

I am not Tolkien, nor would I ever call myself his equal, or worse yet, better. Looking at you, RoP. Nor am I British or a woman.

Happy (hopefully?) end of January to you all, folks. This is the HP update for January. It isn't as large as I had hoped, but for three days, I think it's pretty good, especially since I actually was able to Grammarly it as I went along for once! Woaaaaa!

Chapter 26: The Long Reach of Sauron

On the eve of the day after the caravan had left behind the column of smoke from the funeral pyres at the tiny dwarven Hamlet, Harry and Tauriel were again ahead of the rest of the group. Once more, the two of them had been given leave to range further ahead and to the sides of the trail, which in this area actually had begun to resemble a road, while the other scouts were kept in closer.

All save Nico, who had disappeared earlier the day before, leaving only a short note to explain that he would be back at some point. After months of traveling with the taciturn scout master, Harry understood that was simply his way of doing things. Perhaps the caravan was going too slowly, or perhaps he wanted to venture further northward away from the road and then turn further eastward, but who knew? Although leaving his men behind like that was something Fili would need to reprimand Nico for in the future.

Harry paused for a moment, scanning around them before watching Tauriel from behind as she gained a few yards of space on him. The land here was greener than it had been at most points along their journey, but that didn't mean that it was home to any great number of trees, and there were no farms or more hamlets. According to Thunderbelly, there wouldn't be either up until they saw the easternmost wall of Varni's Folly. Since the southernmost offshoot of the Grey Mountains had loomed in the distance for some days now, that would be happening within the next five or so days.

There were a few scattered trees around the area but according to Tauriel, most of them were gnarled and mean-spirited like the two they had spotted before they had come upon the dwarven hamlet. Worse, several dozen small bushels of nettle bushes (which Harry had taken to calling their dwarvish name of Khr'uz'bar in his head) grew here and there, promising pain and annoyance in even measure to anyone coming close. Beyond that, there wasn't much in the way of rocks, hills or anything else, although for the past day, Tauriel had said that morning that she could see the Grey Mountains descending ahead of them.

Still, the day was, if not warm – a rarity this far north - then sunny at least, and there didn't seem to be any sign of either trouble or rain on the horizon. Harry knew there was quite a bit of

trouble beyond the horizon in the form of Easterlings forces, as young Suli had told them about. But right now, he took a brief moment to just enjoy watching Tauriel move. Seeing her move along mixed the sensual with the artistic in his mind, a thing of beauty that needed to be stopped and admired while also being desired. Tauriel's red hair flew behind her when the hood of her cloak fell away and Harry could see the curve of her neck and the shape of her rear under her cloak, drawing Harry's gaze.

As if feeling his gaze, Tauriel turned her head. Their eyes locked for a moment, and Harry smiled before he bowed from the waist, kissing his fingers and waving his hand towards Tauriel as if to send her a kiss. She laughed, then gestured for Harry to join her as she paused. Harry did so, and Tauriel took his hand in hers. The two of them moved on, leaning in occasionally to exchange kisses, taking delight in one another's company.

Near mid-afternoon, however, the rest of the world intruded upon the couple once more. Tauriel stared ahead of them, then pulled Harry to a stop, crouching low. Harry instantly did the same, trusting her to have a reason and making certain that the hood of his elven cloak was up. With Tauriel's cloak hiding her as well, someone would be able to pass within a yard of the two of them and not notice. "What is it, my love?"

"Riders, I see a few of them out there, and there are more coming into view. They are following the road west."

Harry nodded, looking around them for a few moments, then pointing to a spot near a group of nettle bushes several yards to their left. "I can almost guarantee that they won't be going over that way," he said drolly. "That would be a good place to observe them from."

Tauriel paused from where she had been about to pull her bow off her shoulder, then nodded. The two of them shifted that way, which, once the Easterlings showed up, put the two of them on their left flank. Watching the troop pass by, Harry was able to count them as they went, although he messed up a few times and estimated that there were between thirty-six to forty of them.

All of them were mounted, obviously, and all of them save one was wearing the normal mismatched armor that they had seen in the raiders a few days back. That one wore red armor, the lamellar plate armor that Harry had seen on the presumed leader of the group who had been wiped out by Harry and Tauriel several days prior in the wreckage of the fishing hamlet. This one, however, looked as if it had been intended to be used on horseback, with matching greaves and armored leggings.

That worthy was leading a trail of three horses. All of the others had just one, implying not only that the armored man was of higher standing but that his armor meant he wore their warhorses out quickly. *Interesting. I don't think that armor's heavier than that of the dwarves. So*

their horses don't have any more strength or endurance than the dwarven ponies, a marked contrast to the horses back on Earth I read about in the Middle Ages.

"They all wear the same kind of helmets. I suppose those red armored fellows are an officer core, and they've got enough understanding of logistics to always send three horses with one of them," Harry mused, his voice so low that only Tauriel, who was rubbing elbows with him right now, could hear. "That smacks of far too much organization that I want to see in my enemies."

"I was somewhat appalled at how long it took to move the army rather than the Unseen Host into battle, and that was an elven host, an army that really did not require much in the way of food and certainly not pack animals. And that is to say nothing about how much food horses eat. I know not how much such animals need to eat every day, but given their size, it must be a good deal."

"True. Although, I wonder... You have a better understanding of animals in general, my love. Do those horses look a little on the thin side? I read about horse armies back in my old world, and the horses we've seen so far don't really match in terms of size or strength."

Tauriel frowned at that, examining the horses closely, carefully. A few of them did look malnourished, but she shook her head, telling Harry that she didn't think the majority did. "I think that is simply a sign of their riders not taking proper care of them than any true issue with food," Tauriel said, her tone shifting into one of censorious disapproval, causing Harry to snort.

"What should we do?" Tauriel went on, gesturing to the group of Easterlings, keeping her motion short and economical as if an errant breeze had just moved through the grass. While she trusted the magic of her elven cloak, and, far more than that, Harry's invisibility cloak, which he could bring out at need, there was no need to take untoward risks right now. "We could attack them now. With your spells and my arrows, we could have seven or nine of them out of the saddle before the rest even knew they were under attack. I might even be able to cause the horses enough confusion to throw them. And if they keep going, they'll ultimately spot the caravan. While I trust the dwarven scouts to not get spotted and ambush them in turn, it would only take a few of those Easterlings to get away to perhaps bring down still more upon our heads."

"That last is probably inevitable. But no, we've got time. You're still thinking too much like an elf, my love. You think we're close to the caravan at this point. We've been pushing hard all day. I'd estimate that those horses are at least another full day's journey away from where they might be able to spot the head of the caravan at the pace the convoy moves," Harry teased gently, reaching out to take her hand where it lay on the grass between them.

Tauriel smiled at that, then shivered a bit as one of his thumbs began to gently rub the back of her palm. "Then what? We move around them, warn the column that they're coming?"

“No. We need information. I think it’s time to be a little bit daring,” Harry intoned firmly. “Let’s get ahead of them and then wait someplace where they might stop for the night. At that point, it will be time for us to trust in my spells and your cloak.”

Tauriel was not slow on the uptake, and she began to shift backward slowly, putting one of the nettle bushes between her and the Easterlings before standing upright, shifting further backward, northwards, then leading Harry around. They were soon well away, moving around the column in a shallow circle, and she asked, “Do you mean to try and infiltrate their camp? What will we learn from that if they do not speak common amongst themselves? I do not think that searching their equipment will give us any more information unless we come upon a map of some kind.”

“Actually, even if we came upon something they had written down, I probably wouldn’t be able to make heads or tails of it. I have a translation spell that works for the spoken word, not the written,” Harry reminded Tauriel gently.

Tauriel blinked and Harry looked at her in some surprise. “I never mentioned it to you?”

“No, you did. I just forgot about it.” Harry had been using that spell when they first met in Mirkwood, which allowed him to speak the Sindari tongue, but had not needed it to speak elvish or common by the time he and the dwarves had escaped.

“True, it’s been a while since I’ve needed to use it. And frankly, I never brought it up or mentioned it much because I didn’t want Thorin or the others to think I was using it around the dwarves. They are paranoid about their language, after all.”

Tauriel nodded, understanding that was probably one of the very few things that Harry could do that would ruin his friendship with Thoren and the rest of the dwarves of Erebor. Khuzdul was one of the dwarven race’s most prized secrets, and they never allowed more than curses or scattered words to be known to anyone of any other race. It was why they spoke common so much around other races and the reason why they had a true name hidden behind a public name. They also had earned second names, like Oakenshield, Thunderbelly, or Ironfoot, but those were earned rather than chosen like the common names were.

With a plan in place, Tauriel led Harry to an area where she felt a group like the Easterlings would want to set up a camp, a strange little area to one side of the road where it seemed as if two lines of nettle bushes had grown nearly perpendicular to one another, leaving a sharp corner and two walls of nettle bushes. It was the kind of defensible position that any military mind would grasp instantly, and Harry was not surprised to see that the first of the Easterling to spot it shouted at some of the others, and they began to make their way towards it off the road even before evening truly began to fall.

The Easterlings did not seem to have much in the way of tents, although several of them did own their own sleep rolls, whereas others did not. There were only four tents in the whole troop, and they were small and obviously personal tents for the men who owned them. There didn't seem to be much order about the camp, with anyone who wanted to set fires.

That was a very arrogant act, Harry realized. It killed their night vision deep into what they should have felt was enemy territory. *Yet they don't think it is, do they?*

He pointed this observation out to Tauriel, who nodded firmly.

"No enemy with even an ounce of intelligence would ever set fires like that near the area of Merckwood claimed by my folk. I'm afraid that probably means that we won't be running into any other dwarven settlements with survivors out here before we reach Varni's Folly."

"Thudnerbelly said that was likely when we rescued Suli and the other young dwarf. Which means it's even more important that we get some more information." He reached under Tauriel's hood, gently clasping her face with his hands, watching her lean into his touch for a moment, her own hand coming up to rest in the hood of his own cloak as his other hand moved in a complicated gesture, casting the Rosetta Calx on himself. "Come on, let's get in there before someone, probably that red-armored fellow, decides to post guards."

Actually, getting into the camp wasn't difficult even though by the time the lovers moved, the red-armored man had indeed set out guards. As Harry had thought several hours before, seeing even Tauriel while on the move would've been difficult during the day. At night, with the flames of scattered fires throughout their camp ruining their night vision, it was impossible. And Harry had switched out his elvish cloak for his own invisibility cloak. Like two leaves on the breeze, Harry and Tauriel entered the camp, listening intently.

Even with the spell letting him understand their language, the Easterling language sounded harsh to Harry's ears, like a mix between a human tongue and the Black tongue of Mordor that he had heard from the goblins underneath the Misty Mountains. Some words stuck out, almost as if they were from an older language, but the majority was guttural with hissing consonants and numerous strange uses of vowels for some reason. Yet the Rosetta Calx spell still worked.

"...fool can't have ranged out too much further away from this point," one of the Easterlings muttered to another, Harry missing the first bit of his sentence, his voice muffled a bit by his helmet but not overmuch. None Harry saw so far had bothered to remove their helmets, something else Harry noted of their society. All of them had been wearing them since the moment they had come into sight and were still wearing them now, even as they were encamped. That seemed unusual to Harry's limited historical knowledge of similar human armies.

“True. Still, if Fudak’s been gone this long, maybe his troop found a target? Another stumpy hamlet, maybe? Maybe with some of their womenfolk?” Another said, making a lewd gesture with his hips.

This brought guffaws from a few and sneers and growls from others. Evidently, several of the men here were of the opinion that any woman was good enough, while others seemed to loathe the very idea, although if that was because they didn’t like the act itself or just didn’t think dwarves were attractive, Harry couldn’t tell. Regardless, he shook his head as he thought of how dwarves and men would’ve reacted to something like that sentence and shifted away from that portion of the camp.

Having come in at a different angle than Harry, Tauriel put herself near the horses. She wanted to learn more about the bond between the Easterlings and these magnificent beasts. Several of them were now looking around, sniffing the air, making equine noises of surprise and joy, causing many of the Easterlings looking after them to murmur in confusion to one another. This caused Tauriel to shy away a bit more, yet she heard the first real bit of news the pair would discover that night.

“They’ll settle down soon enough. We’ve been working the horses hard on this patrol, but we haven’t actually let them run hard, really,” one Easterling said, his voice sounding a little older than the others that Tauriel had heard so far, although she would be hard-pressed to tell you why. “If we do so tomorrow morning, maybe before we set out, that’ll settle them down for a good few days. For now, get the feeds on them.”

She watched as each horse was fitted with a small bag containing a small amount of food over its mouth, frowning a little at that arrangement before watching one man, shorter than any of the others, move his hands down one of the horses to his foot. He checked it for a moment, then moved back up before pulling out what looked like some kind of brush and beginning to brush the horse down.

This action brought some snorts of amusement from several of the others who were already moving away from the horses. “Missing your life as a stable apprentice? You’re going to make them soft and your hands softer with all that care,” one of the other men said, the joke going over Tauriel’s head but making many of the others bellow in laughter for what was apparently a very good wordplay of some kind.

“At least I had a job before the Warlord came,” the youngster, again, Tauriel was just judging by his voice, shot back. “You didn’t have to ducat to rub together.”

The other one growled, then shook his head, deciding to move on, as the older one who had spoken up earlier seemed to turn around and glare at him, then gesture peremptorily towards a few of the other horses. The taunter fell silent for a few moments but then spoke up again,

grumbling about the horses now. “Why the great warlord demanded we needed to send all of our stallions south, I don’t know! Mares are too docile for war and not a black one among them. Is the Mighty King in Mordor so--”

That was as far as he got before one of the others kicked him hard in one of the legs, bringing him to his knee with a cry of pain. Before he could say anything, the same man who had hit him smashed a fist into the side of his helmet, causing his head to ring. With a metal helmet on the hit didn’t actually do much damage, but it certainly had gotten the grumbler’s attention. “Enough! You know we are not supposed to speak of him. Even the term Mordor on your lips demeans it!”

That was altogether interesting to Tauriel on many levels. The Easterlings were in cahoots with the dread power of Mordor very obviously, and a warlord had come among them. Further, there was the information on the horses. She didn’t know quite what to make of that one, frankly, but it seemed a sore point with several of the men here, as she had seen many a helmeted head nodding until the grumbler had directly mentioned Mordor. *Why put a gag order on that? Is it simply a way to instill further discipline? Or is Mordor not as strong as Sauron wants it to be, and he wants to hide such connections from the Wise?*

Confused and now wondering what kind of grand design this war might serve the dread lord, Tauriel moved away slowly, making no noise or fast movements, using her elven cloak to good effect. Not for her was all the magic that Harry used to hide his presence. Simple skill was enough, even though she wore her brigandine armor underneath. Soon, Tauriel was away from where the horses were tied down, moving deeper into the small camp.

Elsewhere, Harry had picked up only a few scattered names. A man named Auctar was spoken with reverence, and from the gist of it, Harry thought that that was the name of the man leading this army. A battle at a place the Easterlings called Ash Hills was mentioned a few times, as to of the riders bartered between them about some spoil one had taken during it. The others around them weighed in, apparently keeping the argument going more than anything else.

All that was interesting, but Harry was getting more background information than any real specifics. He also heard that the entire army was under rations, a sign that they might be having trouble with food. *If they are a fully cavalry-based army, that probably goes without saying, but it is interesting anyway.*

He also watched as several of the men pulled off their helmets, fixing some of the inner padding, their movements quick and certain, but almost as if they were working under a time frame. The others nearby watched them work, and one of them even began to count down, a joke, seemingly, but one that fell flat to the pair working on their helmets.

Regardless of where the odd hangup about helmets came from, this allowed Harry to see their faces. Much like the easterners they had seen before, these men looked oriental to Harry, with deep-set eyes and epacanthic folds around the eyes. All of them also had black hair. Some had small beards, while the third had a mustache. All of their hair gleamed the lights of the fires nearby, with some kind of oil or fat worked into it, Harry wasn't certain which.

Most of the men seemed loud and boisterous and seemed to go into body humor even more than dwarves, from what Harry had seen. They also pushed, shoved and punched one another. That wasn't something dwarves went into; instead, preferring to wrestle with their best friends. Twice Harry saw a pair of the Easterlings fall to actual combat, with punches and kicks exchanged that left bruises, if not broken bones. These bouts would only end when one or the other lost their helmets.

Again, they all seemed to keep their helmets on as much as possible, which was strange for Harry. They did take them off to eat, at least, but put them on afterward. Stranger than that was that some of the Easterlings had already laid out to sleep. And they had wound their faces with cloth as if hiding their faces from the world that way. *Odd, very odd. Not showing your enemy your face, I could understand. But not showing your face to your companions? Odd.*

Harry and Tauriel continued to shift and move throughout the camp, listening intently until the red-armored man came out of his tent. It was easily the largest, being the only one the Easterlings had that came close to the size of the tent the pair of lovers used, which wasn't to say that it was large, just larger than the others. The man still needed to stoop to enter and leave it. He spoke to a pair of other men who had remained nearby, and they moved off, dragging a third man between them.

The red-armored man glared around at the others, and a harsh whistle drew all of their attention to him. He didn't wait until they were lined up or standing at attention or anything like that, like an army back on Earth would have. But once he was certain that he had the majority's attention, he pointed down the man at his feet. "Fula here stole food. He spoke out against the Tithe. That is two offenses in a single day's travel. You know Lord Auctar's orders, which come down from the Warlord himself. Through the Bleeding Hand, we serve the eye..."

Through service to the Eye, we serve the True Power," the rest of the easterners intoned, with several of them actually going to one knee, slapping a fist into their chests and veneration. Not all, but more than half of them. Harry was interested to see that a few looked, at least from their body language, as he couldn't see their faces, almost dismissive of such things. Yet despite that, they watched the officer, who pulled out a strange multi-ended whip with small metal prongs on the end.

If Harry had known more about whips in general, he would've recognized this one as a short cat of nine tails. This was a vicious whip meant to leave horrible wounds on its victim.

Nearby, Tauriel was also watching this. She was more than a little disturbed by the quasireligious nature of the answer given to the mention of the Bloody Hand. She was also confused by the word 'tithe'. Tuariel understood what it meant, but what it referred to in this context, Tauriel didn't know.

Taurel watched for a few seconds, then winced and turned away as the man, stripped of his boiled leather armor, was held between his two captors. He gasped and groaned as the whip slammed into his back with skin-tearing force, and she shivered a bit. *How can one person be so cruel to another, especially among their own band? I thought Thranduil was mad and cruel to Harry when he was in our jail, but he was beaten by wooden staffs, not, not like this. And the others... some of them enjoy this. None of us enjoyed what we did to Harry.*

But thankfully it wasn't all of them who were enjoying the show. One of the troopers near Tauriel's current position also turned away, whispering to another. "You watch. He's going to beat Fula near to death. And what will that serve? Remove a sword from the fight and force two more to watch over him on the march tomorrow."

"We all serve. And if you want to argue with the Bloody Hand placed over us, then go right ahead. Your sword's far better than mine, and your body won't have need of it after," another man muttered back.

Both men chortled that, but Tauriel was already moving off, having heard enough.

Harry and Tauriel continued to meander through the camp, with Harry almost brushing against a few people, and Tauriel nearly getting caught between one man and his bedroll, unable to move because there were several other men already within touching distance laying out their own. A quick leap back over a man who crouched down just in time allowed her to get away without being bumped, but only elvish agility allowed her to land silently enough to no longer draw further attention.

As the camp began to settle down to sleep for the night, with only a few guards posted, Harry and Tauriel both made their way back out of the camp, heading back to the meeting point they had set up earlier before starting their infiltration. Ironically, this was another single nettle bush with a small blue piece of fabric tied to one of its lower branches.

Tauriel arrived first and stood there, staring out into the dark until Harry's face appeared before her. He pulled his hood back further, and she did the same, smiling widely at him as Harry practically grinned boyishly before leaning in to give her a kiss.

That kiss rapidly turned intense. For both elves and humans, excitement and adrenaline earned from one activity often translated into another, and soon, Tauriel found herself sitting in Harry's lap as he sat on the ground, their lips locked, tongues exploring, twining. How long they made out, Tauriel didn't know, but eventually, even she had to pull back to breathe for a moment.

Breathing in deeply, Tauriel leaned her head against Harry's chest, feeling his powerful arms, those powerfully muscled human arms squeezing her gently, the wideness of his shoulders, the wideness of his chest. It always made her think of **things**, bedroom-type things. But Tauriel knew that now was not the time for such. Time for that in the future when we returned to our own house by the lake, she thought, with some reluctance.

"Well," she hummed, not looking up at Harry and breathing deeply between each word, trying to get herself and her desires under control. "What, what do you think we learned?"

"Quite a bit," Harry said, his own voice strained for a moment, and his arousal very clear to Tauriel where she was sitting before he shifted lightly away from her. A second later, he fell back onto the ground so that Tauriel could roll off him, propping herself up with one elbow to look at him as Harry continued to go through his thoughts.

"Not a lot that matters right away, but it certainly gave me more of an insight into Easterling culture than I had before. They are tribe based, with the tribes sometimes gathering together into larger units. I heard one man name the tribe these warriors came from, but I don't think I heard it all, just the last few letters. The red armored man is indeed an officer set over them who serves the great warlord in turn. The great warlord uses the Bloody Hand as officers, although what the Bloody Hand are, I don't know. The great warlord is someone different from Lord Auctar, who seems to be the leader of the local army. Life doesn't seem to matter much to them. Not one of them protested the harsh treatment from what I heard.

"I agree, unfortunately. I heard others complain it made them weaker and would mean more for someone unlucky enough to be assigned to look over the wounded. No protests about the act itself. Which either means it's normal among them or they are simply uncaring. They also serve Mordor through their great warlord," Tauriel added softly. "One man mentioned Mordor by name, although the person who did was immediately castigated by his fellows. That, and the Great King in Mordor."

"Strange. Almost as strange as the fact every Easterling seems to always have to wear their helmets as much as possible or hide their faces in some fashion. Even when sleeping," Harry mused. "Did you try to look through any of their items?"

"I did, but I didn't find anything useful or interesting. That troop is out here going after someone whose patrol has been gone overlong from the army. And the call dwarves stumpies. Not exactly a clever name for them, I have to say," Harry quipped.

His jocular tone hid true anger as Harry remembered the scene at the fishing hamlet. Something that Tauriel could hear all too well despite Harry's automatic defense against anger and pain alike. *I've heard that before, though it's been several years. Still, my method for dealing with Harry's coping phase isn't any different now than the time he came back from helping to discover a murderer in Dale at Bard's request.*

With that thought, Tauriel leaned in and gave him a kiss on the cheek, nuzzling into his side, letting her presence pull him out of his bloodthirsty thoughts. Harry smiled at that, and the pair of them stared upwards at the stars for a time, with Tauriel allowing the darkness and those small, precious pinpricks of light, placed there by Varda, to sooth her, washing away her reaction to the easy-going violence and cruelty that she had heard within the camp.

"Do you think we will need to do this again?" she asked after a few moments.

"Not right away. Not for this band. In fact, I think, once we've rested here a moment, we should get up and move," Harry said reluctantly. "Just because I said that Fili and the others didn't need to be warned earlier doesn't mean that I don't want to tell them about this troop. Frankly, I think we need to ambush them. I don't think the two of us could do so in such a way that none of them would be able to escape because, beyond that, I want to take that red-armored one alive."

Tauriel blinked slowly, digesting that, then nodded. "What is the plan then, my love?"

"I think you should return to the dwarves. You're far faster than I am when you're really pushing it, and I think we need to set up an ambush for this lot. Ask Fili for his opinion, but I think the best option would be to hold the column where you meet it, then send the scouts forward as groups to either side to hide. Let the Easterlings see a single cart or two, and then let them attack that cart before the scouts and whoever can hide away nearby from behind."

He sensed more than saw Tauriel's confusion at that and shrugged his shoulders, the movement creating a sound of rustling grass underneath him. "They've all got horses, love. The main problem will be to make certain that none of them escape to warn the rest of their army ahead of us somewhere that we're in the area."

That made sense to Tauriel, and she leaned over and gave him a quick kiss on the lips before pushing to her feet quickly. "In that case, I will be off. Just remember Harry, that even I would have trouble spotting you if you wore your invisibility cloak. Kindly switch to your elven cloak before the battle begins, please."

Harry watched her go for several moments before leaning back and closing his eyes, seeing no reason or desire to put up the tent for just himself. After several long minutes, he did roll to one side and pull out a set of written stones, though, setting them up around him before falling back to

the ground. He then closed his eyes, deciding to get what sleep he could without his Tauriel-sized body pillow.

OOOOOOO

Late the next evening, Harry paced beside the Easterlings, so close that he could still make out some of them talking to one another as they rode on. He then frowned, suddenly turning his head further eastward, brows furrowing as he stared at a particularly large area set to one side of the trail. *What is that? Some, some kind of, of otherness, is there.*

That made Harry remember what Gandalf had told him several times. The older wizard/Maiar in disguise had told Harry that he created splashes in the world which those who could sense beyond the physical in Middle Earth could detect. *So, is that what my Notice Me Not Arrays feel like? Or is it just that I can feel them because they are of my own magical school?*

Harry didn't know if that made sense, but Gandalf had told him about how the Ringwraiths and Sauron had been able to tell Gandalf was around despite using a similar Notice Me Not runic array. It was possible that Harry could do something of the same thing now that he had become a pseudo-Maiar himself.

I can't see past it, which is interesting, and I know enough history now to know that there still exist wards that are not only invisible but cannot be felt. The original Gondor was hidden under one such, and Lady Galadriel and Lord Elrond's realms are hidden similarly. Well, in part, anyway. Something to think about going forward... Hmm... maybe adding a grounding rune to the Notice-Me-Not array?

Shaking those thoughts off, Harry continued to pace the force of Easterlings for a few moments before falling back as it passed by the area Harry had noticed. As it did, a smaller hiding place gleaned to the other side of the trail. *Huh, they split their forces. Sound thinking. I... I can get an idea of the size of the two hiding areas, huh. I would have thought the first was using all the runestones I'd prepared. Good job Meto, then. I would have thought he wouldn't be willing to work on something so 'easy' or have the attention span. Hah, I wonder if Gimli or Fili had to stand over the youngster.*

As Harry held back a chuckle at that image, a shout came from the head of the column. "Look, it's a stumpy cart! I see at least five of the bearded bastards."

"How in the hell did even someone like Gundross miss a cart of stumpy's? Or did he range north or south off the trail?" The man in red armor muttered, his voice barely reaching Harry, who by that point was directly behind the column on the road.

The man then raised his voice, shouting out, "Spread out. We'll come at them from all sides. Who knows if they know any sneaky little holes to hide in around here."

“Around here, with the soil like it is? More trouble than it’s worth,” another Easterling muttered, far closer to where Harry had slowly begun to switch from his invisibility cloak to his elven one.

“Shut up. You know that every one of the hamlets we’ve crushed had underground tunnels.” The second man shivered visibly on his horse. “Fucking stumpies fight better underground than they do on grass, especially with those strange, short spears of theirs. Who’s to say that there aren’t small hidden caves or something out here? Besides I don’t hear you complaining about getting a chance to get our swords wet again.”

“What do I look like, a woman?” The other muttered back, pulling out his saber. Others couched lances as they spread out, forming a half-circle before kneeing their horses into a canter. There didn’t seem to be any bows among them again, something Harry was very thankful for. *Dealing with mounted soldiers is bad enough. Dealing with this world’s version of Mongols would be far worse.*

By this point, Harry could make out the target of the Easterlings as they spread out. It was indeed a single small cart, one of the ones that Harry knew carried food for the trip itself, rather than any of the food or other things that were due to be sold in the Stonefoot holds. It also had a tarp over it. *Hah, don’t doubt some more dwarves are hidden under there. And Fili is the one at the reins of the cart. Of course. Delegation isn’t exactly a thing among dwarvenkind when it comes to combat.*

Harry watched as the Easterlings drove their horses towards the loan cart in the distance, the owners of which were trying rapidly to turn around, to little avail. Two dwarves beside Fili jumped off of the cart, weapons in hand, helmets on their heads and armor gleaming. Harry knew that they were both Longbeards. The dwarves of Erebor favored helmets and their chainmail and trusted their armor to stop most blows, leaving their hands free to wield a larger weapon. The Stonefoots used short, thin-tipped spears and shields, with hammers or short-hafted axes as secondary weapons.

Just as the Easterlings charged into melee range, the areas covered by magic which Harry had been feeling to either side of the trail evaporated, and the Stonefoots led by Thunder Bay charged out, roars on their lips and vengeance in their heart. “Baruk Khazâd! Baruk ai Beâdâr vas mênû!”

Later, Harry would learn that translated loosely to ‘The axe of vengeance has you!’ Which was a rather fitting warcry given what the Easterlings had been doing to the Stonefoot folk.

At the same time, from the back of the cart, three dwarves of the Lonely Mountain flipped up the top of the cart, revealing themselves and their crossbows. Opening fire into the incoming attackers. The same thing happened from the other side of the trail. Spread out, the dwarven

scouts fired into the back and flanks of that side of the half-crescent formation the Easterlings had spread out into.

Each shot hit, and either a horse or a man went down. None but the red-armored man had any kind of armor that could stop an Erebor-made crossbow. The falling horses and men alike caused other horses to stumble, break legs, or outright collapse. What had been a routine attack on a small, albeit well-armed trio of dwarves suddenly became a far more even clash.

Not that Harry was willing to let it continue to be even. Raising a hand, he lashed out with a spell from one hand, a cutting spell that sliced into several men along one flank as they tried to envelop the cart. *Concentrate on helping the scouts first.*

At the same time, the Stonefoot hammered into them from behind and to the left of the Easterling's loose formation, causing even more disarray. An Arrow zipped past through the tumult to hit one of the Easterlings, who had turned entirely around back the way he came, announcing that Tauriel was with the dwarves as well. Harry took a brief moment to watch as she came around the cart, shooting two more who got too close before turning her attention to a more distant target, another Easterling that was trying to get away entirely.

Attacked from the rear and both flanks and facing a far harder nut to crack than they had thought any fight went out of most of the raiders. More tried to turn and run, only to be shot by the scouts or find themselves locked in a fight with the Stonefoots. Others, not losing heart or perhaps going full berserker, charged forward toward the cart.

Looking at that group, Harry spotted the red-armored man still on his horse, urging it forward to attack one of the defenders in front of the cart. Before he could land the blow, Harry lashed out in that direction with a Stupefy.

In his haste, Harry had overpowered the spell, and it was so powerful that it lifted both man and horse into the air a few inches and flung the man from the saddle even as the horse collapsed behind him. The Bloody Hand landed and rolled, his entire body boneless as he hit the ground, which might well have saved him from broken ribs or spine, given the severity of the fall.

With that accomplished, Harry kept his distance from the melee, lashing out again and again with simple cutting spells to slay any of the men who tried to flee. There was no need to be more experimental at the moment. Speed was the thing, as he didn't want his would-be prisoner to be trampled.

By this point, more than half of the horses were down, and others were fighting their masters, unwilling to charge towards an elf with fell intent and unwilling to listen to them over the elf. Still more fell as the crossbows from the defenders on the cart and in the arms of the scouts twanged again, then again. Then the battle was over, the last of the Easterlings falling to a blow

from Thunderbelly's spear, which plucked the Easterling from the saddle as if he was a fish and dashed him to the ground, still screaming before Thunderbelly's spear took him in the throat.

Thunderbelly roared something in dwarvish to his folk, who responded with a wordless cry of their own, with the Longbeards remaining respectfully quiet for a second before Fili picked his way through the corpses towards Harry. "Harry! Well done on sending Tauriel back to us. Setting this up all ahead of time was a grand idea. I don't think any of them got away, and we didn't even have to use all our men." Indeed, only the scouts and six Longbeards had taken part in this fight to add to the Stonefoot warriors with Thunderbelly.

"For that, you would have to ask my lady. She was the one who was handling the cleanup there," Harry replied drolly before turning a real smile on Tauriel, who bowed her head back to him. She made no move to pick her way through the bodies, though, instead moving to one side, drawing the surviving horses to her, soothing their anxiety and concern.

Seeing that, Fili ordered two of his own dwarfs to hurry back to the rest of the convoy. "Get them up here along with the fodder for the ponies. That will settle these horses down, and Thunderbelly and his warriors can take possession of them. I expect there will be far more in the future."

Snorting at that, Harry moved towards the center of the battlefield where the red-armored man had been. "Far be it from me to point out there are more important things than business to a dwarf, but I might have secured us a prisoner."

With Fili looking on, Harry shifted several of the bodies that had fallen on top of the man after he had been knocked unconscious, pulling the Blood Hand to his feet with a show of strength that Harry would never have been able to do when he first came to the lonely mountain, holding the unconscious man out by his shoulders towards the dwarves. "I predict that this one might be able to give us some more answers. He's what they call a Blood Hand and acts as an officer to this lot. It's not exactly imaginative, but it's descriptive, at least."

When they met up with the rest of the caravan, Harry and the other officers hoping to question the prisoner were faced with a problem from a surprising source. The moment that he set his prisoner down on the ground near one of the fires, one of the dwarves nearby hit us, grabbed up a stick, and prepared to be the man over the head, only stopped by one of the other dwarves grabbing his arm. "Die!"

This was young Suli Bloodfoot, The survivor of the fishing hamlet had earned a second name from the caravan when he told some of the others he had kicked an attacker to death in the fight against the Easterling when he and the other dwarves had been forced into their underground cave system.

"Easy Lad, we want to answer some questions of this one first. Then we can kill him," Gimil said matter-of-factly, holding the younger dwarve's arm still and then squeezing.

Harry winced a bit at that. Back in his old world, killing prisoners, well, that just wasn't done among civilized folk. *Or at least not among wizarding folk, as far as I know. Who knows what the nonmagicals were up to.*

But he understood Suli's anger, as well as the quiet bubbling fury on the face of Thunderbelly and the other stone foot tribesmen. The fact that not only had their folk died, man and woman, but that one of their womenfolk had been almost taken captive infuriated them no end. Harry had not seen the young lady that had been with Suli when Harry and Tauriel had liberated them since they'd met up back with the column and had not gone looking. He knew that protecting the young dam had suddenly become the most important thing to Thunderbelly and the rest until they arrived in Varni's Folly. That was how much worth the dwarves put on their womenfolk, which in turn spoke to how rare they were.

"He's right, Suli. You can listen to his answers, but I want to keep him alive while we question him," Harry said, shaking his head. "I don't know any spell to get any answers out of the dead."

That somewhat amused observation caused many a chuckle from the dwarves, but Suli nodded and slowly subsided, watching the red-armored man balefully as he was stripped of his armor and helmet, his hands tied behind him, then set up against one of the wheels of the cart. His feet were also tied together. The man was not going anywhere. "Now, the question is, how to get him to talk."

"What do you mean? We simply threaten to torture him a little, then until he actually gives us some answers, break some fingers," Gimli stated firmly.

Yet Fili was looking at Harry thoughtfully. "You are thinking of something a little more sophisticated, I suppose? Do you want us to get out some pliers and set them up nearby, maybe heat a pair of screws over a fire, let fear do our work for us?"

"It's either that.. or..." Harry paused, his face twisting and a look of utter distaste. "I think I've mentioned a spell in front of you before, Fili, Tauriel. The Imperio? It would allow me to, to dominate this man's mind to the point where he would be forced to answer our questions no matter how hard he tried to fight it." Harry shook his head in revulsion, feeling more revulsion towards that thought now that he had given it voice than he had when he had simply kept it inside his own head. It was as if giving that thought voice had allowed Arda as a whole to express its own distaste for the idea.

Shaking her head firmly, Tauriel reached out and grasped Harry's wrist, bringing his hand up to her lips and kissing the back of it. "No, Harry. Do not sully your soul with such a spell. Domination like that sounds far too close to something the enemy, to what Sauron or even he who was his master would want to do. It is always in desiring control over others or to do them pain that true evil begins."

Harry nodded and subsided, letting Fili take the lead as he shook his head. He loathed the Imperio spell almost more than he hated the AK spell. Harry could at least understand the idea of hating someone so much that you wanted them to die. He'd felt that towards Riddle several times, but the idea of dominating someone else, well, you could argue that simply forcing them to do your bidding for a short amount of time was less inherently evil than wanting someone dead. But it really wasn't. Thinking like that led people down the road to the Dark Arts and what they did to you slower than using the Avada Kedavra, but the road was no less certain.

Once Fili signaled they were ready, Harry used an enervate, waking the prisoner up. He twitched, then reared his head back, cracking it a good one against the solid wall he was tied to. Cursing luridly in his tongue, the man tried to raise his hands to feel at the back of his head, only then realizing that his hands were tied together. He blinked in confusion, then, as he looked around, his eyes widened in shock. "Wh, how, no! I will not be captured like this!"

The Easterling tried to push himself to his feet, but as he was tied around his middle to the wheel behind him, this did nothing but cause him to grunt a bit in pain as the rope dug into his stomach, but he still thrashed and tried to pull himself free until, after a nod from Fili, Suli slapped him upside the head. Young for a dwarf, though he was, Suli was still strong as a normal human man, and the blow sent the man reeling back against the wheel behind him.

Fili reached forward, grabbing at the man's hair and pulling his face, glaring down at the Easterling, who, after blinking a few times, glared back with equal vitriol. "You will answer our questions, Easterling, or else we will start by removing fingers. Once you have no more toes, we will start with other things. And trust me, I'm a dwarf. We know about head and fire. We can keep you from bleeding out for a long time."

Behind and to one side of where the prisoner was, Tauriel shivered. *I, I want to be ashamed right now, as while I know it's mostly an act, I could all too easily see Fili, or indeed any dwarf, torture an enemy for information. An act that I would abhor and castigate them for. Yet, thinking about it, I could all too easily see Thranduil do something similar to a man or a dwarf. I still cannot condone it, but... but I can see why someone would go so far. For kith and kin, for your nation, yes. I can see that. But I will not be a part of it.*

With that, she strode off, shaking her head and leaving Harry and the dwarven commanders to their own devices just as Harry cast the Rosetta Calx spell, on the area around

them. This would let them all understand one another, something the dwarves had been warned by earlier as the attack force marched back to the rest of the convoy.

To Fili's surprise, the man showed no fear. "Do your worst, stumpy! I am a Blood Hand. I serve the Great Warlord, he who has returned, and the lord of the dark. He has elevated the Brethren to our true place, and we will give this world to the One Power!"

Staring into the man's eyes, Fili saw no fear there. *It isn't bravery, not quite. It is more like he has no fear left in him. What kind of man is this, who does not fear pain or death, not because he wants to prove his worth or because of courage, but because he just doesn't care?*

The man continued to rant, trying and failing to pull out of Fili's grip on his hair as he stared around him through blood-soaked teeth. "Bow if you wish to live, if you want your pulling race to live! Bow to the true power, the voice of the Great One in the south, the herald of He Who Is Beyond!"

Harry hit him with a Stupefy, sending the man into the land of the comatose once more. He, Fili and Gimli all looked at one another, shaken by the man's fervor. The man was a true zealot of some kind, a sort none of the three had ever seen before. Orcs and goblins were cruel and hateful towards others, reveling in dealing out pain, with orcs having little fear of it when surrounded by their fellows. Yet alone, that courage faded for both goblins and orcs, especially in sunlight. This man, though? He was different.

"What was that?" Gimli muttered, tugging at his beard as Fili released his hold on the Easterlings hair, unsurprised to find clumps of it coming loose in his hand as he did. "This man, what pushes him to such heights of faith?"

"I, I don't know," Harry said, also staring at the oriental-looking man. "I'd have expected some bravado, some courage. That wasn't courage. It was simply a lack of care for his own well-being."

"Hah! I forget that for all your magic, you're not nearly as well-traveled as the Istari are supposed to be, Harry," Thunderbelly chuckled coldly. "And you two, for all your skill in command, are young yet. You've never fought Easterlings before. This man, well, it's easier to show you what he meant by Brethren, I suppose."

With that, Thunderbelly motioned Fili away. With a small belt dagger, he cut open the man's gambeson, sneering at its quality, then pulled it down the man's arms, revealing his chest to the others.

The man had no hair on his chest, something Harry could relate to, and was, although not as wide in the shoulders as Harry, still trim of frame and decently muscled. Yet neither of those things mattered at all due to the large mark on the man's chest.

It wasn't a tattoo. It was a mark that had been cut into the man's skin, then seemingly allowed to heal wrong or perhaps purposefully cared for in such a way as to leave a scar. A scar in the form of an image. On the Easterlings skin was the image of an upraised Bleeding hand, on the palm of which was a large, bleeding eye, each droplet of blood a smaller scar.

"This is the sign of some mad cult or other that some Easterlings adhere to. One, obviously, connected to, to Sauron." Thunderbelly's gruffness faded for a moment, and he shifted, deliberately turning to look anywhere but towards the south, where Mordor was. Even dwarves did not speak lightly of the Great Enemy. "I know not who this Warlord is, but it is clear he is making use of this cult as some kind of officer cadre."

"He Who is Beyond is a new one to me for Sauron," Harry murmured, recovering from his earlier shock. "I wonder if that really is who that refers to. Still, I suppose it doesn't matter. Do you think we can get anything out of him?"

"Hmmpf, generalities perhaps. A lot of lies and half-truths. Those are always the Great Enemy's most subtle of weapons. But threats will not work on such a man. They fear no pain or death, for they think their souls are already promised to their dread lord. I've fought such before, although never been able to discover much about them in either war or peace."

During peacetime, the Easterlings and dwarves on their borders occasionally traded with one another. Not often, and it was rarely large-scale, but it kept some information flowing between them. Hence why this assault had come as such a surprise: none of the Stonefoot or Blackbeards who traded with the Easterlings had heard a hint of such a large scale war being prepared against their folk.

"There are still a few things we can learn then," Fili shouted for some more rope, and once the man's upper body was also tied to the wheel around the biceps and forearms so that they could not move, he nodded to Harry. "Wake him up again. Let us see if we can sift through his lies for some truth."

Once more, the Easterling woke up, but before he could spout off, Gimli gave him a hard cuff. Stronger than Suli, the blow threatened to knock the man out the old fashioned way, but he stayed awake as Gimli pulled his head back so he was looking up at the officers surrounding him. "Let us start simple. How large is your army, Easterling?"

"Hundreds of thousands!" The man smirked. "Enough to cover the ground with our shadows!"

"Lie," Harry snorted. "Nice alliteration, though."

The Easterling blinked, then stared at Harry, the sight of a human among dwarves seemingly shocking him for a moment. Then he snarled. "Traitor! Why is a human helping the Stumpies!?"

"Because they are far better people than you," Harry answered dryly, sending a small stinging hex into the man's chest, causing him to cry out in shock more than pain. He looked wildly at Harry, and Harry smiled, deciding to lean into the mysterious mage schtick for a moment. Summoning his magic to him in a way he had seen Gandalf do once or twice as they traveled together, he loomed over the man, his eyes flaring with the light of the sun above as his connection to Arien made itself known. "Now, you will answer our questions, or else the pain those tools my fellows prepared for you will be the least of your worries."

"Thousands," the man still shouted back. "You will never overcome General Cromtuah, let alone all of our armies! We have come to conquer, not raid!"

Harry stayed looming over the man, but Thunderbelly gestured for Fili to get a move on. They wouldn't get any specifics, but namedropping and suchlike could be useful.

Agreeing with that, Fili growled out, "What do you and yours call yourselves? Not your folk, but your so-called brethren?"

The Easterling spoke proudly then, smirking at them all. "We are the Blood Hand. We are the Cult of He Who Is Beyond, the one True Power in this world. We have looked to Him for ages, and now we are rewarded as our ancestors were promised."

That rang a bell for Harry, and he barely held back a wince. *Fuck. Sauron's been at work among the Easterlings for a very, very long time, then.*

The Easterling rambled on. "Your Folly will fall again, proving its name once more, and we will claim it and the lands beyond while the goblins have your mountains! Your Houses will fall and..."

Another cuff, from Fili this time, had the man seeing stars, and he fell silent, groaning. Fili and Thunderbelly then tried to ply the man with specific questions, some taunts and sneers, but the man changed tack. He fell silent beyond shouting about how they would never defeat General Cromtuah, how the Blood Hand would come for their lands and families.

This gave them a few small bits of information, though. The Easterling mentioned another leader, a Whuan who 'commanded the greater portion' of their host. He nearly confirmed, after a question from Thunderbelly, that, indeed, the Blood Hand had become a kind of noble class among the Easterlings and that people could join. Thankfully for Harry's gorge, Thunderbelly cut off the questioning there, not letting the man tell them what kind of rites someone needed to go through in order to do so. He already had a good idea of that. The

Easterlings were indeed a confederation of clans and rarely were unified, but they were now. Beyond that, the man didn't give them anything pertinent.

The only other bit of really important information the man let out was that the Easterlings not only knew about the goblins causing trouble deeper into the Grey Mountains but were actually in communication with them. The man didn't know how only that the march into the Stonefoot lands had been prepared with further action from the goblins in mind.

He didn't mention anything about the cold drakes, though, which was something of a blessing. At least Sauron wasn't able to move those creatures to his purposes. Or at least not in a way they would coordinate with his lesser servants.

Eventually, after another ten minutes of this, Harry shook his head. "Unless I want to use the Imperio on him, I think we're done here. He's not going to give us anything we can truly act on." *And I really don't want to do that.*

Nodding, Gimli held out a large dagger to Suli, who had stood to one side, not asking any questions but keeping his eyes locked to the Easterling with a rictus of rage on his face. "Suli."

Suli stomped forward and stabbed the man through the neck, tearing his blade out the side. He turned away, marching back through the camp as the man convulsed, blood spurting from the horrible wound the former fisherman's scaling knife had caused.

Shaking his head, Harry turned away, a shiver of revulsion going through him. Killing in battle, he had gotten used to quickly in this world. Even killing other humans, he could do in a fight without hesitation, even if it gave him nightmares sometimes at night. But killing a prisoner was not something he felt comfortable about. *Still, this is Stonefoot land, and I can't deny Suli has reason to hate these Easterlings.*

"Are the goblins truly causing so much trouble in the mountains?" Gimli asked, looking hard at Thunderbelly. "We knew they were a problem, but the way that man spoke, it sounded as if it was only a matter of time before your mountain holds and valley holds fell."

Thunderbelly grumbled, shaking his head. "Nay. The messages I received from home telling me of this war spoke about the goblins being a trouble, aye, but not that large a one. The cold drakes trouble Fanged Walls, but that is all. We cannot sweep them away with ease, but if not for the Easterlings, we could deal with them. No, it is the fact that the Easterlings have already conquered one of our hill holds and cut off the other two from the rest of my House that is the most worrisome."

Fili and Gimli exchanged a glance at that. Their force was small but extremely well-equipped and supplied at present. They would be the perfect kind of force to fight goblins in the

mountains. But if the Easterlings were the larger problem, where did that leave their orders? Neither knew at present but shrugged it off as Thunderbelly continued.

“I also doubt the thousands or the hundreds of thousands when that madman spoke of the Easterling forces. I doubt there would be more than a force of ten thousand between us and Varni’s Folly. What else they might have, I know not. But I doubt they are having an easy time supplying their troops.”

“Or their horses in particular. Horses can make do on grass, but they need oats and other things to be at their best, right?” Fili murmured before looking sharply at Harry. “You noticed something about this cult of the Blood Hand, Harry. Something that concerned you a lot. Tell us,” he demanded.

“I wouldn’t call it something to be concerned about, just a sign of how long Sauron’s been at work among the Easterlings and how very little I wanted to know about their secret rites. Depending on how large this Blood Hand is, anyway.” Fili continued to look at him, and Harry sighed. “One of the ways that Sauron caused the fall of Númenor was to convince the Númenóreans to believe that Morgoth was the one true Valar and that the others were usurpers. The Cult of Morgoth was known for human sacrifices and worse rites.”

All the dwarves shivered, looking at one another and away again. Every House of the Dwarves had some written record, no matter how sparse, of the time when the greater darkness ruled in Middle Earth, when hope was fleeting, and true victory impossible. The ages since had eroded those memories, but some of the writing still remained, and with it, the dread of those days. “Right. Well, we never expected quarter or honorable actions from the Easterlings anyway. This just proves it,” Fili stated. “Have some of the men cast him aside and burn the body. We will move on through the night again to be well away from here and on the other side of the ambush point.”

The others all hurried to obey, and Harry, with a sigh, went to find his lady fair. On the trail, Harry and Tauriel stayed with the convoy, knowing there were no more Easterlings ahead of them. Harry’s sun spells kept them going through the night, and, as Fili wanted, they were well past the ambush point before the sun came up. Later that day, as they pushed on, the group, with Harry and Tauriel still traveling with the convoy, found a small surprise waiting for them.

OOOOOOO

“I spotted scout sign two days back. It was faint, but it was telling me a scout fled south,” Mkoloan explained, gesturing to his companion, who was staring down into a mug of ale as if contemplating the mysteries of life. “I decided I didn’t want to lead my whole squad out on a hunch, leaving you all a squad of scouts short, in case of trouble.” he shrugged, gesturing with

one hand as if he had made his point twice over sitting here with his quarry and the recent battle.

“What does this scout sign look like? Is it any different from the ones that you have shared with me previously? I did not see any such,” Tauriel said. Were she a human or even a dwarf, there might’ve been a note of challenge in her voice and a good possibility that Tauriel might have been professionally annoyed at the other scout spotting something she missed. Instead, it was only a mild request, and she smiled in approval at Mkoloan.

That seemed to befuddle the gruff senior scoutmaster, but he responded by shaking his head and pointing at the other dwarf. “The Stonefoot scouts don’t use quite the same method of leaving signs as we do. Instead of broken branches or small knots made in grass stalks, they use nettles from the Khr’uz’bar set to point the way, along with whether or not some of them have blood on the underside or not to indicate certain things.”

The one eyed master scout was being deliberately vague because it wasn’t his secret to tell. Tauriel understood that instantly, nodding her head in understanding and looking at the scout from Varni’s Folly as the others had been after the caravan had slowed to a stop and began to set up camp for a few hours.

In appearance, the dwarf looked pretty much like every other Stonefoot dwarf did. A little bit shorter than a Longbeard but far wider in the shoulders and stomach. He wore no armor save for boiled leather, a marked difference even from the scouts of the Longbeard tribe. His head was shaved bald as well, but instead of simply being bald, the man had done something to it with oils or something to make certain that his pate did not gleam in the fires nearby and presumably in the sunlight either. He wore a heavy cloak complete with hood which was done in green and brown, with several short, but thick daggers on his belt. There looked to be room for something else there as well, but whatever it was, it was long gone.

That was not the only sign of wear and tear on the new dwarf’s body, and all told, he looked quite ratty. His cloak was torn, his pant leg ripped in several sections, there was blood in his beard, and his eyes looked like those of a dwarf who had not slept for weeks. Dwarves had incredible amounts of endurance in comparison to humans, but this dwarf looked as if he was at the end of that endurance.

When he spoke, his voice was barely a whisper, causing Fili and all the others to strain to hear. Like every dwarf would when around members of another race. “I’m Gordi, senior scout out of Varni’s Folly. Senior due to literal seniority, not rank as your friend Mkoloan here explained to me. I was part of a group that was ordered to hide well eastward of Varni’s Folly. We were to target and torch any kind of supplies we saw the Easterling Army bring in. It didn’t go well.”

The dwarf's simple words conveyed a wealth of information, his look far away and pain-filled. Still, he did elaborate a bit more when Gimli asked him to. "We were well to the south of here when we came upon a group heavy with plunder. We waited until the nightfall attack. But we didn't prepare for their horses. They raised a cry as we moved through where the horses were tied down all around the camp and then couldn't get away. Two of my friends, they were trampled to death by the horses. The others, sabered. I got away, but wounded."

Gordi shook his head. "I went to ground for a few days, then tried to make my way back north, only to nearly run into another group. They chased me for a while, but I was able to get past them a bit to the road, where I dropped scout sign before I had to retreat back and away from it. That was a week ago, I think."

"We've smashed two groups of Easterlings so far, and we haven't seen any smaller groups. With the scouts out as far as they are, and with Tauriel and Harry ranging ahead of us, I don't think we're in danger of running into anymore yet," Fili soothed and explained in one go.

"Good," Gordi grunted. He blinked as a bowl of stew was presented to him and took it hungrily, ignoring the others as he dug in. "Haven't eaten since the night my friends died," he mumbled by way of explanation through his spoon.

"Understood. What can you tell us about the war in general? What do you know of Varni's Folly? Do they still hold out? I have to assume they do, but the only rumor we heard was from a young fisherman, and they said rumor had reached them that one of your hill holds had fallen."

"True." That one-word answer was as much as they got for a few moments as Gordi turned his complete and total attention to the stew until it was down to the dregs, whereupon he sat the bowl down, looking around for more before turning his attention back to the officers sitting around him. "I wasn't on the border when the war began. But yes, Endo's Hold fell quickly. The speed of this assault, the fact that we had no warning before they started to cross our borders? The holds weren't prepared. Endo Hold's king, he tried. His Army marched out, but they were simply ridden down. At that point, the attackers had yet to split their forces, and they numbered, well, it's estimated they had at least forty to fifty-thousand at the time, in comparison to only a few thousand that the hold could raise on its own."

The dwarves cursed and growled at that number, and more than one Stonefoot in the camp around them spat to one side. "Humans, they breed like rats, feilding armies like that."

Harry didn't take it personally. He well knew that humans spread far faster than dwarves or elves. Tauriel, on the other hand, did not like that comparison and turned to glare at the speaker for a moment before Gordi spoke again, bringing her attention back to him, the last of a chunk of jerky disappearing down his gullet.

The three holds always relied on being able to operate in lockstep when they could, being so close together. But neither of the other two forces could arrive in time to help. They were forced to retreat to their own holds, and one of them wasn't quick enough. The army of Stone Grip was wiped out in a dwarven battle that lasted more than a day and a half, but they at least sent word back to their hold that trouble was coming. As far as we know, both the Grip and Spider's Rest still hold out."

"So they are under siege just like Varni's Folly?" Gimli asked while Harry mouthed the words 'Spider's Rest' to Fili, who shrugged.

"Yes and no. We're still able... or we were still able to relay messages via thrush when I was sent out. But I don't know anything about any high-level information being shared. I know that the main army of the Easterlings marched on Spider's Bane while large skirmishing forces were sent to invest the land around the Grip, and another force was sent to Varni's Folly."

Gordi grimaced, finishing off his jerky with a rough tear of his jaws, speaking even as his mouth was full, causing Tauriel to twitch just a bit. "That force, that force I know more about. It's around ten thousand strong, all a-horse, of course, with around six thousand skirmishers like what you've probably been dealing with."

"Little armor save for their helmets, sabers and lances?" Fili described quickly.

"Yes. That. The other four thousand Easterlings are made of sterner stuff. Lamellar or chain armor in the main. I think there's a difference there. We speculated about it once. Some of these Easterling tribes are simply richer and better equipped than the others, while the lamellar armor might be an attempt to start to upgrade their equipment a bit." Gordi shrugged. "Not that it matters much to us. Good dwarven-steel can still cut through their armor if you get a good cut in, or simply break bones enough to put someone out of a fight if you prefer a hammer."

Harry nodded and thought at that but reflected that the Stonefoot tribes didn't seem to prefer hammers in general and that their short spears were probably in a losing competition with lances, especially lances used by what sounded like heavy cavalry or at least medium cavalry. *Lamellar and chain mail aren't as good as plate mail right?* He knew that was the case for chain mail most of the time, although he would probably put dwarf and chain mail up against any other race's plate armor. But he couldn't remember where on that scale lamellar armor lay.

"Still, ten thousand? That would be a hard fight, true, but couldn't Varni's Folly call on the other holds deeper into the mountains for troops? You should be able to field something like fourteen thousand, maybe more, with the remaining holds adding their strength to yours," Fili mused before frowning. "Unless they are pressed hard by goblins?"

“Fanged Walls can’t send any. Cold drakes have been making trouble there. As for the other mountain holds, they are a lot smaller than you might think, although they did send some aid. Oh, aye, if we put every man who knew how to fight in armor and gave them weapons, we could maybe field an army even larger than that. But the quality would be bad.” Gordi then said something in Khuzdul, to which all of the other dwarves nodded.

Harry would wager it went something like ‘good quality in small amounts always beats poor quantity’ or something like that, as he had heard homilies of that sort from dwarves several times over the past decade. If push came to shove, he didn’t doubt that the other holds **would** raise such armies, but they would be very reluctant to do so, even in dire times such as this, especially if, as Fili questioned Gordi on, they were indeed having trouble with goblins closer to home.

It seemed as if even that problem might be a little too spread out for Fili and his group to make any true difference, on the surface, anyway. *Except when you consider that it will be a series of smaller clashes, rather than one big one. I also know that any single dwarven warrior is the equivalent of eight or nine goblins. So long as they don’t have a leavening of orcs with them, Fili and the others should do fine*, Harry thought, looking over to Fili, who was looking at Gimli thoughtfully, then back to Gordi.

“Still, the other holds must’ve sent some aid. Why haven’t you sought battle with a smaller army, at the very least? The forces that are besieging the other two surviving hill holds can’t possibly be close enough to give the force outside of Varni’s Folly aid in time.”

“You think we didn’t? I was part of the army when we tried. Five thousand dwarven warriors, we marched out to challenge them in the open, but we couldn’t bring them to battle.” Gordi scoffed.

“Wait, what?” Harry asked, confused. “The Easterlings didn’t fight you?”

“The Easterlings refused to give open battle. Their army decamped from in front of our southernmost wall the moment our army tried to sally forth. We moved forward, trying to chase them down, but dwarves on foot might be good for distance, but we didn’t have anywhere near enough speed to catch an Army on horseback. They pulled their army back, and then their skirmishers began to hit us, slashing in and out in small groups. They hit us three times throughout that day as we tried to charge toward the center of their army, coming in on our sides, flanks and back. We lost several hundred good dwarves before we were forced to retreat. They paid for it, as they still have to come to us with their sabers and lances, but we were still getting the worst of it.”

“Damn,” Harry muttered, the scene that the dwarf described reminding him of some stories of battles against the Mongolians back in his old world. Once again, Harry praised the

Ilúvatar these Easterlings hadn't developed horse archery. *They would be a true nightmare if they had.*

In point of fact, there was only one group in middle earth that had developed horse archery up to this point. Luckily, the Riders of Rohan were very firmly on the side of the West.

Fili hummed thoughtfully. "So the main problem is they and the rest of their forces are between Varni's Folly and the hill holds and in our way to boot. Hmmm..."

"You're thinking something devious, cousin," Gimli chortled. "That's the same look you get when you spot a chink in my defenses when we spar."

"To my mind, the problems facing us can be boiled down to the fact we aren't fast enough to catch the Easterlings and their numbers. The numbers, we can overcome well enough. Even their armored riders are not equal to our arms and weapons."

While the Stonefoot scout looked on in confusion, Thunderbelly nodded, as did Gimli. Several times in the recent skirmish the simple but helmets and the chain mail of the Longbeards had proven effective against the sabers of the enemy. Harry wasn't certain that would be the case when it came to a lance at full charge, but that could be offset. So he watched silently as Fili moved over to one of the nearest carts, slapping it.

"We can further overcome their numbers with a stout defense. These carts give us a height advantage even against mounted men. I could wish, Gimli, that you'd been able to make a deal for some human archers to join us, but crossbows we have in plenty."

Gimli grumbled a bit at that, but not very loudly. He'd been able to make a good deal for eighty solid Dale archers to come with them right up until Bard had heard that there was a threat to the Blackbeard lands going on as well, which had also put on hold the idea of Nori and Dori coming with Fili and himself. They, like Dwalin, had gone with Thorin instead.

As for the archers, Bard had seen fit to cancel the agreement to send men with Fili and his caravan. Instead, he had folded those eighty men into a far larger force that would go with Thorin. He had then turned around and used his treasury to pay to double the amount of crossbows and bolts the caravan would take with it.

Snorting in good humor at his cousin, Fili turned to Harry, his eyes bright and eager as he pointed at his human friend. "And we have a wizard. How hard would it be to raise the ground underneath our carts and make them impossible to move? We've got those heavy ropes we could tie them together with, too."

"I can raise the ground underneath the carts. Momentary toughness runic arrays on small stones set into the ropes will make them even tougher," Harry mused, realizing where this

was going and baring his teeth in equal enthusiasm to Fili's. "It would take a truly monstrous impact to shift the carts then."

For a moment, he wondered if the enemy would be prepared for that kind of tactic, as he knew that the Wainriders, who had come out of Rhûn to attack Gondor centuries ago were also supposed to use armored carts. Their entire society, several large tribes brought together into one coalition, had traveled on these carts.

But then he remembered that setting up cart forts like what Fili was describing had not actually been a tactic. Yes, their carts had been armored and had been huge, but what had made them deadly was the fact they used war chariots which in turn were heavily armored and armed. Their similarly armored carts hadn't actually saved them when their horde had been attacked in the Battle of the Camp by Eärnil II, who would later be named king of Gondor.

How that battle really went, Harry had no idea, but what he had heard from Gandalf and a few men and women among Bard's folk who liked to act as historians told him that the Wainriders had been taken in their camp, unable to use their chariots to any effect. So, this use of carts as a quick defense would hopefully take their enemies by surprise.

"But will the Easterlings not realize the impossibility of taking you on soon after the battle is joined or simply balk at the cost?" Tauriel asked in confusion. "They will simply retreat and avoid battle. It is we who need to get to Varni's Folly after all."

"These are human warriors, Tauriel," Harry said, taking her hand and squeezing it, causing the Stonefoot scout's eyes to widen. Evidently, while he knew of the human wizard who was also a dwarf friend, the fact that Harry was involved with an elf hadn't made it to his ears. Not that Harry cared. "Human warriors with their blood up and most certainly by that point dead companions will not be easy to rein in. If we also go out of our way to kill anyone wearing red armor, it will be even harder to do so."

"Hah, that whole red armor equals officer thing won't work with their main force," Gordi warned, getting over his shock at a human and elf relationship quickly. "There's far more of them with the main force than with the troops they send out to scour our lands for food. And a whole lot of their heavy units wear red on their armor to boot, although in their case, it's mostly chain mail, and the red comes from their leggings and their standards. A red snake on a black background."

"Huh... that sign feels familiar," Thunderbelly mumbled before waving the others off. "It will come to me. Still, Tauriel's right enough. We can maybe kill a few thousand before the others start to break off."

That was no hyperbole. The Longbeards had brought four-hundred and thirty men, three-hundred and eighty warriors, twenty-four scouts and the rest drovers under the loud Burgo. Thunderbelly had twelve of his own folk. In a defensive fight, with the carts giving them height, they would reap a grievous toll. Thunderbelly could see that. Yet the problem remained.

“Ah, but you mistake me. I don’t think we can win this fight alone. Not unless pride and stupidity would keep the Easterlings attacking us until the last was dead or they broke entirely. Although here, again, I will need to lean on you, Harry. Gordi, how likely is it to see fog near Varni’s Folly? The kind that can spring up and obscure sight?” Fili smirked. “And how quickly do you think the lord of Varni’s Folly could move to attack if given the opportunity?”

Gordi snorted, then nodded. “You mean for me and Mkoloan to sneak north, contact my folk? As for fog, very likely.”

“I do. I’ll leave how your folk do so and when to your lord, but if we can somehow catch them in between your hammer and our fort, then we can wipe out most of that army.” Fili noticed both Gordi and Thunderbelly twitch at the mention of Varni Folly’s lord and snorted. He knew what was going on there, but even so, he doubted that the general in charge of their military force would be slow to act. “Make certain their leader’s among the dead, and we hopefully won’t need to worry about the scattered remnants.”

Of course, messing with the weather was something squarely in the realm of Manwë and thus wasn’t nearly as easy as, say, creating a beam of reflected light able to cut through hordes of enemies on a sunny day. Something Harry was also willing to do in a pinch. But creating fog was something new, so he spent the next two days as the caravan traveled – slower than it had been, to keep the men in fighting shape – whispering to the wind, reaching out to the local weather pattern so that when it came to it, he could create the needed fog to blind their enemies.

Not two days later, in the early morning, Tauriel spoke up from where she was perched momentarily on the top of the cart foremost in the caravan. “I just saw an outrider. I would estimate they will be able to see us in a few hours.”

“Crossbows up and ready. Thunderbelly, you and your men start looking around for a rise or hill we can set up on. The more elevation we have, the better,” Fili ordered.

Normally, Thunderbelly, as an ambassador, would not fall under Fili’s command, and indeed, up to this point, he had not. Now that true battle was hopefully going to be joined soon, he simply nodded, showing none of the egotism a normal human politician would have felt.

Turning to Harry, Fili advised, “I think you should start up the fog, too. Make it gradual so they don’t realize that’s coming from us too.”

“Agreed. I’ll also hold off on spells unless necessary and keep to my bow until then,” Harry warned.

Fili smirked, holding up his blade. It was no Orcrist, just a regular dwarven blade, but the arming sword, thicker in the body than most human blades would be but far sharper and more durable, would do for him. “Fine by me.”

Soon after midday, a midday that was cold and gray, with, thanks to Harry, fog rising from the ground to the shins of the dwarves, the Easterlings spotted the caravan. Tauriel reported what she was seeing, giving Fili and Harry a play-by-play. “One Easterling broke off and raced further south. In the distance, I can see the mountains changing into hills... and what I would assume is the southernmost wall of Varni’s Folly. Good grief.”

Harry looked over at his lady in confusion, but she didn’t elaborate, going back instead to telling them that two of the Easterlings had moved off to either side and were now racing forward, well out of bow or crossbow range but extensively within sight of the convoy. She reported moments later when they turned back and when some of the Easterlings ahead of them were joined by more. While the main Army was still well out of sight from the dwarven and human perspective, she began to see signs of the enemy camp.

“It is a large, sprawled-out thing. I see more tents out there than we saw when we infiltrated the troop encampment a few days back, Harry, although they all looked to be large and communal bar a few set in the center of the camp. There are thousands of horses out there in makeshift corrals areas around the camp, and they are now being pulled out in groups of ten or twelve. I cannot see much as I cannot see through objects of what is going on in the interior of the camp, but it is clear that the Army knows we are here.”

“How fast do you think it will take us to set up?” Harry asked, looking over at Fili.

Fili frowned thoughtfully, then nodded, understanding Harry’s point. “Thunderbelly?”

Thunderbelly nodded and pointed slightly north to a small rise just off the road, which, here near Varni’s Folly, actually did deserve the name. “Over there is our best bet.”

“You heard the man,” Fili said to Burgo, who looked a little green behind his beard at the thought of what would soon begin. “Let’s get a move on.”

To further obfuscate things, a large portion of the food and other goods had been left behind, hidden under the Notice Me Not arrays from the night before, along with the young woman from the fishing hamlet. Suli was supposed to be with her, but Harry knew he had remained with the convoy.

In their place, around half of the Longbeard tribal warriors had been able to hide inside the carts as they began to move her that morning. It had not been pleasant for any of them, and the grumbling and cursing from underneath the tarps had kept the drovers in good spirits despite none of them looking forward to the upcoming fight as the warriors did.

Soon, palms of horsemen were moving away from the camp, heading towards the convoy. Again, Tauriel was able to describe the scene to the others who still could not make out the enemy just yet. "I estimate around ninety riders coming towards us. They are splitting up, shifting to the left and right again, around us, to take in our numbers."

"Crossbowmen ready," Fili bellowed, his voice carrying nearly to the end of the convoy. Drovers and warriors assigned to sit beside them alike readied crossbows while the Longbeard infantry settled their helmets on their heads, their shields in hand.

As Fili had predicted from Tauriel's description, the riders tried to come close to the convoy and were warned off when three of them died to precise crossbow bolts from the crossbowmen. All three kills were made by scouts from Mkoloan's teams, as they were better shots than the normal Longbeard warriors or the drovers. But it was enough to warn off the rest of the attackers for a time. A more serious attack came in a moment later, with around ninety writers riding in from the rear, having reformed there into a single mass. But the dwarves quickly fired back at them, and when they closed, the infantry had already formed a solid perspective wall around the rear of the convoy.

Sabers flashed down, cutting hard into helmets and shields but bounced off good Ereboran armor, opening up the riders and, worse, the horses for strikes from hammers, axes and swords. More of the horses were lamed than men slain, but once on the ground, the Easterlings were no match for the infantry of the Longbeards, who slew them before they could recover from their falling off their horses.

At this point, it was clear to the officers in charge that they were going to need to attack far harder to break the convoy, and soon, more attacks came in, swirling in, attacking, and retreating. But with the crossbows, it was the Easterlings who were getting the worst of it. At Fili's command, the infantry on the ground pushed out from the carts, shifting from a dense wall to a loose one but still presenting an obstacle that forced the enemy to try and ride them down. Several of the dwarves were knocked off their feet by horses, but at the same time, they cut those horses' legs out from under them as they fell. The dwarves rose, cursing and muttering about bruises on bruises, but alive, whereas the horses and the Easterlings upon them did not.

The convoy reached the tiny hill and, at Fili's shouted command, began to move into a circle. The Easterlings charged in to try and break this up, hitting both the back and the front of

the convoy before lashing out at the center from both sides with spoiling attacks only to peel away after they took a few losses from crossbow bolts.

It was obvious to Harry and Tauriel that the crossbow was really making a difference here, and Harry had to shake his head a little. The Stonefoot tribe didn't go into crossbows a lot, obviously, and what crossbows or bows they did have apparently didn't match the quality of Fili's men. Thanks to the Blacklock's ingenuity with gears coupled with Ereboran steel, those crossbows were each far heavier and faster to fire.

With the initial attacks having failed, the heavier attacks also turned away, leaving at least eighty more of their own dead on the field.

"We've now proven to be a somewhat toothsome opponent. The enemy commander should start to bring up his main forces soon," Fili mused, staring ahead of them, then over to Tauriel. "Any more movement from their camp?"

"What to do so far is there ready force. I can see armor gleaming on at least a hundred men out there already on horseback, red as we were warned to expect on some of them, the others, they are wearing chain mail as we were also warned about. I have to say, the helmets they all wear seem to match that kind of outfit far better than the lack of armor we've been seeing so far."

"Yes, the helmets are still strange to me," Harry murmured, shaking his head as, under his direction, the fog grew just a little bit thicker. It didn't rise any higher from the ground, not just yet, but it was definitely thick enough that if you tried to look for something from more than a hundred yards down on the ground, you would not be able to see it.

The carts finished circling, and the men aboard them quickly exited, forming up in the center, as the infantry, who had shifted position until they were all on the outside of the circle, also moved inwards. Shields were quickly emplaced and then thudded into position along the bottom of the carts between the wheels, while chains were set between each cart, individually connecting them to the others on either side as the crossbowmen, reinforced now, kept the Easterlings away. Fili leaped up off of the cart he'd been riding to go and help while Harry and Tauriel stayed where they were, both of them concentrating on their own tasks.

"Those initial one hundred heavy cavalry have been joined by at least four hundred more. There are also far more raiders on horseback now. They are milling about so much I can't get a good read on their numbers, but I would estimate at least three thousand."

From where he was helping to nail another shield into place along the side of one of the carts, Fili nodded at that, thinking idly that designing carts that could carry goods but could also be fitted to defend themselves in the future might be a good idea. "Harry, do what you can to

make certain our carts stay where they are, please. And then soak the carts down as much as possible with water.”

Harry frowned, then nodded, understanding dawning quickly. If the attackers decided that they would lose too many people simply charging in, they might decide to start throwing torches instead. If the carts were already wet, that wouldn’t be so much of a problem.

Within the next ten minutes or so, timed by one of the dwarves with one of the expensive pocket watches, the defenders were ready, and more than a hundred more raiders had been felled by the crossbowmen. The carts have been set up in a circle, each of them nearly touching one another, then tied to one another with thick rope that normally would be used to pull carts out of ditches at need. Harry’s magic had sort of sunk their wheels into the ground for a few inches, making it certain that none of them would be able to be moved easily. Shields and heavy cloaks had been set up to defend between the wheels on every cart, as well as the sides. On each cart, five dwarves were ready, most of them armed with crossbows, as more waited behind, ready to switch out with the crossbowmen armed with shields and a variety of weapons.

Others were ready underneath the carts, wielding large spears. They had to send some of the scouts off to sacrifice a few trees for those spears over the past few days as the convoy slowed to a crawl, and they weren’t the best quality, yet they gave the defenders just as much reach as the lances of the enemy.

It wasn’t a perfect defensive position. They could’ve had a little more height, in Fili’s opinion, and if they had been facing an enemy that had even one bow to every twenty people, the lack of overhead cover would hurt badly. As it was, they’d not seen a single arrow come their way just yet. He knew they would. With a force that large, they were bound to be some archers, if only in the hands of hunters to bring in game. But in that event, he would trust good dwarven chain mail to see his people through.

“And next time, I think I might want to think about some kind of longer-range weaponry as well to use in situations like this,” Fili mused to Harry, gesturing down towards where the spears were ready to stick out of the Mormon from below them on one of the carts. “Something for those of us on top to use as well. Maybe just more long spears.”

“Or maybe long flails?” One of the dwarves nearby said, raising his own flail and twirling it above his head. It was one of the more unusual weapons owned by Longbeards and, indeed, was the only one in their force. “Add two more heads and a longer shaft, and you can do some serious damage.”

“Maybe if you’re fighting enemies whose primary source of armor isn’t on their heads,” Harry joked, the fog rising another inch, even as Harry stared out into the distance. From here,

he couldn't make out with any detail what he was looking at, but he could see what looked like a gray wall covering the horizon from one side to the other. *Is that what elicited Tauriel's earlier surprise? If so, it's worth getting surprised at, a defensive wall that tall and long?*

Tauriel's shout drew all their eyes to her, then facing the front of their position. "They are charging straight at us. Their heavy cavalry, around five hundred or more."

Well, that was the plan that the enemy commander had anyway. Harry doubted that it was going to go that way.

The heavy cavalry of the Easterlings charged up the hill quickly, a long line of men in a chain mail. The chain mail looked like it was worked to be a bit darker than it should be, from where it connected to their helmet all the way down to below their knees, paired with heavy gauntlets and grieves painted red. In their hands they held lances, their eyes invisible underneath their heavy helmets. Several of them had pennants waving behind them, a red snake on a black background. They charged, and those lances came down, fit to rip through shield, chain mail, and the wood of the carts alike.

"Wait for it, boys," Fili said, smirking just a little bit from where he stood in the center of the court facing this attack, reaching up to pull his helmet down a bit more. Below, the group of three dwarves had been joined by a fourth, as well as to either side, more spears coming to stave off this attack. "Wait for it... I don't want to use the spears just yet. Let them come; Let us deal with it up here if we can."

The charge began to falter before it was in lance range. The horses were not stupid. While their riders were certain that they could smash their lances into the carts in the dwarves protecting them, all the horses saw was a wall of wood and metal. Several of them began to fight their riders, trying to twist around, while others simply slowed regardless of how hard they were forced forward.

Meanwhile, the crossbows of the dwarves continued to wreak havoc, slaying man and animal alike. The chain mail of the enemy was no match for good dwarven metal bolts.

Tauriel and Harry also began to get involved. Harry's bowmanship wasn't up to hitting any of the attackers through their eyes slits, but his bow was more than strong enough to penetrate at this range, the bodkin's of his arrows biting deep into his targets or slaying outright. Meanwhile, Tauriel targeted anyone who seemed to be shouting or gesticulating orders. Each of those individuals within her sight fell, an arrow protruding from an eye slit.

Nonetheless, the charge did reach the side of the carts, smashing into them with enough force to rock the carts a little bit. But that was all. Any chance to get past them or through them

failed entirely. Lances stabbed home, breaking through in a few places, but not many, and bringing their riders within striking distance of the defenders.

Axes and swords flashed out, not at the Easterlings' bodies most of the time, but their limbs. Here, a man with a lance slammed home, only for an ax to come down and chop his arm off just below the elbow with brutal efficiency. There, a lance crashed down into a wheel, which was quickly followed by the man losing all fingers of his hand as a hammer came down, crushing it where his hand held the lance. Here, the Longbeard preference for having a slightly longer weapon that could be used in both hands came into effect well enough, allowing them to strike and maim or kill that need.

For a few moments, there was a pile up in front of three of the carts as the heavy cavalry pushed into themselves, trying to push the carts back to break the circle. Then, as that failed, they began to slide around that area, hoping to find some opening, but they could not. More crossbow bolts slammed into them from point-blank range, and more riders fell to them or to the defenders on top of the carts.

In the distance, a horn called, and Tauriel instantly tracked its location. "Three riders. One of them in the center has a golden strip on his helmet. Both of the ones on the side have horns of some sort. I can't shoot them from here. Unfortunately, they are several hundred yards beyond my range. Even if Harry tried to use magical wind to make my arrows go farther, I doubt I would be able to hit him."

Although that doesn't have anything to do with range, and more that the wind is not the best medium to force an arrow along, Tauriel mused ruefully. We've practiced with that over the past decade a few times and can't quite seem to make it work.

"Keep an eye on them, and if they do enter bow range, take the centermost one," Fili ordered, then nodding in approval at saying no mixer tears despite having removed a chain mail-covered arm from its previous owner.

"Do you think they'll realize how much trouble they will have with their horses attacking us like this?" Harry asked, hopping down from the cart and going to grab another bushel of arrows for himself and Tauriel.

"Possibly. The Easterlings might well do better trying to charge us on foot. At least that way, they would be able to try and sneak underneath the carts, push aside the various shields there and get in among our spear wielders. It would still be deadly work, but it's better than what they just tried. Still, I'll wager they'll try to envelop us first, attack from all sides, trying to probe for weaknesses," Gimli answered, shaking his head with a growl of annoyance. He was stationed directly opposite his cousin in the circle of carts and had yet to see much action at all

since the first assault on the back of the convoy, something he had come over to jokingly complain about.

Whatever the general might have thought at the lack of results from his first probing attack with his heavy horse, the raiders decided to try their luck again. Thousands of them charged forward, shouting battle cries in their language. The raiders enveloped the circle of carts, attacking from every direction at once, howling and shrieking, lunging their horses forward, and then some of them even jumped off onto the carts themselves.

For several moments, the fighting grew intense, with Harry forced to pull out his sword and fight hand-to-hand while Tauriel retreated off the carts to deposit her bow to one side and grabbed her spear. One Easterling had a second to smack a Longbeard man dwarf off of his feet before her spear found him in the side of the neck, killing him instantly.

Then she was up and on the cart, standing behind the frontline of dwarves displacing the dwarf, who turned out to be young Suli, something that caused her to scowl a little. *A youth his age should not be here!*

"I am certain that I heard Thunderbelly ordering you to stay behind with your companion," she said aloud, her spear flashing this way and that, blocking, thrusting and keeping the Easterlings in front of her from trying to leap off of their horses again.

"Just because I am young does not mean I will be ordered to stay behind! Ella will be safe there under wizard Potter's spell craft until we clear the way forward," Suli shot back.

How long that phase of the fight lasted, Harry didn't know, but eventually, the Easterling skirmishers finally began to reply to the frantic notes of the horns of their local general. They left hundreds, perhaps more than a thousand, of their dead piled up around the convoy, but they had slain for dwarves with their reckless abandon and the tactic of leaping from their horses onto the carts. That surprised Fili, but he ordered more of the hoarded spears up and told those who remained underneath the carts grimly, "The next attack, when I get the signal, thrust those spears forward. It's a pity for the poor animals, but I'll regret our dead more."

Although uncontrolled, the assaults from the skirmishers had served a purpose. It had allowed the rest of the enemy's heavy cavalry to get onto their horses. Soon after the rest of the skirmishers retreated, a group of two thousand strong heavy cavalry moved forwards. They split up into six groups, spreading out along the defensive circle to attack it from every angle.

At the same time, the enemy finally brought forward its archers. There were only around a hundred of them throughout the entire army, but they forced the defenders to hide behind their shields, and five dwarves fell, cheeks, necks or arms pierced by the arrows of their

enemies. Only one of them died instantly, though, and the others were quickly pulled off of the carts and moved into the center of the formation.

In return, Harry and Tauriel began to target those archers. Harry's aim was slower and far less accurate, but he still killed with every three arrows he shot at the very least. Tauriel, on the other hand, slew an archer with every shot. Her eyesight training and hand-eye coordination were simply superhuman in comparison to the archers of their enemies.

At a signal from their commander, who was still, annoyingly, out of arrow range, the heavy cavalry charged forward as one from every angle. Crossbows twanged on Fili's order, and several dozen riders fell to the dwarven bolts, who in turn got in their fellow's way, showing that once more, the Easterlings had kept their people in too close. *Or perhaps it wasn't just a mistake, but rather how eager each and every warrior was to come to grips with the hated 'stumpies'* Harry mused.

A second later, Fili shouted, "Spears!"

The spears weren't quite as effective at killing horses as Fili might have thought they would be. However, they were **very** effective at warding the horses off. Suddenly seeing a wall of wood and metal sprouting large dangerous needles seeking their legs, no thank you. Many of the horses among the heavy cavalry tried to shy away, further slowing their assault, but it still slammed home.

The fighting was fierce all across the front, and with Harry still concentrating on keeping the fog slowly rising behind the enemy army, he couldn't do anything else on the magical level. Harry had mastered the magic of his own world to the point where he could cast a few spells simultaneously, but this wasn't a spell from his world. This was reaching out to Adar as a pseudo-Maiar, something that only a few of his spells did, manipulating the weather, which was something Harry hadn't ever done before.

It got so bad that he had to retreat off of the cart he was standing on, leaving a position for two dwarves to take up. This meant he was in a position to see Gimli nearly get himself knocked off the back of a cart and hastily moved over, pushing at his back, keeping him in place. Gimli roared something in dwarvish, Harry couldn't make out the words of it over the tumult and slammed a blowback into the Easterling, who had just nearly smashed him off of his perch with a lance, catching the man in the back as he tried to whirl away. Gimli's The back of Gimli's axe came to a narrow, deadly point, which punched straight through the man's armor. The next moment, a sideswipe from the ax head slammed into the chest of another rider, quickly depositing him on the ground as well, gasping in air.

Meanwhile, Tauriel danced back and off the cart she was on, leaping from one card to another, staying behind the defenders, and shooting at the remaining archers she could see

over their heads. Several times, the Easterlings in front of her stumbled to a halt, staring at the elven woman, and even two times, Easterlings leaping aboard the carts paused, allowing the dwarves to recover and push them off or kill them where they landed.

“Spears up! Bring them up and forward rather than underneath the carts. Stab over your fellow’s shoulders or between the carts!” Fili shouted. *I’m learning quite a bit in this fight.* Fili admitted ruefully. *The reach of those lances is hard to overcome, even with a perch like we have on our carts. Horses are not nearly as warlike when it comes to it as these Easterlings seem to think. Still, the basic premise seems solid enough.*

At Fili’s shout, the reserve of Longbeards and the Stonefoots moved to back up their men directly, climbing up onto the carts or stabbing around them with their shorter spears. Meanwhile, those on the ground thrust upwards and through the sides around their companions between the carts, stabbing deeply into several horses.

The battle continued to rage until another horn sounded in the distance, the same recall order that the defenders had heard before. The remaining heavy cavalry retreated, leaving at least half of their number dead around the dwarves. But three more dwarves had died, and several others had been hit by arrows despite the melee.

Harry hopped back up onto the cart facing towards the enemy commander and the distance stone wall, smirking just a little bit as he saw that the fog was so dense behind the enemy camp that he couldn’t even see anything behind the nearest tents. *It’s lower to the ground and far less thick towards the battlefield and the gathered army, but hopefully...* “Tauriel, how good is your hearing?”

“If you’re asking if I heard anything over the tall mold to indicate whether or not large dwarven gates were opening at some point, I’m afraid to disabuse you. My hearing, alas, is not **that** good,” Tauriel quipped, leaning into his side and breathing in deeply as he put an arm around her shoulders.

Fighting orcs and goblins was one thing. They were unnatural, monstrous creations of dark magic without any souls built upon the twisted, tortured remnants of the Darkness That Came Before’s greatest act of corruption. Fighting humans, even ones whose faces she could not see, was something different entirely.

Harry had much the same problem, although in his case, he was thankful that he could not see his enemy’s faces. It allowed him to dehumanize them to a certain extent despite still knowing their language.

Fili and Gimli both joined them, Gimli leaving his position, at the other side of the defense to Thunderbelly. Fili looked towards the camp, then smirked a little. “Well, this has

been far, far harder than I had hoped it would be, but I think we've baited the trap quite well." He shouted something to the Longbeards nearby, who laughed loudly, the joke apparently being hilarious, as several of the other dwarves took it up.

When the enemy commander looked their way a few seconds later, it wasn't to see an enemy on the brink of destruction or despair. Rather, it was to hear the shouts of the dwarves, bellowing defiance.

That defiance seemingly goaded Autar or whatever his name is forward. Several bugles bellowed, and more of the heavy cavalry formed up. They spread out this time into four groups, smaller and more widely dispersed, with skirmishers moving up between every group of five. It was supposed to be an impressive show of cohesion, although it didn't seem as if it was more than skin deep, as in several places around the defense, Harry could see skirmishers smacking into one another, trying to take place at the front, or shouting and gesturing vulgarly at the heavy cavalry, who returned with their own gestures at times. The heavy cavalry were certainly more disciplined yet they'd also taken heavy losses, and several fights broke out before further heavy cavalry moved to disrupt them.

The general raised his hand, then chopped it down, and the attack began again.

Harry kept his eyes on the enemy general as it did and was just in time to see him stiffen, then slowly fall off his horse to one side, a crossbow bolt in his back. Both of the signalers to either side twisted around, as did many others, but they fell to more crossbow bolts, although one of them might've fallen to a sling stone, Harry wasn't certain from this distance. Then, from out of the fog came a column of dwarves, which quickly began to array itself in a line, charging forward.

That was as far as Harry could see before the attackers charged in again, slamming home, and Harry whooped as he finally could start to use magic. More than a hundred heavy cavalry exploded in front of his position as Harry used a Bombarda to clear them out before lashing out with cutting spells that slew still more. "The Stonefoots are on the move! They got their general!"

With their blood up, the easterners charged forwards before the army of Varni's Folly could get to grips with their back of the formation. They crashed home all around the convoy's defensive circle, but in front of Harry, there was only bedlam as the Easterlings tried to shy away or pick their way through hundreds of their own dead. This allowed Tauriel and several of the crossbowmen free reign to continue to fire into the flanks of that area, widening it slowly but surely, while Tauriel continued to target any archers or men in red whenever she could.

Into this tumult came the Stonefoot army, crashing into the back of the attackers, catching many of them completely unawares, with more coming up and shifting around the first

line to hit the enemy. Short spears stabbed up, killing horses, dumping the riders to be finished off by hatchet or hammer. Soon, more than half of the enemy force was enveloped, and the rest of their army began to realize what was happening.

But by then, Harry had shifted his attention to that area, leaping off the cart facing towards Varni's Folly and racing across the circle, with Fili and Gimli following. They joined Thunderbelly in the defense for a few seconds, and then Harry's magic began to clear still more of the attackers away.

At one point, he thought he heard a distant explosion that was not part of his own attacks and turned to look in that direction but nearly paid for his momentary inattention as a heavy cavalryman lashed up towards him with a lance. The blow struck him in the chest, but his brigandine armor deadened the force of the hit entirely, thanks to how well it was made and the amount of magic that had been woven into it. Instead, it was the man's lance who splintered as if he had just struck a stone wall.

Harry imagined that the man was probably gaping at him for the few seconds it took before Fili's sword sliced into the man's chest with enough force to shatter bones. If the strike hadn't also sliced through his chainmail as if it was made of wood rather than metal. Dwarvish metal was simply that superior to that used by the Easterlings.

When it happened, it was almost startling how quickly it was as if between one second and the next, they all realized the predicament they were in. Instead of fighting to try and break the defenders, the Easterlings suddenly were trying to fight one another to get out, turning almost entirely away from the convoy's defensive position. They attacked the Stonefoot army, trying to push past them in places, but with their losses throughout the day and how widely they were spread out around the convoy's defensive position, they could not push past the dwarven line.

Dwarves still went down here and there, and hundreds of lone riders burst out, speeding on and away, not even trying to get back to their camp to grab whatever goods they could, so spooked were they. But the majority of the retreating came from directly in front of Harry, where the Stonefoots had yet to reach. That simply allowed Harry and the crossbowmen in the defenders to attack them from behind. Very few of the Easterlings ended up being able to retreat.

Then, with the Easterlings' numbers having been shrunk down enough, the two wings of the Stonefoot army met, creating an outer circle, trapping the remaining, desperately fleeing Easterlings between them and the defenders. Very few of them got out after that.

As evening fell, the last of the Easterlings on the battlefield fell as well, slain by one of the Stonefoot clan who shouted out in victory, standing hip-deep in dead men and horses. The siege of Varni's Folly was over, and the way forward was clear.

Although looking at the amount of dead around them, Harry could only exchange a tired glance with Tauriel, who leaned in, sighing faintly. "Why, when our route to our initial destination is finally open, do I think that our way forward has become even more muddled?" she asked softly.

Harry nodded, having gotten the same kind of feeling. This wasn't over, not by a long shot, and what role he and Tauriel would play going forward in this conflict was also yet to be determined.

End Chapter

I had intended to continue, to show what Varni's Folly looks like, more of the Stonefoot Culture and the way it differs in several ways from the Longbeard House, and finally, what Harry and the rest of them would be doing going forward. However, I had three days to work with. That's the long and the short of it, guys.

Regardless, I hope that this all meets with your approval and that there aren't enough small mistakes to really hurt your enjoyment of the chapter. Going forward, I will be deciding in the next two days what to do about the rest of January beyond posting a [FILFy Teacher](#) chapter here for the Super Bowl and getting out a [Making Waves](#) chapter over on my Patty on page. Look for a poll here for either Ranma or HP on Sunday. And as always, if you like the work, please leave a review. Flames will be used to keep my feet warm at night.