how far humanity has come in the realm of music in your world."

"Mission accomplished then. Although I don't think I would ever share this Pensieve with anyone else. Maybe make one for Thorin to use, but other than that, I think I'd prefer to keep such memories between you and me." Tauriel smiled at that, although her smile turned into a frown when Harry returned the memory to his head and let loose a small groan of pain. "Yes, definitely doing something wrong there..." he muttered, grimacing.

Seeing Harry shake his head slowly from side to side and not return that had to around her waist instead rubbing at his forehead, Tauriel turned her body slightly, reaching up with one hand to gently touch his forehead, rubbing it with her fingers, gently moving over her scar. Tauriel watched as the pain of whatever he was feeling faded, then smiled slightly as he leaned forward to kiss her again.

This one was more passionate, and Tauriel allowed her mouth to open when Harry's tongue gently tapped her lips. However, this did not go on for long before Harry had to pull away and yawn, and Tauriel was pleased to note that Harry's arms were once more around her. At no point had his hands moved to rise up or down her body. Tauriel was grateful that he was willing to continue the slow courtship, despite the obvious sign of his desire she could feel pressing into her back right now. "Thank you for sharing that with me, Harry. But for now, I think it is time for you to sleep."

Harry cocked his head, frowning at her. "What about you? Do you need some rest as well?"

"I will close my eyes once I am tired. Never fear." When Harry made to protest, she shifted back around so that her back was once more to his chest as she stared up into the stars, humming softly under her breath. While she could sing, Tauriel was not very good at it, as Sindar or even Noldor elves would rate such things. But Tauriel could keep a tune at least, and soon, Tauriel felt Harry's body slowly fall asleep behind her. At that, she turned her head slightly, nuzzling into his chest, closing her own eyes, dreaming as elves were wont to do, colored somewhat by Harry's presence and the song he had shared of his world while still aware of the world around her.

The next morning, after an intense make-out session that nearly ended with them falling off the tree branch and a makeshift breakfast, Tauriel and Harry debated whether or not to go straight to Lothlorien or to check in with the dwarves first. After discussing it, Harry decided they needed to stop and speak to

Thorin and the dwarves, knowing that he would probably spend several months with Galadriel. "At least the rest of autumn and maybe winter, depending."

Tauriel agreed, saying, "My folk are still sending them food but not so often. From that, I believe they are becoming much more self-sufficient, as I know that more dwarves have arrived since you and Bilbo left the mountain."

Harry and Tauriel hiked through the woods of Mirkwood. Occasionally, they stopped as Tauriel pointed out a few trees she knew or small glades of specific beauty. One or two times, they even saw other elves. With the spiders exterminated, more of Tauriel's people could now wander abroad through the woods and were taking advantage of it. But even so, those sightings were few and far between compared to the leagues the two covered.

For his part, Harry had more fun watching Tauriel than learning about the forest. The forest itself was interesting, but watching Tauriel in her natural environment, racing ahead like a gazelle only to turn and race back just as quickly to point out some tree or glade that caught her attention, was enchanting.

The young couple arrived at the Mirkwood side of the lake three days later, after which the twosome had some fun finding and tying together abandoned barrels. Previously used to transport wine to the elves and then be floated down the river to the lake, as Harry knew, many of them had been abandoned here, left to float in the water since Lake Town was no longer in the wine business.

Once Harry had used his magic to stick all of the barrels together, and they had placed the platform on top, the two of them had a very makeshift, extremely rough barge, somewhat like the one that Bard had used. Although, as Harry put it, "Only in type, nowhere near as good in terms of construction."

"As it will only need to last us up to the other side of the lake, and going across is much easier than going to either side, I believe we can trust it. But if the worst comes, I can swim at least, and given your adventures down the river, I know you can too."

Harry snorted. "I won't say I can win any races, but I can float with the rest of them, at least."

"The Teleri have competitions at about that kind of thing all the time, I believe. In the Havens," Tauriel answered almost absentmindedly as she helped Harry push the makeshift barge out onto the lake. Once it was floating and not obviously sinking, she hopped aboard lithely, a makeshift pole in her hand.

Harry had a slightly less elegant time getting onto the barge, but eventually, they were poling it out into the lake. Once away from the shore, they began to use paddles, but although they were going straight across, which was much shorter than trying to reach the northern or southern sides of the lake, by the time they were within sight of the other side, both of them agreed that they had severely underestimated how difficult it would be. Yet they were still in a good mood by the time they arrived. The sun was up, and although it was slightly cold out on the lake, neither complained.

The pair had been spotted coming into the shore, so Harry was not surprised to find a small welcoming party waiting for them. The fact that Thorin was there with them was a surprise but a good one as Harry exchanged handclasps and backslaps with him, and Bofur had come with the king.

"Are you back to stay, Harry, or are you simply checking in before you head on to see the lady Galadriel?" Thorin questioned, gesturing Harry and Tauriel to follow them. On his head was a new crown

and an iron, steel and gold circlet. It would have been subtle if not for the rubies and diamonds, which gleamed in the light of Anar above them, set around its front.

Many of the dwarves had come with them as an honor guard, despite, in Thorin's words, his own attempts to tell them he didn't need one. These were mostly newcomers who looked at Tauriel with anger or disgust, influenced by past dealings with the elves of Mirkwood and others, but Bofur moved among them, whispering words into their ears or grabbing at the backs of heads and squeezing. Soon those looks faded or were turned away.

Harry had seen all this and nodded thanks to Bofur even as he answered Thorin, saying they would only be staying for a few days. "I wanted to check in with you and see how work was going on with Erebor before heading to see the lady. I got the impression that I will be spending several months there, so I would like to know that you and the others are doing well."

"Bah, as if we need a wizard to mind us! Just because you were the reason we could overcome Smaug is no reason to think we need you around to hold our hands all the time," Thorin answered, his tone jovial despite the words, shaking his head. "But if you look around, you can already see that we have been hard at work."

Harry could indeed see that. Some further work had begun on his and Tauriel's house, although only a little, which was more than fine to both of them since he wanted to be involved in that process. But elsewhere, a road had been cleared entirely to the lake, tapped down and even lined with stones. Further stones from the battlefield had been set up around the hill under which the dragon's corpse had been buried.

Far more astonishingly, when they reached the entrance to Erebor, Harry could see that the rocks which had fallen from the dead drop onto Smaug during their battle with the dragon were gone. They had previously haphazardly blocked the entrance into Erebor. Now that way was open, allowing them easy access into the main hallway of the mountain's vastness.

As they passed through the massive entryway into Erebor, the changes within the mountain were so dramatic that both Harry and Tauriel stopped in placing, staring around them.

Gone were the cobwebs and dirt that had washed out the colors of everything. The flooring had been cleaned almost to the point of shining under their feet. The damage done to it during the fight with Smaug had also been repaired, and the mosaic helped give the cavern more color and life.

It was helped in this by the small, makeshift lights festooned the entire cavern, although they were each separate things, whereas Thorin had said once each chandelier should be tied together to allow for the replacement of the candles or dwarven lights within. "But that work is ongoing, as is replacing candlelight with dwarven lights. Hah! You will like looking at those, Harry. They are an open secret of our folk that none have succeeded in copying."

In several places on the sides of the main cavern, long buntings had been hung along the walls of the vast cavern. These, which had either been in storage somewhere they hadn't faded or been made by the humans or dwarves since, added further color to Erebor it had long missed.

And everywhere Harry looked, there were dwarves. Thousands of dwarves had arrived since Harry and Bilbo had left. They moved around all over the place, on the small roads set into the sides of the massive

cavern, in the entrances to smaller house-caves, on the floor of the main cavern, and in the distance, moving up or down the stairs barely visible at the far end of the cavern.

This included hundreds of their womenfolk. To Harry's surprise, he could only pick them out because they wore skirts and were, in the main, slightly shorter than their male counterparts. *Good grief, they really do have beards. I thought Thorin and the rest were having me on about that.* Thankfully for Harry's sensibilities, their beards were far shorter and less dense than those of their men.

Even better and somewhat astonishing was the fact that while there was a vast amount of noise, it wasn't as loud as it should have been. Somehow the acoustics of the cavern had been changed so that the noise didn't overwhelm. The best Harry could think of was that it had something to do with the Stalactites in the ceiling.

Thorin stood beside Harry, letting his friend and Tauriel take in his city for a moment, smiling faintly at the exclamation of shock that Harry couldn't quite repress. "Bloody hell."

"Your folk have been quite busy, King Thorin," Tauriel said, speaking far more formally than Harry was wont to do. But then again, Harry was Thorin's friend, and Tauriel was merely Harry's 'girlfriend' in human parlance. She and Thorin got along, but they were undoubtedly nowhere near as close as Harry was to Thorin, so formality served best.

"We have indeed. And it is not just my clan, my people who have returned to reclaim their homes. Nor are the others made up entirely of our cousins from the Iron Hills. Several families have come from other Houses, from as far east as the Stiffbeard House. Their ways are slightly different than ours, but they have a touch with stone and stone shaping that is beyond what my own folk can do. We are good at mining, finding minerals and seams, but actually shaping stone, no. You should see some of the arches they had begun to put in on the lower levels of the mine, both functional and decorative in one."

Harry cocked his head at that quizzically. "You have already begun to mine?"

"Only for iron ore, admittedly. We need tools and weapons far more than we need jewelry right now. The goldsmiths who have arrived are already complaining about that, but we have so much gold on hand from the horde, then there really is no point in introducing still more into the economy for now. I have decreed that no new gold seams will be worked until all of the outstanding Barazloc agreements, Jocholoc and grievances built up in the decades since we fled Erebor have been seen to."

Harry didn't quite understand that, but he figured it was some kind of economy thing going over his head. Considering Thorin had used several dwarven words in there rather than speaking entirely in common and words that Harry had never heard before, he figured that was fair enough.

"But come, let me show you what we have been doing in the throne room and the royal living quarters first. Naturally, considering your house isn't fully built yet, you'll stay with my family and me," Thorin continued, gesturing them to the side entrance. There, Harry noticed that the trees that Bilbo had planted were still there, growing quite well despite the lack of direct sunlight. He was pleased by that and was equally pleased with the changes made in the throne room. It had also been completely cleaned, and several tapestries had already been hung to replace the ones that had decayed after Smaug had taken the mountain.

As they entered the throne room, they were hailed by a loud irate sounding female voice. "There you are! Haring off almost entirely on your own, giving poor Balin even more work to do as you go to see your old friend returned. Some king you are."

Thorin flinched a bit as Harry and Tauriel looked in the direction of the voice to see a dwarfish woman marching down the hallway towards them, her hands on her hips. She was shorter than Thorin, but not by much, and had the same lustrous black hair that he had and long mutton chops rather than a full beard as Harry had seen on the women outside. Her clothing was businesslike and somewhat drab in comparison to the colors of the throne room, but Harry reckoned they were also of extremely good quality. Such was certainly the case with the small circlet on her head. The tiara looked as if it had been molded out of a single piece of silver, entwining itself around a series of small jewels.

"Harry, Tauriel of Mirkwood, a be known to my sister, Dis," Thorin introduced them, smiling faintly at her. "Her husband has yet to join us, having some business to complete in the Iron Hills before you can do so. Dis has been invaluable in organizing the throne room and palace redecoration program."

"That and more. Whatever this oaf might tell you when you're alone, I am the one that rules in this palace," his sister said with a smile, shaking her head. "I'm the one that organized both the cleaning and the moving, and now, I'm dealing with the female side of rebuilding Erebor in our own fashion. If it were not for me, Thorin here would've concentrated on food and defense rather than housing, interfamily ties and cleanliness."

She looked up at Harry thoughtfully, cocking her head to one side as he bowed toward her. "So you're the human wizard I've heard so much about, not just from Thorin but from Balin, Gloin and the rest. I heard you were invaluable in reclaiming our home from the stone-blighted Smaug and again in the war against the orcs and goblins. More importantly, I've also heard that you and my headstrong, obstreperous brother are friends."

"I like to think we are, certainly," Harry said, wondering if Dis approved of that. From her tone, it was rather hard to tell.

"Good. Thorin needed friends before he claimed the throne. Now that he has them, he will need them even more. But more important to me than even his place as a king is Thorin, the man. For helping Thorin the man fight the darkness in him, that I thank you the most for." With that, Dis held her hand out, clasping Harry's forearm with her own. "Be welcome to my hall and my home."

Thorin rolled his eyes but did not object to anything Dis had said, which was somewhat telling, in Harry's opinion. That, and Harry felt he remembered that the dwarfish ladies controlled the household to a large degree. They weren't quite the equal of their menfolk. They couldn't go to war or learn how to fight. There were just too few of them to waste like that. Only one out of every four births was female among dwarves, and not all female dwarves married. But in terms of their rights and privileges, the female dwarves were either equal to their men or, on the whole, better off.

"I will expect the both of you to join us for dinner, but for now, if either of you has any interest in tapestry work or works of art, I could use another pair of eyes, particularly non-dwarfish eyes. We're clearing the ambassadorial suites today, and I am uncertain what to do with it," Dis admitted.

While Harry had no interest whatsoever in that, Tauriel said she would be interested in giving her own opinion. "Although I will warn you that if you think these rooms will be used by elves, you will automatically fail. Few elves would be willing to spend time underneath the ground like this. Perhaps if the entrance to your city was bigger, and there was more natural light, that would be different. But as it is, no."

After all, the Elvish city of Mirkwood was somewhat like Erebor in that it was mainly underground, hidden beneath a hill. But there, there was a lot of natural light throughout the city. Even the palace had large windows letting in the sunlight in the main hall.

"You see, that kind of information is important! For all your talk of elves, you never mentioned that they don't like being underground for long, Thorin! Honestly!" Dis exclaimed, reaching out to thump her brother on the shoulder lightly. "Take your friend and go do something. Leave me to the important business."

Smiling at the by-play, Tauriel whispered, "I quite like her, I think," before leaving Harry and following Dis back down the hallway to the far entrance into the royal living quarters.

Shaking his head, Thorin looked up at Harry. "Do not mind Dis. Like with all dwarves dedicated to their craft, Dis seems to believe that her craft and skills are the most important things in the world. But she well understands to not press the issue too hard. Although I will say that Dis will probably push to have us create some sort of exterior housing for visiting elves. That could be interesting, I suppose, if we are visited by elves often enough to make the expense of time and labor worth it, anyway."

Chuckling at that, Harry asked, "And what about you and politics? Or would you act any differently if you were in charge of the forges and the smiths?"

"Certainly not. But the difference there is I would be right," Thorin laughed, and Harry laughed too, noting that it was more of a self-deprecating laugh than simple amusement. "But come, speaking of forges, let me show you what we had done down there recently. If you were surprised by the amount of bustle and change you saw in the main hall, the forges will shock you out of your socks."

"Heh, I do need more of them regardless," Harry quipped, following after his friend.

While Tauriel went with Dis, Thorin showed Harry out the door back into Erebor's main cavern, and the two of them retraced the steps they had taken during the battle with Smaug for a few moments, reminiscing about that victory, talking more about the impression they had both gotten at various points during the battle that anything concrete. The phrase "I honestly thought we were screwed" was used by both of them several times, by which point they had reached the stairs leading down into the area of Erebor devoted mainly to industry. From where the stairs split, they went right down another wide set of stairs to the level of the cavern devoted to the forges.

But even as they walked down those stairs, Harry was again struck with signs of the work the dwarves had been doing. Prior to his escorting Bilbo home, this area of Erebor hadn't seen much in the way of restoration. But it was obvious that it had seen quite a bit since. The safety railings on the various stairs had been replaced, and metal stakes were driven into holes in the stairs, connected with still further beams. Several dwarves were working on them, emplacing still more railings than Harry could see going further downward and another moving along them, carving out an intricate pattern.

Thorin noticed his interest in this work and moved over to the dwarf in question, clapping him on the back. "This is journeyman Woodcrafter Corl. He is inscribing direction patterns into the wooden frame. We routinely do this in our cities just in case something goes wrong with the lighting at any point. This way, even children will understand where they are and where to go in such an emergency."

Harry nodded, understanding this wasn't hyperbole. Most of the lighting in the main cavern was made from hundreds of medium to large torches and lanterns spread through the stalactites. The original system of lights Erebor had in the past had been larger chandelier-like constructs, each attached to chains that allowed them to be wheeled in to be repaired or changed.

At present, the lights were mostly near the edges of the caverns or the entrances to the repair tunnels set into the ceiling. Only an even dozen were further away, placed there by brave dwarves who had climbed out onto the cavern's ceiling to place them.

"Well, regardless, your skill is amazing, Master Woodcrafter."

"Hah, not a Master yet, Wizard. But I'll thank ye for the compliment, the dwarf, who looked around Bofur's age, snorted, then waved both of them off, uncaring of the fact Thorin was his king. "Now, away with ya. I have a dozen of these lengths I need to finish carving today."

As they rounded a corner, the strange acoustics of the main cavern came into effect, deadening the noise of the main cavern, which had been a low thrum of noise in the background, the pair of them having come down the equivalent of three stories. There should still be noise, and Harry wondered how the dwarves had achieved this, only for his thoughts to cut off as a new noise replaced the background noise. To Harry's surprise, the new noise was not just the tumult of men at work on the forges but an actual song. A chorus of bass voices fit to shame any human bassist positively thrummed in the air ahead down the stairs.

How Harry had not heard it before moving around that corner in the stairs, he didn't know. After all, while they were several floors below the main floor of the cavern, they were still technically in the main cavern. There were no intervening walls or anything like that. But he hadn't, and a moment later, after another bend in the stairs, the volume of it rose again, the deep basso profundo voices so deep they were felt just as much as heard.

The noise staggered Harry, and Thorin laughed, grabbing his elbow with a light grip. "And here you listen to one of the secrets of my people Harry, although it isn't so much a secret as talent. Since no one else can use their songs as we do, even if they know of the technique in the first place. Come, I will show you."

Harry nodded, following along. The music was so deep and strong that it rattled his bones and was in complete dwarfish. While Harry understood several phrases in that language, he didn't understand the total picture. He looked at Thorin, asking if he could use a translation spell on himself as he had when they first met to understand what was going on.

But after a moment's hesitation, Thorin shook his head. "It is not a matter of trust, Harry. I do not think the words and phrases would translate well into Common. Indeed, there are words here that Common does not actually have any equivalent. Phrases to describe the heat of the metal, words to describe

various points in the process of crafting that..." he shrugged his shoulders. "I just don't think it will work. It would probably just confuse you more."

"Fair enough, oh Master Smith," Harry said with a laugh, reminded of a time Harry had brought up the idea of cars to Thorin before they had reached the Shire and met up with his folk. The looks of confused annoyance Thorin had worn for most of that discussion had tickled Harry's funny bone at the time, but he was grateful that Thorin was willing to not let Harry confuse himself this time.

And really, Harry didn't need to understand the words, for just like Tauriel the night before with his Pensieve, the power and meaning of the song came through. And as they exited the stairs onto the first platform devoted to metallurgy, that became even more literal.

The forges on this level were fully lit up, although Thorin had mentioned that they weren't at full capacity yet. Harry could see beyond this platform to several other stairwells leading further down, and he knew from his memory of the battle against Smaug they led to still more areas devoted to smithing of various types. Here, it was working with steel that was the objective.

The same braziers that the dwarves had filled with coal before to create the smoke they had used to choke Smaug were now simmering with molten metal as two dwarves stood on either side of them, their voices raised in song. Below the braziers, that molten metal flowed down into culverts to end in molds that could be switched out at need. Besides those, the dwarves worked on anvils, their hammers ringing out to the beat of the song, making Harry realize it hadn't been drums he'd been hearing underscoring the song but those hammers. The whole area was lit by the light of the fires far more than the overhead lighting, and the sight was impressive.

Many of the dwarves had shucked off their shirts entirely, and for the first time ever, Harry saw dwarves actually bundling their beards, tying him down in little nets so that they were out of the way of their work. As Harry watched, one of the dwarfish voices rose, a signal through the song.

Instantly two other dwarves moved, almost as if they were marionettes moving to the strings of the first dwarf, so quickly were they moving. Harry watched as specific amounts of different kinds of metals were added into the mix, listening to Thorin whisper, "Currently, most of the workshops down below need to be cleaned and brought back in working order, an ongoing task and a thankless one, although we have already removed all of the bodies praise be to Mahal. But that forces us to all work in larger work gangs to work on anything, be it chains or tools or the chandeliers like this. Normally, you wouldn't see as large a work gang as this working on a single project, but with the needs of Erebor driving us, we've had to adapt."

"Tools?" Harry asked, nearly swaying once more as the noise of the song and the work being done hammered his senses. Nor was that just a physical thing. Rather, Harry could see a **lot** more going on underneath the surface here. There was a reason why the idea of the two dwarves moving like marionettes had occurred to Harry.

"Aye. Most of the dwarves here, Harry? Bar their weapons and gold, they decided to leave much of what they owned behind. Particularly the Stiffbeards and Blacklocks. They need tools. **Erebor** needs tools. We need scissors, needles, hammers, nails, saws, stone chisels, everything. We also need protective stakes as you saw for all of the stairs. For some reason, Smaug pulled most of them out. We found hundreds of the damn things on the lowest levels, piled together from where they had fallen, rusted together thanks

to water from one of the aquifers, which had burst its banks for some reason. We need chains to replace the lighting system, we need. And all of it must be made Vrahkul, or not at all.”

Harry had heard that word before and mentally translated it to the phrase ‘right and proper’ in Common, although it didn’t quite fit. Something you could take pride in might be a little closer, in Harry’s opinion. Which was more than backed up by the look of pride on Thorin’s face as he watched his people work. But regardless, it simply meant that dwarves would take as much care and trouble in creating different types of tools as they would in creating swords.

And that, and the song Harry was listening to, was perhaps one of the dwarves’ greatest talents. As Thorin had said, ‘secrets’ wasn’t quite the right term because Harry doubted that any other race could do what the dwarves were doing. Because, along with the song, there was power in the air.

Indeed, there was an astonishing amount of magical energies. Harry could almost call it ritual magic, although it wasn’t directed by a single individual gathering the magic of several others. Rather, all the individuals involved could call on the power of the gestalt. *I have felt something similar in Elvish music in Rivendell, but there, it is not the voices that produce the majority of the power but the words being sung. And moreover, each individual is alone. There is a gestalt of purpose but not of power. Not like this.*

Harry could feel it tingle across his body, just as much as the noise of the song buffet senses. There was a connection Harry could actually see, like a network of wires connecting each of the dwarves as they sang. Each one worked perfectly in harmony with everyone else, the dwarves on the forges taking turns bringing their hammers down, the dwarves on the braziers working together to stir the metal and add new ingredients into it at the appropriate time, others working on bringing that metal out of the molds, knowing precisely when to open them and when to hand them on to others at the anvils. It was like a choreography almost everyone working together. No actual commands were needed, simply a change in tempo and rhythm.

A choreography that had all of the dwarves’ Fëa working together. And imparting, Harry realized suddenly, some of their life essences into their projects. He watched in shock as some of that energy was slowly added to the final project, the gathered energies dipping slightly before being refilled. *No wonder dwarven-made objects are so much better than humans or even common Elvish tools! They’ve figured out a way to add just a little bit of magic into everything they make,* Harry thought, astonished. *Is this normal, or is it something they only do as a group?*

He sat down on the steps for a moment as Thorin looked at him in amusement, a wry grin showing through his beard. “You know, occasionally, when you and I were traveling, I heard about how dwarves were only out for themselves to make the most gold they could, to hoard their wealth and whatever. As if greed and being out for yourselves was the soul of your people. I would dare anyone who thought that to come here and see this. Because I think from where I’m sitting, the soul of your people is community.”

Thorin laughed, slapping him lightly on the shoulder. “Well, proving your own worth is important, as is gold. Gold and contracts form a portion of the bedrock of our society. There was a reason why Fili and Balin could keep people from trying to barge past Bilbo’s trees so well after all. But aye, we dwarves are not as one-dimensional as humans like to make us out to be. When it comes down to it, it is what we

can make of our own hands that we dwarves love the most, and when we work together like this, it is the group that takes pride in a job well done.”

Harry nodded, and they sat there for a few moments, the forge's heat causing Harry to sweat profusely while Thorin explained what they were doing. Currently, the main job being worked on was the chandeliers. This means both lots of different parts, all of which needed to fit, or rather be merged together into a greater whole. Not for dwarves was the process of rivets. Rather, they would be welded together, the chandelier growing almost from the central segment outward. When it was finished, the chandelier would be one contiguous piece.

Which was, obviously, very difficult. But no dwarf would be satisfied with less. The song was imperative for everyone to keep time and work going at the right pace, linking all four stages of the work together.

After a few moments, Thorin led Harry on heading further downward to look at the other forging areas. There were a total of twelve different platforms and seven smaller caverns that connected back into them, each of which, Thorin explained, had been devoted to a different type of smith-craft. These were in much worse disrepair than the one above, and a group of dwarves was going around, turning over the various items left behind during Smaug's initial assault on the mountain hold.

Somewhat confused as to what the dwarves were doing, particularly a group with what looked like parchments full of lists, Harry asked, “What are they up to?”

Thorin pointed to a few other groups first. “They are on cleaning duty, something of a punishment detail. Their own dams or clan heads sent them down here, bar one or two who tried to steal food. Food is still an issue thanks to how many mouths we have to feed, and sending them down here is for first-time offenders. Two-time offenders have to go a round with Dori in wrestling. Third time... third time they are expelled from Erebor. Such hasn't happened yet, but Dori has gotten a bit of a workout pounding some sense into more than a few idiots.”

While Harry snorted at that, Thorin went on, pointing to the dwarves with the lists. “The scribes are taking notes for the... the appraisers, I suppose you could say. You know full well how many skeletons we found, Harry...”

Harry nodded grimly, remembering that work, although he had only been involved peripherally. Even then, the sight of Bofur and his band of helpers carrying the desiccated, desecrated skeletons of dead dwarves out of Erebor for proper burial, including the skeletons of what had to have been children, and stuck with him.

“Then it should be no surprise that whole families were wiped out, including families or even whole clans who ran forges here. Each family or clan would have a particular symbol or maker's mark. Only master's in their craft could have their own personalized mark completely disassociated with that of their clan, as they would be eligible to start a new family. And let me tell you, Harry, becoming a master crafter of any school among dwarves is serious business. I am not a Master Smith. I could not create a personal symbol and mark my work with it, King or not.”

“...And each mark is known and cataloged,” Harry guessed, his tone serious and sad. “As is any clan or family they have filial relations with?”

For dwarves, the words clan and family were defined by the size of the familial unit. A clan had to have at least fifteen members. A family was for any group smaller than that. Whereas 'House' signified which subrace the dwarves were a part of, each one going back to one of the seven fathers of the dwarves. Thorin's people came from the Longbeard House, the House of Durin.

"Exactly. Thus the symbols here will allow us to see if we can find someone still among the living who wishes to reclaim their family's position. Family rights and property like that are an important part of our society. Again Harry, what we make with our hands, our craft, is what dwarves love the most," Thorin answered, emphasizing his earlier comment.

After a few moments, the two of them made their way back upstairs, passing through the forges quickly and heading up-mountain to the territory Harry was more familiar with. The areas where the dwarves lived were, if anything, even busier than the main hallway. Here more youngsters could be seen sitting outside their specific home caverns, talking and arguing, wrestling or learning. Harry and Thorin passed by one group, being shown the proper way to hold a tool of some kind. There were also far more stonemasons here, repairing or replacing family marks over specific caves, signifying this or that family lived there.

This liveliness continued several levels above the main cavern floor through a dozen caves and tunnels. Several extremely well-made sat lanterns with candles in them sat at the corner of every passageway. "Those will be replaced by proper dwarven lights eventually, with the lanterns begin passed on to the poor among my folk," Thorin explained.

"Again with the dwarven lights, Thorin? Are you going to actually explain those at some point?"

"In truth, I only know about their proper shape, Harry," Thorin admitted. "I know it has something to do with oil, any kind of oil really, and fire, but how the lights retain their glow is based on working runes into the makeup of the lights."

"...hmmm, that almost sounds like some kind of ever-full spell or array," Harry mused, his knowledge of runes coming to the fore. "Interesting, but maybe not what it appears to be. If you dwarves could do something like that, space expansion charms, or even a runic array to do the same thing, would not be too far off."

At Thorin's confused look, Harry replied, "Think of my mokeskin pouch. Only maybe carrying one item. Like, oh, putting an array like that on a quiver for crossbow bolts."

At that, the king's eyes positively gleamed. "Oho, now that is indeed interesting. If you can help my folk make that leap, if it is possible, then it would be a mighty addition to our armament. Heck, think of it in another way: putting those kinds of arrays on the basket on a catapult. One catapult could then throw as many small stones as a dozen."

"I will bow to your greater knowledge of creating carnage," Harry drawled, putting action to words. This earned him a light thump on his arm as the two continued on their way, heading upwards once more, ignoring the confused, amused or angry looks they were getting from the dwarves around them, who were all startled to see their king being so friendly to a human, despite the rumors of that friendship had spread among them by this point.

The farming sector was also heavily involved, with dwarves hard at work. Mushrooms and other legumes were being grown there now, along with several new types of plants that had been transplanted within by the dwarves. Whatever they were, they were growing quickly, which was undoubtedly a good thing, given the population they had to feed.

All in all, Harry was deeply impressed with how much work the dwarves had been able to accomplish in the short amount of time Harry had been away. It might have seemed longer, but Harry had only been gone less than two weeks, thanks to quickly he and Bilbo had been able to move due to his prolific use of magic during both sides of the journey.

He said so to Thorin as they headed back into the throne room, shaking his head in amusement. "I don't think humans would have been even past the planning stage. You dwarves might've gone at it haphazardly in terms of organizing everything, but damn if the sheer amount of work you've put into everything hasn't been paying off."

"We're still having issues with food. We're almost entirely dependent on the elves' largess in that area, although the problem hasn't grown despite the growth of our population thanks to the farms above. Meat will continue to be an issue for weeks, but when Dain returned to the Iron Hills, he brought several contracts. Soon we'll be bringing in goats in here, along with sheep. Both animals are perfectly happy being underground like this. We used to keep them in several special areas around the city."

"Those larger caverns you showed me today, the ones with the wooden paddocks which had turned to dust?" Those had somewhat surprised Harry, as he hadn't seen them before. The tunnels to them had apparently collapsed, although how and why, Harry didn't know.

"Aye. The animals will start off as communal property, with dwarves being assigned to look after them. But if any dwarf shows skill with the animals, they will be able to step forward and take over the project. Dain may even be sending the humans cows and pigs for Dale, although I don't know if he'll be able to. As such are not in good supply in the Iron Hills in the first place. Still, we sent him further writs of exchange just in case."

For a moment, Thorin fell silent, then continued as if the pause hadn't happened. "Our alliance with the humans is growing strong. Indeed, we still have several hundred dwarves helping them rebuild Dale and scouring the lands around us. And even with sheep and goats within Erebor itself, we will probably always need an exterior source of foodstuffs, particularly fruits."

Harry could tell from that pause that there was something about the Iron Hills or something to do with them, which bothered Thorin, but as Thorin didn't explain, Harry decided to let it lie. Setting that aside, he followed Thorin to the head of a long table, exchanging hand clasps and hugs with Gloin, Dori, and Oin, who were there, while also hearing the murmuring of the other dwarves who at first looked on him in confusion, then in growing approval as neighbors whispered to them who Harry was. The tale of the wizard companion to Thorin and his return to the mountain had apparently gotten around even to these people, most of whom didn't recognize Harry on sight.

On the other hand, Tauriel was still getting a few negative looks when she sat next to Thorin's sister. To Dis' other side, two other dams sat. Judging by their sparse silver hair and accumulation of wrinkles, they were among the oldest dwarves Harry had met, as old as Oin or older.

Thorin's voice pulled Harry's attention back to him for a moment. "I'll ask your apologies now, Harry. I must deal with petitions and contracts. As will Dis, although the ones she deals with will be quite a different type than the ones I will be dealing with."

"A working lunch then?" Harry asked, pushing Thorin's shoulder playfully as they sat down.

The stocky dwarf didn't budge, simply grinning at his human companion. "Among dwarves, lunch is very much a working meal, not for things of the hand but things of the mind and voice. Breakfast is a serious business, so we can concentrate wholly on the food in front of us. And dinner is family time unless it's an emergency." Thorin's eyes went far away, and his smile turned somewhat bitter. "I remember how often my father missed such dinners, but I will not allow myself to fall into that trap. This crown on my head is heavy enough without knowing that I have sacrificed family in my enslavement to it."

Harry nodded at that, raising a flag in a toast to the king, which promptly caused everyone else around the table to do the same, much to both his and Thorin's chagrin and Gloin and Bofur's caustic snickering from nearby. Harry had spent a few moments with both earlier that day, learning that Gloin's family had yet to arrive. They hadn't wanted to abandon everything, as many had, and were planning a more organized transfer from the Iron Hills. Gloin would soon be heading back that way to join them.

Bofur would also be returning to where his family had settled in the Blue Mountains. News had yet to reach the former refugees of Erebor who had settled there that the kingdom had been reclaimed. And frankly, having lost both Bombur and Bifur in the last battle, Bofur wanted to be the one to take word to his clan, to be with them in their grief.

True to his word, Thorin was quickly approached by several dwarves, two of whom held long parchments in their hands. On his other side from Harry, Balin too was dealing with several others. The young king's seneschal had greeted Harry earlier that day, but he was one of the chief logisticians within the mountain, and his time was most decidedly filled.

Dis was dealing with much the same, herself and her two companions, who Tauriel informed Harry in a whisper were her 'Chgldrach'. "They are the keepers of knowledge about heredity, property, lands and so forth within the cavern system."

"I think I saw some of their helpers earlier," Harry mused.

"Quite probably. The dwarves have a very split way of dealing with things. The men are in charge of warfare, crafting and generally speaking, in charge of the money, although there is a major caveat with that last point. The dams handle the rearing of their children to a certain age, control of the home, general education, and courtship. They are also heavily involved in law, safety regulations, debt and the payment of such. See what I meant by caveat?" Tauriel said, smiling faintly, a sign she was greatly enjoying learning about the dwarves. It wasn't as interesting as traveling, but it was still fun.

Harry nodded, indicating he understood. Dwarven society wasn't exactly a completely equal society, but it definitely was a society where the two spheres of influence balanced one another. Considering how few womenfolk there were compared to the menfolk, that was perfectly understandable in Harry's opinion. Indeed, he idly wondered if, perhaps in times of great war, where thousands of male dwarves died, it wasn't the stability that the womenfolk offered that kept dwarven society going.

“Currently, they are discussing whether or not the growing town is up to lifting some of the regulations on food that Thorin and Dis have put in place.”

“Thorin mentioned that meat is still very much at a premium and that the farms can barely feed the sheer number of dwarves that have arrived despite ongoing aid from your folk. Speaking of,” Harry turned his attention towards Thorin as he finished with one petitioner before the other could come forward. “You mentioned needing help clearing out more of the farmland up top. Do you want my help with that?”

Indeed, Harry had some thoughts about those farms. He wasn’t certain how long the transfiguration spell he’d used on the hundreds of yards of solid stone to make it translucent would last. Once it reverts, the dwarves would need other means to light the area with natural lighting. And the quartz crystals the dwarves had used previously were, while decent, were not perfect. Harry felt he could maybe develop a rune-based solution to that issue. *And if so... the possibilities are quite intriguing.*

Thorin rolled his eyes. “I will accept Harry, but in the name of Mahal, you truly need to consider the value and work of your hands!” He pointed at Tauriel with one hand while motioning with his flagon towards the next petitioner to come forward. “I hope you can teach him this, Tauriel.”

Tauriel smiled slyly at the dwarven king. “Does that mean you want me to write a formal contract covering Harry’s aid in this endeavor? While such a thing would not be necessary in Elvish culture, I understand you dwarves have a love for such things, and I am a fast learner.”

Thorin laughed, as did the nearby Balin. “If you wish it! For all that we owe Harry Potter, mere gold and jewelry is nothing to the debt we have accrued with them.”

There were some shocked gasps and exclamations of shock from nearby dwarves, but the members of the Fellowship in attendance and many of those warriors who had been part of the battle against Azog’s army all simply nodded their heads, as did their immediate family members. While dwarves would be hard-pressed to admit it, there were just some things that gold could not buy.

After that, Harry turned back to Tauriel, learning more about the female side of the dwarfish culture. Dwarfish women were immensely precious to their menfolk, and while the power they wielded was more subtle and based more on family and convention than strength or personality, it was very much there.

Dis, for example, would have the final say in distributing daily food for every meal until Erebor was self-sufficient. As part of that power, she could punish or reward good work, and no one would gainsay her. While that kind of power would fade over time, the power to make arrangements between different families, to reward incoming families with houses within Erebor, would not for a while. And even once the mountain was fully restored to its glory, the womenfolk would be in charge of educating the young, as Tauriel had said, keeping the homes.

They were also in charge of everything involved in textiles, selling and trading of said. Although that profession was made up of mostly men, it was controlled by the women. Something that had Harry chuckling to himself since, in the Wizarding World, women were always far more interested in clothing than men. But again, that was the women's duty, to ensure that everyone had enough clothing, just like it was their obligation to ensure no one went hungry.

Furthermore, thanks to the need to make a dynastic marriage, Dis would have almost as much say in who Thorin married as she would her own sons. The succession had to be secured, and ties between the Houses strengthened.

Normally, relationships would be a very personal thing among dwarves. Many a dwarf would pursue a single woman, but it would be the woman who would have the final say, and if a woman took a liking to a man and declared him her One, that was it. Or at least it was if the dwarf in question was amenable. If not, and sometimes a dwarf was so busy with his trade or craft he had no desire for companionship, then the woman would have no other.

The only way outsiders could interfere in that kind of courtship would be if the woman or the man's family, specifically the family's recordkeeper, believed that the relationship struck too close in terms of consanguinity. Such things were important obviously and had become even more so given the upheaval after Smaug's initial attack had destroyed so many records. And so many families.

Near the end of the meal, too familiar-looking dwarves came into the throne room, making for where Harry sat next to Tauriel. One of them scowled a little at the site of the Elven woman, but the other spoke sharply to him, the words unheard by any other through the tumbled of the meal and the crowd within the king's throne room.

Tauriel tapped Harry on the shoulder, looking over his head towards the two dwarves. "I believe you have some admirers incoming, Harry."

Harry glanced in that direction and nodded. "Don't worry, I won't be roped into anything immediate. And I surely won't sign anything without you or Balin looking it over for me."

That caused his lady to chuckle under her breath, while Thorin also noted the two incoming members of the extremely small community of Rune Scribes. Indeed, only four other Rune Scribes had joined the initial two that Harry had met prior to his and Bilbo traveling back to the shire and all of them were journeymen or apprentices. In all of the scattered House of Longbeards, there were perhaps only eight Rune scribes, and even that might well be a generous statement.

"Harry Potter, you mentioned at one point that you would be willing to share or trade knowledge with us about runes. If you are back then, perhaps we can start that project now?" One of the Rune scribes said, his tone almost making the question a demand, something that caused Harry to stiffen.

It also did not make Thorin very happy, and he looked over at the two Rune scribes before being called back to his duties for a second. However, Harry handled it with aplomb. "Gentlemen, I'm not in point of fact back for very long. I simply wished to tell my friend Thorin that our former scout, Bilbo, had been safely seen to his home. Despite the fact that some of his relatives were trying to buy it at auction, which was quite amusing at the time."

While Thorin had heard that story before, all the dwarves nearby hissed at that. The idea of going around a contract - or perhaps, being caught doing so openly - cut them to the quick, as did the idea of treating a relative so shamelessly.

"After that, my lady Tauriel and I have been invited to the Elven realm of Lothlorien." Harry held up his still scarred hand, remembering with some amusement how his other hand had healed itself, burning under the gaze of Arien as he came out of the mountain only for new flesh to have appeared

underneath. *Even without the scars, you could still tell which one is which thanks to how pale the new skin is*, he thought with some amusement. "Lady Galadriel believes that she could heal my hand, which is something I am most interested in having."

One or two of the nearby dwarves that didn't know Harry sneered a bit at the human, wanting to get rid of battle scars like that. One of them even whispered, "leave it to the poxy elves to care so much about the scars of battle honorably won."

Harry heard that, of course, but he wasn't about to explain what needed healing or why. Beyond those of the Fellowship in the crowd, these dwarves were practical strangers, even if Harry recognized the two Rune scribes by sight. They had no right to know his mind needed healing. "However, I will eventually be returning here with my lady." He looked at Tauriel, who nodded in the affirmative, a faint smile on her face as Harry reached under the table to take her hand in his.

"Thorin and others have already begun to put a nice house together for us by the lake. It would be churlish in the extreme to ignore such efforts on our part," she opined.

"Exactly so. So we will return to live here for a time after our trip to Lothlorien, possibly in the spring. Until then, I will not sit down and start talking shop. That would be a full-time project, and I've already volunteered to help with something else to her time here. Time which will be very brief, I'm afraid, before my lady and I head to Lothlorien. We wish to arrive there before autumn fades after all."

"... We can agree to that, I suppose. But we would prefer to put something down in writing, Harry Potter. So we can trust you will not share your runic knowledge with others before sharing it with us."

The Rune scribe who had spoken like this had chosen his moment poorly. Thorin had just finished with his last petitioner and now turned, clapping a hand on Harry's shoulder, his grin showing quite a bit of tooth as he looked at the two Rune scribes.

Although the Rune scribes were an extremely honored trade, indeed, many of them had become as honored as kings in their time or become kings themselves. At the moment, they were bothering Thorin's friend, and Thorin would have none of it. "I am sure that when it comes time to do so, my advisor Balin will have an appropriate contract written up, and we can trust you two masters, Vorni and Rorn, to not be skinflint in your happiness at having such an agreement in place. Further, when it comes time to share, I am certain there will be no talk about Harry simply sharing his knowledge with you. That river will flow both ways equally."

This was something of a problem in many a profession among the dwarves. Dwarves were, as Thorin had pointed out several times, prideful of the things they could create with their hands more than anything else. When that was also built on secret knowledge, the urge to keep such achievements to themselves doubled. Or, as in this case, the skill to create such items in the first place. Master Rune Scribes sometimes didn't share techniques with their own apprentices, let alone rival masters.

There was a major downside to this: if one Rune Master died before he passed on his knowledge, then that man's knowledge was lost. This had inexorably weakened all of dwarfdom, particularly from the time since Khazad-dûm had fallen.

The oldest Rune Scribe straightened his shoulders and glared back at the young king, but Thorin was having none of it, simply staring back at him coolly. And while the older dwarf was learned in his craft

and extremely respected both within the Longbeard House and in nearly every other House of dwarves, this was Thorin. Thorin, whose band of erstwhile dreamers had slain Smaug, who had claimed Erebor for dwarvenkind once more. And he was the king who had reclaimed the Arkenstone, binding to it by the grace of Mahal, their creator. Even now, the stone resided in its special pouch under Thorin's clothing. And even if it hadn't, being the one bound to it by Mahal gave Thorin authority and strength that no other dwarf could match, regardless of whether it was in sight.

This master Vorni found out quickly, looking away within moments, bowing his head in submission as he spoke, his voice a low growl of anger. "As my king says. We will make certain that we share as much information as we learn from you when we get our discourse master wizard."

"I have no doubt. And I am looking forward to learning as much as I am to teach," Harry said politely before getting to his feet and looking at Thorin. "But for now, there is still a lot of work to be done."

That was a pronouncement no dwarf could argue with, and the meal quickly came to an end.

Later that night, Harry and Tauriel met again, joining the Royal family for dinner. This dinner was a very different affair regarding everything but the food involved. It wasn't open to the public and took place in the Royal portion of the palace. Tauriel had been outside with one of the hunting parties and met Harry and Thorin outside in the main cavern, at which point Thorin had left them to have a few moments on their own as he hurried ahead to change and bath for dinner.

Tauriel spent a few moments talking to Harry about the land on the eastern-facing side of the mountain, just holding hands as they stood, nearly hidden among the trees Bilbo had planted to guard the entrance to the treasury. They'd not had much time alone since arriving in Erebor, a marked contrast to the days they'd spent traveling through Mirkwood, but just holding hands like this was nice.

Even if neither of them was looking to sleeping alone again. Although Tauriel had no one but herself to blame, something she was lamenting now. Since unmarried dwarven men and women would never sleep in the same bed, Tauriel had decided to go along with dwarven sensibilities as long as they remained in Erebor.

They were about to move on to the entrance to the throne room only to stop as a cry of "Harry, Tauriel!" practically ambushed them coming from the main cavern.

They turned to see the brothers Fili and Kili moving towards them from the open gateway to the city, waving off Dwalin and several other dwarves who they had entered with. The two brothers clasped forearms with Harry gleefully and slightly more chastely with Tauriel. "Are you here to stay or just visiting before your next journey?" Fili asked, tugging at his blonde beard.

"Here for a few days, if that. I have an appointment with a certain elvish Lady to the south," Harry answered with a grin, exchanging backslaps with both young dwarves. "And what about you two?"

"I was over in Dale, dealing with an issue that had sprung up between our folk and the humans. I had to smack some very hard heads together the past few days," Fili snorted, shaking his head.

"As for me, you know the mission I was sent on, I was sent north to Gundabad. I ran into this reprobate outside just now. It is good to be back, and seeing what our folk have done since we left has been phenomenal," Kili added.

Fili nodded in agreement despite having been here for most of the work. Now he turned to his brother, smacking him on the shoulder. "But come, our mother arrived a few days ago, and you have yet to pay your respects."

Moments later, Harry watched as Kili greeted his mother with a tight embrace, which was returned so hard that Harry feared for both of their ribs while Fili looked on with a wide grin. It was very obvious that both dwarves loved their mother greatly. Indeed, there was a shocking amount of emotion on Kili's face as he hugged his mother, and Harry had to remind himself that it had been many, many months since the two of them had seen one another, from before the start of the Fellowship's journey from the Shire.

They all sat down for the meal and then around a small, homey table, reminding Harry of the one Bilbo had in Bag End. Despite being cooked personally by Dis, the food was the same as it had been at lunch: fish, legumes, mostly the kind called earth-bread, and mushrooms. All of it was in smaller portions than the dwarves would have preferred. Royal family or not, Thorin and his family would not eat any more than his folk until the food situation was solved.

Kili explained his mission, which had succeeded. He, Dwalin and the dwarves they had led northeast had been to Gundabad, where their ancestor Durin had first awoken on Middle Earth. Since then, Gundabad had become the capital of the northern orc tribes. Azog had come from there originally. But they had poured forth their strength in the battle of the Mountain, leaving nothing behind. Kili and his men had fought a few sharp battles against the remnants but had lost only one man among them in doing so and had brought down numerous tunnels and walls, ruining the mountain's fastness for future use, it was so empty.

The party of dwarves had even brought back proof, a small yellow-banded red crystal that could only be found within the caverns of Gundabad, so thin it almost looked like an eggshell, but so hard it almost was impossible to mar or shatter. As the dwarves had it, this was the shell Durin had been encased in, preserving him and the other Fathers of the dwarves before his awakening.

What truth there was to that Harry didn't know, although he did know how the dwarves had been created by Aulë. But they had lacked the fire of life when he had given them up for destruction to his master. Or father. Ilúvatar's connection to the Maia and Valar was unknown to Harry. But instead of destroying them, Ilúvatar had given them life. But if they had been allowed to live from that point on, they would have come before the first race, the elves, which Eru had forbidden. So they had then been put to sleep and sealed away. So there might well be some truth to it.

Regardless, that knowledge and the Arkenstone would raise Thorin and Erebor to even greater standing in comparison to the various other dwarven nations. Even Dis, who had initially remonstrated with Thorin and Fili both for assigning such a serious and dangerous mission and then undertaking it, seemed awed by the site of the gem.

Once Fili had finished his reporting, Thorin asked Harry and Tauriel if there was anything they needed for their journey. Harry instantly asked for a pair of boots, while Tauriel admitted she would like a small buckler. "Harry here has run into two goblin patrols, once going to the Shire and once coming back in the Misty Mountains. That is not good odds for our journey being a peaceful one. And it is a clear sign that the servants of the great enemy are hunting him."

All three dwarven men around the table shouted at that until Dis bellowed them all down. With that done, she demanded Harry explain, "Before these three explode with their own curiosity."

Harry quickly explained, and Thorin began grumbling under his breath. "I think both of you need armor as well. Not chain mail, as even the best we could do now with the materials we have would still make noise. I am surprised you do not have your own set of armor, Tauriel. And what you are wearing now is most decidedly **not** armor."

"Metal is somewhat of a premium among my folk, which will make trading with Erebor in a greater capacity than before under Thranduil most interesting," Tauriel replied before shrugging, ignoring the comment on her leather cuirass since it was quite accurate. "Obviously, if I was a member of the Army rather than the Unseen Host, I would have armor, but as it is, I do not. Nor would I like the heavy plate mail that you dwarves seem to like the best."

"There's a kind of armor, one which is tiny metal plates covered by cloth, I can't remember the name of it, but I saw pictures of it back in my old world," Harry mused. "It's supposed to be both defensible and allow for a wide range of movement."

Thorin hummed in thought while Kili nodded. "Brigantine, we have that here as well. Perhaps we could come up with something similar."

"I will work on it when I can, although I doubt I will have even an outline done by the time you and Tauriel wish to leave. You said you would like to leave tomorrow or the day after? That is far too short a time."

"Take our measurements then, and you can work on it in your free time before we return or pass it on to one of your blacksmiths," Harry answered.

"Free time, yes, I remember that, like a distant dream in the ancient past receding behind me with every day that goes by," Thorin answered dryly, chuckling.

"The crown of kingship not all you thought it would be?" Harry asked somewhat solicitously, even as his lips twitched in amusement at Thorin's acting.

"Heavy is the heart that rules justly," Thorin replied simply, a dwarven phrase. "It's done me some good to take time off for meetings and more meetings and delegations and orders today to help with the farming complex and showing you around, Harry. But such things will have their revenge tomorrow."

Harry shook Thorin lightly by the shoulder, smiling now a little wider. "Well, you were the one that wanted to be king. Just remember, you are my friends too. And when Tauriel and I return, regardless of my discussions with your Rune Scribes, you will have access to my magic and mind once more."

"I thank you for that, Harry and your advice when the time comes. Although hopefully, by that time, Tauriel will have taught you the value of such things. Friendship can be given freely. Time, effort and craft must be paid for, if possible."

"So does that mean you **don't** want some pipeweed? Or do you want me to pay me for some?" Harry asked, halting the process of pulling out a small barrel from his pouch with a sardonic eyebrow raised.

“Now, let us not be hasty. I have some good ale on tap, and you didn’t drink any at lunch. It doesn’t quite match Gloin’s best, but it is certainly up there,” Thorin answered quickly. “An even trade, I feel, is no imposition.”

Harry laughed, and as Tauriel engaged Dis and the two younger dwarves in conversation, Harry and Thorin sat by the fireplace set into the wall of the sitting room in the royal quarters. With one smoking and the other drinking, they talked about Thorin’s plans going forward once Erebor was fully restored.

For then, as Thorin said, the true work would begin.

OOOOOO

Harry and Tauriel stayed with the dwarves for three days, during which they were outfitted with clothing and for Harry, boots. This included winter garb for both. “While Harry might have his heating charms, there is much to be said about having clothing that can keep you both warm and dry,” Thorin had pointed out when that came up.

Harry thoroughly approved, remembering how miserable being wet could be while on the road. The jacket that the dwarves gave him was extremely warm, made from wolf fur and leather, the brown and gray coats hugged their shoulders, and the upper body then fell to below Harry and Tauriel’s knees, which were open at the bottom to allow ease of movement. The coats also had small hidden pockets inside.

The dwarf who had made it for Harry explained that these would normally be used for what they called heating globes. He held up one as an example, a small ball made out of steel bands with a small clasp at the top, which he opened. “You can put pieces of heated coal within to warm the inside of the coat without fear of being burned or smoke showing.”

“Now, that sounds pretty useful,” Harry mused. “Can I get two of those as well?” *I might prefer heating charms, but if it’s winter and there’s a reason to not use a spell, this could be useful. And having some coal in the makeskin pouch could be a good idea too.* Heating charms had to be renewed too, and if they were in a fight, that might not be a good idea.

While Tauriel also enjoyed the idea of being warm while traveling, she liked the multiple pockets more. The elven ranger spent an hour exchanging the items she had in her small backpack. This included herbs from the forest, salt, lembas, and a pouch of seeds she liked to munch on.

After that, she spent several hours modifying how she carried things, so there were no rustles from within the coat and playing hide-and-seek with Kili and several other young dwarven warriors. “If I can hide from them now when it is only autumn and Kili, and the rest know I am around, then I know they will work well during winter.”

Similarly, Harry’s new good leather boots were hearty, thick-soled boots that rose to midcalf of brown leather and, surprising Harry, buttons instead of laces hidden under a flap. “Buttons keep better,” the shoemaker announced gruffly. Harry liked them a lot and spent the rest of his time in Erebor breaking them in, although he felt the button thing was more dwarven sensibilities than anything else.

They were also given a set of dwarfish camping gear, much like the kind Thorin and a few others in the Fellowship had at the start of the journey: tinder packets, salt, a fire starter, and a tent for the two of

them. On top of this, Harry found good cooking gear, which was made of light tin and could be fitted one item into another, all of which could then be placed in a special carry sack. Which in turn went into Harry's mokeskin pouch.

"If I can't make a suit of Brigantine armor for you and your lady, I can at least make certain that you are sent on your way with as much in the way of traveling comforts as possible," Thorin said before smirking and smacking Harry on the elbow. "And I note that you did not pay my artisans for their work. You're learning."

"I thought that I could lean on the largess of the local King for that kind of thing, so I saw no need to mention it," Harry answered mock haughtily, causing Thorin to burst into laughter. If there was one thing Harry would probably never be, it was haughty.

And so it was that on the fourth day of their return, Harry and Tauriel were again on their way, heading straight south. They would move around the Long Lake, then follow the River Running, or the Celduin as it was called in Elvish. The Celduin would take them to Mirkwood by the end of the Old Forest Road. At that point, Harry wasn't certain where they would be going, which was one of many questions he had for Tauriel, although as they left the last sign of dwarfish habitation behind, he decided to ask another question to start with.

"You know, we spent three days in Erebor, and absolutely none of that time was devoted to the house that Balin and the others had begun to build when Bilbo and I left. Should I take this as a sign?"

Tauriel looked at him quizzically for a moment, then after a few steps, understood what he meant. "I actually quite liked that spot. It was just there were so many interesting things going on within the mountain, and speaking with Dis was fascinating. Very few non-dwarves have spent much time around their womenfolk, if they even meet them at all."

That was an understatement, as both of them knew. Harry could probably count on one hand the number of non-dwarves who had been able to spend any time at all around dwarven womenfolk. She slowly shook her head, her face scrunched up as she tugged at her long hair, which she was wearing in a ponytail today. "It is interesting to realize how much of dwarven society is so rarely seen by outsiders at all."

She shook her head, turning back to the present topic. "But if we are not going to live there, it will be through no wish of mine. I quite like the idea of living on the Long Lake, so close to my old home in Mirkwood, but distant enough at the same time to symbolize this new stage in my life."

The look she gave Harry at that line made Harry very certain what exactly she meant by that 'new stage' line, and he nodded, linking arms with her for a moment. She nuzzled into his side, her arms going around his waist as they continued, but Harry had another concern he wanted to bring up. "I know you said that you and your parents do not move in the same circles any longer, that you're not close to them. But when I was in Rivendell, I learned something about elvish courtship, and I'm concerned about giving insults where insult wasn't meant. Are you sure we shouldn't stop in and talk to them?"

Harry could easily have said 'courtship and weddings' there since he understood that among Elvenkind, courtship almost always led to weddings. Very rarely did elves have an attraction to one another that wasn't 'Fëa deep'. Sex and marriage were inextricably tied for elven kind. There were exceptions, of

course, where a man pursued a woman who wasn't interested in him or even already in love with someone else. Such tales wound through the troubles and horrors of Middle Earth, such as the fall of Gondolin, caused by the elf Maeglin, who had fallen in love with his cousin Princess Idril, who in turn had fallen in love with the human male, Tuor. And there was also the case of Luthien Teluviel, who had also fallen for a human man but had also been chased by two of the sons of Fëanor at one point.

*Odd how that always seems to work. I wonder if there have ever been any cases where human women fell in love with an elven man? I haven't heard of any such stories yet. Although I should count my blessings that Legolas was willing to take no for an answer and had never pursued Tauriel as persistently as he could have.*

Tauriel simply laughed. "You're not as subtle as you think you are, Harry Potter," she whispered, leaning in to give him a kiss, which Harry returned.

The kiss turned into a lengthy make-out session right there in the middle of nowhere, with Tauriel smiling happily as she ended it. *Yes, she mused to herself. I greatly approve of these moments of human passion. I don't think I would be happy with that being the emphasis of our courtship, but a few moments like this every day is quite nice.* She turned forward again, smirking slightly at the glazed look in Harry's eyes as she linked arms with him before Harry could recover, staying silent until he did, feeling his arm pull out of hers before winding around her waist.

When Tauriel spoke, it was as if the passionate moment had never happened, throwing Harry off for a moment to her continual amusement. "We haven't even known one another for a year yet, Harry Potter. Perhaps in a year or two... or ten, I will send them a message when we get to that point."

Among humans, she knew that it would have been 'if' they got to that point, but Elvenkind did not think like that. Indeed, the longer Tauriel spent around Harry, the more certain of her path she became.

"I understand, but they are your family. I'm not about to stick my nose into your business. I simply wanted to bring up the idea and point out that I had no problem stopping in if you wish to. But if you don't, do you know where we're going? I know where the lady Galadriel said Lothlorien was, but I'm no master of the land or even reading the local maps. Of which, I hasten to point out, I don't actually have. Thorin had a map showing the route to the Lonely Mountain, but it didn't cover much to the south of the Long Lake."

"There is not, in point of fact, any map of the total of Middle Earth, as far as I know, at any rate. Perhaps Lord Elrond has commissioned something of the sort?" Tauriel frowned in thought. "It actually might be a very good idea. I know that we in Mirkwood have maps of the forest, and the dwarves have maps of their lands and so forth. But a map of the total of Middle Earth..."

Harry let Tauriel mumble to herself for a few moments, amused and intrigued by the amount of interest with which she had suddenly grabbed onto his idea. He even fed her mumbling with a few tidbits about some of the things he had learned about maps in his old world. That wasn't much, and most of it came from talks with Hermione and her father, who had been something of a hiking enthusiast. The idea of topography showing elevation and incline fascinated Tauriel, who could see the military benefits immediately. She had not heard of such a thing except when speaking to some of the older elves who had worked on large-scale construction projects back when the Noldor kingdoms had reined here on Middle Earth or when the human nations of the north had been at their height.

To Harry's amusement, this conversation went on for a noticeable time, the sun moving through the sky as Tauriel probed him for information, thinking about how she would have to change the map of Mirkwood to make use of the new term topography as well as a few other bits of information that she came up with on the fly as he described a few maps he had seen in his world.

This segued into a conversation about the secret to the Marauders' success: the Marauders' Map of Hogwarts.

The idea of a living map, one that could show the movement of people on it, fascinated Tauriel even more than the idea of a more descriptive map of Middle Earth, but at first, she was distracted by the name of the Marauder. "A Marauder is not a good thing, Harry Potter. What was your father doing to earn such a moniker?"

That took some explanation, and after a few fits and starts, Tauriel began to get into the story of pranks and teasing, although she was quick to point out that some of their pranks seemed to take a little too far. However, Harry had her in stitches when he spoke of some of the pranks he had played on a few bullies of his own, even if she was also quick to point out that such things, both bullying and pranking them, would be highly frowned upon in Sindar society. "Indeed, even among Noldor society these days, such things would not be seen as amusing."

"I know. I pranked several dozen people in Rivendell, and it got old quickly. They never tried to retaliate!" Harry mock-whined, shaking his head from side to side. "They'd react for a few moments, then get over it and move on. Where is the fun in that?"

Tauriel laughed, shaking her head with a faint smile, and Harry, feeling a sudden urge, leaned over and kissed her lightly. The suddenness of the moment caught her by surprise, and she smiled at him. "What was that for?"

"You're beautiful, you know?" He asked instead of replying directly. Still, that was answer enough, and Tauriel's smile widened, and she was leaning in to kiss him as well.

Eventually, they continued moving on, and Tauriel returned to Harry's question about knowing where they were going. "I know in general terms where the kingdom of Lothlorien is. The woods are near the far southernmost portion of Mirkwood, separated from the great woods by a wide area of scrubland and brush. In ancient times, that land and the land of Mirkwood were all connected, a forest whose name translates into Greenwood the Great, but Mirkwood is now the largest segment of that forest still remaining..." She frowned and thought for a few moments. "It will take us several weeks to get there, I fear."

"Do you think winter will be fully upon us when we do?" Harry asked, glancing around them. When Harry had been traveling with Bilbo on the other side of the Misty Mountains, the change in weather hadn't been all that apparent. Now it very much was. Indeed, Harry was very thankful for the new clothing that Thorin and the dwarves had given him, although Tauriel didn't seem to feel the weather as much.

"...Hmmm..." Tauriel frowned for a moment, going over the details of what she knew. "The problem is that going straight there will take us through the deepest portions of the forest. To start with, we will go through the same areas where the spiders dwell. And while the Unseen Host slaughtered the spiders

wherever we found them, we never pushed them directly back to the ruins of Dol Guldur. Legolas once said that Lord Celeborn had launched a punitive campaign of their own into the woods, although they had quite a bit of a harder time of it given the difference in terrain. There could still be enemies about."

"Did Legolas open up communications with Lady Galadriel?" Harry asked, surprised.

"He had to reach out to the Lady and Lord Elrond for help understanding the spells placed on the old road. As I understand, I was busy at the time, you understand, but Lord Elrond sent his sons as messengers back and forth," Tauriel explained before shifting back once more to the troubles ahead of them. "So we can either move westward on Old Road when we get there and then follow the river Anduin down. That land is mostly bog and hilly fields, and doing so will put the Misty Mountains on our right, and..." She hesitated and looked a little worried.

That had only previously happened when Harry was captive in Thranduil's cells, and he had hinted that the Great Enemy was still around. "This could be simply my knowledge failing us, but I think the river skirts close to the foothills of the Misty Mountains near Moria. If there is any place in the Misty Mountains which is certainly under the sway of evil, it is that place."

"A part of me wants to see what precisely about Moria is so dangerous. Is it just orcs and goblins?" Harry mused.

"I know not. The fall of Moria is a mystery among my folk, a tale of horror, of fire and death coming for the dwarves from something within their own halls. But if even those of Lothlorien hesitate to go near it, I think it behooves us to be very wary, Harry."

"That rhymes..." Harry murmured, thinking and then shaking his head. "You're right. And the other route?"

"We pass over the Old Road and head southward, following the forest's edge. It will be much easier going there, and then, when we come to an area called the Bight, we cut westward. Doing so, we'll be skirting directly above where Dol Guldur resides. But again, from what I understand, it has now been torn down. Although, I do not doubt that there will still be some remnants of vileness there. Regardless, it will take us weeks at the best speed you can manage."

She did not mean this as an insult, of course. Even though neither was overburdened, it was a simple fact that a human-like Harry couldn't run all day tirelessly as Tauriel could. Even with his spells, Harry couldn't move as quickly, although he wagered the difference wasn't as great as Tauriel thought.

Regardless, he shook his head, his voice a drawl as he replied. "So this jaunt to Lady Galadriel's place of residence isn't exactly as easy as I have been making it out to be. I wish she had hinted that might be the case when last we spoke."

Tauriel laughed. "I rather take it as a sign of her faith in your abilities, Harry, and perhaps mine as well."

Harry's lips quirked, remembering the discussion they'd had about the dreamlike meeting that she and the lady Galadriel had, the hints of something more than the lady had dropped in that meeting. "True. I think I will follow your lead in how exactly we deal with any threats we come upon. But I think the second option is the one you would prefer?"

“A part of me would actually prefer to go still further south, making a large circle around the former area around Dol Guldur, but if we do that, it will add weeks to our journey and will take us into lands tainted heavily by past wars, where no one dwells. No one save bands of orcs and goblins, perhaps. Berennyr is not a land any elf would willingly tread, Harry Potter.” She scowled then. “Although once more, all this could be wrong. I have never traveled farther south than the very start of the Bight and never out beyond the edge of Mirkwood.”

Nodding at that caveat, Harry pursed his lips, trying to remember where he had heard the term Berennyr before, then remembered he had heard the name from Gandalf when he described one of the wars of centuries past, during the War of the Last Alliance. They had been the sight of Sauron’s use of scorched earth tactics. Previously an area of great fecundity, the evil Maiar had ordered them burnt to the ground, adding his own powers to the destruction so that even now, the lands were brown and dead. Indeed, that was what Berennyr translated to in Common: the Brown Lands.

“so we have a choice of an uncertain but extremely dangerous place being very nearby to our route, an uncertain and slightly dangerous route, or an uncertain, dangerous and far longer route?” Harry sighed faintly, then shrugged his shoulders. “The middle one, I think. Between us, I doubt we will find anything in areas that an elven army has already gone over that can endanger us. But I will be putting out runes every night to help defend our camp just in case.”

“You will get no complaints on that score from me, particularly after we hit the Bight,” Tauriel answered fervently. “My journeys down to that realm with my fellows were never pleasant.”

Through the rest of that day and several more after, the two hiked across the land, which was mostly flat, with several boulders here and there and scattered bushes with few trees. With Tauriel’s help, Harry developed the same kind of ground-devouring lope that allowed small bands of elves to cross long distances far faster than any other force could afoot. Thanks to the Elvish bread that Harry had been given in Rivendell and that Tauriel had as part of their supplies, they didn’t even need to stop to eat for every meal, simply pushing on at midday, talking amongst themselves, getting to know one another further as they had when Harry had been a prisoner without any of the angry or regretful overtones of that time.

And even with those, that time helped solidify the interest and connection between them. Now with both time, nothing serious occurring and the chance to concentrate totally on one another, that connection grew greatly, although very rarely did they take their flirtations further than intense making-out sessions. Harry allowed Tauriel to set the pace on that kind of thing without any issue.

Although he did have a hard time of it occasionally when Tauriel was ranging ahead of him. Even when covered by her new coat, the shape of her tight rear and hips could be easily seen

Beyond Tauriel’s Elvish beauty, Harry found a soul wishing to explore, wishing to understand and then push her boundaries. Tauriel wanted to travel, she wanted to see the world, both things that Harry was also very interested in. Her sense of adventure was also something that Harry understood and shared. He was also fascinated by her training as a member of the Unseen Host and lapped up everything she imparted on how to move silently and how to read the weather and the land.

In contrast, Tauriel’s sense of humor wasn’t quite like Harry’s. She didn’t particularly enjoy practical jokes, something Harry blamed his father’s side of him for. She wasn’t above poking fun at Harry, and

she seemed to greatly enjoy explaining the languages of some of the animals they saw on their journey, mainly birds and other things to him, amused by his crestfallen expression in that few indeed among the animals had anything interesting to say. As Harry had previously seen, Tauriel enjoyed listening to Harry's stories about cranking other people, seeming to take more interest in planning the pranks than the actual execution. And if she didn't often laugh aloud at his tales, she always smiled at them, and Harry found that was enough, as was her own verbal jokes and teasing.

Tauriel was also a bit of an amateur poet. However, she decried her own abilities in this area. She was also a good teacher for the history of the Sindar elves in the Second Age, going into greater detail on matters that Harry's education of this new world of his Elrond, Gandalf and Thorin had only touched on. Many a night they spent sitting around the fire, as Tauriel explained this or that moment in Sindar history in greater detail than Harry had heard of before. And if Harry understood more about the sorrow of the elves in Middle Earth during those retellings, that was no fault of hers. Rather, her upbeat attitude and desire to explore stood as a sharp contrast to the typical Elvish attitude of insularity, sadness and waning willingness to interact with the world beyond their lands that dominated this age.

In turn, Tauriel found Harry a delight to be around. His sense of humor was fascinating to her, all too used to her folk's more staid, dry sense of humor. She didn't quite share it, but she greatly enjoyed it, nonetheless. Tauriel found his desire to explore and see beyond the next horizon to match her own, and Harry's sheer energy drew her in.

More than once, Tauriel lost herself in his emerald eyes as he laughingly told a tale from his old world or something he and the Fellowship had seen or done on their journey. Before this, she had only heard about their battles and the dire straits they had faced. Now he spoke more about times around the camps, or his learning the sword from Thorin or the time he had sat outside Bag End with Gandalf, staring up at the stars in this world, listening to Gandalf explain the making of the world and the First Age and making a friend of the older wizard.

And, of course, attraction was there between them as well. More than once, Tauriel found herself simply watching Harry move. When they practiced with his sword against her dagger or a makeshift staff at night, Harry moved so fluidly, so quickly, it was almost like looking at an elf but in a human's body. Harry was wider in the shoulders than elves tended to be and broader in the waist as well.

And occasionally, when they were done, and Harry pulled off his sweaty undershirt to set beside the fire to dry, Tauriel found herself flushing a bit at the sight of his muscles. While her people were routinely in excellent shape, that rarely meant visible musculature, but Harry did have that, a decent six-pack, visible muscles on his arms and powerfully built shoulders, and they were... fascinating to her.

More than that, Harry's affection for his friends, his devotion to them and even the love he seemed to have for his parents, parents he had never known, drew her. The strength and openness of his emotions were **astonishing**, again a sharp contrast to how most elves acted. The little things he sometimes did for her, ranging from helping to roll up her bedroll of the night or finding a particularly pretty flower and pointing it out to her as they went, caused her to smile, whereas when Legolas had tried the same kind of things, she had found them annoying.

However, there was a growing issue that caused Tauriel some concern. Sometimes, Harry had nightmares. Dangerous ones. More than once, his thrashing had awoken her at night, and he had to

soothe him back to sleep, but when questioned, he wouldn't remember much of anything about them, only looking pained, shaking his head with a hand to his forehead. And occasionally, when Harry had nightmares, he spoke. Not of battles as he had described to her previously or of anything from his past life. Rather, what dominated his nightmares was the battle that had brought him to Arda in the first place.

"Dark, everywhere, I'm blind! Fangs in the darkness, coming for me! Break his teeth, beat him back, but the whispers, always whispers," Harry once nearly shouted, so loud Tauriel had thought they were under attack and was already reaching for her weapons before remembering the runestones Harry had put out before they had settled in for the evening. "No, no power, no whispers!"

These were hints that his dreams were about the battle in the dark unknown, the battle against the creature called Riddle. And after hearing that, Tauriel realized there was much more to that battle than the brief description she had heard before.

The next day, as Harry was nursing a cup of Elvish tea she had brewed for them during breakfast, Tauriel put an arm around his shoulders and spoke of what had happened during the night. "I realize that some of that must have been very personal, Harry, and I'm sorry to have overheard it without your permission."

"I... probably would've told you about it eventually. You have a right to know that part of the battle against Riddle in the beyond was mental as well as physical." Harry sighed, leaning against her for a moment before reminding Tauriel about what he'd already explained about the battle in the Void.

"Ever he clung to me, and ever I tossed him aside. So Riddle used his words, attempting to attack my mind and my conviction to battle him. Riddle wasn't always eloquent about it, but he was persistent. How long it lasted I... I don't know." Harry shuddered, his eyes far away as pain wracked his head. "Why can I remember this all now when I barely could before?" *I didn't remember this when I spoke about the battle to the Valar or Gandalf. Why am I remembering this aspect of it now?*

Tauriel frowned at that but had no answer for him, simply continuing to cuddle into his side, feeling his arm around her waist. "But you never gave in?"

"..." Harry cringed, shaking his head. "There were a few times when Riddle grasped for a few... minutes, or whatever when he seemed to finally understand that his promises of power weren't going to be enough, that his threats didn't work. When he tried to offer things, not power or glory or gold or knowledge, but when Riddle truly seemed to understand me as an individual and that family and friends were what I hold most dear. When he started to offer to help me bring back Hermione, to bring back my parents somehow, despite it being nearly two decades since they had died."

Tauriel nodded, leaning against his chest. They had spoken about Hermione several times, and Tauriel did not begrudge the fact that Harry had been in a relationship with a human girl in his past life. That was in the past, his past life, his past world. To do so would have been churlish in the extreme. "But those were even worse lies, yes? Evil cannot create true life nor bring it back."

"Exactly. Even in my old world, there is no power to truly bring back the dead. There are monsters I read descriptions of in some of the forbidden books in the library at Hogwarts called Infreri, which were

undead bodies given some semblance of life. We hadn't learned about them yet in class, but they were supposed to be utterly mindless creatures that attacked anything moving."

He waited for Tauriel's snort at having a class about magic pass by. For some reason, the idea of teaching magic like that in a set of classrooms amused Tauriel greatly, as, while magic obviously was well known among her people, there was no certain or set way to learn such. If an elf had abilities with magic beyond the normal Elvish ability to speak to animals and move silently regardless of terrain, it was almost always a very personal thing. It was much the same with the wizards. Each of them had its own very distinct different abilities.

Even in terms of varieties types of spells, they were different. Radagast rarely used offensive magics, but when he did, they go almost always dealt with the earth, growing vines and making the plants around him attack for him. Saruman was known to use fire, as well as wind attacks. Gandalf, wind and lightning.

"But not only are such creatures mindless, but they would also be controlled by the individual who brought them back to life. The souls would have long since passed on, even if the individuals hadn't died to the soul-killing spell." Tauriel made to object at that point, elves believing firmly that Fëa, even those of humans, could not be simply destroyed. But Harry tapped her side gently, indicating he wanted to continue speaking.

"Riddle kept pushing on that, trying to convince me to stop fighting to let him in. And every time he did, it made me angrier, more certain I needed to defeat him. It's ironic to think about, but if he had just stopped talking, I think the sensory deprivation would have driven me mad, would've broken my will far more than his words could." Harry shivered, remembering the Void, the blackness, the feeling of nothingness, the feeling of being so very alone, so very cold, even as Riddle cut and slashed at him.

For a few moments, the two of them sat silent, then Tauriel turned to kiss Harry on the jaw, then the neck, then back up to the jaw and finally his lips. They continued to kiss for several moments before Tauriel pulled back, leaning her forehead against his. "Whatever tribulations brought you into my life, Harry Potter, I am thankful for it. I'm sorry you had to face that trial, and I am sorry you have lost so much. But you are here now, and we are together. You will never face that darkness again alone. You will never face being alone at all. Not if I have anything to say about it!"

"Thank you," Harry said, pulling her into a tighter hug, then slowly releasing her from his arms. "But since it looks like it's going to rain, I suggest we start our day. Unless you want to put up our tent and just spend inside?"

Tauriel snorted. "The rain will not actually start until mid-afternoon. But at that point, it will be heavy, and we will need more cover than just our tent, Harry. We should head into the woods for now and use the trees to block as much rain as possible.

Unfortunately, those dreams continued, despite Tauriel's soothing touches. It was as if Harry's mind was at war with itself. Memories that he had previously suppressed unco, it was getting worse.

The sunlight seemed to imbue Harry with a certain amount of energy, so regardless of how much sleep he had gotten the night before, he was always ready to go the next day. And while Tauriel would've preferred to travel by night, as most elves would, she was perfectly happy to simply travel, day or night.

Every day brought new sights to her, things that she had never seen before, things beyond the realm of her home in northern Mirkwood.

Eventually, as they skirted the edge of the forest in the distance, always keeping it on the horizon to the right, they noticed it disappearing and turned their feet in that direction. This quickly led them to the Bight, a segment of Mirkwood that had been deforested over generations of human deforestation. The people who had lived here had long since moved on. Harry remembered something about them moving south and became some country named Rohan, but Harry didn't know more than that.

Yet despite it having been several hundred years since the people here had moved on, evidence could still be seen of their residence here. A well dug here, left in place for who knew how many centuries. Remnants of wooden and stone houses, their walls long collapsed, leaving only the flooring or stone walls. And at one point, Harry spotted, before Tauriel could, something that had her pouting a little, a piece of some kind of doll that had been left somehow preserved underneath a rocky outcropping protected there by the passage of time.

But the greatest sign of human habitation was deeper into the Bight, where there were still stumps of trees left uncovered by other growth. Trees that had stood the time test of time for thousands of years had been cut down here by humanity over generations.

This area physically pained Tauriel to see, as, like all Sindar elves, she revered trees. To see the evidence that so many had been chopped down physically pained Tauriel, despite the knowledge that had occurred over centuries.

And it was here that Tauriel first spotted signs of goblin tracks. Between one step and the next, she veered off, signaling a halt with one hand raised, clenching the fist in the sign that Harry had discovered meant a need for silence.

Obeying, Harry moved after her without a word, crouching down beside her, keeping his eyes moving around the area as Tauriel examined the ground closely, staring at a few broken grass marks where they stuck out through the dirt of the ground in front of them. "Goblin marks," she whispered, shaking her head slightly. With a gesture, she set them moving again, following the marks for a few moments before they started to fade, and she frowned, turning back the way they had come to pick up the trail once more. "They must have made a loop into this territory coming from the south, then heading southwest. I wonder why?"

"Maybe hunting?"

"Possible. Orcs and goblins need to live off the land as much as anyone does, more so considering they don't eat plants or much bread. Orcs and goblins need much more meat than even humans do." Tauriel scowled as she spoke, and both tried hard not to think about the nature of that meat if the orcs or goblins could get it. "If they could not be certain of finding such, then perhaps..."

She scowled a little. "Once more, my knowledge of what is out here is failing us, Harry. If we knew more about the terrain out there, perhaps I could tell us more about what the goblins are up to. Regardless, this one was moving in the same direction we are going. I thought it was the opposite at first, but it is not."

“Heading to Dol Guldur? Just to check what was left after Lady Galadriel and Celeborn finished with the place?”

“That is as likely as anything else,” Tauriel murmured, trying and failing to bring the terrain ahead of them to mind. But as she had told Harry several times, her knowledge of this area was poor at best. “Regardless, they are somewhere in the woods ahead of us. Should we skirt wide to the north or south?”

“How ahead of us is ‘ahead of us’? We could enter this portion of Mirkwood anywhere along the Bight, couldn’t we? And still be on the path to eventually come out the other side and heading on to law Florian.”

“If we skirt too far north, we will then come out the other side of Mirkwood into mores and bogs,” Tauriel disagreed. “We could go south, but if we do so lightly and still pass through Mirkwood in the doing, we will travel directly through territory controlled by Dol Guldur. If we go entirely southward, we will enter Berennyrr.”

The winced in her voice and face told Harry what Tauriel thought of going that route, but he had to ask. “Will Berennyrr be dangerous or simply desolate?”

Tauriel hesitated, then shrugged her shoulders. “Desolate for certain. Dangerous, quite possibly. I know not if any actually live there, but it is almost certain that it is patrolled by both fell men and goblins, at least. I would not have assumed it so before finding these tracks, but now, yes.”

Harry frowned a bit, understanding now that the destruction of the Army that attacked the Lonely Mountain had only really dealt with the forces gathered at Dol Guldur and to the north of that fastness while orcs and goblins were still scattered south. South and east, anyway. *From what I remember of the maps I’ve seen, Rohan and Gondor are to the south and west, and they would certainly not allow such creatures past their borders.*

“Then skirting directly around Dol Guldur to the north seems to be the smartest option. Better to go through lands we know are highly denuded of enemies rather than the reverse.”

Tauriel agreed with a shrug, and the two continued on, pushing through the Bight and into Mirkwood proper the day after.

Their first night in this segment of Mirkwood proved without a doubt that there were still enemies about. The two of them were camped against a rock, which had an almost ovoid shape, its sides smooth to the touch as if it had once been part of a river before being tossed here in some forgotten age. A large magnificent-looking tree grew beside it, and Tauriel had spent several moments climbing through its boughs while Harry had made them some food from their travel in packs. She had shot a rabbit earlier that day, and Harry wanted to work it into a stew.

However, before they could start eating, howls in the distance interrupted them, the noises bouncing off and around the trees in a way that made it possible to discern which direction it was coming from. As the two tensed and readied themselves, the howls were joined by the noises of several creatures moving through the woods.

"Harry, you did remember to put down the runes, correct?" Tauriel thought she had seen him do it while up in the tree, but despite whatever was happening to his long-term memory, Harry's short-term memory sometimes fizzled out in his own words. Where the phrase came from, she didn't know, but Tauriel quite liked it.

"I did. The problem is I only have a normal human's sense of smell. Using runes to hide smell is incredibly difficult. There just isn't any rune specifically designed to block out the smell of something from an animal's nose. Block in the air, yes, but that would slowly suffocate whoever was inside, which is not a good idea," Harry mused analytically. "Deaden scent enough to block out a foul odor, sure, but wargs and other animals like them have far better noses than humans, and you can't just double the number of runes to increase the effect."

He then smirked. "However, the Notice-Me-Not will cover everything but the smell, so while they can smell our meal, they can't concentrate on it and can't see us or the area within the array. So it is like the smell is coming out of nowhere. Those are some very confused animals right now. The same thing happened on the way to the Shire."

Moments later, a group of four wargs came out of the woods, and Harry studied the creatures closely. Beyond their general shape, Harry had to admit they didn't really look like wolves. Wolves were sleek, well-proportioned, and, most importantly, didn't slather. These beasts slobbered, their jaws distended, their fangs not fitting together right. Their proportions were all wrong, their front paws and shoulders larger than those at the back. Their fur was strange and matted instead of sleek.

"You know, now that I get a good look at these beasties, they are most decidedly not natural-looking animals. You would think the Big M would have come up with something prettier," Harry quipped.

"Unnatural, aye, more than you know." Tauriel practically growled, a sound most un-elvish, as she glared out past the wolves, ignoring their confused-sounding snuffles or the growls and yips they shared. "Attacking from within the array will break it, correct?"

"That's how it works. Your intent and that level of movement will combine to cause the array to collapse. Is there a reason we're not just sitting back and watching the poor wargs become ever more confused until they go away? I rather think it would be funny to see these wargs try to decide

Tauriel shook her head and placed not one but three arrows to her bow, holding her hand in a very odd manner as she did, each arrow between a few of her fingers as she turned her hand in the other direction. He sighed then and shrugged his shoulders, working out his hands and fingers for a moment. "I would prefer to let the animals go, but if you want to fight them, I'm fine with that."

Tauriel jerked her head forwards as she stared out towards their left flank, not releasing the string for a moment, the strain visible in her arms. "There are three goblin riders past this first group of four. I can't hear their words over the growls of the wargs very well, but they seem confused. It won't last."

Standing up, Harry was somewhat amused that they were about to consciously do the same thing that Aragorn had done so foolishly when the goblin riders had found his, Aragorn and Bilbo's camp. "You realize this entirely defeats the purpose of Notice-Me-Not, right?"

"Whatever are you talking about, Harry? Using a Notice-Me-Not to get the first strike in is a perfectly acceptable use of it," Tauriel quipped, then seeing that her paramour was ready, she let fly. Three arrows flew from her bow, zipping over the heads of the wargs, striking the riders behind the animals who hadn't had riders before. They all fell, skewered in the chest, neck and head.

At the same instance, Harry's magic flashed out. The cutting spell caught all four of the wargs who had been prowling around the camp, cutting them into pieces.

The last three growled and charged forwards riderless, but by that point, Tauriel had another arrow on her string. One fell with the arrow between the eyes, and Harry moved forward, a quick strike from his sword slicing into the snout of the leading warg as it crossed the former border of the Notice-Me-Not array, which Tauriel had not targeted, having seen Harry already moving to engage it. That warg yipped and fell back before whining, collapsing and beginning to spasm in place, green froth coming from its mouth due to the effects of the poison on the blade.

The last warg had circled around them, and Tauriel's arrow flew over its head as it tried to get away, but before it could, another cutting caught it from behind, cutting straight through in a welter of blood that stained the ground and nearby trees a dark brownish red color.

"I realize what you're saying, and yes, it seems to work quite well in that capacity, but that is a secondary effect. The Notice-Me-Not is to make sure we are not noticed, full stop," Harry continued the previous conversation, his tone turning somewhat prim for a moment. "And while we were able to deal with these creatures very well, what about their bodies? We'll have to move camp to escape the smell and stop us from retching. And what if they are found by others of their ilk?"

Tauriel shook her head. "This is Mirkwood. Meat like that will not go to waste for long, trust me. Already I can see a family of scavenger foxes out there. As for moving camp, that you are correct about." She frowned, then sighed. "I apologize for my abrupt action, Harry. But I simply cannot stand the sight of goblins and orcs, knowing what foul things they have done throughout the ages. Not least of which is twisting the wargs into creatures that are more dark monsters than an animal."

She sighed again, moving to join him by the campfire, gently pushing his hands away when he went to help her, cleaning up almost as if it was a penance for her earlier action. "You have no doubt heard that elves taught animals to speak long ago, each in their own way. And that all animals thus pay us some respect for it. But the wargs of the enemy have been so twisted over the centuries that they do not even recognize us as anything but enemies. Moreover, their voices are completely silent. When I hear the voice of an animal like a fox, or a regular wolf, I can tell what they are speaking, as I have mentioned before with birds we've passed."

Tauriel shook her head, glancing over at the corpse of the animal which had died via Harry's poisoned blade. "But when I listen to the growls and snarls of wargs, that is all I hear, growls and snarls. There is no intelligence there, only twisted hatred of everything else in the world, including their dread masters."

By this point, Tauriel had finished dousing the fire and placed the top on the small, extremely well-made pot, handing it up to Harry, who promptly placed a sticking charm on the top, and a lightning spell on the pot which would allow him to carry it along with how any issue. He could have put it in his moleskin pouch, but it would probably have still spilled, the top not being completely airtight.

As he was doing this, Tauriel finished speaking, taking down their tent briskly. "Only Luthien Tenuivel's songs ever worked on beasts of the enemy, lesser or greater, and her songs were so powerful they enspelled even the Great Enemy. Even were I a singer, I would never be able to speak or communicate to wargs, nor would any elf alive, not even one of the Wise. It is best to put such animals down for the better of the world."

"Well, what is done, is done. Let's just move on," Harry answered philosophically. "But, if we are in an area where these creatures still patrol, or once more patrol? I'm uncertain of the nomenclature there. Regardless, we'll need to be more careful."

Tauriel nodded firmly, and Harry picked up the wards stones he put down, placing them in his pouch before gesturing her on. "Ladies first. You're the one with the amazing eyes and ears."

Tauriel nodded with aplomb, but her aplomb disappeared as Harry traced a finger very, very lightly over the tips of one of her ears as she passed him. "And such pretty ears too."

"Wh, which are very sensitive..." Tauriel almost whimpered a bit at the touch before resolutely taking several more steps, putting distance between them, a blush on her face to match her hair at what she had just revealed. Behind her, Harry's laughter followed, causing her to blush an even deeper rouge.

Despite that moment of levity, the two of them were serious as they moved on. And when they found a place to make camp, they ate quickly, with Harry putting down the Notice-Me-Not runes quickly. And then, Tauriel insisted they move on after eating just in case the lingering smell of it brought more wargs instead of putting up their tent.

They set up camp nearby, within sight of where they had eaten, so that Tauriel could see if any more wargs were in the area. Thankfully, there weren't any. But over the next few days, as they continued to travel through the forest, they began to see signs of past battles, and not that far past either. Tauriel estimated that much of the evidence they saw: crushed loam here, broken branches there, blood splatters and bones in more than a few places, and several times they found broken orc or goblin weapons, pointed to a series of small battles that occurred around the same time as Harry and Bilbo began their journey back to the Shire, or directly before.

"This is the way an elven host would fight in the woods, Harry," she explained as she crouched on a large boulder sticking up at the bottom of a tree, pointing to where several arrows had been left behind, picking them up one after another to examine them carefully before adding them to her own even as Harry examined the remnants of corpses left behind nearby.

"Range through the forest, find the enemy, strike from one direction, then another, then another. Pull the enemy's attention every which way until they don't know what is happening. Elves can move through terrain like this unseen, unheard, and, if we have time, even scentless. Certain unguents can cover your smell, or enough mud and dirt can do it in a pinch."

"I'm more concerned that you have mentioned spotting signs of more recent movement," Harry muttered, shaking his head tiredly. Last night had been a bad one, and there were bags under his eyes now. Indeed, Tauriel had argued against them moving on that morning, given how tired he looked, but Harry's energy seemed to return as the sun rose despite it being a very cloudy, overcast day. But now that it was pushing nighttime once more, his exhaustion was catching up to him.

"True. What movement we have seen though is coming from the southeast and is most decidedly patrols of their own Scout groups sent out on long rangings." She hopped down from her previous perch, gesturing for Harry to kneel beside her a moment later as she knelt beside an area of loam between a tree and a bush. "Look here. These orcs are going north and west towards where I believe Dol Guldur is. Or beyond that, Moria. They are heavier, the goblin or orc..."

Tauriel paused, frowning faintly, running her finger lightly over the bruised surface of the loam, where apparently she could see some sign. After a few moments of silent contemplation, she shook her head. "Orc. At least on this beast, anyway. Regardless, they were heavier going north and west than they were coming back, the signs we saw earlier today. They are using up their supplies, despite living off the land as much as possible."

"So they're doing what you predicted earlier, checking to see what is left of Dol Guldur? Make sense," Harry grunted, his own attention on the forest around them just in case. "But no spiders?"

"No. Spiders would not be sent on a scouting trip of any sort. They can't move quickly over open terrain and would not be comfortable doing so. And I do not doubt that the forces of

Lothlorien did as good a job as my folk in clearing out this segment of the forest of that filth. A single brood would be able to rebuild the numbers within a decade. Within two, they would be a threat to any who traveled within this area of the forest. Within thirty, they would be stretching northward. No, Lord Celeborn will have had certain that they were thoroughly expunged," Tauriel explained fervently.

Harry nodded at that, and the two of them moved on. With Tauriel in the lead, they continued on their way, wary of being ambushed. But Tauriel's readings of the signs they'd been seeing seemed accurate. They were moving almost straight east and had seemingly passed through the area least likely to have living enemies. They still saw signs of battle but no new signs of enemy movement. And within four more days, they had reached the edge of Mirkwood and were facing the open rolling hills beyond.

Tauriel smiled faintly, although Harry knew her by now to know that she was extremely pleased. "We have done it. By crossing the forest at an angle from the Bight, we are now just a bit north of Lothlorien. If we keep heading towards the Misty Mountains, we will run into the river Anduin, and then we can follow that river until we see signs of a forest to our right."

"That almost makes me wish I knew how to make a riverboat or even just a barge like we did before without barrels around to use. I'm uncertain what the impact of that kind of thing would be on a Notice-Me-Not, but it would be fascinating to see if we could be both mobile and unseen," Harry murmured, linking arms with Tauriel. She laid her head against his shoulder, and they looked out over the vista before them of rolling grass hills. "Shall we be going?"

Tauriel nodded, and the two moved off, moving across the land as quickly and silently as a cloud.

For the next few days, there was nothing much about the terrain that grabbed either of their attention. There were a few clumps of flowers here and there, but mostly, it was rolling hills, merging here and there hidden marshes, the land visibly shifting around such places. But that was it. It was strange to think that this area was so close to the Gladden Fields, an area made infamous by the death of the last Numenorean king, Isildur.

As they neared the river, the land became slightly flatter, allowing them to see further away. It also brought them out into the weather beyond the forest, and Harry felt a greater chill in the wind than before. Autumn was continuing its inexorable march.

Once they reached the Anduin, they camped alongside the river for a day as Tauriel fished for them. The Elven woman simply stuck her fingers into the water and whispered something in her own language that Harry, at work nearby on making a firepit, couldn't hear. Then she pulled a fish out of the water by its gills, placing it on the ground next to her, before repeating the action twice more.

Harry made them fish fillets that night, pasted in leaves from a tree called Lavaralda, which had given rabbit meat previously a spicy and fragrant flavor. This and half of the last bits of Lembas from Tauriel's supplies made for a great meal. The next day, the two pushed on. Two days later, they saw trees in the distance on the other side of the river. By mid-afternoon, they saw the edge of a forest slowly moving toward them and the river further south.

"Should we cross now and make our way through the woods? Or cross the river at its closest point to the forest... is the forest named something, or is it all Lothlorien?"

Tauriel paused mid-step, frowning thoughtfully. "Tales say that the city of Lothlorien is in the meeting point between the rivers Anduin and Nimrodel. But the tales never mention what the rivers look like at those points. Here, the riverbanks are low enough that we could perhaps swim across. We might not be so lucky later on." Her lips twitched, and she shook her head. "As for the forest, I believe it is just named Lothlorien. Or Lorelin Dorelin."

Harry looked at the river, frowning. "I think you might be underestimating the current. Still, we need to cross somewhere."

This proved to be much more difficult than Tauriel had first thought. The Anduin deepened and sped up past the point where the two of them had first made camp on its shores. There, perhaps they could have crossed easily. The river had widened and slowed at that point, coming out of an area that looked like a decent-sized marsh. Here, on the other hand, it was flowing through quickly and deeply.

Harry nearly drowned within moments before getting his feet under him, and only a hastily thrown rope coupled with a sticking charm had kept Tauriel from being swept along by the current. Still, through adroit use of ropes, Harry's spellwork, and Tauriel's archery, they eventually made it across, wet, bedraggled, and tired.

By mutual agreement, they put up a fire almost immediately upon finishing the crossing, cuddling together in the tent as Harry once more used his heating charms to keep them warm. Unfortunately, heating charms could not dry them out, and Harry didn't know a specific spell for that. The fire would have to do for that.

The efforts to cross the river had taken them most of the morning. However, they still could have covered at least fifteen leagues before the sun started to set. Tauriel continually apologized for this until Harry laughed, kissed her until she fell silent, and said, "It makes me happy somewhat to know that there are some things even elves struggle with. Your eyesight and hearing are so much better than mine, and your dexterity is phenomenal as well. So to see you struggle with something physical is actually quite nice. Brings you down to earth, so to speak."

Tauriel laughed at that, then suddenly smirked. "Well, if we are speaking of bringing someone down to earth..." She kissed Harry again before pushing him onto his back, laying down on top of them, and nuzzling into his shoulder. "Much better."

As she lay on top of him, Tauriel could feel Harry's reaction through his wet clothing. The knowledge that he still responded to her like this despite how exhausted they were sent a thrill down Tauriel's spine, but she had no desire to take things further than that. *Perhaps in a few months' time, though.*

Having set out runes first after getting to shore, the two of them were safe enough that night that they didn't bother leaving their tent until the next morning. Indeed, Harry was so tired that he didn't even dream, something Tauriel was extremely happy for.

They pushed on with the dawning of the next day and, by mid-morning, were reaching the outskirts of the forest of Lothlorien. There, Tauriel paused momentarily, staring at the trees in wonder. Here, at the outskirts of this realm, were trees as old as some of the oldest she had seen in their journey through Mirkwood. It was a clear sign that this area had once been part of Greenwood the great in ages past. She gently ran her fingers along the bark of one tree after another as they moved, eager to explore this new wood, as even at the outskirts, she could tell the feel of this portion of the former Greenwood the Great was different than Mirkwood.

The portions of Mirkwood they had been moving through had been the signs of recent battles, of recent corruption. The shadows underneath the trees were still lengthy, deep and forbidding, and both had occasionally felt it. Even in the north, it would be some time before the land recovered from the shadow Sauron had cast from Dol Guldur.

Here, there was no hint of that kind of thing. Indeed, within a few moments of entering the forest, Tauriel could already feel the impact of elves on the area, as if she stood on the outskirts of Taur-e-Ndaedelos.

"Where to now, do you think? Should we keep trying to keep the river in sight or go deeper?" Harry asked, smiling faintly at how Tauriel was acting.

Tauriel smiled back, shrugging her shoulders. "I would suggest that we push deeper into the forest and then turn to our left. I further think you should lead for a time, Harry. You are the one after all that the lady Galadriel would most wish to see, and she will no doubt have spread your description to the guardians of her realm."

Harry looked at her quizzically, knowing that lady Galadriel would've also given them a description of Tauriel from their shared dreamscape. But Tauriel simply waved him on, taking a few steps to the side and disappearing around a tree from his line of sight. Taking that as a cue, Harry shrugged and moved on, wondering if he was playing bait. *It will be fun to see if so. And here I thought Tauriel didn't like pranks so much. But she's fine with jump scares?*

In a way, Harry was right. Tauriel had spotted signs of recent movement in the foliage above their route and had gone to investigate. She moved quietly, silently even to elvish senses, shifting only minutely between one moment and the next. She followed Harry at a distance and then skirted around and about where he was walking. Soon enough, she spotted more movement ahead of her and went still, watching.

Several trees away, an elf appeared, barely visible even to Tauriel's eyes, staring down at where Harry was walking through the woods. Harry was currently whistling something under his breath as if he had no care in the world. As soon as she sensed the elf was going to move, Tauriel did the same, bounding from the tree she was into the next one, landing with not even a leaf disturbed in her passage.

Not that there were many leaves on the trees at this point. Most of the oak and other deciduous trees had lost their leaves. Which, now that Harry wasn't trying to be silent, had made Harry's passage through the woods all the louder.

"Greetings, human," the elf said, leaping downward. "Seeing as you were allowed through Lady Galadriel's veil, I imagine you are Harry Potter, correct?"

The elf had obviously been expecting Harry to stop, startled by his sudden appearance, but he was greatly disappointed. Harry simply nodded narrowly at him and said pleasantly, "Are you here to escort us then?"

"Us'? Who is 'us'?" The elf asked, thrown off by Harry's poise and the question.

"A gentle tap on the shoulder caused him to flinch. Whirling around, his hand flashing towards a dagger at his waist, his bow falling to the ground at his feet before he paused, staring at Tauriel.

"Us," Tauriel said with a pleasant smile, bowing from the waist, having taken several steps back after tapping his shoulder. "I am Tauriel of Mirkwood, Harry's companion on this journey."

"This journey of life," Harry quipped, causing Tauriel to smile at him as she moved around the somewhat flustered elf to rejoin her companion. "I thought you said you didn't like practical jokes?" Harry murmured outside of the corner of his mouth.

"I don't. But I know my folk Harry and members of the Unseen Host would be hard-pressed to avoid a chance to show off, especially to a human, regardless of what our Lord or lady has ordered. I decided to remind the local elves that they should remember the old adage that there is always someone better. And if they had spotted me, I would know there was much I could still learn."

"Ah, the famous two birds with one stone concept," Harry chuckled.

The elf had gotten himself under control by this time and stared at Tauriel for a second before his manners reasserted themselves, and he bowed from the waist. "Be welcome young elf, to Lothlorien. And I will admit to being impressed. I am Egalisar, and I have served as a ranger to my Lord Celeborn since the time of Eru Thingol, and rarely has anyone been able to sneak up on me like that."

"Your words do me great honor, and I will apologize for my moment of levity. Well do I understand the importance of your position," Tauriel replied magnanimously. "I was part of the Unseen Host of Taur-e-Ndaedelos."

Egalisar nodded at that. "There is no harm done, Tauriel. I would say rather that your sneaking up on me like that is a good cure for complacency. But come. The Lady Galadriel wished for you to be brought directly to her upon your arrival, Harry Potter."

With that, Egalisar turned, leading the way deeper into the forest, engaging them in small talk as they walked.

The change from woodland to an elvish kingdom was gradual, at least to Harry's eyes. Perhaps Tauriel was seeing more signs than he was, but he didn't think so. The trees grew larger, for one thing, older even than the ones they had previously been passing through. So old, in fact, that Tauriel began to murmur in surprise at them. Many of the trees also had small carvings on their branches and trunks, and at times tiny markers of rocks appeared, with small Elvish letters carved into them. There were a few scattered wooden bridges high up in the boughs of the trees and a hidden grotto occasionally well camouflaged among the roots.

But really, the main sign of the difference was the trees, growing larger and then... Turning gold and silver.

Harry stood stock still, staring as the first of the gold-leafed trees appeared among their more normal-looking brethren while Tauriel let loose a peal of laughter, her face utterly delighted, the sound loud and bright like a Springbrook on a bright day to Harry's ears as she exclaimed, "Mallorn trees!"

Rising like kings among even the largest of their brethren, these trees were smooth, almost like beech in terms of their branches and trunks, but their bark was silver, their leaves bright golden. When Harry approached enough to look straight up at the boughs of one of them, Harry could see the trunk dividing eight or nine hundred feet above his head, spreading out so that each tree looked almost like a crown from below. Each Mallorn tree was also huge, as wide across as a redwood, their branches reaching out to cover what looked like half a city block to Harry's eyes.

And it was among those branches that the city of the elves resided.

"Be welcome to Caras Galadon, city of the Galadhrim!" Their guide said as more elves appeared above them and in small, scattered areas around the base of the trees.

Pushing forward, they found a river flowing through the area, slow but deep, with a few bridges crossing over it at different points. Those bridges and several houses scattered through the area were made of stone, with each stone fit so cunningly against their fellows that no mortar was needed. Moreover, the stones were crafted to look like they were covered by leaves of different types of trees, maple, beech, oak, roan and others Harry had not seen before. The houses were almost molded around the trees, their sides shaped to look like natural rocks piled together.

Houses were also visible high in the trees above. These houses worked with the wood as if the trees themselves had been molded by the magic of the elves to create these living spaces. When Harry asked about this in a hushed tone. Something about this city, perhaps the overall feel of the place or the low background music, the song of an elvish choir, made him want to keep his voice down. *There is more background magic here than there is even in Rivendell... amazing. And what was that veil that Egalisar mentioned? Is that Galadriel's equivalent of the border Elrond maintains around Rivendell? I didn't notice anything... but then again, I didn't enter Rivendell either.*

Their guide nodded, as did Tauriel. "Never enough to harm the trees or two or their growth, but yes, our tree singers have worked on the Mallorn trees since well before the start of this age, Harry Potter."

As they continued on, still more of the city could be seen. Stone walkways were built into the trees, somehow merging with the wood of the main trunk and the branches below, creating platforms and walkways called telain according to their guide. Some of these were so large they had small houses on top of them. Bridges of intricately woven ropes of various colors and textures connected one tree to another.

And as they passed, murals could be seen facing inwards from the city's outer edge on various stones or portions of the trees. Things Harry knew were Elvish musical notes carved into the lower branches of trees. Landscape artwork of distant mountains, the image of a sun rising over an ocean. On a few trees, there was a painting of a river multiplied, one painting on each tree. In turn, each painting was slightly different bar the last one. It was as if they were meant to show the same river over various ages, with the last showing the impact of some cataclysm or other.

Nowhere could Harry see a sign or a scene that showed anything of warfare or combat. That somewhat surprised Harry. In Rivendell, there were several murals of ancient battles and rooms for training with swords, bows or spears. Here, if there were such, they were hidden.

And in the background was the sound of elvish music. Flutes, violins, and singing in Sindarin came from the far right as Tauriel and Harry were led towards a ramp leading up into the city.

All the while, the elves above and around them continued their business. There were more such here than Harry had seen in Elrond's halls, although to his eyes, they were very different, or at least more varied, something he had to think about for a moment to explain away. Then it came to him.

*Elrond's folk are mostly Noldor, right?* They were the most warlike of the elves, which made sense given Elrond's history, having been healer aid and commander in war under Gil-Galad after being trained and raised by Maglor, the only one of the sons of Fëanor that most tales Harry had heard of the old days of middle Earth treated remotely kindly. *Not that it is saying much, considering how much utter shite the rest did.*

And while a few Noldor were within sight of the newcomers as they ascended into the main city, they certainly did not dominate. Here instead, were elves of the Moriguendi: Sindar else who had never seen the lights of Valinor or been in the presence of the Valar. While their hair color was mostly the same, silver was more predominant among men and women. The Sindar were not as tall as the Noldor nor as nearly human in the size of their shoulders.

The coloration of their clothing was also very different. Whereas the Noldor preferred brighter colors, red and deep blue or white, the Sindar preferred more natural browns and greens. Yet the designs were far more varied among the Sindar, and the clothing was more detailed in a few ways.

Yet regardless, all the elves who spotted Harry and his companion greeted them, some with confusion, others with happiness, speaking the common Elven tongue of Sindarin. Harry and Tauriel responded politely in the same manner.

Within moments of their starting their slow, and for Harry, gawking way through the city, Galadriel herself appeared, moving towards them on quick feet, coming across one of the rope bridges to them.

As the Lady approached, many of the elves around them nodded their heads to her or curtsied, while Tauriel bowed from the waist profoundly, trying hard not to show how awed she was at the Lady's presence, which here in the mortal realm was almost as powerful as in the dream they had shared.

And her hair was even more striking. It truly was as if someone had captured the lights of Telperion and Laurelin, the great trees of silver and gold that brought light to the land of the Valar, within her hair. She was also tall, several inches taller than all of the elves around her, and her eyes piercing. Despite being faint, the smile on her face seemed to bring joy to the day. "Harry! Be welcome to Lothlorien, my young friend. And you as well, Tauriel of Mirkwood."

Seeing Lady Galadriel in person had much the same impact on Harry now that it had back in Rivendell. This despite his traveling with Tauriel and being very aware of how beautiful she was. There was nothing sensual about it. Indeed, Tauriel was far more attractive to Harry than

Galadriel as a woman, although objectively, Galadriel was more beautiful. Her beauty, like her aura, was otherworldly, much like that of the Maiar or Valar she had lived among in Valinor.

Bowing deeply from the waist, Harry found his words once more coming out almost in a poetic manner. "No matter how fair, the beauty of Lothlorien pales in comparison to that of the light in your hair and eyes, Lady Galadriel."

Galadriel's lips quirked at that into a slightly wider smile, then she took several more steps forward and embraced Harry Potter, her arms around his shoulders. This shocked several elves around them, many letting out quiet gasps. The lady was never known to give out hugs like this. Touches on shoulder and hair, perhaps to those she was closest with. But hugs were only ever given out to her granddaughter, husband, and daughter Celebrain before she left Middle Earth. Seeing Lady Galadriel hugging a human, even one rumored to be a wizard, was astonishing.

For his part, Harry quickly returned the hug, keeping his arms chastely around Galadriel's shoulders as well, having to reach upwards a bit from his own shoulder height to do so, given how tall the woman was. "Galadhrim?" He whispered into her ear. "Really?"

Galadriel's lips twisted into a small sneer as she shook her head, pulling back from the hug to hold him at arm's length before replying. "The people of Lothlorien have been called that for far longer than my husband, and I have led them, Harry Potter. I did not choose that name. Never think that of me. That would smack too much of hubris, and I will not be accused of that. Pride, yes. Hubris, no."

Harry laughed at that, but his laughter was interrupted by another woman's voice coming from nearby, a note of surprise and confusion audible within it. "Beleg Naneth(Grandmother)!? Who is this?"

The two newcomers turned in the direction of the new voice, only for their eyes to widen slightly.

A young elven woman stood on a nearby telain looking down at them, and she was **gorgeous**. Long flowing black hair flowed down her back in a cascade of hair so dark it almost looked like someone had made it out of the nighttime sky, within which could be seen tiny silver stars hanging from chains in her hair so fine they looked almost like spiderwebs, making it look like she had actual stars in her space-black hair.

Her dress, much like that worn by Galadriel, flowed from her shoulders down to her ankle, covering her entirely, yet showing an extremely fit athletic form underneath. Her face was almost like that of Galadriel, but younger, softer, her eyes a little bit wider, a little less discerning and powerful, which did not take away from her ethereal beauty. Gray were those eyes, like that of an overcast sky, as she looked on in some confusion at the meeting between Galadriel and Harry.

Tauriel was not one to feel jealousy at the looks of someone else. Few Elvish women were. Jealousy of that sort simply did not occur to most elves. But this woman had Tauriel want to brush her hair back and find a better dress than her traveling clothing. Or drag Harry right back out of Calas Galadon.

For a moment, she was worried that Harry would become entranced by her beauty. After all, he was still mainly human in his sensibilities, whatever was going on with his mind and body. And human men were supposedly more driven by the beauty they could see with their eyes than anything else.

Yet as soon as that thought came to her, Tauriel realized how foolish it was. *No. Harry is not like that. No one who holds friendship and family as high in their esteem as Harry would ever be so easily swayed by the physical. Certainly not when already in a relationship with someone.*

True to this thought, Harry was not looking at this young elven woman with desire or any hint of attraction. Instead, he murmured, "Meh, I prefer red hair. It must be a Potter thing."

As Tauriel bit her lip to keep from laughing, Harry bowed from the waist towards the new girl, grinning cheerfully. "You would be Arwen, wouldn't you? Your brothers described your eyes and hair to me. You have my deepest sympathies to be related to those two reprobates."

This caused the other young woman to blink in surprise, now very much off-balance. Galadriel laughed, her laughter almost otherworldly. "Harry Potter, be known to my granddaughter, Arwen."

Introductions continued for a time, with Arwen's confusion only slowly disappearing to be replaced by bemused wonder. Galadriel had not mentioned Harry to her, although she had spoken of him to her husband, for while she wasn't one to enjoy physical pranks all that much, moments like this were quite fun to her. Arwen's continued confusion and surprise were all she could have wanted.

*And it's good for her too, Galadriel thought virtuously, amused inside while she didn't show it physically. While her poise and self-control are something I take great delight in, Arwen needs to be shocked occasionally. Indeed, most elves do. We tend not to be able to roll with chaos as much as humans can in our daily lives.*

Once Arwen had recovered suitably to banter back, Galadriel showed them through the city for a time, with his granddaughter joining them, questioning Tauriel and Harry about her brothers since Arwen had not been home to Rivendell in more than a century. She had come to Lothlorien to learn from her grandmother and had remained ever since. Of course, among elves, a departure of a century or so wasn't all that much, but it was nice to hear that her brothers were doing well, even though she had not heard that they had taken part in a war before this.

That caused her to frown faintly and excuse herself to write out a message to the two of them, the tone of which Harry was uncertain about, but he quickly turned back to Galadriel and Tauriel as Galadriel continued leading them on through the telain and wooden bridges. They passed by several other elves, and then Harry looked to the side, seeing a wider, flatter telain set between two trees. So wide was it looked like a small amphitheater. At present, an orchestra was playing, their instruments moving in time with one another as several of them sang.

Soon they were coming to a series of steps leading up to an even higher platform, one directly below the topmost of the largest Mallorn tree, covering at least two city blocks with its boughs. Far below them was a well of water, its sides made to look almost like a natural spring, but the depth and clarity of that water were most definitely not natural. Harry felt that if he tried, he could stare straight down through the clearness of that water to the bottom. Nearby, another ramp led down to it, winding around a single tree to that point.

On that platform, they found another man, who turned from where he had been speaking to two other elves, both bowing and moving past the newcomers, nodding their heads towards Lady Galadriel as they passed. She nodded back, then gestured to the elf who had remained. "Harry Potter, Tauriel of Mirkwood, be known to my husband, Celeborn of Doriath."

This elf was the first male elf Harry had seen since arriving in Caras Galadon or even back when he had first met her that matched Galadriel in height. His hair was silver, falling below his shoulders to the middle of his chest in a straight pattern, his eyes deep and black, and he wore a robe of silver and green, broad in the shoulders in a way that few Sindar elves were. Celeborn examined them calmly, not seeing as deeply, perhaps, as Galadriel but still seeing more than most would have.

He moved to his wife's side, and Tauriel smiled faintly at the softness in their eyes as they looked at one another, the faint upticks to the mouth, the warmth she had heard in the lady Galadriel's voice as she called Celeborn her husband. These were obvious signs of love between the two of them, signs that would have faded between most Elven couples after thousands of years. But such was not the case here.

More than that, Tauriel was trying hard not to gape in awe or make a fool of herself in some other manner as she bowed deeply to the man. For while the Lady Galadriel was revered among all elves, among the Sindar, her husband Celeborn was almost as equally revered.

A nephew of Eru Thingol, one of the first two leaders of their Moriquendi back in the dawn of the world, Celeborn was revered as a wise ruler and a deadly swordsman. Indeed, he was one of the deadliest alive in this age. Quick of eye and hand, he was a fantastic musician, a great orator and a leader of warriors.

Like any of the Sindar, Tauriel knew of Celeborn's history. He had fought in numerous small engagements at the edge of the Veil of Melian while it still remained, then fought the dwarves

during the sacking of Menegroth. Having left the ruins of his kinsman's lands, he remained aloof from the troubles following the Silmarils thereafter, unwilling to have anything to do with it or the sons of Fëanor.

In the Second Age, he fought under Gil-Galad as his wife helped carve the high king his kingdom. There he served until the fall of Eregion under Sauron's assault, joining his wife in carving out the realm of Lothlorien. *Lady Galadriel might make many of the decisions here, but these two are very definitely a marriage of equals.*

"I am greatly thankful for your welcome, my Lord," Tauriel responded as Harry silently bowed from the waist.

"And it is a joy to meet you as well, Tauriel of Mirkwood. I have heard my wife speak of you and have had reports of the Battle of the Mountain. And it is a similar joy to meet you, Harry Potter," Celeborn said, staring at both of them thoughtfully.

"I thank you for your welcome for me and my lady, my Lord. Calas Galadon is magnificent. It flows and works with nature in a way that no human construction could ever match and is all the more fantastical for it."

Celeborn nodded in response to this, then gestured with one hand to another rope bridge leading into the 'royal quarters'. "Come, my folk will have prepared a meal for us. There we shall share our tails. I would like a firsthand account of the battle against Smaug and against the orcs. And I know my wife would like to hear tales of what the dwarves have accomplished in Erebor. And I'm certain you have questions about what we were doing at the time."

"After that, we will show you two your rooms for as long as you stay here," Galadriel added, moving to lead the way.

### **End chapter**

Fun fact: Galadriel is, at the time of this work, more than 8000 years old. In RoP, in the second age, 5000 years old. She is not young. She stopped being young during her time as the Maia Mireil's student in Doriath and, even then, had experienced things well beyond what that shallow, bitter creature from Amaz-Earth has ever raged about.

In other news, One of the problems in terms of the original Lord of the Rings was that several of the Ringwraiths had been sent back to dol Dol Guldur to command forces there, which pinned the forces of Galadriel in place and kept the elves further north at bay. However, this was decades after the Necromancer had been ousted. So why wouldn't the good guys have been more proactive? In the original, it could be argued that elves were rarely willing to put forth the effort to be proactive at this time. However, that really is a little silly.

I'm not saying that in the 70+ years between the events of the Hobbit and the events of the Fellowship, the forces of evil couldn't have rebuilt the place or that Sauron couldn't have sent troops there in small

packages, building them up over time. There isn't much between Mordor and dol Dol Guldur beyond sheer distance, and the Black Gate is facing toward Dol Guldur in the distance.

This site – <http://lotrproject.com/map/#zoom=2&lat=-1204.5&lon=1500&layers=BTTTTTTTT> is a tremendous resource, and if any of you are thinking of trying your hand in Tolkien land, I will urge you to use this map. It is an excellent map in terms of what the land looks like during the time between the hobbit and the Fellowship. I don't agree with where Dol Guldur is to the edge of Mirkwood and Lothlorien beyond. I think it would be more to the center and further north. But beyond that, I think they got a lot more right than wrong.

Regardless, here at least, I mention that Galadriel and her husband were much more proactive in making certain that the ruins were precisely that, **ruins!** Since in the original, they eventually led a campaign against it, and Galadriel did tear the place down at that point, slew the three Ringwraiths there? It isn't that big a stretch.