

I am not british, nor do I own either property.

Here's the next chapter of ***Fate***, Folks. This version hasn't been edited yet by any of my beta readers, so if you notice mistakes or lore inaccuracies, point them out, please!!! I went over it with Grammarly, but I know I had trouble with some of the names and making certain what I wrote here was built on what has gone before. And now it's time to jog Tomon and Hiryo's elbows for ***DA*** and ***Effect***, respectively. Hopefully they simply forgot to hit the send button to get the chapters back to me, LOL. I will also be starting work on ***Making Waves***. Should hopefully have that done Monday night, but we will see.

Chapter 24: Marching Towards the Sound of War

Tauriel and Harry settled into their home by the lake and their lives within the kingdom of Erebor with little fanfare, busy as they both were. It was not so much a cabin in the woods as most humans would have imagined it, but rather a mixture of House and elvish-style tree house, built around one giant tree and the wardstone.

At first, that ward stone had been blank, but over the years, Harry had carefully added several wards to it, each layer taking up time to experiment before etching the array in place. The first wards he had done had been purely defensive. Wards to keep the foundation of the House from ever degrading, wards to hide the House from scrying since Harry knew that was a thing in this world. Sauron was still out there, and Harry knew he was a target for the fallen Maiar.

After that, wards to keep strangers away were added, and finally, wards to warn of people coming near. The first was necessary because, despite Bard's best efforts, the knowledge that Harry was a wizard had spread without carrying with it the fact he wasn't willing to use his magic to solve whatever ailment or problem that people came to him with. The dwarves, thankfully, didn't have that kind of mindset, but far too many humans seemed to want to bother the wizard-like that. Or kill him for being a wizard and thus obviously untrustworthy, despite how high Harry stood in the confidence of Bard and Thorin.

Yes, people were stupid. Harry had known that in his past life, and this wasn't the first example of it Harry had seen in this world either from humans, elves or dwarves. But it was still frustrating. Thankfully, the wards around the area were so strong that no stranger could even enter the copse of trees without being turned around.

The warning ward had been the most difficult after a fashion, not only to come up with but to get right and had taken the better part of a year. The problem was that Harry wasn't the only one that the wards needed to warn, and while Tauriel had a normal Silvan elf's sense of magic, they had found out during testing that the warning ward was too subtle for her to sense.

Something that, at the time, had somewhat annoyed her. "As I do not think we have to wonder which of us is the most subtle, Harry."

Yet after getting over his laughter at that comment (and kissing away her annoyance during a very pleasurable turn of the candle) Harry had figured out a way to connect that ward to a color-changing ward. This was then set into specially made dwarven lights. The small runestone would change the color of the light to warn Harry and Tauriel of strangers coming near.

Strangers as defined by people not read into the wards, anyway. Thorin, Fili and the rest of the Company still living in Erebor were read into the wards right off the bat, followed by a few other dwarves, Bard, and a few of his representatives, along with Legolas. Tauriel's parents were, alas, next to be added in. Harry and Tauriel's newest friend, Gimli, was the latest to be read permanently into the wards. A tiny drop of blood on the wardstone and Gimli not only could find their home without being with one of them, but he also didn't trigger what Kili called the 'Stranger Danger' ward.

Gimli had become a semi-frequent visitor whenever he was in Erebor. Somewhat amusingly, the warlike dwarf loved to fish and talk as a way of winding down from his time on patrol. Sometimes, he, Harry, Fili and Dwalin would all be out there, sharing mugs of good mead and just whiling away a day.

The rune stones in the lights still burnt out after a few warnings, but that, too, Harry and the dwarves had been able to solve after a bit of trial and error. The dwarves had been able to design lights that had a small separate area at the bottom beside the ever-full oil. This, in turn, had an opening in it that let Harry just replace the rune stone within after they turned to dust.

Magically speaking, their home was almost as defended as Rivendell, although far smaller in area. They lacked the offensive spellwork on the rivers that Elrond had weaved over the centuries, but Harry was certain that a band of orcs could pass by the house without finding it, even if they already knew the general location to look for them in. Not, mind you, that was likely to happen, given the power of Erebor or even Dale. Yet strangers were also a thing, and more than once over the past few years, Bard had found strange men trying to spy on his realm.

While Harry had worked on defense and Balin and a few carefully chosen architects among the dwarves had designed the House itself, Tauriel had stamped her own presence very firmly on both the House and the surrounding area. The trees around the House were well-

cared for, connected one to another by insanely well-hidden ropes, which in turn connected to the main tree well above the normal level of the House, allowing for a quick, silent exit at need.

A tree grew up and out of the house's interior, a mighty oak that had been transplanted from Mirkwood by the elves, its lower boughs blended together to create a rooftop. As for the walls, Tauriel had worked with several of her fellows in order to merge the ground, bushes and stone the dwarves had provided in order to create walls that looked almost natural, like a dense hedge, until someone was right on top of it. Only at that point would someone see the stone within.

Unlike Harry's work on the magical side, none of this was done with defense in mind. It was simply the way of Sindar and Silvan elves to blend any construction into the forest around them. The large copse of trees that dominated the side of the Long Lake near the Lonely Mountain hardly counted as a forest, but the principle, as one elf was quick to point out, remained the same. The bedrock of the house, the cellar, and the stone for the walls came from the dwarves, but the elves designed the exterior of the house and a lot of the interior. Even the small dock where Gimli introduced Harry to the normal (nonmagical) method of fishing looked almost natural, shaped to look like a tiny peninsula sticking out of the rest of the land.

Two stories above the rest of the building a true treehouse sat, containing the couple's bedroom. Much like the houses of the elves in Lothlorien, the telain merged into the tree, including the covered spiral staircase leading down into the rest of the house through. Even that spiral staircase was made into the living wood of the tree. Walls and slats of green wood merged into the tree, becoming simply another part of the tree.

Within the building the lovers had slowly stamped their differing personalities on the house. Tauriel had, over a few years, created respectable-looking chairs, the dwarves providing them with soft cushions. Harry had made the kitchen area his own, and both of them loved a small booth-like nook bulging out of the side of the house. The lack of intervening walls between the main room and kitchen allowed large groups of their friends to come over and dine with them, but the nook was just for the two of them.

A few murals were painted on the walls, showing how Tauriel had taken up painting a few times over the past few years. While most elves would say that Tauriel didn't have much talent for it, Harry still felt her painting of the Lonely Mountain on one wall was amazing. She didn't do so well with people or imagined scenes, though, and one of the other walls had been cleaned of paint several times, causing much teasing and laughter over the past few years. Similarly, the branches of the tree wound through the roof had been gently carved over the years into various simple designs.

In turn, Harry had created a pensieve. Set into the northernmost wall, it displayed up onto the wall memories placed in a small bowl-like dent in the floor there. Many a night had been spent with the two of them sharing memories like this. Only a few times had Thorin or Balin used it, as the dwarves did not really go into plays or theater much. The memories they shared were more about the past of the Lonely Mountain, and it did not do to dwell on the past, lest it blind you to what could be done in the present.

The main bedroom had also been changed over time to suit the lover's tastes. The king-sized bed had been shrunk, as elves were not in the habit of tossing and turning, and nor was Harry. The window along one wall had been enlarged to spread across one wall along the height of a dwarven head, the glass of which could be removed with ease in nicer weather, and a large portion of the roof had been hit by the same spell Harry had used above the farming areas in the Lonely Mountain to let light reach them.

Only, since the roof of the House was simple, thin wood, the spell had yet to fade, while that one had. This had resulted in a major project for Harry and the dwarven rune scribes, but one they had completed in under five months. Now, the underground farms of Erebor were a wonder to look upon, and Harry knew that Dain had requested similar work be done in his holds in the Iron Hills.

A small patio had been added to the telain, along with a door. In one corner was another small nook with a tiny desk, on which could be found scattered stones, parchment, an ink quill and an etching set. Along one wall, the weapons and armor of the pair lay, excluding the training swords, which were always left in the main room. A few knickknacks lay across the top of a long dresser, full of clothing made by elves, humans and dwarves alike.

Over the years spent making this place their home, Harry had woken up without Tauriel beside him many times. As he blinked his eyes open now, his head was already twisting around to look to where he knew she would be, a faint smile coming to his face as he took in the sight.

It was still night out, the light of the stars and a pale half-moon coming in from the window. Unlike in most elven realms, the pair of them normally kept to the diurnal cycle of the dwarves, something Tauriel had never complained about. But occasionally, the pair of them had stayed up all night, just cuddling together, staring up at the stars. No matter how many generations removed, the stars, the gift of Elbereth Gilthoniel that had been the first thing the elves saw upon waking, would still have power over any elf.

Now, Tauriel stood naked as those ancient elves had been upon waking on Middle Earth as she leaned lightly on the windowsill, breathing in the night's breath, staring up at the stars above. Her dark red hair had grown longer over the past few years, flowing down now to mid-back. Her rear was small and pert, her legs thin and well-muscled, her back showing much of

the same musculature, perhaps a bit more toned now than in years past due to her sword and spear training among the dwarves. As she turned her head slightly, her cheeks, too thin and sculpted to be human but perfect in Harry's eyes, could be seen, as could her long, tipped ear and one blue eye, reflecting the light of the stars above.

For a moment, it was like a spell had been cast on Harry. He could not have looked away if he had wanted to, and he very much did not.

Slowly he got out of bed, the movement causing Tauriel to turn towards him, and she smiled, increasing the power of the enchantment coming over him. Like Beren and every other man who had ever fallen in love with an elf, Harry was thoroughly ensnared by his lady, and he would not have it any other way.

Reaching her, Harry gently took Tauriel into his arms, kissing her ardently. *By the Valar, but I love this woman. I might have an eternity to spend with her now, but even that seems too short a time!*

Pulling away, he breathed more deeply, feeling his arousal rise between them in reaction as he felt her naked body against him, but feeling no urge to act on it. "You... you are my life," He whispered, putting as much emotion, as much devotion and love as he could into the words despite the spontaneity of his declaration.

The pair of them hadn't really gone much further, physically speaking, since they had traveled up from Lothlorien. Yet Harry, despite knowing that was beyond unusual for human-human relationships, felt no urgency to physically take the next step in their relationship. Yes, he desired Tauriel, and in point of fact, he had shown this the night before as he had nearly every night they lived in his House. And he knew the desire going both ways, having felt Tauriel's reactions most intimately and being the recipient of her own ministrations.

But somehow, it hadn't seemed right or proper to take the next step. Part of that was just because of how long courtship lasted among elves. It wasn't unusual for an elvish courtship to span fifty years or more, and very, very rarely did an elven couple take that final step before they were wed.

On a social level, it was seen as a sign of self-control and the true nature of the connection between the couple that they could wait so long. And not doing so before you were wed in the eyes of the Valar until the pair had said their vows under the eyes of Elbereth Gilthoniel on Thû's (Manwë's) name was seen as an ill omen for the future. Harry had learned that many elven scholars took that concept literally, believing it was one of the reasons that the somewhat forced relationship between the Dark Elf, Eöl and Aredhel had gone so badly for all concerned, including their son, who caused the fall of Gondolin.

Harry wasn't certain he agreed with that. Putting Maeglin's later actions, his betrayal of Gondolin thanks to being spurned by his cousin the princess, on the fact his parents conceived him before actually marrying seemed more than a bit of a stretch. On the other hand, Harry was very firmly of the mind that taking that last step needed to happen at a romantic moment. And given how busy nearly every day since they returned to Erebor had been, there hadn't been any time to really set up a moment romantic enough. Even the nights spent watching plays or listening to songs from his past via Harry's pensieve hadn't seemed enough, somehow.

Yet, there was a real, if still mystical, side of things to consider. When elves made love, their Fëa mixed. This began during the courtship, of course, and both Tauriel and Harry had felt it from almost the start of their relationship. But when making love for the first time, that process finished, and both then and every other time, the two lovers also **expended** their Fëa to a degree. Whether or not that expending of soul and life energy resulted in the creation of a child was random but was also something that Tauriel was not ready for. She was still considered young by her people, not having seen her first five hundred years yet. As such, she was a little leery of taking that last step, regardless of her growing desire to do so and how much she had enjoyed the human method of courtship.

More prosaically (and somewhat embarrassingly), there were also the reactions of his future in-laws to consider, and how often they stopped by unannounced. Even now, going on ten years since they had first been introduced to Harry, Tanwë and Lauriel were still very much of the opinion that this was some kind of phase that Tauriel would wean herself away from eventually. While Tauriel's relationship with her parents wasn't the warmest, she wasn't willing to make it any worse just yet due to, as Harry had put it, jumping the gun in that manner.

"And you are my joy," Tauriel answered now, her own words and tone just as filled with love as Harry's. She smiled, running one hand down his back as she did, feeling the powerful muscles there, feeling his fingers caress her own.

As she reveled in that light touch and delighted in the broad shoulders that he had developed, Tauriel's thoughts on the moment and their relationship in general somewhat mirrored Harry's. Working out with the dwarves had been very kind to Harry, who had seemingly aged only slightly over the past few years. He had added a few inches to his height and several to his shoulders. His muscles had gone from wiry to honed for strength, endurance and speed alike, coming to what Tauriel felt was probably nearly to the peak of human health. He was also a fell blade now, specializing in sword and buckler style, with an emphasis on movement just as much as strength and the speed of his strikes.

After all, Harry couldn't match a normal dwarf in raw strength, let alone Thorin, who was his most frequent sparring partner. Building on the style-type training Celeborn had given him,

Harry's spars with the dwarves helped him to practice dodging and striking on the move, using his shield to block what few strikes he could not outright dodge. This rough manner of training had polished his skills to an incredible edge.

But while Harry's body has changed in terms of muscle mass and strength, the true difference in the past ten years can be seen in his eyes, Tauriel reflected now, biting her lip lightly as she stared at her lover, losing herself in those emerald orbs. It was as if, over the past ten years, his internal magic and the magic of Arda had finished interweaving one another, his emerald gaze becoming ever more striking over the years.

"When I see you at night like this, it is almost as if Arien's light has been stored in your eyes," she said aloud, causing Harry to flush a bit, but he did not look away. "I have heard tell that Curunír and Mithrandir have their Voices, powerful voices that draw attention and can bend the minds of those around them. With you, it will be your eyes that will draw everyone to you, and I doubt not that you will find them a weapon against those who do not know you."

"Well, if we have to move around mankind, hopefully needing to hide my eyes alone rather than those long beards will allow me to move more easily among them than either Saruman or Gandalf can. Dwarves, not so much," Harry snorted.

Tauriel laughed quietly for a moment at Harry's use of humor to deflect her honest words of wonder before falling silent, her hands moving up and down Harry's back as they locked gazes. Holding Harry like this always sent a sensual thrill through Tauriel, working in tandem with her more emotional love for the man who had, as she had just said, become the source of much of her joy in life. Every day she woke up beside him, every time that he joked with her, worked around the House together, spoke and talked, all of it fed her love for Harry. *My man. My Istari. I will walk together with you for all my days and count myself blessed beyond any on Arda, regardless of what trials we face.*

The thought of trials fought to bring a frown to Tauriel's face as her mind tried to bring to the fore why she was awake just now. But it failed for the moment as she felt Harry's turgid manhood pressing into her right above her own womanhood. "I'm sorry, by the way. Did my absence wake you?" she breathed.

Feeling Harry nod against her neck, even as he began to lick and nibble at her shoulder, Tauriel gently twisted them around so that Harry was leaning back against the wall beside the window. "In that case..." she began, moving down his body. "Let me make it up to you..."

"WH... what about your parents, love?" Harry asked, reluctant to stop her but knowing that one thing would lead to another and it would be some time before they left their bedroom if he didn't. "I thought the thrushes said that your parents were on their way here again and might arrive at any time. Given how they like to travel at night..."

Tanwë and Lauriel never called ahead, seeming to want to find Harry and Tauriel doing something they shouldn't, in their eyes. Or maybe just assuming their daughter would always make them welcome. Both of which were somewhat annoying to contemplate. Yet while the thrushes of the mountain were useless in terms of delivering nonverbal messages – they simply couldn't understand the importance of written messages – they were very good about scouting and looking out for specific individuals at need. Tauriel convinced several who made their home in the surrounding copse of trees to be on the lookout for her parents as they flew far and wide, and they acted like the wards did for her parents and other 'welcome' guests.

"We still have some time before that," Tauriel said, her hands having reached his manhood by this point. She paused then, looking up at him, becoming serious for a brief moment as she pushed down her arousal. "I will want to have a serious talk with you before they arrive, Harry. There is a reason why I was up besides wanting to look at the stars."

She then looked back down, and Harry shivered as he saw her lick her lips. "But for now..."

At that point, any thought of dissuading Tauriel left Harry's mind. Although he was right, it was well into the morning before the two of them finished pleasuring one another to their mutual satisfaction. Such things, after all, could not be rushed if one had the dedication and enthusiasm necessary to do it right. Alas, this meant they did not have enough time for that serious conversation Tauriel wanted before her parents knocked on their door.

"I would've thought that you were at an age where humans grow those strange beards you and the short folk are so enamored of. Yet for the short time I have known you I have not seen such. Strange," were the first words out of Lauriel's mouth as Harry held open the door for her and Tanwë. She peered closer at Harry, tucking her head to one side. "I have not heard of any race of man that does not grow a beard, but then again, I haven't exactly made a study of your short-lived people, and perhaps I am just wrong about the length of time needed."

This was a little too blunt even for Tanwë, but Harry was somewhat used to it. After arriving, Lauriel was always a little too acerbic for polite Company. It wasn't as if the travel from Mirkwood annoyed her, or perhaps just not just that, but rather, that entering the House where Harry and Tauriel lived, which was quite expansive in Taur e-Ndaedelos terms, annoyed her.

It was all in an effort to get a rise out of Harry, hoping to show her daughter how violent and combative humans could be. However, while normally Harry would have to excuse himself, mostly to the kitchen, in order to get away from such comments, after what he and Tauriel had been up to, Harry was just in too good a mood to be annoyed by the woman's comments. "And hello to you too," he said blandly, speaking in Sindar rather than in the common tongue, going

on to add a common elvish greeting. "The hospitality of my home is freely yours so long as you bring no strife within these walls."

Tanwë nodded his head in thanks. Surprising Harry somewhat, he had been the one to mellow the most over the past ten years. It seemed that in his case at least, the fact that his daughter was clearly extremely happy with Harry and that Harry was not aging before their eyes as he had feared a human would meant more than it did to his wife. Lauriel still did not believe that Harry and Tauriel were right for one another. Yet even she had stopped trying to attack the relationship itself, only sending initial barbs Harry's way before calming down a bit. "I thank you for your welcome to my wife and I, and assure you we bring nothing but good cheer."

Ignoring that patent lie, Harry gestured the two of them over to seats in the sitting room that dominated the first floor of the House before moving over to sit next to Tauriel on the sofa. Her hand found his, and the two of them exchanged a loving glance before Tauriel replied to her mother's initial comment. "Actually, Mother, Harry has occasionally shown evidence that he might be able to grow a beard, but he has always heeded my words that he should not do so."

That was putting it mildly. The first time that Harry had forgotten to shave after a few days of allowing his facial hair to grow and the two of them had... partaken of certain activities like that they had been doing for most of the night before and the morning, Tauriel had almost crushed Harry's head between her thighs in shock while wincing in discomfort. Elvish skin was extremely sensitive. Hence, if Harry wanted to continue to have access to such bounty, there were certain rules he needed to obey.

Thankfully, the meaning behind Tauriel's somewhat more open-than-they-should-be words went over the older elven couple's head.

Watching her mother look of disapproval, Tauriel fought hard not to roll her eyes. The feel of Harry's hand in hers gave her strength to ignore that urge, and she asked politely, "What brings the two of you to our home this time?"

"What brings us every time, to see if you have come to your senses," Lauriel retorted. "But I see you have not."

"We are actually wondering if you would be willing to travel with us back to Taur e-Ndaedelos. Your sister wishes to speak to you but cannot get away from her duties to do so." From his tone, Tanwë didn't think that this invitation would be taken up but felt he had to offer it nonetheless.

"Exactly. Surely your human here can live without your presence for a few days." If Lauriel had her way, it would be at least a few weeks, more than enough time for whatever

infatuation their daughter had with Harry to die away. While she was no longer trying to convince Tauriel to leave Harry, that did not mean she was above trying more 'subtle' means.

But Tauriel simply shook her head. "I have no desire to see my sister at this time, nor any desire to travel to Taur e-Ndaedelos." She paused, looking over at Harry out of the corner of her eye. "Rather, I believe that the time might be coming soon that we will be traveling elsewhere."

Harry caught that but said nothing as her parents frowned, wondering what she meant. Then the parents continued, trying to convince their daughter to come back with them, to no avail. While Tauriel was more than willing to talk to her parents, she and her sister had never seen eye to eye. Harry had learned that the sister had been almost furious that Tauriel had caught Larry's eyes rather than her, despite the fact that from the first, Tauriel really hadn't responded to Larry's interest in her. And she was even less happy with Tauriel's relationship with Harry than their parents. Thus, rather than risking a permanent estrangement from her sister, Tauriel simply wished to not meet her any time soon.

The rest of that day was somewhat uncomfortable for Harry as he, again, tried to win over the two parents. This was always the way with them. The pair would arrive, their acceptance of Harry and Tauriel having regressed during their absence. While no longer trying to push so hard that Tauriel threatened to cut them off, they would make barbed comments about Harry, the House, and so forth. Nothing was good enough for the pair of them, and it would take time to wear them down to the point the barbs stopped, and they left once more.

At this point, Harry felt that if he could get the man alone, Tanwë might come around to accepting that his and Tauriel's relationship was good for her. Despite having been the one to put his foot in it hardest with Harry right off the bat, the man had mellowed every few years now when he saw that there was no sign of Harry having wandering eyes or aging in any appreciable way. Unlike Lauriel he at least could tell the difference between Harry's body changing due to exercise and training rather than Age, and he also seemed to at least understand how impressive Harry's magic was.

There was still an aspect of 'no human is good enough for my little girl' in the man. Yet that was at least understandable.

Lauriel, on the other hand, continued to see him as simply a jumped-up human despite his magical powers and his love for Tauriel. She had learned the tales of Beren and Luthien, of Idril and Tuor, and Dior and Nimloth. Lauriel feared that, while the love between them might be true as with every elven and human pairing, tragedy would soon befall the pair and those around them. Where Lauriel felt that tragedy would come from, Harry had no idea, but that, and her basic distaste for Man, continued to color her interaction with Harry.

Thankfully, like Tauriel and all other elves Harry had met, her parents greatly enjoyed fish. Meals of fish cooked by Harry mellowed even Lauriel considerably, as they always did whenever they visited. They kept on trying to convince Tauriel to leave Harry behind and come back with them to see their sister, but the barbs thrown Harry's way stopped after the second day. The married couple's tone also shifted, not trying so overtly to take Tauriel away from Harry for a time but more in an effort to heal a rift between their children.

Yet no amount of remonstrations, demands or simple requests based on filial piety were enough to get Tauriel to travel with them back to Taur e-Ndaedelos. "If Lëawi wishes to reconcile with me, she will come to me, not vice versa. She attempted to first convince Legolas to look her way rather than mine, then shifted to trying to push us together to the point where I was ready to become almost human in my dealing with such," Tauriel finally growled on the fourth day of her parent's stay, cutting across her father's words, which was the height of rudeness in elvish culture. "Words were said between us that cannot be taken back. I will not deny taking part in that wholeheartedly, but I was not the one who started it."

At those words, Tanwë subsided, shaking his head. "So she told us. Lëawi is willing to apologize for it but is not willing to leave Taur e-Ndaedelos. But I have your word that you two will reconcile if she does make that journey?"

"You do," Tauriel answered firmly, then smiled at her parents, a true, honest smile, one they had seen more of in these little visits than they had seen for decades before. Something that Tanwë realized with a start as Tauriel continued. "Just because I don't wish to be the first one to make the move to treat one another as sisters once more does not mean I stopped loving Lëawi as such."

This seemed to satisfy both Lauriel and Tanwë. Even though Lauriel still sent a few barbs Harry's way and seemed to disdain anything around the House that seemed to Manish to her, the pair spent their last day with Harry and Tauriel somewhat pleasantly before leaving as the sunset.

That night, as the two lovers cuddled in bed, Harry broached something that had been on his mind the entire time Tauriel's parents had been visiting. That first hint of something bothering Tauriel hadn't been repeated often, but Harry had seen them, only to then forget about them under the pressure of needing to entrain her parents. "So, is it just that you are wishful to start traveling again or is something specific guiding you? Don't think I've missed the hints you've been dropping, love."

"Ah, I had hoped you had noticed. I wasn't truly able to keep it in my mind while my parents were here, but something is bothering me. Something that has bothered me a tiny bit more every day. Yet even now, I do not know what it is, not precisely. I confess that I could wish

that Oromë would speak to me in dreams as he did to train me while your mind was being healed by Lady Galadriel,” Tauriel breathed, shaking her head. “But he has not, leaving me with only vague impressions and an urge to travel that is gradually growing stronger.”

“I gather that even setting aside my out-of-mind experiences, Arien’s talking to me as she did through my mind alone a few times was highly unusual and perhaps even dangerous. Well... more than to just my own brain, anyway,” Harry mused, snorting a little as he remembered how much time it had taken for Galadriel to heal his mind, both the physical makeup of his mind and his actual brain after the touch of the Valar had essentially set into stone his PTSD from being in the great beyond for who knew how many years battling Riddle.

“I also recall that Gandalf mentioned that the Valar had wished to remove their influence from Middle Earth, to leave it to the elves that already live here and to Man in particular. Certainly, I haven’t gotten the dream visitations since early on in the process of Lady Galadriel’s efforts.” His lips twitched. “Then again, I don’t know if that is still their plan, and even setting aside the exceptions they made for me and for you, there’s also the Arkenstone and the strength it has gifted Thorin.”

“True enough. But whatever the wish of the Númeheruvi (Lords-of-the-West), Lord Oromë tasked me with hunting down the creatures of the dark Lord, those left behind after Morgoth’s fall that might one day walk Middle Earth free under the sky again, or might join in communion with Sauron should his power rise once more. And I have been... I have been feeling more and more uncomfortable these past few weeks,” Tauriel confessed.

Harry’s eyes widened at how long she had been feeling this urge, and he leaned in, taking her hand in his, which she squeezed an apology for not telling him from the first, confessing, “At first, I could not tell why I was feeling uneasy, only that occasionally, I would wake up, and I would stare out at nothing. Whenever I went out on patrol or in training with the dwarven scouts, my attention would wane on the world around me, as if I could tell there was something just beyond my sight but could never find it. It only grew to the point where I understood what this feeling meant the evening before my parents arrived. And only last night could I tell you for certain where my feet are urging me to go.”

“Where?” Harry asked, instantly accepting her apology and her reasoning, bringing her hand up to his lips to kiss gently.

Tauriel smiled at that before frowning, her attention shifting back to the conversation. “Somewhere north. These past few days, my mind and eyes have wandered in that direction alone. While the nature of my quarry still eludes me, I am certain what I am to hunt lies north of here.”

“Could it be cold drakes?” Harry asked, leaning away from Tauriel and scooting up in the bed until he was leaning against the wall behind the bed. Tauriel joined him but instead leaned against his shoulder. Harry’s arm went around her, his hand resting at the top of one of her breasts, something he did his darndest not to notice due to the serious conversation. The past few days had not been fun, as having her parents in the guest room below had put a halt to anything besides kissing about as effectively as being under an incontinence charm would have back in Harry’s old dimension.

Not only would it have been the height of impropriety for a not-yet-married elven couple to have relations (if they were doing so in the first place) with one another while their relatives were around, but from a purely human perspective, Harry and Tauriel were loud. The entire House was warded to not let noises in or out, but Harry hadn’t warded their room to keep any sounds within from getting out to the rest of the House. The covered stairwell as fantastic to have during winter for Harry, but it also served as a long funnel for noises coming from above or below. And frankly, using a Mufflatio would have felt kind of wrong. As if they were sneaking around doing something they shouldn’t.

“Those are the only dangerous creatures that spring to my mind when I think of the north, but I suppose it could also be an outbreak of spiders. Those creatures had to go somewhere when you and the Unseen Host pushed them out of Mirkwood,” Harry continued.

“I do not know. I feel as if it should be something else, but that is all I can tell you. Nor am I getting any more of a specific location than simply ‘North’,” Tauriel answered with a wry smile. “I am not, unfortunately, an expert at trying to put into words such ephemeral feelings, unlike my normal nature sense. This feeling sits in my mind with far less weight than even the furthest tree of our little territory does to me from here.”

“That’s not good. Still, it gives us at least a starting point.”

For a time, the two of them talked about what it could mean. Not that they should leave soon; that was a given. But rather whether or not they should try to head straight north, or if they should try to find an easier way through the mountains to the north.

Tauriel hadn’t really talked very much with any of the dwarves about what lay to the north of Erebor’s territory around the lonely mountain, although she knew the general lay of the land within a week’s travel of the northern edge of the Long Lake. She had been on more than a dozen scouting expeditions to the north of their little home as part of her role in training the dwarven scouts over the past ten years.

Away from where the River Celduin fed into the Long Lake, the ground became rocky and uninhabitable once more, with scattered bits of grass and very few but large trees. Wild cats, small furry creatures, which Harry likened to prairie dogs when Tauriel described them to him,

and numerous snakes made their home in that area. And near the River Celduin, the river was just as wild and powerful as it was below the Long Lake. Listening to that and going over what he knew about the distances involved, Harry estimated it would take the two of them moving as fast as they had up from Lothlorien to travel the better part of three weeks to the foot of the Grey Mountains.

The Grey Mountains lay almost perpendicular to the Misty Mountains, connecting to them at the now-destroyed Orcish fortress of Mount Gundabad. Kili and Dwalin had led a band of dwarves there after the Battle of the Lonely Mountain to clear it of any remaining orcs, as the mountain was sacred to the dwarves. Their legends told the dwarves that it was there that the 7 Fathers of the dwarves had first woken up on Arda.

Harry and Tauriel knew all that and had sat down with Kili and Dwalin to go over their campaign there in detail. They had seen the evidence of the pilgrimage that the pair had brought back, an eggshell-thin bit of rock the dwarves all claimed to be the shell that their forefathers had been kept in prior to their awakening by Mahal. It was now one of the royal treasures in Erebor.

Yet when it came to the Grey Mountains, Tauriel had no knowledge. While Mirkwood stretched far to the north of the edge of the Long Lake, it stopped well before even the hills of the Grey Mountains. Nor had any of the dwarven scout groups she had been a part of traveled far enough north for even an elf to see them.

Harry knew a bit more about them than that. He and Thorin had spoken in more detail about Longbeard House's history, and Harry knew that the Grey Mountains had been home to a few settlements of dwarves in the past. After Moria had been abandoned, the majority of the survivors first came to Erebor, creating a nation there under King Thrain the First. But at the time, the depth of the lodes currently being worked under Erebor had yet to be understood. The nation had also sent out prospectors to the Grey Mountains, and once they found gold and silver deposits there, the initial iron, coke and random gem veins they had just begun to find in Erebor lost their luster.

Thrains descendent, Dain the First, led his people to those mountains in a mass migration. While some of their people had remained in Erebor, the vast strength of the Longbeard House shifted to those mountains, where they created several kingdoms in the Grey Mountains alongside the Stonefoot House, who already lived there further east. For six hundred years, those nations grew in strength and numbers. Eventually, the cold drakes of the north began to battle both dwarf Houses, although mainly targeting the Longbeards.

According to Thorin, it was because they had been the ones to find the greatest veins of gold, and gold always attracted dragons. "Now, I can't say if that is because of Thorin's vanity or

truth, but from what I saw, gold was the main reason for Smaug's assault on Erebor, so I would err on the side of truth there," Harry said sardonically. "And there's also the fact there are still some House Stonefoot Holds in the Grey Mountains further east.

"And how long did the dwarves fight these cold drakes? I cannot imagine any dwarf giving up easily," Tauriel questioned, frowning even as she nuzzled into Harry's side. "And When did you and Thorin speak so in-depth about his people?"

"Oh, several times over the years. Specifically when he introduced me to Thunderbelly," Harry replied, getting a laugh from Tauriel as he always did when using that particular dwarf's assumed name. Thunderbelly was the current chief ambassador from the Stonefoot House and was almost as fat as Bombur had been. But he was also almost as strong as Dori and a doughty warrior. "his ancestors shifted further east away from the cold drakes, losing two of their holds to the cold drakes."

Harry became serious then, shaking his head. "But while the dwarves fought hard, the cold drakes were just too strong and a horrible thought, too numerous. The War of the Dwarves and Dragons officially started in 2570 of this Age."

Dwarves, like Elves and Men, measured years from the start of an Age, the ending of the previous Age having always come from some tremendous victory. The Elder Days technically began when the Children of Ilúvatar awoke and ended with the Destruction of Angband and the second capture of Morgoth. Considering this Age saw the shift of years being measured by the Two Trees to the Sun and Moon, what the term 'year' meant shifted drastically, starting anew in a Second Age had probably made a lot of sense. One Valian Year, as measured by Telperion and Laurelin, was equal to a little under ten Sun Years. The Second Age, similarly, ended with the first downfall of Sauron in the days of the Last Alliance of Men and Elves. Although Harry personally felt that it should have ended a little over a hundred years earlier with the destruction of Númenor by Ilúvatar, considering how much destruction that had wrought.

"The Longbeards and their Stonefoot allies fought the cold drakes for seven years before they realized they were losing the war. Thorin and I talked about it, and he and Balin both reckon their folk killed at least five dozen, maybe more cold drakes, but for the loss of thousands, along with their holds and hoarded gold." Harry shook his head. "From the few records the Longbeards kept of that war, few of the cold drakes could ever match their ancestors in size or intelligence, but their scales were nigh impenetrable, and their size made them even harder to kill. Retreating from the Grey Mountains, the Longbeards resettled Erebor. Delving deeper, they eventually found the coke, lead and gold lodes that the people of Erebor today still work to make their weapons so amazing and the mountain as a whole so rich."

Tauriel nodded at that, smiling faintly as she looked over at where her spear lay. Leaf-shaped, with a longer blade than most elven spears, that weapon had been made by Harry and one of the dwarven Master Smiths for her over the past ten years. It was no masterwork weapon like Orcrist, but it would serve Tauriel, and she knew that Harry had been fascinated to learn about metallurgy from the dwarves.

“Yet despite the fact that Thorin’s people retreated straight south, I don’t think that those mountains are going to prove very possible there,” Harry continued. “I think we might have to skirt well to the east if we’re to find an easier way to the Forodwaith beyond. Unless what you’re hunting is in those mountains specifically,” Harry paused, staring at Tauriel, whose eyes had widened, flicking in a direction that Harry somehow knew instinctively was to the northeast. “Ah, was it something I said?” He quipped.

“For just a moment, it was as if I felt the hand of the Hunter on my shoulder,” Tauriel admitted, nodding her head. “It was when you mentioned the Forodwaith. My first hunt, my first task lies beyond the mountains in that ice-covered land.”

“I don’t know much about the Forodwaith other than the fact it’s an ice and snow-covered realm... maybe as large as the lands between the Misty Mountains and the Iron hills, or even larger if you count the areas that are too cold for any living being to live in,” Harry mused. “We might need to put together some more supplies in the realm of clothing. While the pair of us can make light of weather to a certain point, and I can come up with runic arrays to help, we can still freeze to death if we’re not careful. And leaving without talking to Thorin first would just be rude, so I hope you are not so compelled we must leave with the dawn.”

Smiling and shaking her head at Harry’s semi-poetic turn of phrase, Tauriel stated that the pull was not that strong just yet. “And I’m also almost out of arrowheads anyway. So long as we can leave within a few days, I think I will be satisfied.”

“I’ll send a thrush over now. Fili’s always burning the midnight oil these days, and he can tell Thorin that the two of us need to speak to him about something in the morning,” Harry proposed, shifting to get out of bed before pausing. “Hmm. Come to think of it, aren’t Fili and Kili set to leave with their caravans soon?”

Tauriel thought about it and nodded. “I think so. Kili might even be leaving tomorrow. Although I do not recall him saying how long he would be gone this time.”

“Going south to the Stiffbeards usually takes around eight months round trip, but... huh, come to think of it, he didn’t mention how long he would be gone. He normally does.” Harry suddenly grinned as he moved to his desk, winking over at Tauriel. “Why do I think there’s something there he isn’t telling us?”

The next morning, the two of them woke up as the sun crested the horizon, and it was Tauriel's turn to find Harry out of bed. However a moment later, her nose told him where he was, the smell of breakfast wafting up from below. On silent feet, she swung out of bed, heading downstairs. There, she found Harry wearing what he had called a 'gag' apron, with the words 'Kiss the Wiz-cook' on it. While a part of her objected to the term, Tauriel was more than happy to obey the order given the fact that besides the apron, her lover was currently naked. The little jolt of surprise kissing the back of his neck earned her and caused Tauriel to giggle. "I see we still have to work on your hearing, my heart."

"Tauriel, if I ever get to the point where I can hear you coming, it will either mean you've lost your touch or I've turned into an elven ranger." Harry twisted around, placing the pan he had been cooking with to one side for a moment as he lifted Tauriel into his arms, kissing her ardently. "And last I checked," he murmured, "you like my human side."

As Tauriel doubted there had ever been an elven relationship in which the man would pin the woman against their kitchen's wall and kiss the living daylight out of her while both were the next best thing to naked and truly had more important things to be doing, Tauriel found it hard to argue that point. Nor would she complain nearly an hour later when breakfast was a piece of toast and some fruit as Harry had accidentally let his fish sausages burn. But despite this pleasant interruption, at around midmorning, the pair left their home and headed up to Erebor.

By request, there was no set trail leading to Harry and Tauriel's home. That had annoyed the dwarves, particularly Gurak Surehand and the other Rune Scribes, at first, until their outdoor experiments were interrupted by several humans trying to talk to Harry to convince him to use his magic to solve their problems or help them in some way. That had faded over the years, thankfully, but one desperate or ambitious person still tried to find 'the wizard of the Lake' once a month despite the best Bard could do to stop his folk from believing that Harry could use his magic to solve all their problems.

Thus, much of the land between the copse of trees by the Long Lake and the hills leading up to the Lonely Mountain remained the same, the equivalent of a national park, almost at the heart of the dwarven territory. Hunters routinely made their way through the area, and there were a few dwarven houses built around small, well-kept farms, but those were nowhere near as plentiful as they would be in a human realm.

Beyond that area, as the years had allowed the two lovers to make their home their own, so too had the years allowed the dwarves do to Erebor and the surrounding area. Although to be sure, few dwarves wouldn't put it so. After all, what changes had been wrought had been made by their hands and sweat, not simply because of the passage of time.

The first sign of such was seen as the pair passed by the large semi-square flat area set between two hills that were used by Harry and the Rune Scribes when they were experimenting or simply practicing new runes. Protected by Notice-Me-Not wards by Harry and a series of concealment wards made by the dwarves, only those who were in the know could see it, let alone be interested in the particular acre of land. And even within Erebor, those who knew about the 'lab' and who didn't actually use it were few and far between. The dwarves were even more serious than Harry was about making certain no one could learn their secrets.

The land within the 'lab' showed the results of some of those experiments: an area of molten metal covering more than a yard in every direction, a series of divots blown out of the land. Currently, two apprentices were working on something under the eyes of a Master Rune Scribe, fitting a series of runes on ever smaller bits of stone while nearby, forgefires were working to melt metal in preparation for the next step of their experiment.

To one side of this small class, another journeyman was working on something else in an area set up like a jeweler's room rather than a blacksmith's. The dwarf was working on a wide bracelet made of silver, his work space separated from the others by a tall bocage, with a small viewing platform creating another side of the square, protected by several shields.

Harry's eyes narrowed. "That's young Meto. What's he up to?"

Tauriel looked at him, but Harry was already moving forward off the trail leading up to Erebor, saying over his shoulder, "I know what Meto was trying to do, but he shouldn't be doing it without me or at least one of the Master Rune Scribes nearby."

Shrugging, Tauriel followed him only to watch as Harry went from walking to running, his hand outstretched, his voice a shout as he cast a spell too fast for him to fully internalize it. "PROTEGO!"

Meto had been folding a small, simple piece of silver among many on a bracelet. But just as he did so, the piece of precious metal began to glow a white light beyond the heated red it needed to be to be bent in the first place. The dwarf was quick to react, dropping his weapon and moving away as the light flowed into the two pieces of silver on either side of the one he had been folding. The next second, the whole bracelet exploded, sending white-hot bits of silver everywhere.

Even though he had begun to fling himself to the side, the dwarf might well have been killed regardless, but Harry's shield spell arrived in time. Creating a simple wall of magical energy, the anti-magic shield was able to hold the silver bits in place long enough for the dwarf to get behind a set of steel shields set in a small raised viewing area to one side of the experimental area.

Meto waited until the *TING TING* sound of molten metal smacking into metal faded before he poked his head around the shield. He instantly regretted this decision as Harry's voice sounded from nearby. **"You bloody idiot!"**

Flinching, the young dwarf, one of the very few blond dwarves Harry had met, turned towards Harry, shrinking into himself as Harry marched towards him, followed by the Master Rune Scribe on duty. "Er... Master Harry, I didn't see you..."

"You know that I didn't okay using my anti-bug wards in silver! Our work with the Notice-Me-Nots proved that there is a limit to what kind of runic arrays can be worked into metal and will work. Worse, I saw what happened there! You were using some of your own runes, weren't you? Clear sight and wakefulness, I'd wager. Not one, but three arrays on a **bracelet**?! Do you not remember the size of the crater the last time Gwythol and I tried to pair three arrays together like that!?"

Meto's face turned mulish as only a dwarf's face could. "I worked it out how the runes should be able to flow together. The power upkeep of both Clear Sight and the Antibug Ward is minuscule and YOW!"

Lowering his hand from where he had sent a stinging hex into the dwarf's chest, Harry's scowl deepened. Normally, he wouldn't be very comfortable with any kind of corporeal punishment, but he felt it was justified after the young idiot had just tried to kill himself. "And the problem's in the fact that the antibug ward, like all wards..." Here, Harry had reached the young dwarf, and he began to prod him in the forehead with a hard finger to emphasize each word. "don't ...work...when... cut... off... from... the... world! It was one of the first things we learned, you idiot! What in the world made you think that..."

Looking at the suddenly crestfallen face that replaced the previously obstinate one, Harry sighed. "You forgot, didn't you?" When Meto nodded, Harry scowled. "I think I've found a good Second Name for you, Meto: WormsRecall, as in you have the memory of a worm!"

One of the many things that Harry and the dwarves had found out over the years was that some runic arrays that Harry had learned or made himself simply did not work when used in conjunction with the dwarven methodology. Wards did not work at all when folded into metal or even pinned between different layers of things. They needed to, in some fashion, no matter how small, engage with Middle Earth. That was why the ward stone in Harry's house wasn't hidden at all, rather being one of the walls of the house. Further, heat and the fact they were using metal also impacted a lot of wards negatively. Defensive wards like shield stone runic arrays to add impact to things along with the dwarven rune for weight? Those worked when folded into metal. But wards, runic arrays that needed to be 'aware' of the world was a hard no.

“I apologize for the young fool. Meto told me he was working on the True Sight and Wakefulness runes.” The Master Rune scribe had hurried over from his class and now ground a palm into the back of Meto’s head. “You’ll be banned for months from the laboratory for this foolishness, Meto! For lying to me, that will cost you good gold!”

While the older dwarf had used the term Harry had given to this area, which had been universally accepted, he went on in Khuzdul for a moment. Harry could follow some of it, but not all. While the dwarves were willing to let him listen to them speak, not even Thorin had offered to teach him their tongue, that seeming just a bit too far given how hard they worked to keep Khuzdul, like their true names, a secret. Right now, he mentioned the word contract and then some numbers, all of which meant that for lying about what he was going to work on, intentional or not, Meto was going to need to pay his Master a goodly amount of money in recompense.

Harry let the Rune Master continue for a few moments but then interrupted. “You were right in one thing you mentioned, Meto. The anti-bug ward hardly needs to be empowered to start working. But it is still a ward. There is a workaround that you should have already learned. I’m afraid you need to go back to the classroom.”

Meto scowled but didn’t argue, and Harry shared a wry look with the older dwarf before the older dwarf asked if Harry’s schedule was back to normal. But Harry had to shake his head at that. “Sorry, Togan, but that won’t be happening. Tauriel and I are probably going to be traveling once more soon.”

By this point, Harry didn’t need to be involved in the low-level training of the apprentice Rune Scribes. Gurak and two of his fellows, one of whom was a late arriver from the Blacklock House, had learned a lot of Harry’s runes. Not all of it, but enough to teach along with their own runes. Instead, they spent at least ten days every month experimenting alongside Harry or finishing Harry’s own education in dwarven runes. But now, with Tauriel feeling the urge to travel north, Harry doubted that they would be experimenting anytime soon.

To his surprise, Togan merely nodded sagely and, grabbing Meto by the shoulder, marched him away. The young, rather accident-prone and slightly duplicitous dwarf sighed but didn’t try to fight it, and Harry chuckled once before turning back to join Tauriel again.

The road leading up to Erebor from the hills below the Lonely Mountain had been practically remade all the way to Dale. While one offshoot led down to the lab, a far larger offshoot led to the west and the Old Forest Road, which eventually through Mirkwood and the Pass of Imladris, where Beorn and his small realm lay, having grown in numbers, if not territory over the past ten years. Not a lot of trade went that way, but what did went peacefully now thanks to Legolas rebuilding the spells on the road within Mirkwood and Beorn’s folk, keeping

the passes clear through the mountains. Several times over the past few years, messengers had passed from Elrond to Legolas and Thorin along that route.

Yet, while that road was important, it rarely saw traffic, whereas not a week went by when men and dwarves alike used the road between Dale and Erebor. The road had been enlarged twice over to handle the traffic of men coming in with large carts full of food, drink, wood or cloth, or dwarves heading the other way with tools, weapons, or other things. While the dwarven migration to Erebor had slowed over the past ten years, Dale was still drawing in people from small, scattered settlements south of the Lonely Mountain, the likes of which Harry and Tauriel had seen abandoned or destroyed remnants as they traveled up from Lothlorien, the human realm growing in turn.

When the sun began to fall, the steel-covered stone doors of Erebor shut. Work might continue into the night, but trade with other races only happened during the day.

The houses near the massive entryway into the dwarven nation where Harry and Tauriel had lived prior to their House being finished had been made into permanent dwellings for humans and elves. While the dwarves didn't understand why living underground for months on end bothered other races, they were aware it did, and over the years, they had taken requests as to how to make those homes more comfortable.

Two twin guard towers had been erected outside the entryway into Erebor. Large enough for one of the dwarven ballista each, a band of five dwarves manned those defenses constantly, adding to the band of twelve dwarves that provided security at the entryway into the underground realm. In these days, those guards were mostly ceremonial, but they were still important when it came to regulating traffic on busier days. And no one in Erebor was likely to ever take defense for granted. Not after Smaug.

Quixotically, The Dragon's Mound, as it had come to be called, was unchanged. Near to fourteen years since his death and burial, the dragon's taint still seeped into the ground, leaving the mound as dead and brown as the Brown Lands to the south.

Today, the road out of Erebor was the sight of a long, winding column of carts, around eighty or so, a massive group. The springs and the way the wheels all worked together to somehow lighten the load were distinctive, showing them all as Stiffbeard make. As was the fact that Harry and Tauriel could spot covered carts that didn't carry goods but rather a new version of the ballista that Harry and Tauriel had seen in use when they first met members of that standoffish Dwarven House.

Although even there, the ballista's general framework was different than it had been back then. With the better steel available to Erebor, the Stiffbeard penchant for devices had come out strongly, showing why, despite the horrible start they'd had with Harry and Thorin,

they had become well-thought-of. The ballistae on the wagons were repeating ballistae. Each wagon-sized weapons platform consisted of a box containing a dozen smaller launchers, each of which shot an arrow the size of a stabbing spear rather than the larger variety. Able to be fired in sequence and reloaded easily like their smaller crossbows, those carts could cut any attacking force into ribbons before they met the pikes of the guards.

With the princesses of their folk having been mainly returned home, the Bloodhammer honor guard had been called home. Instead, there was only a squad of such, acting more like officers to the pike company that made up the guards for this caravan.

Although the overall leader of the expedition was not a Stiffbeard. Rather, he was a young, dark-brown-haired dwarf who still struggled even now to grow a beard worth the name that Harry knew very well. Currently, he was talking amiably with one of Erebor's guards as he waited for the last few carts to trundle their way out of Erebor.

Kili paused as he spotted Harry and Tauriel, holding up a hand to them and gesturing them to the side. "I was hoping that the two of you would be able to settle with your parents by today, Tauriel. As you can see, we're off, and it would have seemed ill-luck to start on such a journey without saying farewell in person to all the members of our little Company still living here."

Looking over his shoulder into Erebor, Kili's face looked troubled for some reason. Yet when he said nothing, Harry decided he needed to lighten the mood. "HA! As if you haven't made this particular trip before. True, this might be the largest caravan Erebor's yet sent into Stiffbeard land, but even so, you've done this before. And I doubt that you're worried about the return on your investment..."

At that, Harry wagged his eyebrows. This would indeed mark at least the fourth such caravan Kili had been involved in over the past five years. "Tell me, is there some reason why you're always so eager to head down there? Moved on from Sia, did you?"

Sia had been the name of a middle-aged dwarven woman who had not yet found her One from the Stonefoot Tribe that Kili had been trying to court. That had ended when, instead, she had met and almost instantly fallen in love with one of the chief miners eight years ago.

Sensing similarly that something was bothering Kili, Tauriel got in on the teasing, too. "Hmm... the last time Dis and I talked, she didn't tell me she had begun formal discussion with anyone among the Stiffbeards for you, but she did mention you having some interest there. And here I thought it was merely a mercantile interest."

The youngest member of the ruling clan of Erebor blushed a little, looking away. Kili had filled out a little over the past ten years, putting on more muscle, although, as many of his folk

joked about, his beard still wasn't much to write home about. He had also spent a goodly number of the past ten years learning warcraft from his uncle and Dain of the Iron Hills, ruler of the Longbeard nation that sat between Erebor and the holdings of the Blacklock House.

"It hasn't gotten to the point just yet, but I might've found my One among them," Kili admitted after a few flushed moments. "She's not... Goli isn't a princess or anything like that, rather the daughter of a major merchant house with a, well, a... penchant for crafting and inventions."

Looking around, he leaned in and pulled out from under his tunic a silver pendant. Clicking open the lid, Kili showed Harry an amazing sight: a small watch. While Harry had seen clocks in various places in Middle Earth, they were all grandfather-clock-sized. This was the first truly portable version he'd seen yet, and he whistled appreciatively. "Very nice, Kili."

"Goli gave this to me the last time I had to leave with the return caravan." Kili hid the watch, which was probably worth its weight in diamond, away once more, his still-youthful face firming. "I mean to stay this time until I have won her hand or Goli has found her One elsewhere."

"That puts more of an onus on Fili to marry for dynastic reasons, does it not?" Tauriel mused. "I know Dis was lamenting his inability to attract a woman's attention."

Kili barked a laugh. "Well, yes, Fili's a bit too buried in work, as most of our race has a tendency to do..." He sobered for a moment, looking back into Erebor once more before shaking his head. "But you'll learn more of that from him and my uncle, I have no doubt." He threw off his moment of concern with difficulty, putting on a cheerful face. "But with my uncle already happily married to Ani and thus securing an alliance with the Blacklocks and Fili spending so much time in the Iron Hills or among the Stonefoots, I am free to follow my heart. Whether or not Goli accepts, we shall see. The watch was a amazing gift but..."

He shook his head, the sober mood he had coming back to him for a third time, although this time, Harry knew it had a different cause. Given how few women there were in comparison to dwarven men, living so far away from your prospective bride was just one worry heaped on an already large pile.

He said this aloud, and Tauriel followed up on it by saying, "Yet if she truly is your One, Kili, take heart. Your absence alone will not make her heart seek another if she is leaning in your direction now."

Kili's wry smile at Harry's words widened at the elven woman's words, and he nodded in her direction. "I can hope. It was only on my last trip down to her home in Waterhold that we

began to exchange gifts. When we meet, I will know, and at least I will, barring weather, arrive within the month I told her I would.”

While Harry was musing on a dwarven hold being named Waterhold and where it could be in the vague mental map he had of the Stiffbeard lands Kili glanced back over his shoulder into Erebor once more. “I could wish the timing were different, but even setting aside Goli, I had put my name on the contract to fund and lead this caravan, so I cannot get out of it now.”

“What do you mean you wish the timing could be different?” Tauriel asked, frowning.

“The way you say it sounds as if there’s some trouble somewhere. But we’ve been so busy playing host to Tauriel’s parents we haven’t received any news from Erebor or elsewhere,” Harry added.

“Yes, your prospective in-laws tend to take all your attention every time they visit,” Kili snorted, but whatever else he would have said fell by the wayside as one of the Bloodhammers shouted at him, causing Kili to reply with a long sentence in Khuzdul. “I will have to leave Fili and Thorin to fill you in on the latest word coming in from the East. The day is already wasting, and I have to be gone. Hopefully, we will see one another again in another decade or so.”

Harry blinked at that, wondering now both about what news Fili and Thorin had that was making Kili so grim about leaving right now and at the fact that Kili was admitting that he would be away from Erebor for that length of time. That wasn’t normal for the caravan teams sent south. Evidently, he was serious about this woman among the Stiffbeards, Harry mused, then shook hands with Kili. “Good luck then, both in that endeavor and in talking to your mother about it if this Goli woman agrees to your suit.”

“Be yourself, Kili. Never attempt to be anyone else, especially when pursuing a woman. We will see straight through such things in time, if not right away,” Tauriel advised, shaking his hand before stepping away. “And try to stay out of any snow drifts.”

Kili laughed at that, remembering the time a few winters ago when Kili and Tauriel had been part of a winter patrol. Kili had woken up and found a snow drift had grown up around his tent, burying him within until he and the other dwarves had dug him out. “Ha! Right back at the two of you. Stay safe, and keep your weapons ready.”

With that, Kili turned aside, racing over to join the end of the caravan.

The Istari and Elf stood there for a time, watching the caravan bound for the South and the Stiffbeards marching alongside it as it wound away from the entryway along the road. The road to the Stiffbeard territory wasn’t nearly as well kept up as the one to the West or to the east. Outside of the reach of Dale, there just was no way the dwarves could maintain an actual road over the empty, barren lands.

In recent years, that route had become even more perilous thanks to roving bands of goblins and a few small groups of trolls becoming more restive. But counting out the number of guards, Harry shook his head. "They'll be fine. That caravan might be a large target, and I could wish they had some of Dain's Boar Riders, but I'm counting at least eighty Longbeard guards along with the Stiffbeard pike company."

"And I noted one of the scout bands when we first arrived," Tauriel noted. "Unless outright war has broken out once more with the Easterlings or Haradrim, they will make it through, and Kili will return to the Lonely Mountain again."

"Maybe with a wife, maybe not," Harry agreed with a chuckle, wondering if Kili would be able or willing to make that happen on his own without Dis speaking for him to Goli's family. *Knowing Kili, the answer's yes, but he may ruffle a few beards doing it, especially among the hidebound Stiffbeards.* "But regardless, Kili's a survivor. Something he proved many times on the trail with the Company and after."

Only when the last of the Stiffbeard pikemen were out of sight did Harry look over at Tauriel, allowing a frown to appear on his face. "Am I the only one who is a little concerned about what news we are about to hear?"

"You are not. If memory serves, Fili should be heading into House Stonefoots territory with a similarly sized trade caravan sometime soon. So whatever trouble is going on in the east might do with that House, or something dire has occurred straight east among the Blackbeards House, calling him in that direction," Tauriel mused.

"And you don't have any hint that this trouble might involve whatever Oromë's hints in your mind are pointing you toward?" Harry probed.

"None, my love. I am still certain whatever I am to hunt is within the Forodwaith, but if it is the source of the troubles Kili warned us of in the East or perhaps among the Stonefoots, I cannot say," Tauriel admitted.

Harry scowled a bit but then chuckled. "I suppose that would be too easy. Still, let's find out what this news is and tell Thorin or yours. The sooner, the better." With a nod to one of the guards at the gate, the pair bypassed the long line of dwarves and humans which had built up waiting as the caravan left, eager to enter the mountain.

Normally, the two of them would take their time heading towards the palace. Instead, they would take in the sight of the massive bazaar that dominated Erebor's main cavern. More often than not, Harry's eyes would be drawn up to the massive network of chandeliers above. Composed of several large lamps made by Blacklock and Longbeard artisans, the inventiveness of the Stiffbeards showed in how the lights hung or could be moved around for quick cleaning

or dousing at night. Sometimes, Tauriel would become fascinated by the amount of colored cloth or glass on display from the Blacklocks who had made their homes here. Harry would make his way for the smithy below or see some of his friends in the crowd of short folk while Tauriel moved to look at the glassware, weapons or clothing on display.

Today, though, neither took the time to do so. Instead, the pair hurried on to the king's hall.

Entering the King's court, Tauriel and Harry moved forward, shifting to walk along one wall rather than joining the crowd in front of the throne. For a moment, they watched Thorin speaking in orbit to several of the local clan heads. He seemed to be smiling behind his beard, although if that had to do with the conversation or something else, Harry couldn't tell from here. What he could see was that there weren't nearly as many Stonefoots around the place as there normally would be. Normally the heavy-set dwarves stood out easily among the Longbeards that perforce dominated the crowd, but Harry couldn't see a single one.

He also noticed one of his friends was missing when he would normally be dealing with his own group of questioners. "I take it that Balin not being here means he went with his plan to push on to the Shire to see Bilbo," Harry murmured. "If he didn't, he would have been back sometime in the past few days."

"I would imagine so," Tauriel said with a nod and a faint smile. "Hopefully, a dwarf stopping by will not cause nearly as much trouble as your and my visit did five years ago."

Harry snorted at that, shaking his head. Around two and a half months ago, it had been decided to send Balin to Elrond with the hopes of opening up formal talks of trade with Rivendell. While Dale and Erebor already had a somewhat good series of trade agreements with Mirkwood and Legolas, that didn't stop the dwarves from opening up talks with the more distant Rivendell. Especially since Rivendell could, in turn, allow for more normal travel to the Blue Mountains and the two Dwarven Houses there. It would still take months, but with the elf's help, it might be safe all the way to Bree.

...More importantly, in some dwarven minds, an agreement to pass goods through Rivendell would allow dwarven merchants access to the Shire and its pipeweed. Pipeweed was one of the many things that could not be grown near the Lonely Mountain, nor did the humans of Dale have any knowledge of it. Two of House Stonefoot's holds sold a good bit of pipeweed to House Blacklock, but it was **ridiculously** expensive for anyone in Erebor to get their hands on it since those trade deals were locked under contract to their current resellers. Gaining access to a new source of pipeweed, no matter how far away, would be a magnificent idea.

As the head of Thorin's council and easily one of the most diplomatic dwarves in Erebor, Balin had been an easy choice of ambassador to Elrond. And if it did take a few weeks to travel

to the Shire to speak to Bilbo, and he came back laden with several casks of pipeweed, that was two birds with one stone. But that wasn't to say that the hobbits would welcome a dwarf any more than they had welcome Tauriel and Harry when they had traveled to see Bilbo.

"Well, I rather doubt that Balin is going to be tempted to circumvent their Bounders by taking the elvish ways and then simply appearing in midday outside Bag End," Harry replied with a chuckle. "And I still say we should've stopped in the Old Forest to see if we could find Tom Bombadil."

Chuckling, Tauriel shook her head at that, smiling a secret little smile as she looked away from her lover to look towards Thorin, taking in the smile still visible through his beard. Harry caught this little movement and looked between Thorin and her, eyes narrowing. "You know, it seems to me that there are a lot of smiles hidden behind those beards out there, especially those who I know are friendliest with Thorin. Even Dwalin seemed to be smiling, and I could easily count the number of times that was true when we were on the trail together. Even Gloin's here, and he's **never** in court."

While related to Thorin and his family, much like Balin and Dwalin were, Gloin had little interest in leadership or ruling, simply wanting to master brewing, as Thorin had done smithing. Yet he was here now, and Harry somehow knew that his lady knew why. And that it had nothing to do with Kili leaving as he did or the news that both he and Tauriel were worried about hearing from the east.

"The last I talked to Ani, it was not confirmed, but she might be pregnant," Tauriel confided in a low tone. "I do not know if the dwarves announce such things, but I would wager that at least those close or related to the king and queen know about it."

"Except for the plodding wizard, who is always the last to know," Harry quipped, smiling himself. He locked eyes with Thorin over the heads of the crowd, and his friend's smile widened just a tad before he gently tilted his head to the side, indicating that Harry should look in that direction.

There, he found Fili standing near one of the doors leading into the Royal quarters. He twitched his head towards the back of the hall, which told Terry that it was all right for him and Tauriel to bypass the crowd here just as they had done outside when entering Erebor.

Tauriel made their way around the hall, being ushered into the Royal quarters by Fili, walking down a familiar corridor into the main sitting room of the royal House of Erebor. One which had changed dramatically in the past three years since the wedding between Thorin and Ani.

Among dwarves, courtship could last between one or three years, depending on circumstances once it was clear that both parties were interested in one another and the matriarchs of their prospective clans hadn't found any reason to disallow the marriage. Yet royal marriages between the dwarves and houses happened very rarely, and there was a set precedent of waiting setting years, one year for each dwarf in House before the actual wedding and marriage could go through. Thus, Thorin and Ani had been only wed for three years up to this point.

Yet even so, Ani's stamp was very clear here in the Royal quarters, just as it was in other areas.

The normal dwarven lamps that had been here before Samug had been replaced by new ones shaped into the likeness of crystals in the corners of the room, showing off the glassmaking ability of Ani's Blacklock clan. The bits and pieces of furniture that could be moved around before had been replaced by more comfortable chairs, a larger circular table, and a small bar set to one side. Across the entrance into the sitting room, a short grandfather clock sat, its entire front made of glass showing the intricate gears.

Above the clock, there was a large plaque of steel.

Seeing that plaque, Harry smiled, remembering Ani and Thorin's wedding. It had been... different. A lot more writing and an exchange of contracts and crafted goods than Harry felt would be normal in a human wedding in Middle Earth. And an hour of prayer to Mahal.

The dwarves didn't make a point about it, but they were highly religious. Everything they did with their craft, their skill of eye and hand, in devotion to The Smith of the Valar in a way. And when they wed, they sang of their deeds, bride and groom switching off. Then, as they finished, their family members took up the tail, asking one after another for this union to be long and fruitful as the couple carved out their names, both True Name and Public, into a plaque of slightly warmed metal. In this case, silver.

Normally, that signing would have been simply scored into the metal, but with a royal couple, the names were marked into the metal, and then those marks were filled in with molten gold from a nearby brazier. Then, if one of the couple was a Master in his or her craft, the pair would work together to create an image of their House on that same plaque. The prayers ended then, and the segment of the plaque containing the couple's True Names was cut off. Ani and Thorin had held it, letting a drop of blood fall onto their names, and the wedding ended.

Followed by a **lot** of drinking. It was considered bad luck among the dwarves for anyone at the party to be able to walk away.

With the portion containing their true names elsewhere hidden away, the image of the royal house Thorin and Ani had come up with took up most of the plaque and... wasn't all that imaginative, in Harry's opinion. Something he had teased his friend about several times over the years. A shield carved to look like it was made out of wood instead of metal with a blood-red ring set into the middle and an image of a mountain around the shield was somewhat meh. But Symbolism like that was important to the dwarves in such things.

Ani's touch could be felt throughout the royal quarters. One of the other rooms, a former bedroom, had been shifted into a work office, complete with several desks, where Thorin, Balin, and Fili could work altogether or speak privately with anyone they needed to. But this room was now for social gatherings rather than both social and business as before. Similarly, another room had been transformed into a royal library, with all of the walls lined with bookcases filled with books, maps and important documents.

"Ho Istari!" A voice bellowed as they entered, and Harry blinked, turning from where he had been gazing at the wedding plaque to stare at Thunderbelly, ambassador of the Stonefoot tribe. He lounged on one of the larger padded chairs in the room, tugging at his beard with one hand and drinking from a huge mug of mead in the other. "And what are you two doing here, eh?"

Across from him, Ani sat docilely, her hands moving swiftly as she drew something on a piece of parchment. "You know well enough that both Harry and Tauriel have leave to come and go as they wish," she murmured.

In dwarven terms, Ani's redring was the equivalent of a dusky-hued... not maiden, as she wasn't young, but it was close. Ani's skin was the same light copper color as most of the Blacklock House, setting off her normal red, black and white clothing quite well. Her hair was the color of night, the blackest color hair Harry had ever seen bar Arwen, a comparison Harry had made at one point and which had made Ani's eyes light up with delight at the time. Apparently, even dwarven women liked being compared to elves in terms of beauty.

She was shorter than Dis and quite soft-spoken. Rarely had Harry ever seen her out and about as Dis was, but, in the past three years, it was Ani who had taken over the duties of Queen from Dis. Dis was still in charge of her two sons, and finding a marriage for Fili was an ongoing issue. But the Royal household was now firmly in Ani's hand. What conflict might've occurred during this takeover, Harry had no idea nor any interest in learning.

Because while Ani might be soft-spoken, there was more than a hint of steel to the woman. A scar on one hand and a certain look in her eyes told of the hardship that she had lived through along with all of the people of her hold, the Blacklock hold of Red Rocks, after they had been forced to flee during a war with the Easterlings. On the same scarred hand, Ani

wore a thin ring of red metal of some kind, which she had designed and crafted herself. And even here in the royal quarters among friends, or at least trusted associates, considering Thunderbelly was there, she wore a royal circlet on her brow.

And something still kind of bothered Harry; Ani also had a beard, just like every other dwarven woman Harry had yet seen. A short one, barely a fuzz, really, connecting her sideburns. Yet despite this, Ani's general shape, which she tended to show off just a little more than Dis or any of her generation would, and her voice made it clear she was a woman. Her voice was an almost furry contralto when she spoke, and Harry had been immensely impressed by her singing voice on more than one occasion over the past few years.

"Underbelly. I imagine I'm going to be speaking with you in a moment, but I also understand from my ladylove that some congratulations are in order, Ani," Harry bowed deeply to Ani, a wink and a smile on his face. "Is it true?"

"It is," Ani said in that furry contralto of hers. "I had suspected for nearly a week now, but Dis and the other matriarchs on the lady's council are certain. It is early days yet, but a happy occasion still." Her eyes flicked over from where she had been drawing to stab into Thunderbelly, who shifted uncomfortably under the suddenly cold glare in those deep black eyes. "Although that happiness has been overridden by dismay and concern thanks to the news coming from other quarters."

"Now, give over, Queen Redring," Thunderbelly said quickly. "That's no fault of mine! I didn't tell the Easterlings that now was a fantastic time to invade, nor the goblins of the mountains that they had finally made up enough numbers to cause trouble."

Thunderbelly was a typical example of a house Stonefoot dwarf. He was almost as wide as he was tall, being more than wide enough to make three of Harry even now that he had built up some muscles of his own. He had a massive belly, thrusting forth like a battering ram, and had, in fact, used it as such in the past, hence his name. Indeed, Harry hadn't ever even heard his normal, public one. He also had equally massively thewed arms. The top of his head was shaved clean, as the warriors of his House always did. Yet he cowed now under the glare of the Queen.

If anyone ever makes the mistake of thinking Ani doesn't have a brain or will to match, they will be making a very dangerous mistake, Harry thought, not for the first time. While Ani wasn't out there in public with Thorin all that often, which Harry knew Thorin had thought she might well be, that didn't mean that she was slow to put forth her own counsel or make your own opinion known.

Ani had put her stamp on not only the trade agreements with her House in general but with the trade agreements with the Stiffbeards, quantifying those in a way that Thorin hadn't

yet. Even though, at that point, the two hadn't even been married. She had also been very forthright about giving her opinion about politics and city-state matters that would normally be outside the purview of a woman in dwarven society while leaving the military aspect and the political side of things alone. It turned out she had not been the one to run her hold's guerrilla war, even though she had thought up the idea of the overdone knuckle dusters that allowed them to give weapons to far more of their people than would otherwise have been the case.

Harry felt that she and Thorin made for an excellent match. She was not, as Dis had once put it, a counterweight to Thorin's flail, but she certainly helped him in aiming it. *And, at times, cover that mace with a sheath of velvet right before it strikes.* The fact that she and Tauriel had become firm friends within weeks of meeting one another also meant quite a bit in Harry's eyes.

Now, Tauriel sat next to her friend, leaning in and whispering, the two of them exchanging hugs, which caused Thunderbelly to start, although Harry had seen them do so several times before. From what Harry heard before he decided to no longer listen in, it appeared as if Ani had kept the secret of her possible pregnancy from Thorin until that morning.

No doubt that had brightened his day considerably, but Harry, looking at where Thunderbelly was slowly recovering from the glare that Ani had pinned him with, had to wonder if that news truly offset the news from the east. He let the two women talk for a few moments before coughing quietly, looking over at Ani. "The trouble which Thunderbelly just mentioned with the Easterlings, I take it that Thorin and Fili are going to be taking steps? And does that affect your House at all, lady?"

Fili had not followed Harry and Tauriel through into the Royal quarters, having heard his name be called by one of the other dwarves in the King's Hall.

Ani frowned pensively, setting aside the drawing she had been doing on a new ring design and turning her full attention onto more important matters, alas, than her pregnancy. "It doesn't get. However, I do not doubt that it might eventually do so. You know that some of the scout groups Tauriel has trained over the past few years came from my folks, and we also have trade going on with the Easterlings. Even in times of war, occasionally. The trade hasn't dried up yet, but we know of some kind of warlord rising among the Easterlings over the past few years. One who has been able to bring together the disparate tribes in a way we rarely see."

Harry frowned, thinking about what he knew about the Easterlings. He knew they used cavalry, although how much and in what manner he didn't know. He knew that in the past, the Westerlings had also used chariots. Calling themselves Wainriders at the time, they had conquered large portions of what had been Gondor territory at the time, along with the Rhovanion nation. Numerous times in the past they had been able to smash the dwarves in

open combat, only to find that they could not break through the defenses of the dwarves in their cities.

“And you mentioned goblins making trouble at the same time for your people, Thunderbelly? That’s interesting timing, isn’t it?”

“If you mean to ask if we think know that they’re in collusion with one another, we do not. They would need to be able to get messages to one another through our territory, and while we Stonefoots are not nearly as good scouts as the elf’s trained Thorin’s scouts to be, we’re still good enough to spot groups of goblins coming and going,” Thunderbelly grumbled. “No, it just seems to be bad timing.”

“Or something else stirring both of them up,” Harry retorted. After ten years of peace, Harry might well not have leaped to that conclusion if not for Tauriel’s feelings about the need to head north. With that uppermost in his mind, Harry had to wonder if this assault by Orc and Man was set into place by the Great Enemy.

At the implication of that, Thunderbelly shivered a bit while Ani scowled, looking away. The dwarves of the other houses had not been happy when Thorin had sent to their various kings the knowledge that the great enemy still lived, sharing with them much of what Gandalf had told Harry and Thorin previously.

“Even the great enemy needs physical troops able to pass on messages, his attention cannot be everywhere,” Thunderbelly said in response, although his voice sounded far weaker than normal, almost uncertain. “He might be able to somehow stir them up, but he would not be the warlord directing the war.”

“That I will give you,” Harry acknowledged, although he remembered something else that Gandalf had told him about the nine chief servants of Sauron, the Witch King of Angmar and his fellow compatriots. He also knew that Gandalf had said it would probably take many decades or more before the great enemy would be able to instill in his servants enough power to incorporate them into physical bodies more after their defeat at the hands of the White Council in Dol Guldur. *Yet even so, it might be possible. Any such creature would be able to manipulate the minds of men and goblins easily. Yet, how do such creatures travel? Sauron would be able to influence both goblins and men from a distance to a certain degree, but is that a power the Nazgûl share? I wish I knew more about how the Nine Riders acted. Something to ask Gandalf if the old man ever stops by again.*

Gandalf had actually stopped in to speak to Harry a few months after Ani and Thorin were wed as if he had somehow heard that news. He had been spying on the Corsairs of Umbar for years, but hadn’t had much knowledge to share about Sauron and what he was up to.

“The borders of Mordor are closed, my young friend. Not even the greatest scouts in the world can pass that barrier,” Gandalf had said at the time. “I found several agents of his among the corsairs, but it seems as if he was sorely weakened in Saruman’s pursuit of him, and he is in no position just yet to stretch out his hands beyond his realm.”

At that point, Thorin and Fili came in, and with a look at his wife, Thorin asked everyone to step into the office room, leaving Ani behind. While she had been the figurehead of a guerrilla campaign and knew quite a bit about logistics, she was no master of maps or strategic warfare.

The furniture in the office wasn’t quite as comfortable as in the sitting room and the air of the room was much more serious. Here was where the day-to-day work of running Erebor was done, even more than out in the hall where Thorin dealt with matters of law and contracts.

One of the desks was currently dominated by a map of the area surrounding Erebor. The areas between the Lonely Mountain and the Iron Hills were intricately mapped out, and there were also several roads shown that lead northeast into Stonefoot territory, starting with one that then broke off into three. One, the westernmost, was marked by an ‘X’. Soon after the point where the others broke off, the area around the road had none of the detail that was visible nearer the mountain.

“I take it that you have already learned of what is going on in House Stonefoot’s land?” Thorin began without preamble, the smile he had been wearing sloughing off his face as he settled down in front of the desk that held the maps. All thoughts of his impending fatherhood were gone as the King Under the Mountain scowled furiously at the map, tapping the edge where the details started to fade. “This is the extent of our mapping thus far. The number of cartographers that can be trained with the new skills and education necessary to create detailed maps, as you explained to us is still a bottleneck. Traditionally, the land Erebor claimed to control spreads to here...”

He pointed to a further point, making a broad line to the edge of the River Celduin above where it fed into the Long Lake and then east before shifting down in a sweep to where it intersected with the triangle marks of the Iron Hills. “to here. We haven’t even sent out scouts beyond the point where, as you can see, the detail fades. I had thought that we would need to be worried about the southeast, not the north. I thus chose to map out the lands between us and the Iron Hills, then the lands of Dale, before turning our attention to the lands between the Iron Hills and the Blacklock lands. A project that has barely begun from the last missive Dain sent me.”

Looking at the map, Harry understood, shaking his head at the note of self-recrimination he heard in his friend’s voice. “Don’t bother beating yourself up over it, Thorin. From what I’ve

been told, this problem is happening far beyond Erebor's traditional reach, and you can hardly be blamed for prioritizing your own lands and those of your closest allies."

As Thorin grunted in acknowledgment, Harry went on, looking over at Thunderbelly. "And speaking of what is going on, can we have more details, please? We've gotten generalities and hints since meeting Kili by the gates, and it's getting annoying."

Sighing deeply, Thunderbelly grumbled. "So much for hoping someone else would take on this shame for me. Dwarf Friend, you might be to Erebor, but you are still a human and an... elf." Then he shook his head and went on bluntly. "My House can claim to control two valley holds, two mountain holds, and three hill holds. As of the latest messages that arrived via a runner, all three hill holds are under assault by an Easterling army, and goblins have been seen raiding both valley holds. Cold drakes have also been seen near one of them. As such, My King and the other Kings of House Stonefoot are calling on Erebor and House Longbeard for aid."

Harry could almost see Thunderbelly translating the 'hold' terms, but Tauriel asked the question first. "As you said earlier that you've seen no evidence of collusion between our enemies, can I ask for more clarification in terms of what those various 'holds' are and where?"

Grumbling even more at being questioned by an elf, Thunderbelly shook his head. "Aye. Valley holds are holds in valleys, the ends of which have been closed either by Mahal's hammer or our labors. The mountain holds..." he gestured all around them, indicating Erebor was an example of said. "As for hill holds, they are a mix of underground caverns like Erebor and built-up dwarf-made dwellings and are normally made within hills rather than mountains."

Harry nodded at that. He had figured some of that out but felt the term 'hold' was a misnomer. Each hold was essentially an independent city-state with its own king and government, the size of the population varying wildly. The various Houses each would act as a conclave of kings, led by the one with the most seniority, decided. The city-states of each House would come to the aid of their fellows, united by shared blood and marriages. Although the number of city-states that the Stonefoots had surprised Harry. *I knew that the Longbeards had lost much of their power when Erebor fell, but I didn't think the other Houses had that many more city-states.*

"Dain's Iron Hills is a series of what humans normally call towns, connected via underground roads and having large-scale fortresses built onto the hills, with a central underground capital. Some of those fortresses had the aid of Númenóreans to design them in ancient days when the Longbeards and Blacklocks had made friends with the Men of Númenor," Thorin explained, nodding thankfully to Fili as he handed out watered-down mugs of mead.

Fili took up the tail then. Having been involved in several trade caravans into Stonefoot land, he knew much of the land between Erebor and the realms of their fellow dwarves. He

pointed to the map, marking out distances using the distance ledger on the portion of the map with detail to count out leagues past the edge of the map. Even the closest point was a formidable distance away from Erebor. Fili said a normal caravan would take five months to get to “Varni’s Folly, on the southernmost tine of the Grey Mountains around halfway along the range’s length. It’s the closest Stonefoot city to us here in Erebor. From there, you can take roads to the valley hold east and north, which is the closest hold to the monstrous valley called the Withered Heath.”

Tauriel frowned faintly, trying to imagine what he was talking about without anything to look at. “The Withered Heath is where the majority of the cold drakes that warred with your folk came from, correct?”

“And still come from,” Thunderbelly growled. “I was in...” Again, Thunderbelly had to pause to translate from Khuzdul before going on. “Fanged Walls...” he frowned, then shrugged it off, continuing while Fili twitched but politely made no move to correct the other, older dwarf’s translation. “Not twenty years ago, and the walls were attacked by a cold drake. We killed it, but not before it shattered portions of the wall and slew more than a hundred of our defenders.”

“I am sorry for your loss, and I did not mean to sound as if I was making light of the Withered Heath. I am just having trouble picturing what we are talking about. If a regular valley takes four to five days to travel, how far or how long is the Withered Heath?” Tauriel questioned.

“Who knows? No one has tried to travel to that vile land in dwarven memory. Even when the Longbeards joined us in the Grey Mountains, we did not try to cross that land,” Thunderbelly shook his head. “Even those weird humans... Can’t remember what they were called. They rode horses. Even they didn’t try that in the records of my great, great, great grandfather despite being, as he put it, crazy brave. But then again, they were farther to the west anyway, near the River Anduin.”

Thunderbelly twitched at the look Fili was giving him. “What, I like horses! I always liked reading the stories and looking at the pictures of those folk.”

Harry shook his head at that, linking that to some of the things Gandalf had told him about Rohan and the Rohirrim. They hadn’t covered the Horse Lords in detail, but he knew that the Rohirrim had once been Northmen, refugees who rose to make a new nation after their home kingdom of Rhovanion had been conquered by the Wainriders well over a thousand years ago. The survivors had rebuilt in the north and then helped the much-reduced Gondor destroy the Wainriders for good, although the war cost Gondor the last of its kings and both his sons.

Heh, I can remember that, but I can't remember the name of that inn we stayed in Bree when we went to see Bilbo. Odd how even an occlumency-assisted mind works.

Setting that aside, Harry estimated that the time when the Horse Lords were called the Éothéod was the period Thunderbelly was talking about. *And the Wainriders were a coalition of Easterlings, just like the ones facing the dwarves now. Interesting how things change yet remain the same.*

A touch of Tauriel's hand brought Harry back to the here and now in time for Kili to say, "The three are probably the strongest, not only because they are closest to us and thus have seen the most goods in trade, but also because they can reinforce one another in less than two days as a dwarven army could march."

Given that dwarves, even heavily laden dwarves could probably march any human army into the ground, that was a good indicator that those three holds would be able to see to themselves with a little help in terms of metal weapons and scouts. Something Fili said aloud before going on. "The hill holds are laid out in what looks like a scythe blade almost sticking out from the end of the Grey Mountains, but they are all further away from one another than the first three. They can help one another but with difficulty. Their roads in that area are good, better than in the mountains by a long margin. They are simply further away from one another. And they are at least three months' march away from any large force sent from the Blacklocks."

"The roads are that good because they are **the** major source of food for the other holds and need to be as the traffic on them is nigh constant. We Stonefoots have never been as good at underground farming as you Longbeards, nor have we ever had as many Rune Scribes. And yours haven't yet agreed to take contracts with any of our holds bar Varni's Folly, which doesn't really need their aid," Thunderbelly grumbled. That seemed to be his base state of speaking at present, although if the troubles facing his folk were as dire as they sounded, Harry could hardly blame him.

"Two of the valleys can supply meat and furs aplenty, but bread, vegetables and such do not survive long there. The winds coming off the mountains are too cold," Thunderbelly continued. "Without those hill-holds, the rest of my folk will need to rely on Erebor for food or starve. And now our enemies use our roads to invade our lands!"

While the main trade with the Blacklocks was glass, steel, jewels and cloth, With the Stonefoots, it was mostly unrefined ores, meats, and spices coming into Erebor. In turn, metal goods, jewelry, and gold had flowed out, but in recent times, food had become a decent-sized export for Erebor to the Iron Hills and the Stonefoots. This was made possible thanks to Harry's runes and dwarven ingenuity. Harry's runes could keep bugs or rodents away, while dwarven runes could keep food cool. Recently, they had even found a way to take runes they used in

their underground farms and Harry's runes to create an array that, although very large, could keep the foodstuffs of a cart fresh for the months it took to transport anything to Varni's Folly.

"Through us, the elves of Mirkwood and Dale can both help to shoulder that burden. I've already begun a message to Legolas in that regard," Thorin agreed. "But Fili's force will be the first we send. They will have some food, but more weapons, healing supplies, scouts and warriors."

Thorin looked up at Harry and Tauriel. "Harry, I know not what kind of recompense the Stonefoots will willingly pay you to help, and I hate to ask, but..."

"You don't have to. If any of my friends are going looking for trouble, I think it's only natural I go with them. Besides, the Easterlings have long severed the Great Enemy, going as far back as Ulfang in the First Age and his betrayal of the elves of East Beleriand in the Nirnaeth Arnoediad (Battle of Unnumbered Tears)." Harry answered before glancing over at Tauriel.

He gestured down at the map, but she shook her head. Despite all the talk about the cold drakes and the Withered Heath and the Easterlings, none of it had jolted her as much as Harry mentioning the Forodwaith. *My quarry is in the frozen wastes, not the dragon-blasted Heath or the Grey Mountains. That is a distinct pity.*

Inwardly tsking at that and after wordlessly asking for permission, Harry explained what Tauriel had been feeling: that some dark creature or monster was stirring in the frozen wastes. All the dwarves looked surprised at that, but Thunderbelly just shrugged, his face the very picture of fatalism. "Part of the reason why we're having trouble is that the cold drakes are appearing again in more numbers than we've seen since Smaug traveled south. We've even seen a few fire drakes, although none as large or dangerous or intelligent as that monster."

He shook his head grimly. "Since Smaug burned one of our valley-holds from one edge to another for food and fun... the survivors spoke of how he was laughing as he burned their homes and neighbors alive... we can only pray to Mahal that he was an aberration which will hopefully never come again. Yet even without such my House is facing a desperate time. The reports from Fanged Walls say they've been attacked by five cold drakes and two of the fire-breathing beasts in the past two months. If that continues, the valley will need to be evacuated."

"Aberration, greatest and largest of calamities, dead overgrown lizard." Harry shrugged, interjecting a bit of humor deliberately before the dwarves could lose themselves in fell memories. "The appellation changes wherever you're standing in relation to the object in question. Gandalf... Er, Tharkûn," Harry changed the name he used for his old (in both age and time spent as) friend quickly when Thunderbelly looked confused for a second. "Tharkûn and I

talked about it once, and he was of the opinion that the birth of Smaug was indeed an aberration. No other dragon will ever grow to such a size in the modern Age.”

Not without outside influence, anyway, Harry added mentally as that horrible thought occurred to him. *Could Sauron, or maybe some other follower of the Greater Darkness, somehow influence dragons to grow larger?* He looked at his lady love, but Tauriel didn’t seem to have made that leap of logic yet. *And come to think of it, where did Smaug himself spring from? Gandalf told me he was the largest and greatest of dragons, but...*

Once more setting aside an intrusive thought, Harry touched the map with a gentle finger. “So while myself and Tauriel are willing to travel with Fili and his caravan, I don’t know if we will stay with you to fight off the Easterlings. I presume that’s going to be the main thrust of...” he paused as Thorin shook his head firmly.

“No. Going by the last report we had from those hill forts, they are stuck in a series of sieges against a massively overwhelming foe. A small force will not suffice there, as will be the case in the Grey Mountains. Fili will make certain the other holds of the Stonefoots do not starve, and he and his warriors will reinforce their efforts against the goblins in the mountains while I will lead an army of Erebor and a thousand volunteers from Dale to aid our cousins.”

Harry was silent, contemplating the idea that his best friend in this world might be going into a war without him. For a moment, he felt honestly torn between going with Tauriel, the love of his life, and Thorin, his best friend, but after a moment it faded. Thorin would have an army at his back against a powerful but straightforward enemy. Whereas Tauriel, who knew what threats she would be facing?

Tauriel caught the conflicted look on her love’s face but decided to set aside talking about it for now. After all, they would have the journey to discuss what to do once they reached Stonefoot lands. “How many warriors can you field now? It was around five thousand dwarves the last time I spoke with Dwalin.”

Among dwarves, the difference between professional warriors and militiamen was very small. Especially here in Erebor, where excellent weapons and armor could be produced in bulk. So the real question was how many dwarves could be removed from the local economy without causing trouble in the various crafts or sectors.

“Closer to six thousand, but I won’t take all of those troops. I will take only around four thousand, split into five corps, each with their own baggage and artillery trains. My folk have been busy and learned much from the Stiffbeards,” Thorin stated, smiling grimly, using a term for the organization he was speaking of that he had gotten from speaking to Harry about the wars in his old world. “Dain will hopefully meet us halfway to the Stonefoot hill holds with his boar riders. That will give us a cavalry arm.”

Left unsaid was the fact Dain would also be a voice of experience when it came to leading large forces. While Thorin had held a command in the war against the orcs in the Misty Mountains, that had been a small command of barely three companies. While he had held overall command of the dwarves and humans in the Battle of the Lonely Mountain, even that force had been a smaller force than this one.

Harry nodded slowly at that, then asked, "And you, Fili, how many are you leading? And are any of the others coming?"

"Two companies of regular infantry and six groups of scouts," Fili answered crisply. "Nori and Dori will be coming with us, and Gimli will be my second in command. He's currently over in Dale organizing the archers to join us and my King's army, along with one of Balin's secretaries to write up the contracts." Thunderbelly grumbled at that again but said nothing as Fili continued. "Those men will be paid in full by the Stonefoot holds, both for their time and any injuries or deaths that occur. Just like among our own folk, no human family will go without income if their patriarch dies."

Harry glanced over at Thorin, who smiled and shrugged in answer. Harry understood that shrug as meaning this was yet another step up for Fili, another test of Thorin's current heir. Regardless of when Thorin's son (far more likely than a daughter), Fili would remain the heir until the young dwarf-to-be came of age. Considering that was normally considered to be around fifty for dwarves, that was still a ways in the future. And Gimli had already proven himself in command of smaller units as well.

"Wait, so who is going to... I presume that it will be some time before you set off?" Tauriel began, looking at Thorin, who answered that it would take him three weeks at minimum to ready the supplies and artillery trains for his army. "Then... who is going to rule Erebor? Will your people accept Ani as your voice in your absence?"

"*Sigh*. that is going to be a problem. Not only is Ani a woman, but she is a pregnant woman now. Our societal mores will not allow her to speak for me as king in public," Thorin admitted. "Kili would have remained as my visible deputy if not for him having signed a contract to fund and lead that caravan." Even princes among the dwarves were held to their written word. "Fili is needed on the orcish front, as we need to be seen by all the Stonefoot houses we have trade agreements with doing something for them. Dwalin would be my next choice among those available, but he..."

"He's no leader," Harry snorted, a reaction echoed by Fili and Thorin. "And he thinks every problem can be solved with an axe or sword. Gloin and Oin aren't really leaders, either. Balin would have been easily the best choice... I think you and he really need to think about

training up some actual ambassadors rather than asking him to make that journey or even the one to the Iron Hills.”

“Teach your mother to smelt pig iron,” Thorin barked back, glaring for a moment before both dwarf and human began to laugh ruefully as the others all looked on.

As Thorin’s prime minister, Balin had truly come into his own, almost acting like a second King Under the Mountain occasionally, given how trusted and respected he was. If He had been left in charge, no one within Erebor, even among the humans in Dale, would have questioned it. Yet there was no way to get a message to him in enough time for him to turn around if he had already set out from Rivendell toward the Shire.

“But dwarven kings have gone to war before in similar straights,” Thorin said as he finished chuckling, shaking his head. “I can shut down the court for a given value, setting aside most of the day-to-day decisions, decrees and rulings I need to make. Gloin and Oin will be here to act as mediators for anything that cannot wait among the various crafts, and if a third voice is needed, Gurak Surehand can step in as the most senior Rune Scribe. And both Gloin and Oin can relay Ani’s orders if a true king’s decree is necessary as in the realm of law or contracts being broken.”

Given how important contracts were venerated among the dwarves, that rarely occurred, and when it did, the outcome did normally have to be decided by the king. Unless it was between one individual and another who practiced the same craft. In that case, the rest of their fellows would provide a tribunal to decide who was in the right and what monies were due to the aggrieved.

“Well, you know you’re folk best,” Harry agreed. It wasn’t a perfect solution, but from the look on their faces, Fili and Thorin were both certain Fili needed to go with the caravan and take part in the lesser campaign against the dwarves, such was the importance of the defense treaties they had made with each individual Stonefoot hold. So he wasn’t going to comment further. *Dwarves are not humans, after all. They are far more orderly as a society and as people. I very much doubt anyone will try to take over, like what might occur in a human realm.* “When are you thinking of Leaving, Fili?”

“Two days,” Fili answered firmly. “Gimli needs time to return, and we need that time to gather supplies for our donkeys.”

Harry and Tauriel looked at one another, and after a moment, Tauriel nodded. “in that case, we will indeed be going with you.”

“Happy to have you, Harry,” Fili answered with a grin.

Harry smirked back at him, then turned to Thorin. "Now, let's discuss what kind of runic arrays both caravan and army will want, what Gurak and his fellows and I can supply in those two days. I envision a lot of work in my near future..."

OOOOOO

As the year 2951 of the Third Age picked up pace for Harry and Tauriel, another Istari was scheming. Gandalf had turned his attention to the Haradrim and the Corsairs of Umbar, fearing that they would become the source of Sauron's true military might in the wars to come. This left Saruman to keep his watch on Mordor in conjunction with the Rangers of the north, those rare descendants of Númenor who had survived the Witch King's wars. But having... inside information, Saruman knew that Sauron was not going to be in a position to attack out of Mordor for decades yet. So he had sent his servants out to the east.

Saruman was an Istari, a Maiar given the form of a seemingly mortal being to walk Middle Earth. His agents were not human men or women. Rather, they were the birds of the sky: ravens, crows, sparrows, hawks. Only the largest and most independent of birds refused his call, refused to let him use their senses as his own, for the eagles were Manwë's to command and his alone. Beyond that, Saruman had also made a point of becoming friendly with the Stiffbeards on several of his journeys abroad. He found in them minds that worked much like his own when it came to mechanical devices. As such, he knew about the growing dwarvish strength in Erebor and had even heard a head highly edited tale of Harry's meeting with the Stiffbeards.

Currently, Saruman was in one of the rooms furthest up the tower of Isengard. This room had several large windows. The interior of the room and the walls between the windows were lined with bird perches, each perch connected to a food dispenser of Saruman's design. Along the back wall was a table, where Saruman was now sitting, staring at a map of Rhûn that was not nearly as detailed as he could have wished. Neither he nor any of the wise had ever been able to map out that realm to his satisfaction. Nearby, a door led into the main room of his living quarters.

With the information available to him at present, Saruman estimated that the Stiffbeards might prove to be a far harder nut to crack than the Haradrim thought when they gathered their strength enough to attack once more. Certainly, their weapons, armor, and devices would all be of far higher quality now, thanks to the amount of steel weapons and otherwise flowing down into their territory from Erebor.

I do have to wonder about the secret of that production capacity, Saruman thought Even before Smaug, Erebor was renowned for producing as much steel as any four or five other dwarves and holds, and of rare quality to boot.

At the moment, that thought was not his primary concern. Rather, his mind was on the war to come. All of his birds had reported the same thing in Rhûn: men and horses moving, armed and coming west from their distant cities. *While the birds cannot count, they can share their memories with me, and the size and numbers of different armies on the move are telling.*

War was going to hit the Stiffbeard lands as well as the Blacklock, while the first blows had already landed upon the Stonefoot. Whoever Sauron had sent to rouse the Easterlings was doing a magnificent job of it, and they were quite well-led, in Saruman's opinion. The army sent against the Stonefoots would shatter several of their city-states while using smaller, more mobile forces to harry the Blacklocks. It was a masterful campaign thus far, but it felt unfinished to Saruman.

Even the sieges on those small city-states of the Stonefoots feel like a distraction. No, the Easterlings' true blow will fall somewhere else.

Saruman pondered for several minutes, then shook his head. *It will not fall against the Blacklocks. While they do not have as many holds as the Stonefoot or the others, they are now the stronger of the four eastern Dwarven Houses thanks to the trade with the growing power of the Lonely Mountain. They are also the most flexible, tactically speaking. The Stonefoots make a decent enough target but a thorny one. Obviously, they can be reinforced by Erebor, just like the Blacklocks could, given time. And only a fool would believe that assaulting a dwarven fortress would be quick.*

"No, that entire campaign is secondary," Saruman whispered aloud as he realized what was going on. *Somewhere deep into Rhûn, far beyond the range of even my winged spies, there is another army preparing. One that will fall on the Ironfists. Break them, and you secure a border with the Haradrim. And you isolate the Stiffbeards from their closest allies. Erebor might be willing to send trade caravans all that way, but that is a far cry from fielding an army so far away from your own land.*

But there is Harry Potter to consider. What will he be up to? From my discussions with Gandalf and the impression I got from our brief interaction, Harry is someone who likely cannot stop himself from diving headfirst into trouble to defend others, regardless of whether he knew them or not.

He looked up as several birds flew in one of the windows. Sitting on a perch, they each hit several small buttons set into the stone. A small chute opened in front of each bird, letting loose some birdseed or, in the case of one of the ravens, pulled off the top of a magically sealed container. Within lay small strips of meat, which the crow instantly began to devour.

One by one, Saruman met the eyes of the birds, pulling the information of what they had seen from their minds. Soon, he had an even better idea of what was going on in the Northeast

than he did before. *Goblins moving in groups of a hundred or more strong in the Grey Mountains, and the cold drakes moving out of the Withered Heath into the mountains in larger numbers than they have in years. Perhaps I was wrong. Perhaps the Stonefoots are truly the target of this war. Or perhaps whoever is on the other side is more powerful than I expected. Could Sauron have decided to empower his nine riders before himself or any other endeavors? If so, Khamûl could be the one leading this campaign. Not the witch king. For all of his power in personality and magic, he is no real general nor an Easterling.*

Regardless, it is clear that either the Nazgûl or Sauron himself has somehow been able to rouse the cold drakes, as well as the goblins of the mountains, despite how horrible their losses were to the dwarves in the Battle of the Lonely Mountain and the offensives the Stonefoots launched afterward. With a three-pronged assault, even if the Stonefoots House is not the true target of this war, they may well be doomed to fall even with Erebor's aid. But that almost makes it certain that Harry will get involved. Where? Against which enemy? And how can I use this to my own advantage?

Still thinking that, Saruman left his bird room, heading into his throne room for a moment then down, deep into the tower. His leg, injured in his 'chase' of Sauron, had long since healed, letting him get around with ease despite his apparent age. He paused in one room, staring into a room that looked like a mix between a jeweler's and a glass blower's workshop. The lights within gleamed blue as he stared at several scrolls on the walls and the notes flung everywhere. *My research into the Rings of Power has come to an unsatisfying conclusion. As has my search for the One Ring. Like Sauron, I know it is still in Middle Earth, but where? Where eludes me. My birds have told me of goblins searching the Nindalf and along the rivers. The Nindalf was a land of marshes fed by a portion of the River Anduin that was largely uninhabitable below the Eryn Muil near the border of Rohan and Mordor. But if the ring fell into the river Anduin finding it would take thousands of eyes and decades of work, not including those blasted marshes. No... that cannot be my path forward.*

Saruman's contemplation was interrupted by a feeling hitting him from one of his specially prepared stones. He had taken the idea from what Gandalf had told him of Harry Potter's wards, and while they couldn't work very well, they served as internal warning systems for Isengard. Someone had just entered the tower from the keep beyond.

He was already moving down the stairs to the bottom of the tower by the time one of his retainers was coming up. The woman bowed deeply to Saruman, who she served as her mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother, viewing the Maiar as a god. She was of Dunlending stock, a folk that Saruman whose ancestry had idly traced all the way back to the Haladin, one of the three tribes of Men to make their way west and befriend the elves. But like most descended from that reclusive house of the Edain, her people had fallen into near

barbarity. Still, like her parents and grandparents before her, the girl had taken to instruction well enough.

“Master, one of your other servants, a Rohirrim, wishes to speak to you,” the woman said. “Another arrived earlier today, not a servant, and they supped together with other men of Rohirrim here in Isen.

The distaste was plain in the girl’s voice but not visible on her face, and Saruman nodded. *Good, her training works despite how much those of Dunlending stock loath the men of Rohan. It has been more than two hundred years, yet that hatred hasn’t faded a jot.*

The wild men of the hills, as they were called, the Dunlendings had lived in the Veil of Isen and further east in Calenardhon, the land the men of Gondor ceded to the Éothéod for their help against the Wainriders. Since then, it had been renamed Rohan and expanded despite dozens of small wars and several major ones. The last had been a little under two hundred years ago, eleven years prior to Smaug descending on the Lonely Mountain. It was in helping the men of Rohan in that war, although the Dunlending remnants didn’t know it, that Saruman had won their respect and the right to the Veil of Isen and Isengard itself.

“Is he in the receiving room?” When the woman nodded, Saruman smiled. “You have done well. Return to your duties.”

The receiving room was on the first floor of the tower, a former guard room that was to the left of the massive, nearly impenetrable door that sat in the outer wall of the tower like a plug in a hole once closed. It was simple but comfortable, and the man of Rohan rose from a padded seat as Saruman entered. He bowed formally, and Saruman smiled thinly. “Gaheris.”

“My lord,” Gaheris replied, only then rising from his bow.

Gaheris was one of the men of Rohan who Saruman felt had potential. He was a rather ambitious fellow who wanted to enrich himself any way he possibly could but came from a poor Westfold house that had sent him to serve here in the Veil of Isen, hoping that in doing so, he could earn his way when they had nothing to give him. That kind of ambition was easily turned to Saruman’s own devices, and he wondered if it could be so now.

“Master Saruman, a messenger came with a report from Rohan for you.”

Saruman made no move to take the messenger tube from the man, simply sitting down in a chair nearby, looking at him thoughtfully. “You would have been given verbal reports as well. Give me those and your opinion.”

The man noticeably straightened his shoulders, proud at being asked his thoughts, although, frankly, he had few shoulders to straighten, in Saruman’s opinion. The man looked

slightly rattish, with none of the height or blonde hair that made the men of Rohan so distinctive. "Orcs and goblins have been seen trying to get through Rohan without being detected. All the Marches from the Westfold to the Wold have reported it. They were not trying to go to Gondor, nor were they trying to attack any of the Rohirrim's settlements. Rather, they are trying to simply get past them, heading north into the Brown Lands. Others have been seen along the rivers for some reason, but few of those lived overlong. Yet the Forces of the Riddermark are mostly away on the border with Mordor. These smaller forces are a bad sign, but one the men of Rohan are not equipped to deal with at present."

Gaheris smiled thinly, enjoying the fact this made his king look weak. And it was not, indeed, that the men of Rohan could not deal with these scattered bands of fell folk. Rather, their current king lacked the will to order such. *Fengel has always been more concerned with living well and fondling his gold than anything else.* "As such, the king is asking for you to lend your aid in both warding off such groups and in discovering their goals."

"Interesting. And what do you think that goal is?" Saruman murmured before needing to hide a sneer and a snort alike as the man gave his own thoughts on this matter. Gaheris felt that the goblins and orcs trying to sneak through the Mark were trying to go north to link with the powers of the Dwimordene. "The witch of the woods has weaved her webs for thousands of years! If she were to join the Great Enemy, reach out past her forests, then surely Rohan would be doomed, caught between two enemies!"

Saruman was amused, as always, by the superstitious nature of humans, and how much hatred Gaheris felt towards womenfolk in general. Dwimordene was the name the men of Rohan had given to Lothlorien on their retreat north and then their migration back south in ancient times. Those men who entered Lothlorien never returned, yet a rumor still began of a Witch whose beauty ensnared their minds, turning them into trees or fell creatures of the night.

To think of Galadriel as a witch! Such foolishness. Still, it is useful to keep a wedge between Rohan and the elves. Not that the elves have any strength left for open warfare any longer.

"You are right. That is a problem that we need to make certain does not come about. Whatever these orcs and goblins might truly be up to, the Great Enemy will not have sent them forth without purpose. And it comes to my mind that this is not the first such report I have seen over the past ten years."

Still, with what my winged agents show me, this proves that Sauron also has no idea of where to look for the ring beyond along the river Anduin thanks to the ancient Battle of the Gladden Fields. At least not yet. I am not so foolish as to believe that Sauron will remain without

such direction for very long. But for now, I can rest easy in the knowledge that he will not find it there. Let him waste his energy searching, then. I will turn my own attention to other matters.

Standing up, Saruman made for the door, gesturing the young horse rider out of his way. He took the scroll from the man, opened it, and read it crisply as he walked until he came to a doorway on the first floor of the tower that led into one of his many forges. "How many of you folk of Rohan am I employing currently, Gaheris?"

"a hundred and ten at present, my Lord, with another fifty womenfolk." Those womenfolk were mostly unwed, young adventurous ladies of lower houses of nobility among were the Rohan, or even peasants, who decided to try to see if they could make a better life here in the Veil of Isen under Saruman's rule for one reason or another. Gaheris disdained such, but it was true that they were excellent cooks at least.

Saruman did not. *In years to come they too will serve my purpose, just as the women of Dunlending descent will.*

"Fengel has asked me for advice when he already knows what he should be doing. Keeping his land clear of orcs and goblins, no matter how many men he must take from the fields." Saruman kept his own disdain from showing more than a tiny bit, but that was enough to make Gaheris' rattish face break into a sneer. "But, if he is asking me for aid, I will give it to him, even though I believe that the cause of the good peoples of the world would be better served by my personally heading northeast."

Gaheris' sneer became a frown at that, but he then gaped as Saruman opened the door wide enough for him to enter behind the older man. Within, there were row upon row of excellent swords, shields, and lances. All of them were of such high quality that even dwarves would have nodded in approval. "My Lord, what do you intend?"

"I intend for you to take my gathered horde of weapons. Whether you use them or pass them on to others, all I ask is that each of these weapons taste the blood of the goblin of the orc and that I keep having your trust in the future. Do you understand?"

Gaheris' ambition was playing once more across his face as he stared at the armor and weapons in front of him. Such armor that even a Marshal of the Riddermark would have trouble matching. It was said that the King had hundreds of such weapons in his horde for his personal muster at need, but how well the other nobles of the Eorlingas could arm their Éored varied wildly. "I understand completely, my Lord."

"I am certain you do," Saruman murmured, already turning aside and moving to a small writing desk set into the corner of the forge, one of many he had scattered throughout the tower for when an idea struck him. Once there, he began to write even as he smirked inside.

Each of those weapons was special in a very different way than what Gaheris thought. All of them had been embedded with a stone that would allow Saruman to discover their location wherever they were and to work his influence through them on the bearer in a subtle fashion. He would not be able to directly influence the minds of the individual, but he could gently heighten their darker emotions or their greed.

And in the case of Gaheris, I don't even need to try that hard. He and the others who carry these weapons will become, if they survive, secret tools among the writers of Rohan for me in the future. Perhaps they will even pass these weapons on, letting me influence the generations to come, weakening Rohan from within. I well know Rohan will stand with Gondor and the so-called free peoples, which means they will almost certainly stand against me when the time comes.

"In return, I require two horses," Saruman said aloud, looking up as he finished writing, his plans forming as he did so. "They are to have good endurance and footwork over rough terrain but be otherwise unremarkable. I intend to travel to the Northeast, and I must go swiftly."

A chance to work alongside Potter against the Easterlings is not one I will give up, and if, in so doing, I can weaken Sauron without making it seem as if I have set myself directly against him, all the better. The orcs and goblins searching for the ring are no threat. The ring is not within the Anduin nor any of its tributaries. No, it will be discovered someplace else. And I have time to devote to that after I have gained access to Harry's runic knowledge and perhaps even his spells. With that, I may even be one step closer to making my own ring instead of needing to rely on finding Sauron's. Regardless, I will be stronger for that knowledge.

Scene break

True to Fili's words, the military caravan heading into House Stonefoots' lands was ready within two days. Harry and Tauriel met them outside Erebor that morning, dressed for travel. This included the armor that the dwarves had made for both of them, and Fili wasn't the only dwarf to smile in appreciation as they saw the pair wearing them under their cloaks.

Both lovers currently wore their Elvish cloaks, classed with the leaves of Lothlorien, but underneath, the brigandine armor could easily be made out. Dozens of finger-sized, scale-like plates were riveted into heavy cloth on either side. The rivets had also been worked with some kind of oil to take away the shine and make them immune to rain and cold. The cloth was green and dark grey the better to blend into the surroundings, if such a thing was needed.

And both sets of armor were positively brimming with magic. Harry had learned quite a few of the dwarves' tricks about molding his magic into the metal of things during the smithing process, although only through years of experimentation to learn which type of runic array

would work with another across the two schools. In a way, the two pieces of brigandine armor had been a kind of test bed for what Harry and the dwarves could do together.

Between Harry and the rune scribes, although it took several years to get it right, they had created brigandine armor that could stand up to a dragon's bite, wouldn't ever rust, was padded against impact, cooler and lighter than it should be and further, was silenced. What little noise that kind of armor made normally was simply completely absent, an absence of sound that could, with the touch of a hand to a specific rune and a pulse of magic into a small chain at their wastes, spread over the rest of the individual wearing it.

And on that same small chain was a rock that contained an antibug ward, much like the ward Meto had tried to fold into silver a few days back. A thought that was uppermost in Harry's mind as he saw one of the dwarves in the group ahead of him. "Meto! What are you doing here?"

The young dwarf scowled, running his hand through his beard and down the cloak he was wearing. While he wasn't wearing the same armor, Harry knew his chain mail, like that worn by several others in Fili's force, had been reinforced by runes. Under that, they wore gambesons, which, while kind of stifling at the present moment, would serve them in good stead to dull any blunt force objects hitting them just as much as the scale mail would. "Master Togan and the others decided I could do more good among the Stonefoots than here. I'm good at the rune plaques we use in the farms, so they thought I could at least earn good coin there."

Harry frowned at that, thinking it a bit too much for his near disaster, but it wasn't his place to discipline any of the would-be rune scribes. That he left to their masters. "Well, alright then. I can give you some instruction when I put wards down at night if you want."

Meto nodded at that while Tauriel looked around the hundreds strong band. All of the wagons and carts were loaded with food bar two in the center, which Tauriel knew would be loaded with arrows, spears, cooking and camp equipment. No artillery here.

The Longbeards, around three-hundred-and-eighty strong, were already formed into columns as they marched out of Erebor, one column on each side of the carts. All of them, either those dwarves on the carts or marching, wore chain mail. Most were simply incredibly well-made, their chains so tight an elf would be hard-pressed to push a needle through, the quality of steel such that most orc or human weapons might break on them. Every Longbeard also wore a small helmet on their heads. Shields would be in the carts, but weapons, axes, swords and hammers were in hand.

In comparison, what armor the Stonefoots wore was invisible. How the overly wide dwarves were not sweltering in their heavy woolen cloaks, Tauriel had no idea. But they, too, carried their weapons, short stabbing spears with thin heads, made to penetrate rather than

slice. At their belts, they wore short swords or hatchets. For some reason, they disdained helmets, which Tauriel felt odd considering most enemies dwarves faced were taller than them, but she put it down to Stonefoots strangeness.

“Ho, you two, get up here with us!” Fili shouted from the head of one column, calling up Tauriel and Harry from where they had been beside Meto. He then turned to his men, shouting something in Khuzdul he pumped a fist in the air. They responded with a roar of “Baruk Khazad, Khazad Ai Durin Nur!” raising their weapons in the air.

Harry smiled at that, then clasped arms with Gimli, grinning cheerfully at the other dwarf. “Gentlemen, this looks like a magnificent cavalcade. Let’s go find some trouble, shall we?”

Gimli and Fili both laughed while Tauriel rolled her eyes, even as she smiled at the pair of young dwarves. Of all their dwarven friends, the only pair that she liked better than these two were Thorin and Ani. *It will be quite nice to travel with the pair of them I feel.*

Within moments, the troop was on its way, the dwarves jogging along in the ground, devouring lope of dwarven infantry, while Harry and Tauriel marched alongside the two young leaders. Wary but strangely eager for the challenges ahead.

End Chapter

Don’t worry folks, this is the last chapter where romance will be a large component of the chapter. And damn do I LOVE working in Tolkien land. Thank you, Sir Tolkien, you made a magnificent world for those of us with actual imaginations to play with.

Regarding the timeskip, I had to think long and hard about this. I did NOT want to get bogged down further in small timeskips and world-building just around Erebor. So I wanted to show the various changes wrought by Harry and the Rune Scribes as an aside, then go into it in small increments going forward on that score to show what they had come up with as they used it in war. I realize that I probably did more tell than show because of this, but I hope you all can understand the reasoning behind that. I also hope you all liked the further hints into dwarvish culture.

As for the main plot, in the books, it was mentioned several times but never expanded upon that the Stiffbeards, Ironfoots, Blacklocks and Stonefists had lost their homes. Migrations of dwarves were mentioned moving into and through Erebor and beyond to the Blue Mountains to join their folk there in a scene with Samwise and other hobbits talking about the queer folk passing through the Shire.

I imagined this would have been a gradual thing, of multiple wars over decades well away from Erebor and Dale, until it very much wasn't. For those who don't know, in canon, Dain Ironfoot fought a war in the northeast against forces from the Easterlings and eventually defeated them.

In the past chapter, I had Sauron start that work by sending the Nazgl Khamûl to his folk. Now, I will build on that. The campaign in the northeast will begin in the next chapter, folks, as we start skipping travel times and delve deeper into first the Stonefists, then the Blacklocks as both Houses feel the fell attention of the Nazgûl and the dwarves and Harry go to war. Will Saruman's prediction prove accurate? Who can say?

As for what Tauriel needs to hunt down... well... that would be telling. I will also need to think hard about what to do about the cold drakes. Should they be as intelligent as Smaug but weaker and smaller? Or more animallike up to a certain age/strength? We will have to see. As for the goblins in the mountains... they have no idea what's coming for them.

Anyway, I hope you enjoyed this, and as always, feel free to point out mistakes and leave a review!