

I am not J.R.R Tolkien. I would never aspire to be so, unlike a group of individuals who I will not deign to name.

Howdy, all. This was the winner of this month's HP poll. I am still losing days every month to helping my family (no not going to be more specific, this is the internet LOL) prepare the house for a kid. It's been really hard, but hopefully, in September, I will have more time to devote to fanfic stuff. We will see.

Anyway, here is the chapter. I do my best to skip the travel portion for Tauriel and Harry, but I wanted to show a bit of what the land to the northeast of the Lonely Mountain is like. But from the next chapter on, there will be more action.

This chapter has been edited by me with Grammarly. I will be rereading it online (for some reason rereading it via the webpage helps me spot mistakes more than reading in word? *SHRUG*) over the next few days, but if anyone spots any mistakes, please tell me. I feel I should put in more about the runic arrays on the carts, but at the same time, I don't want to yet? Eh, tell me what you all think. I will be trying to get FILFy done and off to it's editor by the end of the month, and will post Heroes when Tomon gets it back to me... and yes, I will be nudging his elbow on that point tonight, LOL.

Chapter 25: War's Pull

"I would like to thank Master Hamfast once more for his help in allowing me to win this reward for the tenth year in a row," Bilbo said as he waved at the small crowd of hobbits around him from all over the Shire that sat in front of him at more than a dozen long tables. Several in that crowd were looking at him a little annoyed, while others were looking at him with narrow, wary eyes. The majority, though, were simply chuckling and laughing, amused that Mad Baggins had won the autumn fair's contest for largest vegetables once again.

"I will note that as always, the local boys got their voting in early this year when they tried to abscond with my mushrooms. I hope the embarrassment I gave them will keep them from attempting such on my neighbors," he joked, his eyes flicking over a few younger hobbits in the crowd, many of whom looked away in embarrassment.

It was one thing to try and steal vegetables. For many youngsters in their horrible tweens, as more respectable hobbits called it, across the Shire, that was almost a right of passage. Getting caught at it and getting caught stealing **mushrooms**, of all things? That was utterly shameful. If a farmer caught a young hobbit doing so, he was well within his rights to take a cane to his back.

Bilbo and his farmhand, Hamfast Gamgee, did not use such painful punishments for the most part. Instead, after ensnaring any trespassers, which covered quite a lot more territory than simple vegetable stealers, they would fit the punishment to the crime. If someone had tried to break into Bag End to look for dwarven treasure, for example, that would earn them a bit of humiliation on the first attempt and then a proper thrashing on the second.

For vegetable thieves, though, it was always simple humiliation. Sending them off without their shirts or britches was one of Gamgee's favorites, while Bilbo liked to write little messages on their skin with paint while the trespasser was tied up and squirming. Frequently, some of those writings pointed out pieces of advice; about how to move more quietly, about how to stay hidden for longer, and that, really, coming in at night wasn't actually the best idea because any kind of noise around the garden when there shouldn't be any stood out.

The local tweens were still uncertain which they disliked more: the embarrassment or the more painful punishments.

Bilbo's words garnered loud shouts, jeers and laughter from the crowd, although some of those faces still looked annoyed while others became more pinch-faced as they knew what Bilbo was going to say soon. To many a respectable hobbit, it was getting to the point where many of them were wondering if there was truly some kind of magic to how well Bilbo's garden did. He routinely won or at least placed in the top three for contests that dealt with vegetables, flowers and herbs. Even his apples did well for all that he only had three apple trees on his property.

And they are quite right about that, Bilbo thought complacently, even as he prepared to continue his speech into territory that would not be as well received. *It's just that they refuse to see the forest for the trees.* "Just like all of the Shire has been blessed by the hands that work it, so too is the love myself and master Gamgee put into our craft in my little garden a benediction to the powers of the Valar and Lady Yavanna in particular. Every time I win one of these, I know and acknowledge that, at heart, it is the love of growing things and working the soil that we all share that come from her which has let me take the prize."

The laughter slowly trickled away and mutters about, "Oh, there he goes again," and suchlike rebounded. Others in the crowd mumbled, "knew it," or "Ugh, there's that unnatural talk again."

Others muttered more direct imprecations on Bilbo being odd, infested by the strangers that had occasionally stopped into Bag End since his return eleven years ago. Some of them even muttered about how 'the dwarf' had renewed Bilbo's oddness, although most didn't connect the dwarf, Balin, to Bilbo's ability to grow things. Even the insular hobbits knew that

dwarves were not the best when it came to working the earth unless it was to dig metals out of it.

By this point, Bilbo was used to this response. Yet while most hobbits did not really wish to acknowledge magic, the Valar, or even the world beyond the borders of the Shire in many cases, Bilbo refused to do so. He had seen plainly the hobbit's ability to purify the land when burying Thorin had helped him overcome the Dragon Taint. Even the lands around the lonely mountain and close to Lake Town had changed despite how short a time Bilbo had to work with small plots of it.

So he would continue to give thanks to the lady of growing things until he no longer had voice to do so. *And maybe some of these knob-headed fools may think about it and remember that all of us are followers of the Giver of Fruits.*

Yet he knew it made his neighbors and other contestants uncomfortable and so moved along briskly. He had some people he wanted to talk to today in any case. So he finished as he normally did, pointing to two large wheelbarrows that were even now being pushed down from Bag End towards where the contest had been going on in the Party Field, a field kept free for events such as these. There, they would join the small booths that had already been set up by several others lining the outer edge of the area.

"My friends, I asked that all of you partake in some of our blessings from this year's crop. Master Gamgee and I have already set aside enough for ourselves and his family for the coming winter, and I know that there are others around here to boot. Let's stop all this contest nonsense and get down to what we are all here for: eating good food!"

Bilbo smiled happily as the cheers redoubled. If there was one thing that every hobbit would agree with, it was the importance of good food and good company. With a final wave at the crowd, he nodded to the two men pushing those wheelbarrows. Both hobbits were of an age with Hamfast. Bilbo had hired them to help sell his wares with very specific instructions. Those instructions were to sell them at a rate those who wanted them could pay. Thus, a poor hobbit mother would be able to buy as much as a rich matron, and such would flock to the two hobbits selling Bag End's faire.

Both would be walking away with a good portion of the profits, but Bilbo felt that was fair enough. After all, changing the prices for the individual like that in a crowd was bound to draw some ire from those not partaking in the lower price. The workers could blame it on Bilbo, of course, but would still have to deal with a lot of shouting.

This way, Master Gamgee could spend time talking with some of the other dedicated farmers and farmhands for a time, while Bilbo spoke to some of the locals. In particular, some of the Tooks, Brandybucks and others. The local Sheriff was already at his table, and he waved at

Bilbo while his companion, The Head Bounder, the other half of the Watch, simply nodded his head, taking a long draft from his ale.

Bilbo slid into place beside the man, tapping the table as a young, pretty hobbit lass quickly wound its way her way through the crowd, a plate of sandwiches, bread, cheese, and other things resting atop it for them all. "So, gentlemen, how goes the autumn for you all?"

His companions all chuckled at Bilbo's ebullience, his good humor and energy infectious, even though most hobbits of his age. "I note Bilbo, that you didn't make a point of parading the latest would-be vegetable stealers in front of the crowd this year? Is there any particular reason for that? I know you caught several youngsters from Buckland last year, and they all took it in good fun. Even my sister Primula, who really was a tiny bit too old to go along with such things," Rorimac Brandybuck laughed cheerfully. "Hah, but she's begun to settle down at last over this past year."

A younger man than Bilbo and the others at the table, he was a good friend to those he came close to and was one of few Brandybucks in the crowd at present. He often acted as the Master of Buckland's ears and eyes beyond the reach of Buckland. Since his father was the Master of Buckland Hall and the leader of that small, almost independent territory, that was fair enough in Bilbo's view, who respected that shrewd old man quite a bit. Similar to his father, Rorimac hid his sharp mind, which had already begun to grow the Brandybuck fortune, under a smiling face.

"You Brandybucks have always been a wild sort. I don't know why you think your sister would be immune to that," Adalgrim Took stated, his smile giving his true feelings on that score. After all, that was something that could be said for many a Took as well, despite the vaunted position the family held within the Shire.

The Tookes were the preeminent family in the Shire, able to trace their line all the way back to the Oldbucks, which had been one of the families that had founded the Shire. The family's patriarch routinely became the Thain, the head of the Shire, although admittedly that did not mean nearly as much in hobbit lands as it would among the Big Folk normally.

Taxes and suchlike were not nearly as rigorously enforced among hobbits, but that did not mean they were unimportant. Normally, the Thain made certain that the Post and the Watch were well-funded, as well as helping the lawyers keep track of the laws of the Shire, although even there, most hobbit clans saw to their own business. Lawyers were only needed when two prominent clans found themselves disputing over something.

In times of disaster or war, though, the position of Thain became much more important, as it was when Bandobras Took led a force of hobbits against the orcs of Mount Gram when they invaded the Northfarthing. In such times, the Thain became captain of the muster and

leader of the Shire-moot, either to lead them in war or as a larger group to deal with a natural disaster that threatened the Shire.

The last time that was needed was to deal with a series of natural disasters and floods some fifty years ago. White wolves had also invaded the Shire the winter before. The-then Thain had led the Shire through nearly two years of such disasters but then had stepped away from the power as all Thains had before. Power like that was good for getting things done, but too much trouble to any good hobbit.

Adalgrim was the head of a junior branch of the family, the Tooks as a whole currently being led by Fortinbras the Second. Like many a young Took, he had been a Bounder and was currently acting as a junior sheriff, although his adventurous years were well behind him at seventy-two. Still, his own son Paladin was in his tweens, and had been a guest at Bag End several times over the past ten years. Both expected and not. "Although I too wonder why you didn't parade the latest group around. Two years ago, you had Paladin up there painted blue from head to toe when he was caught the night before the contest."

"Ah, the reason why I didn't do so this year was because one of the fellows we caught this past week was a Sackville-Baggins. There is enough bad feeling between the two branches of the family for me to not want to add still more sold to the wound."

Even his listeners, none of whom were exactly normal hobbits as most hobbits would use the term, looked at Bilbo a little sideways for that phrase. Yet the conversation quickly shifted as he explained what exactly he had done to the latest batch, which earned him several howls of laughter.

"Hahaha.... Ah, anyway, Bilbo, I received your message that you wished to join the Watch again for our archery competition," the local Sheriff said, glancing over at his bounder companion. "But I have to ask, would you be willing instead to be one of the judges?"

Bilbo hummed thoughtfully, then shrugged. "Certainly. I'd like to see some of your younger fellows step up their game a bit. Certainly, there should be some youngster with a better eye than this middle-aged fellow!" that earned him some snorts, as in his sixties, Bilbo was in the prime of his life, but he continued on, looking over at the Head Bounder. "However, have you given any thought to my idea about having actual training classes?"

"In sneaking around, I rather think most of my fellows don't need much help there," the Bounder's commander, a Proudfoot named Caradoc, said. He didn't really have a title like that. Instead, he was simply the Head Bounder, a title much like that given to the Postmaster who organized the distribution of mail throughout the Shire or the Senior Sherref. This showed the lack of importance to the job of Head Bounder that the hobbits felt.

Which, in these days of peace and plenty was well enough, in Bilbo's opinion. There was no tremendous danger on the horizon here in the Shire, and when he woke up from nightmares of the Battle of the Lonely Mountain or, worse, the battle under the Misty Mountains, Bilbo prayed fervently that it would remain so. As he thought of those days, of the time he had been forced to take the life of that poor creature Gollum, a hand dropped to his pant pocket for a moment. There, Bilbo's hand found the familiar indent of the ring, even though it did not register to his mind that his hand had done so. Instead, he looked on as Caradoc continued to speak.

"However, I do think that having a lesson on archery as you practice it, might be a good idea, Bilbo. I've got plenty of competent archers, but picking out proper targets, moving after firing and keeping hidden while doing so? Those are things that we Boulders could learn for our betterment. I believe we finally came to an agreement on that point over this summer."

Bilbo smiled at that and reached across to shake Caradoc's hand. "Excellent. I hope such lessons will never be needed, but," Bilbo shrugged, and the man nodded.

Caradoc had been alive during the time of the white wolves. Barely thirty-four at the time, he had still taken part in fighting them off and had no desire to see such again, or worse, the tall folk or the evil orcs and goblins trying to make trouble in hobbit lands. "Indeed, although thankfully, we've only had peaceable folk coming through the Shire recently. Like your friend, Bilbo. Strange but still peaceable."

The conversation then turned to news from Bree, which was the only area outside the Shire that those in the Shire routinely exchanged news with, and then to what was new in Buckland. Since Bilbo had repeatedly gone through Buckland and out into the forest beyond, he was intrigued by the news that the Old Forest had made another attempt at the High Hay.

But generally speaking, the conversation was light and full of fun, with plenty of food coming and going, all of it on Bilbo's account. It was well known that Bilbo was quite rich from his adventures abroad, and he had no issue with paying for the food of his friends at any point. Indeed, as many of the poorer families knew, he was quite generous.

About an hour passed like this before Bilbo heard his name called by someone in the crowd. Turning in that direction, he saw one of the members of his extended family, one that he quite liked, coming through the fair toward his table. An elderly hobbit, his back stooped with age, and leaning on a young lady, he smiled at Bilbo as he came within conversation range. "Well, you did again, did you, Bilbo? And here I thought my Dudo would have a chance to win his first contest."

"Didn't he get second place, Fosco? I think that is quite a fine achievement, first and second place both taken by a Baggins. And he is some twenty years my junior, Dudo will get

better in time as he learns to understand the soil better. Already I've heard it said that he's got soil under his fingernails," Bilbo said. *Although if he truly blessed the land in Yavanna's name, I dare say he would be my better already.*

Bilbo stood up along with his fellows as he said the polite phrase, which was the hobbit equivalent of saying a farmer was a hard worker and liked to get his hands dirty. Even the slightly more formal Adalgrim stood, nodding his head politely to the older hobbit. While Bilbo had more primacy in the extended family because he came down from the firstborn son of the family's ancestor, Balbo Baggins, elders in hobbit society were always treated with respect.

"Come, sit, Fosco. I see Dora over there, talking with a few other ladies. No doubt giving them advice as usual, although I don't see Drogo around anywhere. Is he still off with the rest of the family?" Bilbo asked, smiling lightly at Prisca Baggins, a distant cousin who liked to look after the older members of the extended Baggins family.

"Hah, no!" Fosco looked over at Rorimac while Prisca giggled at his side, helping the older hobbit sit down. "He's actually off in Bucklebury. He seems to have found an interest in a certain scapegrace daughter of the Brandybucks."

Rorimac blinked, then laughed, and the conversation devolved from there into the most favorite topic of all for hobbits, families and their goings-on. Quite a good time was had by all as it should be at such events.

That night, Bilbo allowed himself to bow out of the festivities early, despite knowing that there were going to be several competitions and contests on various drinks and cordials that he would miss. He walked up Hobbiton Hill to his little smial, smiling at the bright green door newly painted that morning by Hamfast. Every four years, the handyman put a new coating of paint on the door right before the autumn fair.

Bilbo had to shake off old memories again for the second time that day as he pulled open his door and entered quickly, laughing quietly to himself. "What was it that Balin said, 'memories condensed into smaller time stay with you the longest?'" 'T'was certainly the busiest part of my life, to be sure."

Chuckling at that, Bilbo wound his way through his hobbit hole, smiling faintly as the sounds of the distant revelry died away from the distance and the door closing behind him. As it did, Bilbo absentmindedly patted his waistcoat pocket again. But this time, Bilbo noticed he was doing it.

Bilbo frowned, reaching inside and pulling out the ring, staring at it for a moment, wondering why he had been doing so. *And that's not all you should wonder my lad. You used it a few days ago to avoid the Sackville Baggins. Mind you, it was a force of them, five all at once,*

and that's enough to try the patience of a Maiar, let alone a merely mortal hobbit like yourself. Yet you could've simply tried to hide in the normal way. And it's not the first time this past year it's happened.

"You slip too easily onto my finger these days," he murmured, staring at the ring, turning it this way and that. It was a pretty thing, a simple band of golden metal, thicker than most rings would be among hobbit folk, both in the width of the band and in the size of the finger it was meant to fit. Yet still, it fit on his finger. It was a treasure, to be sure, and he recalled fondly how he had used it to help him hide from the elves and orcs alike. Yet even so, there was no need to use it like that.

"Perhaps, perhaps, I should set it on the mantle. Yes. Remove the temptation to use it. Such things are useful, to be sure, but they should not be abused. Besides, if I keep on using it, I might get out of practice myself. I'm only in my sixties. There's no way I should need to use such a thing against other hobbits with all the training and experience I have in sneaking about unseen against far more dangerous watchers. Especially those lumps of gristle, the Sackville Baggins!"

Nodding his head firmly, Bilbo moved over to the fireplace. Starting the fire within, Bilbo then set the ring on top of the mantle next to a small drawing that one of his other young cousins had made of him and Balin a few months back when the dwarf arrived in the Shire. While the majority of the Shire felt that the dwarf's visit had been just another example of Bilbo's strangeness, his own family, especially those who grew pipeweed, had greatly enjoyed his visit.

"That will do," he said to himself, smiling faintly as he looked at the drawing beside the ring before pushing it behind the picture so that it would not be visible unless you stood directly by the side of the fireplace. "Yes, remove the temptation, and let the memories of that time once more fade. And maybe, get a little practice in over the next few days. If I am to teach the Bounders how to sneak and shoot, as Harry once put it, I'll need to work on my own sneak craft for a bit just to make sure that I haven't lost my edge... Hmm... I wonder whose mushrooms I can visit? It would be quite a thing to return the favor."

With a chuckle at his own wry thought, Bilbo turned away from the ring, heading into his kitchen to get himself a bit of a nightcap.

So strong was Bilbo's desire to not lean on the ring too much that he kept the ring there hidden behind the drawing of himself and Balin sitting outside Bag End for nearly two full months. But then, on a bright day in winter, with a chill in the air and an inch of snow on the ground, the ring was back in his pocket once more...

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"Hmm... it seems as if my Master at Arms was quite correct," Elrond hummed, somewhat impressed as he stared down at the prone form of Ensel, who was gasping for air and wheezing both from exertion and from the blow to his side that Elrond had gotten through his defenses a moment ago. "You have indeed improved."

"I, I have not noticed so much myself, Master Elrond," Ensel said, slowly pushing himself to his feet. "I will admit that I win at least two out of every five spars with Trevadron, yet even in the bout I win, I still take more injuries. Wouldn't that mean that, if we were fighting for real, I would have lost?"

"You are human, your learning ability is different than those of my folk. You never made the same mistake twice, the pain working far better for you to learn a lesson than it would for someone from my folk," Elrond answered, no censure or condescension in his tone, simple fact. "Do not despair that you are not as fast as I or Trevadron. You have other strengths: basic physical endurance that most elves lack and upper body strength. You can also learn to be almost as quick as an elf and as precise, as skilled."

Elrond chuckled quietly, his eyes far away as he remembered the wars of the Last Alliance. "We elves might be tireless while simply walking or running, and we do not need nearly as much food as humans. Hah, I well remember learning that when we marched with the men of the human nations of the Númenóreans against Sauron. But unlike many of our ancestors who spent thousands of years in the light of the Valar and the Two Trees, when it came to the exertions of actual combat, we elves can also become tired quickly. You know this. You have taken part in many an exercise among my folk."

This was actually very true. When the Noldor first returned to Middle Earth, one of the things that set them apart from the Silvan elves, those elves of the Sindar and Laquendi who had remained behind, the Noldor had far more energy and endurance. Now, the survivors of those days, of whom Elrond was not one, who still remained in Middle Earth, did not retain that endurance. The only ones who did were counted among Cierdan's folk at the havens or with Lady Galadriel. The elves born in Middle Earth since those days retained the ability to ignore cold and heat to a great degree and rarely, if ever, grew tired when it came to running and walking. But when it came to hard labor like building something or combat, that was not the case.

"I know, and I do not begrudge the time spent to become as good as I can be with a blade. I would simply like to walk away from one bout without my body covered in bruises, Master Elrond," the young man said, shaking his head with a wry chuckle. "But I did ask for this. I asked you and Trevadron to make me the best swordsman you possibly could out of my merely

mortal clay, and if that involves that clay being beaten into shape, this particular lump will not complain.”

Several other elves and more than a few men snorted at that, but the men also smiled, impressed.

These men had begun to arrive a few days ago, but Ensel had seen several of them come and go from Imladris and had even seen several of them train alongside the elves of Imladris before. These were all men of the north, Rangers, Dunedain. Each and every one of them was descended from Númenor, just like Ensel, although none were of an age with him. These were the men Ensel would be working alongside when he came of age soon and could leave Elrond’s house to see the world beyond.

That was the reason why, in his own mind at least, Ensel had felt the eyes of these men on him a time or two since they had begun to arrive. They were evaluating Ensel, making certain he would not be a liability when it came to a fight or the hardships a Ranger was forced to shoulder in the world beyond the Last Homely House. That understanding had made it hard for Ensel to not try and show off in his training, but Ensel sensed somehow that trying to do so, even if he succeeded, would not be seen as a good thing in this crowd.

To a certain extent, this was true. But the Dunedain had other reasons unknown to Ensel to be evaluating him. And so far, the hard, perennially weary men of the north were impressed, and not just because none of them could’ve claimed to be the master of arms of the last lonely house three out of five times, regardless of how bruised they might be afterward. No, Ensel could deal with the bruises and his drive that impressed them more than simple skill. That kind of stubbornness and ability to deal with pain would serve him in good stead.

“That will come in time. Indeed, over this winter, your exercises will be stepped up to a tremendous degree. You have learned much in terms of geography, of history, of the tales of your people and mine. You have mastered your voice such that it is reckoned among humankind and my own to the point that the singers of my house often request your presence. Now, you must step up your training on the blade, the bow and war. For this winter, that alone will be your charge. I fully expect you to have far more in the way of bruises over the next couple of weeks than you have ever had before young Ensel. But we will see your request fulfilled.”

“That was only a portion of my request Master Elrond, and you know it,” Ensel gently but firmly corrected his... he wasn’t certain what Elrond was to Ensel and his mother, really. Savior, certainly. Master of the land they lived on, again, certainly. Yet even so, Elrond seemed to take more interest in Ensel’s doings than he felt was quite on point for either of those relationships. Indeed, at times, Elrond treated Ensel almost as if he were a family member.

It was hard to put into words how Ensel had come to that conclusion. Elrond was polite and welcoming to everyone, and the Dunedain had come and gone throughout Ensel's life. But the Dunedain were guests, welcome, certainly, but still guests. Unless one of them needed healing, Elrond would not drop everything to greet them. Several times Elrond had done so for Ensel, in a way that he would not for even other elves who lived in Imladris. Whenever he had free time, Elrond would come by to speak with Ensel, and their conversations ranged across the spectrum, from history to animal husbandry to healing.

Ensel had tried to get Elrond and his mother to explain this relationship and other things to him when he was younger, but neither had and eventually, Ensel had stopped asking. Yet it remained there, a minor mystery at the center of his life here among the elves of the Last Homely House.

"I know," Elrond said, breaking Ensel out of his musings. "You requested also to head out into the land beyond the borders of my realm. I accepted that then, and I will tell you now. When the weather clears in the spring, you will be free to range out with your fellow men of the north." Elrond gestured to the human men around them. "Experience is the greatest teacher of all, after all."

The men all chuckled while Elrond smiled blandly, his eyes tracking back to Ensel. *If this youth is to be the one for which Anduril will be re-forged, who will rise to bring together the tribes of men against Sauron as in the past, then he must prove himself not just to me, but to his people.* "But there is still much that you need to learn before I allow that."

"I understand, Master Elrond. I'm prepared." Ensel stated firmly, staring back at Elrond, a weight behind his eyes that few men could create, a certainty to his tone that made Elrond smile. This was no hasty or arrogant decision made by a youth eager to see the world. It was made with a clear understanding of the dangers involved and a desire to meet those challenges.

"Excellent. Then I will no longer be taking it easy on you," Elrond's smile shifted into a small smirk. "You will practice with me rather than Trevadron from now until the evening bell. Not just today, but every day, after the noontide bell, you will be here in the training area with me until evening falls."

To his credit, Ensel didn't flinch, merely gulping slightly before pushing himself to his feet, getting into a ready stance with his sword held in the proper guard position. "At your pleasure, Master Elrond."

Hours later, Ensel found himself unwilling to sit upright from where he lay with his head on the root of a tree in Imladris' expansive garden. Next to him was a small plate of food along with an equally small cup of wine. It was all he had felt he could keep down after the punishment he'd taken, having been proven all too correct on that score.

But, he consoled himself, I am getting better! I could feel it, my response time and my feeling out the fight. I could almost read Master Elrond's moves by the time of our last spar. And those leg exercises might seem evil, but I can at least see the point in them after speaking to some of the Dunedain. Not like the lessons I was forced to take for the past few years on diplomacy and history. I know my mother has told me much about the northern kingdoms of Arthedain, Cardolan and Rhudaur and how we are all descended from Númenor, just like Gondor, but I have never understood why I was getting lessons in languages and diplomacy.

It was a minor mystery, one he had brought up on occasion just like he had brought up the strange, almost familial way Elrond acted towards Ensel. When he had asked Elrond, he had simply looked at Ensel thoughtfully, then stated when Ensel reached his majority, he would be told. His mother said it might be needed and refused to elaborate. Unwilling to spend time wondering about the whys, Ensel had simply set aside that mystery as well, concentrating on learning everything his teachers were willing to teach him.

"You did quite well, you know. I have seen grown men, rangers with hundreds of ambushes and small-scale battles under their belts not do half as well against Master Elrond. He fought in every war against Sauron and is reckoned a fell blade among the Noldor, who themselves are the most warlike of the elves."

Ensel looked over to where the voice had come from and saw several of the northern Rangers standing there watching him. Nine in number, they were all dressed similarly, brown leggings, green shirts, and dark cloaks swept back. No weapons were present here, but the way they stood, these men gave off the feeling that such were not needed to make them dangerous.

Looking at the Dunedain now, Ensel was struck by the difference in them in comparison to the Bree folk that he had seen eleven years ago on his journey with Harry and Bilbo to the Shire, the last time he had seen more than two or three other humans at a time. These men were taller in the main and thinner in shoulder and waist, but Ensel didn't doubt they were stronger than the men of Bree for all their weight. Long black, brown and in a few cases gray with age dominated, with no orange or blonde hair among them. Their skin was pale but harshly weathered for all that, with thin faces and grey eyes just like Ensel's own. Their fingers were thin and calloused through years of training and combat. Their grey eyes were deep set into their heads, again unlike those of the Bree folk.

Hooded gazes they were, which saw the world around them through the lens of harsh experience, experience which had not broken them nor their ancestors. Proud they were, these men of the north and Ensel knew they had a right to be so. Not just because they were descendants of Númenor, or Arnor, the northern kingdom created by Elendil himself and the three kingdoms Arnor was eventually broken into, but because of what they had, as a people,

survived since the fall of those kingdoms during the wars with Angmar. Indeed, in reading the history of his folk, Ensel often felt that their decline and fall could be told in two parts, both equally tragic.

First would be the fall of Númenor, which began long before Ilúvatar sank the island. No, that fall began when Ar-Pharazôn usurped the kingship, captured Sauron and brought him back to Númenor. Sauron's whisper's in the Golden King's ears did the rest, poisoning his mind. Ar-Pharazôn had already turned from the Valar and the elves along with the majority of Númenóreans, and with Sauron leading the way, their worship soon turned to that of Morgoth, and their religious practices soon included human sacrifice.

Then came the fall of the island, when Ilúvatar destroyed it due to the fact that Sauron had convinced a aging Ar-Pharazôn to launch a full attack on Aman. Since Ilúvatar had decreed that no force of mortal men could cross the ocean, when Manwë asked the Creator for aid, he was wroth, the seas rose, and the island and Ar-Pharazôn's fleet was destroyed.

After that, a time of peace came for the followers of the Valar among the Númenóreans, who had over centuries begun to remove themselves from the island that had been their home under Isildur, who became high king of Arnor and Gondor, the southern and northern kingdoms. Elendil ruled directly in the north, while his sons ruled Gondor in his name. However, that peace was shattered by Sauron. Eventually, Isildur fell in the Battle of the Gladden Fields, and the two kingdoms truly became separate.

Yet perhaps the worst was to come for the men of the north, for as the seasons grew colder in the north, so to did the men of Arnor diminish in numbers and strength. Their unity also began to diminish, and when King Eärendur died, his three sons could not agree who would rule. Thus the kingdom was broken up into three: Arthedain, Cardolan, and Rhudaur. These three kingdoms often fought one another, and it was into this time of strife, in the year 1300 of the Third Age, that the kingdom of Angmar rose under its Witch King. Over the centuries, the Witch King, a bearer of a Ring of Power and a Ringwraith under Sauron, destroyed Cardolan and Rhudaur through causing internal strife and military force. Plague, treason, strife, and discord were his weapons, and for several centuries he wielded them until finally, Arthedain, the last realm of men in the north, fell. It's king was slain, its capital sacked, and what was left of it's people fled to Lindon, the land of the elves of the Havens.

There, they rallied, joining a might army sent from Gondor via the ocean, and with a force from Lothlorien and Rivendell, the greatest army since the Alliance of Elves and Men fought against the Witch King, shattering his army and his realm. Only the Witch King remained, still alive. Some thought him unable to be killed by any man, but Aragorn did not know the truth

of that. As for the Númenóreans of Arthedain, they became the Dunedain, a small clan of folk, scattered across the north.

That was what the ancestors of these men had survived. Yet still they stood, defending lesser folk against the creatures in the dark, hunting orcs, goblins and worse in the ruins of the north, from the dark lands of Angmar to the Misty Mountains and the Grey Flood in the south. Even beyond that area, they had begun a silent vigil of late over the realm of Mordor, never entering but watching as much of the land's borders as they could.

Ensel tried to stand in respect, only for one of the Dunedain to move forward, pressing him back down with a firm hand on his shoulder. "No need for that. That last blow you took when you were off balance when Elrond didn't anticipate you would be able to deflect it, and so put more strength in his blow than he should have, which your thigh no doubt felt when the blow landed regardless. Let your leg rest before you stand on it again. Even Elrond's healing skills cannot make such a bruise as nothing so quickly."

"Thank you, sir. I will do so. But I am sorry, I do not know any of your names," Ensel confessed.

"We will tell you our names in time if you truly do mean to range out with us come the spring," another man said with a harsh chuckle as if the term he used was too blasé for what it described. "Some of us will still be here. Others will have come and gone or been replaced. The Work does not stop in winter, no matter how dangerous it might be."

"The Work..." Ensel said thoughtfully, then slowly nodded. "The ongoing conflict between orcs and men, or perhaps the watch on Mordor?"

"Both of those are but a parcel of it. The Work is against the enemy, against Sauron. Do not make the mistake of thinking that just because Sauron cannot communicate with them that the orcs in the north or the feral lands of Angmar, the spirits and fell beasts, do not bend to his will. Few and scattered those creatures might be, but they are still there, still at times gathering in sufficient strength to attack other folk. Such it was two hundred years ago, in my father's time."

More, we rangers must always be aware of Sauron's influence these days, since he returned to Mordor. He cannot yet field armies, but he has fell men under his influence, and with them, Sauron can bend the minds of weaker men. Beyond that, our Work is a thing of small-scale battles, of halting this or that raiding band from the north. Or even in the south, where proud Gondor and proud but currently ill-led Rohan miss any danger larger than an army," one of the others said, his voice both wry and tart. He moved to squat near where Ensel lay on the ground. Two of the others came over and gently helped Ensel to sit up against the tree rather than simply laying his head against one of the roots.

As they did, Ensel examined them, and both men would later tell the others that it was as if he was staring deeply into them, his gaze holding a strength of will and insight that perhaps only Elrond or one of the wise would match. It was unsettling, yet also comforting, as if this young man who shared their ancestry understood their hardships and did not feel sad for them, rather respecting their strength.

"I understand. Where an army cannot go unseen, a group of three or four orcs could. I once had an experience with such on the road to the Shire. Do you know of it?" Ensel asked, not trying to act as if he was an expert or anything, just showing he knew enough to at least understand it.

"The place with the little people, the hobbits? Fat and lazy they might seem to most, but we have tales of their colonizing the Shire, of their war against the orcs of Mount Gram. While we were busy dealing with other bands, as my companion said, two hundred years ago, a large force of orcs attacked the Shire. The Thain of the time beat them off, killing their chief." one of the other said with a laugh. "There is depth to the Hobbits that most do not see."

"So I discovered when hearing of Bilbo Baggins part in the tale of Thorin and company, although I did not hear most of it from him, but from the dwarf Balin when he passed through both coming and going this past year." Ensel chuckled quietly. "At any rate, I do know something of the small battles you all fight. But I would dearly like to learn more." He smiled then, patting his wounded leg, which had been wrapped around with a poultice but was still quite sore from the blow he had taken. Elrond had been extremely apologetic about that, having wanted to strike him, yes, but not nearly that hard.

Yet Ensel had waved it off, stating simply that it had been his own arrogance to think that he could try to deflect Elrond's blow in such a manner when he had been caught off balance. "I would have been better served to try and take advantage of the strike in some manner." He'd said at the time, and Elrond had asked him how he would do so, which led into a series of conversations that kept Ensel's mind busy as Elrond himself sought to his wound.

"But tell me of yourselves. Not the battles you have seen or the deeds you have done. Rarely have I ever been able to converse with other humans, and right now, that is what I want to do. To get to know you." Ensel stated earnestly. "Just like you, I would like to know those who I may in time fight alongside."

The men looked at one another, then shrugged and began to take turns speaking about themselves and what they had seen of the world beyond the Last Homely House.

This went by for weeks as Ensel came to know the men and vice versa. Many a time Ensel surprised them with his insight, some bit of advice or understanding of the individual that the person in question himself had missed. Sometimes, it was minor, like one of them having

developed a lingering injury to one elbow that had slowed him somewhat when it came to sword fighting and had never even noticed it. Other times it was deeper, when one of the men would speak of home and hearth, the way he said a single name resonated to Ensel.

Through probing questions, it became clear to the man that he was actually pining for a young woman of his acquaintance when the very idea of doing so should have been, in the man's own words, "anathema to me. I had never intended to court, let alone settle down. But perhaps, perhaps there is something there..."

That man became the first to give his name to Ensel. He was Penaer, and he had been a ranger for over eighty years. He was not the oldest among the group of Dunedain in Imladris that winter, but he was one of the most experienced. Penaer had ranged along the feet of the Misty Mountains for most of his life, there and deep into the broken lands of Angmar. And while the dwarves had done an excellent job not once but twice cutting the number of orcs and goblins in the mountains down, there were always more, small scattered bands eager to prey on anyone they could.

Ensel's insight was not the only way Ensel impressed the men, nor his memorization of what he was told about their own lives was the most amazing of his talents. His skill with sword and bow were superlative, but that the Dunedain had expected. They had not expected his tactical insight, the way he was able to follow the tales of their small-scale battles and skirmishes so easily, pointing out places where they could've done better within seconds. Nor did he speak like some kind of armchair analyst. Rather, Ensel spoke as a fellow person who understood that in the heat of things, battles could often go awry but wanted to help them become better in the future.

In turn, Ensel got to know these men. Tall and fair they were in appearance. Grim and watchful at the best of times, even here in Imladris, a place of welcome and home for many. Only occasionally did they smile, but when they did, it was with their whole faces, with true and proper warm emotion. They chuckled often, but darkly or low, with a wry twist to their lips. Each had a tale to tell, either of hardship survived or battle won, and Ensel heard and memorized them all.

But above all, it was clear to Ensel that the blood of Númenor was still in these men as strong as it was in himself. Each Dunedain could perhaps live to a hundred and sixty or more and still be hail of mind if not of body by the time they passed. They could see farther, hear more, and were, as he had supposed, physically more powerful than most men of other breeds could match.

Their longevity was a gift from the Valar to those of the Edain who had never married into the royal house, which had the lineage of both elf and Maiar within it. That had begun to

fade when the men of the island had been forced to intermarry with other houses of the Edain or even those men who had never joined the elves in their wars against Sauron, but it was still present in the Dunedain to a far stronger degree than the men of Gondor thanks in part to having a larger population of Númenóreans when Arnor was first founded by Elendil, but also because the Dunedain had kept to the traditions of their people in a way that those of Gondor had not been able to save in their oldest, most noble houses.

One evening, however, more than half of the rangers had left Imladris, ranging out to the north and east with Elrond's two sons. The pair of them were apparently well-known to the Dunedain and firm friends to many, just as they had become to Ensel in a way. The others had seemingly disappeared on their own errands or were listening to the evening choir elsewhere in Elrond's sprawling mansion.

Thus, for once, Ensel took his evening meal alone, sitting at a small stone table in a reading room in Elrond's mansion, warmed by a fire against the chill beyond the walls. Currently, he was reading a book, a historical account that Lauchanar's village, another Dunedain whose name Ensel had earned, had kept since the destruction of Arnor by the Witch King of Angmar.

It made for grim reading at times, but there were moments of joy and happiness. Every death was mourned, but every child born was applauded, a time of delight for parent and village alike. Other moments of joy occurred when they met up with other villagers or townsfolk or won a victory against the wandering orcs, who, although crushed in the final battle against Angmar by the men of Gondor, the Galadhrim and Elrond's folk, still roamed that territory. More than that, the book spoke of the great works of their forebears, portions of the ancient kingdoms that still stood like the ruins of the old capital, Annúminas.

All of it, grim, great or happy, fascinated Ensel in the way it was written. The language might be Sindarin, like most here in the Last Lonely House, but the tone, the emotions, it all resonated with Ensel in a way most of the historical texts he read failed to do.

Yet right now, Ensel wasn't really seeing the writing in the book. Instead, he was simply staring at the writing, thinking about all that he had learned and one aspect in particular he had learned over the past few days before most of the Dunedain had left. They hid it well, but around Ensel, it had come out a few times that the Dunedain believed that there was still the blood of Elendil, the blood of the kings of Númenor somewhere in their own people. That eventually a king would rise among them once more. And Ensel was anything but stupid.

So, could that be why Elrond treats me as he does? As if I was a family member? Because, despite being removed by who knows how many generations, we are kin, no matter how distant? It would explain much. But then... what does that really mean to me, in these

days? When the Dunedain is so few, when there are no northern kingdoms to rule. When Gondor is so far away and so different?

The sound of soft approaching feet on stone broke Ensel out of his thoughts, and although most would be hard-pressed to tell one human foot from another, let alone that of a different race, Ensel could tell who this was before he even stepped into the room. "Lord Elrond."

"Ensel. That is a most pensive expression you are wearing. It speaks of someone who is grappling with a sudden change in how he views the world." Elrond spoke lightly, but his expression was grave as he moved to sit across from Ensel in another padded chair. "You believe you have discovered an answer to an old question."

Elrond's tone made that a statement rather than a question, yet Ensel nodded nonetheless. "I have. I have learned of a great hope among the Dunedain, and wondered about my life here in Imladris, the only young boy here, son of the only human woman who lives here. The way you treat me, the lessons. And then I realized that perhaps my name, Ensel. Hope. Hope for what I must ask myself."

"A hope for a better future, perhaps. You are not the first Estel. There have been many since the fall of the northern kingdoms. The hope for the future of those men who still wander but are never lost. A hope for me that someday, the people of my brother's nation will rebuild to match their previous glory. Many generations of your family have, in some fashion, been raised here in my house." Elrond answered, the two of them locking gazes. "You are Aragorn, son of Arathorn, and by blood, you are the last descendent of Elendil, and in you, there lies the blood of Kings, the blood of my brother, Elros."

"..." Aragorn fell silent, feeling his real name settle into himself, examining it from all sides before accepting it as truth and concentrating on what Elrond had not said. Had not, in fact, been doing. "But you are not telling me that I am the rightful king, nor are you telling me to seek my crown or to command my people," he stated after who knew how long contemplating things. "You're simply stating my ancestry. Thus, what I do with that knowledge is in my own hands."

Aragorn allowed his lips to twitch into a wry smile. "How typically Elvish of you."

Elrond chuckled. "But true for all that I am not giving you advice. Your life is your own, Aragorn. What you do with it is entirely up to you. If you become a simple ranger, I will be pleased. If you become a leader of the Dunedain, I will be pleased. If you decide that such life is not for you, that you would prefer to stay here for the rest of your days, I will accept that too."

Aragorn slowly nodded, shaking his head. "I had known, I had known that my life here was special, that living here, learning from you and the other elves, set me apart from other men. I had not realized the entirety of it. The weight of the line of the High King. For it is not just the north, but the south, but Gondor, which I am the inheritor of."

"Yes." Elrond simply answered. "And now, what will you do with that information?"

"Nothing." Aragorn shrugged, shaking his head. "For the moment, this information changes nothing. I am no leader yet. I do not deserve to be. While the rangers of the north have suffered from birth to now, I have been safe here, learning in luxury. I must earn their respect. I must face those hardships myself before I can even call myself a ranger, let alone anything else. And what kingdom what I be a king of anyway? There does not seem to be anything of the north that could be forged into one. And Gondor has its stewards. Given the failures of the kings before them, it seems to me that Gondor can sustain itself much better with a steward than it did with the kings of old."

"Cynical, yet perhaps accurate. This coming from the child who used to play kings and orcs when he was young," Elrond teased gently, although his tone told Aragorn that he approved.

"The child puts such dreams away to become a man. A man knows that he needs to understand the world far better than the child ever could believe possible. I appreciate knowing who I am, but I am still in the process of making myself who I will become, so much so that I do not know what I will end up being," Aragorn admitted ruefully. "I will continue to build myself, and then perhaps, perhaps in a year or more, I will be able to decide that before going forward."

Elrond nodded, although inside, he was smiling, seeing the weight of his lineage settling onto Aragorn's shoulders, leaving him changed slightly, but not broken by it, or suddenly driven through the lash of ambition. "Well thought out. And what does that mean for the now?"

Elrond chuckled quietly. Already he was developing some of the mannerisms of the men of the north, cutting down on his gestures, keeping his chuckles and laughter lower than before. "For now, it means that I need to get to bed early. Time and the lessons wait for no one, no matter their lineage."

OOOOOOO

It was a truism throughout history, no matter the planet, and perhaps, no matter the species, that the larger the force on the move, the slower it went. Things like the need to use roads, the problems with wheeled vehicles on extremely horrible examples of said roads, and the amount of supplies, weapons, and so forth all had an impact. Beyond that, of course, was the fact that the road to Varni's Folly from Erebor was barely worth the name.

“Our people traded once long ago when we Longbeards had our on holdfasts in the Grey Mountains, but they have never been maintained since,” Fili had explained the day after they left the area historically controlled by Erebor. “And even then, there wasn’t a direct road from the Lonely Mountain to any territory of the Stonefoots. So to call it a road is being so generous you have been taken advantage of, as we dwarves would say.”

Even if the dwarves of Varni’s Folly and Erebor decided to invest in it, the road was simply too long and would require too much work to make it into a proper dwarven road like the road between the Lonely mountain and Dale, or going further southwest. The best they could do would be to make it more like the road leading out from the Iron Hills into Blacklock lands, but unlike there, the Stonefoot House didn’t trade enough large-scale goods with Erebor to make it viable. If that remained the case going forward was anyone’s guess, but everyone involved with the convoy heading to Varni’s Folly understood that it would be a journey of some months because of all of the aforesaid reasons, and the sheer distance involved, which was almost the same as from the Shire to Mirkwood.

There weren’t mountains in the way, yet that didn’t mean that it was very hospitable territory. The land between Varni’s Folly and the Lonely Mountain was rocky in intervals, sparse, with little in the way of growing things other than a type of brown bush that seemed able to grow anywhere. Rains could create mudholes of horrid depth, especially, it seemed on the road. Even without rain, there were deep ruts in which a cart could catch a wheel, forcing the dwarves to push them out, frequently in horrid conditions.

Yet all this didn’t really mean that TTauriel was any happier about the slow pace.

“I do believe that your lady is going a little stir-crazy, Harry,” Fili said from where he was marching beside Harry, the both of them looking ahead of them towards where TTauriel had just disappeared over the horizon at the typical ground devouring lope that unencumbered elves could achieve. At present, the dwarves of the convoy could see quite a ways in every direction, as there were no trees or even small hills to provide cover. “She didn’t even wait for the okay to set off this time.”

“My lady did wait for us all to have finished loading the camp back up, though,” Harry pointed out with a chuckle, shaking his head. “Tauriel’s been putting up with your dwarven pace for three months now. Let her have these little moments to get away from everything.”

That, Fili reflected, was quite true. The first few weeks, Harry and TTauriel had gone along with the rest of the convoy without complaint, using the time to get to know a few of the dwarves and how convoys like this operated. After that, the pair of them randomly joined the scouts as they started to range out ahead of the convoy as they left traditional Ereborian territory. But even the scouts had to return to the rest of the convoy, which acted like a tether, a

set area around the convoy they could not leave, made worse by the fact they needed to report in at set intervals. Neither of which was Tauriel used to.

It's also true that Elvish armies, even full armies like the one that helped us during the Battle of the Lonely Mountain, don't march with as nearly as large a baggage train as the convoy, Fili reflected.

For one thing, there was all the food they were transporting. Even Thorin's army would not be transporting this much food in such a manner: food that wasn't meant to be consumed on the way by the army itself, but rather to be sold at Varni's Folly, transported in specially prepared – and runically protected – carts.

Elves did not need nearly as much food as a dwarven army, even one unencumbered without siege weapons would need. Their armor was also traditionally lighter than dwarven armor, although given how much stronger dwarves were, that was probably a wash in Fili's opinion. Elves also didn't make use of animals in their armies. They did not have any cavalry as the humans were supposed to. Nor did elves make use of donkeys to carry supplies. Rather, each individual carried their own equipment, complete with food, mostly Lembas or other trail fare. Admittedly, those supplies were of far better quality than dwarves or men could make, but even so, it was impressive.

According to one elf Fili had talked about after the battle against Azog, the elves didn't make use of any kind of field equipment nor bring along tools to make camp. Instead, they trusted in their own scouts and guards, and every group of four would split the work of carrying the group's tent.

That, Fili felt, was something of a weakness. But regardless, it was plain fact that even a dwarven army would probably already be in Varni's Folly by this time or perhaps had marched straight past it.

"Still, we're making good time," Thunderbelly said, his voice a low grumble almost lost in his massive beard as he slid one hand over his bald pate. "I didn't expect us to be able to move this fast, frankly. I didn't complain about the changes you made in how we set up camp and everything, Fili, but I didn't anticipate it would have this big an impact."

"I can't take all the credit for our speed. Harry's work with our Rune Masters has developed quite a few amazing things to help make marches like this, and in particular with the carts we're using, far easier than they should be," Fili demurred.

"I only wish we could come up with some magical way of flattening the road ahead of us," Harry snorted, earning laughter from the surrounding dwarves.

The road here was... Well, Fili had been all too accurate on its quality. It was barely a suggestion. The only thing that could really be said about it was that there were none of the horrible, many-thorned bushes on the road that could be seen decorating the surrounding area, and there weren't any large rocks they needed to move around. Indeed, the road was remarkably straight, a sign of the dwarven frame of mind when it came to such things. At least six or seven times a day, one of the carts would get stuck in a rut between small rocks or mud pits, and the nearest dwarves would need to get behind and push.

Yet, Fili was also correct. Beyond the runic arrays needed to preserve the food they would be selling to Varni's Folly, there were a few that the rune masters and Harry had developed on the various carts, each of them the work of weeks of etching and months of trial and error, if not longer. Wards of lightness on the cart from Harry and wards of protection and durability on the metal wheels from the dwarves. If they hadn't had those, which acted almost like a permanent Impervious charm (a kind of spell that was flat out impossible in this world, Harry had checked) on the wheels and axels of the carts. That and dwarven-made springs allowed the drivers to not need to replace their spines every sixty leagues.

To top it off, Harry could use both heating and cooling charms every twelve hours on the donkeys pulling the carts, making them as comfortable as possible. Spells to summon up water at intervals on the trail so they didn't need to stop and search had also helped. For nearly a month Harry had been the only source of water for the entire convoy as they passed through an area without any nearby streams or ponds and no rain to speak of. His Lumos spell was even more helpful. With that spell creating an artificial sun above them, Fili had ordered the convoy to keep on moving, pushing on through the night four out of every five nights.

That had somewhat backfired, in Harry's opinion. After years spent with TTauriel he quite enjoyed the night, and not just when they could cuddle together either. He always enjoyed hearing Tauriel speak of the stars, staring up at the nighttime sky.

But Harry wasn't about to complain. The dwarves were pushing themselves hard. With Harry's wards, there was no need for any guards on duty while they were not moving, and between that and the heartiness of his own folk, Fili had set a ruthless pace for men, donkeys, and carts alike. Now, two months ahead of schedule for a convoy this size, they would be coming near the border of the lands truly controlled by the Stonefoot house within the next six, maybe as few as three days.

A moment after Thunderbelly had complimented their pace, however, a shout came from somewhere along the column. It was in Khuzdul, but the frustration and anger could not be missed.

“You just had to say something, didn’t you,” Fili deadpanned, turning to look, falling out of the line of march for a second with Harry and Thunderbelly to stare behind them and where the shout had come from. And sure enough, another shout came, this time in Common. Near the end of the convoy, one of the carts had gotten stuck again in a rut in the road. “You conjured that into being, you beardless ass.”

Hearing that taunt, Harry laughed, shaking his head, reminded of a night a few weeks into their travel when one of the dwarves had asked Harry how he had yet to grow a beard. His droll response of pointing at TTauriel and saying that, “my lady has decided I shall not,” had won quite a lot of incredulous laughter from the dwarves.

They could not understand the very concept of going without a beard if you could grow one in the first place. Indeed, many of these dwarves in the convoy, particularly the Stonefoots under Thunderbelly, hadn’t been around humans before coming to Erebor. Many had yet to get used to the idea that human women didn’t have beards.

“Shall we go help them, do you think?”

Fili nodded at Harry’s words, and the two of them moved back down the column. Thunderbelly stayed where he was, re-joining the marching column when he could. “That kind of thing is for you young folk. I will just continue marching on.”

As they came near where the cart had gotten stuck, Harry could see that Gimli had already moved forward along with two other dwarves from the rearguard to help with the stopped cart, which was blocking the way of the last card behind it. The cart had lodged one of its rear wheels in a muddy hole in the road, one that was deep enough to bury it up to the axle. The wheel couldn’t move at all, either forward or back.

Shaking his head, Harry moved forward with Fili, the young dwarf taking up position to the far right of the cart’s rear, while Harry simply reached over Gimli’s head. “Excuse me, short one. I note you might need some help here.”

“Bah! I would not be so quick to applaud your height, tall one. You do recall where that places your man parts in relation to our fists, don’t you?” Gimli retorted while the dwarves around them laughed.

At one point, Harry had offered to help use magic to further lighten the load of the cart, but the dwarves had not agreed with it. Despite having gotten used to Harry’s magic and applauding its use in many ways, when there was something that pure physical effort could do, like now, they preferred to do it the simpler way rather than rely on magic. Harry’s willingness to forgo using magic himself yet still pitch in had won him a lot of respect among many of these dwarves, most of whom Harry had never spent any time around.

When Gimli grunted, "Heave!" Harry put his back into it, and with the added help of Fili and Harry, the cart's wheel burst out of the mud so quickly that Gimli and two of the other dwarves lost their balance, falling onto the ground as the pair of donkeys at the head of it instantly began moving once more.

Spluttering, Gimli flailed for a second before getting his face and beard out of the mud, shouting, "I know you did that on purpose! Run into another rut today, and you will be taking care of the donkeys for the rest of this journey, Burno. And If you run into that same rut, Osli, I will jump on that cart and beat you to death with my boot!"

"Bah, who do you take me for, Gloinson," The dwarf on the last cart growled out, moving around them slowly, pushing out into the terrain to either side of the track. Thankfully, here, that didn't lead into its own set of trouble, be it heavier rocks, those nearly deadly bushes, or other such terrain-based issues.

Harry reached down to give Gimli a hand up. "You all right there?"

"So long as Osli doesn't run me over anyway," Gimli grumbled, grabbing at Harry's hand. A sudden look of mischief entered his face, and instead of letting Harry touch him up, he pulled down. The greater strength of the dwarf caused Harry to fall forward with a squawk into the mud, splashing face first into it as Gimli had a moment before. "It's always nice to know that you're willing to get down and dirty with the rest of us despite your magic HarryYACK!"

Gimli's voice cut off as Harry smacked him in the face with a handful of mud. This almost caused him to fall back into the mud from where he had sat up as he had pulled Harry down beside him. But a last-minute twist of his body let him roll to the other side of the mudhole.

"I've never been overly fond of the idea of mud in general, but I've never ever shirked from hard work either, even if it will get me dirty," Harry quipped as Fili reached down and helped him to his feet, with some of the other dwarves reaching down to help Gimli.

"I take it that your arguments with Osli are continuing? He hasn't said anything around me," Fili muttered, looking at his second in command and then gesturing to the others to get going again. He, Gimli and Harry fell into line almost at the extreme rear of the column, with only one of the guards falling further back of them.

"Bah, of course he wouldn't. You're the best blade among us, and you made a point of calling Osli up to spar twice when we were forced to stay in camp due to the weather. As for me and that buffoon, I am not one to hold grudges, but he will never serve under me again as anything but a drover, if that. Our dressing down of him seems to have lost its impact over the past week. He's made comments about me several times, just barely in my hearing. Gah, the useless lump of quartz. Imagine changing your scouting route because you ran into

‘troublesome’ terrain, only to report that you had discovered nothing. Admittedly, there wasn’t any trouble to be found, but if he had tried that kind of thing near enemy territory, we would’ve been well within our rights to beat him senseless in front of the whole convoy,” Gimli grumbled.

That had happened a few weeks ago. Osli had been one of the scout leaders coming out from Erebor. He had moved there along with his family from the Iron Hills, already well-trained in moving quickly and silently, at least as dwarves reckon such. Since then, he, like many others, had been trained in mapmaking, reading and reporting terrain. But during his time in the Iron Hills, a problem had seemingly passed under the eyes of those higher up in the chain of command, such as it was among dwarves.

Osli had issues taking orders from those younger than him. Gimli was young for dwarf, as was Fili and Osli’s disdain for both of them being placed in command over him had come through several times during this trip, but it only came to a head a month ago when he had ignored the route that Gimli and Fili had assigned his scout group. Instead, Osli had led his six-man squad to double back and around through an already cleared by another scout group in order to avoid what he felt was territory too treacherous for any kind of threats to exist within it.

Which was another matter. While Osli was a veteran of the war under the mountains against the orcs, he had never dealt with trolls. Trolls, as Gimli had made a very loud point about explaining to Osli, would make light of any such terrain. In fact, they would prefer it over flat ground because the large, craggy, rock-filled territory would provide them with enough rocks to make makeshift hiding places during the day so they would not turn to stone under the light of Anar.

Osli made it worse by attempting to argue, pointing out how inexperienced the pair were, but Fili had cut his legs out from under him by stating a simple line in Khuzdul that Harry hadn’t understood but had been told later would translate to something like, “And where were you when Thorin came looking for allies against the Dragon? Where were you at the battle of the Lonely Mountain?”

Shaking his head, Harry patted Fili on the shoulder. “Well, never mind it for now, my friend. Let’s get a move on before the convoy leaves us behind.” He then smirked and, using an Aquamenti spell, filled up a wineskin at his side. “And you might want to get the mud out of your beard before it solidifies.”

Grumbling, Gimli did so while Fili and Harry hastened away, moving to one side of the convoy until they were near the front once more.

Removing Osli from his command of one of the scout groups was but the latest way in which Fili and Gimli had stamped their leadership into the convoy. There had been a myriad of other ways, not least of which was the pace that Fili demanded the convoy set itself to.

One of the other scout leaders had also been replaced, although amicably. Jorda's ability to describe terrain verbally to others wasn't all that good, and he was also slow, if incredibly accurate when it came to writing down observations or even creating a map. For this trip, there was no real need to wait every night for him to draw out his actual map. Instead, he had been tasked with compiling the maps and verbal descriptions of the other scouts and the Stonefoots who had made this trip before into one map. Indeed, Fili had gone so far as to commission Jorda for a later work, a full, formal map of the territory between Varni's Folly and the Lonely Mountain. In so doing, Fili had removed any of the resentment the man might've felt.

Similarly, Gimli and Fili had worked with both the drovers and the infantry accompanying the convoy. The infantry had not had any kind of officers assigned to it besides Gimli and Fili, but by the end of the second month, they had chosen the dwarfish equivalent of a cadre of noncommissioned officers to back them up. The two standouts were one of the scout leaders named Mkoloan, and a drover by the name of Burgo.

Mkoloan was a middle-aged dwarf with one eye but was one of the best shots among the dwarves, to the point that Tauriel respected his skill with his small, specially made crossbow, a Master-crafted item. He was also very good at everything a scout needed to do but drawing an actual map. His verbal notes were by far the best, and his skills at hiding and sneaking around were better than any of the other dwarves. Not up to even a normal elf's level in a forest, but very good for a dwarf.

In contrast, Burgo was one of the least militant dwarves in the convoy. He was one of the few Longbeards Harry had yet to meet who had a waistline that came close to matching Harry and Fili's dead friend Bombur. Burgo also had a mind made for notes and a massive voice, able to shout and be heard from anywhere in the convoy. He had become the equivalent of quartermaster for the convoy before they had even left Longbeard lands.

In some way Harry knew this, the creation of a command cadre had been a test for Fili, just like giving him the overall command. He had been given what amounted to troops that had yet to be assigned a formal command structure by Thorin in order to test to see if Fili and Gimli could pick out leaders and advisors for himself without any aid from Thorin or someone else with more experience. In that, Harry felt that the young dwarves were doing extremely well.

As he and Fili reached the head of the column, Harry had to hold back a wry snort. Frankly, I think they've had it much easier than humans would in similar circumstances.

Certainly, I don't think anyone can question the general competence of Fili, Gimli or anyone else in this command, and other than Osli, there aren't many character issues either.

Dwarves didn't really have the egos of humans, or at least they didn't have the same kind of arrogance when it came to lording it over their fellows that humans did. Human nobles throughout history had felt they were simply better than their fellow men because of the fact they were born into a noble house. People born into privilege among humans were also quite normally arrogant about it and developed bad habits.

Dwarves, on the other hand, only cared about what each individual dwarf could do with their own two hands. Their craft, be it blacksmithing, farming, or warfare, was what dwarves took pride in rather than their families or the amount of gold they had earned. Harry had yet to see one dwarf lord it over his fellow dwarf just because he was given power over them, taking delight in ordering them around or acting like he was better than them in some indefinable fashion. Nor did Fili and Gimli set themselves apart from their men, instead working alongside them. They also, as Gimli had just reminded Harry, partook in the same sense of humor as the rest of their men, which included pranks and practical jokes.

Harry had been somewhat surprised to learn that dwarves on the march were, strangely enough, prone to pranks. Harry had not seen that among Thorin and Company but supposed the more somber, fraught mood of that party for much of its travels had something to do with it. But even then, young Ori, Fili and Kili still attempted to play pranks occasionally.

Throughout the day, Harry kept marching alongside the dwarves, his longer stride letting him do so easily, joking and talking with Fili and Gimli as the trio moved around the convoy, exchanging words of encouragement and shouting taunts as they went. At one point, they came upon another cart that had gotten stuck, but the quick movements of the infantry to either side had it up and moving again before it could slow down the traffic behind it or Harry and his friends could pitch in.

Unfortunately, Rain began to fall on them at around evening time. At this time of year, it would have been only a bit chilly near Erebor, a sign of autumn. But this far east and north, it was bitterly cold.

The Easterlings had launched their campaign against the Stonefoots at the start of spring, but it had taken months before the Stonefoots realized the true size of the threat and for their kings to agree to send for help from the Longbeard House, and then more time since. While in Erebor, it would be very early to see such a sign of autumn, this far north and east, it seemed as if the autumn season would last a very long, miserable time, if the weather and the way the few plants they had seen for a while were reacting was any indication.

Harry made a point of recasting warming charms on all of the donkeys and many a Longbeard looked as if they wanted to ask for similar, but refused to. The Stonefoot dwarves, in contrast, didn't even seem to feel it despite the large droplets smacking down onto their habitually bald heads. It was very evident that their heavy fur coats were coming into play once more,

Despite the turn in the weather, the party pressed on, with more dwarves shouted into position between the carts by Gimli rather than alongside. This had the convoy spread out a bit more, but when the carts inevitably began to get bogged down in the mud, the dwarves were ready and in position to push them out quickly. This happened a lot, as even with Fili and a small group ahead of them shouting out about where there were ditches or rocks, the road, in general, was quickly becoming a several-inches-deep quagmire. Again.

Throughout the day, runners from the scout groups sent out on every side came back to report a lack of trouble, but TTauriel did not make an appearance until well into the night. When she did, she announced her presence from well outside the range of Harry's small Lumos that was lighting up the way for the convoy. Tethered to the central cart by Harry's will, it followed the convoy around, sort of bobbing in the air occasionally like a balloon, lighting the night almost as if it was still daytime.

"Hello, the convoy! One elvish scout coming in!"

"Come ahead, lady!" Burgo bellowed before Harry or the others could, his voice so loud the dwarves marching around his cart had to cover their ears.

Harry chuckled a bit, watching as those dwarves shouted at Burgo in turn, annoyed at the ringing in their ears. But more than the dwarves still being loud and seemingly in good spirits despite the weather, Harry knew his smile had more to do with his lady's return.

Racing past Fili and the dwarves in front of the rest of the convoy, TTauriel quickly fell in beside Harry, smiling at him as they linked hands. Thunderbelly, Gimli, and Fili moved to join them, understanding that her arrival meant news, something Fili put into words. "How is the road ahead of us Lady TTauriel?"

"The road narrows dangerously once more. Those dangerously prickly bushes that we have seen far too much of once more crowd the trail there. A few trees try their best to make the area seem a bit more hospitable, but they fail badly. Generally speaking, the land is becoming a little greener as we go along, a little more filled with growing things, as you said we might start to see. But it isn't much just yet. If you push, you might reach the outer edge of that area by morning."

“Good. That means we are truly near Varni’s folly. It has a few outlying farms, and the soil is decent enough on this side of the valley hold,” Thunderbelly grunted. “We should actually be near a small hamlet in a few days. Fisherfolk, the hamlet’s built beside a small lake. After we reach that, we’ll be within another four days normal speed of travel to the southernmost wall of the holdfast.”

“The idea of trees should make you happier, love, yet I sense you’re not. You didn’t even react to the idea of fish there, which, since we haven’t seen any such since we left Erebor, is another bad sign.” Harry said, squeezing her hand. If they weren’t being looked at by three dwarves, he would raised it to his lips and kissed it gently, but now was not the time for such things. *And for more reasons than the fact we have an audience.* “What is troubling you?”

“I **am** troubled about something. I did not see much in the way of game. Such has not been unusual before this, but I would’ve thought I would see more squirrels, more small animals, and perhaps a rabbit or fox once the lands started to turn a bit greener. I have not. Moreover, there just seems to be a general sense of wariness in the air. I have also seen ravens and crows on the wing, whereas I should have seen thrushes, sparrows and other smaller birds as well. I have not seen any such at all today.” Tauriel bit her lip thoughtfully, shaking her head. “I had noticed the lack of birds yesterday, but seeing the large carrion birds now rather than thrushes or sparrows, that is worrisome.”

While Fili and Harry frowned, Thunderbelly looked particularly troubled at that. “Sparrows and thrushes make their homes in Varni’s Folly just as they do the Lonely Mountain, all across the holds territory in fact, though we have lost the ability to speak to them as some of you Longbeards still can. Yet you say you haven’t seen a single one? That’s highly unusual.”

After a moment, Fili nodded too. “I agree. I’ve not been to Varni’s Folly that often, but each time I have, I have seen several thrushes.” He smirked slightly over at the far heavier dwarf. “I have even talked to a few.

“I pushed at least some twenty, perhaps more than thirty leagues ahead of your foreword-most scouts after making a loop around the area,” TTauriel stated, not trying to sound arrogant, simply making a statement of fact. As a lone elf, she could easily outpace even the best dwarven scouts like Mkoloan. “I did not see a single sparrow or smaller animal or bird bar ravens and crows in the air. Moreover, they were not near me but rather in the distance. Always in the distance, the calls unfriendly on the ear.”

Harry frowned at that, crossing his arms. During the Battle of the Lonely Mountain, ravens and crows had come in the service of Sauron to help block out the sun even more than the clouds, and had even attacked the allied army. Harry hadn’t needed to deal with any such attack, although Gandalf had told him of his own experience at the time. “I didn’t think that

Sauron would be able to spread his influence this far out, not even after eleven years or so recovering from the beating he took from the White Council.”

“I did not say that they were under the influence of some dread presence, my heart,” now was TTauriel’s turn to squeeze Harry’s hand. “But ravens and crows **are** carrion eaters. If I am seeing them already, there could be trouble near Varni’s Folly, well before where we expected to find such. Correct me if I am wrong, but the problems we are supposed to solve are in the mountain holds to the north, not to the southwestern-most valley holdfast.”

Thunderbelly began to curse luridly in Khuzdul at that, and Gimli and Fili exchanged grim looks. Fili thought about it quickly, then asked TTauriel if she had spotted any place ahead of the column where they could stop for the night. Fili didn’t want to, but if they were going into troubled territory, he wanted his convoy to have a good night’s rest under them.

TTauriel did indeed know of a place within another ten leagues ahead. It was a small hill stilling up just slightly from the rest of the land around them currently, with a large rock dominating the center of the hill but more than enough room for the carts to be placed in a circle around it. “Normally, I would not pick out a spot as it is too obvious and seen from afar, but with Harry’s defensive wards, we should be safe enough...” Tauriel smiled faintly. “Even if we would normally stick out like a single oak among birch up there.”

“True.” Fili nodded, then, with an effort to add some humor to his tone, he shouted, “Burgo. I have something you need to shout for me.”

While dwarves all prided themselves on making light of hardship, there were still some cheers at the idea of setting up camp soon thanks to the rain. It had begun to get under the armor of many of the dwarves into their gambesons, and being wet and cold was never pleasant, even if the dwarves didn’t need to worry about rust as a human army would. If Harry didn’t know better, he would suspect that some dwarven magic went into the oils they used on their armor and weapons, but there wasn’t. It was pure chemistry, or perhaps alchemy, coupled with the dwarves mastery of metals. Even without the oil, dwarven equipment was nowhere near as prone to rust as that of other folk, even, according to a rather irritated Celeborn, modern elven equipment.

“Lady Tauriel, if you could find Mkoloan and the other scout groups and tell them of the change in plans? Even they should get some rest when they can,” Fili requested.

Tauriel nodded and, with a kiss to Harry’s cheek, turned around and raced off once more, leaving the convoy to continue on its muddy, rainy way.

By the time the first scouts started to struggle into camp, the camp was nearly finished. The dwarves were extremely efficient about the process at this point, with Harry and a group of

their own cooks putting up a cover over several small fire pits while other dwarves set up tents near the carts and wagons. They used the carts and wagons as a portion of the tent, sometimes even stretching the tarp out between two of them. Still more dwarves went out and found firewood that Harry could squeeze the water out of via his magic to use in the fire pits, saw to the donkeys, patrolled the area, or helped Meto find places to put down the nightly ward stones.

The youth had not sought Harry out as often as he expected on this trip, something that concerned Harry a bit. But Meto's help around the camp was welcome, as was his work as a drover without complaint.

When TTauriel finally returned, the camp was completely set up, and Harry had finished helping the dwarves cook with enough time to even prepare a meal for her and himself, knowing Tauriel did not enjoy the heavily meat and legume-based diet that the dwarves favored. She smiled at that and smiled even more when she noticed that he was using some of his special cooking equipment. Specifically Harry was using the specially designed pan he had commissioned in order to make his own bread.

"Are you still trying to remake Lembas, my heart?" Tauriel asked, sitting down and nuzzling into his side for a moment, sighing happily as his arm went around her shoulders. Although the rain did not bother Tauriel overmuch in her cloak, and thanks to her elvish heritage, it was still a somewhat depressing night, especially given what she could feel of the land around them.

"There is no sensible reason why I can't remake the bread we received from Lady Galadriel," Harry mock-grumbled before turning lightly and kissing her on the temple, then leaning in deeper into her hood to kiss her ear, causing Tauriel to hum in pleasure before turning back to his cooking. After another moment, he pulled the bread off of the thin mounting over the fire pit. After a few looks inside, Harry pulled off the top, then quickly upended the pot onto a small plate, the bread sliding out easily thanks to a layer of butter on the inside of the pan.

He then cut the bread into several slices, spreading a garlic-based sauce on them to go with some of the meat and vegetable skewers that he had also made for the pair. "Try it and tell me what you think."

With a smile, TTauriel did so, humming once more in pleasure at the taste of it. She quickly finished off a full slice, taking a sip of water before replying. "I think you're still emphasizing the taste a little too much. For my palate, that is perfect, but it doesn't quite taste like Lembas. Nor does it fill me up anywhere as much. I tell you Harry, there must be something

different about how my folk create the bread, some magic you will have to wheedle out of them.”

Harry sighed, slumping theatrically at his failure, but it seemed as if her compliments on the taste were really what he was going for at this point because he quickly smiled, leaning against her in turn. He had already understood there was some inherent elven magic to the actual flatbread they had been given in Lothlorien, but that was no reason to stop trying to make his own.

The two of them spent several moments simply enjoying one another’s company and chewing slowly on the food before Fili joined them at their fireplace. He smiled in delight at the bread and at Harry’s invitation, took a slice, adding it to his own bowl of stew. He began dunking it into the bowl of stew, a sight that made TTauriel grimace. For all that she had come to enjoy many a dwarf’s friendship by this point thanks to Harry, there were just some things that she could not understand. Dunking good bread into stew was one of them.

Gimli soon joined them, but at least he was polite enough to wave away the offer of bread rather than subject TTauriel to another example of horrible taste.

Soon, Fili’s sub-commanders joined them at the fire one after another, spending a few moments listening to their specific instructions for the day to come. The scouts would group up in larger groups. Rather than the squad of six they had been moving around in previously, the group going ahead of the column would be broken into three. One under Mkoloan would move forward of the convoy. The other two scout groups would range on both sides and behind the column to make up the slack.

Furthermore, the column itself would shift. The wagons would all remain together rather than be separated by groups of infantry as they had today when the rain hit. Instead, the infantry would split into two groups. A group of eighty would remain close to the convoy. The rest, some two-hundred and sixty Longbeards under Fili and Gimli, would move forward, keeping ahead of the column by at least a few leagues. Thunderbelly and his Stonefoots would also come with them.

“I realize that it is weeks before we expected to see even a hint of trouble and that on the other side of Varni’s Folly. But with TTauriel’s report, I’m not willing to let us simply walk into anything that we can avoid or overwhelm with sufficient preparation. If the scouts spot trouble, the infantry, with your squad with them, will race ahead to deal with it before the carts and wagons arrive,” Fili stated to the last of the infantry sub-commanders.

As the other sub-commanders had before, the dwarf rumbled an affirmative in Khuzdul, and Fili turned to look over the fire at Harry and TTauriel. “Harry, TTauriel, could I ask the pair

of you to head out as well? I trust my scouts, but they can't move nearly as fast as you can, and the more time we have to prepare for whatever trouble might be awaiting us, the better."

"Certainly. However, if we run into small-type trouble, we might be able to deal with ourselves. Would that be all right?" Harry asked. His tone was whimsical, but his emerald eyes, burned with all the light of the sun in them at night, something all of the dwarves had noticed by this point, were hard as they gazed back at Fili.

"If it is marauding animals or such like, please, feel free to deal with it. But if it is goblins or orcs, or worse, if somehow the Easterlings have penetrated this Far West, prioritize getting that information back to the convoy," Fili stated seriously. "My folk have far too much experience with goblins in particular when it comes to ambush, and I would like to dearly know if they are in the territory at all before they try to spring anything on us. Again, I trust Mkoloan and the others, but even the best scout has fallen to goblin trickery in the past."

What he did not say was that, as good as his scouts were, they were nowhere near as good as TTauriel and Harry at moving unseen, be it in the dark or in the day. It stood to reason that if they spotted the enemy, the enemy might well be able to spot them in turn. Mkoloan was perhaps the only dwarf that could hide in the terrain they'd been moving through to the extent another dwarf, or goblin, who was trained to do so, could not spot them.

TTauriel nodded, and the conversation shifted onto more pleasant things while all around them, the dwarves of the column prepared for trouble.

Harry was the first to wake the next morning, the rise of the sun creating an echo deep within him, empowering him the moment it began to crest the horizon. It was going to be a good day, in terms of the weather anyway. Somehow, Harry could sense that there would be very few clouds in the sky, and Arien's charge, Anar would smile down on them the entire day. *No matter what we might find out there. Ironical that,* he thought, trying to push down certain other thoughts as well as he felt TTauriel beside him.

Over the past decade, both he and TTauriel had realized that the rising of the sun also... made him a bit more randy, so to speak. Harry was honestly uncertain how much of that was in his head and how much of it had to do with becoming a Maia to Arien, but he couldn't stop himself from turning over slightly, looking down at TTauriel for a moment, taking in her features.

As if she could feel his eyes on her, TTauriel woke up, going from rest to instant wakefulness as her people did, leaving the land of dreams seamlessly for the physical world. *And yet, I find I enjoy the company in both of my Harry,* she thought, smiling at her love before he leaned down and kissed her.

They didn't obviously have any time to do much more, but even so, little moments like that were treasures, especially given what might be out there that day. Soon, the two of them had broken their fast together in the tent and donned their brigandine armor, weapons and cloaks, with Harry switching out from his normal elven cloak to his invisibility cloak. The cloth of the green and dark grey brigandine matched Tauriel's elven cloak, although the cloak would not be up to stopping a rock thrown from a trebuchet from breaking Tauriel's bones like the armor would.

Looking over at Harry, Tauriel smiled as she saw his quiver was correctly tied to his outer thigh and around his waist, although the sight of his bow over his nonexistent shoulder was somewhat amusing. "I see you have decided to bring along your bow, Harry."

Harry looked to the side, noticing where Tauriel was looking and seeing only his bow and not the shoulder its string should be going over. "Heh. Well, you spent all that time over the past few years teaching me how to shoot. I haven't quite figured out how to imbed spells into my arrows, but an arrow can go just as far as a spell, and without a lot of noise or... other reactions either."

Laughing, Tauriel moved in to kiss him lightly on the lips. The pair stayed there for a few moments, neither moving to deepen the kiss, simply taking joy in the gentle touch before slowly pulling away.

When they stepped out of the tent, the pair were prepared to march off that very moment. All around them, the rest of the dwarves were doing much the same, although more than a few stumbled at seeing Harry's head and a portion of his chest but nothing else. Meto, nearby, stumbled, staring, "What the... Master Harry, wh, where have you stored the rest of your body?"

"Hah! Interesting thought, but no, Meto. This is just one of the enchanted items I brought from my world." Chuckling at that and the gawking from the other dwarves nearby, Harry turned back to the tent and Tauriel. Between the two of them the tent came down quickly, and once they did, the rest of the column was ready to go in its new formation.

"Remember, you actually have to return to the convoy at some point. The two of you just can't race off together," Fili teased gently. "And if you see a problem too big for the two of you to solve, I fully expect you to actually come back and report on that rather than get in over your heads. There's only so much your magic can do to even the odds of sheer numbers, Harry."

"You're talking nonsense. My magic makes me all-powerful!" Harry said, his voice a dull drone rather than arrogant or enthusiastic, earning chuckles from both Tauriel and Fili before he held out his hand to the dwarf. Clapped it briefly, he said, "I like to think that my lady and I know how much trouble we can chew. We'll report back to you at midday if nothing else."

Fili agreed to that and watched as the two turned away, heading down the road. By the time they left the outer edge of the camp area, they were already loping along in that same ground-devouring pace of the elves Tauriel had shown so often, and Fili shook his head with a chuckle, looking over at Gimli. "Those two might be a tough act to follow, but we are at least going in the same direction. Let us get this convoy moving, cousin."

OOOOOOO

Harry and TTauriel moved side-by-side down the trail until they began to enter the territory TTauriel had seen the day before, where the ground became a little greener. Two trees and dozens of the horrid bushes that had plagued the convoy several times before could soon be seen ahead of them and to the sides of the road. Luckily, those bushes were separated by a good few feet. "Huh, it looks like those damned spike bushes don't even like one another, doesn't it?"

"I have noticed much the same, yes. Still, I rather doubt your cloak, would be bothered by such, unlike mine own. It would be the height of silliness to believe a cloak magically enchanted to hide its wearer from death could be penetrated or torn by thorns. Even ones like those," Tauriel joked back.

Even an elf like her didn't really have anything good to say about those bushes, which had caused numerous problems for the scouts and even, at one point, the convoy itself, forcing the infantry to spend some time cutting them back. Something that, according to Thunderbelly, was a yearly event.

The fat Stonefoot ambassador had laughed harshly as he watched the Longbeards at work, not a one of his own people moving to help them. "Those blasted Khr'uz'bar can spring up in a few weeks fully grown, can exist nearly anywhere it isn't too hot. How they spread we do not know, but we know their roots are deep, going down at least ten feet for some. You would have to dig down that far to get rid of the tap root to get rid of them entirely."

Harry later learned from Fili that Khr'uz'bar literally translated to 'Fucking Painful Bushes'. Which, frankly, was all too apropos.

Without further discussion, the pair split off from the road, moving a bit more northward into the woods, moving slower now, with Harry letting TTauriel set the pace. With the magic of his cloak and Tauriel's cloak of Lothlorien, Harry only had to activate the ward on a small chain that stuck out from the brigandine armor they both wore at their waists to silence their feet. *Not*, Harry thought in some amusement, *that Tauriel really needs that. I, a poor plodding human, certainly do, though.*

The pair moved silently forward, still eating up the ground far faster than any of the dwarves might have been able to. Soon they passed the two trees they had spotted at a distance, and Harry had to admit, they did not do much to make the area look more hospitable. "I can't even tell what kind of trees those are, they are so gnarled and warped."

"Warped indeed. Their voices are crotchety and mean-spirited. They resent the very land they have grown upon and resent all that can move for that freedom," Tauriel replied sadly. "Even I would not be able to commune with them."

"Huh. Makes me wonder how those trees even came to be planted here." Harry stared at the trees for a moment, their bark black, mottled in grey with hundreds of gnarled bits sticking out, their boughs twisted every which way. They had few leaves, and those looked almost like a cross between a birch leaf and a cactus to Harry's eyes.

The pair pushed on until Tauriel estimated it was near midday. At that point, the ground had become a bit greener, if still immensely rocky. Large clumps of tall grass started to dominate the land, along with a few scattered, hardy trees, oak trees for the most part. "These are much more satisfied with their lot than those other two," Tauriel breathed as she stood beside one such. "Its roots go deep, it has sun and rain, and is content."

"Good to know, but unless it can tell us anything about what is going on in this land, I doubt it helps us much, my love," Harry said, coming up behind her and putting his hands around her waist. Given they were both wearing armor, that wasn't nearly as nice a feeling for either of them as it would be normally, but both enjoyed it despite that.

"Hmm..." Tauriel reached out, placing a hand on the bark of the tree, shaking her head. "No. I cannot get any further impression of the land here than I already have. Only a brief feeling of sadness that no birds have come to nest in its boughs for several weeks."

"That at least tells us that what's going on is relatively recent," Harry mused. "That's good to know. Correct me if I'm wrong, but wouldn't goblins or orcs mark up such trees for fun?"

"They would, and the trees would remember such for certain." Cheered up by that, Tauriel turned in Harry's arms and gave him a brief kiss before moving away, leading the pair onward.

The trees never grew dense enough to be called a true forest, more simply being a spattering of trees across the terrain. Further, they never had the dense canopy of branches and leaves that would block out the sky even when standing directly below one. Thus, the pair of them spotted smoke on the horizon at around the same time.

The two lovers paused, and Harry looked over at Tauriel. "What can you see?"

For all the ways that Harry had become semi-Elvish in terms of his Fëa, his eyesight had only improved so much since his body had completed the process of turning into a pseudo-Maiar. He could see quite a ways and sensed more of the world around them, but his eyes were no match for Tauriel's.

Without replying, TTauriel turned to the tree they had stopped under. Climbing up it as quickly and easily as a monkey, Tauriel was soon perched on the topmost branches, keeping her weight spread out among the small branches with the ease of centuries of practice. Peering ahead of the pair towards the smoke, she grimaced. "There is a small hamlet out there, three houses together, just off the side of the road. I can even see the glint of water beyond on a large pond."

"Just like Thunderbelly said we would, a small hamlet of fisherfolk around a small pond or lake a ways away but still within reach of the road," Harry murmured before blinking, wondering what the difference between a small lake in a large pond was. Then he shook himself, knowing that his mind was trying to dwell on that rather than ask the question that was growing within his mind at present. "It isn't a natural fire from a fire or a chimney, is it?"

TTauriel landed lightly beside him, her grim face telling him more than her words. "No. No, it isn't. But it is a problem the two of us might be able to deal with. I see only ten attackers, if that. And I think I saw two prisoners still alive. Even I cannot say for certainty, though."

"They're meat for the gristle then," Harry said grimly, nodding his head as he pulled back his cloak a bit to get at his quiver where it hung at his side. "Who are the attackers?"

"Humans." Harry blinked at that, pausing and turning to look at his lady in surprise. "I know. Even after you pointed out how goblins would mar and despoil the trees if they were in the area, I thought any trouble would still come from goblins or orcs. But these are humans. Tall, helmed, with horses nearby. No horse would ever stomach having an orc for a rider."

Harry nodded, knowing that the horses would deeply intrigue Tauriel. She had never seen one before, as her people, the Silvan and Sindar of Mirkwood, had never kept such. Indeed, after talking to Galadriel, Harry had learned that Elrond was somewhat unusual among elvenkind for the fact he had a decent number of horses trained not for travel but also war, something few elves in history had done. To most elves, all life was sacred, so leading animals into battle where they might die was not something most elves felt comfortable with unless the horse was intelligent enough to consent to it. The elves had never fielded the kind of heavy cavalry that Harry had read about in Medieval armies back on Earth, although the humans in Middle Earth certainly had.

"In that case, there is more trouble in this land than we feared," Harry mused. "Outriders, I'd guess. We won't learn more from standing here, though."

Tauriel smiled tightly and then raced off fleet as the wind through the grass. Harry followed her, his own steps far heavier but still silent, his cloak now up and covering his face, hiding him even more than Tauriel among the scattered trees and clumps of tall grass.

In this manner, the pair quickly crossed the intervening distance between the small hamlet and where they had seen the smoke. Soon Harry could see the scene in its entirety, and grimaced, understanding why Tauriel hadn't described it further.

The hamlet was made of three houses, sturdy, two-story affairs made of stone as such structures were by dwarves who lived on the surface rather than within a mountain or underground. A fourth building, a low-slung barn, sat nearby. All four buildings were surrounded by an outer wall out from the houses by some distance, but it was small, barely chest high on a dwarf. Harry imagined that the attacker's horses had been able to just leap over it. Near one house, a small farm field began. Given what he had heard from the Stonefoots, it would consist of root vegetables, potatoes, onions and carrots, although the amount would not be much. A small wharf stuck out into the lake, where two tiny caracoles were tied up.

Five goats lay dead scattered across the territory inside the small outer wall, and the corpse of a single cow lay in the door of the barn. While the thatch of only one of the houses had been set alight, the front doors of the others had all been smashed open. Several window shutters had been smashed as well at ground level. Sacks of various food and stolen items had been laid out one after another in a central pile, while the horses, around twenty or so, had been allowed to range around the hamlet, grazing on the grass that had previously fed the handful of goats.

And then there were the bodies of the dwarves who had made this place their home.

At the distance they were still at currently, dwarven bodies looked far, far too much like children's bodies in Harry's opinion, especially when they were face down. There were at least four dwarven bodies that he could see. *There'll be more inside the buildings. Why would the attackers bother to drag them outside, after all?*

The dwarves had not died easily. At least twelve human bodies lay out where Harry could see them, and a thirteenth was added by two of the attackers as Harry watched, the two of them dragging the corpse between them.

Four of the attackers were also injured in some fashion and lounged around near the loot, possibly talking to one another, but if so, their voices could not travel far enough for Harry to hear them. One of them even was missing his helmet, replaced by a makeshift bandage covering half his face, a sleeve torn from one of the dwarves, perhaps? Harry couldn't tell.

But he could see that Tauriel had been correct. Near the wounded Easterlings, two young dwarves, Harry could tell that from the lack of long beards, were tied up near the sacks of loot, their mouths gagged, their hands behind them, their feet tied together. From here, Harry could only make out splotches of blood on them in various places. Yet, they were alive, shifting where they sat, with the older one trying to somehow shield the younger, scooting forward to place himself between the younger dwarf and their captors.

Tearing his eyes away from the two prisoners, Harry stared at the humans who had attacked them. *So, these are Easterlings. They certainly appear warlike enough, but I can't say I'm impressed.*

Perhaps because they were scouts, their armor was somewhat generic to Harry's eyes, studded leather cuirasses, with one of the bodies that had been pulled aside having a set of armor that wasn't in a style Harry had seen before, at least from what he could see from where he and Tauriel crouched in a small clump of tall grass. The armor was painted in a deep red color, the color of blood, and stood out on the ground, but beyond that and the fact it had been caved in, Harry could not tell much about it.

Perhaps the better armor, or at least the red is a sign of rank? Harry didn't know and certainly wasn't going to learn from talking to these Easterlings. He fully intended to kill each and every one of them.

More unusually, all of the Easterlings in sight wore the same kind of helmet. It was a full-face covering helmet, with only an area cut open for their eyes. From the tops of their helmets came three small spikes, as if they could be used to ram the bodies of opponents. *Or perhaps for fashion?* Again, Harry didn't know, although the sight of those heavy helmets paired with the barely useful armor was somewhat strange.

The only one who Harry could see any features of was the one with the thick bandage covering his face. He looked, well, to Harry's eyes from this far away, he looked somewhat oriental, although with a more shallow, thickset face than any of the Chinese he had seen in London occasionally with Hermione or at school in Hogwarts. The Easterling also didn't have any kind of facial hair, yet his eyes were old, and the raider sneered down at the bodies of the dwarves. As Harry watched, he kicked one of the dead dwarves to the fury of the older of the two prisoners if his increased wiggling was any indication.

Right, time for these people to die, Harry thought grimly, his emerald eyes practically blazing within his hood.

He looked over at his lady, letting her see inside the hood for a moment. She nodded slightly and moved to the side, shifting out of the tall grass. So silently and so swiftly did Tauriel

move that even with the tall grass, Harry could barely discern her movements, and within a few yards, he would've been hard-pressed to tell you where she was.

Knowing Tauriel would be ready, he turned his attention back to the Easterlings, choosing his target carefully as he pulled back his bow. It wasn't his primary weapon, but it would do to start the ambush.

TTauriel made no signal. Instead she simply fired, and a moment later, Harry saw an arrow sprout from the chest of one of the men nearest the horses. He fell silently, the arrow having taken him through his armor and into his heart before he could even contemplate the pain of it.

Harry had none of Tauriel's artistry, although he fired almost before her victim fell to the ground. The next man nearest the horses simply fell gasping, his arrow taking him in the stomach. Two more were dead before Harry's second arrow could even leave its quiver, and it was a poor shot, taking one man running for the horses in the leg.

Yet even as he began to use his spellfire instead, TTauriel was somewhat pleased by her lover's skill. *AccuTauriel is deadly. Speed can be taught. It is always nice to see that Harry took my lessons to heart, even in this manner*, she thought, taking aim at another man who was trying to run into one of the houses. He did not make it.

Meanwhile, Harry's spell work had cut two of the men and a half. The next moment, a man who was running towards Harry's position with his sword raised became Harry's next target. A Bombarda spell blew the man into giblets, and the horses, to an equine, decided enough was enough. The lot of them bolted, some rushing away, hurtling themselves over the outer wall of the hamlet, while others simply ran from the point of conflict, following the wall around and away.

If the remaining Easterlings had any thought to try to follow their more quick-thinking fellow and close with their attackers all thought had gone out of their heads upon Harry's first spell. Two of them tried to race after the horses and were felled by Tauriel's arrows, while the third attempted to run behind one of the houses. That one almost made it, unlike the other men who TTauriel had targeted, but Harry's final spell hit him in the back. The Rifela cored straight through the back of his neck and out the front in a geyser of blood.

With that, Harry and TTauriel moved forward, wary that there might be others within the houses. This proved to be the case a moment later. When they came closer, an Easterner made to rush Harry from the barn entrance, his sword raised to strike. Another leaped out of a window, trying to race away along the shoreline, his weapon abandoned in his fear.

The one charging Harry fell, an arrow taking the Easterling through the side of his neck from Tauriel, her attack going in just below where his heavy metal helmet began. A cutting spell hit the last Easterling, the Reducto cutting the man in half. Between one step and the next, the fleeing man's upper body fell off at a small angle, blood gushing everywhere, adding more red to the blood-spattered town of the once-peaceful hamlet.

Huh... I suppose I should have captured that one, but I didn't think of it, Harry mused, the anger and fury he'd been feeling during their attack ebbing away, leaving him mildly annoyed with himself. *Still, I wager there will be other groups like this out here. I doubt one such would be able to dominate the land in such a way that Tauriel would have noticed the impact on the area's overall spirit and the lack of animals.*

Shaking his head, Harry turned his attention to the two wide-eyed prisoners, who were looking almost as fearful of him as they had been of their attackers. Kneeling down to eye height, he kept his hands away from his sword, his bow once more on his back. Raising one hand higher than the other, Harry made a small flame appear on one finger. As he did, TTauriel came over, pulling back her hood to show her elvish ears. Whatever enmity existed between dwarves and elves, these folk at least would know that she wasn't with the humans who had just attacked them. "I am Harry of Erebor, named friend by King Thorin Oakenshield, Lord of Erebor," Harry spoke in a calm, measured tone, hoping to use it to further calm the pair down. "Hopefully, you've heard of me, but if not, I hope that my work at least has shown you that I am no friend of the Easterlings. Will you allow me to untie you?"

The survivors, both children, nodded quickly, and Harry moved forward, reflecting he was grateful that dwarves usually learned Common when they were young regardless of anything else, or else he would have been forced to use a translation spell, and he knew most dwarves would not take his understanding Khuzdul well.

Removing their bonds took but a moment with a small knife while TTauriel knelt down in front of them, introducing herself in turn. "I know it might be painful to think about, but do you think we got them all? Are there other such bands around here that split off after attacking your hamlet?"

"We, we didn't see any," one of them, the older one, said. The youngster was perhaps within another five years or so of becoming an adult in dwarven terms and bore a wound across his shoulder and neck, a testament to the fact that he had fought just as hard as the rest of the hamlet's folk. The other young dwarf also bore some wounds, but while the older dwarf's wounds had been caused by a sword, the younger looked as if he had simply been kicked and battered about after being tied up.

Looking closer at the second, Harry breathed a sigh of mixed relief and repressed anger. *Oh. Not a he at all, rather a she. A young lady, in point of fact, for all that she has barely begun to grow a beard.* The fact that she had been wearing a regular fisherman's clothing had thrown him, and their bagginess hid most of her feminine form even now.

Moving slowly still, Harry held up his hand and began to use what little healing spells he knew on her, knowing that the boy would refuse all aid until she was seen to.

That sight caused the youth to calm down further, and after a moment of speaking to the young woman in their own language, he began to explain what happened. "They caught us just as we were going to start fishing. They came out of the brush so fast we didn't have any warning. If it wasn't for Dando's shout of warning from the second story of his family's house, we would've been caught completely flat-footed. As it was, we were able to retreat inside and arm ourselves. Old Stal was too slow, but he took one of them down with his fisherman's pole. Don't think that damned human realized how long Stal's fishing poll was right up until he took them in the center of the saddle with enough force to hurl him off his horse!" The youth said fiercely. "We all tried to barricade ourselves in, but..."

From there, the youth described the rest of the fight. The inhabitants of the hamlet, nearly twenty all told, had holed up in their houses, with nearly all of them helping in some fashion bar the youngest. But because they didn't really have any crossbows or bows, they hadn't been able to make use of those defensive positions very well.

"The humans were so quick on their horses that they started to attack the doors before we were able to pile too much furniture in the way. One rider actually used his horse to batter in the doors. He turned it around and had the horse do this double kick thing that smashed the door to Rugo's house!" the youngster explained. "Rugo and his family retreated underground at that point into the tunnels connecting our houses, but the humans kept on coming."

A few of the horses who had remained inside the hamlet's outer wall had begun to calm down, but the rest had already bolted off, frightened by Harry's magic. Now, the horses slowly moved towards TTauriel, who had stood up by this point, moving away from the two dwarves to put them more at ease. She held out her hands to the horses, and one after another, they came forward to nuzzle at Tauriel's hands. Such was the way elves had with all good beasts and whatever else, these horses had not been put through training cruel enough to turn them entirely evil, like the wargs that orcs and goblins could make use of.

That was interesting to Harry, and he wondered if there might be some way they could use that in the future, but in the main, he continued to listen to the youth, nodding his head, giving praise and commiseration where needed, buoying the youngster up further. By his account, the dwarves here at given as good as they possibly could have, including one matron

who had apparently lugged a heavy cauldron up to a second-story window and dumped it out on two of the attackers. That attack had killed one of the Easterlings when it landed on his head regardless of his helmet, breaking his neck, while the scalding water had burnt another's eyes through his helmet and his arms very badly.

The defender retreated down into a small tunnel area that connected their houses. At the center of that was a communal larder but no interior doors. That last meant they were forced to fight the attackers rather than simply board themselves up. The humans, perhaps under the influence of bloodlust, had continued to attack, losing several more of their number. "They hadn't brought out all of their dead before you attacked," the youth stated with grim pride.

"Well, that is quite a tale, my young friend. I think that you should come with us to tell it to Fili and his convoy. Erebor learned of the Easterlings attack into Stonefoot territory months ago, and we've been on the road for a while now. We're heading to Varni's Folly, and from then on, we're supposed to help against the goblins and cold drakes troubling other holdfasts of your folk as Thorin leads an army against the Easterlings. But the Easterlings having pushed this far into Stonefoot House lands will probably change our plans."

Not that Harry was primarily interested in asking the youth to relieve the day's horror again. He simply wanted to get the pair where they would be safe and knew that not being able to see to the safety of the girl on his own would be enough of a knock on any dwarf's pride without Harry outright stating it.

The young dwarf nodded, understanding what Harry was saying, then looked over to the girl, speaking in Khuzdul for a moment. She nodded, and got to her feet before moving towards one of the houses, entering quickly. Harry looked at the young man, who did not answer directly, simply saying, "There are some things that we need to take with us if we are to leave. We have family in Varni's Folly we can stay with until this trouble is past, but some things, some things need to be taken care of now."

Harry nodded, then gestured to the bodies of the dwarves. "If you would like to take anything from them or from those bags that the Easterlings have made up of what they thought of as your treasures, please do so. And then... point me to where you wish me to dig graves for your fallen."

The dwarf looked bemused at that but nodded, muttering about how "Mahal would understand the need for haste, rather than ceremony," under his breath as he did so. Soon, he had shown Harry to the small hamlet's equally small cemetery, which sat outside the hamlet's outer wall to the east. It was marked out with simple stone markers that Stonefoot dwarves apparently used to mark the passing of their own.

As Harry went to work creating graves for the fallen, the young dwarf did as Harry had asked him to. He went from one dead body to another, both outside and within the buildings. Stone-faced but red-eyed, he began to hum a dirge in Khuzdul under his breath, which the girl joined in a moment later.

Leaving the two dwarves to their grief and Harry to his own work, TTauriel examined the dead humans closely. Their armor was obviously not of very good quality, but if they were outriders or scouts, that made some sense, as did the fact there was no uniformity among them when it came to their armor. Such folk would need to move quickly and unencumbered for long periods, and there was only so much that horses could do if the riders wore heavy armor.

She examined their helmets more closely, pulling one of them off and turning it from side to side, frowning. There was something that she did not like about the general shape of it. She wasn't certain why, but it gave off a feeling of subtle **wrongness** to her. *And why do they all have the same kind of helmet when their armor is so different from one to another? Is it a symbol of their particular clan? It certainly does not seem to be particularly utilitarian.*

When she turned her attention to them, Tauriel found that the saddlebags contained what humans might call food for the trail. None of it was edible to TTauriel's mind, although it was certainly a far sight better than anything orcs or goblins might've made do with. There was also more of it than orcs and goblins would have had, let alone elvish folk, and examining the bags of stolen items, she discovered four of them contained food taken from the hamlet. *So, do groups like this one have to live off the land, or did they decide to take this food just because it was better than their own?*

Beyond a few trinkets and small items, necklaces, and tiny worked statues of iron that might've been worth something to the riders, she found little to nothing in the saddles of the horses that it stayed. None of the dead had maps, written orders or anything else of importance on them either, although she did make a note that these humans used curved swords of a kind she had never seen before. The swords had a large guard that curved to cover the whole front of the hand holding it, which she could understand as a good defense for that hand, but the immense curvature of the blade and the reasoning behind it eluded her. None of them carried any bows but did seemingly have a few simple lances, long pieces of wood capped with small, needlelike points. Again, TTauriel put the nature of those weapons down to the fact that this group were forward scouts at best, simple raiders at worst.

The only one of interest was one of the dead, the one with the deep red armor. The red armor was actually quite well-made armor, of the kind that the dwarves called lamellar, with plates of metal set into horizontal rows. Underneath, he wore a very thin gambeson, it's make nowhere near as good as the ones that Harry and Tauriel were currently wearing, with next to

no actual padding within it. The armor came down to just above his knees and was paired with a set of heavy greaves, yet it still looked to Tauriel as if that would leave some of his leg, his knee and lower thigh open to attack. *Especially if he was riding a horse. So, is this an infantry officer put in charge of a group of raiders?*

Wanting to test the quality of the armor, TTauriel spent a few moments trying to dig a dagger in between two of the joints. The armor's wearer had died from having his entire chest caved in by a strike from a dwarven hammer, but TTauriel felt she would've been hard-pressed to get an arrow in between those joints. *His eye slit is a different story, but that armor is of good quality. It would probably stand up very well to a pitched battle if paired with a shield and sword. Although I still do not understand the nature of the strange curved blades they all possess.*

Unlike the helmets, the swords were, like the armor of the group of Easterlings, of various make, even if the overall style of the blade was the same across the board. Some had heavier guards for the hands, others barely had any. Some blades looked old but well cared for. Others looked almost brand new. *But I think I have learned as much as I can from these bodies.*

Deciding that she needed to hunt down the horses that had run off, she gazed at the ground for a few moments, discerning where they had all gone. To her surprise, after leaping the outer wall, the horses had come together in the rough ground beyond and then raced off as a group. *Odd, I would not have thought that horses were so herd-oriented. Still, I will put that down to my own ignorance of the breed.*

Absentmindedly patting one of the horses who had stayed behind on the nose, Tauriel looked at the trail closely, seeing that the horses had run the lake to the south, the quickest way to gain some distance from the noise of Harry's magical assault.

Tauriel reported this to Harry, who nodded and agreed that she could try to hunt them down. "In fact, bring them back here," he said, looking over at the two young dwarves, who he was currently helping retrieve a few more dwarven bodies from within their former homes. "I think handing all those horses over to these two is the best kind of recompense for what occurred here we're going to get."

"Horses will indeed bring good money in the market at Varni's Folly," the youth said, smiling gratefully at Harry for not formally addressing the fact that the other dwarf who'd survived the attack was a girl. As Harry had suspected, the fact he hadn't been able to protect her and the other dams who had died in the attack was starting to get to the youngster.

Harry smiled at him and then turned back to his work while TTauriel raced off, hoping to find some information in the pouches of the attackers to use in the future. Unfortunately, in this, she was disappointed. Not even the best horse among them, the one that looked most

cared for and had the fieriest personality, had anything important in its saddle pouches. Not even a map of the area, which would've been perhaps the most helpful, considering she had no idea what kind of language the Easterlings used when they wrote things down. *And I know that Harry doesn't have any spells to translate written languages either. A map would have at least had some kind of markers on it to tell us something of what is going on between here and the holdfast.*

With a sigh, she returned to the small hamlet, leading the horses. Like their brethren, the horses were more than willing to follow Tauriel thanks to her elven heritage, and soon, she had them all under her spell, leading them back to the hamlet and over the outer wall. An offering of hay and oats was eagerly accepted, and she spent some moments moving among them, only to pause and stare into the distance towards the direction she and Harry had come from. "Harry, Mkoloan and his scout group are in sight. Well, in my sight, anyway. I doubt they can see us just yet, but even from the road, I daresay they would be able to see the smoke."

"You forget Mkoloan's got a spyglass with him, love." Harry ignored how the two dwarves had both started at that mode of address, helping to lay another dwarf down beside his future grave. He had offered to use his magic to carry the dead to their final resting place, but like the dwarves of the convoy and helping to push the carts out of holes, the two youngsters had firmly shot the idea down. "He can probably see a decent amount of what's been going on here."

Thinking about it, Harry shrugged. "Why don't you head out to meet him? Mkoloan can send a runner back to the convoy, and then we can wait here with these young folks while Fili and the rest catch us up." He then looked at the young man, who had yet to give Harry even his common name. "I don't suppose you have any information about the war in general, do you?"

The young dwarf shook his head. "We've heard some things about attacks on Varni's Folly and West Axe by goblins and sightings of cold drakes near Fanged Walls, as well as information about sieges to the hill holds to the east. We had heard nothing to say that the humans had pushed this far towards Varni's folly, let alone passed it like this. But we are rather away from things out here."

Harry nodded, then gestured down at the graves he had dug. "Would you like to wait for the other dwarves to arrive, or should we start seeing to your friends and family now?" He then smirked dryly. "Or we could just burn the bodies of the humans while we wait."

That last seemed like a good idea to the young dwarf. Moments later, after Harry had used magic to levitate all the dead attackers out into one mound, which the young dwarf had not objected to, he was somewhat surprised to see how many the dwarves had accounted for. All told, there were seventeen dead dwarves. There were at least thirty-six dead attackers from

before Tauriel and Harry arrived on the scene, most of them having died in the fighting in the tunnels. *And these were barely trained fisher and farm folk. Fighting dwarves in enclosed spaces is obviously a losing proposition.*

He held out a branch to the youth, lighting the edge of it on fire with a spell. “I think you should have the honors, young man.”

The youth nodded, Eagerly accepting the torch. Since the female dwarf had enough presence of mind to good cooking oil over them as well as some of the nearly purloined ale that the attackers wanted to take with them, the mound of dead Easterlings instantly began to burn. Their weapons and helmets had been set aside. They would at least be able to be sold to be melted down, the metal reused in Varni’s Folly.

The young dwarves were still glaring into the fire when Mkoloan and his scout group arrived moments later in the company of Tauriel. When he arrived, the gruff, businesslike Mkoloan made a brief service to the dead dwarves. All of it beyond the first few lines in Khuzdul, so Harry was unable to hear out what they were saying, but he knew dwarves well enough to understand what it would be about. The dead would be revered, Mkoloan telling about how they had defended their hearth and dams well, how they had taught their children well, how their goods and the things of their hands would succeed them, and thus they would be remembered.

The dwarves of the reinforced scout party and the two locals stood there, silent in prayer to Mahal for a few moments before turning, and with Mkoloan leading the two youngsters, the group started back to meet up with the convoy.

Once he met them, Fili instantly agreed that the two youngsters should join their caravan and turned over the young girl to one of Bulgo’s workmen. After which, Thunderbelly, Fili and Gimli asked some questions about the attackers and then about the fight Harry hadn’t Tauriel had before realizing that, with so little information, all they could do was keep pushing on for now. But it was very clear to everyone that events here in the east had gone far worse than they had feared when they left Erebor months ago.

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“Thus, with that final load of grain for the donkeys, we should be ready to go in the morning. However, I would like to reiterate my concerns about how much we are loading up both ourselves and the donkeys of our baggage train, sir. Water alone is going to be an issue. Even with the new runes that the Rune Scribes came up with, there is a limit to how much donkeys can carry. Are you sure that we should not requisition some more carts?”

“No.” Thorin Oakenshield shook his head, leaning back in his chair and looking over at his cousin, then back at the speaker. Noli Inkhand was one of Balin’s chief Book Keeper, or such would be the term directly translated into Common for what the other dwarf was without any of the true context. The term ‘secretary’ was not a word that had been introduced into the common lexicon as yet, and in any event, even that word would not quite match Noli’s position in the hierarchy of Erebor.

Right now, he was acting as Thorin’s logistical officer. The older dwarf had a way with numbers and organization that only Balin could even come close to matching, although he was far more obstreperous to those he worked with and did not have nearly as good people skills as Thorin’s chief advisor.

“No, Noli. I realize why you keep wanting to push for more carts and donkeys. Redundancy is always a good thing. But remember that we will be able to refill our supplies when we get to Blacklock lands and even buy more donkeys if need be. I’ve already sent runners ahead with our requests and funding for it. My wife’s people will come through for us. And frankly, we can move far, far faster with simple donkeys than we can with carts, even on good dwarven roads. Which, I do not have to tell you, will be practically nonexistent once we start to leave Blacklock lands and push into the Stonefoot territory to the north.”

It wasn’t that the Blacklock and Stonefoot Houses were at odds with one another. It was simply that none of the houses had large-scale trade between them until Erebor had been reclaimed, and trade began to grow between the Blacklock and Longbeard houses. Even the roads linking the territories of those two Houses, now near to five years after Thorin and Ani had wed, were nothing to write home about. “I want as much mobility and speed as we can get, and carts would simply slow us down.”

“True, and might I say cousin, that I’m glad you came around to that kind of thinking. Donkeys are always the way to go. Although I did not see how well your friend Harry and our room scribes would work together before they started creating such amazing things. With the lightness runic array and the rest, they will have changed our logistics needs for the better in a way that I doubt anyone will have foreseen. The fact that you are even here and are already in a position to move on is a sign of that,” Dain chuckled.

When Dain had gone to the aid of Erebor, he had done so with five hundred infantry and two hundred of his new battle boar riders. In the main, the two groups were able to travel at relatively the same speed while using a handful of donkeys to bring along food, with all of the dwarves carrying their own equipment, much like an elven army would. Although woe betide anyone who tried to point that out to the combative Dain Ironfoot.

He could have fielded a larger army given enough time, as at the time, the Iron Hills was the only real kingdom of the Longbeard House. Although that demographic had changed dramatically since Erebor had been regained.

Dain had then passed that information on to Thorin at one point during a night of drinking. With the creation of the lightness wards and the rest of the runic arrays that Harry and the Rune Masters had come up with, Thorin had taken that concept to heart when it came to organizing his army.

That army had several nasty surprises that he, Harry and the rune Masters had worked up between them. But above all, Thorin hoped that it would be the mobility of his army and their ability to throw up fieldworks that would take his enemies by surprise.

That, and the general toughness of dwarves on the march, had allowed him to get from Erebor to the Iron Hills within two months, although he had been stuck in the Iron Hills for several weeks, waiting on information as to where precisely to march next, communicating with the various Blacklock kings, and gathering more supplies for his army, while also waiting for the human complement to arrive.

He was, however, thankful that he had. Most of those humans had arrived saddled, with their own horses not only to ride but as part of their supply train, and there were over eight hundred of them, all of them archers. It would cost Erebor quite a bit in terms of gold and goods, but those archers might well be incredibly important going forward, just like the five hundred boar riders that Dain had decided to commit to Thorin's force.

Thorin looked back at his older cousin, cocking his head thoughtfully. "And you're positive you don't want to personally come with us? If nothing else, I had hoped to have you as my second-in-command and the commander of your boar riders."

Dain chuckled wryly at that, shaking his head, amused that his younger cousin would offer and would do so without any kind of smugness. "That would be rather amusing, having two kings in the same army. And the most senior being the second in command. But I rather think it would be, what was that term your human friend used to describe that crazy spell of his in the battle? Overkill?"

As Thorin chuckled, Dain continued. "I would have no problem subordinating myself to your command, Thorin, considering our familial relation. But some of my people might take it amiss."

Neither Dain nor any of his advisors had anticipated how many of his folk would want to move to Erebor once it had been reclaimed. He had known all of the families from Erebor originally would want to move back, but many of his advisors disliked how the Iron Hills had

gone from the single kingdom of their house to the second-largest kingdom in a little over a decade. The Iron Hills were still a kingdom, but they had lost their primacy.

Dain wasn't about to complain, though, since the back-and-forth trade between the Blacklock House, particularly the city of Red Stone, and Erebor was making his people rich. Moreover, the weapons coming out of Erebor had put them in a far stronger position than they had been for centuries. There were ballistae on towers that had never had such, and every man in his army had better armor and weapons than they'd had during the Battle of the Lonely Mountain. Even his boar rider's equipment was better. That was to say nothing about some of the Rune Master's new creations, which he had just ordered several cartloads worth of.

"Further, I don't think you need me for this campaign." Dain smirked. "I remember your role in the War of Dwarves And Orcs, and so long as you have Dwalin around to help you when you get yourself into trouble on a personal front, you'll be fine."

Hearing that his cousin had seen through his seemingly simple request to the real reason behind it, Thorin's lips twisted behind his beard into what anyone but him would call a mix of a pout and a growl. After all, while Thorin had led a large contingent of dwarves from the Iron Hills and been his father's chief advisor during the war against the orcs in the Misty Mountains, this would be the largest army he had personally led in his own name. Furthermore, the Easterlings were not orcs. Humans could be crafty opponents, as the Eastern Houses had learned to their cost several times. Having another dwarf, one who was far more experienced in warfare than he was, especially on this scale, would have been a relief. Yet having been called out on it, he would not say anymore, although he did point out that it was entirely unlike his cousin to refuse a chance to go to war.

"And who says I am?" Dain grinned, showing all of his teeth, then pointed to Noli. "Tell him. I know you've noticed."

Noli coughed a little, stroking his beard. "Er, well, my King, it seems as if someone else has been buying a large amount of campaign-style food and supplies, which drove up the prices for our own. In fact, I was forced to go... well above budget? Um, I was even forced to start a line of credit on the kingdom's behalf to pay for it all."

"I will want to see those ledgers then, and I will countersign any such line of credit," Thorin said before staring at his cousin in thought. "You're going somewhere else."

"My nose is telling me that there's more to this war, Thorin. You can help the Stonefoot. I'll move my army somewhere else. It won't be as large as yours, and I'll lack archers, but I've got crossbowmen aplenty. I've been in touch with King Greyaxe or Green Spike hold, and I hope to base myself there until this war is over."

Thorin nodded pensively. Green Spike hold was a Blacklock city, a hill hold like the Iron Hills, although the territory it was set into was entirely different from what little he knew of it. It was the furthest south of the Blacklock cities, and his merchants and diplomats hadn't had much to do with it, even as the trade between the Blacklock city of Red Rock and Erebor picked up to include other Blacklock cities. More importantly, though, the strategic location of Green Spike was... interesting. "You suspect the Easterlings are going to attack on a broader front then? It crossed my mind to wonder if they were going to do so, but I've seen no news from my wife's people that has occurred as yet."

"Perhaps, perhaps not. But something is telling me that there is more going on here than we have heard just yet." Dain looked troubled for a moment. "Something has roused the Easterlings. The entirety of them, not just this or that clan, or even this or that group of clans. No, this is... I do not know what it is," Dain confessed. "But I trust my nose when it comes to trouble. You will be pushing northeast, which will put your army close enough to one of the Blacklock holds, and if I shift my army to Green Spike, we'll be in a position to help them or Red Rock."

The Blacklock House had three holds, each of which was larger than the individual holds of the Stonefoot House, thanks to the fact that they had entirely lost one hold in the same war, which had Red Rock change hands for a time. Red Rock, a hill hold was the centermost of the three, was two and a half weeks travel away from the northernmost mountain hold of Parn's Tower and three and a half weeks travel from the southmost hold, Green Spike. "That makes sense. Is there anything you need from me and mine to help your own muster along?"

"No. I sent out several shipments of weapons and armor that need to be replaced, but I ordered a shipment of weapons about two days after you arrived, along with several of those magically enhanced carts. They'll arrive here in three weeks. Once it arrives, my army will move out," Dain said firmly. "A thousand infantry, eight hundred boar riders, and a thousand five hundred crossbowmen."

"A formidable force, and one that still leaves enough of our folk here to protect the Iron Hills if need be. Which hopefully it won't, considering the Blacklocks are also mobilizing," Thorin answered, nodding his head slowly. Not as large as his own force, but with the boar riders and crossbowmen, it would probably be able to hit just as hard. "And what do your own logistics look like?" He added, wrinkling his brows.

"There, I'm afraid we haven't nearly as many donkeys, let alone the special metal plaques that the Erebor rune masters were able to devise with their new arrays. Such things take time, but as I said, I was able to procure several dozen carts from Erebor. Half of which will have the Potter & Surehand Special Assortment on them."

Thorin chuckled at that name, remembering how Harry had looked when it first came up in conversation, but it was accurate, nonetheless. It wouldn't be as useful for an army on the move as it would for simply transporting food in the first place, but those arrays would still be useful. The lightness array was a godsend for animals and carts alike, to say nothing of the enhanced durability arrays worked into the metal wheels and axles on those carts. "Excellent. In that case, I think it is time we..."

He paused at a knock on the door, and Dain shouted, "Enter!"

One of his servants entered, opening the door to allow a messenger to come through. Judging by the sash he was wearing on his shoulder, he was one of the outer watch messengers, and he bowed towards Dain. "My King, there is a lone human at the gates. He says he is Saruman the White."

The two Longbeard kings looked at one another in surprise. Then Thorin shook his head, chuckling quietly. "If it weren't my friend Harry showing up, I would've thought Tharkûn would be the one to stick his nose into our business."

"The fact that a wizard is sticking his nose in puts more credence into the idea that it isn't just our business. Even if we dwarves are the only ones being attacked at present," Dain answered tartly. He didn't have nearly as much faith in the wizards as his cousin did, nor had he had any dealings with even Tharkûn. But Dain knew that Saruman had dealings with the Stiffbeard House on occasion, and Dain had seen humans passing through to commission various glasswork from the Blacklock House under the wizard's name. Turning back to the messenger, he nodded. "Show him down."

In a mountain hold, that would have been 'show him in', but Iron Hills was a hill hold. What they lacked in width, they made up for in depth. The entirety of the hills that gave their name to the hold was filled with small caverns and tunnels containing houses, mining areas, smithies, and everything else a city needed. There were farms around and on the hill, but they were small, with the majority of what was on the surface defensive towers, walls, and keeps, all interconnected by underground tunnels.

Currently, Thorin, Dain and Noli were in Dain's Royal sitting room, the equivalent of Thorin's back in Erebor. The only difference was that Dain's palace was built in a small cavern set directly below a larger cavern. While the larger cavern was not the side of Erebor, the smaller cavern was actually larger than Thorin's palace.

The three of them didn't have long to wait, and soon, Saruman was led into the sitting room.

Almost immediately, Thorin was struck by how like yet unlike he was to Tharkûn. The two of them were certainly of an age, wizened and ancient seeming but somehow still spry and energetic, leaning on a staff more for affectation than need. His eyes were piercing, looking at all three dwarves as if he could see far below the surface of each.

Yet Tharkûn held himself a little more like a normal person. In a crowd of old people, Tharkûn could disappear if he so wished, and he liked to simply fit in wherever he went. His eyes were both piercing and kind and his mannerisms gentle.

Thorin did not think that Saruman would be able to pull that off, nor would he even try. His face was far more regal, far more austere than Tharkûn's, and he did not seem the type to want to be thought of as just another person. Rather, he gave off the air of someone who was above most people. His eyes were judging rather than warm, and his body language was far more standoffish.

Yet when he spoke, Saruman's voice was a rich baritone, warm and welcoming, and instantly Thorin and Dain both smiled. "Good Kings, I thank you for seeing me. It has taken me quite a few months to travel here from Orthanc, given the dangers between. Yet I am glad that I at least arrived somewhat in time if you are still here, King Oakenshield."

"Truly? Yet you have not told us what brings you here, Saruman," Thorin said, standing and bowing from the waist towards the old wizard. "As far as I know, no call for aid from the Stonefoot House made it so far west as to reach any of the human realms, let alone Orthanc, where I believe Tharkûn mentioned you reside normally."

"We of the Wise have our own ways of hearing news. We have heard of the wars against the Eastern Houses of the dwarves, and I am here to lend my aid to that endeavor," Saruman said, bowing back to the king of Erebor. "If you worked with my friend Gandalf in the past, I am certain you will find me useful..."

End Chapter