

Howdy all! This is the next chapter of Fate.

Good news: it only took me since Thursday to write this up. Bad news: I only started on it on Thursday because my parents didn't arrive to take over half-day babysitting for my niece until Thursday. So I couldn't really do stuff up to that point. RL and family, what can ya do?

Anyway, posting it here first, and then on Wednesday over on fanfic. This chapter's mostly about Harry and his companions learning more about the Easterlings and making plans, as well as showing that, while the Stonefoot House isn't nearly as militant or rich as the Longbeards, they still got mad skill.

Chapter 27: Know Thy Enemy

Healing the wounded among the caravan took Harry, with his middling skills with small-scale healing spells, and Tauriel, with her knowledge of poultices and herbal remedies, some time after the battle had ended. By that point, the dwarves of Varni's Folly had finished slaughtering the routed enemy and begun to build large pyres to burn the dead Easterlings and sent their own wounded back into Varni's Folly. Tauriel had noticed there seemed to be a goodly number of said, but few dead from when the Stonefoot House warriors had come up out of the fog behind the enemy as the Easterling host surrounded the cart fort.

Fili soon met with two of the locals along with Thunderbelly. This talk had gone on for some time, during which the two young dwarves Harry and Tauriel had saved had been sent forward to the hold. They had been accompanied by the horses that had been captured in that battle and the wounded from Erebor as well as the caravan's dead. Twenty-nine dwarves had lost their lives among the Longbeards during the battle. That was a grievous toll for those left, although an astonishingly small number in comparison to the piles of dead Easterlings they had piled up.

Once their wounded were sent off, the caravan began to shift out from its previous circular position, although they did need to split up some of the donkey teams. Several of the donkeys had also died during the battle makeshift cart fortress when a few of the Easterlings had gotten past the carts themselves or hurled spears past the defenders.

From where she had been helping to set a dwarf's broken arm, Tauriel could see several of the drovers bowing sadly over the dead donkeys, stroking their heads and murmuring something in Khuzdul. *I always find it strange how dwarves simply cannot take to farming or animal husbandry for the most part. One out of every eight hundred or so have a feel for the soil rather than the stone, I think was the way Thorin put it once. Yet they all love their doughty little donkeys. I suppose stubbornness calls to stubbornness.*

Tauriel shivered as the smoke of a nearby pile of dead wafted over the hill and pulled away from her work. Holding a hand over her nose and mouth, Tauriel fought down an urge to retch as the smell of charring meat, refuse and leather hit her.

The dwarf she had been working on nodded sagely. "Aye, lass, the smell of burning dead bothers me too. Hopefully the wind will change quickly."

She looked at him closely, realizing that given his age, the Longbeard dwarf, who was among the many that Tauriel hadn't talked to during the journey, might have been one of the dwarves who had fled from Erebor when Smaug attacked. *If so, he probably knows that smell all too well, even if he wart part of the Battle of the Lonely Mountain.* "It is a scent that I hope to never become used to, good dwarf."

He snorted at that as Tauriel bent to her work once more. "Nor does anyone else, lass."

It wasn't only the smell that was bothering Tauriel, that was making her feel weak and drained. The weight of the battle hung on her shoulders with all the weight of a great oak, and Tauriel knew she needed to get away for a time. Looking around, Tauriel breathed a sigh of relief at how there were no more wounded within the caravan to see to and went to find Harry.

She found him leaning against one of the caravan's carts, his eyes closed, as he kneaded his face with both hands wearily. Healing on top of the battle had seemingly taken it out of him as well, although whether or not that was physically or on a spiritual what level, Tauriel wasn't quite certain. *Probably both, honestly.*

Nearby two of them had already begun to be pulled away from the fortress. It was led by the chief drover, Burgo, and Tauriel paused for a moment next to him. "I would recommend going around the battlefield and the enemy camp to the south of us. From what I can see from here that territory is a little flatter, with less rocks to get in the way. Getting back onto the road as quickly as possible after you bypass the Easterling camp would also be advisable."

With the windrows of dead Easterlings on the road and in the area between the cart fort and the Easterling camp, there was no need to discuss why taking the road the whole way was a bad idea. On the other hand that road, at least here, did actually deserve the name, being flat and paved with stonework. Quite unlike the bare, almost invisible trail they'd followed since leaving Erebor.

Burgo nodded, bowing his head to her respectfully, before turning away. "Alright, you worthless bits of pyrite, get a move on!" He bellowed in his massive voice. He was so loud Tauriel was pushed away almost by the sound, while dozens of dwarves within hearing range all turned and glared at the bombastic man.

Harry had also looked up at the shout, but his eyes found Tauriel, remaining on her as she moved towards him, his face shifting into a tender smile. "How are you holding up?" He asked, as she reached him.

"Not very well, Harry. I..." Tauriel fell silent as Harry's hands clasped one of her own, pulling her into a side hug, and she leaned her head against his shoulder for second, taking some solace in that touch and his wordless support.

Killing other sentient beings never came easily to elves, who felt the soul, the Fëa, was sacred regardless of race. Warped as their souls were, as evil as their actions were, the Easterlings were all human, unlike fell creatures like the orcs, goblins and trolls who had created in the darkness of Angband in the First Age. This whole battle had worn on her in a way that Tauriel had never had to deal with before, and it left her drawn, exhausted and wholly out of sorts.

"I need to get away for a time," she said simply, shaking her head. "I, I will return in a few hours, when night falls at the latest, but for now..." Tauriel gestured almost helplessly towards the fires, the smoke coming off of them, the dead that liberally covered the ground in nearly every direction.

"I understand beloved," Harry said, whispering the words into her hair before kissing the top of her head gently. "Do you think you'll meet me inside Varni's Folly, or outside?"

"I think I will meet you outside." Tauriel's lips quirked, and despite the horror of the day pressing in on her mind still she tried to essay a small bit of humor. "I think that the Stonefoots would look at me very askance if I was able to get past their defenses and into the valley hold without them knowing it. Thus it might behoove me to somewhat diplomatic."

Harry chuckled about, gave her another kiss to her forehead, then let her go. Tauriel leaned up, gave him a brief kiss on the cheek in turn, then moved away, picking up speed as she first crossed the area that still remained within the circle of carts, then past them and out the other side, racing on until she was out of sight well to the west beyond the battlefield. Harry watched her go until she was well out of sight, then shook himself and pushed away from the car he had been leaning against, looking over to one of the dead bodies that had yet to be collected from near the caravan.

It was one of the Blood Hand, the religious elite of the Easterling Army. Two dwarves Stonefoot dwarves from Thunderbelly's troop were working on the man's armor, pulling it off and setting it aside, along with the gambeson, laughing quietly as they mocked its quality.

All of the Stonefoot dwarves Harry could see in sight from the army that had come out of Varni's Folly were doing the same. Further, every twentieth dwarf in sight had pulled out a

scroll and an ink blot to make notes as large piles of weapons and armor were being made, not just dead bodies. It was stinking, horrific work, but evidently the dwarves of Varni's Folly had decided that nothing the enemy army had could go to waste. They had also begun to ransack the camp from what Harry could tell, but only the areas around the perimeter for now.

"Which is probably a good thing. I don't know enough about the worship of Lord High Evilness, but I know enough about it to be incredibly leery. Dwarves might be resistant to outside influence and corruption in general, but if Smaug could infect gold with Gold Madness powerful enough to drive Thorin mad for a bit, then who knows what could be found on a worshipper of Morgoth or Sauron," he murmured to himself, causing a flinch in the only dwarf near enough to hear.

Back in his old dimension, Harry knew about cursed items and so forth of course, like the diary he had run into in his second year at Hogwarts. He didn't think the dwarves would discover anything similar to that here, but with the machinations of Sauron to consider, it was always best to err on the side of caution.

As he was thinking, Fili had moved over to the two dwarves who were working on the body of the Blood Hand warrior, and after a short series of words, the two of them pulled off his undershirt as well, revealing the man's chest. The dwarf would been working on his body spat something pithy in Khuzdul and Fili sighed, looking over at Harry, and gesturing him over.

Harry already knew what they would see, but wondering why it was important he moved towards them. True to his prediction, like the first Blood Hand they had captured and questioned days back, this one had the same bloody hand-shaped scar etched on his chests. Within that bleeding hand was an equally large bleeding eye, with each droplet of blood from both hand and eye denoted by a smaller scar. Only the number of droplets was different in each one, denoting some kind of difference in status. *Or perhaps just experience? Like battles won in the name of the cult?*

"Harry, I've informed the Stonefoot commanders of your presence. They know you're an Istari, and since you're here, they want you to be among the first to enter the central area of the camp now that the battles over and examine things there. If there's anything... Tainted, we want it gone, and the locals know that the central area of the camp is the place where such would be," Fili explained. All of the Blood Hand members which weren't acting as officers were housed there."

"I would've volunteered for that anyway, and not just because I'm also worried about something of that nature." While Harry had yet to truly get a handle on the senses that he had been given once he had finished transforming from Earth-type wizard to Arda-type Istari tied to Arien, the Maiar of Light, he was confident that he would be able to discover anything that was

tainted by blood magic or something similar. *At least, I hope so*, he thought worriedly, before shaking that unease off. “There is also a lot we can learn from studying the comp of our enemies, anyway. We don’t know enough about the Easterlings for my liking.”

Fili frowned at that, and a dwarf from nearby, who Harry hadn’t noticed before this, spoke up as well. His Common was harsh and stilted as if he had to think of each word before he said it, completely unused to the language. “What do you mean by that wizard?”

Before Harry could answer both the question and the sneering wariness in the dwarf’s tone, Thunderbelly came around to the nearest cart. Before the local dwarf could turn to look his way, Thunderbelly slapped him upside the head hard enough to nearly send the other dwarf to his knees. “You’ll watch your tone when you speak to Harry Dwarf Friend, Proli, or you’ll face me in the wrestling ring! Besides everything he’s down for the Longbeards, Potter’s helped us tremendously this day, and his might of arm, magic and mind will undoubtedly continue to help us going forward.”

Harry acknowledged that with a nod, before addressing the dwarf who questioned him. “I don’t know about you all from Varni’s Folly, but I wasn’t able to discover much about the Easterlings from speaking to Thorin or on our way here. If you know anything about their culture, their leadership, and so forth, then I am all ears, but even so there would still be stuff to discover from an enemy camp. Writings, missives from this army to their high command, maps, even logistics contracts and so forth.”

Harry used the word contract there deliberately, because he knew it would gain the dwarves’ attention. Regardless of house, contracts and written agreements were a cornerstone of dwarven culture and were highly important. All three of his listeners nodded, although they still looked a little confused, which Fili put into words. “The idea of maps and writing and so forth being important is one thing Harry, but why would their culture be important to know about? Why would their leadership be important to know about?”

“Is it easier to make a deal with someone you know or don’t know? Can you predict their actions better if you know someone or are meeting them for the first time after only hearing rumors?” Harry asked shrugging his shoulders. Then he gestured to the body of the Blood Hand nearby. “For specific examples of information that might help us, we know that the Order of the Bloody Hand is some kind of quasi-religious elite. How far does that go? How many of them are there in comparison to the number of normal Easterlings? What do the rest of their folks think of them? If the Blood Hands are not only feared, but revered, that will make this war far, far harder.”

Harry waited, and Fili nodded slowly, while Thunderbelly and Proli both still looked more bemused than anything. With a mental shrug, Harry went on.

When Tauriel and I infiltrated a small camp of Easterlings a few days ago, we learned that their discipline is incredibly harsh. Moreover, no one is willing to stand against these Blood Hands, and the Easterlings don't speak about the Great Warlord. If someone tries, they take matters into their own hands to see such is punished. But how far does that spread? Further, how good are their logistics? All of them have those full face-covering helmets and weapons. How are they able to do that? Why helmets instead of chest armor?"

Lots of the dead Easterlings were what Harry termed light cavalry. They didn't have much in the way of armor with boiled leather cuirasses or gambesons making up the majority. They also had heavy cavalry, of course, but in terms of numbers, Harry thought there was at least twelve light for every single heavy cavalrymen. *And the Blood Hand elite made up a large portion of the heavy cavalry.* As for the reason why they went for helmets, and, further, covered their heads and faces at all times as best they could, well, Harry had some ideas there. None of them good.

The dwarves still looked a little dubious, but Fili at least was frowning thoughtfully rather than dismissively. "You're saying that, that knowing more about your enemy in general is just as important as knowing what they are capable of in terms of tactics, weapons craft and strategy?"

"Exactly. How much stomach for war do their people have, how long can they sustain a campaign? How will the enemy act when faced with sudden reversals? Those kind of questions are almost as important as finding any maps and so forth that we can," Harry agreed. *At least, it was important back in my old world with all the conflicts that occurred there.*

Another dwarf joined them then and hearing those words, he nodded thoughtfully, saying something to Fili in Khuzdul for a second. When he spoke to Harry, his common tongue was just as rusty as the other man's but lacked any kind of overt suspicion. *When was the last time any of these dwarves even saw a human beyond an Easterling, let alone talked to one?*

"That sounds interesting to me. As much as some of our folk have occasionally traded with Easterlings on our borders, we've never really learned much about their culture, about their numbers, or indeed where their main settlements are. It's always been random wandering bands, occasionally even whole families on the move in times of peace. It is obvious that the Blood Hand has become a kind of elite class among the Easterlings which they were not even as long ago as fifteen years, but you are correct. If the cult is big enough to dominate their entire society to the point that they all worship...worship the Great Enemy, this war will be far, far harder. I hadn't made that connection before"

The other local who Thunder Bay yet smacked upside the head, Proli, snorted a laugh at that, causing the new speaker to shake his head, before introducing himself to Harry. "I am

Karo. I'm in command of the military forces of Varni's Folly by the words of our chieftain, Stolli Tollmaster."

Harry nodded, although he was somewhat bemused by the fact that the chieftain of the valley hold hadn't come out to war himself. He knew for a fact nothing short of having had his leg chopped off would've kept Thorin from joining a battle like this, and even then he probably would've been hobbling out after the Army or riding a donkey like it was a war horse. Still, he set that to one side, and he, Fili, and the three Stonefoot dwarves made their way through the battlefield towards the camp.

Within a few yards, the smell of the dead that they were walking around hit Harry at last, and he gagged. The dwarves had already pulled out scarves, tying them around their mouths and noses, and after a moment, Fili offered a spare one to Harry, who took it gratefully. He then paused at the site of several of the Easterling heavy cavalry where they had all died. They had seemingly been caught wheeling away from the makeshift forecourt fortress. Their sides and backs were perforated by crossbow bolts that had punched through their chain mail.

Reaching into a pouch, Harry pulled out a quill, which he tapped with a finger, then, after pulling down the scarf, tapped his once more glowing finger against his mouth. The dwarves watched askance as the Quill then began to hover in the air. A bit of parchment soon hovered next to it, following Harry around for a moment. "What is that for, Harry?"

"It's to take notes on anything that we find. Writing everything down right away is probably a very good idea, and I noticed that none of you had thought to bring along any writing implements."

"Apologies, but the armies... Assayers? Quartermasters?" Karo looking at Harry and Fili thoughtfully.

"Quartermaster probably is close enough," Harry opined, to which Fili nodded as well.

"Quartermasters then, are going to be busy tallying up the total goods that we have claimed from the dead Army. And I honestly did not think that taking notes of what we would find in the camp would be all that important. What serves us knowing what the enemy have taken from us, or about their horrid rites?" There was a hint of interest and challenge alike in Karo's words, as if he, while being already partially convinced by Harry's words, wanted to see some actionable intelligence to back it up.

Harry nodded equitably at that and gestured down to the armor of the heavy cavalry. "I'm not a metalsmith like Thorin is, but I would ask if it's unusual for metal from the east to be this kind of color."

"It is very usual, although I don't know any dwarf who has asked about it. All we know is that it isn't strong enough to stop good dwarf and steel more than a few times," Karo answered. "Are you looking for something specific?"

Behind them, Thunderbelly grimaced a little, looking away. In actuality, Stonefoot weapons were mostly not of good quality when compared to those of the Longbeard house, and the Easterling armor did well enough against their weapons. And worse, their tactics. *We need more of those crossbows the Longbeards and my company used. Not only are they better made than ours, but they are faster to fire, and just as powerful as our homemade ones. Just as much as Harry's spell work, those crossbows made a significant difference in how well the battle went around the cart fort. I know I purchased a full cartload of them, but that's still too few.*

"No, not really. I don't know enough about metallurgy to say I'm looking for anything specific as he put it. I'm just wondering," Harry said with a shrug. "Knowledge is power, any kind of information we come up with about the Easterlings might prove useful in the long run. If, say, this metal's susceptible to rust, then if you're in a siege again, attacking after a few days of rainfall might be a good idea. Or what if all their metal comes from a single source, and that's why it all looks the same?"

Karo hummed thoughtfully, while his fellow muttered something about how only knowing about how to kill them really mattered, in as efficient and cheap a manner as possible. "From what I understand, it isn't unusual for swords or armor made in a hold to look somewhat alike, I have heard of that before. It's an interesting idea, but I still don't see why it would be important."

"In my old world, there was a war. One side was evil in a way that only the Great Enemy could ever match. They were eventually beaten, not only by wins on the battlefield or conquering their territory, but because there was a single resource they needed most of all for their war, and once the source of it was cut off, whole armies were left on the vine, unable to retreat fast enough or at all. If our enemy can't make new armor, can't replace broken weapons because we have cut them off from their source of steel, then..." he shrugged.

"Then they will be weakened, and desperate to secure another source of iron," Karo exclaimed, suddenly getting it. "I see."

The others all nodded too and began to banter questions back and forth about the Easterlings, wondering what else they could learn, hat it would matter, and so forth before Karo shouted at a nearby Stonefoot, sending the warrior off. They were joined a few moments later by Gimli, followed by one of the local quartermasters and a group of ten Stonefoot warriors.

"Where did Tauriel run off to?" Gimli asked, looking around for the redheaded elf. Without her hood up, the elfish woman should have been extremely noticeable.

“She needed to excuse herself from the battlefield for a bit,” Harry answered simply. “The battle wore on her in a way that Tauriel wasn’t quite prepared for.”

The locals all looked at one another, then Proli asked Thunderbelly something under his breath. The answer caused him to sneer, and several of the other Stonefoot dwarves in hearing range also sneered, looking at Harry even more askance than they had been.

Harry paused in place, his eyes locking on to Proli. The light from them, muted in the day, still caused the man to flinch suddenly as he felt the power of that gaze on him. “Do you have anything you want to say?” Harry asked softly.

The obstreperous Proli slowly shook his head, and backed away, and Harry’s gaze flicked around the group of Stonefoot warriors. None of them could meet his Arien-touched gaze, and Fili snorted, patting Harry on the elbow. “Don’t worry about him Harry. The locals will start to get to know you and will come to trust you and your lady as much as my house does and will also stop worrying about her elvish status. But even the finest forge will always produce some slag.”

No dwarf would ever gainsay another’s right to be with their One. That wasn’t really the issue here. The issue was that Harry was supposedly an Istari, and Tauriel, more importantly, was an elf. Although the Stonefoot House had never had much dealings with elves, neither good nor bad, they still retained the normal dwarfish wariness and distaste for elves.

Harry blinked, then laughed, pushing Fili lightly on the shoulder, as the walk resumed. “That was a very Thorin way of putting things, my friend.”

“Are you saying that my uncle, my male role model and king, has influenced my mode of speech? how dare you!” Fili said, clapping two hands to his face in mock-shock.

Harry chuckled again, then looked at Fili. “Speaking of Thorin though, you haven’t seemed to choose any craft for yourself, have you? I know that Kili wishes to become a warrior like Gimli, but I thought your mother at some point had mentioned that you weren’t nearly as warlike as your younger brother.”

The two youngsters had come a long way since the time that they had been two of the youngest and easily the most jovial of Thorin’s company. Kili had become a respected warrior, constantly training with Thorin and Dwalin whenever he wasn’t out on caravan leader duty, not just becoming a warrior, but a war leader, who had had the guardianship of several caravans under his belt before the latest one he had left on heading down to Stiffbeard land, and the woman he was apparently courting there. Similarly, Fili had grown into his role as air to Erebor. Indeed, this entire mission was just another part of that growth.

Fili didn't lead like Thorin did, through willpower and personal strength, but through charisma and thoughtfulness. Harry felt he would be a good king, several centuries from now anyway. Given how long dwarves lived, it would be highly unusual if all he did was simply wait for that time in the future when he became king, simply continuing to act as his uncle's hands and ears away from the mountain. Especially considering Balin's duties as chief master.

"I'm not, you're right about that. All Kili wants is a good fight, and" Fili grinned, look past the battlefield to happier moments. "Hopefully finding himself a good woman. However, I can't say that any craft I've put my hands to over the decades have ever called out to me." He shook his head, then went on, his words oddly mirroring Harry's, if in a different direction. "I might take over from Balin as head of our growing diplomatic service, perhaps... or maybe just the espionage aspect of it."

Harry looked at him quizzically at that, and Fili snorted. "Money talks among humans even more than dwarves, and if all of this," he gestured around them, indicating far more than the battlefield within sight. "Is part of the Great Enemy stirring, then we will need to know more about what is going on beyond our borders. Which is not an idea that many dwarves are comfortable with. I am, and having a dedicated spy organization could be very important going forward."

"Back on my old planet, every nation had their own spy network. Many even spied on their friends, just to know what they were thinking from one moment to the next," Harry said thoughtfully. Fili's words were niggling something at the back of his mind, but he couldn't bring it to the fore right now. "I don't see the need for that on Arda but mixing spying on other nations with scouting enemy terrain and so forth could be very useful. I did mention how I'm hoping we can find some maps of the East, remember."

This small talk took them to the outskirts of the Easterling encampment. From here, Harry could see that while most of the tents had been smashed down or trampled during the dwarven assault, many of them had been bypassed, being out of the way of the straight charge from Varni's Folly towards the embattled cart fort or simply having no one within to grab the attention of the charging dwarves.

Yet even here, among the communal tenants and the fires, there were a few oddities. First, segments of the camp were marked out by ditches. Wide, but not very deep, they were more than enough to force a dwarf to need a run up to leap over. Fili and Gimli did so easily, while two Stonefoot, with much grumbling between them, were forced to step down into the ditches and then pull themselves up over the other side.

"They've got more of these facing Varni's Folly, but thankfully, we knew ahead of time about them. We brought along bags of dirt and rocks and tossed them ahead of us to make

paths through,” Karo said, pointing in that direction of the camp. “They’ve also got built-up areas, mounds of dirt which my commanders and I watched them build them from the wall.”

Proli sneered. “Using their swords, hands and other makeshift tools to do it. Fools didn’t seem to bring along a single shovel.” His sneer deepened into a wrathful snarl. “Although that changed soon when their raiders started to bring back good dwarven tools to help with the work.”

Every dwarf there flinched at that while Harry made a note of that with his quick quill, wondering why the Easterlings hadn’t thought to bring tools like that along. *I mean, they’d need shovels for latrines if nothing else.* For the dwarves, though, the idea of tools, things that their owners had created or bought with good coin the dwarves in question had earned, was horrifying, something Harry knew from his time in helping to explore Erebor.

Fili asked solicitously if those tools had already begun to be recovered. They had, and Karo’s quartermasters would try their hardest to make certain those tools find their way back either to any surviving family member, or the original seller. “Our quartermasters are going to be very, very busy, for the next few days.”

“I’ll be willing to create copies of any paperwork they’re doing if it helps,” Harry offered.

Karo blinked, then smiled, tugging his beard respectfully towards Harry. “That would be a truly incredible offer, Harry, and I accept wholeheartedly. I will ask you to help with that tomorrow morning if that is alright?”

When Harry nodded, Gimli hummed thoughtfully, and wanting to move the conversation along, staring over a crushed tent towards where one of the berms that Karo had been speaking of. “Hmm... perhaps those mounds are for siege weapons like ballista or catapults? Those mounds look large enough for such.”

“The Easterlings don’t have anything like that. Mahal’s beard, they don’t even have many bows, let alone anything else,” Proli snorted. “And even if they did, our own would smash them easily. We might not have many, but we’ve got a few catapults on the walls.”

“Maybe, but in so doing, that would give your engine’s position away,” Harry murmured, shaking his head. *Like two wizards in a duel fighting between one another, hiding as much as they are attacking.* “I can’t imagine you can move such easily. Still, you’re right. From the impression I’ve been getting so far of the Easterlings, I don’t think they go in much in the way of siege equipment.”

A moment later though, one of the other Stonefoots nearby shouted at them, gesturing them towards one of the tents that hadn’t been smashed down by the dwarves. Within, they

found several large bolts, about as long as a man was tall, thin, but with a built-up arrowhead on top.

The Stonefoots looked at them, tapped the metal, and sneered at the general quality of them, with Karo shaking his head. "While the idea of destroying our own engines on top of the walls has some merit, these wouldn't help them break even our gate. Perhaps the local general had ideas above his station in a way and hoped to do more than he had been assigned to."

"So you are of the opinion as well that this army was mainly to keep your troops behind your walls?" Fili asked, while Harry knelt down and examined some of the other ballista bolts, before entering the tent looking around thoughtfully.

"Aye. We dwarves are hardy folk as you well know, but we can't run horses to ground easily, and hit-and-run tactics against us in the field are devastating. Keep us here, siege Spider's Bane and the Grip, and play the long game," Karo stated firmly.

"Be very thankful that these Easterlings have never developed horse archers either," Harry murmured, before shaking his head, although once more something Karo had said tried to spark something in his mind. "They've only the bolts here, unless they've got parts of the blisters elsewhere in camp, this looks like a logistics error of some kind. And also..."

Harry hefted one of the ballista bolts up off the ground difficulty, shaking his head as he put it off. "These crates have at least ten bolts each in them. Carrying even one crate would be work for a cart, or several horses carrying them between them? No single horse carrying two of these would be able to move very quickly, if at all."

Fili looked around, estimating. "There are at least fifty crates here. I'd wager anything that these came after the Easterlings got situated here and were supposed to be brought along with the rest of the ballista. There could be a caravan or something similar moving somewhere to the east bringing such."

Face lighting up with interest, Karo nodded at that and exiting the tent, began to relay orders to one of the local Stonefoot. He raced off, or as fast as a Stonefoot warrior could go anyway. Much like Thunderbelly and most of the other Stonefoot warriors that Harry had met, the runner was far heavier looking than the Longbeards of Erebor whom Harry was most used to.

Gimli moved over after Karo. When he came back, Gimli was scowling a bit. Harry caught the motion, and asked, "What's wrong?"

"Karo is sending out a strong group of scouts, but few of them have bows, and none have crossbows. The Stonefoot crossbows are far heavier than our own, and their scouts don't use them often. I'd offered to send out a few of my own, but he refused. I'll admit his idea to

use some of the captured horses is a good idea, but even so, having only two out of the twenty have bows is foolish,” Gimli grunted.

“It is his army, cousin,” Fili said, from Gimli’s other side, placing a hand on the other young dwarf’s shoulder. “Remember, this army’s been cooped up in Varni’s Folly for some time. If the Stonefoots want to get some of their own back without us setting them up for it, that is on their heads.”

The nearby Proli grumbled at that, but didn’t say anything as the group moved on, with Thunderbelly actually offering an apology for his fellow Stonefoot. “We are all stone stubborn and as prideful as mountains, Gimli. It was your plan and the distraction of the cart fort and Harry’s magic which gave us this mighty victory, relieved Varni’s Folly of the siege, and Karo and the rest of his officers know it. Let them search for a small win all their own.”

“...” Harry stayed silent for a few seconds, then had to sit speak up. “You do realize that you described nearly every dwarf I’ve ever met with that first sentence, right?”

Thunderbelly laughed at that as did the others, even a few nearby Stonefoot warriors who had overheard. Still laughing, the group continued on to a few other tents, with Harry activating his quick quill again, to take notes of what they found. There was little meat to be found, but oddly enough, lots of butter, and what Harry could identify as powdered milk. It didn’t look like what he had cooked with occasionally back in his old world, but he could recognize it regardless. Millet too could be found in lots of little pouches that had been left behind in a few of the tents nearest where the horses had been kept.

Other than that, there was dwarfish food in the form of bread, tubers, apples and vegetables. All of which was portioned out to each tent they examined in equal amounts, placed in piles near the large communal coral cauldron set into the middle of the equally communal tent. There was also drink, steins left on bodies or beside bedrolls, one of which Gimli held up to his nose, sniffing at experimentally before placing it down. “That’s fermented milk.”

“How do you know that?” Fili asked his cousin in confusion. “I’ve never even heard that milk could be fermented, let alone drunk.”

Gimli blushed a little looking away, tugging his beard self-consciously. “Let’s just say that it is a memory from my younger years of a dare from a friend. That kind of smell stays with you. It is somewhat nutritious, and can keep a body going, and has a kick to it, too.”

“Now I am both wondering how exactly you know all of that and what you would’ve had to do if you hadn’t agreed to the dare,” Fili snickered.

Gimli shivered a little, shaking his head and now pawing rather than just tugging at his beard looking away, causing the others to laugh.

“Hmm... I suppose you could get milk from mares rather than cows. And look, these waterskins seem to be color coded. This one has a white cap,” Harry pointed out, looking at the waterskin for a second before setting it aside. Another with a blue cap had water. A third wineskin had a red cap. Pulling it open, Harry poured out a dollop onto a nearby bedroll, frowning. “That looks like blood.”

The dwarves all agreed and looked at one another then Harry. Even Karo, who had returned by this point, looked a little uneasy, and Gimli asked hesitantly, “Do any of us know how to tell a difference between an animal blood and human blood? Do these easterners use blood like that in some ritual or something? Or is this the blood of some unlucky dwarf who they captured?”

The very idea seemed to incense the dwarves, but Harry shook his head. “I’m going to try to use a spell. It should have the blood flow towards the nearest source of the person or animal it came from.” That caused some queasy looks among the locals, but they still watched as Harry poured out the rest of the blood in the container into a bowl. Then as it began to pool, Harry waved his free hand over the bowl, the fingers of his hand sparking with yellow energy as he moved them in such a way that Thunderbelly wondered aloud if being an Istari had given Harry an extra finger joint.

The spell was a modified Point Me spell, which Harry had modified with a few finger movements from a fetching spell that used the law of similarities to call one item to another. After a moment, it seemed to work. The blood began to shift in the pool, not towards any of them, but towards the back end of the tent.

One of the dwarves reluctantly moved in that direction, cutting through the back of the tent, and Harry followed the surging blood in the bowl until he found a dead horse, not noticing how that dwarf and several others flinched away at the sight of his gleaming eyes underneath the tent canopy, or the sigh of relief as his eyes shifted back to normal in the light of the sunset. The others all watched as he circled around the horse, then breathed a joint sigh of relief from everyone around when he said, “It’s pointing to the horse.”

I can’t say all of those wineskins are going to hold horse blood, but at least it looks like the Easterlings only use horse blood in their cooking, and not anything else. Harry noted that down for his quick quill, before saying louder, “Communal tents seem designed to hold from twenty to forty each. The largest item I see in terms of supply in the tent is a large cauldron. Everything else comes in sizes that could be carried on a horse with a man, or perhaps on a pack horse, if each individual has more than one horse to their name.”

Looking around the tent, he continued. “They have some, very small, meat packaged in salt, but most of the meat looks fresh, and probably are made from horses. Beyond that,

significant amounts of food come from what we heard was called the Tithe, which had large groups of raiders bring in food to add to a communal pile and then split up between the various squads or whatever they are called.”

A similar spell on sausages that were hanging from the tent poles had them straining in the same direction as the dead horse. Harry noted that down as well, then looked at one of the opened packages of meat, pulling out some of the salt, staring at it in confusion before tentatively licking it. “Much like the metal of their weapons and armor, the salt used to preserve some of the meat has a strangely dark color. It almost looks more like pepper rather than salt but is most certainly salt in and taste.”

Karo turned away from another Stonefoot warrior, gesturing to Harry with some urgency. “Come Istari. One of the other intact tents holds armor and other things that we recognize coming from the Blood Hand, and the men who have entered say there is a feeling to the place, an oily clinging vileness from something within.”

“Whoever is behind that cult really needs to work on naming things. Cult of the Bloody Hand first, then calling everyone in it Blood Hands? Seriously, there’s keeping with a gimmick, and just having no imagination,” Harry quipped, hoping to lighten the mood which had just plummeted.

It worked, but Harry’s mood personally plummeted in turn when he entered the tent that Karo’s people showed him too. Because the moment Harry pushed the tent flap out of the way, he felt something in the air, a miasma or lingering foulness that hit his senses like a punch to the way. It reminded him strongly of being in the presence of the sword that Gandalf had sprung on Galadriel and the White Council in Rivendell. It wasn’t as strong, but it still made his scarred hand twitch in pain.

Yet he pushed the pain aside easily. Pain was an old friend, even pain like this. He stood there unmoving for a second, taking in everything around him, searching for the cause of the miasma of darkness. *No... causes...* he thought after a moment.

This tent was bigger than any of the others, and not because it was any more accoutered within. Rather, here too, the Easterling soldiers seemed to practice austerity, well, outside of things they had taken in war. Despite there being a good deal of jewelry, a few gold necklaces, copper bracelets with large cut gems in them, furs, and uncut gems, though, Harry felt this tent could house at least seventy Easterlings.

There were a few extra sets of armor left behind in the rush to get ready and attack the caravan. Harry wondered aloud, more to take his mind off the pain in his hand than for any other reason, if that was because their owners hadn’t bothered to get into armor or if this was a sign that even on the move move like this, the Blood Hand could add to their numbers. “If so,

that's a bad sign for how much organization and society-wide respect they have, if others wish to join their ranks."

Moving forward, Harry nearly hissed as his hand throbbed when he stepped near a dagger laying on the ground. It reeked of Mordor, and he could feel the throbbing from his scarred hand get worse as he knelt down beside it. "I understand the Stonefoots want to melt down most of the armor and other things we have taken from this army, but these..." He touched the dagger and began to feel a roiling fury within him, the part of him connected to the Maiar Arien practically howling to do something, to banish these tainted creations.

"Daggers like these cannot be reclaimed. Break them, bury them in the dirt, do anything but melt them. They're not as fell as Nazgûl blades, but there is magic to them that is... anathema," he nearly snarled.

Following the impulse coming from his connection to Arien, Harry turned, and moving between the dwarves, headed back out of the tent. Above them, Anar was still in the sky, although it was pushing well past midday and into evening now. As he held up the blade, though, a gleam of sunlight seemed to solidify, coming in from an angle to impact Harry, then coalescing into his hand, where it melted the blade away.

This process Did not hurt Harry, neither the heat of the blade or the searing touch of the sun. Rather, it was as if the blade had simply turned into shadow in his grip, disappearing, the power of the sun banishing the darkness woven into the blade's creation.

The dwarves watched this, and all respectfully stood aside as Harry reentered the tent, bringing out still more of the daggers. Unable to hold one in his scarred hand, which by this point was now clenched at his sign like a tortured claw, Harry brought the daggers out one after another watching as they disappeared like smoke on the wind. And only as the last faded into nothing but disgusting smelling ash on the wind did the pain in his hand subside. It still throbbed, but, it didn't feel as if his hand was about to come apart at the seams.

Harry stood there for a moment, letting the light the evening's sun wash over his body, trying to ignore the pain in his hand. As he did, he felt Fili move up beside him. "You know, those scars on that hand, it... they were emitting reddish light as you held those blades, Harry. Are you alright?"

"Heh, you know the story about my hands, Fili. You know what caused those scars. I'm just happy that Arien was able to heal one of my hands when I first became her Istari. Beyond that, the Lady of Lothlorien did what she could for them, and for me. The pain won't ever stop coming if I'm close to such items, but at least for the rest of the time, they don't cause me any agony." Harry smirked slightly. "A small price to pay for knowing when such are around, aye?"

"I suppose most might think so." Shaking his head, Fili stood there, his hand on Harry's elbow in wordless support, while the Stonefoots around them all bowed their heads in respect.

When the pain became manageable, Harry and Fili reentered the tent then, and the others stayed silent watching him move around examining things and speaking to the quick quill. He noted the armor, the types of weapons that had been left behind, of which there was a wider variety than they had seen among most of the rest of the army. There were also extra helmets, and other things that emphasized how organized everything seemed. "Whether or not that is part of the general organization of the Army or if the cult was organized and then imposed order on the Easterlings I can't tell, but one way or another, it's a bad sign."

He fell silent for a moment, pulling out several more waterskins, shaking his head, as a creepy crawly feeling went through him. It wasn't quite as bad as being near the daggers, and it was only causing his hand a bit of pain, but there was something very much wrong with whatever concoction was within the oddly ubiquitous waterskin. "Whatever is in here is as foul as the daggers. I don't know what it is, and I don't think I want to."

He looked around, picking out several others that were smart similarly, at least twelve other similar water skins with a green stopper. "Take these and throw them in the fires. I..." Harry frowned then shook his head. "Again I don't know what's in it, but I'd urge you to do so with a fire well away from anything else, and then not to stand anywhere nearby."

That was just a guess on Harry's part, but it was one that the dwarves could easily obey. *And if whatever brew is in here is part of some vile ritual, maybe used in helping to make the Blood Hand's scars so... neat and tidy looking, then breathing it in would be bad.*

Reluctantly a few dwarves came over under Karo's orders, taking the waterskins from Harry. Harry would later learn that they and several others traveled for a half day to the north from the battlefield and then created a small fire pit there before burning whatever tincture was in the waterskins. And as the steam created a myriad of colors above the pit and wafted away, they all stayed well, well away from it until the final bits of steam and smoke it disappeared.

By the time the last of the waterskins had been taken away, Harry had moved on and found even more disturbing signs in the next tent Karo's men had determined were holding things of particular foulness. Here, though it wasn't anything magical the Stonefoot warriors were leery about. Rather, there were the bodies of human women, less than two dozen laid out there as if in repose, but very, very dead.

"I... I wonder if these are camp followers," Harry mused, waving off the dwarves' looks of confusion. Of course their race certainly didn't go into such things, and Harry figured in fact most human armies wouldn't either. *But Easterlings or the Southrons, then its more than likely. But... why are they dead, and in such a manner?* "Are these the only womenfolk you found?"

"Aye," Proli answered with a growl. "None of our troops have reported any. But why would these women kill themselves? Surely even Easterlings know we dwarves don't hurt women?"

While they didn't revere the womenfolk of other races as they did their own dams, dwarves would no more hurt a human woman than they would a human child. If a human woman attacked a dwarf, the dwarf in question would defend himself, but unless the human woman in question was a legitimate threat to his life, the dwarf would treat her with kid gloves.

"I don't know," Harry answered, staring at the dead women sadly as he took in their forms.

Each of the women wore black clothing from head to foot, covering their faces much like the masks of the Easterling warriors did with black wrappings, except for their eyes. And all of them had slit their own throats. *Or at least, Harry reflected morbidly, there didn't seem to be any kind of struggle. If these women didn't kill themselves, they didn't fight their killer.*

"We took the camp so quickly, they needed to make this choice almost within moments of our breaching their defenses. I tell you now, if any of my men had discovered any of these women alive, we would've fought to keep them so! They might be human women, but they are still women!" Karo added to his second-in-command's words, shaking his head and rubbing one hand up over his bald pate. "I will admit they might not have been treated all that well as prisoners, but they would still be alive."

Harry reflected internally that the dwarves would probably have a very different definition of being treated well than a human army would have in similar circumstances, remembering all too well stories of human wars back on earth, and the horrors that befell womenfolk of all sorts after their side lost the battle and they were captured. He didn't say that aloud however, simply nodded, acknowledging Karo's words, before kneeling down next to one of the women. "I want to see if these womenfolk are marked like the men of the Order of the Bloody Hand. If you all wish to turn away I will completely understand."

Fili was the only one who did not, kneeling down to help Harry remove the woman's clothing, one after another. The others all had turned away when they heard between hisses from behind them.

"They are marked," Harry said grimly. "But not in the same manner as the men. Instead of having the scar of the hand on their chests, these women have the mark of the Blood Hand on their stomachs. I don't think I need to go into detail on what that could mean."

All of the dwarves looked a little sick, yet Thunderbelly still answered. "Either, either that's a sign that they have left their ability to have children behind or..."

“Or they have dedicated their wombs to creating more warriors for the cult,” Harry shuddered. “I can’t sense any magic here, other than the daggers. You may do with these bodies what you will. Their spirits have already passed on, although I would request they be buried. I don’t know what kind of indoctrination they’ve gone through, and I frankly hope never to learn the full extent of it either, but I think that they have been through enough in this life.”

Soon another band of Stonefoot dwarves arrived from the work still going on with the bodies of the dead army, to take command of the dead womenfolk.

Thankfully for the group of investigators, the next few findings had nothing to do with the cult. Rather, a few of the dwarves had begun to gather pennants and other markers together. Harry examined them for a time, seeing the same red snake on a black field that they had seen carried by the second group of Easterlings that the convoy had dealt with. That pennant predominated, and Harry wondered aloud if that meant that specific clan had dominated this army. “Although considering how few pennants there are in terms of how many men, I don’t know if that’s really the case. Perhaps troops were only awarded specific pennants if they fought well in battle? Regardless, there are other sigils here as well.”

“The hill on a white field is known to my folk. We’ve seen it before in smaller Easterling raids over the centuries. The raised blade is similar,” Karo mused, pointing at each sigil as he spoke. “The pointing finger, the oddly clawed hand, the running horse, and that beast with two horns on its head are all new.”

Harry reckoned that last was an aurochs of some kind instead of some kind of oxen, given the drill-like nature of the horns in question. The clawed hand looked like that of a reptile, not a fire or cold drake, but still, something with claws, scales, and webbing between the fingers.

More importantly, the second most prominent pendant among the group here was the one that had a running horse on it. That made Harry wonder if perhaps that was another prominent clan, while the others were smaller clans or tribes, something he noted down his quick quill. This theory was further added to when one of Karo’s troops pointed out, “The two pennants that were outside the tent we believe was the enemy commanders match the red snake on a black field, and the running horse on a green field.”

Harry nodded, then asked to be led to that tent next. Having already asked for a copy of what Harry was writing down, Karo easily led the group in that direction, finding several other Stonefoot warriors around the tent. “We don’t have as nasty a feeling from this tent as we did with the tents with the womenfolk and the Blood Hand in it, but the sheer extravagance of this tent in comparison to the others made it stand out, and like you Harry, I hope to find something interesting within.”

Within the tent, which was marked out by the others with a golden trim, was not the accoutrements of a general or someone important. Indeed, beyond an even larger than normal pile of loot, the only thing of extravagance that Harry could see in the entire place was a large cup of gold filigree that was, in Fili's words, "Definitely not of dwarf make. Indeed, it looks almost like the whole thing was hewn to me rather than shaped!"

While the Stonefoots all laughed and called Fili a typical Longbeard snob when it came to metalworks, Harry looked around, taking in what else was in the tent beyond the shiny, expensive looking items. The goblet, which, admittedly was of poor quality in comparison to even most of the simple gold goblets he had seen on sale in Erebor, sat on top of a small dining table that itself was built to wrap around the central tent pole. That table seemingly doubled both as a dining table and as a worktable, considering that both plates and some papers were stacked there along with writing implements.

Around the tent there were four bedrolls. They looked a little more extravagant than the others Harry had seen so far in the camp, in that they all had fur tops and small pillows built into one end, but otherwise nothing stood out about them. "Tell me, the general, was he also marked?"

Karo blinked in chagrin, exchanging glances with his fellows before turning back to the tent flap. "I'll go see. Unfortunately, he was with the rest of their army, so I don't know if his body has already been taken and placed on one of the pyres."

Harry nodded, the group spread out through the tent looking for other things of interest. Beyond a few strange looking wooden bracelets, they discovered intricately made devices. They weren't made of wood, but what Fili and Gimli recognized as simple iron. "Pug iron we call it, the simplest form of iron that you would take out of the ground without mixing anything else in. These bits have been shined to a fine sheen, and the etchings in them are adequate for an apprentice attempting to earn a spot at a jeweler's I suppose but nothing to write home about," Gimli opined, with Fili nodding along firmly.

Snorting at the very dwarfish insult there, Harry concentrated on the maps. He looked from one to another, frowning thoughtfully as he set them each on the floor for a moment to try to connect the edges from one to another and to find any landmark that he or the others could recognize.

Here, Proli grumpily pointed to a few symbols on the map, which he could tell noted the three hill holds. "The large X through one of them means that must be Endo's Hold. That means this one's Spider's Bane, the one surrounded by green, while the other one with lots of green dots around it is the Grip."

Green was obviously the color the Easterlings used to denote Allied forces. The marks for the holds were a deep blue, the hue of which had many of the dwarves around them wonder where they had gotten the dye for it, it was such a strong color.

However, beyond that, these maps didn't cover all that much territory. None of the maps showed enough of the east to really give any indication of how much territory the in Easterlings control.

"Someone out there understands information control, I think," Harry murmured. "I can't imagine any nation or even any clan not having maps of their own territory, and to not bring such along in war is a deliberate choice."

"Agreed," Fili said grimly. "There's a reason why my uncle and the rest of us don't allow any of our maps to fall into the wrong hands, and the why our mapmakers and surveyors are protected so well whenever they are out about their business."

Beyond the maps, the group discovered a lot of reports and papers, but the writing was simply gibberish to them. The Easterlings wrote in a large square and blocky looking lettering and didn't seem to believe in paragraph spacing or headers or anything of that nature. At least not in these kinds of reports, which Harry assumed were logistics reports and other things of that nature. Regardless of what they were, how to make any headway on reading them eluded Harry. He had no spell to translate a written language into something he could read, a lack that he was very annoyed to admit to at the moment.

"You helped us with the daggers and the rest Harry, I think we've discovered as much information as we can here," Karo soothed. "Come, one of my soldiers just reported that they were able to find the general's body. They've set it aside on the other side of the camp towards the southern wall."

As they exited the camp and moved towards where one of the Stonefoot warriors was waving his hand over the body of the general, another shout, a short, pithy curse in Khuzdul, came from nearby. Fili answered before any of the others could, and some bristling weapons were lowered as Tauriel came within sight, moving through the groups of moving dwarves and guards. She slid up to Harry, and Harry wordlessly engulfed her in a hug, their foreheads leaning against one another for a moment.

Tauriel still looked wan, drawn, and almost ill, a sadness hovering over her that even the dwarves could see as they looked at her. As dark and evil as the Easterlings were, they were still beings with souls, and ending so many lives was something his fierce huntress had never faced before. It was a tiredness of spirit Harry knew of no true way to abolish other than simply being there for her as she dealt with it, which was what he did now.

After a few moments, Harry began to whisper into her ear what they had discovered so far as two of the Stonefoot warriors bent to remove the armor from the general. He also been marked by the Blood Hand, although there was yet another mark on the shoulder, a second scar that had seemingly been treated similarly in order to retain the desired shape. A large sickle sat there, covering his arm from shoulder down to elbow.

"Is that a mark of his rank, or is there some internal division within the Blood Hand once you reach a certain rank?" Harry mused, shaking his head. "The next time we fight these fellows, I think I'm going to insist on gathering at least a few dozen prisoners in order to question them all one after another. We just don't know enough about the Easterlings yet."

And I think I will set aside the horror and taint of using Imperio next time we have a prisoner, Harry thought grimly. This cult makes the Death Eaters look like whiny, opinionated children acting out because they can't use their money to lord it over their 'lessers' and that's just what I'm getting from what we've found out so far. Who knows what else we will discover in the future?

That earned Harry some growls from the dwarves around him. The idea of taking prisoners from the Easterlings wasn't one that sat well with any of them. More than one of them muttered to another in common that the only good Easterling was a dead one, a sentiment that Harry was somewhat annoyed to find he actually shared in to a certain extent. *But knowing more about them will at least let us counter the Easterlings as a whole more effectively... if we can.*

Tauriel frowned, pointing at something on the general's armor. "That belt, is that a sign of rank as well? It has strange images on it."

Harry blinked and looked at the belt closer, before asking the dwarves who had stripped the general of his armor to remove it. When he did, it became clear that Tauriel's observation was accurate, and Harry hastily asked for one of the dwarves who had gathered up the various reports they had discovered to bring it out. Instantly, all of them could tell that there was a connection between the images worked into the leather belt in comparison to the writing. They were one and the same, and Harry gazed back into the camp shook his head slowly. "The Easterlings don't strike me as the group to write out messages on their belts for no apparent reason. This belt is important in some fashion. Maybe beyond being in a an entirely different language, they also put their messages in code?"

"Perhaps. And if so, it points once more to the fact the Easterlings know about information control, as you said earlier, Harry. We are familiar with code phrases and of course we dwarves have our own language which we have never taught to any outsider, not even

someone like you, Harry,” Fili mused. “But using such a code all the time is unusual. And seemingly redundant if the Easterlings use an entirely different language on top of it.”

“Maybe there’s some kind of internal division they have to be aware of?” Tauriel suggested. “Did you not say, Harry, that Mithrandir said two of his Order went into the East in centuries past? There could be, I suppose you could call them counter-cults trying to fight the Great Enemy’s influence among the Easterlings and Haradrim.”

“Again, prisoners. Need them, need to question them. A lot,” Harry said dryly, taking Tauriel’s hand in his. “For now though, I think we are done here.”

Karo nodded, staring at the body of the general thoughtfully for second. “All of them have scars. I haven’t seen a single one of them that it is unscarred, either on his face chest or arms. None of them have been treated with whatever created the scar of the Blood Hand, but still. These are hard people for all that they are humans. Before this war, a lot of my folk looked down on the Easterlings because they were human and had to rely so heavily on numbers to do anything. We’d even looked down on the Blacklocks for losing them in their last few wars with the Easterlings. Now... no.”

“With the scarification, the use of masks, and the strict discipline, it, it feels to me as if the Easterlings are being indoctrinated into treating themselves almost like orcs,” Tauriel said, causing Karo to stiffen a bit as she addressed him for the first time. “They are being trained to not care for themselves almost as much as they do not care for the enemy.”

“That, that make sense, I suppose,” Karo agreed reluctantly. “Certainly the Easterlings willingness to fight to the last man matches some of the worst sorts of orcs out there.”

After that, the group moved on, heading towards the road that would lead them to Varni’s Folly. Harry held Tauriel’s hand as they walked, which caused some looks from the dwarves that they passed by, and the dwarves that they were walking with. Although whether or not that was because the two were holding hands in public, something dams and their husbands just didn’t do in dwarfish culture, or because Harry and Tauriel were a human and an elf, Harry couldn’t tell and didn’t care. His lady needed the reassurance right now, and frankly, her hand in his own scarred one was helping to ease the lingering pain there.

Then he was too busy staring as he suddenly realized the sheer scope of the wall defending the southern side of Varni’s Folly. “Good grief, you dwarves don’t think small, do you?”

The wall ahead of Harry looked almost as built up and formidable as the Great Wall of China was supposed to be back on Earth, although it certainly wasn’t as long, and wasn’t as poorly positioned. This wall encompassed the valley from one end to another, anchored into the

mountains almost like someone had molded the stone of the wall into the stone of the mountains, which here ran sheer upward, its upper edges marked further by towers that stuck out of the mountainside.

And here, when Harry said mountain, he didn't mean an easy slope of any kind whatsoever. These mountains, at least from this angle, started to become sheer cliff faces almost from the ground level, and got worse as they rose into the air. To say nothing of the fact there was snow which began around the same place the wall's top sat. It would take dedicated teams of hundreds armed with ropes, pulleys and pitons, to make much headway of those slopes, all while being under fire from the towers there.

Further, while the wall of stone that the dwarves had somehow erected went from one side of the valley to the other, it also had bits sticking out here and there, triangular fortifications pushed forward from the rest of the wall. Harry hadn't seen their like before, although he could instantly tell that those areas created breaks in any direct charge against the wall. They came to points which a siege tower wouldn't be able to latch onto while also creating areas where the defenders could shoot down at an angle on any attackers. Thus they would be able to hit the flanks of any attacking hordes as they reached the wall.

I wish I knew more about cannons, muskets and guns in general. If I did, this place would become the next best thing to impossible to attack, Harry thought to himself. He knew about them from books he'd read as a youngster before Hogwarts of course, but he didn't know anything about their construction, or about gunpowder in general. Although this wall reminded him of a book he had seen once in the library. In passing. Fort construction through the ages or something, *I think that was the title.*

Karo and Proli laughed, while Thunderbelly and several Stonefoot dwarves straightened proudly.

In the center of the wall was a series of gates. The outer wall gate was a simple portcullis, backed up by a heavier gate right behind it. The walls on either side of the tunnel through the wall, which was at least two yards thick, was marked by murder holes and small sluice gates, the kind down which nasty things could be poured.

Strangely, the gates didn't look nearly as powerful as the rest of the wall. Certainly they didn't resemble the rolling porthole-like massive construction that was the entry into Erebor. It was as if the Stonefoot tribe, despite having the ingenuity and skill to create the rest of the wall in the first place, hadn't had the engineering wherewithal to create something similar. *Or perhaps it was the cost of such a thing?* Harry didn't know, but in comparison to the rest of the wall, the gates were not of the best construction.

He was tempted to ask, but Tauriel beat him to it. "Why is the gate of such an imposing edifice lacking in terms of defense and skill in comparison to the rest?" She asked delicately.

"The gate and in fact a large portion of the interior area of the wall are not nearly as formidable as they seem from this side," Fili said. He had been here before, and spoke quietly, grateful that Thunderbelly and the others had moved ahead of them enough to not hear Tauriel's question as it was a sour subject. "Even for my folk, constructing something like this wall would be work for thousands and take many decades, even a century. Construction on the wall began soon after the fall of Erebor, and work on it isn't complete yet. There are certain questions about contracts that have come up," he finished, as if each word was paining him in turn.

Harry had to frown thoughtfully at that, and was inclined to ask more questions, but the look on Fili's face as well as the look on some of the others around them told Harry not to bring it up just yet. Karo in particular looked like he was ready to spit fire at any moment.

Once they came out of the wall, there was enough to wonder about that Harry's questions about the wall faded away.

The valley ahead of them wasn't very wide. Harry and Tauriel, with their enhanced eyesight, could easily see well up both sides of the valley. The bottom of the valley was only a few miles wide to either side before it began to ascend, if that. Further, the bottom of the valley was dominated by a river, a wide, slow-moving thing that twisted around from where the tunnel through the wall entered into the valley, creating a 'U' shape. Inside that shape was a central hill marked by stone houses and roads, along with a few low walls here and there.

On either side of the valley were also other houses of stone, built into the side of the mountains, and undoubtedly leading deeper into vast caverns and hallways of various dwarven families. Amongst those houses were trees, which dominated above a certain point, although even from here Harry could see that those trees had tough going for them on the vertical faces of the mountains. On the bottom of the valley were a few scattered farms, predominantly around the river. There very obviously weren't enough of them for the number of dwarves that had to live here, but there were still some.

Yet the strangest and most interesting thing was the sight of what dominated the nearly nighttime skyline within the valley. From one side to the other, there were dozens, maybe hundreds of thin rails of wood and stone. They looked almost like a wide spiderweb of some kind. From that web, thin pillars, around the same width as a dwarf's leg, dove down into the water of the river at certain points.

At first, Harry thought those were just support for whatever the rest of that construction was, but then Tauriel leaned forward, staring up at where one such column connected to the

network above. "There is, there is something inside it. Like a corkscrew moving upward. And I see water flowing from the corkscrew into the, the funnel? Is that entire construction to transport the water of the river elsewhere?"

"It is indeed. Those screws are pushed by the movement of the river, and transport water upwards. It took us centuries of trial and error to get the concept right in relation to where the tubes needed to be to both not interfere with one another or the river in general, and then to support the aqueduct network, but it was the first Royal Project we of Varni's Folly created. Even when we lost control of the valley in the ancient past, most of that construction remained, and we merely had to repair chunks of it," Thunderbelly stated proudly. "With it, every clan and even most small families have running water and even toilets."

"Huh, that's actually quite fascinating," Harry mused, before he blinked looking over at Fili. "You know, I've never actually studied how you Ereborans transport water. It never occurred to me before." His eyes widened further. "Come to think of it, how do you all deal with latrines anyway?"

Fili first out laughing, as did Gimli and the others around them. "You have just one Kili a good deal of money, Harry! He thought that the moment you saw any other dwarven city it might occur to you to wonder that. Drat it all, I thought it would take you actually needing to go to the bathroom while within Erebor."

"Wait, what, I had to have...huh... no. Ten plus years and that never came up..." Harry mused, while Tauriel and the others around him laughed.

Gimli was the first to calm down after a second explaining that dwarves had long since created various engineering marvels in order to simply move about water and waste within their holds. It was a necessity and hearkened back to even the earliest days the dwarves could remember. "Honestly for us in Erebor that was even tougher than figuring out how to move molten metal around. But as much as my uncle and the other smiths might whine about it, it was also more important."

"Here, the use of aqueducts like that is seen as the most efficient method, although I believe over the centuries people have added to the columns and even the network to the point where they are all works of art and no just a genius of design," Fili added.

A few of the nearby Stonefoot smiled proudly, the words carrying a hidden meaning to dwarfish folk, which Harry could understand. All dwarves loved working on and being praised for their works of their hands and minds.

"Looking at all this, I doubt that army could have achieved much even if they were able to break through the wall," Tauriel murmured shaking her head.

“They weren’t supposed to, love. Remember, they were simply supposed to bottle the Army of Varni’s Folly up here while the hill holds are dealt with. Spider’s Bane is the main target of their army, at least according to what we heard from that one scout we met with,” Harry reminded Tauriel.

Tauriel blinked, frowning pensively, almost shivering again. “I had forgotten that. I had forgotten how large this war is. It’s not just a single conflict, but a large-scale effort, one with multiple goals targets and so forth. I’m not used to thinking in those terms, or really in such numbers. The army we smashed outside was larger than any army my folk could field, and even nearly matches the orc and goblin army we fought outside the Lonely Mountain.”

Admittedly, Tauriel knew that the folk of Mirkwood were but pale shadow of what they had once been in terms of numbers and might, let alone in comparison to what elvish kind as a whole could have fielded in the days of their strength. Yet it still had to be said.

However, as she spoke, Harry nodded slowly, once more something niggling at the back of his mind.

Tauriel stared up at the mountains around them as she and Harry continued forward into the valley. “Setting such thoughts aside for now, I see trees up there of a like I have never seen before.” She flashed a small smile over at Thunderbelly. “I have to also say I am happy to see so many trees beyond the outskirts of your... hold? City?”

“You can use either term, lady,” Thunderbelly answered. “If there was enough space within the valley for us to spread out and create more than one center of population, it would be simply a hold, but Varni’s Folly is small. If I went to the highest place in the valley, I could see the other two ends of the valley, and the road leading deeper into the mountains. You certainly would be able to. That isn’t enough space to truly spread out, not for us dwarves.”

Tauriel nodded at that, though inwardly she had to shake her head. Dwarves actually enjoyed being in closer, more congested confines with their fellows than any elf, Sindar or Noldor, would put up with, far more in point of fact. The small copse of trees by the Long Lake where Harry and Tauriel had their house was about as much space as a family of elves, three or at most five, would wish to have for their own area Taur-e Ndaedelos. In Erebor, that same amount of space would be broken into several family or two medium-sized clan caverns. Here, given the number of houses and how many there were, she estimated it would be much the same.

“As for there being so many trees, well, we Stonefoot don’t really work with wood if we have stone to hand. Not cutting down many trees above a certain line is also a pragmatic response to being here in the mountains.” When both Harry and Tauriel looked at him in confusion for that, Thunderbelly snorted. “What, don’t elves know about soil erosion?”

“It is a term I’ve heard, but what it means in this contest is a mystery to me,” Tauriel said, chuckling rather than taking offense.

“Trees help protect soil from being eroded away by minor landslides, heavy rainfall or avalanches,” Thunderbelly explained. “Indeed, several of the small walls you see up there are there to stop avalanches and other dangers. They aren’t entirely to keep out any small band of orcs or goblins that are somehow able to find a way over the mountains without our...” he paused. “Special Scouts, I suppose you could call them. Dwarves specially trained to move around the mountains to watch for trouble. After you reach a certain height, even the toughest cannot make any headway, but near the middle ranges there are a few places where orcs or goblins could sneak in. Very, very few, though, as, once they are found, walls are put up and a small watch is maintained. But valley holds like this must always be on the lookout for such.”

“Especially up here in the Ered Mithrin, where it isn’t just orcs and goblins who can threaten good, honest dwarves, but cold drakes occasionally,” Harry agreed, while Tauriel wondered if elven folk could travel higher into the mountains better than dwarves assumed any could.

She set that aside for now, though, instead simply staring up past the highest walls, examining the trees there as much as she could from here. “I see. That is honestly fascinating, Thunderbelly. But will such ‘Special Scouts’ shoot first and ask questions never? I ask because I don’t think I have enough knowledge of warfare or anything similar to add anything to the conversation you all will undoubtedly soon be having with your king, and I wish to explore a bit.”

Looking at Tauriel, Harry wondered if that was all but didn’t question it. Tauriel caught his look, and nodded slightly, indicating she also wanted to meditate for a time on where to go from here. Above and beyond Harry’s desire to help the dwarves against the Easterlings and goblins, Tauriel was here for a specific mission. She needed to figure out where to go from here in terms of what Oromë wished her to hunt.

Thunderbelly shrugged. “Milady, I’ve seen what that brigandine armor you and Harry wear can stop. If they do, I doubt it will bother you much.”

Chuckling at that, Tauriel looked over at Harry, squeezing his scarred hand, which she was still holding. “Unless you think you will need something from me, my love?”

By this point they had reached the outskirts of the houses on the valley floor and had even turned to follow a second street towards the central hill. A few dwarves moving around the area had paused to take in the highly unusual sight of Harry and Tauriel, an elf and a human, but now those able to hear Tauriel blinked, staring at them in surprise with some of them sporting more censorious looks.

Thankfully, none of them spoke up, and Harry, already getting used to that reaction (again, it had to be said) ignored it for now, simply smiling at his lady, bringing up their joined hands to kiss the back of her hand. "I don't think so. Go, my lady. If you want to find me, I have no doubt you'll be able to, just as I will you if I need to."

Tauriel chuckled at that, then turned, and took a small road leading to the northeastern edge of the valley. Soon she was out of sight among the buildings, appearing a moment later, still heading upwards. Harry watched her go for the second time that day until she was racing up the curve of the valley, almost at the topmost terrace already.

He hadn't noticed that Fili and the others had all stopped waiting for him to move on until Thunderbelly coughed loudly enough to make Harry start. Looking around, he saw some amused, and many annoyed looks from the dwarves around him, but refused to apologize, instead making a joke of it. "Can anyone tell me when the besotted aspect of courting someone ends?"

Fili, Gimli and even Thunderbelly began to laugh at that, while Karo and his second in command just looked away. "I'm afraid you're talking to the wrong crowd if you wanted an honest answer to that question, Harry, but judging by my uncle and his queen, I would assume it doesn't ever end, it simply shifts to something a bit less demanding."

"I am lost then," Harry mock-lamented, before smirking. "And like Thorin, I wouldn't have it any other way."

Gimli and Fili both snorted at that, while Thunderbelly had to explain to Karo and Proli about how much Ani Redring did as Queen Under The Mountain, how important she was and how good a working relationship, not just a personal one, she had with Thorin. By that point, the group had reached a bridge over the river, heading towards the central hill. This bridge was one of several and wasn't even the largest Harry could see looking along the river in either direction.

All of the bridges Harry could see were just as sturdy as Harry had come to expect from a dwarfish creation. It was made of heavy stone, at least two-handspans thick, arching slightly over the river, with two large pylons coming up out of the river.

To either side of the floor of the bridge, the sides were raised, leading, in four places, into the stone funnels. Standing near one, Harry could hear the grinding of one of the screws that Karo had mentioned as well as the movement of water. He was tempted to use a spell to cause the stone to become transparent just so he could see the thing in action but felt that would probably be frowned upon by the dwarves around him.

A moment later they were across, heading upward, the road heading around the hill in a spiral, with a defensive wall, only about as tall as Harry, built at intervals, accompanied by gates they had to be allowed through. As they passed the second of three, Fili tapped Harry's elbow

gently, then when Harry looked at him, pulled Harry's arm so they slowed, letting Karo, Thunderbelly, Gimli and Proli put a few feet between them. "Before we enter the local king's halls, I wanted to tell you something. He is...do not expect him to be very respectful at first, Harry. His position as King is not nearly as solid as Thorin's and he may well resent even the part me and mine played in the victory over the Easterlings, to say nothing of your simple presence here."

"Are we talking a person who's just generally unlikeable and mean spirited, doesn't like strangers, or is a little dog who doesn't realize how big the world beyond his yard is?" Harry questioned, sighing faintly. *Huh... you know, two out of three of those... well no, all three could be used to describe the late, unlamented Thranduil.*

"A bit of one and two. He doesn't mind strangers, per se. I've been here before, and eventually we were able to have an amicable conversation. Once he realized we of Erebor weren't looking for preferential treatment in terms of his tolls for conducting business with his people or moving beyond to the other Stonefoot holds. He is a penny pincher of the first order, and as a dwarf myself if I am describing Lord Tollmaster as such, you know it is saying something."

"Ouch. So don't get dragged into any conversation about money, got it. Not that I would have anyway. I'm not here looking to sell my runic arrays or even anything I've created with them. I'm here to help against the Easterlings and the goblins while my Lady and I travel north to the Forodwaith." *Well, that's the plan, anyway. Although given how badly the Easterlings have mauled the Stonefoot House, I don't know if that is in the cards any longer. They certainly seem the greater threat in comparison to the goblins of the mountains, anyway. But will Tauriel's task force us further north regardless?*

"There is more, of course. Like my uncle, Tollmaster was born into the royal family of Varni's Folly. But unusually for my folk, he did not pursue any craft, skill or anything else while waiting for his father to pass," Fili grimaced a bit. "Even Balin, who is our finest diplomat, spent a few decades pursuing other things. It can be safely said of Tollmaster that his hands are not skilled, even if his mind is."

That was a very dwarfish insult, if a somewhat mild one, Harry thought with amusement. "I understand. I will let you do the talking unless called upon, and I'll try to ignore any insults he throws my way."

"Thank you, Harry. I'm sorry to say that as small-minded as Tollmaster is, as king of Varni's Folly, we still need to deal with him," Fili replied with a sigh of relief, before smirking. "Although, can you control that eye thing you can do? Make the effect bigger? More striking?"

Harry chuckled. *And Arien's sled is over the horizon now.* "Ah, so it's time for some intimidation? Heh. Consider it done."

The two friends shared a laugh at that then hurried to catch up with Gimli and the others.

The hall of the king here in Varni's Folly was the first one made by dwarves that looked to be mostly above ground, a multi-story keep shaped like a rectangle. It was still built into the side of the hill much like every other house that Harry and the Longbeards had passed but sprawled out in every direction rather than digging deep into it. Harry wondered why that was, but didn't ask, and then, as they entered, realized his first impression was somewhat wrong. It seemed to be as if the hall was both a king's hall, and a final defensive structure. The outer area they passed through led up to the top of the keep via several stairwells they passed, while the first story and what a human would think of as the basement were both devoted to the king and his court.

The group were led into a study at the back of the main hall, where more than a dozen Stonefoot stood in groups, going over paperwork that Harry guessed had to do with the weapons, iron and so forth they had claimed from the Easterling army. One or two arguments, in common as the dwarves here had been warned of Harry's presence among the Longbeards, were certainly about what to do with the largess they had suddenly gathered.

The study itself was behind a large throne, one built out of what looked like a single piece of stone coming up from the floor and into the ceiling. The hall was not a natural one, so this wasn't a stalagmite and stalactite meeting, rather the hall had been carved in such a way as to leave that pillar, along with a few others, remain once the rest was hollowed out. This one, though, unlike the others, was marked by a throne, carved into the pillar, creating an overhang above it. The throne was marked by a large cushion of red and gold, a marked contrast to the blue and gray colors that dominated elsewhere.

That color combination dominated in the study as well, with every chair marked by red cushions, and two wide tapestries lined with red, showing scenes of the Valley in their cloth. Like in Thorin's study, there were several book and scroll cases, although these looked older, not as battered or ill-cared for as the remnants of the furniture Thorin had inherited after Smaug's death did. Two other doorways led off somewhere, closed now and most of the chairs, single seats unlike the sofas that Thorin favored, were made of wood, pulled near to the single desk in the room. The exception was a large stone chair behind that wooden desk, where Tollmaster sat.

The king of Varni's Folly was one of the oldest dwarves Harry had yet to meet, or at least Harry thought he was as old as Runemaster Surehand. His beard was entirely white from what Harry could see as the king did not stand up as they entered, well-trimmed in a perfect V and expensive looking, colorful clothing, lined with fur. Tollmaster's face was also heavily wrinkled, his eyes deep-set and a light brown color, his hands wrinkled and almost gnarled as they sat on the desk. He had massive sideburns, so large and built up they nearly hid his ears, while on his head, his hair flowed down to his shoulders.

That was telling, Harry knew, probably more important as the deliberate slight given to Fili and Gimli by Tollmaster not rising to greet two royals., Fili was reckoned a prince among his people, and among dwarves, rising to greet someone of near or equal status was simply a given in dwarven society. Gimli's royal blood was a bit more removed than that, but with Fili there, that was a given.

On top of that, though, Tollmaster's hair told Harry that he wasn't a warrior. Stonefoot warriors all shaved their heads bald, with most of them going naturally bald quickly. Tollmaster's hair looked as if he had not cut it for a few decades at least. He was also thin, almost spare in comparison to the other Stonefoots, only looking as thick around the middle as a Longbeard.

"So young Fili, I saw the battle you orchestrated out there. A most interesting idea, creating a makeshift fortress out of carts. I hope doing so did not cost you any of the goods my people are owed in your caravan," Tollmaster stated, waving them into the chairs, his eyes flicking over the three newcomers, trying hard not to flinch as he saw Harry's glowing eyes, while Karo and Proli took up chairs to either side of the desk. There were so many chairs it almost made it seem as if the room was designed for discussions between equals, but for the shape of the table and Tollmaster's chair. "You would still have to pay me for the toll of the full amount, regardless."

"I am fully prepared to do so, Tollmaster," Fili said, a subtle insult as he didn't use the man's rank. Given the grimace Harry could barely see underneath the old dwarf's beard, it had hit home, and Fili went on in a more diplomatic tone. "But we could never have won that battle if you did not send out your army to take advantage of the trap we prepared for our mutual foes. Indeed, we would eventually have been overcome against such numbers without your willingness to trust us."

"Trust had little to do with it. Desperation did. We cannot farm enough to feed our folk, and none of the holds north of us have enough surplus to offer much either. We needed to break the siege south of us so we can at least access the farms beyond. Like the small combine you apparently saved, Istari." Tollmaster's gaze flicked to Harry, and he flinched noticeably as he tried to stare back at Harry's glowing eyes. "You would be Dwarf friend Potter, yes? The Rune scribe? How long do you intend to stay in my hold? As a stranger there are certain taxes you must pay for any extended sojourn. As king, I can decide in what sort of specie such is owed..."

"That is a question that can only be answered by where we go from here," Harry answered firmly. "But I tell you now, I will not be paying in runic arrays. I have a contract with Rune Master Surehand and will not be making any deals outside of those he makes without Gurak and Thorin's agreement."

Harry had learned well over the past decade to not be so free with his craft, and wasn't about to give this man anything, even a simple shield stone. "We have more important things to talk about now though than your getting your just due. I am certain you've already learned that Fili,

his force and myself are not just here to transport the goods due to the markets here in Varni's Folly, but also to help as best we can against the threats facing your House as a whole."

For several moments, Tollmaster tried to glare Harry into submission, but the Istari had a noted advantage in such a contest, and eventually Tollmaster looked away, clearly shaken. "V, very well," he grumbled, acting as if the war with the Easterlings was but a distraction in his mind when it came to enriching himself.

Judging by the look on Karo's face though, he did not agree. Recovering some of his snappiness, Tollmaster looked at Proli and barked out a command. "Take out the map of the hill holds."

His attitude remained sour, but Harry ignored it, looking down at the map closely. It wasn't one of the advanced ones that the Longbeards had created for their territory which instituted the changes and added information Harry had passed on to their cartographers, but it still showed most of the prominent features. Harry could pick out the markers for the three hill holds, although the names eluded him, including dwarfish script that Harry had not seen before. *Perhaps each House has developed their own written language?* Regardless, the mark of a big 'X' through one hill hold was obvious and probably meant that was Endo's Hold.

Beyond those markers, Harry could read the fact the hill holds were all situated in a semi L-shape, with Endo's Hold being the one at the tip of the 'L' as it faced northeast, the L not quite at full ninety degrees of how Harry would right out the actual letter. All three were in an area dominated by hills, marked on the map by a series of upside down U marks. There were numerous rivers also moving through the area, although Harry had only a rudimentary idea of their size. Or indeed, the side of the total area being shown until Fili politely asked Tollmaster what scale the map was made by.

But surprisingly, there were more markers than just the bare terrain information being shown. There were lots of dark black dots scattered around one hold, which Tollmaster gruffly explained was Stone Grip. This was the hill hold on the small line of the L, the northernmost one. By process of elimination, this meant the other hill hold was Spider's Bane. It was completely surrounded by lines of black markers, with few clear areas between them. This matched what they had been told by the scout that Mkoloan had found: that one of the surviving hill holds was being sieged in the traditional manner, while the other had mobile forces around it, keeping the dwarves from getting out but not attacking the hill hold directly.

For some reason that disposition though bothered Harry. The position of the main force around the southernmost hill hold instead of near the Grip was... odd. "Can I ask how close the hill holds are for a dwarven army?"

“For our own army, we could travel into the hills of Rolling Gates within two weeks if we traveled light. As in, every man carrying his own supplies and no baggage train,” Karo answered instantly, indicating the hilly area where all the hill holds were had a name, if not a very descriptive one. “That presupposes we can live off the land at a certain point or be supplied by one of the hill holds. Given Spider’s Bane and the Grip are both still holding out, I would assume they would be able to supply us with food if we could break through the enemy. But...”

Gimli scowled. “We got lucky here, Harry. Your magic, the fog you were able to call up, the local army being restive and in one encampment meant, we could wipe them out in a single battle. The Easterlings’ own bloody-mindedness saw to the rest. If we strike for the Grip, there’s no single target for us to strike at.

“And if I allow the army to march out and attack the infantry-based army around Spider’s Bane, we’ll be outnumbered badly, with no surety of victory,” Tollmaster ground out, glaring not at the newcomers, but at Karo and Proli, who glared right back. Evidently this was an old argument, and a vitriolic one for the Stonefoots to air it in front of Harry, Tauriel and the two Longbeards.

“We have an obligation to go to the aid of our fellow Stonefoots!” Karo shot back heatedly, making Gimli and Fili exchange glances.

“When we have troubles closer to home in the form of goblins? We might be safe, but they are cutting us off from our fellow holds, and Fanged Walls is dealing with more cold drake incursions we’ve seen in my lifetime,” Tollmaster ground out. “The hill holds are supposed to keep enough preserved food on hand to see themselves through at least a three-year siege, that’s why they don’t ever trade nearly as much food with the rest of us as they could. If they cannot, that is not our problem. We should deal with the goblins, then, if the Easterlings are still sieging our fellows go to their aide bolstered by the forces of Fanged Walls on top of what has already been gathered here from Cold Depths and Verdant Stream.”

Deciding those names were probably the other Stonefoot Holds, Harry set that aside, pointing out something he saw as immensely important. “I am afraid you are discounting the religious aspect of this war, King Tollmaster.”

His semi-respectful tone got Tollmaster’s attention and cut off Karo’s scathing response, and the general slowly nodded. “The Blood Hand.”

“That’s right, them and the Great Warlord who has raised them to prominence among the Easterlings. This whole war was set in motion by the Great Enemy, Sauron.” Harry deliberately used the former Maiar’s given name and was somewhat pleased when Tollmaster’s face visibly whitened. *Although no dwarf will ever serve the dark willingly, that doesn’t mean*

they aren't afraid of it's lord. "With that in mind, we need to think that these armies are not only more organized, as we've seen evidence of already, but far more determined.

"We also saw evidence of even the army we dealt with here being given siege engines," Thunderbelly pointed out. "We have to assume most of those have been sent to the army besieging Spider's Bane. Even good dwarven walls can be overcome eventually by such things."

Tollmaster stared at Thunderbelly for a moment, as if wanting to bring up something else, before Fili spoke up once more, asking politely if Tollmaster could tell them more about the way the war had been going so far. "We only have the information one of your scouts passed on to us. Judging by this map, nothing important has changed from what he told us, but any information can be helpful."

Grumbling again under his breath, yet somewhat quelled by the mention of the Great Enemy, Tollmaster explained. "We didn't really have much warning before the Easterlings swarmed out from the east upon Rolling Gates. And we should have. We Stonefoots have actually had something of a brisk trade with the Easterlings at times over the centuries. Bear furs, skins, food, steel, food, gold. There are families even here in Varni's Folly that was part of that trade. But this time, there was no warning at all from the Easterlings such families traded with. Instead, the latest such trades continued as per normal, until suddenly, scouts from the hill holds ranging only a few days out discovered the forward most units of the invading army."

Tollmaster drew a line from Stone Grip to a point between it and Endo's hold on the map. "Stone Grip's army moved out to help Endo's Hold, but they were crushed in open battle along with the army out of Endo's Hold. A few survivors were able to escape back to their home, and they sent trained hawks carrying messages to us and to the other Stonefoot holds. That's how we're able to still communicate with our fellows despite the Easterlings."

He scowled at the Longbeards. "We Stonefoots have mostly forgotten the skill to talk to thrushes or other birds unlike your House, and the size of messenger hawks limits the message size. We're also losing two hawks for every hawk that gets through. I know not how they are killed, but we only have a few trained hawks remaining here, and I doubt the other holds are any better."

He looked down at the map again. "The Easterlings tricked the kings of Endo's Hold and the Grip. They didn't have just one army, but several marching on our territory, the other two came in at us from different angles to hammer the joined forces of the two hill holds once they were engaged with one of the enemy armies. From what we were told, those armies, unlike the army we dealt with, was made of mixed units. The Easterlings all move on horseback, but significant portions of the army then dismount to fight on foot."

Karo took up the tale, gesturing to the map. "Since then, the enemy divided again. One force rode for Varni's Folly, while the rest split, as you know: infantry to besiege Spider's Bane, the

only Hill hold that retains it's army, and the other, cavalry forces scattered around the Grip to keep them from doing anything." He scowled shaking his head. "Not that Stone Grip would be able to field enough trained troops to matter. It will take us generations, if ever to rebuild from the losses our House has already taken in this war. Valar-cursed humans just breed too damn fast!"

Wincing a bit at that, Harry nodded. It was simply fact, after all. "Especially if the women of the Easterlings are all part of this Blood Hand Cult and believe that pumping out babies or pleasing their menfolk is a holy task." Tollmaster looked at him in confusion, and Harry and the others explained what they had discovered in the camp.

Hearing about the ritual daggers, Tollmaster seemed to lose the last vestige of his wariness towards Harry and thanked him profusely for his help in dealing with such things. "We dwarves might be incorruptible by such things, but that doesn't mean we could deal with such very easily. We would have been forced to simply bury them and hope the land Mahal helped to create would be enough to suppress the corruption."

Tollmaster scowled a bit, looking at Karo who nodded. "That cult was known to us before this war. It won't surprise you that our traders also acted as spies as well. The Easterlings have dozens of cults, all of whom cross over from their various tribes. The Hand, the eye inside the hand, yes, we knew of them, and knew they served the Great Enemy, unlike most of the other cults. "The eye of Sauron is held in the Hand that obeys', I believe is how it went."

He shook his head then, seeming to sag before tapping the X over the marker of Endo's Hold. "I think, however, that probably means the fact the Grip wasn't able to tell us of any refugees from Endo's Hold means that they wiped out the population there. Normally Easterlings wouldn't go quite that far. They have taken elves as slaves in past wars or even ransomed some of us back. But now, with the Great Enemy directing the war, I shudder to think about what has happened to our folk who have fallen into their hands. Even being a slave might be better than such, as horrifying as it is to contemplate that."

For a moment everyone fell silent, with Thunderbelly visibly gnashing his teeth and Gimli and Fili exchanging grim looks. Harry, though, was staring down at the map, trying to figure out why the disposition of the enemy's forces were niggling at his brain. Eventually, it was Gimli who spoke up, asking about the area between Varni's Folly and the hill holds, and further deep into the mountains. At that point, Fili began to explain his thoughts about how the caravan could be used to bring the goblins to battle and crush them, as well as how big a problem the goblins were right now.

While the Easterlings had brought far more numbers to the fight and were an outright threat to any hold they attacked, the goblins had pretty much shut down travelling from Varni's Folly to the holds north and west of them. There were thousands of them scattered throughout

the mountains, which had moved in a little after the Easterlings had attacked. Barely had the forces of a few of the other holds reached Varni's Folly when the goblins had begun to appear between them and their original holds.

Nearly five hundred dwarves had lost their lives to the goblins since then that Tollmaster knew of. There were likely more. While they could communicate via hawk with the other holds, several of them were also under random assault. Essentially, while the Easterlings were a major threat, the goblins were just as dangerous a threat to the Stonefoot holds ability to work together. Worse, Tollmaster had thought to use half his army to clear them out, but the goblins, showing a marked amount of cunning, were unwilling to fight the army.

They had, admittedly, gotten to and left behind the local troops from the closest mountain hold, Tiaod's Quarry (or at least that was it's name in Common), but the goblins had come back quickly. But by this point, the other holds were also starting to have food issues. Most of the holds in Eren Mithrin could grow some of what they needed, but not enough without the hill holds to the east to trade with, which didn't even mention the ability to go out hunting. Hunting parties had been getting attacked for months now, and many had been wiped out.

"We don't have enough men to go out and find their hidden caverns, their spawning points, but goblins won't be able to stop themselves from attacking us in turn," Fili mused. "We can clear the roads between your holds by simply tricking them to attack us. Then, after each route is cleared, we can help your own scouts and regular troops to find where the goblins are coming from, if they are spawning within these mountains at all rather than having traveled here from elsewhere."

"That will actually help us a lot more than you might think. Your cart fortress idea and your better weapons, especially those quick loading crossbows of yours, will let your people do a far better job of fighting goblins in the mountains than even we can. As for spawning points, we don't think there are actually many of those," Proli spoke up for the first time since entering. He still sounded gruff, but professional. "We think they came from the west, moving into Stonefoot territory slowly over the years before starting to make real trouble just as the Easterlings began their war. That timing really should have told us the Great Enemy was on the move if nothing else."

"That's well and good, but I'd like to perfect the mobile fort concept before we move on," Fili cautioned. "We also have the goods that Thunderbelly made agreements for. Including food, as well as the regular weapons, armor and other sundry items."

Thunderbelly nodded formally and pulled out the contract he and Thorin had agreed to. "I have a full accounting of the agreement I made with King Oakenshield here, my king, in my position as ambassador and local factor. I think you will find it to your liking, even if, given the circumstances, I did not bargain as closely as I might have."

"Hmmpf, I will be the judge of that." Tollmaster seemed to smile almost, eager to shift the conversation to more mercantile things. "And of course, if you require help, I will be more than willing to make further agreements..."

Harry let Fili to that discussion, although he thought the king was being very narrow-minded even thinking about profit and loss at this point. *A certain amount of thought in that direction is to be expected from a dwarf, but this much? And from one who isn't a warrior to boot, it's a bad look.* Regardless, he turned his attention to the map again, carrying on the conversation about the war with the others.

"Realistically speaking, how long do you think the Easterlings can maintain a siege?" Gimli asked, scowling as he looked at the others. "We saw how well organized their army is when we examined their camp, but we smashed a, as much as it annoys me to say, a small army in human terms... Or at least the histories I've studied lead me to believe. Even so, it was still mostly living off the land. The bigger an army is, the harder that is, and the more important logistics becomes."

"Truth. Unfortunately, that's a question we have no way of answering from here. Maybe this army had to live off the Tithe as much as possible because most of their prepared foodstuffs was assigned to the other armies?" Proli grumbled.

"I can tell you that the hill holds will be able to hold out for far longer than the Easterling's might think. But, if they are able to bring up siege equipment as you said earlier I don't know how long Spider's Bain will be able to defend itself. The Grip is a different story, given how much of their defenses are natural rock formations," Karo added.

"Could you explain that please?" Harry asked, still staring down at the map.

"Stone Grip is named that for a very simple reason Harry," Fili explained, turning from the conversation with Tollmaster. He had been there once and well-remembered what he was talking about. "It's built into a natural rock formation that looks as if some giant hand of stone has thrust up out of the ground, creating fingers of stone. The dwarves of the Stonefoot House worked with the natural stone, creating walls between each of those fingers. Wide or as tall as the fingers themselves, out of which towers have been carved out of the very rock. The Grip also is large and wide enough to house hundreds of farms, enough to create a surplus to sell to the rest of the Stonefoot House, much like Spider's Bane and Endo's Hold. They will be able to sustain themselves for at least several years before they run out of meat, maybe as many as ten if they began rationing instantly."

"The King of the Grip died with his army, but his chief advisor, Tantolo, is known as a good planner. He probably ordered that rationing began almost as quickly as word arrived of the defeat." Tollmaster stated, with a scowl Karo's way. "Thus they are not a priority."

Karo ignored that, and shook his head, wry pride in his voice. "I still wonder how they were able to get word back to the Grip about the destruction of their army. That truly must have been a harrowing journey for the ages, hounded by Easterlings on horseback and on foot, needing to cross a territory that was once your own, but was now crawling with enemies."

"Mkoloan might well meet his match if he ever meets the dwarves who accomplished that feat," Gimli agreed with a nod, earning a snort from Thunderbelly.

"True enough, cousin. Yet as I was saying, that is the Grip, and that kind of defense is probably why the Easterlings didn't try to besiege the grip in the normal fashion. Spider's Bane is very different, it's simply a series of small fortresses built with interconnecting walls. While the Grip is mostly above ground, Spider's Bane is mostly underground, built into massive underground caverns. But unfortunately, most of their farmland these days is above ground. They are decent enough when it comes to underground farming, but it was the surface farming that allowed them to build up a surplus in order to trade with other holds. And I don't have any idea about how well their king would have kept their own internal stock of food," Fili said, looking around at the Stonefoot dwarves.

"That isn't the primary concern," Karo disagreed, waving that off. "Even at its worst, I would assume they would be able to hold out for at least two years. But that is only if the Easterlings aren't able to bring in siege equipment. None of our holds have any similar weapons, not even hearing Varni's Folly." He looked a little bitter for a moment at that, as did Proli and Tollmaster. "None of my folk have ever proven good enough with gears and pulleys and so forth to create such beyond the simplest of catapults. We have spear throwers and archers to be sure, but that will matter little against ballista or bigger mangonels and such."

"How long have those sieges been going on for?" Gimli asked, while Harry wondered if Thunderbelly had been trying to make a deal for some engineering type help from the Stiffbeards only to not be able to. "Has there been enough time for heavily laden wagons and so forth to join the Easterling army from further east? Are you all going to be under a timetable when you march out?"

"Near to half a year by this point," Karo answered instantly. "Our own siege lasted for around four and a half months before you all showed up. I don't think we will be under a timetable, as there are no roads or anything resembling such heading eastward. When our traders went east, they went with donkeys rather than carts. In fact, I can't remember ever even hearing of Easterlings using wagons at all."

I can, well, chariots, but same principle, Harry mused, thinking of the Wainriders from centuries ago. With the knowledge of that particular war against Gondor and the other nations of Man, Harry had to think that Karo was being far too dismissive of the idea of carts over that terrain.

Beyond that, though, there was still something bothering him about the Easterlings had proportioned their forces. He fell silent, staring down at the map, willing the idea to come to the forefront, while around him, Gimli and the others began to talk about resources Varni's Folly had, what could be allocated to the Longbeard troops as they began to make their way through the mountains, and what would be allocated to the army heading east.

This drew Tollmaster into a debate with Fili, while Karo, Thunderbelly, Gimli and Proli descended into a loud argument about infantry versus infantry tactics

Busy with his own thoughts and staring at the map, Harry barely listened to either conversation. Something about Tollmaster demanding a percentage of the gross? Whereas Gimli was growling about a shield wall being the Stonefoot army's best friend and then arguing about adding spears to their regular stabbing spear-based combat style. Regardless, Harry didn't think very important at the moment. Or he did, until Fili ground out, "Once more, you are not seeing the big picture here, King Tollmaster!"

That phrase stuck in Harry's mind even as the rest of what Fili went on to say flew past him. Looking up, he caught Karo's eye, gesturing down to the map. "Do you have any other maps? Maps going southward from Rolling?" He asked quickly.

The urgency in Harry's tone cut through the other voices, even as Tollmaster opened his mouth to lay into Fili. Karo blinked, then nodded, and looking at his king, who waved him off, went over to one of the scroll cases, coming back with a much larger map. It wasn't nearly as detailed even as the one for Rolling Gates, but it did show territory between the Stonefoot House, and the territory the Blacklock House claimed. Harry quickly asked what scale these maps were on, and learning they were on the same scale as the others, he quickly began to figure out distances, using his finger to walk a line from stone grip towards the territory of the Blacklock house.

"Harry? What are you doing?" Fili asked, feeling concerned.

"Karo said it before," Harry said, looking over at the others. "Why are they content to use their infantry forces to simply be siege Spider's Bane? They don't care about taking it. They wanted that army, the only one that is still intact in that territory, to remain where it is. Why are there horses down here, not simply besieging, but ranging far and wide around Stone Grip? They're not keeping the few remaining forces the stone grip household has within it, they don't fear it. They are there because they can make a quick march south!"

Tollmaster and Karo both frowned, but Proli, surprisingly, began to nod. "The reports from the Grip tell us they haven't even tried to come close to the Grip. They are gathering a lot of food from the area around it though and burning everything they can."

“From there, the Easterlings could march south to join other forces attacking the Blacklock House without anyone able to even see them go. Everything that is going on with the Stonefoot House is to keep your troops at home! You’re not the primary target, the Blacklock House is. That’s where Thorin is leading the army of Erebor, because we received words they were being attacked as well. What if they have to contend with another force coming from Stonefoot lands?”

And we have no idea here in the north what is going on in the Blacklock house since we left Erebor. I could still be missing the real picture here, dammit! With no knowledge of how many Easterlings there I’ve no idea how big this picture can get, Harry thought worriedly. Despite that, Harry was certain he was right about this part at least.

Tollmaster continued to scowl, but the others all paled. “If even one of the Blacklock holds fail, that could be disastrous for them, especially after the latest war with the Easterling’s a few decades ago that Queen Redring was forced to lead her people through,” Gimli grunted. “Their numbers haven’t started to be rebuilt from that war. If they are struck that hard again it could never recover.”

While the Blacklocks House was richer and more warlike in general than the Stonefoot house, they didn’t have the Stonefoot house’s numbers prior to this war and hadn’t had them even before the war which had seen one of their hill holds, the one that Ani Redring came from change hands. Worse, that war was far deadlier for the Blacklocks House than Harry had known the first time he had learned about it. He had since discovered that another of their holds had been wiped out, most of the dwarves within slain. The Easterlings had paid for it in the form of their invading army also being massacred eventually, but the Easterlings would have rebuilt those numbers in the decades since. House Blacklocks {check s} had not and would not be able to for generations of dwarves, if ever, given the disparity of womenfolk to menfolk.

“That is why Thorin’s marching east. But if the Easterling’s knew he would, then... then having a complete cavalry force, one that can cross vast distances quickly, quickly enough to get into position to take part in any battle in the future without Thorin realizing they could...”

“You’re jumping at shadows,” Tollmaster scoffed. “There is no way that an Easterling could...”

“Not an Easterling. The great warlord,” Harry said, knowing suddenly that his next words would be right. “The Great Warlord is servant of Sauron. A Nazgûl.” Even saying that term allowed because the shiver to go through Harry’s spine, where all the doors around him stiffened, their faces clamping down in anger and hate. “When I spoke to Gandalf about the Ringwraiths and their powers once, he told me one of the Ringwraiths was known to be an Easterling. He would be perfect to lead them in this war, and perhaps equally important could direct forces that are widely

dispersed, communicating with them via the ravens and crows as you all use your trained hawks. Crows and ravens could even scout for such, I think.”

Tollmaster’s face paled once more, while Karo and Proli began to curse. Fili and Gimli looked at one another worry prevalent in both of their faces. “I have the utmost trust in my uncle and in King Dain, but dealing with an entirely different army coming at them from an angle they could not expect, plus walking into a war that’s been directed by an ancient unkillable king...”

Deciding not to mention that he might have a spell which could let him kill all but the Witch King among the Nazgûl, Harry looked over at Fili, gesturing down at the map. “What do you want to do Fili?”

Fili scowled a bit, told master cut his hand off quickly, his voice sounding more blustery than certain or official to Harry’s ears. “The army of Varni’s Folly will follow my commands. While I can accept that my forces should march out to protect the holds of Stonefoot House, this is ripe speculation. I will not allow you to completely derail our plans going forward without proof of this concern of yours.”

This caused Karo to scowl, as Tollmaster simply glossed over the fact he had not wanted to send the army forward at all. But Tollmaster ignored him glaring at Fili and Gimli before looking at Karo, making certain his orders were being heard.

We don’t even know if, if this great warlord is indeed a Nazgûl and can do all you say. Making plans prior to having such knowledge confirmed is foolish. And it is Spider’s Bane that we believe to be in the most danger given what you yourselves said. When you leave here, that is where your army will go. And Fili, your forces, those carts that you say you will not turn over to me and mine and your strategy to use them as mobile fortresses, al of those is better used on a small scale, nor against consecutive mounted forces. I will... will accept Thunderbelly’s agreements for the cart of crossbows on top of everything else, but you and your troops will continue your journey into the mountains to deal with the goblin threat, as the contract between King Oakenshield and Thunderbelly states.”

As much as Harry and Fili did not like to hear that, Tollmaster was right. While the far better weapons and armor meant that the Longbeard house troops could have a much larger impact than their numbers would suggest, if you took the wagon fort concept out of the equation, the impact they could have shrunk dramatically. Heck, all any mobile force would have to do would be to simply keep a watch on them, then when they forted up, surround the caravan at a distance away from the dwarves long range fire. Eventually, even the caravan would run out of food and be forced to start moving again.

And on the move, they would be vulnerable, Fili acknowledged. He had been thinking about ways not only to better the wagon fort concept, but also ways to combat it, and then ways

to combat those ways. The Easterlings, more than the goblins for certain, would have the means to do so, as well as be able to bring to bear far greater numbers to bear in territory that favored the hit and run style of attacks that would be most devastating to any force on the move.

“He’s right, Harry. All of our planning was meant to let us bring in and wipe out goblins in the mountains. I’ll admit our scouts would be of fantastic use in any terrain, as would our infantry. If we joined forces with the army here, the impact would be large but...” Fili sighed, trying hard not to glare at Tollmaster. “But that really wouldn’t be the best use of our forces. Beyond you and your magic anyway.”

Harry scowled. He knew Tollmaster was right, he was working on a lot of guesswork here, but something was simply telling him that his instincts on this point were all too accurate. Still, he knew the dwarves wouldn’t believe him without proof and Harry couldn’t really blame them.

Yet that didn’t really matter. What did matter was Thorin might be in danger, to say nothing of the rest of his army and maybe the entirety of the Blacklock House. “Your mission, Fili, Gimli, was to help the Stonefoot House clear up the mountains of the goblins and get them some much needed supplies. That’s fine. But the reason my lady and I were along on this journey wasn’t to help with that task. She has her mission to the north, and I simply wanted to do whatever I could to help you all against the troubles plaguing you. And I think I can do that best by heading east. I will talk it over with Tauriel, but when you all march out Karo, I think we’ll be going with you.”

OOOOOOO

At first, Tauriel thought that the trees that made up the majority of the forests which covered the mid to high areas of the mountains above Varni’s Folly were simply a mix of oak and pine. Odd certainly, and quite unlike any trees she had seen previously. But when she began to move among them, she noticed that their roots were far thicker on top of the ground as well as digging deep, deeper than any tree she had previously seen. Indeed, it seemed as if the entire forest had an interconnected web of roots, bursting out of the ground to the point they came up to her knee in places, and, Tauriel sensed, going so deep that there might be more tree underneath the ground and dug into the stone of the mountain than showed above. Considering these trees didn’t seem to grow any larger than two stories that wasn’t saying much in comparison to the trees of Mirkwood, but still.

“No wonder the Stonefoots believe that these trees are just as good a defense against avalanches as their walls are,” she mused to herself, touching one tree then another, her eyes closed as she communed with them. These trees were ancient. Many of them so old that they could remember past ages, when much of these mountains were covered by a single forest, before the world changed with the fall of Númenor and even the coming of Morgoth. They could

remember a time when the darkness had yet to become something to fear. And these trees could remember Tauriel's people.

Not just from that ancient time either. Not just from the mass exodus from Cuiviénen towards the West that Oromë the Huntsman started amongst the First Born, the three great migrations, the folk who became known as the Vanyar, Noldor and Teleri. No, these trees remembered the elves who remained, those who did not journey to the east at are, the Avari, or the Unwilling.

Tauriel had long known about the Avari. The fact that many elves had stayed behind rather than join the journey to the West in the First Age was taught to every elf who had been born since. Yet so light a touch had the Avari had on the world that this was the first time Tauriel had ever been in a place that still remembered them, where evidence of their existence still existed at all, really. The Avari had created no cities, no hidden halls. These were simpler elves. Not touched by the light of the Valar, the Avari simply did not have any kind of power to them in terms of magic ability, skill with stone, metal or craft, nor great touch with nature.

And yet, the Avari had strode this land, silent and watchful, simple, yet learned in their own fashion. They understood how to work with trees, if not to the extent the Silvan elves did. They knew how to move quietly, to leave no trace in a way that had Tauriel raised a brow in appreciation as she saw memories of the tree's younger years as if she was there. The trees spoke to her of archers and hunters that even the Unseen Host would have respected, a whole clan of elves who were able to hide away from even Morgoth's attention for a time through simple physical skill rather than the magic the Sindar and Noldor had to use.

But such means only worked for a time, alas.

This valley had once been claimed by a group of Avari for several thousand years. Well before the coming of the dwarves, elves had, in fact created these trees, trees which now dominated the Ered Mithrin. The Avari here had lived their simple lives in the valley below, content. Until the coming of orcs and worse. While their defenses might have been able to hide the Avari from merely mortal servants of the greater darkness, but not balrogs.

The trees remembered that time even more than the good centuries before it, for many trees had been felled by the fiery blades of the balrogs or cut down for sport by orcs. The trees remembered seeing their gentle caretakers taken, with many being slain and the survivors rounded up, led away in chains of file iron. Indeed, the vision was so powerful that Tauriel could almost feel the remembered heat of the balrog's blade as it passed by this tree, slicing an elf in twain before cutting down the tree's neighbor.

Pulling away from one ancient tree that had apparently survived being close to such a battle, if battle it could be truly called for the ancient elves of this valley had no ability with

warcraft beyond their archery, Tauriel shook her head, then moved further up the mountains. Only when she began to push past the last of the trees and into the snowcapped peaks of the mountains, did she stop.

There, Tauriel knelt and leaning her back against the last of the trees, she began to meditate. She began to meditate on the feeling that was pulling her north. Her quarry was still too far away for her to be given a definite direction on a compass, yet that feeling was stronger now. *Stronger* she thought, frowning pensively even as she kept her eyes closed. *And more urgently. Whatever is going on in the north, it is calling me there ever stronger to deal with it. What manner of beast I must hunt I still do not know, but it is there, and in some fashion, it is even more important than the Easterlings, and I am operating under a time limit.*

Tauriel knew Harry's mind. Even if they discovered that the Easterlings were beginning to fall back, were beginning to feel the pressure on the two fronts from the wars they had launched into Blacklock and Stonefoot land, he would still want to take part in that greater conflict. The goblins of the mountains were certainly a danger, but the Easterlings were still the larger threat. And Harry, being Harry, would want to try and deal with that larger threat. Yet that was not Tauriel's path. In fact, given the feeling of urgency, Tauriel was fighting with herself not to simply leave Varni's Folly right now.

Frowning, Tauriel left the mountain, heading down to meet up with Harry. When she met with the Stonefoot dwarves, they were standoffish and suspicious yet still directed her in the correct direction to meet up with Harry and the others in the local palace. There, she found that Harry and she had been given a suite of rooms, and she found Harry there, poring over maps, a scowl on his face. Tauriel came up behind him, putting her arms around his waist, leaning her chin on his shoulder for a moment. "Have you discovered still more about this war with the Easterlings to bother us?"

"It's far more organized and controlled than we had thought before this, and I mean that on the strategic level," Harry said, turning just a bit to give her a brief kiss on the cheek, leaning his head against hers before explaining his feelings about what was going on in the East. "I can't say there's a lot of evidence to back my theory, but I'm almost certain it's fact. This great warlord is a Nazgûl, a Ringwraith, and if one of them is controlling the war effort, then all bets are off on what conglomeration of Easterlings can plan or do."

Tauriel nodded, yet inside, she could only shake her head. "I understand what you're saying Harry, and I agree with you. I even agree that Thorin might be in danger... and that you could probably make a far greater difference if you went with the Army to the east."

"I am sensing a large 'however' coming..." Harry said, turning fully in Tauriel's arms, his own arms going around her waist, his glowing eyes staring into her own with a sense of profound sadness. "You're still being called North, aren't you?"

"I am," Tauriel admitted sadly. "With greater urgency than before. I... I'm sorry Harry. As much as I would like to stay with you, I think I am under some kind of time constraint here. We are coming to a point where the skills of a huntress will stop availing me at all against whatever creature is in the north. I don't know how, but that is the feeling I am getting."

Tauriel slowly pulled away until they were simply holding hands rather than hugging. "And even if we left the others, there's a limit to how quickly we could travel. I might be able to get back in time to do something about the Easterlings and whatever goals they have, but I might not."

"So the decision is now to either go with you, and help you in your quest, or go east, and perhaps be precisely where I need to be to do the most good for the dwarves of two Houses, not to mention Thorin and his army," Harry said sadly.

"To do the most good, I think, is the right attitude," Tauriel said sadly. "You're not the one being called to the north, Harry. Your powers and abilities might not be needed for my task, whereas they could make a vast difference against the Easterlings."

"So we part ways?" Harry fought back a scowl at the mere idea of it. They been apart for a few days here and there over the past decade plus since returning to the Lonely Mountain and the territory around it, but this parting felt far more important, far more sudden and treacherous, as well as certainly being a separation that would be far longer than a mere few days. At best, Harry figured they would be apart for a month, maybe three or more.

"I'm afraid so. I think we were both cognizant of the fact that this might be coming, Harry. And I think we need to admit it now. Tomorrow, I'm leaving Varni's Folly. I will push straight north, as best I can through the mountains, trusting to my own skills to stay hidden of for many dangers until I come upon the beast I am to hunt. And you, you will go east to war."

Both of them were feeling far sadder at this parting than even a normal human couple might have. In Elvish terms, they were still deep into the courtship phase, where their Fëa continually intertwined with one another, a process that would normally take a few decades. Thus, parting like this was not something any Elvish couple would ever willingly do with such a point. But they needed to, and both of them knew it.

Yet after a second, Harry's face firmed. He leaned in and kissed Tauriel slowly, lovingly. Then, even as she squeaked a bit in surprise, Harry lifted her up and moved towards the bed that they had been given.

It was actually two beds, with a second bed being brought in and then both of them dismantled so that the two mattresses could be placed one next to another in order to create a dead fit for a tall person, but Harry didn't really care about that right now. "That," he said as he pulled back from the kiss, working his way down Tauriel's jawline to her neck, with where he began to nip and suckle. "That is for tomorrow. Tonight, I think we owe it to one another to create yet another fond memory before we part ways."

End Chapter